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24.120 Moral Psychology
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VI *Akrasia*

Socrates' Position

Now surely no one freely goes for bad things or thing 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 it 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 want 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 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:

- PI 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?