Resolutions and Strength of Will

This essay offers an explanation of how it is that agents successfully abide by their resolutions. Though one might naturally assume that it is through the exertion of willpower alone that we successfully resolve to quit smoking, be kinder to others or visit the gym each morning, I think this common intuition is mistaken. In fact, I argue at the close of this essay that our willpower is not a sufficient, and only occasionally a necessary, condition of our success. Instead, what keeps our resolutions locked in place and our actions on course is a *belief*. This essay will therefore be largely focused on the epistemology of resolutions, with most of my positive thesis presented in §1.4. I will argue for the view I call *resolution-cognitivism* which states that 'when one resolves to ϕ, one believes that one will ϕ'. The vital insight upon which I'll construct my case is the importance of non-reconsideration. It has previously been noted by others that it can sometimes be rational to put a stop to one's deliberation about what to do.[1] If we take this idea seriously enough, I think we inevitably arrive at a rather strong form of resolution-cognitivism.

Though philosophers have often considered resolutions in the same philosophical breath as ordinary intentions, I believe it is instructive to consider resolutions in isolation as a proper subset of intentions. It becomes clear why this is so when we consider the aforementioned belief conditions of both resolutions and of intentions. A belief that one will achieve one's resolved ends provides an explanation of the stability a resolution has in the face of temptation.[2] Intentions, though clearly possessing some stability, lack the stronger stability of a resolution and are more easily revised in the face of countervailing considerations. On my view, this can be easily explained by the weaker belief conditions intentions possess. I begin in §1.1 by discussing resolutions more generally, before outlining in §1.2 some recent compelling work in experimental psychology which lends support to some form of cognitivism. In §1.3 I outline some of Michael Bratman's objections to cognitivism about intentions and question whether the same objections apply equally to resolutions. As stated above, I present my own descriptive account of resolutions in §1.4 and consider some normative puzzles this view raises in §1.5. In §2, I move on to discuss what I take to be the most important corollary of the preceding discussion, namely the relative unimportance of willpower for successfully carrying out one's resolutions.

1. Resolutions

1.1 Resolutions and ordinary intentions

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[1] Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting,* pp. 137-166.
[2] Stability is understood to be a threshold that determines the relevance of incoming information. Temptations and other countervailing considerations that fall below the threshold fail to cause one to re-consider one's resolutions or intentions, even though it's possible that, were one to re-open deliberation about whether to ϕ, new information would lead one to abandon one's resolution or intention. Both intentions and resolutions exhibit stability, but resolutions are, by definition, more stable. See Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason,* p. 16 and Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting,* p. 2.

Whenever we resolve upon a course of action, we do so in the hope of overcoming our 'contrary-inclinations', usually inclinations to do that which is against our better judgement (hence the close link between resolutions and the problem of akrasia). In locating the unique feature of a resolution that distinguishes it from an ordinary intention, it won't do, however, simply to say that resolutions are ordinary intentions that cover cases where our inclinations might lead us astray. Ordinary intentions would fail to control our action in the right sort of way as there's nothing to prevent an ordinary intention simply altering when the moment of temptation arrives. There must be some extra feature of a resolution absent in an ordinary intention which prevents such last-minute revision. As I see it, there are two plausible candidates: that they are second-order intentions or that they entail a belief in their success.

Richard Holton has suggested that part of what explains the ability of resolutions to hold firm against temptation is that they are second-order mental states, specifically second-order intentions.[3] This is a *prima facie* plausible solution to the problem because a second-order intention is nothing but an intention to abide by our first-order intention. The idea is that if we are offered a cigarette after we have resolved to quit but are nonetheless tempted to take it, our second order intention to abide by our first order intention kicks in, preventing us from altering our first-order intention and thereby taking the cigarette. If this were true, then it would also lend support to certain views about the ontology of persons, where the unique indentifying feature of the concept of a person is the ability to form second (and perhaps higher) order mental states.[4]

Whilst this is an intuitively plausible view, I don't think that it stands up to closer scrutiny, especially once we consider more carefully how temptation works. When presented with a particularly tempting choice our better judgement tells us we ought to reject, it's well known that we often revise our judgments to bring them into line with the temptation on offer.[5] Upon being handed the cigarette, I begin to waiver - *'perhaps my health isn't as important to me as my future enjoyment? All things considered, it's probably better for me to take the cigarette after all'.* There is nothing to stop this judgement shift from causing me to call into question my second-order intention as well as my first-order intention. Once my first-order intention is fatally weakened, my second-order intention crumbles away with it. This is not to say that resolutions *are not* second-order intentions. It might be the case that every resolution is indeed an intention accompanied by another intention to abide by the first intention. It might even be that a second-order intention is a necessary condition for a mental state to be a resolution. Even if it were however, it would not explain how we abide by our resolutions in the face of temptation and therefore cannot be the full story when it comes to resolutions.

