

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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Published by iSaRa Solutions

Acting against Reason: Re-examining Weakness of Will from Plato to Donald Davidson

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ABSTRACT

The problem of weakness of will (*akrasia* or incontinence) has been known as a puzzle for philosophers, at least, if not earlier, since Plato. In general, a weak-willed action is an intentional action that the agent recognizes to be in conflict with her best evaluative judgment. So, an agent who intentionally and freely takes drugs, even though she judges that it would be better if she quits, would be engaging in a weak-willed action. It shows a paradox: how can a rational agent knowingly do otherwise? This poses weakness of will as a challenge to theories of rational agency. I want to argue that the problem of incontinence, or weakness of will, should be understood in light of the fundamental limitations of human beings. Practical reasoning, therefore, must take into account the plurality of values, principles, and goals that often come into conflict.

Keywords: Weakness of will, action, practical reasoning, rationality, evaluative judgments

INTRODUCTION

Imagine someone who fails to do what she judges would be best and just chooses to do an inferior course of action instead. For example, consider the plight of a student, say Alina, who is having her exam the next day, she has her subject to be revised, but she feels the urge to go out to watch a movie, and ends up watching it. Here, Alina has reasons for both the actions. She has her exam the next day so she needs to revise the subject in order to score good marks. But she also feels a desire to watch a movie in order to relieve herself from the tension of exam. She also knows that it is inappropriate for her to go out and watch a movie this time as she may get poor marks in her exam if she does not revise her subject properly. After the overall assessment of the merits and demerits of the alternative courses of action before her, Alina reaches to an evaluative judgment that revising her subject is better than going out to watch a movie. But she intentionally chooses to go out to watch a movie. Here, this character undergoes a practical failure termed as '*akrasia*' or 'incontinence' or 'weakness of will'.

In general, weakness of will refers to such a scenario where the agent believes that she has *X* and *Y* courses of actions open to her to choose and to act upon, and she also believes that she has stronger reasons for preferring action *X* over *Y*, however she intentionally and deliberately chooses

action *Y*, and in acting so, she acts against her better judgment. An *akratic* or incontinent or weak-willed action is a deliberate and intentional action that the agent recognizes to be in conflict with what she evaluates as her better judgment. So, an agent who continues smoking even though she judges that it would be better to quit it, would be engaging herself in weak-willed actions.

Now, in order to understand weakness of will more clearly, let us see the case of Alina somewhat differently:

Alina has two courses of actions before her, either she goes to sleep on time or drinks late into the night. After contemplating on all the relevant considerations, she thinks that it would be better for her to sleep timely so that she can be on time to her office, however she is forced by another person to drink and she ends up drinking late at night.

In this case also, the agent has two choices before her, she deliberately outweighs one choice against the other one but she has no freedom to choose. She does not intentionally drink but was forced to drink. Yes, Alina goes against her better judgment in this case also but she was forced to do that way, so her action here is not a weak-willed action. For an action to be weak-willed, there should be options left open to the agent to choose and the freedom to choose from. Moreover, the act must be intentional and done after evaluation.

The debate on the notion of weakness of will deliberately thrived after the opposition of the theory by Socrates in *Protagoras*. Socrates was utterly opposed to this theory. For him, weakness of will does not exist. It is because Socrates maintained that nobody acts consciously against what is best. If he/she acts so, it is only because of ignorance (Plato, trans. 1956). For Socrates, the man who knows cannot be incontinent as nothing is more potent than knowledge (Plato, trans. 1956). Aristotle proceeds the debate by asserting the possibility of weakness of will. In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, he holds that one can act against what he/she believes to be the better course. Here Aristotle goes contrary to the views of Socrates. Aristotle maintains that “when the incontinent man is unable to resist pleasures what he has is not knowledge but only opinion” (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1145b). Further, he holds that the theory of incontinence is an ethical theory and is concerned with morality. In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, he states, “continence and endurance are among good and commendable qualities, but incontinence and softness among those that are bad and censurable” (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1145b). The debate on the problem of weakness of will is rejuvenated in 20th century philosophy by Donald Davidson. He continues the debate by opposing Aristotle’s view, by distinguishing the theory of weakness of will from any ethical theory. In “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?”, Davidson maintains, “I should like to deny that there is a simple connection between the problem of incontinence as I have posed it and any particular ethical theory” (Davidson, 1980, p.27). Later on, Sarah Buss (1997) and C.C.W. Taylor (1980) further proceed the debate by criticizing Davidson’s theory of weakness of will.

