

Rational Resolve as Magnification: A Response to Holton

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In his paper “Rational Resolve,” Richard Holton raises two questions about resolutions: first, the descriptive question of how they work, and second, the normative question of whether it is rational to persist in them. Holton answers the latter, but he leaves the former question alone, assuming that resolutions work. However, central to Holton’s account of rational resolve is the idea that resolutions “entrench” a previous rational decision, that any rationality in obedience to resolutions gets its rationality from some previous source. Because Holton assumes the descriptive account of this previous source, the origins of his argument remain blurry. The aim of this paper is to outline the foundation Holton assumes, and to give a descriptive account of how and why resolutions work.

In order to give this account, I will argue that Holton is wrong to claim that resolutions add no extra features of rationality and will instead propose that resolutions add a multiplication or magnification feature, one dependent on the reason the resolution is based upon. I will argue that this extra feature of resolution works by an agent knowingly entering into a test of will—a test of will that I will show cannot be escaped.

HOLTON AND THE WORK OF RESOLUTIONS

In investigating the rationality of resolutions, Holton first considers the nature of practical rationality, and then pivots to the bootstrapping problem. The bootstrapping problem surmises that if resolutions are just a special kind of intention, then they should not create extra reasons to act that we would not have

otherwise (Holton 513). If I have no reason to jump in a lake then certainly intending or resolving to jump in a lake will not furnish some new reason to do so. Holton sees two ways out of the bootstrapping problem: either resolutions *do* create extra reasons or we embrace a two-tier account of resolutions. Holton ultimately rejects that resolutions are able to provide extra reasons on their own. Instead, he endorses a two-tier method; if resolving to V is rational, it is because it was rational to decide to V in the *first place* and the rationality of the original decision is *conferred* onto the resolution. Holton claims that on the two-tier account resolutions do not *create* reasons but merely *entrench* the original rationality through a transfer principle (515). Holton's account is therefore dependent on what I will explore: an account of resolutions and why they work in the first place.

To push back on Holton's entrenchment account, we may ask: why do resolutions entrench reasons? Why do they not merely rest on the surface, blown away with other intentions in the face of foreseen temptation when it may be rational for our judgement to shift (Holton 507)? Faced with the enticing Sirens, Odysseus prevented his own suicidal action by tying himself to the mast. Odysseus was held by rope, but with what do resolutions bind us? Holton's entrenchment presumes some sort of *extra* strength or durability is present. The rationality from the original intention is somehow more protected than if it were *not* entrenched. So, how can a resolution help protect the original intention more than one non-resolved, especially if Holton denies resolutions create any extra reasons?

RESOLUTIONS AS SELF-PROMISES

If a resolution *did* furnish extra reasons, then the bootstrapping problem would be solved and there would be no real mystery. Consider something we do think creates extra reasons—promises. If I promise you I will jump in a lake then we do think that I have created a reason, even though I had none before. What if it is argued that resolutions are simply *self*-promises? This would address the first horn of the dilemma; anything we resolve (promise ourselves) to do would immediately become rational. This seems wrong; so, we attend to self-promises next.

Labeling resolutions as self-promises is enticing, yet the structure of a self-promise is inherently impotent, which would leave resolutions just as impotent to entrench rationality. Unlike a standard promise between two parties, within a self-promise a single individual plays both roles: promisor and promisee. In a standard promise, if the promisee releases the promisor the reason for acting is terminated. The promise can be settled by fulfilling the promise or by being released. So, if I am both the promisee and the promisor, how can a self-promise bind me in the face of temptation? If resolutions are merely self-promises, what is to stop me (the promisor) from releasing myself (the promisee) from my promise?

If resolutions were self-promises we would expect broken resolutions to have

no impact on us, akin to the way I am no longer impacted by a settled promise. Yet, somehow resolutions remain entrenched and continue to hold psychological sway over us in a way that settled promises do not. It seems where we can be released from promises we can only *break* resolutions. A broken resolution is *not* the same as a settled self-promise.¹ I suggest that resolutions, unlike self-promises, have what I will call a “one-way feature” that, once lowered, cannot be lifted off. This one-way feature will provide the descriptive account of *why* resolutions work, the description that grounds Holton’s normative account and provides the explanation for entrenchment.

In order to describe how this entrenching one-way feature works, I must first show that while resolutions do not *create* extra reasons, they do add something. This something may be vaguely described for the time being as some *magnification* of mental grief, a feeling of dissonance. I will spend the rest of this paper explaining *how* and *why* resolutions generate this extra feature.