1.2 Psychological evidence for resolution-cognitivism

The fact that resolutions are second-order mental states is unable able to adequately account for their high stability. The approach was however, along the right lines. Rather than to simply posit another intention, it seems that we need a mental state of a

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[3] Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting,* pp. 11-12.
[4] See Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the will and the concept of a person'. Interestingly, children only begin to form successful resolutions at about the same time they acquire second-order concepts. See Schult, 'Children's Understanding of the Distinction between Intentions and Desires'.
[5] The classic experiment here is Mischel *et al.,* 'Cognitive and attentional mechanisms in delay of gratification'.

different *kind* to guarantee that the intention involved in our resolution has the abilities we want it to have. This leads to the second option – cognitivism.

In arguing in favour of cognitivism, there are two potential sources of evidence as well as two sets of questions one can ask. Our evidence may be either conceptual or empirical and our question may be descriptive or normative. Descriptive questions ask what is in fact going on when I form a resolution or an intention to act. Normative questions ask what the connections between my resolutions and other mental states must be in order for my action to be rational. In tackling both sets of questions, philosophers have rightly focused on the conceptual connections between intentions and other mental states via reflection on their own mental states, as well as our use of the term 'resolution' or 'intention' in ordinary language. With respect to purely normative questions, in order for our intentions and resolutions to form a coherent set, we require them to be subject to certain conditions. The cognitivist has a straightforward answer to this problem as intentions can derive their coherence conditions from beliefs, but more on this in §§1.4 – 1.5.

In addition to the purely conceptual, there is another rich well-spring of evidence that can help shed light on the cognitivism debate which derives from experimental psychology. Psychologists have long been interested in the very same questions as philosophers, albeit with a different method, emphasis and vocabulary (goal-pursuit and self-efficacy take the place of practical rationally and akrasia, for example). We ought to be open to the idea that the psychological sciences can provide extremely useful empirical data to help resolve the dispute between the cognitivist and their opponents, at least with respect to the descriptive question. Some might view this as controversial. Recent debates over the utility of experimental philosophy, for example, suggest that philosophers are sceptical of using empirical data to derive conclusions about how our concepts function.[6] I am broadly sympathetic to such concerns, but in this instance it seems to me that it is fully appropriate to use and interpret empirical data in the light of recent philosophical advances. Once we do this, we'll see that the descriptive question is largely settled by the empirical evidence in favour of cognitivism.

Perhaps the most philosophically neglected yet compelling psychological evidence in favour of cognitivism has been gathered from a large number of experiments conducted by Gabrielle Oettingen and colleagues investigating the phenomenon of *mental contrasting*.[7] The subjects of these experiments are told to imagine a desired future, then asked to think of the present as it stands in relation to this desired future. This encourages subjects to consider how likely their desired future is given their present situation. If subjects are confident that their desired future is attainable, they form an expectation of their own success and are subsequently more likely to obtain this future than subjects who are more doubtful.[8] These expectations of success serve the function of a regulatory mechanism. An expectation of success for an unrealistic goal is soon abandoned and with it the end goal. In any case, high expectations of success lead to 'immediate and tenacious goal pursuit' compared to low expectations of success which lead to weaker goal pursuit.[9]

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[6] For the argument in favour see Nichols and Knobe, 'An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto'. For an argument against, see Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, pp. 208-246.

[7] For a comprehensive review of the evidence, see Oettingen, 'Future thought and behavior change'.

[8] Oettingen *et al.*, 'Self-regulation of goal setting: Turning free fantasies about the future into binding goals'.

[9] Kappes *et al.,* 'Mental contrasting changes the meaning of reality'.

Further work combining the idea of mental contrasting with 'implementation intentions' has revealed an even greater amount of successful goal-attainment via an expectation in one's success. Broadly speaking, the idea of an implementation intention was introduced by Peter Gollwitzer to cover cases of specific 'if-then' future-directed intentions. An implementation intention is an intention to do *x* if situation *y* arises.[10] It appears that the formation of an implementation intention is the crucial moment whereby an expectation of success is formed. If one's desired future is attainable, then one is able to form a series of implementation intentions that reveal a clear path to obtaining this future. After this deliberation, an expectation that one will succeed is formed. If no such path to success is forthcoming, no such expectation is formed and one's goal will eventually be abandoned.

