

Donald Davidson:
Paradoxes of Irrationality

§ **The Paradox:**

___ Irrationality \neq non-rationality; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason.

§ **Different forms of 'irrationality'**

- (1) Perhaps it is in some sense irrational to believe in astrology, flying saucers, or witches, but such beliefs may have standard explanations if they are based on what their holders take to be the evidence.
- (2) The sort of irrationality that makes conceptual trouble is not the failure of someone else to believe or feel to do what we deem reasonable, but rather the failure, within a single person, of coherence or consistency in the pattern of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, intentions and actions.

§ **Reason-Explanation:**

Q: What is your *reason* for doing this?

Reason \rightarrow Behavior

___ Such explanations explain by rationalizing: they enable us to see the events or attitudes as reasonable from a point of view of the agent.

* Two necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for reason explanations:

First, there must be a logical relation. Beliefs and desires have a content, and these contents must be such as to imply that there is something valuable or desirable about the action.

Second, the reasons an agent has for acting must, if they are to explain the action, be the reasons on which he acted; the reasons must have played a *causal* role in the occurrence of the action.

§ **Davidson's Analysis of Normal Intentional Action:**

___ What is to be explained is the action. At the minimum, the explanation calls on two factors:

- (i). a value, goal, want or attitude of the agent,
- (ii). A belief that by acting in the way to be explained he can promote the relevant value or goal, or will be acting in accord with his attitude.

\Rightarrow All intentional actions, whether or not they are in some further sense irrational, have a rational element at the core.

§ The Case of Akrasia ('Incontinence'; 'Weakness of Will'):

___ The case of an action where the agent acts counter to what he believes, everything considered, is better.

The Plato Principle: (the doctrine of pure rationality)

___ No intentional action can be internally irrational.

The Medea Principle:

___ A person can act against his better judgment, but only when an alien force overwhelms his or her will.

Aristotle's View:

___ Weakness of will is due to a kind of forgetting. It is not quite a case of a conscious and an unconscious desire in conflict; rather there is a conscious and an unconscious piece of knowledge, where action depends on which piece of knowledge is conscious.

Davidson's criticism:

___ Neither the Medea Principle nor the Aristotle analysis allows for straightforward cases of conflict, cases in which an agent has good reasons both for doing, and for refraining from, a course of action; or, what comes to the same thing, good reasons for doing each of the two mutually exclusive things.

§ The Paradox of Irrationality:

___ What requires explaining is the action of an agent who, having weighed up the reasons on both sides, and having judged that the preponderance of reasons is on one side, then acts against this judgment.

[Inconsistency]:

___ Pure internal inconsistency enters only if I also hold -- as in fact I do -- that I ought to act on my own best judgment, what I judge best or obligatory, everything considered.

[Akritic act]:

___ The agent goes against his own second-order principle that he ought to *act* on what he holds to be best, everything considered.

[the Puzzle of Irrationality]:

___ How can someone knowingly and intentionally act contrary to his own principle that he ought to act on what he holds to be best, everything considered?

§ Davidson's Main Thesis on Irrationality:

___ Many common examples of irrationality can be characterized by the fact that there is a mental cause that is not a reason.

Q: How is that possible?

A: [The partition theory of the mind]

___ The mind can be partitioned into quasi-independent structures.

___ The parts are defined in terms of function; ultimately, in terms of the concepts of reason and of cause.

___ Between the various parts of the mind, there could be non-logical causal relations.

An Partition theorist's explanation of akrasia:

___ Suppose: there are two semi-autonomous departments of the mind, one that finds a certain course of action to be, all things considered, best, and another that prompts another course of action. One each side, the side of sober judgment and the side of incontinent intent and action, there is a supporting structure of reasons, of interlocking beliefs, expectations, assumptions, attitudes and desires.

§ Davidson's Assumption of Intersubjectivity

Unless we can interpret others as sharing a vast amount of what makes up our common sense, we will not be able to identify any of their beliefs and desires and intentions, any of their propositional attitudes.

§ Davidson's Assumption of Holism

The meaning of a sentence, the content of a belief or desire, is not an item that can be attached to it in isolation from its fellows.

§ Davidson's Assumption of Interpersonal Interpretation

- 1. The one attribution rests on the supposition of many more -- endlessly more. And among the beliefs we suppose a man to have, many must be true (in our view) if any are to be understood by us. The clarity and cogency of our attributions of attitude, motive and belief are proportionate, then to the extent to which we find others consistent and correct.**
- 2. We often, and justifiably, find others irrational and wrong; but such judgments are most firmly based when there is the most agreement. We understand someone best when we hold him to be rational and sage, and this understanding is what gives our disputes with him a keen edge.**

- 3. We have no trouble understanding small perturbations against a background with which we are largely in sympathy, but large deviations from reality or consistency begin to undermine our ability to describe and explain what is going on in mental terms.**