

ON TWO SOLUTIONS TO AKRASIA

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Abstract

In ancient and contemporary discussions of weakness of will, or *akrasia*, Aristotle and Davidson have articulated two of the more seminal accounts. Yet drawing a sharp distinction between the conditions on akratic agency, the reasons why it poses a problem, and solutions in the accounts of Aristotle and Davidson makes clear that Davidson's rejection of Aristotle's solution is illicit insofar as his own solution is, at root, Aristotelian.

Introduction

The claim that an agent can freely, knowingly, and intentionally perform an action that the agent judges worse than an available and incompatible alternative is troubling. Surely such an agent, in so acting, acts irrationally. Calmly judging an action *worse* than its strict alternatives while knowingly performing the action invites diagnosis, if not contempt. 'Why,' one imagines asking with some exasperation, 'would you be doing exactly what you yourself hold you shouldn't? Have you *no* will-power?' This, very roughly, is the puzzle posed by the phenomenon synonymously dubbed 'weakness of will,' 'incontinence,' or '*akrasia*', where the *akrates* lacks *kratos*, or power of self-control. (cf. Mele 1987, pp. 3-4).

In the course of proposing his own solution to the problem of *akrasia*, Davidson (1980) briefly considers and rejects the solution Aristotle proposes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I submit that Davidson is too hasty, not because he has Aristotle wrong, but because Davidson's own solution is itself an Aristotelian solution. If so, then Davidson cannot reject Aristotle's solution without rejecting his own solution.

I proceed as follows: First, I explicate Davidson's and Aristotle's accounts of *akrasia* by examining the characteristics of akratic agency, on the one hand, and the reasons why it is thought to be problematic, on the other hand; second, I examine Davidson's and Aristotle's solutions with an eye towards explaining just how these solutions solve the problem of

akrasia as they conceive it; third, I conclude by comparing their solutions so as to argue that Aristotle's solution subsumes Davidson's.

The Problem of Akrasia

The rough gloss of akrasia I gave in the opening paragraph obscures an important distinction between the phenomenon of akrasia proper and the problem or problems the phenomenon presents. Certainly what we take the problem to be will depend on what properties we think akratic actions have or what conditions we think the agent must meet to be said to have acted akratically, so the problematic features of akratic actions are not independent of their defining features. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that stating the problem defines akrasia or defining akrasia states the problem. What, then, is it for an agent to act akratically, and what grounds the intuition that such actions are irrational, if not impossible? I look first at how Davidson and Aristotle each characterize akrasia, and then examine why they think it is a problem.

Defining Akrasia

Davidson helpfully provides an explicit account of akrasia in his seminal paper, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?":

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. (1980, p.22)

Note that Davidson's account of akratic action is quite broad. It is not merely concerned with moral normative judgments. Any judgment of what is better to do –legal-normative or etiquetical-normative, for example –is allowed. Any agent who intentionally acts contrary to his own better judgment and believes he need not have, acts akratically.

To understand Davidson's conditions on akratic agency, consider the following example of akratic action Davidson develops in his (later) paper, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality':

A man walking in a park stumbles on a branch in the path. Thinking the branch may endanger others, he picks it up and throws it in a hedge beside the path. On his way home it occurs to him that the branch may be projecting from the hedge and so still be a threat to unwary walkers. He gets off the tram he is on, returns to the park, and restores the branch to its original position. (1982, p. 292)

So far this is not a description of akratic action as defined above –it is peculiar action, certainly, perhaps even idiotic –but it is not akratic action *per se*. Accordingly, Davidson goes on to add that the agent spent some time on the tram considering whether or not to return to the park to remove the stick and judged that it would be better, all things considered, to stay on the tram and thus avoid returning to the park. The rest of the story follows as before: he leaves the tram even after defeating the reasons for leaving the tram and returns to the park to replace the branch. The agent acts entirely contrary to his own best judgment, and so acts akratically. Thus the agent:

- i. leaves the tram intentionally;
- ii. believes that the alternative of staying on the tram is open to him; and,
- iii. judges that, all things considered, it would be better to stay on the tram than to leave the tram.