HOW RESOLUTIONS WORK: A DEPENDENT EXTRA FEATURE

Holton was tempted to recognize some extra feature of resolution, but he ultimately rejected it. I will argue that the force of some extra feature was felt because it exists. As argued above, the extra feature that makes a resolution’s entrenchment resilient is not the *creative* feature of promises.² However, it is a subtle feature, one that is present in every resolution but its effect not always noticeable due to its dependence on the original reasoning. Consider three people: Alvin, Beatrice, and Christine.

Alvin wakes up and desires a salad for lunch. The whim strikes him, and he resolves to order one at lunch. When lunch arrives, Alvin realizes his appetite has changed and that a hamburger is preferred; he orders the hamburger instead. What work has this resolution done? Since Alvin made his lunch resolution based on nothing but incidental whim and resolutions do not *create* reasons, this resolution is empty. Alvin will not feel any dissonance; he will not feel any *extra* weight due to his resolution. The obstinate resolver aside, it is more likely that Alvin will brush off the idea as exactly what it was—a whim.

Beatrice is in a different situation. Beatrice has been told by her doctor that her cholesterol is dangerously high. If Beatrice wishes to live a longer and an overall better life, she is told she must eat a salad each day for lunch and avoid red meat. Beatrice believes this assessment and does want to live a longer and overall better life; at a distance from temptation, she understands and agrees she must eat the salad, even though she loathes it. Beatrice wakes up and, considering this diagnosis, resolves to eat a salad for lunch, knowing that she will be tempted to order her habitual hamburger instead. Beatrice arrives at lunch and breaks her resolution. The resolution itself was not strong enough to hold Beatrice back. Will Beatrice feel dissonance? In this case, because the original reason to order the salad

was strong, the resolution *will* add to his dissonance. Not only will Beatrice feel the weight of knowingly harming her health, she will also feel the *extra* weight of breaking her resolution, of being weak willed.

Christine is in the identical situation as Beatrice but with one crucial difference. Christine does *not* resolve to eat salad for lunch. Just like Beatrice, Christine believes the doctor and thinks it is best to eat the salads, but, unlike Beatrice, she has not resolved to order a salad.³ Unlike Beatrice, Christine is in a vague middle ground, knowing what she should do, believing why she needs to do it, and desiring the results of the action yet still avoiding committing to it. Avoiding taking a stance, Christine is in a position akin to Harry Frankfurt's "wanton," the essential characteristic being "that he does not care about his will (68)."⁴ When Christine orders a hamburger instead of the salad, she will feel and think *different* than Beatrice. While Christine may still understand what they are doing is irrational, they will not have broken a resolution. They will not feel the extra weight of weakness that comes with explicitly failing a test of will; instead, they are more likely to continue thinking: "Yes, I should get the salad, and when I *really* want to I will." Unlike Beatrice, Christine is poised to remain in self-deceit. Without resolution, Christine can begin to bury their head in the sand, moving further from rational action.

Between our characters we can examine the subtle extra feature of resolutions. Resolutions are not some powerful extra reason that overwhelms the agent, for Beatrice failed at her task just like the unresolved Christine. Yet, there must be some additional feature within resolve or else Beatrice and Christine would have an identical psychological response. The answer lies in case Alvin. Even though Alvin resolved just like Beatrice, we don't think Alvin *should* feel any dissonance—Alvin's *resolution* was null because their *rationality* was null. Alvin's resolution was made on a whim with no real reason to eat the salad, the same act Beatrice had *very good* reason to do. The extra feature of a resolution is not a *creative* one, one that creates reasons *ex nihilo*; it is a multiplication or a magnification feature, one *dependent* on the reason it is employed. Alvin's resolution was ineffective because his reason was empty; it was zero, and, no matter how large the multiplier, the result will always be zero. No matter how powerful the microscope, nothing will be seen if there is no specimen on the slide.

This extra feature of resolutions is not a silver bullet, one that immediately steels the will against temptation; instead, because of its dependence on rationality, it helps transfer the strength of the original reason that is determined through rational deliberation—just like Holton suggested. This account, seeks to meet rationality and the resolutions that flow from it at the most basic level—the deliberative process made in the face of reality.⁵

If the original reason for making the resolution is believed rational by the agent, resolution is "effective." If it is not rational then the resolution is still present, but its effect is not seen because of its dependence on the original

rationality.⁶ Likewise, the stronger the reason the more effective the resolution. By “effective” I do not mean successful. The effect of a resolution is not to infallibly steel the will so that the action is achieved; the will is vital, but it is separate from the feature of resolutions I am discussing here.⁷ Instead, effective here means that the resolution is activated, that it does have an effect on the situation.