On purely conceptual grounds, we can see that expectations of success provide the correct kind of contrary inclination defeating feature needed to explain the stability of resolutions. They do so because they successfully provide a block to further consideration on behalf of the agent. If one intends to refrain from a particular action and one believes that one can successfully refrain from performing it, then one will fail to be strongly tempted to perform that action. One will fail to be strongly tempted because a belief in one's success prevents *judgement shift*. To see this, notice that many, if not all cases of temptation, involve a change in an agent's belief about the value of the desired object.[11] In cases where one fails to abide by an earlier resolution, one will likely judge that the desired outcome of the resolution wasn't as important as one previously thought. This is the mechanism that needs to be stopped if one is to successfully resist temptation and this is exactly what an expectation of success is capable of doing. If one has a high confidence in one's own ability to achieve the initially desired outcome, then one would be unlikely to open up the question of the desired object's value. The initial high valuation is locked in place, so to speak, by one's confidence that the valuable object will be obtained. It would be simply irrational to sacrifice a highly valued good one was confident of obtaining for a lesser good one had, at best, equal confidence of obtaining. As such, one's belief about the inferior desirability of the lesser good remains unaltered.

1.3 Bratman's objections to cognitivism

Before I move on to discuss more precisely the nature of the belief that one must have in order to successfully resolve to perform an action, I want to consider two counterexamples Bratman raises for cognitivism *tout court* (though in his case, cognitivism with respect to all intentions as opposed to just resolutions).[12] Fortunately, although Bratman might be correct in the case of intentions, his counterexamples aren't so clear cut when we consider resolutions.

Bratman argues that the only entailment relationship between beliefs and intentions is that an intention to φ means that one cannot believe that one *will not* do φ.[13] Nonetheless, intentions have a number of important functions which relate them to beliefs, the most important of which for Bratman is that they lend support to

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[10] Gollwitzer, 'Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans'.
[11] See again Mischel *et al.*
[12] Ibid. pp. 38-39.
[13] Bratman is unclear about whether we require a belief that it's not the case that we'll fail to φ or whether we can simply lack any belief about φ. For an argument that amounts to the former, see Wallace, 'Normativity, commitment, and instrumental reason'. For a classic argument that intention entails a belief that one will try to succeed, see Hampshire and Hart, 'Decision, intention and certainty'.

expectations necessary for inter and intra-personal co-ordination. My intention to attend to the meeting tomorrow lends support to your expectation that I'll be there. Similarly, my intention to be there lends support to many expectations I have about my actions over the course of the day.

However, Bratman gives at least two examples of intentions without an accompanying belief in success. In each case, I think we could agree with Bratman that these cases describe the relationship between belief and intention accurately, whilst denying that they do so in the case of resolutions. Bratman's first example is that of visiting a bookshop on the way home from work. I can intend now to visit the bookshop, Bratman claims, whilst being agnostic about whether or not I actually will visit. I'm aware of a tendency I have to be absent-minded and often run on automatic pilot once I get on my bike to travel home. Thus, I don't expect that I will stop at the bookshop, even though I intend to. In order to see why this example doesn't work for resolutions, simply replace the relevant intentions with resolutions. Now, I *resolve* to visit the bookshop. Nevertheless, so the example goes, I'm agnostic about whether I actually will visit. I'm agnostic because I know that I can be absent-minded and may forget once I get on my bike and run on auto-pilot.

This is now a great deal less plausible than Bratman's original example. Given that resolutions are supposed to be contrary-inclination defeating and I'm aware that the inclination I'm trying to defeat is my absent-mindedness, my resolution is formed precisely in order to overcome this character trait. It therefore seems odd to say that I'm *completely* agnostic as to whether I will visit the bookshop in light of my considered resolution to visit it. Nevertheless, it might perhaps seem strange to some ears that I resolve to visit the bookshop and then immediately form an all-out belief that I will visit, free from any doubt whatsoever. Won't some doubt remain about whether I'll be successful in fulfilling my resolution to visit the bookshop? I'll return to address this doubt in the next section.

Bratman's second example concerns an attempt to move a log blocking my driveway. I wake up in the morning to find a log barring my exit and I have an important engagement to attend to in the evening. I intend to move the log this morning but am sceptical of my abilities to do so. I therefore plan to move it in three different ways: with a chainsaw, a rope and an axe, none of which I believe will be successful in moving the log individually, though together I think I have a pretty good chance. Since I have an important meeting in the evening, I call a tree-removal company to make a cancellable appointment for later in the afternoon who will certainly be able to move the log. If intention entails belief, it seems that I believe the log will be moved twice: once by myself in the morning and once in the afternoon by the tree-removal company. On Bratman's account though, I neither believe nor disbelieve that I will move the log in the morning, instead forming two conditional sets of plans for the future: one in which I successfully move the log myself and the other in which the tree company successfully moves it in the afternoon.