If asked, the agent would declare that it would indeed be better to stay on the tram than it is to leave, even while leaving the tram.

Aristotle does not give an explicit definition. He does, however, compare the vice of akrasia, as it is ordinarily understood, to other vices and correlative virtues:

Now both continence and endurance are thought to be included among things good and praiseworthy, and both incontinence and softness among things bad and blameworthy; and the same man is thought to be continent and ready to abide by the result of his calculations, or incontinent and ready to abandon them. And the incontinent man, knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion, while the continent man, knowing that his appetites are bad, does not follow them because of his reason. The temperate man all men call continent

and disposed to endurance, while the continent man some maintain to be always temperate but others do not; and some call the self-indulgent man incontinent and the incontinent man self-indulgent indiscriminately, while others distinguish them. The man of practical wisdom, they sometimes say, cannot be incontinent, while sometimes they say that some who are practically wise and clever are incontinent. Again men are said to be incontinent with respect to anger, honour, and gain (*Nic. Eth.* 1145b8-20).

Unsurprisingly, Aristotle finds no clear consensus on *akrasia* in his rehearsal of common sense. One view has it that the *akrates* is one who correctly reasons to what is best, but is overcome by desire and does something else. Another has it that the *akrates* discerns by reason what is best but is quick to ignore his ‘calculations.’ *Akrasia* and self-indulgence are sometimes conflated in common sense, while *akrasia* may or may not be impossible for the ‘man of practical wisdom.’

Aristotle extracts his account from this complicated store of common sense about *akrasia*. What emerges is the picture of an agent reasoning (as usual) to a practical conclusion, yet the agent fails to act accordingly. Socrates, Aristotle notes, was convinced that this is impossible, since “no one ... acts against what he believes best –people act so only by reason of ignorance” (1145b26-7). Aristotle rejects Socrates’ conclusion for the simple reason that “this view contradicts the plain phenomena” (1145b27). *Akrasia* is certainly possible, and perhaps even ordinary. It is a failing of some kind, since “the man who behaves incontinently does not, before he gets into this state, think he ought to so act” (1145b29-30).

Forging ahead, Aristotle’s account of *akrasia* may plausibly be rendered as follows:

An agent A does x akratically iff

- a. x is an incompatible alternative to a possible action y;
- b. A has reasoned that y is the best thing to do; and
- c. A does x intentionally.

a. simply says that in cases of *akrasia* the action done akratically, here x, is a genuine alternative and not merely another way of performing the action y that the agent has reasoned he ought to do. Otherwise the agent could correctly claim that he was doing y, and it is clear from Aristotle’s discussion that in that case we would not have an instance of akratic

action. (b), I think, can be justified by noting both Aristotle's emphasis in discussing common wisdom on the role of calculation in akrasia and his use of practical knowledge –presumably the result of practical reasoning – in prefacing his solution to the problem of akrasia:

[S]ince there are two kinds of propositions, there is nothing to prevent a man's having both and acting against his knowledge, provided that he is using only the universal and not the particular; for it is particular acts that have to be done. And there are also two kinds of universal; one is predicable of the agent, the other of the object; e.g. 'dry food is good for every man', and 'I am a man', or 'such and such food is dry'; but whether this food is such and such, of this the incontinent man either has not or is not exercising the knowledge. There will, then, be, firstly, an enormous difference between these manners of knowing, so that to know in one way would not seem anything strange, while to know in the other way would be extraordinary. (1147a1-9)

While not explicitly stated, (c) is justified by Aristotle's claim that “incontinence either without qualification or in some particular respect is blamed not only as a fault but as a kind of vice” (1148a2-3). The akrates is blameworthy, and so is held responsible for his action. Presumably he would not be held responsible were his action accidental or unintentional. Even if this is a stretch, we shall see that Aristotle's solution to the problem of akrasia requires (c).