In this paper, I have attempted to re-examine the problem of weakness of will from Plato to Davidson. The first section is devoted to the classical approach to the theory of *akrasia* or

weakness of will. The second section deals with the contemporary approach towards the problem of weakness of will, specifically focused on Davidson's theory of incontinence. Here, I attempt to present and discuss Davidson's theory of incontinence, triad of incontinence, practical reasoning and his paradox of irrationality. The third and the final section is a critique of Davidson by contemporary philosophers as, Dorothy Walsh, C.C.W. Taylor and Sarah Buss.

PROBLEMATIC OF THE STUDY

In case of a weak-willed action, the agent has alternative courses of actions open to her and she has to choose one of them. She judges one course of action to be better than the others. But she goes against her judgment. In doing so she violates the account of practical rationality, i.e., acts contrary to what she ought to do. I then try to resolve this problem by reconsidering the account of practical reasoning in a way which allows for the possibility of incontinence.

The problem of incontinence or weakness of will is taken as the problem of how agents can intentionally do what they do not prefer to do or in terms of Aristotle, what they consider as wrong to do. In the words of Donald Davidson, "If a man holds some course of action to be the best one, everything considered, or the right one, or the thing that he ought to do, and yet does something else, he acts incontinently" (Davidson, 1980, p.21). Hence, according to his statement, it is clear that an incontinent action is carried out even though the agent recognizes that an alternative course of action would be better. It is also the case that such an action is intentional. Now, the problem is: when an intentional act is considered as the act which is in accord with wants and desires, how we can simultaneously judge something inferior (less preferable) or wrong and yet want to do it. It is in this context, my paper would attempt to investigate the possibility of weakness of will.

In his work on weakness of will, Davidson has maintained that the agent lacks a reason for performing action *X* when she believes that, all things considered, an alternative action would be better. The agent identifies something fundamentally irrational within her own intentional actions (Davidson, 1980). Here lies the paradox of irrationality. As we look into the norms of rationality, it seems unviable for an action to be irrational as well as intentional at the same time. Korsgaard (1997) has argued that rationality rules out the possibility of irrational action in practice. So, keeping these things in mind, I would oppose Davidson by holding that weakness of will is possible when the agents may find sufficient reason to go against their own rational verdict. I would refer Sarah Buss in this context. She argues that practical rationality contains the potential for self-undermining and it does so in such a way that it generates a reason for acting irrationally in case of incontinent or weak-willed action (Buss, 1997).

CLASSICAL APPROACH TO WEAKNESS OF WILL

The concept of *akrasia* appears in early Greek literature, most notably in Euripides' "Hippolytus". But the earliest comprehensive philosophical account of *akrasia* or weakness of will is presented in Plato's *Protagoras*, in which Socrates advances the thesis that "no one willingly does wrong"

(Plato, trans. 1956, 1145b). Plato presents Socrates as propounding the view that virtue is knowledge. All forms of virtue- courage, self-control, justice- are, at their core, nothing but manifestations of ethical wisdom. Socrates treats this ethical wisdom as an understanding of human well-being. One who has this ethical insight is better able to make sound choices, behave rightly, and ultimately, live well. In contrast, someone who lacks wisdom, especially if he/she is unaware of this absence, tends to make poor decisions, acts wrongly, and experience unhappiness. From this perspective, wrongdoing is not deliberate. When individuals behave badly, it is due to ignorance about the good that one ultimately desires. Socrates holds that human beings aim for what is inherently good, particularly well-being or pleasure. They act with the assumption that their choices will lead them toward it. However, when their understanding of the good is mistaken, their actions end up working against their own genuine interests and desires. Socrates says, “No one, who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course” (Plato, trans. 1956, 358b-c). According to Socrates, the man who *knows* cannot be incontinent as nothing is more potent than knowledge. Socrates maintains that nobody acts consciously against what is best. If he/she acts so, it is only because of ignorance. Since knowledge and belief about what is valuable are always action-guiding, any putative knowledge or belief that fails to guide action must also fail to qualify as genuine knowledge or belief. In case if an agent acts against what is best, he/she merely seems to know, or falsely believes that she does, but in reality, he/she cannot truly grasp what is in his/her own best interest.

