How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?

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Abstract and Keywords

Davidson attempts to analyse the case in which an agent deems some available course of action to be better on the whole than the one he actually, and intentionally, takes. He insists that the case presents a genuine problem that cannot be analysed away by tinkering with, or simply dismissing out of hand, the principles of practical reasoning that generate it—viz. that if I could, I would perform an action I want (provided I want it more than any other one), that I want to perform an action more than another one if I deem it better, and hence, that I would perform an action that I deem better than any other one if I could. Davidson dismisses various accounts from Socrates and Aristotle onwards that one way or another deny that the incontinent person acted intentionally, voluntarily, and with full knowledge of what he was doing (he also notes that these accounts mistakenly treat the problem as
necessarily moral, ignoring that one might be overcome by an excessive sense of duty while knowing the course of pleasure to be the better on the whole). Presenting his own account, he notes that if reasons are causes, as Essay 1 argued, then the strongest reasons would seem to be the strongest causes—as this would evidently rule out incontinence, Davidson has to dissociate the ‘causally strongest’ reasons from those the agent deems best, to the effect that the conclusion of the practical syllogism based on the latter is no longer identical to the action the incontinent agent performs (as Essay 1 had claimed).

**Keywords:** akrasia, Aristotle, causal theory of action, practical syllogism, Socrates, weakness of will

An agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgement; in such cases we sometimes say he lacks the willpower to do what he knows, or at any rate believes, would, everything considered, 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. In using this terminology I depart from tradition, at least in making the class of incontinent actions larger than usual. But it is the larger class I want to discuss, and I believe it includes all of the actions some philosophers have called incontinent, and some of the actions many philosophers have called incontinent.

Let me explain how my conception of incontinence is more general than some others. It is often made a condition of an incontinent action that it be performed despite the agent's knowledge that another course of action is better. I count such actions incontinent, but the puzzle I shall discuss depends only on the attitude or belief of the agent, so it would restrict the field to no purpose to insist on knowledge. Knowledge also has an unneeded, and hence unwanted, flavour of the cognitive; my subject concerns evaluative judgements, whether they are analysed cognitively, prescriptively, or otherwise. So even the concept of belief is perhaps too special, and I shall speak of what the agent judges or holds.
If a man holds some course of action to be the best one, everything considered, or the right one, or the thing he ought to do, and yet does something else, he acts incontinently. But I would also say he acts incontinently provided he holds some available course of action to be better on the whole than the one he takes; or that, as between some other course of action which he believes open to him and the action he performs, he judges that he ought to perform the other. In other words, comparative judgements suffice for incontinence.

We may now characterize an action that reveals weakness of the will or incontinence:

D. 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 \( x \).

There seem to be incontinent actions in this sense. The difficulty is that their existence challenges another doctrine that has an air of self-evidence: that, in so far as a person acts intentionally he acts, as Aquinas puts it, in the light of some imagined good. This view does not, as it stands, directly contradict the claim that there are incontinent actions. But it is hard to deny that the considerations that recommend this view recommend also a relativized version: in so far as a person acts intentionally he acts in the light of what he imagines (judges) to be the better.

It will be useful to spell out this claim in the form of two principles. The first expresses the natural assumption about the relation between wanting or desiring something, and action. ‘The primitive sign of wanting is trying to get’, says Anscombe in *Intention*. Hampshire comes closer to exactly what I need when he writes, in *Freedom of the Individual*, that ‘A wants to do X’ is equivalent to ‘other things being equal, he would do X, if he could’. Here I take (possibly contrary to Hampshire’s intent) ‘other things being equal’ to mean, or anyway to allow, the interpretation, ‘provided there is not something he wants more’. Given this interpretation, Hampshire’s principle could perhaps be put:
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.

The second principle connects judgements of what it is better to do with motivation or wanting:

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 \(y\).

P1 and P2 together obviously entail that if an agent judges that it would be better for him to do \(x\) than to do \(y\), and he believes himself to be free to do either \(x\) or \(y\), then he will intentionally do \(x\) if he does either \(x\) or \(y\) intentionally. This conclusion, I suggest, appears to show that it is false that:

P3. There are incontinent actions.

Someone who is convinced that P1–P3 form an inconsistent triad, but who finds only one or two of the principles really persuasive, will have no difficulty deciding what to say. But for someone (like myself) to whom the principles expressed by P1–P3 seem self-evident, the problem posed by the apparent contradiction is acute enough to be called a paradox. I cannot agree with Lemmon when he writes, in an otherwise admirable article, ‘Perhaps akrasia is one of the best examples of a pseudo-problem in philosophical literature: in view of its existence, if you find it a problem you have already made a philosophical mistake.’

If your assumptions lead to a contradiction, no doubt you have made a mistake, but since you can know you have made a mistake without knowing what the mistake is, your problem may be real.