Drawing on Davidson's example, our man on the tram acts akratically by Aristotle's definition as well:

- i. Leaving the tram is an incompatible alternative to staying on the tram.
- ii. The man has reasoned that it would be best to stay on the tram.
- iii. The man leaves the tram intentionally.

Of course, the fact that Davidson and Aristotle's accounts agree in this case should not be taken as evidence that the accounts agree in every case. Indeed, it would be no surprise to discover that the accounts are extensionally inequivalent –i.e. that there are actions which are akratic under one account but not the other. A brief comparison of the two accounts supports the conclusion that more actions are akratic under Davidson's account than under Aristotle's.

Both accounts agree that the agent's akratic action is intentional, but they disagree on two possibly important points. First, Davidson merely requires that the agent believe an alternative to the akratic action is available, whereas, if I am right, Aristotle thinks that it must in fact be the case that there is a possible alternative to the akratic action. Thus Aristotle rules out as instances of akratic action those actions for which the agent has no possible alternative, while Davidson allows such cases, provided that the agent have the (false) belief that an alternative is available. Second, Davidson simply requires that the agent judge the alternative better, all things considered, than the akratic action. Yet it is not clear that the judgment is the result of any particular reasoning *per se*. For all Davidson says it could be just a snap judgment. Aristotle, on the other hand, requires that the agent actually have reasoned out what is best. So Aristotle rules out, for example, cases of putative akrasia which involve snap or unreasoned judgments.

It follows that Davidson's account allows for many more cases of akrasia than Aristotle's. The converse, that Aristotle's account includes cases Davidson's excludes, arguably does not hold. Davidson's account of akrasia *contains* Aristotle's in this sense: since the totality of judgments includes reasoned judgments, and since the range of actions believed to be possible presumably extends well beyond those actions which are possible, it can be argued that the class of Aristotelian-akratic actions is a proper subclass of Davidsonian-akratic actions. That said, why is akrasia on either account such a troubling phenomenon?

The Problem of Akrasia

For Davidson akrasia is problematic because it is incompatible with two other principles some versions of which, he thinks, are self-evident truths:

- 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. (1980, p. 23)

So if indeed A judges that it would be better to do x than to do y and A believes that he is free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x

if he does either x or y intentionally. But then it cannot be the case that there are akratic actions as Davidson has defined them.

While Davidson admits to not being satisfied with the statements of the principles, he nonetheless maintains that attempts to solve the problem which involve rejecting one or more of the principles, perhaps by reinterpreting ‘intentional’ or ‘wants’ or ‘judges’ or ‘better’ in such a way as to block the contradiction, are misguided: The fact that an interpretation can be found which blocks the contradiction fails to show that there is no interpretation which results in contradiction. “I am convinced that no amount of tinkering with PI - P3 will eliminate the underlying problem” (p. 24).

For Aristotle the problem of akrasia is partly historical. According to Socrates, genuine cases of akrasia are impossible, since, as a matter of principle, no one acts against what he believes is best. Freely doing x is incompatible with believing that x is not the best possible alternative. Yet as we have seen, Aristotle thinks “this view contradicts the plain phenomenon” (1145b27). So akrasia is problematic, in part, because it has been thought to be impossible when it is clearly possible.

More importantly, akrasia as Aristotle defines it is problematic because:

It is then practical wisdom whose resistance is mastered? That is the strongest of all states. But this is absurd; the same man will be at once practically wise and incontinent, but no one would say that it is the part of a practically wise man to do willingly the basest acts. (1146a4-7)

The problem is explaining how akrasia is possible while allowing that the agent correctly reasons that an alternative to the akratic action is best. Practical wisdom, or correctly reasoning about what is best to do, carries with it an implication that the practically wise man will follow his wisdom: nothing, that is to say, should be allowed to override practical wisdom. It is “the strongest of all states.” Thus akrasia is problematic because the existence of cases of akrasia contradicts the principle that practical wisdom should be indefeasible, or that the man of practical wisdom will always act in accordance with the conclusions of his practical reason. For Aristotle, the problem akrasia presents is how the “plain phenomenon” can be explained in such a way that it does not threaten practical wisdom.

