

The Problem of Incontinent action : Davidson

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Abstract : This paper intends to defend incontinent action as proposed by Donald Davidson. Incontinent action , as he holds, follows from weakness of will. Another important notion of Davidson's philosophy of action is that of rational belief. A belief is rational, if all things considered, it is the best belief. This best reason will be able to decide which actions are better and more beneficial than others. But sometimes one lacks the will power to do what he knows, or believes , everything considered, will be better. This is incontinent action. Incontinent is supported in the following way. If we do not think but see, we shall often meet people in the actual situations of life who knows fully well, y is better than x, yet he does not refrain from doing x. For example, a smoker knows that smoking will bring evil consequences, yet he smokes merrily. And his reason is that it will stimulate him to do his action with more enthusiasm , or it will reduce his tension. In fact life is crowded with examples of this sort. And what goes on in actual situations speaks amply in favour of incontinent action.

Key Words : Incontinent action, rational belief, reason-cause, Nyaya view, Davidson

I

Attention to incontinent action has a long history from the philosophers of the classical tradition to Donald Davidson in particular of the modern period. It is not that all of them have same stance to incontinent action. Some of them are quite averse to it : while someone like Davidson upholds it strongly. Incontinent action, he tells us, follows from weakness of will: and quite interestingly, he underlines that incontinent action is intentional. In this paper, I shall try to defend Davidson of course in my limited way.

II

Before we consider what incontinent action is, and how, according to Davidson, it is intentional, we should remember some points about Davidson's thesis.

First he says that reason is the cause of action. This, of course, is contrary to the opinion of philosopher like Gilbert Ryle (*The Concept of Mind*), G.E.M. Anscombe (*Intention*), or Stuart Hampshire (*Thought and Action*), who make a distinction between 'reason' and 'cause', and abandon the position of Davidson that rationalization is a species of casual explanation. We don't intend to enter into debate whether Davidson is right or his opponents. We take Davidson's position for granted and try to narrate his position.

In 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'¹, he says explicitly that he does not deny the role of reason in action. Indeed he says that there is reason behind an action. This reason operates when it 'leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory or agreeable'². In other words, when someone does something for a reason, he has (a) some sort of 'pro attitude' towards actions of a certain kind and (b) believes or knows that his action is of that kind. For example, when a man performs a sacrifice to fulfill his desire for a son, he has pro attitude towards the action of performing sacrifice, and further believes that his action is of that kind for his intended goal to have a son. In short, giving the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming the pro attitude (a) or the related belief (b) or both.

It goes without saying that reason is necessary for explaining an action. When somebody asks a man: 'why did you leave the place?', the reply may be, to give Davidson's example, Claustrophobia gives him the reason for doing so and this appears to us reasonable because we know, people want to avoid or escape from what they fear. Again, jealousy is the reason for pouring poison into the glass of wine of one's rival x because the poisoner believes that this action will harm his rival, remove the cause of his agony or redress an injustice³.

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It should be noted in this connection that reason that explains and justifies the choice of action should be reason 'in full detail'. If I say 'John goes to the church to please his mother', obviously John has some pro attitude towards pleasing his mother. But this is not enough, for it is possible that John goes to the church not only to please his mother but also because he thinks that it is right to do so or it is his duty to do so. Thus we need new descriptions of actions in terms of their reasons. For example, if I say specifically, John went to the church 'with the intention of pleasing his mother', it gives a 'new, fuller description of the action' of John's going to the church.

It follows from the above that an action is intentional if it is not abnormal, or done under compulsion; if instead justification and explanation (which go hand in hand) of this action come from reason.

But Davidson does not approve of this eulogizing over the relation between reason and action without bringing in the concept of cause. It is indeed true that if someone's behaviour seems strange or pointless, we need an interpretation of his alien behaviour. And when we recognize the reason of his behaviour, we get an interpretation, a new description of what he did 'which fits it into a familiar pattern'. Hence giving reason is to redescribe the action which explains it by placing it in a pattern. Yet the difficulty remains how can reason (which is mental) can bring out effects (eg act of sacrifice) which is a physical event? Consequently the relation between reason and action becomes a mystery. This has been recognized also by Stuart Hampshire: 'In philosophy one ought surely to find... this connection altogether mysterious'⁴. The only way out of this, according to Davidson, is to introduce the concept of cause, and to give up the idea that reason alone explains action (effects), that causes are separate from effects, that, therefore, reasons are not causes. But there cannot be any effect without a cause, and hence action cannot be well explained unless reason is invested with causal power to prompt the relevant effect i.e. the relevant performance. In this respect, Davidson follows Aristotle's attempt to solve the mystery by introducing the concept of cause. As he puts it: "... the best argument for a scheme like Aristotle's is that it alone promises to give an account of the 'mysterious connection' between reasons and actions."⁵

Another important notion of Davidson's philosophy of action is that of rational being. A belief is rational if given the available evidence, it is the best belief. In other hands, since men are rational beings they behave rationally. It means that they perform only those actions which are good to them. That is, they are able to decide which belief is better than the other to produce the action that will be most beneficial to them instead of doing harm to them.

