

**Donald Davidson: *Incoherence and Irrationality***

**§ The Main Issue:**

\_\_\_ Can standards of rationality *ever* be objective?

**Davidson's claim:**

\_\_\_ Constitutive standards are standards with which an agent's attitudes and intentional actions must generally accord if judgments of irrationality are to be intelligible.

**\* [Irrationality]:**

\_\_\_ Irrationality, like rationality, is a normative concept. Someone who acts or reasons irrationally, or whose beliefs or emotions are irrational, has departed from a standard.

**Q: But what standard, whose, is to be the judge?**

**Q: If you deviate from my norms of rationality, and you do not share my sense of what is reasonable, then are you really irrational?**

**<external standards>**

\_\_\_ differences in judgments or disagreement over fact or norm.

**<internal standards>**

\_\_\_ We should limit ourselves to cases in which an agent acts, thinks, or feels counter to his own conception of what is reasonable; cases where there is some sort of inner inconsistency or incoherence.

**\* [Inner Inconsistency]:**

1. The agent has far better evidence against his belief than for it; and
2. The agent appreciates that the evidence he has *is* evidence against his belief, and holds that the evidence against outweighs the evidence for his belief; and
3. The agent accepts "the principle of total evidence" which counsels an agent to accept the hypothesis supported by the totality of evidence he or she has.

**§ Causes as Reasons**

\_\_\_ What is needed to explain irrationality is a mental cause of an attitude, but where the cause is not a reason for the attitude it explains.

**Intention to form a belief → an attitude or an act**

§ **General Principles of Rationality**

\_\_\_ [the principles of total evidence for inductive reasoning,]:

One ought to adjust one's degree of belief in an hypothesis to what one deems to be the extent to which it is supported by all one's available evidence -- what one takes to be the available evidence, of course, since one can do no better.

\_\_\_ [the Principle of Contenance]:

One should prefer (act on) the judgment based on all the considerations deemed relevant.

\_\_\_ basic principles of logic

**Q:** What counts as available evidence?

**Q:** Do you think that we generally obey the above principles of rationality?

**Davidson's Claim:**

It is only when beliefs are inconsistent with other beliefs according to the principles held by the agent himself -- in other words, only when there is an inner inconsistency -- that there is a clear case of irrationality.

Intentions, intentional actions, and other propositional attitudes are never irrational in themselves, but only as part of a larger pattern.

➔ "Irrationality" = Inner Inconsistency

§ [synchronic inconsistency]:

\_\_\_ Synchronic inconsistency requires that all the beliefs, desires, intentions, and principles of the agent that create the inconsistency are present at once and are in some sense in operation -- are live psychic forces. It is by no means easy to conceive how a single mind can be described in this way.

§ **Davidson's Argument (A):**

1. Intentional actions entail the existence of intentions.
2. An intention consists in an evaluative judgment of a certain kind.
3. So, acting with a certain intention can entail the existence of a judgment that is inconsistent with other attitudes and principles of the agent.
4. Therefore, the irrationality lies in the inconsistency of the intention with other attitudes and principles rather than in the inconsistency of the action with those attitudes and principles.

§ **Davidson's Argument (B):**

1. Beliefs, intentions, and desires are identified, first, by their causal relations to events and objects in the world, and second, by their relations to one another.
2. These obvious logical relations amongst beliefs; amongst beliefs, desires and intentions; between beliefs and the world, make beliefs the beliefs they are.

3. Therefore, they cannot in general lose these relations and remain the same beliefs. Such relations are *constitutive* of the propositional attitudes.

#### § Davidson's Conclusion

**If someone does go against those principles, he goes against his own principles.**

**It is a condition of having thoughts, judgments, and intentions that the basic standards of rationality have application.**

**There is no such list as "basic principles of rationality." We only have a "background" of rationality. Any aberration only makes sense against a background of rationality.**

**Large scale of deviation → no rationality**