

Donald Davidson:
How Is Weakness of the Will Possible

1. the definition of 'incontinence':

D. In doing x an agent acts incontinently if and only if:

- 1) the agent does x intentionally;**
- 2) the agent believes there is an alternative action y open to him; and**
- 3) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x.**

2. The paradox:

The contradiction seen in P1 - P3:

P1. If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally.

P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do x than to do y, then he wants to do x more than he wants to do y.

P3. There are incontinent actions.

3. Davidson's goals:

- (i) What I hope rather is show that P1-P3 do not contradict one another, and therefore we do not have to give up any of them.**
- (ii) I shall offer an explanation of why we are inclined to think P1-P3 lead to a contradiction; for if I am right, a common and important mistake explains our confusion, a mistake about the nature of practical reason.**

4. the central problem:

Does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgment that my action is not for the best, all things considered, and yet where the action I do perform has no hint of compulsion or of the compulsive?

5. weakness of the will \neq moral weakness

I propose to divorce that problem entirely from the moralist's concern that our sense of the conventionally right may be lulled, dulled, or duped by a lively pleasure.

6. the nature of the problem:

Incontinence is not essentially a problem in moral philosophy, but a problem in the philosophy of action.

7. the definition of 'practical reasoning':

[practical reasoning]

___ reasoning about what to do, reasoning that leads to action.

8. the logic of intentional action:

- (i). he sets a positive value of some state of affairs (an end, or the performance by himself of an action satisfying certain conditions);
- (ii). he believes (or knows or perceives) that an action, of a kind open to him to perform, will promote or produce or realize the valued state of affairs;
- (iii). and so he acts (that is, he acts *because* of his value or desire and his belief).

9. moral conflict and incontinence:

[moral conflict]:

___ a case where there are good reasons both for performing an action and for performing one that rules it out (perhaps refraining from the action).

[Incontinence]:

___ Incontinence can exist only when there is conflict in this sense, for the incontinent man holds one course to be better (for a reason) and yet does something else (also for a reason).

10. the meaning of 'his better judgment':

___ the judgment based on all relevant considerations known to the actor.

11. The Aristotelian model of practical reasoning (under which incontinence is impossible):

- P1. It would be better for me to obtain P.
- P2. Doing Q would enable me to obtain P.
- C3. Therefore, I do Q.

Aristotle apparently identifies drawing the inference and acting.

12. Davidson's analysis of the problem with the Aristotelian model of practical reasoning:

___ The trouble lies in the tacit assumption that moral principles have the form of universalized conditionals.

13. Davidson's logic of practical reasoning:

The central idea is that a moral principle, like 'Lying is (prima facie) wrong', cannot coherently be treated as a universally quantified conditional, but should be recognized to mean something like, 'That an act is a lie prima facie makes it wrong'; in symbols, 'pf (Wx, Lx).'

14. Davidson's Solution

This modified account of acting on a reason leaves P1 and P2 untouched, and Aristotle's remark that the conclusion (of a piece of practical reasoning) is an action remains cogent. But now there is no (logical) difficulty in the fact of incontinence, for the akrates is characterized as holding that, all things considered, it would be better to do *b* than to do *a*, even though he does *a* rather than *b* and with a reason. The logical difficulty has vanished because a judgment that *a* is better than *b*, all things considered, is a relational, or pf, judgment, and so cannot conflict logically with any unconditional judgment.

15. Davidson's conclusion:

___ It is possible, then, to be incontinent, even if P1 and P2 are true.

16. Davidson's analysis of the fault of incontinence:

___ The akrates does not, as is now clear, hold logically contradictory beliefs, nor is his failure necessarily a moral failure. What is wrong is that the incontinent man acts, and judges, irrationally, for this is surely what we must say of a man who goes against his own best judgment.

17. Davidson's principle of continence

* [the principle of continence]:

___ perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons.

18. Davidson on irrationality:

Q: What is the agent's reason for doing *a* when he believes it would be better, all things considered, to do another thing

A: for this, the agent has no reason.

What is special in incontinence is that the actor cannot understand himself: he recognizes, in his own intentional behaviour, something essentially surd.

*** [footnote]:**

___ Of course he has a reason for doing *a*; what he lacks is a reason for not letting his better reason for not doing *a* prevail.