With the above points in mind we shall now turn to Davidson's incontinent action. In 'How is Weakness of the Will possible?', Davidson gives us an account of incontinent action in the following way: 'an agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his best judgement (on his rational belief); in such cases, we sometimes say he lacks the will power to do what he knows, on at any rate believes, everything considered, would be better. It will be convenient to call actions of this kind incontinent actions or to say that in doing them the agent acts incontinently'⁶. Thus an agent acts incontinently if it is performed despite his knowledge that another course of action is better or he acts incontinently if he does something inspite of the fact that he knows that he is doing something counter to another course of action which is the best one everything considered or the right one he ought to do. Or, he acts incontinently if he takes some available action to be better on the whole than the one he does. So we are now able to characterize an action that reveals weakness of the will or incontinence. And this in the following way:

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.

III

Not all thinkers are kind to incontinent action. Socrates, for example, points out that there cannot be an incontinent action' since it is the outcome of ignorance. Some other thinkers argue that according to Davidson, the

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agent can judge that all things considered, y is better than x. Yet he does x rather than y. Thus in an incontinent action, one does not act on the basis of all things considered judgement (ATC judgement). But the problem is, how it is possible. How can an akratic with the knowledge that y is better than x can entertain x at the same time? It really involves a logical contradiction to judge that y is better than x, all things considered and not judge that y is better than x. In fact, this is the point of Thalberg⁷. He has pointed out, how is it possible for you to be sincere to do y based on all things considered, if you say, I ought to do y and yet I am doing x? We may understand Thalberg's position in this way. There may be irrational act where the agent does not care for the principle of continence or rational all things considered principle. Here we can easily explain irrationally as an inevitable consequence of his abnormality; but an akratic person is not irrational in this sense. He upholds the principle of continence, yet acts against it. And this presents a real problem. The question is, why upholding the principle of continence, you run against it.

Incidentally, this is also the question of the Naiyayakis. According to the Naiyayikas, it is from cognition that action follows. The question is, how it is possible. What is there in a cognition so that it can produce the will to do through the mediation of desire?

The old Nyaya in particular talks about three cognitions which jointly cause or bring about the desire. One is the cognition of the agent that he or she can bring about the desired good by performing the action. The other is the cognition that he/she can perform the action. Lastly the cognition that the performance of the action will bring good, and no evil consequence.

Voluntary action is intentional used in the common sense as being purposive or goal-directed. In this sense, all Indian theories including the Nyaya one hold that actions are intentional, being goal-directed.

It should also be noted in this connection that the Naiyayikas, in fact, all Indian thinkers, believe that intentional acts are causal or belong to the causal order i.e do not stand outside the causal order. When a man performs a sacrifice to fulfill his desire for a son, he believes that performance of this sacrifice will bring out his intended goal. This belief leads to the effect i.e performance of the act of sacrifice. In other words, cognitive belief causes or gives rise to relevant voluntary acts which are directed to acquiring something good i.e the valued goal of serving the purposes e.g of having a child. It should be emphasized in this connection that a cognition that his action will bring evil consequence will produce in him a feeling of aversion.⁸

In other words, one cannot act intentionally if one knows fully well that all things considered, it will not bring good consequence. Thus knowledge of the stronger evil will produce in one the feeling of aversion. But in an incontinent action, this does not happen, and here lies the difficulty. Since knowledge of the stronger evil is the cause of the feeling of aversion, it is not possible to find a situation where there is knowledge of the stronger evil but no consequent feeling of aversion. Hence one cannot act incontinently.