Interestingly, Davidson and Aristotle agree that the problem of akrasia is not the existence of such actions *per se*, but that the existence of

akrasia apparently defeats key principles of rational agency. In Davidson's case, the defeated principles have to do with the grounds of intentional action, while in Aristotle's case, the defeated principle has to do with the possibility of practical wisdom. Presumably, then, a solution in each case will remove the appearance of contradiction between the phenomenon of akrasia and fundamental principle.

Davidson's Solution

Davidson solves the problem of akrasia, as he construes it, by capitalizing on the 'all things considered' clause of D(c). That is to say, the akrates' judgement is of the form 'it would be better to do x than to do y, all things considered,' while the antecedent of P2 requires the detached, unconditional judgment of the form 'it would be better to do x than to do y.'

To make his solution clear, Davidson introduces new notation. While I'm suspicious that the notation does more to obscure his solution than it does to clarify, Davidson does take pains to justify the notation. His idea is this: no moral principle can be stated as a universally quantified conditional. For example, the logical form of the universal moral principle 'lying is wrong' is: for all x, if x is an act of lying then x is wrong. Yet it is simply false that lying is wrong, in the sense in which 'lying is wrong' is formally represented as a universally quantified conditional. It is fairly easy to point out cases in which lying is not wrong. Cast as a universally quantified conditional, 'lying is wrong' is false. Yet there is a way to formulate 'lying is wrong' so that it is not false, or at least not obviously false: properly understood, 'lying is wrong' is actually the claim that lying is *prima facie* wrong –i.e. lying is wrong *in the absence of countervailing considerations*. So 'lying is wrong' is properly understood as saying that lying is wrong provided that reasons against lying outweigh reasons for.

Thus far motivation. To capture the correct form of 'lying is wrong' in terms of lying is *prima facie* wrong, Davidson introduces the 'pf' operator. He does not give a semantics for the operator except by loose reference to the 'lying is wrong' example. He gives just enough of the syntax of the operator to enable a solution of the akrasia problem. Here's how it works:

'pf' is a sentence forming operator on pairs of sentences, but not in the way in which '&' is a sentence forming operator on pairs of sentences. Rather, 'pf' is restricted to pairs of sentences <J,G>, where J is an

evaluative judgment and G is the ground or set of reasons for J. The use of ‘pf’ is something like a modal operator in two ways:

1. The syntax of ‘pf’ places it at the beginning of a $\langle J, G \rangle$ pair, thus $\text{pf}\langle J, G \rangle$.
2. Just as Q cannot be inferred or detached from $\text{NEC}(P \rightarrow Q)$ in the absence of further assumptions, J cannot be inferred or detached from $\text{pf}\langle J, G \rangle$ in the absence of further assumptions.

Perhaps the best we can do in understanding the semantics of ‘ $\text{pf}\langle J, G \rangle$ ’ is to read it informally as:

prima facie, J given G.

With respect to the problem of akrasia, understood by Davidson as the apparent inconsistency of P1, P2, and P3, “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.” (1980, p. 39) Thus the akrates’ judgment that it would be better to do x than y, all things considered, in D(c) is properly represented as:

$\text{pf}\langle \text{it would be better to do } x \text{ than } y, \text{ all things considered} \rangle$

which does not by itself, as per (2) above, allow for the inference to, or the detachment of,

it would be better to do x than y,

which is what the antecedent of P2 requires in order to infer:

A wants to do x more than A wants to do y,

which in turn is precisely what P1 requires.