Resolutions have a function akin to sight; they orient the agent, clarify their problem, and hold it in magnified focus, setting the stage for the agent in calling down a challenge on themselves to achieve this clear task. By magnifying the rationality of the original decision, resolutions clarify and multiply the motivational force of the original rationality, this extra clarification and force enlarge the dissonance felt through failure. Like Holton said, this is an entrenchment, a transfer of knowledge and rationality, but the trench’s depth reflects the rationality of the original resolve. Now we can turn to the final question: why don’t rational judgment shifts in the face of temptation release us from the extra feature of resolutions; in short, *why* do resolutions work?

WHY RESOLUTIONS WORK: A ONE-WAY FEATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

If what I have argued is correct, then resolutions really do add an extra feature, a kind of amplification of mental dissonance which is perpetrated through magnification of the original rationality. We have all broken resolutions and felt a sense of guilt, not only about the failure to do what was rational but about the failure *itself*. If I resolve to quit smoking every day and fail every day, after a month or two, I am more likely to quit *resolving* than to quit smoking. If I must be weak willed then at least let me be honest about it; why keep resolving when all it makes me is a hypocrite?

I feel this way exactly because the resolution has played its role well. Each time I resolve to stop smoking I enter into a test of will; each time I smoke I fail the test. I quit resolving instead of smoking because I no longer wish to be a failure or at least to so clearly see myself as one. If I continue to smoke, knowing it is irrational to do so, but do not resolve to stop, then I have not entered into a test of will; therefore, I cannot fail it. I may be slowly ruining my health and *implicitly* weak willed but at least I am not *explicitly* weak willed. Like Christine in the example above, I may still feel or even *know* smoking is irrational but until I declare I am *really* trying I can live in an uncommitted vagueness—one where I try without resolving, one I can hide in when I fail. At the very least, a position of non-resolution is a set up for self-deceit and wantonness, a position that resolution fights against.

Resolutions pull us from vagueness and this non-committal attitude. They magnify and clarify the situation and the rational decision made to address it. They acknowledge the problem, decide on a solution, hold it in focus, set clear and definite rules of the test, and, finally, get our agreement to enter into this test of

will. We metaphorically “see” in better definition and sharpness; a vision that makes our commitment unequivocal instead of amorphous and vague. This may still seem the *how* of the work of resolutions, but it is the nature of how resolutions work that explain *why* they work. The one-way feature of resolutions, the reason that a resolution cannot be escaped like a self-promise, is that of knowledge. Resolutions work by an agent’s knowledge of entering into a test of will, one that is based in rationality.

To describe this one-way feature of knowledge, consider a typical resolution. If I resolve to quit smoking,⁸ I am entering into a type of test. There are only so many ways to exit this test: I can quit smoking and pass; I can smoke and fail; or I can quit the test, claiming it was bunk—that my judgment was off earlier or that it is more rational now. Unless there was a substantial change to justify the judgment shift, the test of resolution remains.⁹ Pass, fail, or quit, we are still affected by our rational resolutions because they show us our failings, and we know it; we ask them to judge us and they do. We cannot be released from them like a self-promise for the reasons shown previously, and we cannot worm out of them through a foreseen judgement shift for this is exactly why we asked them to judge us in the first place. But if we were to try, where would we look?

Consider the most ambiguous exit from the test of resolution—that of quitting. This seems to be the best way out; after all, why can’t I quit a test I set up and I am grading? If I am the test-taker and the test administrator, why not tear up the test and walk out? The answer is that you can. You can claim the test was bunk and walk away, but I argue that you cannot “forget” your weakness, the action of quitting a resolution you knew to be rational. In normal cases, a proper rational resolution, one that fulfills the characteristics I outlined above, will not allow an agent to dive totally back into self-deceit without dissonance or shame.¹⁰ The act of resolving clarifies your reasoning and endorses it; to then decry the test because you no longer like it is to try to escape back to vagueness, to a place where deceit is easier.¹¹

I am not claiming that self-deceit is impossible after a resolution. I am claiming that in standard cases an agent cannot immediately and indefinitely pretend that the resolution was irrational to avoid the dissonance of the one-way extra feature of a resolution.¹² This self-deceit may certainly take place over a longer period of time. I may convince myself that my smoking is not so bad after all, but it will not be instantaneous to dodge a feeling of dissonance at the knowledge of my weakness of will. There may be other types of forgetfulness that complicate this account, but I will have to leave these objections for a different place.¹³ The test of resolve is powered by the one-way feature of knowledge; it is a trap that once we enter into, we have no escape. We have only to pass, fail, or know we were too afraid to find out which of the two we’d score—its own admittance of failure. Like the proverbial apple, the price of knowledge is that it is not so easily forgotten.