The attempted solutions with which I am familiar to the problem created by the initial plausibility of P1–P3 assume that P1–P3 do really contradict one another. These attempts naturally end by giving up one or another of the principles. I am not very happy about P1–P3 as I have stated them: perhaps it is easy to doubt whether they are true in just their present form (particularly P1 and P2). And reflecting on the ambiguities, or plurality of uses, of various critical words or phrases (‘judge better’, ‘want’, ‘intentional’) it is not surprising that philosophers have tried interpreting some key phrase as meaning one thing in one principle and meaning something else in another. But I am convinced that no amount
of tinkering with P1–P3 will eliminate the underlying problem: the problem will survive new wording, refinement, and elimination of ambiguity. I shall mention a few of the standard moves, and try to discredit them, but endless ways of dealing with the problem will remain. My basic strategy is therefore not that of trying to make an airtight case for P1–P3, perhaps by working them into less exceptionable form. What I hope rather is to show that P1–P3 do not contradict one another, and therefore we do not have to give up any of them. At the same time I shall offer an explanation of why we are inclined to think P1–P3 lead to a contradiction; for if I am right, a common and important mistake explains our confusion, a mistake about the nature of practical reason.

I

Here are some of the ways in which philosophers have sought, or might seek, to cope with the problem of incontinence as I have stated it.

The sins of the leopard—lust, gluttony, avarice, and wrath—are the least serious sins for which we may be eternally damned, according to Dante. Dante has these sins, which he calls the sins of incontinence, punished in the second, third, fourth, and fifth circles of Hell. In a famous example, Dante describes the adulterous sin of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. Commentators show their cleverness by pointing out that even in telling her story Francesca reveals her weakness of character. Thus Charles Williams says, ‘Dante so manages the description, he so heightens the excuse, that the excuse reveals itself as precisely the sin . . . the persistent parleying with the occasion of sin, the sweet prolonged laziness of love . . . ’ Perhaps all this is true of Francesca, but it is not essential to incontinence, for the ‘weakness’ may be momentary, not a character trait: when we speak of ‘weakness’ we may merely express, without explaining, the fact that the agent did what he knew to be wrong. (‘It was one page did it.’) Aristotle even seems to imply that it is impossible to be habitually incontinent, on the grounds that habitual action involves a principle in accord with which one acts, while the incontinent man acts against his principle. I suppose, then, that it is at least possible to perform isolated
incontinent actions, and I shall discuss incontinence as a habit
or vice only as the vice is construed as the vice of often or
habitually performing incontinent actions.\(^6\)

A man might hold it to be wrong, everything considered, for
him to send a valentine to Marjorie Morningstar. Yet he might
send a valentine to Marjorie Eveningstar, and do it
intentionally, not knowing that Marjorie Eveningstar was
identical with Marjorie Morningstar. We might want to say he
did something he held to be wrong, but it would be misleading
to say he intentionally did something he held to be wrong; and
the case I illustrate is certainly not an example of an
incontinent action. We must not, I hope it is clear, think that
actions can be simply sorted into the incontinent and others.
characterizes actions only as conceived in one way rather than
another. In any serious analysis of the logical form of action
sentences, such words must be construed, I think, as non‐
truth‐functional sentential operators: ‘It was incontinent of
Francesca that . . . ’ and ‘It was intentional of the agent
that . . . ’ But for present purposes it is enough to avoid the
mistake of overlooking the intentionality of these expressions.

Incontinence is often characterized in one of the following
ways: the agent intends to do y, which he holds to be the best
course, or a better course than doing x; nevertheless he does
x. Or, the agent decides to do y, which he holds to be the best
course, or a better course than doing x, and yet he does x. Or,
the agent chooses y as the result of deliberation,\(^7\) and yet does
x, which he deems inferior to y. Each of these forms of
behaviour is interesting, and given some provisos may be
characterized as inconsistent, weak, vacillating, or irrational.
Any of them might be a case of incontinence, as I have defined
it. But as they stand, they are not necessarily cases of
incontinence because none of them entails that at the time he
acts the agent holds that another course of action would, all
things considered, be better. And on the other hand, an action
can be incontinent without the agent's ever having decided,
chosen, or intended to do what he judges best.

Principle 2 states a mild form of internalism. It says that a
judgement of value must be reflected in wants (or desires or
motives). This is not as strong as many forms of internalism: it does not, for example, say anything at all about the connection between the actual value of things (or the obligatory character of actions) and desires or motives. Nor does it, so far as I can see, involve us in any doctrine about what evaluative judgements mean. According to Hare, ‘to draw attention to the close logical relations, on the one hand between wanting and thinking good, and on the other between wanting and doing something about getting what one wants, is to play into the hands of the prescriptivist; for it’s to provide yet another link between thinking good and action’. I confess I do not see how these ‘close logical relations’, which are given in one form by P1 and P2, support any particular theory about the meaning of evaluative sentences or terms. A possible source of confusion is revealed when Hare says ‘. . . if moral judgements were not prescriptive, there would be no problem about moral weakness; but there is a problem; therefore they are prescriptive’ (p. 68). The confusion is between making a judgement, and the content of the judgement. It is P2 (or its ilk) that creates the problem, and P2 connects making a judgement with wanting and hence, via P1, with acting. But prescriptivism is a doctrine about the content or meaning of what is judged, and P2 says nothing about this. One could hold, for example, that to say one course of action is better than another is just to say that it will create more pleasure and yet maintain, as Mill perhaps did, that anyone who believes a certain course of action will create more pleasure than another (necessarily) wants it more. So 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.