There is another difficulty which emerges against Davidson when we recall his endeavour to explain the underlying mental mechanism of incontinent action to make it more clear and precise. He observes, what is special in incontinence is that the actor cannot understand himself: he recognizes, in his intentional behaviour something 'essentially surd'. In other words, the point of Davidson is that an act of incontinence is intentional, irrational though. In incontinent action, there is a surd element in one's intentional behaviour. In 'Paradoxes of irrationality'⁹, he explains the surd element in one's intentional behaviour. In incontinent action, the mind is divided into semi-independent structures or systems. Among these semi-autonomous systems, one may find certain course to be ATC based and another that prompts action counter to ATC. Thus in one of the sub-systems of the agent's mind, there is, for example, the belief that one should not smoke and in another system, may be in the main system, there is the belief that smoking will give him pleasure. But as the rational belief, 'one ought not smoke, operates from the other side of the main system which entertains the thought of the pleasure of smoking, its influence becomes weak and it cannot motivate the main system. Hence the desire for pleasure in the main system, though operates as a cause of smoking, fails to act as a reason. So behind every irrational action we have a mental cause that fails to

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rationalize the action. We have in other words, non-rational causality. Davidson often illustrates non-rational causality by giving the example of humming a tune in order to remember a name, where the latter will be the cause of the former but surely not a reason.

But is it not a fact that his admission of non-rational causality goes against his fundamental thesis that reasons are causes of actions? David Pears¹⁰, however, has given an answer to this question. According to him, it is not correct to think that there is no reason at all behind an incontinent act, that mental causes behind incontinent acts are non-rational. Indeed as he says, behind an incontinent action, the underlying mental cause indeed operates as a reason, though not a rational reason. Consequently, we have the following distinctions – (1) a mental cause operates non-rationally; (2) a mental cause operates as a reason; and (2) further divided as (a) reason that operates rationally and (b) reason that operates irrationally. So we have an explanation of reason in irrational or incontinent act within the general class of intentional acts.

Davidson, however, will not accept the above defense of Pears. For, according to him, there cannot be any reason that operates irrationally. Reasons are necessarily rational. Then what does Davidson mean by non-rational causality?

IV

But all the above objections, it seems, are not fair to Davidson. Davidson Says : ‘ 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 of the compulsive? There is no proving such actions exist; but it seems to me absolutely certain that they do.’¹¹

I read this passage in favour of incontinent action in the following way. If we do not think but see, we shall often meet people in the actual situations of life who know fully well that y is better than x, yet they choose X due to weakness of the will. For example, a smoker knows that the action he is doing i.e. smoking will bring evil consequences, that he knows from his experience or via media the terrible death rate due to cancer caused by smoking. If you ask him, why then he does not refrain from smoking, he will give this or that reason in favour of what he is doing, for example, it will stimulate him to do action with more enthusiasm or it will reduce his tension. Thus it is a fact that he does indeed entertain two things at the same time: not doing y i.e. refraining from smoking and doing x i.e. smoking merrily which he values more than y. In fact, life is crowded with examples of this sort, as says Davidson. This also implies that incontinent action is intentional.

If we learn from this practical experience, we can easily get at what Davidson means by non-rational causality. By ‘non-rational’ he does not mean that there is no reason. Surely we acknowledge the reason given by the smoker for example. In fact then there are two courses of action in the light of reason: one course in favour of smoking, and the other, the better one, in favour of abstaining from smoking; for otherwise it can lead to cancer or serious heart disease. Therefore, Davidson rightly points out, ‘Ofcourse, [an akratic] has a reason for doing a what he lacks is a reason for not letting his better reasons for not doing a prevail’¹². This brings home the real significance of Davidson’s use of non rational which means not absence of reason, but lack of reason based on taking all things into consideration.

Again there is another reaction against incontinent action on moral ground. According to Aristotle, it is passion, lust, or pleasure that distort one’s best judgement and so prevent an agent from forming a full fledged judgement that his action is wrong. Similarly, Mill¹³ also says, ‘[men] pursue sensual indulges to the injury of pain, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.’ In other words, their point is, passion or sensual indulgence distracts us from the good or forces us to the bad. Or, what is conventionally right or good is lulled, dulled or duped by passion and pleasure. Aristotle, however, obscures this point by concentrating on cases where the incontinent man behaves under the influence of rule. This follows from his idea of intentional action. Davidson explains this by giving a simple example. Let us suppose that the agent has a desire, e.g., to know the time. He realizes that his

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desire will be satisfied if he looks at his watch. Obviously we know, why he looked at his watch; we know the intention with which he did it, e.g., he did it with the intention of knowing the time. Following Aristotle we may say, the desire of the agent is for him a principle of action, and it can be expressed propositionally like; 'it would be good for me to know the time, or, 'any act of mind that results in my knowing the time is desirable'. Such a principle Aristotle compares to the major premise in a syllogism. And the minor premise expressing the agent's belief that follows from the major premise will in this case be, 'Looking at my watch will result in my knowing the time'. Subsuming the case under the rule, the agent performs the desirable action i.e he looks at his watch. Thus his action is the conclusion of the above premises. It goes without saying, that the agent acts straight forwardly given his desire and belief; there is nothing that can generate his awareness that what he is doing is not good. This means that his action is intentional, but not incontinent. But if incontinent action behaves under a rule, what's the reason of Aristotle for saying that incontinent action is dominated by passion?