We now apply the same technique as last time and imagine that I form a *resolution* to move the log rather than an ordinary intention. I resolve to move the log this morning, in three different ways. In addition, I call the tree removal company. Is it so clear that when I have *resolved* to remove the log with my chainsaw, I do not believe that I will move it? Firstly, this case is interestingly different from the last one. In the bookstore example, my resolution was designed to overcome an inclination I had towards absent-mindedness. In this example, my resolution isn't designed to overcome any mental characteristic of mine. Instead, it is designed to overcome some external obstacle. Secondly, given the experimental evidence

provided by Oettingen, my lack of belief in my own success at moving the log is likely to lead to a weaker attempt to lift it. I'm therefore less likely to lift the log by myself if I don't expect to. Expecting to move the log would increase the probability of me successfully moving it and achieving my goal. It seems that in the case of resolutions I need to be more than agnostic about my ability to move the log. Once again, whilst we can accept that ordinary intentions only require the lack of a belief that one won't succeed, we need not think the same about resolutions. I have gone some way to dodging Bratman's objections by showing that they don't straightforwardly apply in the case of resolutions. But how and why are resolutions different? If I am to be at all successful, I need to say a great deal more about the nature of the belief that accompanies a resolution in order to settle our doubts about these two cases.

1.4 Beliefs and resolutions

Though I wish to make as few epistemological commitments as possible, I shall accept an increasingly common picture of belief as closely connected with practical deliberation and action. This view is most notably held by Timothy Williamson, who conceives of belief as the acceptance of a premise for the purposes of practical deliberation.[14] This position is not without its problems. With such a heavy focus on practical reasoning one struggles in dealing straightforwardly with purely theoretical reasoning. Even if such difficulties cannot be easily overcome, given the emphasis of this essay on practical reasoning, we can accept this purely practical notion of belief without much worry if we assume that whatever its theoretical analogue is, it will leave our practical notion more or less intact.

In addition to this, I'll make one further commitment. This time to the idea of a *live possibility*.[15] Something is a live possibility for an agent if that agent actively considers it in her deliberations. If we accept the idea that something can be a live possibility, we can give an account of partial belief without the need to resort to credences, since one partially believes *p* if one takes *p* and not-*p* as a live possibility. One all-out believes *p* if one takes *p* as a live possibility and not not-*p*. Given well-known difficulties with associating beliefs with credences such as the failure of agglomeration and the arbitrary nature of any threshold for all-out belief, I think an approach such as this has a great many advantages.[16] Unfortunately, I cannot argue at length for it here. Notice of course, that one need not take all propositions one would assign a non-zero credence to as live possibilities but only those one actively considers in one's deliberation. The fact that an agent's live possibilities are the ones she considers in her *deliberation* ensures that we can easily retain Williamson's emphasis on belief as a practical attitude when we add live possibilities to our picture.

Bratman's bookshop example misleads us by inviting us to consider the agent from a *deliberative standpoint*. It seems to us that she need not believe that she'll visit the bookstore at all because we are able to imagine her deliberating about whether or not she will succeed. When we do, we find that she may well be sceptical. But it is trivially true that when an agent is deliberating whether or not to ϕ, she will not all-out believe that she will ϕ. There must be at least one other live possibility in which not-ϕ, otherwise one would either not be deliberating, or deliberating instead about *how* to ϕ.

[14] Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits,* p. 99.
[15] Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting,* pp. 29-34.
[16] See Frankish, 'Partial belief and flat-out belief' for further discussion.

In fact, we are now in a position to notice an ambiguity between two forms of practical deliberation. We can deliberate about whether or not we should φ and we can also deliberate about *how* to φ. I'll call the first sort of deliberation type-1 deliberation and the second type-2.[17]

We now have all the pieces in place required to give an account of what is going on when one resolves to φ as opposed to when one merely intends to φ. The process of forming a resolution occurs as follows: we first assume that an agent has engaged in type-1 deliberation and now intends to φ. Once type-1 deliberation ceases, type-2 deliberation can begin. Type-2 deliberation involves careful consideration of how to implement one's intention to φ and, as Oettingen's work suggests, it is during this deliberation that one forms a belief in one's success.[18] If we accept that one most successfully abides by one's resolutions by not re-considering them, then it follows that one must all-out believe that one will φ when one resolves to φ. If not-φ were a live possibility, then one would have re-opened type-1 deliberation. One engages in type-2 deliberation after such type-1 deliberation has ceased. When both type-1 and type-2 deliberation has ended, an agent ceases all forms of conscious deliberation and unthinkingly goes about executing actions aimed at achieving φ. Let's call this the *performative mindset.[19]* Now the important part: when an agent has resolved to φ *she does not move back to the type-1 deliberative mindset*. When an agent moves to the performative mindset, they no longer engage in any form of deliberation of either type, but instead simply act so as to execute a series of actions in line with one's prior intentions and beliefs. The fact that one does not move back to open type-1 deliberation is guaranteed by one's belief that one will succeed in achieving φ. Considered type-2 deliberation sets an agent on a trajectory towards φ that will, *ceteris paribus,* remain fixed. If some unexpected obstacle arises, type-2 deliberation re-opens and one finds a new way of achieving φ before one eventually moves back to the performative mindset. At no point is not-φ a live possibility.