Perhaps the most common way of dealing with the problem of incontinence is to reject P2. It seems obvious enough, after all, that we may think x better, yet want y more. P2 is even easier to question if it is stated in the form: if an agent thinks he ought (or is obligated) to do x, then he wants to do x; for of course we often don’t want to do what we think we ought. Hare, if I understand him, accounts for some cases of incontinence in such a way; so, according to Santas, did Plato.
It is easy to interpret P2 in a way that makes it false, but it is harder to believe there is not a natural reading that makes it true. For against our tendency to agree that we often believe we ought to do something and yet don't want to, there is also the opposite tendency to say that if someone really (sincerely) believes he ought, then his belief must show itself in his behaviour (and hence, of course, in his inclination to act, or his desire). When we make a point of contrasting thinking we ought with wanting, this line continues, either we are using the phrase ‘thinking we ought’ to mean something like ‘thinking it is what is required by the usual standards of the community’ or we are restricting wanting to what is attractive on a purely selfish or personal basis. Such ways of defending P2, though I find them attractive, are hard to make conclusive without begging the present question. So I am inclined, in order to move ahead, to point out that a problem about incontinence will occur in some form as long as there is any word or phrase we can convincingly substitute for ‘wants’ in both P1 and P2.

Another common line to take with incontinence is to depict the akrates as overcome by passion or unstrung by emotion. ‘I know indeed what evil I intend to do. But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury’, rants Medea. Hare makes this the paradigm of all cases of weakness of the will where we cannot simply separate moral judgement and desire, and he adds that in such cases the agent is psychologically unable to do what he thinks he ought (Freedom and Reason, p. 77). Hare quotes Euripides' Medea when she says ‘... an unknown compulsion bears me, all reluctant, down’, and St. Paul when he writes, ‘The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will; and if what I do is against my will, clearly it is no longer I who am the agent...’ (Romans 7.) This line leads to the view that one never acts intentionally contrary to one's best judgement, and so denies P3; there are no incontinent actions in the sense we have defined.10

A related, but different, view is Aristotle's, that passion, lust, or pleasure distort judgement and so prevent an agent from forming a full-fledged judgement that his action is wrong. Though there is plenty of room for doubt as to precisely what
Aristotle’s view was, it is safe to say that he tried to solve our problem by distinguishing two senses in which a man may be said to know (or believe) that one thing is better than another; one sense makes P2 true, while the other sense is needed in the definition of incontinence. The flavour of this second sense is given by Aristotle’s remark that the incontinent man has knowledge ‘in the sense in which having knowledge does not mean knowing but only talking, as a drunken man may mutter the verses of Empedocles’ (Nic. Eth., 1147b).

Perhaps it is evident that there is a considerable range of actions, similar to incontinent actions in one respect or another, where we may speak of self-deception, insincerity, mauvaise foi, hypocrisy, unconscious desires, motives and intentions, and so on. There is in fact a very great temptation, in working on this subject, to play the amateur psychologist. We are dying to say: remember the enormous variety of ways a man can believe or hold something, or know it, or want something, or be afraid of it, or do something. We can act as if we knew something, and yet profoundly doubt it; we can act at the limit of our capacity and at the same time stand off like an observer and say to ourselves, ‘What an odd thing to do.’ We can desire things and tell ourselves we hate them. These half-states and contradictory states are common, and full of interest to the philosopher. No doubt they explain, or at least point to a way of describing without contradiction, many cases where we find ourselves talking of weakness of the will or of incontinence. But we ourselves show a certain weakness as philosophers if we do not go on to ask: does every case of incontinence involve one of the shadow-zones where we want both to apply, and to withhold, some mental predicate? 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. And if this is so, no amount of attention to the subtle borderline bits of behaviour will resolve the central problem.
Austin complains that in discussing the present topic, we are prone to ‘... collapse succumbing to temptation into losing control of ourselves ...’ He elaborates:

Plato, I suppose, and after him Aristotle, fastened this confusion upon us, as bad 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.  

We succumb to temptation with calm; there are also plenty of cases where we act against our better judgement and which cannot be described as succumbing to temptation.

In the usual accounts of incontinence there are, it begins to appear, two quite different themes that interweave and tend to get confused. One is, that desire distracts us from the good, or forces us to the bad; the other is that incontinent action always favours the beastly, selfish passion over the call of duty and morality. That these two themes can be separated was emphasized by Plato both in the Protagoras and the Philebus when he showed that the hedonist, on nothing but his own pleasure bent, could go against his own best judgement as easily as anyone else. Mill makes the same point, though presumably from a position more sympathetic to the hedonist: ‘Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures than when it is between bodily and mental.’ (Utilitarianism, Chap. 11.) Unfortunately, Mill goes on to spoil the effect of his point by adding, ‘They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.’
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 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.