Plato holds that it is obvious for a human being to make a choice between two options by choosing the better one. When a good alternative is available and a person is aware of it, he/she would not willingly opt for an inferior one. This aspect of Plato's treatment of the problem of *akrasia* is taken as the denial of it. Plato rejected the possibility of *akrasia* by presenting Socrates' views that no one willingly or consciously acts contrary to what she knows to be best. If he/she acts so, it is only because of ignorance (Plato, trans. 1956, 1145b). But this Platonic view is contradicted by our daily life experiences. On occasions, we do act contrary to our preferred course or a known better course. The possibility of such actions was asserted by Aristotle. For him, *akrasia* is a lack of, or deficiency in, the power of self-control (*sōphrōn*). According to Aristotle, the one who possesses the power of self-control is the continent man and the one who lacks it is the incontinent one. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he states: “The continent man is identical with the one who tends to abide by his own calculation, and the incontinent with the one who tends to depart from it.” (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1145b). Aristotle holds that one can act against what he/she believes to be the better course. Here Aristotle goes contrary to the views of Socrates. He maintains that “when the incontinent man is unable to resist pleasures what he has is not knowledge but only opinion” (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1145b). Aristotle holds that we use the word ‘know’ in two senses, in one sense, ‘having knowledge and using it’, in other sense, having knowledge but not using it’. This distinction is not to be equated with that between real and apparent knowledge nor with that between true belief and knowledge. He distinguishes several occasions in which potential

knowledge or belief fails to be actualized (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1147a). The first are cases in which an agent possesses knowledge he/she is not actively using because he/she is not in a situation in which such knowledge is relevant. Secondly, potential knowledge may fail to be exercised because it is not yet genuinely and fully possessed, so that its active exercise in appropriate situations is not yet fully habitual. Finally, an agent may have knowledge relevant to a situation in which he/she actually does find himself/herself and yet, for some reason or other, be unable to summon or exercise his potential knowledge. It is this sense of ‘knowing, that is followed in the case of weakness of will where the agent may use a language that flows from knowledge but does not yet know it.

Aristotle asserts that the theory of weakness of will is concerned with morality. He considers the problem of weakness of will as a moral conflict between our practical reasoning and our contrary action. In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, he states, “continnence and endurance are among good and commendable qualities, but incontinence and softness among those that are bad and censurable” (Aristotle, trans. 1976, 1145b). The 20th century philosopher Donald Davidson opposes Aristotle’s view in his paper “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” where he maintains that there is no simple connection between the problem of weakness of will (as he has posed it) and any moral theory (Davidson, 1980). Davidson does not take the problem of weakness of will as a moral conflict, rather he considers it as the conflict between an agent’s privileged evaluative judgment and her intentional contrary action. He distinguishes the problem of weakness of will from the problem of intentionally acting contrary to one’s judgment of the morally best thing to do. In his view, that is only a special case of the general problem of intentionally acting contrary to one’s judgment of what is best to be done.

Moreover, Aristotle holds that the incontinent man, knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion. But contrary to Aristotle’s position, Davidson maintains that incontinence is an irrational act and is not guided by passion or desire. If the agent is overcome by passion or desire, he cannot act freely or deliberately and hence it cannot be a clear case of incontinence.

DONALD DAVIDSON ON WEAKNESS OF WILL

Donald Davidson continues the debate on weakness of will by criticizing the views of Aristotle. In his classic paper “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?”, Davidson defines the phenomenon of weakness of will as a failure to act in accordance with what one believes to be the best evaluative judgment. In other words, a weak-willed agent is one who judges that *X* is better than *Y*, all things considered, but (freely and intentionally) chooses *Y* over *X*. Here, Davidson identifies the agent’s better evaluative judgment with an “all things considered judgment”. All things considered judgments are conditional judgments. They are conditioned on the basis of all the relevant considerations. Again, Davidson identifies the unconditional judgment with an “all out judgment” (i.e. intention). Hence, following him, it can be stated that in the case of weakness of will, the agent’s all out judgments differ from her all things considered judgment. The weak-willed agent

does contrary to her best judgment, even though at the same time, in her practical deliberation, she comes to the conclusion that, all things considered, it would be better to do something else.

So, according to Davidson, 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*.

THE PARADOX OF IRRATIONALITY: DAVIDSON’S TRIAD OF WEAKNESS OF WILL

Davidson holds that the existence of the incontinent actions pose a challenge to the doctrine that in so far as a person acts intentionally, he acts in the light of what he judges to be the better. In particular, Davidson tries to show that incontinence is compatible with this claim, which he suggests, is self-evident. His aim is to make incontinence compatible with the following two principles (Davidson, 1980):

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*.

The first principle expresses the relation between wanting something and doing it. The second principle entails the relation between judging something as better and wanting to do it. Following these principles together, we reach to the conclusion that if an agent judges that one course of action is better than another, and she believes herself to be free to do either one, then she will intentionally perform the action she judges to be better, if she does either one. Thus these two principles *appear* to be inconsistent with the possibility of free intentional actions contrary to one's better judgment. That is to say, it is seemingly inconsistent with the fact that:

P3. There are incontinent actions.

