

from trying to decrease the urge's strength (say, by vividly picturing the pie as well-chewed chewing tobacco), successful resistance might not be beyond his reach – even if that urge is his strongest desire at the time. And generalizing from Kennett and Smith's point that desires need not 'transmit' their full 'force across the means-end relation' (69), any desire the agent may possess to refrain from trying to reduce the urge's strength need not be nearly as strong as the urge itself. But then, as I have implied, he may want more to try to reduce the urge's strength than not to try this, and he may immediately make a corresponding attempt. If it were true that 'whenever we do something – and so ... whenever we try to do something – we want to do that thing more than we want to do anything else we can do' (63), this attempt would be precluded by the man's strongest desire at the time. But, as I have explained, the quoted claim is false.

Elsewhere, I have argued that a theorist need not appeal to higher-order desires to make the point that an actional exercise of self-control is possible in a scenario like Frog and Toad's (Mele 1987: 73–74). Brief attention to this claim will reinforce the point about exercising self-control. Suppose that Toad is a relatively simple-minded fellow: he never thinks in terms of motivation. His therapist has advised him that when he thinks he should stop eating cookies, the picturing technique would help him stop. If, as Kennett and Smith claim, one can have a relatively strong desire for something x while having no desire at all for a recognized means to x , then, in principle, Toad may have a relatively strong desire to continue eating cookies while having no desire, or a relatively weak desire, to refrain from trying the picturing technique (see n. 1). And even if his desire to keep eating cookies is his strongest desire at the time, his desire to try the picturing technique in order to bring it about that he stops eating cookies may be stronger than his desire to refrain from trying the technique (cf. Mele 1987: 69–72 and 1995: 49–54). But then Toad, like the more sophisticated Frog, may be sufficiently motivated to try the technique even while he is engaged in eating cookies.

Perhaps, given his present motivational condition, Toad is in no position simply to stop eating cookies immediately. But it does not follow from this that, given his present condition, Toad cannot intentionally do something with the hope that it will stop his binge. And why would Toad want to do such a thing? Perhaps because he believes that he should do something to halt his binge and has a generic desire to do whatever he believes he should do. Or perhaps because he wants to avoid making himself sick and believes that the picturing technique might turn the trick. Of course, Toad might also have a desire simply to stop eating immediately. But even if his present condition precludes his *simply* stopping, he may be able actively to exercise self-control in a way that will help him stop.

To be sure, my suggestions here rely upon Kennett and Smith's claim that a desire may fail 'to transmit its force across the means-end relation' (69). I happen to agree with that claim and with a more general version of it (Mele 1987: 67–72 and 1995: 49–54). But my point is that if the claim is granted, then once we recognize that we can do more intentionally at a time than what we want most to do, the door is open to intentional, active exercises of synchronic self-control. These exercises, being intentional actions and being subject to the agent's intentional control, go well beyond the exercises that Kennett and Smith urge are possible. In stopping where they do, they underestimate our prospects for synchronic self-control.

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Synchronic self-control is always non-actional

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In 'Frog and Toad lose control' we set up a puzzle (Kennett and Smith 1996). Is it possible to reconcile the fact that people can exercise synchronic self-control, on the one hand, with a truism in the philosophy of action, on the other? The truism is that whenever people do something intentionally at some time, and so whenever they try to do something, they want to do that thing more than they want to do anything else they believe they can do at that time. But when they exercise synchronic self-control they identify what they most want to do, at a certain time, as something that they shouldn't do, and they try for that reason, at that very time, not to do it.

There are really two problems here. First, what does it mean to say that people identify what they most want to do as something that they shouldn't do? What does that 'should' mean? And second, how is it

possible for people to do what they believe they should, in that sense of 'should'? Our answer to the first question is that people can truly believe it to be irrational to do what they most want to do. For example, Frog might most want to eat cookies, so satisfying his weaker desire for immediate pleasure and frustrating his stronger desire to be healthy, because his desire to be healthy, unlike his desire for immediate pleasure, has not transferred its force across the means–end relation.¹ Our answer to the second question is that people are capable of having thoughts that restore their rationality, or which at the very least cause them to mimic being rational. For example, despite his profile of desires, we can imagine that Frog has the capacity to have certain thoughts which enable the transmission of his desire for health across the means–end relation. At a certain time, then, though Frog wants most to eat a cookie he might not do so. He might have certain thoughts – perhaps he thinks of cookies as lumps of fat – which cause him to want more to refrain from eating a cookie, and so, when he acts, refrains from eating a cookie instead.