There are numerous occasions when immediate pleasure yields to principle, politeness, or sense of duty and yet we judge (or know) that all things considered we should opt for pleasure. In approaching the problem of incontinence it is a good idea to dwell on the cases where morality simply doesn't enter the picture as one of the contestants for our favour—or if it does, it is on the wrong side. Then we shall not succumb to the temptation to reduce incontinence to such special cases as being overcome by the beast in us, or of failing to heed the call of duty, or of succumbing to temptation.14

II

Under sceptical scrutiny, P1 and P2 appear vulnerable enough, and yet tinkering with them yields no satisfactory account of how incontinence is possible. Part of the reason at least lies in the fact that P1 and P2 derive their force from a very persuasive view of the nature of intentional action and practical reasoning. When a person acts with an intention, the following seems to be a true, if rough and incomplete, description of what goes on: he sets a positive value on some state of affairs (an end, or the performance by himself of an action satisfying certain conditions); he believes (or knows or perceives) that an action, of a kind open to him to perform, will promote or produce or realize the valued state of affairs;
and so he acts (that is, he acts *because* of his value or desire and his belief). Generalized and refined, this description has seemed to many philosophers, from Aristotle on, to promise to give an analysis of what it is to act with an intention; to illuminate how we explain an action by giving the reasons the agent had in acting; and to provide the beginning of an account of practical reasoning, i.e. reasoning about what to do, reasoning that leads to action.

In the simplest case, we imagine that the agent has a desire, for example, to know the time. He realizes that by looking at his watch he will satisfy his desire; so he looks at his watch. We can answer the question why he looked at his watch; we know the intention with which he did it. Following Aristotle, the desire may be conceived as a principle of action, and its natural propositional expression would here be something like ‘It would be good for me to know the time’ or, even more stiffly, ‘Any act of mine that results in my knowing the time is desirable.’ Such a principle Aristotle compares to the major premise in a syllogism. The propositional expression of the agent's belief would in this case be, ‘Looking at my watch will result in my knowing the time’: this corresponds to the minor premise. Subsuming the case under the rule, the agent performs the desirable action: he looks at his watch.

It seems that, given this desire and this belief, the agent is in a position to infer that looking at his watch is desirable, and in fact the making of such an inference is something it would be natural to describe as subsuming the case under the rule. But given the desire and this belief, the conditions are also satisfied that lead to (and hence explain) an intentional action, so Aristotle says that once a person has the desire and believes some action will satisfy it, *straightway he acts*. Since there is no distinguishing the conditions under which an agent is in a position to infer that an action he is free to perform is desirable from the conditions under which he acts, Aristotle apparently identifies drawing the inference and acting: he says, ‘the conclusion is an action’. But of course this account of intentional action and practical reason contradicts the assumption that there are incontinent actions.
As long as we keep the general outline of Aristotle's theory before us, I think we cannot fail to realize that he can offer no satisfactory analysis of incontinent action. No doubt he can explain why, in borderline cases, we are tempted both to say an agent acted intentionally and that he knew better. But if we postulate a strong desire from which he acted, then on the theory, we also attribute to the agent a strong judgement that the action is desirable; and if we emphasize that the agent's ability to reason to the wrongness of his action was weakened or distorted, to that extent we show that he did not fully appreciate that what he was doing was undesirable.

It should not be supposed we can escape Aristotle's difficulty simply by giving up the doctrine that having the reasons for action always results in action. We might allow, for example, that a man can have a desire and believe an action will satisfy it, and yet fail to act, and add that it is only if the desire and belief cause him to act that we can speak of an intentional action. On such a modified version of Aristotle's theory (if it really is a modification) we would still have to explain why in some cases the desire and belief caused an action, while in other cases they merely led to the judgement that a course of action was desirable.

The incontinent man believes it would be better on the whole to do something else, but he has a reason for what he does, for his action is intentional. We must therefore be able to abstract from his behaviour and state of mind a piece of practical reasoning the conclusion of which is, or would be if the conclusion were drawn from the premises, that the action actually performed is desirable. Aristotle tends to obscure this point by concentrating on cases where the incontinent man behaves 'under the influence of rule and an opinion' (Nic. Eth., 1147b; cf. 1102b).

Aquinas is far clearer on this important point than Aristotle. He says:

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 second.16

An example, given by Aquinas, shows the plight of the incontinent man:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE SIDE OF REASON</th>
<th>THE SIDE OF LUST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(M₁) No fornication is lawful</td>
<td>(M₂) Pleasure is to be pursued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m₁) This is an act of fornication</td>
<td>(m₂) This act is pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C₁) This act is not lawful</td>
<td>(C₂) This act is to be pursued</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can make the point more poignantly, though here we go beyond Aristotle and Aquinas, if we construe principles and conclusions as comparative judgements concerning the merits of committing, or not committing, the act in question. The two conclusions (C₁) and (C₂) will then be (given some natural assumptions): It is better not to perform this act than to perform it, and, It is better to perform this act than not to perform it. And these are in flat contradiction on the assumption that better-than is asymmetric.

And now we must observe that this picture of moral reasoning is not merely inadequate to account for incontinence; it cannot give a correct account of simple cases of moral conflict. By a case of moral conflict I mean a case where there are good reasons both for performing an action and for performing one that rules it out (perhaps refraining from the action). There is conflict in this minimal sense whenever the agent is aware of considerations that, taken alone, would lead to mutually incompatible actions; feelings of strife and anxiety are inessential embellishments. Clearly enough, incontinence can exist only when there is conflict in this sense, for the incontinent man holds one course to be better (for a reason) and yet does something else (also for a reason). So we may set aside what is special to incontinence for the moment, and consider conflict generally. The twin arguments of the previous paragraph depict not only the plight of the
incontinent man, but also of the righteous man in the toils of temptation; one of them does the wrong thing and the other the right, but both act in the face of competing claims.