It follows from Davidson's solution that:

- i. akratic action is possible;

- ii. the existence of akratic action does not conflict with P1 and P2;
- iii. practical reasoning which concludes with action requires the unconditional judgement that doing x would be better than doing y, sans phrase, as per P1 and P2;
- iv. the inference from:

pf<it would be better to do x than y, all things considered>

to:

it would be better to do x than y,

which is necessary for action, requires the additional assumption of what Davidson calls the Principle of Continenence:

“Perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons.” (1980, p. 41)

The Principle of Continenence is not a logical principle. Rather, it is a principle of practical rationality. The akrates is irrational in the sense that he fails to apply or observe the Principle of Continenence. Yet it is not the case that the akrates is being self-contradictory in so acting. By acting akratically, the agent demonstrates that he has failed to apply the Principle of Continenence and thus his inference from ‘pf<it would be better to do x than y, all things considered>’ to ‘it would be better to do x than y’ is illicit.

Davidson solves the problem of the inconsistency of P1, P2, and P3 by arguing that, properly understood, akrasia only occurs in cases in which the agent has failed to ‘perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons’ (1980, p. 41). A peculiar feature of Davidson’s solution is that it implies that, however much broader Davidson’s definition is than Aristotle’s, there is nevertheless a class of putative akratic action which is impossible. Such actions are those characterized by the agent having made a full-out, all available relevant reasons given – that is to say, unconditional – judgment. Following Pears (1982), call this last-ditch akrasia. We may cast last-ditch akrasia as:

An agent A does x last-ditch akratically iff A does x:

- a. freely,
- b. knowingly,
- c. intentionally, and
- d. contrary to her judgment that an incompatible action *y* is better to do than *x*.

The last-ditch akrates acts according to Davidson's Principle of Contenance and nevertheless acts akratically. Hence Davidson's solution is ineffective against last-ditch akrasia: his solution to the problem of akrasia is tailored to his definition of akrasia, yet his definition excludes the possibility of last-ditch akrasia. Worse, even stronger forms of akrasia than last-ditch akrasia may be conceivable, if not possible. For example, one can imagine an agent freely, knowingly and intentionally doing an action *x* contrary to her best judgment that an incompatible action *y* is better and her intention to do *y*. The upshot is that while Davidson successfully shows that akrasia, as he defines it, is possible and does not contradict P1 and P2, there are conceptions of akrasia for which Davidson has no solution except by denying their possibility.

Aristotle's Solution

In extracting Aristotle's solution, it is instructive to consider what Davidson takes Aristotle's solution to be. For Davidson, Aristotle's solution is to view the akrates as being something of a battleground:

The image we get of incontinence from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hare is of a battle or struggle between two contestants. Each contestant is armed with his argument or principle. One side may be labeled 'passion' and the other 'reason'; they fight; one side wins, the wrong side, the side called 'passion' (or 'lust' or 'pleasure'). (1980, p. 35)

Davidson sees Aristotle as proposing that desire distorts practical reason in such a way that the agent is incapable of making a fully informed judgment that the action he does is not the best action, as he would have done so in the absence of strong desire. Accordingly, Davidson rejects

Aristotle's approach on two grounds. First, his theory of practical reasoning excludes the possibility of *akrasia* as Davidson has defined it: “[b]ut of course this account of intentional action and practical reason contradicts the assumption that there are incontinent actions” (p. 32). Second, we could not hold the *akrates* blameworthy for so acting. Thus, “it is not clear how we can ever blame the agent for what he does: his action merely reflects the outcome of a struggle within him” (p. 35).

Although Davidson's explication may be fair to Aquinas and Hare, I do not think that it is a fair rendering of Aristotle; neither, it seems, does Davidson. In ‘Paradoxes of Irrationality,’ Davidson gives a substantially revised account of Aristotle's solution which is much nearer the mark. Returning to the man-on-the-tram example, Davidson proposes that for Aristotle the *akrates* has two competing desires –the desire to stay on the tram and the desire to return to the park. In the case of *akratic* action one desire is temporarily forgotten or becomes such that the *akrates* is not fully aware of it, while the *akrates* remains fully conscious of the desire which leads, ultimately, to the *akratic* action. Accordingly, the agent leaves the tram because, at the moment of leaving the tram, the knowledge that not leaving the tram is the better action is unconscious or, at least, not fully conscious knowledge:

It is not quite a case of a conscious and an unconscious desire in conflict; rather there is a conscious and an unconscious piece of knowledge, where action depends on which piece of knowledge is conscious. (1982, p. 295)

It is worth noting that under his revised account of Aristotle, Davidson is willing to allow that Aristotle is able to handle at least some cases of *akrasia*, which is certainly further than he was willing to go on his first try at Aristotle.