Our solution to the puzzle is thus that some exercises of self-control consist in the havings of thoughts which restore our rationality, thoughts which we have the capacity to have, but which do not themselves count as actions we perform. The capacity to have such thoughts is, as we say, a back-up mechanism which enables us to be means–end rational when we would otherwise have failed (Kennett and Smith 1996: 70). Alfred Mele usefully calls these cases of 'non-actional' self-control (Mele 1997, this issue: 120). He is sceptical 'whether events that are not actions properly count as exercises of self-control', but we do not share his scepticism. People exercise control over their own desires by forming desires in accordance with the means–end principle. But the formation of such desires is not an action. More generally, people exercise control over their own thought processes simply by having the thoughts that they are disposed to have, at least in so far as they thereby exercise their capacity to have thoughts that follow rational patterns. But the havings of such thoughts are not actions. It therefore seems to us that there is no real stretch involved in describing those havings of thoughts which enable the transmission of the force of our desires across the means–end relation as exercises of self-control.

This is not Mele's real complaint about what we say in any case. More significantly, he complains that we incorrectly state the truism in philoso-

¹ In 'Frog and Toad lose control' we also discuss the possibility that Frog is irrational to eat cookies not because his doing so is means–end irrational, but rather because his doing so displays a failure of orthonomy (Kennett and Smith: 65–67). In order to keep things simple, in this paper we will focus on cases of means–end irrationality. We discuss the varieties of self-control elsewhere (Pettit and Smith 1993, Kennett forthcoming).

phy of action, and that our incorrect statement leads us to ignore an important way in which people can exercise synchronic self-control by performing actions. Here is the example he gives in the attempt to show that our statement is incorrect. Once Mele had three desires: a desire to read philosophy article A, a weaker desire to read philosophy article B, and an even weaker desire to sip iced tea. What he most wanted to do was to read philosophy article A. But what he did, in the end, was read philosophy article A while sipping iced tea. Apparent counterexample: Mele sipped iced tea even though, of the things he thought he could do, he wanted to read philosophy article B more than he wanted to sip iced tea.

We do not think that this is a counterexample. We think that what Mele most wanted to do was to read philosophy article A while sipping iced tea. In our view, he preferred doing this to all of the following: reading philosophy article A while not sipping iced tea; reading philosophy article B while sipping iced tea; reading philosophy article B while not sipping iced tea; reading neither philosophy article, but sipping iced tea; reading neither philosophy article and not sipping iced tea. In a perfectly straightforward and natural sense, then – the only sense someone could have in mind in stating the truism – we think that Mele did do what he wanted most to do, of the things he believed he could do.

Mele does not like this description of the case he has in mind. He thinks that though he most wanted to read philosophy article A simpliciter, because he could also satisfy his desire to sip iced tea at the same time as reading philosophy article A, he did that as well. He thus denies that he had any desire at all to read philosophy article A while sipping iced tea, and so denies that this is what he most wanted to do. But we can see no good reason to deny that, at least in the circumstances described, he does desire most to read philosophy article A while sipping iced tea. We are therefore happy to describe the case he has in mind in our own preferred way.

