

III Akrasia

Socrates' Position

Now surely no one freely goes for bad things or things he believes to be bad; it's not, it seems to me, in human nature to be prepared to go for what you think to be bad in preference to what is good

(*Protagoras* 358c6–d2; see also *Meno* 77b)

(Contrast Plato's later position, in which the human psyche is understood as partitioned: see, for instance the metaphor of the chariot at *Phaedrus* 246a6)

The argument as presented in the *Meno*: bad things make one miserable; no one would do that which they believe will make them miserable.

Davidson's Presentation of the Problem

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 (i.e. cases in which an agent intentionally performs an action x that he judges to be worse than an alternative action y, whilst believing himself free to do either).

Distinguish that which is judged morally best from that which is judged best in other ways: the toothbrush example.

Davidson's Solution

Davidson distinguishes two different sorts of practical judgement, conditional (*prima facie*) judgements:

Relative to considerations C, doing A is best;

and unconditional, all-out, judgements (judgements *sans phrase*):

Doing A is best

(in Davidson's subsequent account, these unconditional judgments are equivalent to intentions).

Unconditional judgments always follow from conditional judgments. If the agent is rational the unconditional judgements should follow from her *all-things considered* conditional judgments:

Relative to considerations C (the total set of considerations available to me), doing A is best

But often they will follow from a conditional judgment that concerns only *some* of the relevant considerations:

Relative to considerations C* (which fall short of the total set of considerations available to me), doing B is best

An agent never acts against her unconditional, all-out judgments (since this is her intention). But she may well act against her conditional, all things considered judgments. This is what happens in cases of akrasia. In effect, the agent judges that, relative to all of the considerations available, doing A is best; but that relative to some subset of the considerations available, doing B is best. She then forms the unconditional all-out judgment that doing B is best on the basis of the second judgement, and acts on that. (She acts on the consideration of the delicious nature of the cake, and not on this consideration, together with the more significant consideration of the effect it will have on her health.) This is to violate the *principle of continence*: act on the basis of *all* of the available considerations (compare the *principle of total evidence for inductive reasoning*: believe the hypothesis supported by *all* of the evidence).

So the three principles are made consistent as follows:

- P1 If (S wants to do A more than to do B, and S believes that she can do either A or B, and S does either A or B intentionally), then S does A intentionally.
- P2 If S forms an *unconditional, all-out* judgement that doing A is better than doing B, then S wants to do A more than to do B
- P3 There are incontinent actions, i.e. agents sometimes act against their *conditional, all things considered*, judgements (or against the conditional judgements that they would have made if they had considered all of the evidence available to them).

How satisfactory is this? Couldn't there be clear-eyed akrasia in which the agent acts contrary to their ?

Watson's criticisms of Davidson: akrasia from two aspects of desire

Two aspects of desire: being motivated v. judging best

Are these both aspects of desire? What makes the second look desire like?

Humberstone's distinctions

In a television documentary about a beauty contest, the winner, newly crowned, wipes away the tears and says: I never realized how much I wanted to win. Presumably she was reflecting not on how much effort she had put in—she already knew that—but on how good it made her feel to have won.

'Wanting, Getting, Having'

Desire is a cluster concept (cf. the notion of a game). A desire can be strong along three independent dimensions of assessment:

1. How strongly does it motivate you to act?
2. How happy would you be if it were satisfied?
3. How disappointed would you be if it were not satisfied?

So, according to Humberstone, there can, for instance, be two desires, of which the first is stronger on dimension 1, but the second is stronger on dimension 2. Likewise for dimensions 1 & 3, and for 2 & 3:

Get job ($p = .5$) — very pleased
Successfully cook complicated meal ($p = .5$) — reasonably pleased
Unsuccessfully cook complicated meal ($p = .5$) — very disappointed
Fail to get job ($p = .5$) — indifferent

The dimensions are held together by *normative* principles (which can be violated) like:

GO FOR IT: Make your efforts at satisfying desires proportionate to the extent to which you'd be happy to have them satisfied.

Some more examples

A colleague is offered an attractive job elsewhere. He decides, after much agonizing, to decline the offer. He explains that, as soon as he had made the decision, he realized that it was what he really wanted.

Marcel wants Albertine; or at least, he expends much effort trying to get her to move in with him. But as soon as he knows that she will, he finds himself indifferent to the prospect. He concludes that in some sense he never really wanted her at all.

Problems with the second dimension

- (i) Is happiness too restricted a notion? Pleased that? Satisfied that? Glad that? Or a list: pleased, or joyful or relieved ...
- (ii) Can't we be pleased by things we didn't want, and made miserable by things we did want? The beauty queen a year on. The pleasure machine. The hot chilli pickle. Don't we think of desire as more *prospective* than this makes it?

Revisions of the second dimension

- (A) X wants a more than b iff X *believes* that he would be more pleased if a happened (rather than b), than if b happened (rather than a).

Problems: the pleasure machine; doesn't help with the beauty queen example.

- (B) X wants a more than b iff X would be more pleased *to learn* that a was going to happen (rather than b), than that b was going to happen (rather than a).

Problems with (B)

Imagine an old rationalist whose daughter wants to be a nun. He loves his daughter, and wants her to be what she wants to be. But he cannot bear the idea of her being a nun. Despairing of reconciling his basic wants, he just wants that she be a nun but he not know that she is.

Bernard Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism'

Henry wants his wife to organize a birthday party for him but only if it's a surprise, i.e. only if he doesn't know that she's going to. If he were to know that she was going to do it, he'd rather that she didn't do it at all.

Another revision

- (C) X wants a more than b iff X is more pleased at the *prospect* of a happening (rather than b), than of b happening (rather than a).

To be pleased at the prospect of something is (roughly) to imaginatively entertain it, and be pleased at that. One can imagine it from an impartial viewpoint. One can thus imagine a

situation in which p obtains but one doesn't believe that p (whereas one can't believe that that there obtains a situation in which p obtains but one doesn't believe that p).

Does this help with the beauty queen example? Perhaps sometimes one can only get full imaginative acquaintance if one actually believes that it is going to happen. And in the beauty queen case the belief only comes at the moment that the desire is actually realized. That is still getting clear on the prospect (unlike the question of how she feels a year later).

Psychological evidence for something like this distinction

It appears that addicts have intrinsic desires for the substances they are addicted to that are quite independent of their beliefs about how much pleasure they will derive from them, and perhaps from how pleased they are at the prospect of getting them. Moreover, such desires don't seem to be restricted to cases of addiction.

An alternative response

Watson's response distinguishes two aspects to desire. But there is an alternative response which trades on the distinction of intention from desire and belief. If intentions can be formed independently of one's desires and beliefs, then what is to stop someone forming an intention to act against their desires and beliefs? (NB this requires a strong separation thesis: intentions need not originate in beliefs and desires.)