Despite the fact that some of what Aristotle says can be taken as consistent with Davidson's first account, surely the more charitable reading is the second. Indeed, textual evidence is strong for something like the second account:

The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, and here we come to something within the sphere of perception; when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must in one type of case affirm the conclusion, while in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act (e.g. if every thing sweet ought to be

tasted, and this is sweet, in the sense of being one of the particular sweet things, the man who can act and is not restrained must at the same time actually act accordingly). When, then, the universal opinion is present in us restraining us from tasting, and there is also the opinion that everything sweet is pleasant, and that this is sweet (now this is the opinion that is active), and when appetite leads us towards it (for it can move each of our bodily parts); so that it turns out that a man behaves incontinently under the influence (in a sense) of reason and opinion, and of opinion not contrary in itself, but only incidentally--for the appetite is contrary not the opinion--to right reason. (*Nic. Eth.* 1147a24-1147b3)

Consider Aristotle's example. There are two distinct practical inferences made by the agent, which may perhaps be represented by the following practical syllogisms:

A	B
1 Everything sweet is pleasant	1 Sweets are to be avoided.
2 This is sweet.	2 This is sweet.
3 Taste this.	3 Avoid this.

Yet despite the fact that the agent has reasoned thus in each case, at the time of action it must be the case that one syllogism is relevant in the production of action while the other is not. To explain this, Aristotle draws an analogy between the akrates and a sleeping man:

[...] for within the case of having knowledge but not using it we see a difference of state, admitting of the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk. But now this is just the condition of men under the influence of passions; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness. It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to these. (1147a10-18)

The stretch of reasoning relevant to action, say that represented by (A), is fully available to the agent. Yet (B) is submerged. The agent is unaware, at the time of acting, of (B), and only later comes back to being aware of (B). How this happens is something of a mystery, but it is an empirical mystery, to be resolved by empirical study:

The explanation of how the ignorance is dissolved and the incontinent man regains his knowledge, is the same as in the case of the man drunk or asleep and is not peculiar to his condition; we must go to the students of natural science for it. (1147b6-8)

Aristotle's solution is particularly inviting in Davidson's example. Davidson's man on the tram presumably has two competing desires. On the one hand he has the desire of eliminating the threat he thinks the stick might pose since it is lodged in the hedge and on the other hand he has the desire to proceed on the tram home. On Aristotle's account, the man engages in two distinct and incompatible –insofar as their conclusions are concerned –pieces of practical reasoning. Representing the agent's reasoning with practical syllogisms, we have:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| (C | D |
| 1 Hazards should be eliminated. | 1 It is good to get home at the end of a day. |
| 2 There is a hazard back in the park. | 2 The tram is a way to get home. |
| 3 Leave the tram. | 3 Stay on the tram. |

The man's reasoning issues in contradictory actions, therefore it cannot be the case that both (C) and (D) are active at the time the man in fact leaves the tram since “in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act.” Using the man's action, Aristotle solves the problem of *akrasia* –i.e. shows how it is possible and does not contradict the principle of practical reason –by supposing that it must be the case that the man was aware of (C) but at the time of leaving the tram he was (temporarily) unaware of (D). (D) was submerged or, to use Davidson's term, unconscious. When questioned later the *akrates* would presumably agree that he should have stayed on the tram, but the reasoning foremost in his mind at the time led him to leave the tram.