In the case of ordinary intentions, one can move freely between both the deliberative and the performative mindset. The explanation for this difference is that the belief in success one acquires one when resolves to φ is lacking when one simply intends to φ. The strongest belief which accompanies an intention may only be partial, given one's freedom to re-open deliberation about what one intends to do at any time. At other times, an agent may simply lack the belief that one will fail to φ, in which case one will be even more vulnerable to revising one's intention to φ.

In addition to the empirical evidence presented above, Gollwitzer has conducted an entirely separate series of experiments which reveal interesting differences between subjects engaging in type-1 versus type-2 deliberation. He refers to agents

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[17] This is not to be confused with Kahneman's distinction between two different systems of thought. It would appear that any kind of conscious deliberation akin to type-1 and type-2 thinking in *my* sense would both fall under Kahneman's system-2. The unconscious execution of resolved action however, would fall under Kahneman's system-1, somewhat like my performative mindset (see overleaf). See Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

[18] Exactly how this expectation comes about is at present a matter of some speculation. I suspect that if an agent is able to devise a series of achievable steps towards their goal φ, then she will form an all-out belief that she will succeed. If type-2 deliberation is repeatedly unable to devise incremental steps towards success, each one of which an agent believes she can achieve, then the aim to φ is eventually abandoned. Nonetheless, my present goal is simply to try and establish the fact that an expectation is formed at all, regardless of the details.

[19] One will be able to form new intentions unthinkingly in the performative mindset, but one cannot form a resolution in this way.

carrying out type-1 deliberation as in a *deliberative mindset* and agents in type-2 deliberation as in an *implementational mindset*. On a number of standard psychological tests, simply asking subjects to think about whether to ϕ as opposed to how to ϕ and vice-versa, where ϕ is some unrelated task, causes significant differences in performance.[20] These findings support my contention in virtue of allowing space for an empirical distinction between these two types of deliberation. They are also *prima facie* somewhat at odds with my argument, since Gollwitzer found that each type of deliberation determines an agent's 'global mental state', in such a way that each are mutually exclusive. An agent cannot be in both mindsets at once. How then, can one hold firm one's decision to ϕ when thinking about how to ϕ? I think this apparent difficulty can be overcome however, when we consider more carefully Gollwitzer's experimental set-up. It appears that his subjects were *primed* to engage in one type of deliberation, which explains the effect such deliberation had on ostensibly unrelated tasks. There is, to my knowledge, no work which suggests that an agent is unable to cease type-1 deliberation before holding one's decision fixed, moving to an implementational mindset and beginning type-2 deliberation. Oettingen's research suggests that something like this goes on, but the precise nature of the expectation formed in her research is somewhat unclear.[21]

Now it is possible to re-visit Bratman's objections with a more detailed understanding of the epistemology of resolutions and see why they don't apply in the case of resolutions. In the bookstore example, my lack of certainty that I will be successful occurs when I deliberate about which action to take. Because I may well be unsure that I will visit the bookshop, I might take steps to ensure that the cost of my not-visiting isn't high or damaging. But once I form a resolution to visit the bookshop, deliberate about how to visit and then begin executing the task of visiting, the only live possibility for me is that I *do* visit the bookshop. If I come home to realise that I have indeed forgotten to visit, my deliberative prudence ensures I won't be too disappointed. Nonetheless, my resolution to visit the shop ensured that during my cycle ride home, visiting the shop was my only live possibility. Similarly, in the log example, my deliberative prudence ensures that I take a large number of steps to guarantee that the log will be gone by the evening. Nonetheless, when I *resolve* to mend the chainsaw, pull the log aside with a rope, or chop away at tit with an axe, my only *live possibility* is that I move the log. If I were to find in either of these cases that I was unable to visit the shop due to roadworks, or my chainsaw-mending abilities weren't up to scratch, I would not re-open the question of whether to visit the bookshop or whether to mend the saw, but instead ask what other method there was of achieving my aim. That is, type-2 reasoning would re-open, but not type-1.