More clear and consistent is St. Aquinas' denial of incontinent action which is under the influence not of reason or rule, but of passion or lust; here passion pulls the reason out of her throne, and prevents us from seeing what is good. To quote him at length:

He that has knowledge of the universal is hindered, because of a passion, from reasoning in the light of that universal, so as to draw the conclusion; but he reasons in the light of another universal proposition suggested by the inclination of the passion, and draws his conclusion accordingly... Hence passion fetters the reason, and hinders it from thinking and concluding under the first proposition; so that while passion lasts, the reason argues and concludes under the second¹⁴.

In this connection, we may refer to Austin who is against the moral concern of Aristotle or St. Aquinas. He accuses them of making a confusion of weakness of will with moral weakness which distracts us from the good and where we act against our better judgement. To quote him:

Plato, I suppose, and after him Aristotle, fastened this confusion upon us, as bad in its day in its day and way as the later, grotesque, confusion of moral weakness with weakness of will. I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments and do, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. We often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse.(Cf , 'A plea for Excuses', in V.C.Chapell (ed.), *Ordinary Language*)

The point of Austin is that when I am tempted to take two segments of morsels, I do succumb to temptation due to weakness of will. But this does not imply that I am doing something wrong i.e I do not lose control of my self, and thereby raven, snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down to the discontentment of my colleagues.

Consequently it does not pay very much to concentrate on the thinkers with moral concern whose main point is to condemn incontinent action as being under the sway of emotions and passions – though this is done not very consistently, not without involving confusions. As in this paper my intention is always to speak for incontinent action, it is most rewarding for our purpose, finally, to have another positive evidence in favour of such action taken from our everyday experience. And this we find in the following observations of Davidson: "As a first positive step in dealing with the problem of incontinence, 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. I have just relaxed in bed after a hard day when it occurs to me that I have not brushed my teeth. Concern for my health bids me rise and brush; sensual indulgence suggests I forget my teeth for once. I weigh the alternatives in the light of the reasons : on the one hand, my teeth are strong, and at my age decay is slow. It won't matter much if I don't brush them. On the other hand, if I get up, it will spoil my calm and may result in a bad night's sleep. Everything considered I judge

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I would do better to stay in bed. Yet my feeling that I ought to brush my teeth is too strong for me: wearily I leave my bed and brush my teeth. My act is clearly intentional, although against, my better judgement, and so is incontinent.¹⁵

I shall conclude my paper by giving a short resume of what I have said above. Davidson introduces incontinent action and characterizes it in the following way. When we do x, we act incontinently if: (i) we do it intentionally; (ii) we believe there is an alternative action y open to him, and (iii) we judge that everything considered (ATC judgement), it would be better to do y than to do x. In other words, if the agent holds some course of action to be best one, everything considered, or the right one or the thing he ought to do, and yet does something else, he acts incontinently.

Various objections have been raised against it. (a) one of the main objections is: what is the agent's reason for doing x when he believes, it would be better, all things considered, to do another thing y; (b) another objection emerges from his emphasis on non-rational causality which is against his fundamental conviction that reason causes action.

(c) Another reaction against incontinent action is on moral ground. Thinkers with moral concern take incontinent action as being under the influence of passion, lust or pleasure which moves us away from action that has good consequence. We have tried to defend Davidson against those objections as far as possible, and finally to make our defense more weighty, we have utilized Davidson's elegant and powerful way of speaking in favour of incontinent action with reference to the example taken from our ordinary life.

I owe heavy debt to Prof. Amita Chatterjee for utilizing her paper on incontinent action (Viswabharati Journal) with profit.

Notes and reference

1. 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
2. *Ibid.*, P.3.
3. *Ibid.*, P.7.
4. Cited from Davidson's Essay, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', P.11.
5. *Ibid.* P.11.
6. 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?' in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, P.7.
7. 'Questions about motivational strength in actions and events' in Lepore, Ernest and Brian McLaughlin (eds.), *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
8. Cf. J.N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.
9. 'Paradoxes of irrationality' in Wollheim, R. & Hopkins, J. (eds.), *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
10. Cf. *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*.
11. 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?', P.29.
12. Footnote, at the end of 'How is Weakness, etc.', P.42.
13. J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chap.11, cited from Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p.30.
14. Cited from Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p.33.
15. 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?', p.30.