

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

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Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?"

- Weakness of the will: "An agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgement; in such cases we sometimes say he lacks the willpower to do what he knows, or at any rate believes, would, everything considered, be better." (21)

Such actions are *incontinent actions*. Here are Davidson's initial necessary and sufficient conditions for incontinence:

D. In doing  $x$  an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does  $x$  intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action  $y$  open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do  $y$  than to do  $x$ .  
(22)

◦ But incontinence conflicts with the old doctrine: "... in so far as a person acts intentionally he acts in the light of what he imagines (judges) to be the better." (22)

◦ P1–P3, on p. 23, seem to be an inconsistent triad. But which should go? Davidson thinks that we can keep them all, arguing that they are not inconsistent after all. Davidson will also consider other ways of handling the supposed inconsistencies.

I.

- 'Incontinent', like 'intentional', creates an intensional context.
- Some might construe incontinence as acting contrary to one's intention or choice to do something that was judged to be better. But Davidson notes that this is not necessary for incontinence.
- P2 expresses a kind of internalism — it expresses a necessary connection between value judgments and motivation. Reject P2 is a common way to

resolve the apparent inconsistency. But Davidson says that a sincere belief that one ought to  $x$  should reveal itself in behavior. (27)

- The weak-willed needn't be overcome by passion. Nor need they be confused in their evaluative judgments or compelled in their action.

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? There is no proving such actions exist; but it seems to me absolutely certain that they do. (29)

One needn't lose control of oneself when one gives into temptation. (Austin makes this point, as quoted on p. 29.) Also, incontinence does not require the sensual winning out over the moral or prudential. In fact, it can work in the opposite direction — see Davidson's example about brushing his teeth.

## II.

- Davidson endorses a generic, Aristotelian conception of practical reasoning:

When a person acts with an intention, the following seems to be a true, if rough and incomplete, description of what goes on: he sets a positive value on some state of affairs (an end, or the performance by himself of an action satisfying certain conditions); 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; and so he acts (that is, he acts *because* of his value or desire and his belief). (31)

For Aristotle, the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action. But, this seems to rule out the possibility of incontinent actions. (32)

- Consider Aquinas's example of the dual reasonings of an incontinent man — reason vs. lust. (33) But, the act cannot both be pursued and not pursued. Davidson notes that life is full of such conflicts.

Davidson considers two possible ways of avoiding genuine conflict. First, one could admit only one ultimate value. Second, one could distinguish the *prima facie* desirable from the absolutely desirable. But Davidson claims that the first option is false, and the second is unhelpful.

- Davidson presents us with two images for thinking about incontinence. On the first image (associated with Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hare) incontinence is viewed as a battle between two parties, say reason and desire, with the wrong side winning. On the second image (associated with Plato, Butler,

and Dante) three parties are involved — the will decides who wins the battle between reason and desire. Davidson endorses the second image. (This should remind you of some passages from Frankfurt.)

- See the bit of “reasoning”, performed by the will, as depicted on p. 36. Note that the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

- Davidson diagnoses what he sees as the the main problem:

The real source of difficulty is now apparent: if we are to have a coherent theory of practical reason, we must give up the idea that we can *detach* conclusions about what is desirable (or better) or obligatory from the principles that lend those conclusions colour. (37)

Analogy: Hempel on reasoning from probabilistic evidence.

Davidson then offers the following account of the weak-willed:

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 judgement that *a* is better than *b*, all things considered, is a relational, or *pf*, judgement, and so cannot conflict logically with any unconditional judgement. (39)

But, this naturally leads to the following question:

For how is it possible for a man to judge that *a* is better than *b*, all things considered, and not judge that *a* is better than *b*? (39)

Davidson now suggests a modification of his original definition of ‘incontinence’.

A plausible modification of our original definition (D) of incontinence might label an action, *x*, as incontinent provided simply that the agent has a better reason for doing something else: he does *x* for a reason *r*, but he has a reason *r*’ that includes *r* and more, on the basis of which he judges some alternative *y* to be better than *x*. (40)

- The main problem with the akratic is that he is irrational:

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 judgement. (41)

The incontinent man discards relevant evidence — see the *principle of continence*. (41)