The situation is common; life is crowded with examples: I ought to do it because it will save a life, I ought not because it will be a lie; if I do it, I will break my word to Lavina, if I don't, I will break my word to Lolita; and so on. Anyone may find himself in this fix, whether he be upright or temporizing, weak-willed or strong. But then unless we take the line that moral principles cannot conflict in application to a case, we must give up the concept of the nature of practical reason we have so far been assuming. For how can premises, all of which are true (or acceptable), entail a contradiction?

It is astonishing that in contemporary moral philosophy this problem has received little attention, and no satisfactory treatment. Those who recognize the difficulty seem ready to accept one of two solutions: in effect they allow only a single ultimate moral principle; or they rest happy with the notion of a distinction between the prima facie desirable (good, obligatory, etc.) and the absolutely desirable (good, obligatory, etc).\(^{17}\) I shall not argue the point here, but I do not believe any version of the ‘single principle’ solution, once its implications are understood, can be accepted: principles, or reasons for acting, are irreducibly multiple. On the other hand, it is not easy to see how to take advantage of the purported distinction between prima facie and absolute value. Suppose first that we try to think of \(\text{(p.35)}\) ‘prima facie’ as an attributive adverb, helping to form such predicates as ‘\(x\) is prima facie good, right, obligatory’ or ‘\(x\) is better, prima facie, than \(y\)’. To avoid our recent trouble, we must suppose that ‘\(x\) is better, prima facie, than \(y\)’ does not contradict ‘\(y\) is better, prima facie, than \(x\)’, and that ‘\(x\) is prima facie right’ does not contradict ‘\(x\) is prima facie wrong’. But then the conclusion we can draw, in every case of conflict (and hence of incontinence) will be ‘\(x\) is better, prima facie, than \(y\), and \(y\) is better, prima facie, than \(x\)’. This comes down, as is clear from the structure practical reasoning would have on this assumption, to saying ‘There is something to be said for, and something to be said against, doing so and so—and also for and against not doing it.’
Probably this can be said about any action whatsoever; in any case it is hard to accept the idea that the sum of our moral wisdom concerning what to do in a given situation has this form. The situation I describe is not altered in any interesting way if ‘prima facie’ or ‘prima facie obligatory’ is treated as a (non-truth-functional) sentential operator rather than as a predicate. I shall return shortly to this problem; now let us reconsider incontinence.

The image we get of incontinence from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hare is of a battle or struggle between two contestants. Each contestant is armed with his argument or principle. One side may be labelled ‘passion’ and the other ‘reason’; they fight; one side wins, the wrong side, the side called ‘passion’ (or ‘lust’ or ‘pleasure’). There is, however, a competing image (to be found in Plato, as well as in Butler and many others). It is adumbrated perhaps by Dante (who thinks he is following Aquinas and Aristotle) when he speaks of the incontinent man as one who ‘lets desire pull reason from her throne’ (Inferno, Canto v). Here there are three actors on the stage: reason, desire, and the one who lets desire get the upper hand. The third actor is perhaps named ‘The Will’ (or ‘Conscience’). It is up to The Will to decide who wins the battle. If The Will is strong, he gives the palm to reason; if he is weak, he may allow pleasure or passion the upper hand.

This second image is, I suggest, superior to the first, absurd as we may find both. On the first story, not only can we not account for incontinence; it is not clear how we can ever blame the agent for what he does: his action merely reflects the outcome of a struggle within him. What could he do about it? And more important, the first image does not allow us to make sense of a conflict in one person's soul, for it leaves no room for the all-important process of weighing considerations. In the second image, the agent's representative, The Will, can judge the strength of the arguments on both sides, can execute the decision, and take the rap. The only trouble is that we seem back where we started. For how can The Will judge one course of action better and yet choose the other?
It would be a mistake to think we have made no progress. For what these colourful gladiatorial and judicial metaphors ought now to suggest is that there is a piece of practical reasoning present in moral conflict, and hence in incontinence, which we have so far entirely neglected. What must be added to the picture is a new argument:

**THE WILL (CONSCIENCE)**

(M₃) M₁ and M₂
(m₃) m₁ and m₂
(C₃) This action is wrong

Clearly something like this third argument is necessary if an agent is to act either rightly or incontinently in the face of conflict. It is not enough to know the reasons on each side: he must know how they add up.¹⁹ The incontinent man goes against his better judgement, and this surely is (C₃), which is based on all the considerations, and not (C₁) which fails to bring in the reasons on the other side. You could say we have discovered two quite different meanings of the phrase ‘his better judgement’. It might mean, any judgement for the right side (reason, morality, family, country); or, the judgement based on all relevant considerations known to the actor. The first notion, I have argued, is really irrelevant to the analysis of incontinence.

