

Weakness of the Will

Much of what we do, we do against our better judgment. Why? What drives us to act contrary to our beliefs, intentions, and values? How can we better live up to our commitments? Is it always a *bad idea* to succumb to our impulses? Are there any insights to be gained from ancient thought? In this course, we will try to answer these questions by tracing the concept of *akrasia*, or “weakness of the will,” through the history of philosophy and psychology, beginning with the ancients and culminating in contemporary research.

Required Texts

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Epictetus, *Handbook*

- All other readings available in a Course Reader and on the course website

Class Schedule and Readings**Weeks 1-2** Introduction

“Cookies” video, from *Frog and Toad are Friends*

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## Ancient thought

Plato, *Protagoras*, selections

Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, selections

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII

**Week 3** Weakness of the will, within and without religion

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books I, II, and VIII, selections

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay

**Week 4** Early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology

Sigmund Freud, “The Anatomy of a Mental Personality”

B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior*, selections

**Weeks 5-6** Later 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy

Donald Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?”

Davidson, “Paradoxes of Irrationality”

Gary Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of the Will”

Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”

David Velleman, “The Guise of the Good”

**Weeks 7-8** Contemporary psychology

Nalini Ambady, video lecture, “How Subtle Cues Shape Behavior and Performance”

Nisbett and Wilson, “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes”

Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, selections

Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational*, selections

Adam Pearson, et al., “The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism”

Deborah Hall and Keith Payne, “Unconscious Influences of Attitudes and Challenges to Self-Control”

**Week 9**      Making philosophical sense of the psychology

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Bryce Huebner, “Trouble with Stereotypes for Spinozan Minds”

Tamar Gendler, “Alief and Belief,” selections

Gendler, “Alief in Action (and Reaction)”, selections

Eric Schwitzgebel, “Acting Contrary to Our Professed Beliefs”

**Week 10**      Is weakness of the will always irrational?

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Jonathan Bennett, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn”

Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*, selections

Richard Holton, “Inverse Akrasia and Weakness of Will”

Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, selections

**Weeks 11-12**      Can we trust our intuitions?

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Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”

Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, “How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work?”

Joshua May and Richard Holton, “What in the World is Weakness of Will?”

Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Turning the Trolley”

**Weeks 12-13**      Where to go from here? Philosophical insights

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Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II, selections

Epictetus, *Handbook*

Richard Holton, “How is Strength of Will Possible?”

Hagop Sarkissian, “Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy”

Sarkissian, “Confucius and the Effortless Life of Virtue”

**Week 14**      Where to go from here? Empirical approaches

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Re-watch Ambady, video lecture, “How Subtle Cues Shape Behavior and Performance”

Virginia Valian, “Beyond Gender Schemas”

Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, selections

Peter Gollwitzer et al., “The Power of Planning: Self-Control by Effective Goal-striving”

Gordon Moskowitz, “On the Control Over Stereotype Activation and Stereotype Inhibition”