

THE PERTINENCE OF INCONTINENCE

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Abstract

In this paper I suggest a reconstruction of the traditional concepts of continent and incontinent action. This reconstruction proceeds along the lines of a standpoint of bounded rationality. My suggestion agrees with some relevant aspects of Davidson's treatment of this topic. One of these aspects is that incontinent action is typically signalled by the following two subjective experiences: a feeling of surprise towards one's own action and a difficulty in understanding oneself; another is that incontinence cannot simply be disposed of in terms of some inability of the agent to avoid "succumbing to temptation"; still another is the view that incontinent action is common in real human affairs. But my suggestion disagrees with other relevant aspects of Davidson's treatment of incontinence too. In particular, it avoids what I take to be its two major drawbacks. These are a view of continent action that falls prey to a completely unrealistic concept of psychological rationality and the idea that incontinence necessarily involves a dimension of essential irrationality.

1. Two Cases of Self-Defeating Action

Consider cases A and B below.

Case A: John Smith is about to complete a project for which he has been working hard in the past few weeks; the project is to be handed in the next morning; handing in this project within the deadline lies at the top of John Smith's preferences; but John Smith is feeling extremely sad that evening; he is actually not able to make himself do the work by means of which the project would become completed, although he knows how to do it and nothing or nobody prevents him from doing it; actually, he spends the evening sitting in his sofa browsing through books and journals he is not

really interested in reading, solving minor and not pressing problems he could have solved in the following days and having a row with his wife. In short, instead of doing what he has to do in order to satisfy his top preference he just procrastinates.

Case B: Tom Brown is about to do a familiar task he needs to accomplish in order to do the job the doing of which lies at the top of his preferences. For the past decade he has been doing this task in a certain way. But now a new methodology has been introduced. At the office he was taught how to implement it and was subject to some training. He managed to master this new methodology rather well and was able to appreciate that by using it he would be able to do the task in question more efficiently. He thus developed the belief according to which using the new methodology was the best way for him to accomplish the task. He is about to act now. However, he does the task using the old, familiar way rather than the new way he himself judges to be the best way to get it done.

2. Cognitivism, Hedonism, and Incontinence

Cases A and B are *prima facie* plausible descriptions of particular human actions that contradict a widely accepted causalist reading of the so-called folk psychological explanatory framework for human action. The latter is in turn widely accepted to be true. They differ in two important respects. First, whereas in case A the agent is described as undergoing a strong emotional state, in case B this is not so. Second, whereas in case A no action was undertaken by the agent in order to satisfy his overriding desire, in case B the agent did act in order to satisfy his overriding desire. However, the action he undertook was not in agreement with his own judgment about the best way to act in order to satisfy this desire of his. The action was, however, performed in agreement with one of his beliefs about a relevant way to act (although not the best one) in order to satisfy that desire. Given these differences, the question arises whether or not cases A and B should be classified under the same category. In reality, the answer to this question varies depending on whether

one's underlying theory of action is cognitivist or hedonistic.

According to the cognitivist, there is an intermediate step mediating an agent's cognitive treatment of his beliefs and desires and action itself, namely, the forming of a judgment about the best way to act under the circumstances. In this sense, both cases, A and B, constitute instances of the same phenomenon, namely, the agent's acting in disregard of his own judgment about what is best to do under the circumstances. This phenomenon is usually called incontinence (or *akrasia*, or weakness of the will). From the standpoint of the cognitivist, what distinguishes cases A and B is, *prima facie*, just the fact that they display a different aetiological pattern. Different causes are at work in each case, but they both produce the same effect. This effect — incontinent behaviour — needs to be accounted for in that it seems to be a violation of a natural law regulating human action.

According to the hedonist, cases A and B do not admit being classified in the same way. In reality, the hedonist does not accept the idea that the agent first combines in the appropriate way his beliefs and desires and then forms an intermediate judgment about what is best to do which will, in turn, originate the action. As in Aristotle's original version of the practical syllogism (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147a; *De Motu Animalium*, 701a), action itself is supposed to be the conclusion of practical reasoning. And, for the hedonist, practical reasoning is supposed to be a matter of weighing the prospective satisfaction following each of the different alternatives standing before the agent and choosing the one that promises to provide the most of it. If no intermediate judgment about the best way to act is formed, it is not possible to act against it either. Therefore, cases such as case B are simply not considered to be possible: if the agent had the desires he had, and if he acted in order to satisfy the most powerful of them, then acting in the way he did act was, for him, by definition, the best way to act. Thus, according to a hedonistic reading, incontinent action is simply action in which the agent disregards his own scale of preferences and, hence, fails to maximize prospective satisfaction as he himself envisages it. In short, from a hedonistic standpoint, only cases similar to case A admit being considered to be cases of incontinence.