Arguably, then, Davidson has a better account of Aristotle's solution in (1982) than (1980). Nevertheless, Davidson rejects Aristotle's solution in (1982) for much the same reasons he gave in (1980). Aristotle's solution, Davidson thinks, excludes the possibility of a genuine case of conflict between better judgment and action. Moreover, while there are surely some cases where Aristotle's solution applies, in the vast majority of cases “we are not normally paralyzed when competing claims are laid on us, nor do we usually suppress part of the relevant information, or drive one of our desires underground” (1982, p. 295).

Davidson's rejection of Aristotle's solution is startling given the large extent to which it echoes my earlier criticism of Davidson himself. Recall that my point there was the familiar criticism that Davidson has failed in 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible' to give a solution to last-ditch akrasia, yet this seems to me to be surprisingly analogous to the point Davidson is raising against Aristotle. I take this to suggest that there may be more similarities than differences between their solutions, contrary to what Davidson supposes. At the very least, we should examine their solutions more carefully, paying close attention to the extent to which they actually differ, if at all.

Conclusion

We now have before us six analyses: Davidson's definition of akrasia, his explanation of the problem, his solution to the problem, and likewise for Aristotle. I said at the outset that I would argue that Davidson's solution is best viewed as a species of Aristotle's solution, and that is what I take up here. That is, I first argue that Davidson's solution as he casts it in 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' has the same features as Aristotle's solution; I then show that Davidson's Principle of Continence is on at least one natural interpretation indistinguishable from the principle of practical reasoning Aristotle takes the akrates to be violating. In something of a coda to the argument suggested by an anonymous reader, I close by arguing that the reasons Davidson gave for rejecting Aristotle's solution apply just as well to his own solution.

Having rejected Aristotle's solution outright in 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', Davidson turns to a reconstruction of his own solution from 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible'. This account of his solution differs from the first in that it entirely drops the formal 'pf' notation in favor of the simpler view that the akrates acts on the basis of a conditional 'if all things are considered, it would be better to do x than y' but makes an illicit inference to 'it would be better to do x than y' –illicit, since the akrates fails to observe the second order principle that one ought to act on what one holds best. Davidson's reconstruction of his own solution is thus similar in strategy to his earlier statement of it, but there are important differences.

In 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', Davidson puts special emphasis on the role reasons play in intentional action. In discussing the behavior of the man on the tram, Davidson (1982, p. 297) points out that each action except the stumbling has a reason. The agent removed the stick because he

believed it posed a hazard and he wanted to eliminate the hazard. Yet contrary to his own better judgment he got off the tram because he believed the branch might still pose a hazard and he wanted to eliminate the hazard. His behaviour at each step is explained by reference to relevant reasons given in terms of his beliefs and desires along with the causal role those reasons play in producing actions. That is, intentional actions and their reasons in the form of belief/desire pairs must be related in two distinct ways in order to count as a reason-explanation:

- a. There must be a logical relation –i.e. the contents of the belief/desire pair *imply* the intentional action.
- b. There must be a causal relation –i.e. the belief/desire pair *cause* the intentional action.

To be sure, (a) and (b) are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions on reasons-explanations for Davidson. Nevertheless, Davidson’s account of reasons-explanation is remarkably similar to Aristotle’s account of the role of practical reason in the production of action since there is both a causal relation –i.e. the reasons produce the action –and a logical relation –i.e. the desire and belief of the agent form the major and minor premises, as we have seen, of a practical syllogism. Moreover, for both Aristotle and Davidson, one can have reasons which are not causes, or even reasons which cause contrary actions. Thus far Davidson concurs, adding “[a]t this point my account of incontinence seems to me very close to Aristotle’s” (1980, p. 41) as a footnote to the following claims:

There is no paradox in supposing that a person sometimes holds that all that he believes and values supports a certain course of action, when at the same time those same beliefs and values cause him to reject that course of action. If *r* is someone's reason for holding that *p*, then his holding that *r* must be, I think, a cause of his holding that *p*. But, and this is what is crucial here, his holding that *r* may cause his holding that *p* without *r* being his reason; indeed, the agent may even think that *r* is a reason to reject *p*. (1980, p. 41)