This point about the proper description of Mele's case is important, and not just because it enables us to avoid his counterexample to our statement of the truism.² Mele bases his description of an alternative way in which, as he sees things, we can exercise synchronic self-control – an alternative in which the exercise of synchronic self-control is an action (see also Mele 1987: 67–72) – on his own preferred description of this case. Given that

² In fact we agree with Mele that the truism 'is not easy to formulate accurately and in a way that avoids obvious counterexamples' (Mele 1997: 120). Given that we state the truism simply in order to bring out the puzzle about self-control, we would therefore not be surprised if our statement of it were liable to counterexample. We would not be worried either. Our statement of the truism only needs to be accurate enough for us to both bring out and solve the puzzle about self-control.

we wish to discuss Mele's alternative in what follows, but cannot go along with his description of it, we will therefore have to begin by redescribing it in the way we prefer. We do not think that any point of substance is lost in this redescription, but we signal the fact in case we are wrong.³

Suppose Frog has a desire for immediate pleasure and a stronger desire for health. Because he is means-end irrational, he ends up desiring to eat cookies more than he desires to refrain from eating cookies. His extrinsic desire to eat cookies is therefore stronger than it should be in the following sense: if he were means-end rational, his desire would be weaker than his desire to refrain from eating cookies, but in fact it is stronger. In addition, however, suppose that Frog's desire for health combines with his belief that he can promote his health by doing something that reduces the strength of his extrinsic desire to eat cookies so as to produce an extrinsic desire to reduce the strength of his extrinsic desire to eat cookies. And suppose further that what he believes he can do is to have images of eating frogs' legs while eating cookies. Now consider his options.

Frog can eat a cookie while doing something that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs (so satisfying both his extrinsic desire to eat cookies and his extrinsic desire to reduce the strength of his desire to eat cookies); he can eat a cookie while not doing anything that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs, or indeed anything else of that sort (so satisfying his extrinsic desire to eat cookies, but leaving his extrinsic desire to reduce the strength of his desire to eat cookies unsatisfied); or he can simply refrain from eating cookies (so satisfying his extrinsic desire to refrain from eating cookies, but thereby leaving both his stronger extrinsic desire to eat cookies and his extrinsic desire to reduce the strength of his desire to eat cookies unsatisfied). What does he desire most to do?

This situation is much the same as the one Mele faced when he decided to read philosophy article A while sipping iced tea. Given what we said about that case, we should therefore say that, in this case, Frog clearly most wants to eat a cookie while doing something that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs. Moreover, Mele tells us that this is what Frog should do if he is to exercise synchronic self-control – he should eat a cookie while doing something that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs – and he tells us that this provides an alternative to our own account of how Frog can exercise synchronic self-control in the circumstances of action that we describe at the outset, an alternative in which Frog's exercise of self-control turns out to be an action. Synchronic self-control is made possible in this case, he tells us, because Frog acts to satisfy more than one desire at a time, and the satisfaction of one of his desires

results in the undermining of the strength of another. Even if we are right, then, that some exercises of synchronic self-control are not actions, some exercises of synchronic self-control are actions. So Mele argues, at any rate. But we remain unconvinced.

To begin, we do not think that Mele describes a case of synchronic self-control. In Mele's case, what Frog wants most to do, at a time, is to eat a cookie while doing something that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs. But what Frog thinks he should do, at that time – what he thinks he would do if he were means-end rational – is refrain from eating cookies altogether. What Frog does, then, when he acts, is not what he believes he should do. Rather he does what he most wants to do despite the fact that he believes he should do something completely different instead. It therefore seems to follow that Mele describes a case in which Frog is out of control, in at least some sense. But in what sense? The only answer available seems to be that Frog is out of control in the sense of having lost synchronic self-control. Frog has lost synchronic self-control because if he were in control – that is, if he were to engage in the exercise of synchronic self-control at that time – he would not eat a cookie at all at that time, whereas in fact he does eat a cookie. But if this is right then Mele can hardly have described a case in which, on the contrary, Frog succeeds in exercising synchronic self-control.⁴

Does Mele describe a case in which Frog exercises self-control in any sense at all? By eating cookies while doing something that causes him to have images of eating frogs' legs Frog does manage, over time, to diminish the strength of his desire to eat cookies. If Frog performs this action because he believes that the upshot will be that, at the later time, when the strength of his desire to eat cookies is sufficiently diminished, he will then desire most to do what he will then believe he should do in order to be means-end rational, then it seems to us that this does perhaps count as a case of self-control. But, in the terminology of 'Frog and Toad lose control', what it looks to be is a case of diachronic, rather than synchronic, self-control (Kennett and Smith 1996: 68).

