

Akrasia: Judgement, Knowledge and the Surd

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Akrasia refers to the failure of an individual to act in accordance with morality, despite her knowledge of the correct action. Aristotle describes it as desire winning out over reasoned judgement. The defining feature is not that a person acts immorally, but rather that she is aware of the correct course of action, yet takes the wrong one. This definition seems to contain a contradiction, for how can we truly know something to be the right course of action and fail to do it? It is this issue that Donald Davidson attempts to resolve. He offers a formalized analysis of this contradiction; I will not attempt to replicate that formalized argument, but rather present it informally.

Davidson (2001) identifies three propositions that lead to the contradiction in the idea of akrasia. First, if I want to do some act (x) more than I want to do another (y) and I believe that both x and y are possible, then I do x intentionally. The second premise is that if I judge x to be better than y, then I also want x more than I want y. Third, there exists a situation where I judge x to be better than y, both x and y are possible actions, and yet I do y intentionally, and not x. There is an implied premise that one cannot do action x and action y intentionally.

The contradiction is that it appears to be possible that even if I judge x to be better than y, and thus want x more than y, I can still do y intentionally. Because of the implicit premise, we have the contradiction of akratic action. Davidson believes that akratic actions are possible, so he offers a solution to the contradiction by appealing to scientific reasoning. Wherein phenomena are explained by weighing different sets of evidence, and one must consider the different sets of evidence, coming up with something like a probabilistic account of which evidence to use. He then applies a similar framework to moral reasoning

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It is possible to have a set of reasons for a judgement that are *prima facie*; I judge x to be better than y, all things considered. This conditional judgement is based on the set of reasons that includes *all* of my relevant reasons, beliefs, and desires. This is different from my unconditional judgement, which, in the case of akrasia, judges an act better than another based on a reduced set of reasons. In an akratic act I judge with a limited set of reasons that can contradict what would have been my conditional, or all things considered, judgement.

The contradiction of how I can judge x to be better but not do x is resolved by identifying two types of judgement. The second premise, if I judge x to be better than y then I also want x more than I want y, is a case of unconditional judgement that x is better than y. In the third premise, however, we must understand judgement in a different way when we say that there exists a situation where I do judge x to be better than y, and yet I do y intentionally. This is the conditional judgement, which says that all things considered I would judge x to be better, but in this case I choose from a limited unconditional set to do y.

In order to clarify this idea of competing sets of reasons Davidson considers a case in which we have one set of conditional reasons for choosing x, but given additional reasons that include our conditional reasons our judgement should actually be y. In the end we choose to follow our limited reasons when we act incontinently. The contradiction is eliminated because we are dealing with two different judgements, so it is not the case that the same judgement is leading to two different actions, rather two types of judgements lead to different actions, one of which is continent while the other is not.

While this seems to deal with the logical inconsistency, there is a deeper question that it raises, *viz.* why does the incontinent person choose to follow his unconditional judgement and not his conditional judgement? Davidson acknowledges that a psychological answer “will no doubt refer to the interesting phenomena familiar from most discussions of incontinence: self-deception, overpowering desire, lack of imagination and the rest.” (2001, p.28) When he presses deeper, however, the answer he offers is surprisingly curt when he says; “what is the agent’s reason for doing *a* when he believes it would be better, all things considered, to do another thing, then the answer must be: for this, the agent has no reason” (ibid. p.42).

He answers how it is that we can be incontinent by developing a sophisticated scheme of two types of reasoning, but it seems that he has in fact simply pushed the issue at hand further into the shadows. He accounts for incontinence simply with irrationality, and perhaps this is accurate, but if that is the case, being continent is simply a matter of training the will to be rational in choosing which set of judge-

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ments to follow. Is this any different than Aristotle's account of *akrasia*? This is the question I want to turn to next.

Whereas Davidson reconsiders the nature of the judgements involved, Aristotle, instead, reconsiders the nature of the knowledge involved in making judgements. Aristotle attributes a fuller knowing to the second premise, so that our judgement that *x* is better than *y* involves full knowledge of the relevant information. In the third premise, however, Aristotle identifies an imperfect knowledge, wherein the incontinent person may know that *x* is better than *y*, but he doesn't truly know it, and so, in the end, he does *y* intentionally. (1147b9-14) Aristotle proceeds to offer an account of how knowledge in the incontinent person is imperfect, thus explaining how *akrasia* as strong desire creates two levels of judgement. At this point the similarities between Davidson's and Aristotle's account are apparent, but to understand the differences fully I will move to a discussion of the types of imperfect knowledge.