So, resolutions are entrenchments, but in order to explain why the

entrenchment works we have embraced a subtle extra feature of resolutions, a feature dependent on the particular situation and its rationality. This feature clarifies and magnifies the rationality of our original resolve, multiplying the justificatory and motivational force it finds there. This multiplication factor amplifies dissonance when we fail in our resolve due to the extra clarity and force it brings. I have described this extra factor as a one-way feature; one-way because once it is entered into it cannot be so easily escaped. This one-way feature is plausible because resolutions are powered and sustained through knowledge—the knowledge that we are asking ourselves to judge ourselves—our resolutions acting as our own indelible rulers, mirrors reflecting acts we’d rather not see, instruments in the arduous call to know thyself.

NOTES

1. One may say we can *quit* resolutions but I will show how this is not an escape route later on.

2. It is more likely closer to what Holton had in mind when he mentioned extra reasons “even though these are not reasons that the agent will consider” when in the face of temptation. Holton turns from here to what he calls unreflective dispositions. If there is an extra feature of resolution it is that it gives us a reason to be unreflective and arational.

3. Note that this is not a case of someone who judges that a short life lived on red meat is better than a long life lived on vegetables.

4. Like the wanton, Christine does not want to decide her will. She wants to remain in a place characterized by indecision and lack of second order will. This may not be the case for Christine currently, but a position of non-resolution certainly sets Christine up for wantonness.

5. This account meets the standard that Holton says extra features of resolve don’t—that they are not descriptively accurate. Holton was concerned that though we prefer to be resolute rather than weak, this preference is not strong enough to outweigh temptation in which it would be rational to persist. I agree and this description can account for this, allowing for both dissonance in failure and yet failure all the same. It also addresses many difficulties surrounding resolutions: why are they effective for some but not others; why do they work in certain situations but not others; why do they seem to be on a sliding scale of importance, working only sometimes?

6. It is also plausible that a resolution made without a reason is not a resolution at all but simply a whim or passing fancy. But this is a peripheral contention and can be put aside for now.

7. There is an easy conflation of resolutions as I am discussing and resolve as will power. I offer a quick metaphor. If you were driving in a downpour, the side of resolutions I am investigating would be the headlights and the windshield wipers, but the will is the transmission of the car. Resolutions help you see where you are going, but no matter how clear the sight, without the transmission (resolution in the sense of willpower) you go nowhere. The interaction of the will and resolutions is worthy of much examination elsewhere. Some of this examination is taken up by Holton in “How is Strength of Will Possible?”

8. Let's assume I consider this the rational and overall best decision.

9. See above for Holton's rules of thumb for legitimate judgment shifts. In this case it may look like a massive medical reversal that smoking cigarettes is actually beneficial for your health. If health concerns were the main reason for quitting, the resolution could be quit without any feeling of dissonance.

10. A weaker claim would be no *rational* agent could escape; I think even non-totally deluded irrational agents will still not escape scot-free. When they return to their rationality later on the feeling will be waiting for them. I'll discuss some more extreme irrational cases below.

11. This is assuming a case where there is no legitimate judgment shift. In this case the change of mind is most likely from the exact temptation that the resolution was made to avoid.

12. Normal cases of self-deceit in the face of a rational resolution are not immediate. To bury one's head in the sand of deceit is a very real possibility, but it is a process and not done in one swift act. There may be abnormal cases of agent's particularly practiced at self-deceit but I set them aside. It is more likely that an agent is skilled in rationalization; in which case they may slip the bounds. In fact, the study of when it is rational to stop rationalizing is the aim of Holton's "Rational Resolve." But here we would transition from a descriptive account of resolutions to an account of when they are rational and tricks of how to persist in resolutions—something outside our purview. Yet, the weaker claim of no rational agent escaping can remain intact with Holton's account of rational irrationality.

13. There may be a version of legitimate forgetfulness, not one of cognizant self-deceit, but of perhaps busyness. Consider Jeremy from Christine Korsgaard's footnote story in *The Normativity of Instrumental Reason*. Jeremy makes a positive resolution like: "I resolve to study for my exam tonight." Restless at the moment, he goes for a walk. He stumbles into a friend who invites him for a drink; Jeremy can afford the time for one so he goes. Jeremy is then bounced from place to place until the night is gone and he hasn't studied. Has Jeremy forgotten his resolution in a way that escapes the test of resolution? I'll follow Korsgaard in suggesting this a problem of an inactive will. I imagine that when the resolution is remembered, when Jeremy awakes the next day, he will find not only the consequences of not studying waiting for him but also an extra dissonance at being so weak willed as to *not even remember* his resolution. I suspect the answer lies in how resolutions interact with the will, that if an agent is so forgetful of resolutions then the problem rests in their will power, not in the structure of resolutions. However, this type of forgetfulness of a resolution does add an interesting case worthy of longer treatment elsewhere.

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