If this is not sufficiently convincing, let us imagine a different case altogether. Forming a *resolution* to visit a bookshop or move a log seems like a rather odd thing to do, precisely because, as mentioned in §1.1, resolutions are typically policy intentions designed to overcome certain character flaws or particularly tempting situations. Anscombe raises the case of the man who knows he is to be tortured, thinks it likely that he will break down, but is determined, or resolves, not to. Anscombe even goes on to raise a far more complex case in which St. Peter has it on divine authority that he will betray Christ but is also determined not to.[22] Could one

[20] For a good overview, see Gollwitzer and Bayer, 'Deliberative versus implemental mindsets in the control of action'.

[21] Private correspondence from Gabrielle Oettingen to Richard Holton, February 2014.

[22] Anscombe, *Intention,* p. 94.

resolve not to betray Jesus and simultaneously not only just partially believe that one would betray Christ, but all-out believe it?

Once more, I think our intuitions about both the torture case and St. Peter's predicament are confused. Of course the man who is to be tortured may be almost convinced that he will breakdown when he *deliberates* over whether to resist his captors. When the tortured man engages in type-1 deliberation, he may, therefore, partially believe that he will break down. But in order for him to resist in the first place, it must be true that not succumbing is at least a live possibility. Otherwise there would be no point in resolving not to break down. If the tortured man really does resolve not to succumb, then *whilst* being tortured he will have moved to an performative mindset in which succumbing is not a live possibility. Of course, the pain threshold may become so high that type-2 deliberation re-opens. If no viable options for resisting present themselves, then he may indeed re-open type-1 deliberation, at which point his resolution is temporarily suspended and perhaps eventually altogether abandoned. The case of St. Peter is more interesting, because Anscombe seems to suggest that he has an all-out belief that he will betray Jesus yet resolves not to. At this point, I simply have to disagree with Anscombe. I do not think that such a case is even remotely intelligible. If one is ever to be resolved upon a course of action, that action simply must be a live possibility in one's practical deliberation. If we weaken Anscombe's claim such that Peter allows it as a live possibility that he won't betray Christ, then Peter's resolution works in much the same way as the tortured man. He moves to a mindset whereby he fails to consider the possibility of failing, even if, were he to deliberate over the matter, he would conclude that it is extremely likely that he will betray Christ. St. Peter's challenge is therefore to find a way of convincing himself that Christ may be fallible rather than the problem of resolving to do something he thinks is impossible.

1.5 Normative considerations

Thus far, I have been concerned with a number of descriptive questions concerning the nature of resolutions and their relationship to other mental states, arguing that a resolution to ϕ entails an all-out belief in one's success in doing ϕ. Up until this point, both philosophical and psychological evidence has been fruitfully brought to bear upon an answer. Now we move into the domain of the purely philosophical and ask when is it rational to form a resolution? If, as I have claimed, resolutions are linked in some intimate way to beliefs, this nicely settles one branch of normative concerns since whatever consistency conditions we have on beliefs will also apply to resolutions. But this strong connection between beliefs and resolutions creates problems of its own. Before I discuss the specific issue faced by my account, it will be helpful to consider a related problem Velleman raises for his own account of intention.[23]

Velleman takes the cognitivist approach to an extreme by arguing that intentions simply *are* beliefs, specifically that they are self-fulfilling expectations that are motivated by a desire for their fulfillment and that represent themselves as such. It's fair to say that his account is rather idiosyncratic, but I won't discuss its merits here. What's relevant for my purposes is that his identification of beliefs and intentions forcefully reveals a similar problem to one faced by my own brand of cognitivism. Velleman argues that an agent cannot perform an action unless she anticipates that she

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[23] Velleman, 'Practical Reflection'.

will perform it. The problem then arises as to how an agent could ever perform an action which wouldn't occur without her prior anticipation that it would. A rational person forms beliefs on the basis of their evidence. On Velleman's view, given that there is no evidence about one's ability to act until one has already concluded that one will act that way, it will always be irrational to arrive at this conclusion and, therefore, to act. Velleman's answer is to insist that one's conclusions about one's own actions somehow take into account their own effects. "The agent must jump to his conclusion before the evidence is complete" he writes, "but he jumps with the assurance that the evidence will be completed, even as he lands."[24]

Now onto my related problem. Recall that to all-out believe p is to have a practical attitude towards p whereby p is one's only live possibility. This state is reached after some amount of type-1 deliberation in which both p and *not-p* are live possibilities. Let us imagine that some agent has deliberated thoroughly about whether to achieve some extremely desirable end. She thinks that it is more likely than not that this end will not be achieved on the basis of induction from the evidence of her past experience. Let us say for example, that she has tried to give up smoking a number of times in the past and each time she has failed. It would seem, therefore, that the rational thing to believe is that she will not succeed in quitting smoking this time either. On the other hand, if she forms a resolution to stop smoking and with it forms an all-out belief that she will stop smoking, then the chances of her successfully quitting are improved. Given this fact, it seems that it would be rational to form a resolution to ϕ and an accompanying all-out belief in one's success, even when such a belief is contrary to our strong inductive evidence pointing to our inability to ϕ. We have two rationality constraints pushing us towards opposite conclusions: one based on induction from past experience and the other based on the fact that my desire to achieve some end is made more probable by an all-out belief in my success. Let us call the former the evidence-constraint and the latter the probability-constraint. How can resolution formation ever be rational if these two requirements demand we form contradictory beliefs?