Hedonistic tradition typically describes incontinence as originating either with the experiencing of strong emotional states or in responses to the presence of strong sensorial stimuli. The former originate cases of “disturbed action”; the latter originate the sort of cases that fall under the classical heading of “succumbing to temptation”. Both types of causal antecedents are viewed as subverting the agent’s normal pattern of discounting future utilities. This hedonistic vision of incontinent behaviour is taken to be specially suited at explaining addictive behaviours. From this standpoint, the strength of the proximate satisfaction associated with the sensorial stimulus begins by making the agent disregard the future cost of indulging in it; once the addiction sets in, its chemical pull will lead the agent to disregard even more powerfully his own experience of those future costs and thus to further increase his already abnormal devaluation of the future (Becker & Murphy 1988).

To make things a bit more complicated, it is convenient to add that, from the standpoint of cognitivism, it is not at all clear that cases of “succumbing to temptation” should actually be considered to be real cases of incontinence. Actually, besides defining incontinent action as action performed by the agent contrary to his better judgment, cognitivists also define it simultaneously as free and intentional action. It is at least arguable that a substantial amount of the cases typically considered to be paradigmatic of the phenomenon of “succumbing to temptation” are cases in which the action the agent ended up performing does not admit being considered to be either free or intentional or both.

Indeed, it seems to be perfectly legitimate to contend that in the case of addictive behaviours such as smoking, drinking or drug taking, or in the case of compulsive behaviours, such as those related to the indulging in abnormal patterns of food intake, the autonomy of the agent is seriously limited by the presence of a chemical distortion of his natural pattern of motivation. But if this is the case, then the acts that constitute these behaviours will be neither intentional nor free, since the agent is neither acting for a reason, in the technical sense of the term, nor being free not to act as he did. Thus, these would not be genuine cases of incontinence.

The fact that incontinence has been so often discussed in asso-

ciation with examples of “succumbing to temptation” has also originated a tendency to mix incontinence or weakness of the will with moral weakness. But weakness of the will should be kept separated from moral weakness. In reality, from the standpoint of the cognitivist, the two concepts are clearly distinct. A morally weak action is an action performed against a judgment of what is morally best to do. But a judgment of what is morally best to do is not necessarily a judgment of what is best to do. An agent may believe that what is best to do morally is to perform a certain action X but that nonetheless what is best for him to do is to perform some other less moral action Y. If he does Y rather than X, then his action will be morally weak but not weak willed. Conversely, if he does X rather than Y, his action, although morally strong, will be weak willed. That is, only if we picture the extreme case of a completely moral agent, for whom the action he judges to be best and the action he judges to be morally right always coincide, will it be correct to say that, for him, the set of morally weak actions and the set of weak willed actions will be co-extensional. But, of course, even in this extreme case, co-extensionality and synonymy are not the same.

Note that, for the cognitivist, cases of emotional response performed contrary to the agent’s own better judgment are borderline cases. It is certainly true that they cannot be simply assimilated to cases of chemical conditioning, since they do not depend on the agent’s need to satisfy a craving for an externally induced substance; on the other hand, however, the experiencing of emotions by an agent is, as is well known, associated with the release of powerful endogenous chemical substances inside his body, the evolutionary purpose of which seems to be precisely to make sure that, under the appropriate circumstances, he will be conditioned to behave in certain ways rather than in others. Therefore, it is again not at all obvious that these cases should fall on the intentional side of the barrier separating intentional from non-intentional action. Sceptics about incontinence, such as Gary Watson, argue precisely on grounds such as these that an action contrary to one’s better judgment cannot be free and therefore that there is no clear difference between incontinence and compulsion (Watson 1977).

If the view that it is possible to act freely and intentionally in

some determinate way while at the same time judging that it would be better to perform some other action is to be kept, and if both — cases of “succumbing to temptation” and cases of *prima facie* incontinent or weak willed emotional action — admit being meaningfully regarded as cases of compulsion, then one is entitled to expect from a cognitivist account of incontinence that it be, at least, able to provide us with an un mistakeable account of cases such as case B above. I’ll proceed to analyse three cognitivist accounts of incontinence in order to see whether or not this is so.