But now we are brought up against our other problem, the form or nature of practical reasoning. For nothing could be more obvious than that our third ‘practical syllogism’ is no syllogism at all; the conclusion simply doesn’t follow by logic from the premises. And introducing the third piece of reasoning doesn’t solve the problem we had before anyway: we still have contradictory ‘conclusions’. We could at this point try once more introducing ‘prima facie’ in suitable places: for example, in (M₁), (M₂), (C₁), and (C₂). We might then try to relate prima facie desirability to desirability sans phrase by making (C₁) and (C₂), thus interpreted, the data for (C₃). But this is an unpromising line. We can hardly expect to learn whether an action ought to be performed simply from the fact that it is both prima facie right and prima facie wrong.

The real source of difficulty is now apparent: if we are to have a coherent theory of practical reason, we must give up the idea that we can detach conclusions about what is desirable (or better) or obligatory from the principles that lend those
conclusions colour. The trouble lies in the tacit assumption that moral principles have the form of universalized conditionals; once this assumption is made, nothing we can do with a prima facie operator in the conclusion will save things. The situation is, in this respect, like reasoning from probabilistic evidence. As Hempel has emphasized with great clarity, we cannot reason from:

(M4) If the barometer falls, it almost certainly will rain
(m4) The barometer is falling
to the conclusion:
(C4) It almost certainly will rain

since we may at the same time be equally justified in arguing:

(M5) Red skies at night, it almost certainly won't rain
(m5) The sky is red tonight
∴ (C5) It almost certainly won't rain

The crucial blunder is interpreting (M4) and (M5) to allow detachment of the modal conclusion. A way to mend matters is to view the ‘almost certainly’ of (M4) and (M5) as modifying, not the conclusion, but the connective. Thus we might render (M4), ‘That the barometer falls probabilizes that it will rain’; in symbols, ‘pr(Rx, Fx)’, where the variable ranges over areas of space-time that may be characterized by falling barometers or rain. If we let ‘a’ name the space and time of here and now, and ‘Sx’ mean that the early part of x is characterized by a red sky of evening, we may attempt to reconstruct the thought bungled above thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pr(Rx,Fx)</th>
<th>pr(~Rx,Sx)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fa</td>
<td>Sa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∴ pr(Ra,pr(Rx,Fx) and Fa)</td>
<td>∴ pr(~Ra,pr(~Rx,Sx) and Sa)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we want to predict the weather, we will take a special interest in:

pr(~Ra,e) or pr(Ra,e)

where e is all the relevant evidence we have. But it is clear that we can infer neither of these from the two arguments that went before, even if e is simply the conjunction of their premises (and even if for
our qualitative ‘pr’ we substitute a numerical measure of degree of support).

I propose to apply the pattern to practical reasoning in the obvious way. The central idea is that a moral principle, like ‘Lying is (prima facie) wrong’, cannot coherently be treated as a universally quantified conditional, but should be recognized to mean something like, ‘That an act is a lie prima facie makes it wrong’; in symbols, ‘pf(Wx,Lx)’. The concept of the prima facie, as it is needed in moral philosophy, relates propositions. In logical grammar, ‘prima facie’ is not an operator on single sentences, much less on predicates of actions, but on pairs of sentences related as (expressing) moral judgement and ground. Here is how the piece of practical reasoning misrepresented by (M₁), (m₁) and (C₁) might look when reconstituted:

(M₆) pf(x is better than y, x is a refraining from fornication and y is an act of fornication)

(m₆) a is a refraining from fornication and b is an act of fornication

∴ (C₆) pf(a is better than b, (M₆) and (m₆))

Similarly, (M₂) and (m₂), when rewritten in the new mode, and labelled (M₇) and (m₇), will yield:

(C₇) pf(b is better than a, (M₇) and (m₇))

A judgement in which we will take particular interest is:

(C₈) pf(a is better than b, e)

where e is all the relevant considerations known to us, including at least (M₆), (m₆), (M₇), and (m₇).

Of course (C₈) does not follow logically from anything that went before, but in this respect moral reasoning seems no worse off than predicting the weather. In neither case do we know a general formula for computing how far or whether a conjunction of evidence statements supports a conclusion from how far or whether each conjunct supports it. There is no loss either, in this respect, in our strategy of relativizing moral judgements: we have no clue how to arrive at (C₈) from the reasons, but its faulty prototype (C₃) was in no better shape. There has, however, been a loss of relevance, for the
conditionalization that keeps (C₆) from clashing with (C₇), and (C₈) from clashing with either, also insulates all three from action. Intentional action, I have argued in defending P1 and P2, is geared directly to unconditional judgements like ‘It would be better to do a than to do b.’ Reasoning that stops at conditional judgements such as (C₈) is practical only in its subject, not in its issue.²¹

Practical reasoning does however often arrive at unconditional judgements that one action is better than another—otherwise there would be no such thing as acting on a reason. The minimal elements of such reasoning are these: the agent accepts some reason (or set of reasons) r, and holds that pf(a is better than b, r), and these constitute the reason why he judges that a is better than b. Under these conditions, the agent will do a if he does either a or b intentionally, and his reason for doing a rather than b will be identical with the reason why he judges a better than b.

This modified account of acting on a reason leaves P1 and P2 untouched, and Aristotle’s remark that the conclusion (of a piece of practical reasoning) is an action remains cogent. But now there is no (logical) difficulty in the fact of incontinence, for the akrates is characterized as holding that, all things considered, it would be better to do b than to do a, even though he does a rather than b and with a reason. The logical difficulty has vanished because a judgement that a is better than b, all things considered, is a relational, or pf, judgement, and so cannot conflict logically with any unconditional judgement.