Once again, we find that non-reconsideration provides the solution to this problem, just as it provides the solution to the descriptive question. Now that we have properly distinguished between type-1 and type-2 deliberation, we can see how both these rationality constraints operate on different processes. One's type-1 deliberation is operated upon by the evidence-constraint. It would be irrational for me to form a resolution as the result of type-1 deliberation against insurmountable inductive evidence. I ought not to form a resolution to become an astronaut, for example, if I am 80 years-old, poor, unfit and lack any flying experience. Nonetheless, it will still be possible for me to form a resolution to ϕ even if there is some evidence to suggest that I will fail to ϕ. All that is required is that I don't all-out believe that I cannot ϕ as a result of my type-1 deliberation, just as in St. Peter and the tortured person's predicament discussed above. Once I have concluded my type-1 deliberation and decided to ϕ, the evidential constraint no longer operates upon my decision to ϕ. My type-1 deliberation is closed off. At this point, it becomes rational for me to form an all-out belief to increase the probability of my success through deliberating carefully about *how* to ϕ. If my type-1 deliberation concludes and I come to believe that it is not unreasonable to assume that, once I make a firm commitment, I would be able to achieve some otherwise unlikely end, it would be rational for me to put a block on those things that might prevent me from achieving that end, such as further type-1

[24] Ibid. p. 57.

deliberation. This is true even if, were I to open type-1 deliberation again, I would find that it no longer made sense for me to form the same resolution.

2. Strength of will

2.1 The will as willpower

Having spent a great deal of time discussing the epistemology of resolutions, I devote the last section of this essay to what I take to be the single most important consequence of the way that resolutions function. Namely, that strength of will is not a sufficient explanation for how one abides by one's resolutions and only occasionally a necessary component. Given that this conclusion is likely to be rather counter-intuitive, let me first be clear about what my claim isn't. There are at least two dominant conceptions of the will one finds discussed in the philosophical literature. The first is of the will as primarily a decision making capacity that is closely related, or perhaps even identical to, an agent's practical reasoning or judgement.[25] When I say that the will is unimportant, I do not mean the will in this sense. In fact, engaging in type-1 or type-2 deliberation would be an example of employing one's will so conceived. The second picture of the will is as a mechanism by which we exert control over our actions in an attempt to overcome temptation and act in accordance with our better judgement. We can call this notion 'willpower'. As Gary Watson points out, given that one can decide whether or not to exert the will in this sense, these two notions cannot be the same thing.[26] When I say that the will is unimportant, I mean that *willpower* is unimportant.[27] Furthermore, I do not make the claim that willpower is in any sense a myth. Agents certainly exhibit willpower and an agent may even feel that their abundance or lack of willpower is a defining feature of their character. In this sense, an agent's will may be extremely important. However, it will be comparatively unimportant in determining whether or not they abide by their resolutions.

Before I present my case, I'll return once more to the work of Richard Holton, whose views on willpower offer a clear demonstration of its supposed centrality. On Holton's view, the will is an independent resource that acts to prevent us from reconsidering our resolutions.[28] We are able to revise our intentions and this clearly involves changing them, more or less dramatically. But we also seem able to reconsider our resolutions without necessarily changing them. Though this involves a *suspension* of our resolution, it doesn't yet involve a revision. Revision can and often does follow on from reconsideration, as our judgement can easily shift in the face temptation, as discussed in §1.1. At the other end of the spectrum from reconsideration, there is the state of non-reconsideration, where resolutions guide our action without any conscious effort. This is akin to what I have called the performative state. Holton argues that there must be some state that doesn't involve suspending our resolution, but nonetheless involves rekindling our awareness of the reasons for holding the resolution and perhaps allows us to strengthen our resolve. This state Holton calls *rehearsal*. Rehearsal and reconsideration are not sharply

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[25] Watson, *Agency and Answerability,* p. 124.
[26] Ibid. p. 124, note 4.
[27] Future references to 'the will' in this essay refer to this notion, unless otherwise stated.
[28] Holton's view and mine are therefore in agreement about the central importance of non-reconsideration. For his full account outlined here, see Holton, *Willing, Wanting Waiting,* pp. 112-136.