Reasons and causes ordinarily track one-another in unexceptional reasons-explanations: an agent’s reason for performing an action is also a cause of the action. In the case of akrasia, the better reasons an agent has for acting fail to also cause his action, while the agent's akratic or lesser reasons do. Yet if agents are (minimally) characterized as having beliefs,

desires, and the capacity to form intentions, then the akrates is almost literally of two minds. Davidson (1982) goes somewhat further than (1980) by explaining akrasia in just this way:

[...] the way could be cleared for explanation if we were to suppose two semi-autonomous departments of the mind, one that finds a certain course of action to be, all things considered, best, and another that prompts another course of action. On each side, the side of sober judgement and the side of incontinent intent and action, there is a supporting structure of reasons, of interlocking beliefs, expectations, assumptions, attitudes, and desires. (p. 181)

Hence the akrates' judgments, both akratic and best, are made relative to specific and isolated reasons which serve to justify them. Being of 'two minds', the akrates acts –and acts freely and intentionally – for *some* reasons, but not for all the available reasons. That is, the akrates fails to form an all-out (non-relative, non-conditional) judgement which, presumably, she would have formed had she been of 'one mind'.

Davidson's solution to the problem of akrasia in 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' presupposes first and foremost that the mind is loosely partitioned into semi-autonomous, perhaps overlapping, regions of belief and desire. Thus one partition might judge that x is better than y, and another may prompt the doing of y for its own reasons. The first partition is overruled or submerged by the second. Thus the man on the tram has a partition which reasons that he ought to leave the tram and another which reasons that he ought to stay on the tram. The partition which concludes with leaving the tram overrules the partition which would otherwise have kept him on the tram. The akrates on this view suffers from what might be called 'multiple-agent disorder.'

The explanation of akrasia that emerges from Davidson's solution is, however, fundamentally Aristotelian. Where Aristotle solves the problem of akrasia by supposing that stretches of practical reasoning with 'their' beliefs, desires, and resulting intentions become submerged in light of or obscured by other stretches of practical reasoning, Davidson solves the problem by supposing that the akrates' mind has partitioned itself into distinct and independent regions of reasons with 'their' beliefs, desires, and resulting intentions, where one region can override or push aside another in producing action. The only difference seems to be whether we conceive of Aristotelian competing stretches of practical reasons as Davidsonian independent agents or not. Surely, though, one way of

characterizing competing stretches of practical reasons, inasmuch as each one enjoys all the attributes any agent does –i.e. having beliefs, desires, forming intentions, and producing actions –is precisely as independent agents.

Indeed, the principle Davidson suggests the akrates fails to observe in so acting is itself remarkably similar to the principle of practical reasoning I indicated Aristotle proposes in his explanation of the problem of akrasia. In particular, we have:

Aristotle: One should always act in accordance with practical reason.

Davidson: Act on what is believed best, everything considered.

Yet if what one believes best, everything considered, is just the result of practical reason, as Davidson seems to think, then the principles come to the same thing.

A bold conclusion is that Davidson's solution is nothing more than a reworking of Aristotle's solution. A more modest conclusion, and the one I draw, is that Davidson's is an Aristotelian solution –one of a range of solutions which are consistent with Aristotle's. It follows that Davidson's criticisms of Aristotle are either mistaken or criticisms of Davidson's own solution.

Recall that Davidson had two reasons for rejecting Aristotle's solution: Aristotle's account of practical reasoning excludes the possibility of akrasia, and we apparently could not blame the akrates for her actions even if Aristotle's account allowed for akrasia. Partitioning the mind to explain akrasia, however, is sensitive to the same criticisms. For if the akrates' mind is partitioned into independent regions, then it is not clear how the resulting action can be construed as an instance of akrasia any more than a committee selecting a course of action at the behest of one member in opposition to another member can be viewed as weak of will. It is still more of a challenge to see how we might hold the akrates responsible for her action under Davidson's solution, since the akrates' action is not *her* action *per se* but the action of one of her semi-autonomous mental partitions.

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