Cases of diachronic self-control do not, as such, provide us with the same puzzle as cases of synchronic self-control. They do not conflict, as such, with the truism because when an agent exercises diachronic self-control what she believes is that, absent the exercise of diachronic self-control, there will be a conflict between the strongest desires she has at a

³ See also footnote 4 below.

⁴ Note that this objection goes through even if Mele is allowed to describe the case in his own preferred terms. If Frog wants most to eat a cookie, and he does so, but he also wants to reduce the strength of his desire to eat cookies, and he does that as well, then it still remains the case that he fails, at that time, to do what he would do if he were means-end rational. He therefore fails to exercise synchronic self-control.

future time, and the beliefs she has at that future time about what she should then do. But it is consistent with someone's having such beliefs, and her acting upon them, that at the time at which she acts – the time at which she exercises diachronic self-control – she both believes that she should act in that way and wants most to do so. This is not to say that all exercises of diachronic self-control are actions, of course. Indeed, as we will see presently, some exercises of diachronic self-control are non-actional. It is simply to say that it is easy to see how the exercise of diachronic self-control could be, and in fact typically is, an action.

Synchronic self-control is very different in this regard. Suppose that, at a certain time, through means–end irrationality, Frog ends up desiring most to eat a cookie. Given the truism, if Frog succeeds in performing any action at all at that time then he must eat a cookie. He must eat a cookie because there is simply no strongest desire available to cause any other action, including an action of synchronic self-control. It does not follow that the exercise of synchronic self-control is impossible, however. For, as we show, he can still exercise non-actional self-control. Suppose that, at the very time at which Frog desires most to eat a cookie, he has certain thoughts which prevent his desire from having its characteristic effect. He thinks of cookies as lumps of fat, and these thoughts enable the transmission of the force of his desire to be healthy across the means–end relation, so causing him to desire most to refrain from eating a cookie instead. If Frog has such thoughts, and if he has them because of his tendency to have the thoughts that it is rational for him to have in his circumstances, then we say that Frog exercises synchronic self-control. When next he acts what he does is just what he believes he should do: he refrains from eating another cookie.

Our claim, then, generalising on the basis of this case, is that all exercises of synchronic self-control are non-actional. They are non-actional because there is no suitable strongest desire to cause an exercise of actional synchronic self-control. Importantly, however, note that while we claim that all exercises of synchronic self-control are non-actional, we do not claim that all exercises of non-actional self-control are synchronic. Indeed, we deny that this is so. Suppose that at a certain time Frog has the thoughts that we describe, and that he has them for the reasons we give, but that these thoughts do not prevent the strongest desire he has at that time, his desire to eat a cookie, from having its characteristic effect. Frog will then eat a cookie despite the fact that he is thinking about cookies as lumps of fat. But if Frog's having these thoughts eventually enables the transmission of the force of his desire to be healthy across the means–end relation so that, at a later time, he ends up desiring most to refrain from eating a cookie, then we say that Frog's having those thoughts still constitutes an

exercise of self-control, but that what it constitutes is an exercise of diachronic, rather than synchronic, self-control. His exercise of diachronic self-control is still non-actional, however, because, by hypothesis, his having the thoughts he has is not prompted by a desire to have such thoughts but rather by his tendency to have the thoughts that it is rational for him to have in the circumstances in which he finds himself.

The claim that there is no suitable strongest desire available to cause exercises of synchronic self-control might be contested. Given that the connection between desires and actions is causal, and given that causes precede their effects, it follows that the desires that do the causing of our actions are the desires that an agent has at a certain instant, and that what they cause are the actions that the agent performs at a slightly later instant. But if this is right then isn't it at least logically possible for there to be a suitable strongest desire to cause an agent's exercise of synchronic self-control? Even if the exercise of synchronic self-control does take place at a time at which the agent desires most to act in a certain way, and even if the exercise of synchronic self-control does prevent those desires from having their characteristic effect, why can't the exercise of synchronic self-control itself have been caused by the strongest desire the agent had at a slightly earlier instant? Surely it is plausible to suppose that it was caused by such a desire if, at the earlier instant, the agent desired most to have certain thoughts that would prevent the desires she was going to have at the next instant from having their characteristic effect.