All the three principles together form the triad of incontinence, as proposed by Davidson, and are self-evident according to him. Now, the problem before Davidson is that, for him, the principles P1 and P2, and the claim that incontinence is possible, are difficult to be denied. But these two principles appear to rule out the claim that incontinence is possible. Davidson claims that the principles of the triad, P1-P3, do not contradict each other. But these principles are commonly reckoned to be contradictory due to a mistake about the nature of practical reason.

RETHINKING RATIONALITY

Davidson maintains that incontinence is a practical failure within the ambit of reason. Such actions are irrational. Moreover, such actions are unintelligible and unjustifiable. The agent fails to justify her actions contrary to her judgment. Dorothy Walsh, in her paper “*Akrasia* Reconsidered”,

criticizes this view of Davidson. She maintains that incontinent actions are intelligible as the incontinent agent is responsible for his actions (Walsh, 1975).

C.C.W. Taylor, in his paper “Plato, Hare and Davidson on *Akrasia*” maintains that the triad of incontinence as proposed by Davidson is inconsistent. He claims that the principle P2 is false. There may be such circumstances where one may judge something as better but may not want to do it (Taylor, 1980).

Davidson holds that an incontinent agent acts freely and intentionally against her all-things-considered, better evaluative judgment. Sarah Buss, in her work ‘Weakness of Will’ opposes this view by asserting that it is not possible for someone to do something freely, if she thinks that, all things considered, it would be better to do something else (Buss, 1997). By proposing this view, Buss is not rejecting the possibility of Weakness of Will. According to her, weakness of will is possible as it is possible for someone act freely against her own best judgment, not against her all things considered better judgment.

In case of a weak-willed action, the agent prefers *X* over *Y*, but acts contrary to her preference and goes for *Y*. Her preference is made through her evaluative judgment by taking into account all the relevant considerations. Her preferences cannot go against her evaluative judgment and what she prefers is what she intends to do. The preferences are not forced upon the agent against her will, rather they are products of her own judgment. Hence, “If an agent’s preferences are a function of her evaluative judgments, then they cannot be in conflict with her judgments regarding how it would be best to act, all things considered.” (Buss, 1997, p.19).

Davidson maintains that the agent has no reason for why she acted contrary to his all things considered better judgment. He holds that the agent has reason for her action but what she lacks is the reason why she failed to let her better reason prevail over her weaker reason. Buss contradicts this view and asserts that: “Weakness of will is possible because it is possible to conclude that one has sufficient reason to reject the verdicts of one’s own reason” (Buss, 1997, p.13). Buss has demonstrated this through a reductio argument. Let’s assume that someone deliberately does *Y* because she believes she has sufficient reason to act against her all-things-considered evaluative judgment, which favours doing *X*. In other words, at time *t*, her action reflects the belief that there are adequate grounds for not doing what she otherwise considers the better option, all things considered. This implies that, at that moment, she takes herself to have enough reason to set aside her own evaluation of the available choices. In the words of Buss, “the agent seems to have concluded that she can legitimately override her all things considered evaluative judgment without ceasing to endorse it” (Buss, 1997, p.21). Hence, the agent may see herself as justified in overriding the conclusions of her own reasoning.

CONCLUSION

The work can be concluded by maintaining that the phenomenon of *akrasia* or incontinence is evident in our practical life. In general, it is a failure to abide by one’s best judgment. This failure may be a *moral* or a *practical* failure. It is in this framework that the problem of *akrasia* is discussed by most of the classical philosophers as well as contemporary philosophers.

The problem of Incontinence is taken as the problem of how agents can intentionally do what they do not prefer to do or in terms of Aristotle, what they consider as wrong to do. In the words of Donald Davidson, “If a man holds some course of action to be the best one, everything considered, or the right one, or the thing that he ought to do, and yet does something else, he acts incontinently” (Buss, 1997, p.21). Hence, according to his statement it is clear that an incontinent action is performed despite the agent’s knowledge that another course of action is better. It is also the case that such an action is intentional. Now, the problem is: when an intentional act is considered as the act which is in accord with wants and desires, how we can simultaneously judge something inferior(less preferable) or wrong and yet want to do it?

It seems that the problem of incontinence or weakness of the will needs to be seen in the light of human finitude is a salient feature of human condition. Our cognitive and volitional finitude imposes both cognitive and practical constraints in the performance of our actions. Perhaps, it would never be possible for us to achieve all that we choose as our goals. Therefore, any account of practical reasoning must take in to account diversity of values, principles and goals. Given our limited capacities, it would always be difficult for us to reconcile conflicting values and interests. Therefore, we shall need to have a look at the problem of weakness of will with special focus on finding way of reconciling conflicts of interests and diversity of values and principles.

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