ABSTRACT. The standard philosophical view is that compulsive behaviors are caused by “irresistible” desires. Gary Watson famously argued that this view conflates compulsion with weakness of the will, and proposed differentiating weakness and compulsion by appealing to the normal strength-of-will of members of the community. This extrinsic distinction leaves no room for phenomenological differences between weakness and compulsion. Evidence from clinical psychology shows, however, that compulsion is associated with certain phenomenological features that are absent in cases of weakness. I therefore reject the irresistible desire account. Instead, I propose that psychological compulsions “wear down” an individual’s normal faculty of self-control, i.e., the will. The recurrent inhibition of the behavior by the will overexerts this faculty, causing the psychological stress noted by psychologists. This stress raises the cost of resistance until it is unbearable. The subject abandons resistance and therefore performs the behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the standard view of compulsion, compulsive behaviors are caused by irresistible desires. Like ordinary actions, the irresistible desire for some state-of-affairs together with a belief that some behavior will produce this state-of-affairs cause the formation of an intention, which then causes the behavior. Unlike ordinary actions, the desire which is a cause of the action is resistant to the ordinary mechanisms of self-control which might otherwise have prevented its expression in action.

In other words, the irresistible desire account characterizes compulsive actions in terms of the ineffectiveness of our ordinary mechanisms of self-control. As Gary Watson famously noted, this poses a challenge in distinguishing compulsive
actions from weak-willed actions, which are also characterized in terms of the ineffectiveness of ordinary self-control (Watson, 1977). This paper will argue against the irresistible desire account and propose an alternative. I claim that the best way to account for compulsion without conflating it with other forms of action is to reject the standard desire–belief model of action. I begin by arguing that Watson’s account of the distinction between weakness and compulsion cannot work.

2. IRRESISTIBLE DESIRES

A desire need not be irresistible under any circumstances in order to count as “irresistible” under the standard account. After all, someone might suffer from a compulsion to stay home, but nonetheless rush into the night when his house is ablaze. It is necessary to delimit the modal. As the previous case shows, we should restrict the modal to normal circumstances. We must also stipulate that only an individual’s actual capacities of control are relevant to determining whether a desire is irresistible. A desire may be irresistible in the relevant sense even though some extraordinary training program would have allowed one to resist it successfully. However, we should also require that the individual has developed his capacities of self-control to a normal degree. I may be unable to resist a desire because I failed to develop my capacities of self-control, but my behavior is not thereby compulsive. So, an individual’s desire is irresistible if he has made reasonable efforts to develop his capacity for self-control but is nonetheless unable to resist engaging in the behavior under normal circumstances.¹

Additionally, we should add that the irresistibility of a desire must be assessed relative to some temporal interval. Most individuals who suffer from psychological compulsions can suppress the behavior for short periods of time, but are unable to prevent the action from happening sooner or later. For instance, an addict in the grip of an urge for the drug can surely resist her desire for one second, but may be unable to hold out for an hour.