Possibly it will be granted that P1–P3, as interpreted here, do not yield a contradiction. But at the same time, a doubt may arise whether P3 is plausible, given this interpretation. For how is it possible for a man to judge that a is better than b, all things considered, and not judge that a is better than b?

One potential confusion is quickly set aside. ‘a is better than b, all things (viz. all truths, moral and otherwise) considered’ surely does entail ‘a is better than b’, and we do not want to explain incontinence as a simple logical blunder.
The phrase ‘all things considered’ must, of course, refer only to things known, believed, or held by the agent, the sum of his relevant principles, opinions, attitudes, and desires. Setting this straight may, however, seem only to emphasize the real difficulty. We want now to ask: how is it possible for a man to judge that \( a \) is better than \( b \) on the grounds that \( r \), and yet not judge that \( a \) is better than \( b \), when \( r \) is the sum of all that seems relevant to him? When we say that \( r \) contains all that seems relevant to the agent, don’t we just mean that nothing has been omitted that influences his judgement that \( a \) is better than \( b \)?

Since what is central to the solution of the problem of incontinence proposed in this paper is the contrast between conditional (prima facie) evaluative judgements and evaluative judgements sans phrase, perhaps we can give a characterization of incontinence that avoids the troublesome ‘all things considered’. A plausible modification of our original definition (D) of incontinence might label an action, \( x \), as incontinent provided simply that the agent has a better reason for doing something else: he does \( x \) for a reason \( r \), but he has a reason \( r' \) that includes \( r \) and more, on the basis of which he judges some alternative \( y \) to be better than \( x \).\(^{22}\) Of course it might also have been incontinent of him to have done \( y \), since he may have had a better reason still for performing some third action \( z \). Following this line, we might say that an action \( x \) is continent if \( x \) is done for a reason \( r \), and there is no reason \( r' \) (that includes \( r \)), on the basis of which the agent judges some action better than \( x \).

This shows we can make sense of incontinence without appeal to the idea of an agent’s total wisdom, and the new formulation might in any case be considered an improvement on (D) since it allows (correctly, I think) that there are incontinent actions even when no judgement is made in the light of all the reasons. Still, we cannot rule out the case where a judgement is made in the light of all the reasons, so the underlying difficulty may be thought to remain.

In fact, however, the difficulty is not real. Every judgement is made in the light of all the reasons in this sense, that it is
made in the presence of, and is conditioned by, that totality. But this does not mean that every judgement is reasonable, or thought to be so by the agent, on the basis of those reasons, nor that the judgement was reached from that basis by a process of reasoning. There is no paradox in supposing a person sometimes holds that all that he believes and values supports a certain course of action, when at the same time those same beliefs and values cause him to reject that course of action. If $r$ is someone's reason for holding that $p$, then his holding that $r$ must be, I think, a cause of his holding that $p$. But, and this is what is crucial here, his holding that $r$ may cause his holding that $p$ without $r$ being his reason; indeed, the agent may even think that $r$ is a reason to reject $p$.

It is possible, then, to be incontinent, even if P1 and P2 are true. But what, on this analysis, is the fault in incontinence? The akrates does not, as is now clear, hold logically contradictory beliefs, nor is his failure necessarily a moral failure. What is wrong is that the incontinent man acts, and judges, irrationally, for this is surely what we must say of a man who goes against his own best judgement. Carnap and Hempel have argued that there is a principle which is no part of the logic of inductive (or statistical) reasoning, but is a directive the rational man will accept. It is the requirement of total evidence for inductive reasoning: give your credence to the hypothesis supported by all available relevant evidence.

There is, I suggest, an analogous principle the rational man will accept in applying practical reasoning: perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons. It would be appropriate to call this the principle of continence. There may seem something queer in making the requirement of total evidence an imperative (can one tailor one's beliefs to order?), but there is no such awkwardness about the principle of continence. It exhorts us to actions we can perform if we want; it leaves the motives to us. What is hard is to acquire the virtue of continence, to make the principle of continence our own. But there is no reason in principle why it is any more difficult to become continent than to become chaste or brave. One gets a lively sense of the difficulties in St. Augustine's extraordinary prayer: ‘Give me chastity and continence, only not yet’ (Confessions, VIII, vii).
Why would anyone ever perform an action when he thought that, everything considered, another action would be better? If this is a request for a psychological explanation, then the answers will no doubt refer to the interesting phenomena familiar from most discussions of incontinence: self-deception, overpowering desires, lack of imagination, and the rest. But if the question is read, what is the agent's reason for doing a when he believes it would be better, all things considered, to do another thing, then the answer must be: for this, the agent has no reason. We perceive a creature as rational in so far as we are able to view his movements as part of a rational pattern comprising also thoughts, desires, emotions, and volitions. (In this we are much aided by the actions we conceive to be utterances.) Through faulty inference, incomplete evidence, lack of diligence, or flagging sympathy, we often enough fail to detect a pattern that is there. But in the case of incontinence, the attempt to read reason into behaviour is necessarily subject to a degree of frustration.