The problem with this suggestion is that the desires that cause an agent's actions don't simply initiate them. Actions take time to occur, so the desires that cause them must both initiate and causally sustain them over time. Consider, for example, someone who desires most to raise her arm, and who acts on this desire, but who then loses her desire to raise her arm before the act is completed. What we notice is that the act of arm-raising itself ceases as soon as the desire is lost. If the arm was half way up then it doesn't keep on rising simply because it was initiated by the agent's desire to raise her arm all the way. Her desire to raise her arm must causally sustain the arm-raising throughout the time that it occurs. Similarly, given that it takes time to have a thought or engage in a piece of imagining that constitutes an exercise of synchronic self-control – even a fleeting thought takes time to occur, as does the flash of an image before your mind – the desires that cause a thought or an imagining must both initiate and causally sustain them over time. A dilemma therefore suggests itself.

On one horn what the agent desires most to do is to have a thought that prevents her from ever acquiring a different strongest desire in a few moments time. For example, the agent might truly believe that she will acquire a desire to eat a cookie, which will then be her strongest desire, in

a few moments time if she does not think of cookies as lumps of fat over the next few moments, but desire most, right here and now, to have such thoughts. In that case, though we can easily imagine her desire both initiating and causally sustaining her having of that thought over the next few moments, the having of the thought that she has, and so the exercise of self-control that it constitutes if this thought has its desired effect, then evidently occurs prior to, and prevents the having of, the desire to eat a cookie. The exercise of self-control, though actional, is then at best diachronic.

On the other horn of the dilemma what the agent desires most to do is not to have a thought that prevents her from ever acquiring a different strongest desire in a few moments time, but rather to have a thought that prevents the strongest desire that she will in fact have at the very next instant from having its characteristic effect. For example, right here and now an agent might desire most to think about cookies as lumps of fat at the very next moment because she truly believes that at that very next moment she will have undergone a shift in her desires and will then desire most to eat a cookie, and believes that thinking about cookies as lumps of fat will prevent that desire from having its characteristic effect.

But if this is what the agent desires most to do then it is hard to see how her desire really could cause her to have a proper thought. Even if she does believe that thinking about cookies as lumps of fat would prevent her desire to eat a cookie from having its characteristic effect, her present desire, which will disappear at the very next moment, could at best initiate such a thought, a thought that would itself disappear at the next moment after that when there is no longer any desire to causally sustain its occurrence. The agent would then simply act on the strongest desire she has at that next instant: her desire to eat a cookie. She would eat a cookie, and so fail to exercise synchronic self-control at all.⁵

Or rather, she would fail to exercise synchronic self-control if she refused to exercise anything other than actional self-control. She might well still exercise non-actional self-control, though, because it is by no means impossible for an agent to desire most to eat a cookie and also, simultaneously, to have a tendency to have the thoughts that it is rational for her to

have in her circumstances. There is therefore no obstacle at all to supposing that an agent who desires most to eat a cookie may yet think about cookies as lumps of fat, a thought that prevents her desire from having its characteristic effect, if we suppose that what initiates and causally sustains her thought is her tendency to have the thoughts that it is rational for her to have in her circumstances. Non-actional synchronic self-control thus seems to be perfectly intelligible. Actional synchronic self-control is quite unintelligible.⁶

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⁶ We would like to thank Al Mele for his very helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

⁵ Does our argument support the stronger conclusion that actional exercises of synchronic self-control are logically impossible, or merely the weaker conclusion that, given the empirical fact that the thoughts that constitute our exercises of synchronic self-control have to last longer than a single instant, so we never in fact exercise actional synchronic self-control? Those who think that the concept of a thought that lasts for a single instant is incoherent should think that it supports the stronger conclusion. Those who think that that concept is coherent should think that it supports, at best, the weaker conclusion.