defined however, but form the ends a spectrum with a multiplicity of states lying somewhere in-between the two poles. We employ our willpower in rehearsing our resolutions in order remind ourselves of why we have them but without offering them up for reconsideration. Drawing on the experimental work of Baumeister on the phenomenon of ego-depletion, Holton adopts a picture of the will as operating like a muscle. It can be exercised to increase its strength and if left unused it will atrophy.[29] Altogether, we arrive at a picture in which one's willpower is central to explaining how we successfully execute our resolutions via the notion of rehearsal.

2.2 The unimportance of willpower

There is a large amount of common ground between Holton's view and mine and I do not wish to lose sight of our similarities by over-emphasizing our differences. It would also be foolish of me to argue that the will has no role whatsoever or simply doesn't exist, given the experimental work of Baumeister. My worry is that the exercise of one's will is not a sufficient condition for abiding by one's resolutions, and is only occasionally a necessary one. The will is somewhat akin to an additional tool one can and often does employ, but that we frequently needn't. As Holton himself admits, rehearsal can and often does lead to reconsideration and reconsideration can and often does lead to revision. Thus, on the picture Holton sets up, it can be rather hard to successfully abide by one's resolution. As soon as we start to think about them we call them into question. We need to take more seriously the idea that the best way of abiding by our resolutions is not to think about them *at all*.

The conceptual resources I employed in §1.4 allow us to do exactly this. The motivating thought behind Holton's introduction of the idea of rehearsal seems to be the thought that when we encounter the temptations our resolutions are designed to overcome, we need some way of bolstering our resolve. We require this additional motivation because the presence of an obstacle forces us to confront it in thought. Holton writes:

> "If one is to be successful in resisting having a cigarette, and if cigarettes are around, one must constantly monitor whether one has picked one up; and one can hardly do that without thinking about cigarettes, and the possibility of smoking them. Successful resolutions cannot work unthinkingly."[30]

Of course, if we have resolved to stop smoking and are presented with a cigarette, we cannot simply ignore the existence of the cigarette. Neither can we pretend that we have simply forgotten how they function, how to light one, inhale the smoke and so on. However, we can call upon the distinction between type-1 and type-2 deliberation to explain what's going on. Recall that a resolution to φ entails an all-out belief in one's success in achieving φ and what is required for this all-out belief is that not-φ not be a live possibility. One can re-open type-2 deliberation when one finds oneself tempted in order to search for a new way to avoid succumbing but this does not mean that the question of whether to φ in the first place is re-opened. As such, there is simply no need to rehearse one's resolution to φ. One can think about smoking in a type-2 sense without thinking about it in a type-1 sense. The motivation for the very

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[29] See, for example, Baumeister and Heatherton, 'Self-regulation failure: An overview'.
[30] Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting,* p. 123.

idea of rehearsal is thus undercut. In abiding by one's resolutions, willpower very often simply falls out of the picture.

So what role is there for the will? On Velleman's extreme cognitivist position, the will has no clear role at all.[31] My more moderate, though still relatively strong form of cognitivism, need not go as far. I stated at the beginning of §2.1 that willpower isn't sufficient for explaining how we abide by our resolutions, but is occasionally necessary. Though an agent's all-out belief in her success accounts for much, there will undoubtedly be occasions when the high informational threshold that constitutes the stability of one's resolution is overcome and type-1 deliberation is forced open once again. The moment when one feels this happening, and the resultant judgement shift that swiftly follows, is the moment where we need our will to compel us not to reconsider our resolution to ϕ. Herein lies the true efficacy of Holton's notion of rehearsal. At this point, one does not all-out believe that one will succeed and thus our resolution to ϕ is temporarily suspended whilst we reconsider it. At this point, and only at this point, do we rehearse the reasons for our resolution in an attempt to close off type-1 deliberation once more. Given that the will is a limited resource, if we were constantly required to employ it to successfully resolve to ϕ, we would soon give up on most, if not all, of our resolutions through sheer fatigue. The fact is that, more often than not, we don't re-open our type 1 deliberation and therefore have no need to call upon our willpower to abide by our resolution. Hence, the will is at best a necessary tool for an already struggling agent, rather than an essential component for the successful execution of our resolutions.

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[31] In 'What Good is a Will?', Velleman argues that the will is an evolutionary by-product which lacks a specific purpose. Though he falls short of doing away with the will altogether, it is hard to see how, on such an extreme cognitivist view, any meaningful role for willpower can be found, despite Velleman's protestations to the contrary.

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