I want to categorize three types of imperfect knowledge. (Bovens, 2005) The first is the case of knowledge that is possessed but simply not put to use, a sort of wilful ignorance where one simply does not make use of the relevant knowledge, instead allowing our strong desire to overwhelm our knowledge. Aristotle compares this individual to people incapacitated by drink, sleep, or madness. (1147a15) The second type of imperfect knowledge is when desire overcomes one's ability to make the appropriate inferences given the knowledge one has. One may know generally, but desire does not allow that knowledge to be applied to specific situation. (1147a5) Finally, there is knowledge that simply lacks the force of true conviction. We may "know" what is correct, but we don't know it in an immediate sense. Aristotle compares this to an actor who knows his lines, but that knowledge falls short of truly knowing the lines as one's own thoughts. (1147a20)

Aristotle gets around the contradiction of *akratic* action in a different way than Davidson, by including the notion of essentially false knowledge. Aristotle uses only one definition of judgement, what is different is the lack of knowledge involved. With perfect knowledge we would do *x* intentionally, but because our knowledge is imperfect, in the ways outlined above, we do *y* intentionally. If imperfect knowledge is the cause of *akrasia*, rather than an irrational choice between types of judgement, then we have a firmer basis for understanding why incontinent actions happen, and thus hopefully a better prescription of preventing them.

Yet Davidson may be right in criticizing Aristotle's view as an attempt at amateur psychology that engenders interesting philosophical questions, but in the end avoids the question of incontinence in the face of non-deficient knowledge. Davidson's point reveals a problematic notion of truth, at least concerning moral issues, in

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Aristotle. “Does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgement 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 the compulsive?” (Davidson, 2001, p.29) For Aristotle our conditioned judgement is our knowledge of the truly moral action, and our unconditional judgement is an imperfect or false knowledge. Davidson’s argument does not require that we discount our unconditional judgements as simply false, they can also be true and in competition with the truth of our conditioned judgements. The choice between the two is what Davidson attributes to “the surd.” These cases of incontinence, as a product of irrationality, will be a minority of cases. He makes room for the fact that psychological factors can explain incontinence, but he wants to suggest that there are at least some actions that it cannot explain and they must remain fundamentally irrational. For clarification let us consider Davidson’s tooth-brushing example, which divorces akrasia from overtly moral concerns.

In his example, Davidson staying in bed and not getting up to brush his teeth after a long day is the correct action, which would be to say the right action all things considered. Then when he fails to do that and brushes his teeth anyway, he is acting irrationally by choosing to follow his unconditional judgement (Davidson, 2001 p.30). This is clearly an act of incontinence where imperfect knowledge and desire are not culprits. But does this tell us anything useful or interesting about incontinence?

I think the answer must be yes. Davidson’s elimination of the contradiction in akrasia and identification of distinct forms of judgement extends our understanding of incontinence to include akratic actions in the face of non-deficient knowledge. Aristotle’s answer is unsatisfying because it appears that incontinent actions can only be the result of a failure of knowledge. Davidson makes this point by referencing Dostoevsky, “What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, knowingly, that is fully understanding their real interests have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path... compelled to this course by nobody and nothing.” (Dostoevsky quoted in Davidson, 2001 p.30) It is actually more problematic for Aristotle to rely on an absolute truth in moral judgements, than it is to embrace the surd in Davidson’s approach. Dostoevsky’s insight at best leaves us in a world where truth is too difficult to be ascertained in all judgements and we’re doomed to a degree of ignorance, or at worst, if there is not absolute truth external to the world, then Aristotle’s framework is an unattainable ideal.

It is useful to use Davidson’s distinction in types of judgement in tandem with Aristotle’s understanding of imperfect knowledge. Allowing us to account for akratic acts caused by desire, habituation, and imperfect knowledge, within a sophisticated scheme of how we make judgement. Davidson’s account, however, does something

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more significant in that it makes room for understanding akratic action where we are not so sure of the truth of our judgements as Aristotle hoped we could become. Most akratic acts will be still be matters of weakness, fewer still will be the result of impaired knowledge of what we actually believe to be true, but there will be further cases where we may believe two opposing inclinations to be equal as regards the truth and our decision will be between one or the other sets of reasons. The combination of both Davidson's and Aristotle's accounts is crucial here, before Davidson's notion of the surd seemed to push the majority of akratic actions into the shadows of irrational choices between sets of reasons. Aristotle's account of desire and deficient judgement illuminates akratic actions, allowing us to account for them in many cases. Davidson, however, takes us further than Aristotle could, because his scheme of competing sets of reasons can at least give a descriptive account of akratic actions that do not suffer from deficient knowledge. The reason for that choice is, as Davidson identified, beyond rational account, and belongs to the surd.

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