What is special in incontinence is that the actor cannot understand himself: he recognizes, in his own intentional behaviour, something essentially surd.

Notes:
(1) In a useful article, G. Santas gives this account of incontinence: ‘In a case of weakness a man does something that he knows or believes he should (ought) not do, or fails to do something that he knows or believes he should do, when the occasion and the opportunity for acting or refraining is present, and when it is in his power, in some significant sense, to act in accordance with his knowledge or belief.’ (‘Plato's Protagoras and Explanations of Weakness’, 3.) Most of the differences between this description and mine are due to my deliberate deviation from the tradition. But there seem to me to be the two minor errors in Santas's account. First, weakness of the will does not require that the alternative action actually be available, only that the agent think it is. What Santas is after, and correctly, is that the agent acts freely; but for this it is not necessary that the alternative the agent thinks better (or that he ought to do) be open to him. On
the other hand (and this is the second point), Santas’s criteria are not sufficient to guarantee that the agent acts intentionally, and this is, I think, essential to incontinence.


(5) C. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, 118.

(6) ‘Incontinence is not strictly a vice . . . for incontinence acts against choice, vice in accord with it’ (*Nic. Eth.* 1151a); ‘vice is like dropsy and consumption, while incontinence is like epilepsy, vice being chronic, incontinence intermittent’ (1150b). But Donne apparently describes the vice of incontinence in one of the Holy Sonnets:

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one;  
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot  
A constant habit; that when I would not  
I change in vows, and in devotion.

(7) Aristotle sometimes characterizes the incontinent man (the akrates) as ‘abandoning his choice’ (*Nic. Eth.*, 1151a) or ‘abandoning the conclusion he has reached’ (1145b); but also often along the lines suggested here: ‘he does the thing he knows to be evil’ (1134b) or ‘he is convinced that he ought to do one thing and nevertheless does another thing’ (1146b).


(9) G. Santas, ‘The Socratic Paradoxes’.

(10) Aquinas is excellent on this point. He clearly distinguishes between actions performed from a strong emotion, such as fear, which he allows are involuntary to a certain extent and hence not truly incontinent, and actions performed from concupiscence, for example: here, he says ‘concupiscence inclines the will to desire the object of concupiscence. Therefore the effect of concupiscence is to make something to be voluntary.’ (*Summa Theologica*, Part II, Q.6.)
(11) ‘It is but a shallow haste which concludeth insincerity from what outsiders call inconsistency.’ (George Eliot, Middlemarch.)

(12) ‘Oh, tell me, who first declared, who first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own real interests . . . ? What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, knowingly, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path . . . compelled to this course by nobody and by nothing . . . ’ (Dostoevsky, Notes from the Underground.)


(14) I know no clear case of a philosopher who recognizes that incontinence is not essentially a problem in moral philosophy, but a problem in the philosophy of action. Butler, in the Sermons (Paragraph 39, Preface to ‘The Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel’), points out that ‘Benevolence towards particular persons may be to a degree of weakness, and so be blamable’, but here the note of self-indulgence sounds too loud. And Nowell-Smith, Ethics, 243ff., describes many cases of incontinence where we are overcome by conscience or duty: ‘We might paradoxically, but not unfairly, say that in such a case it is difficult to resist the temptation to tell the truth. We are the slaves of our own consciences.’ Slaves don't act freely; the case is again not clear.

Aristotle discusses the case of the man who, contrary to his own principle (and best judgement) pursues (too strongly) something noble and good (he cares too much for honour or his children), but he refuses to call this incontinence (Nic. Eth., 1148).

(15) For a version of this theory, see Essay 1.

(16) Summa Theologica, Part II, Q. 77, Art. 2, reply to objection 4. Aquinas quotes the apostle: ‘I see another law in my members fighting against the law of my mind.’

(17) Examples of views that in effect allow only one ultimate moral principle: Kurt Baier, in The Moral Point of View, holds
that in cases of conflict between principles there are higher-
order principles that tell which principles take precedence;
Singer, ‘Moral Rules and Principles’, claims that moral
principles cannot conflict; Hare, in *The Language of Morals*,
argues that there are no exceptions to acceptable moral
principles. If ultimate principles never conflict or have
counter-examples, we may accept the conjunction of ultimate
principles as our single principle, while if there is a higher-
order principle that resolves conflicts, we can obviously
construct a single, exceptionless principle. And of course all
outright utilitarians, rule or otherwise, believe there is a single
exceptionless moral principle.

(18) A more sophisticated account of conflict that seems to
raise the same problem is Ryle's account in *The Concept of
Mind*, 93–5.

(19) My authority for how they do add up in this case is
Aquinas: see the reference in footnote 16.


(21) This claim is further pursued in Essay 5.

(22) We might want to rule out the case, allowed by this
formulation, where the agent does what he has the best
reason for doing, but does not do it for that reason.

(23) At this point my account of incontinence seems to me very
close to Aristotle's. See G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Thought and
Action in Aristotle’.

(24) See Hempel, op. cit., 397–403 for important
modifications, and further references.

(25) Of course he has a reason for doing \( a \); what he lacks is a
reason for not letting his better reason for not doing \( a \) prevail.
How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?

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