3. Three Cognitivist Accounts of Incontinence

The first proposal I will examine is Frederick Schick’s. Drawing on Aristotle’s own writings, Schick introduces the concept of an *understanding* in the traditional belief-desire theory of action-explanation. An *understanding* is, according to his words, a *seeing* or a *grasping* of some possible fact. Although a cognitive element, an understanding is neither a propositional attitude nor the proposition in terms of which the fact is seen or grasped (Schick 1991, pp. 78–84; Schick 1997, pp. 16–21).

Thus, from Schick’s standpoint, a further condition needs to be introduced in the usual belief-desire action-explanation formula, namely, the condition according to which the agent has to be able to *see* or *grasp* the appropriate course of action as an instance of doing the action he judges to be best. That is, he has to harbour the understanding that that course of action is a doing of the action he judges to be best to do.

Schick’s contribution to the incontinence debate boils down to the suggestion that this condition is not always met. That is, according to Schick, it is possible that an agent judges that it would be best to do D rather than E, but that he refrains from doing D and does E because he does not understand the course of action by means of which he could bring about D as, in fact, a doing of D. If this is the case, the performance of action E is, according to Schick, incontinent (Schick 1991, pp. 110–15). A close related possibility was actually contemplated by Aristotle himself. Actually, Aristotle

seems to have contemplated as possible cases of incontinent action those cases in which the agent does some action F because he understands F to be an instance of D-ing (i.e., the action he judged to be best to do) despite the fact that F is not in reality an instance of D-ing. That is, whereas in Schick's story the agent *misses* the action he judges to be best, because he is not able to see that a given sequence of steps it is in his power to undertake is in fact a way to perform that action and thus ends up performing a less preferred action, in Aristotle's story the agent *mixes* the performance of the action he judges to be best with the performance of a less preferred action. In Schick's story the agent is *aware* that he did not perform the action he thought to be best but believes falsely that he failed to perform that action because it was not possible for him to perform it. In Aristotle's story, the agent is *not aware* that he did not perform the action he thought to be best; he thus believes falsely he did perform that action, i.e., the action he undertook is not the action he believes to have undertaken.

It seems to me that Schick's move does not really capture the intuition underlying the view that there are incontinent actions. As a matter of fact, if the agent acted against his own better judgment because he did not see that the way by means of which he could have acted according to his better judgment was indeed a way of acting according to it; or if, according to Aristotle's suggestion, he did so because he did not see that the course of action he undertook was not an instance of the action he believed he was undertaking, then what we should say is that the agent fell prey to some sort of cognitive failure. Falling prey to such a failure does not contradict the traditional belief-desire action-explanation formula; it simply means that some of its auxiliary clauses are not satisfied. What makes cases of incontinence interesting is not only the assumption that the agent acts against his better judgment. Two further assumptions are also crucial in this respect, namely, the assumption that the agent was able to *see* that he did so (an assumption not satisfied in Aristotle's suggestion) and the assumption that, having seen that he did so, the agent had also the justified belief that it was in his power not to have done it. This assumption is, however, dropped in Schick's treatment of incontinence. Thus, his

analysis of incontinence is clearly not able to account for cases such as case B above.

The second cognitivist proposal to deal with the problem of incontinence I will examine is Alfred Mele's (Mele 1987). He tries to account for the possibility of incontinent actions by introducing a distinction between two different dimensions of an agent's reasons: the agent's *evaluation* of them and their *motivational force*. According to Mele, although these features are not wholly independent from each other, they are so to a certain extent. From such a partial independence, it follows that an agent's evaluation of his reasons and the motivational force they carry need not always be in mutual alignment. If they are not, there is conceptual room for weak willed or incontinent actions. Thus, an incontinent action is an action in which the agent was more motivated to perform the less evaluated alternative than the more evaluated alternative. Given the fact that, according to Mele's view, when the agent acts incontinentally he is aware both that the action he is performing disagrees with his own evaluation and that he has a justified belief that it is in his power to act in agreement with his own evaluation, Mele's proposal seems to satisfy the two desiderata mentioned above.

This disparity between evaluation and motivational force Mele talks about is, in turn, to be explained in terms of: i) the existence of a previous high level of motivation associated with the presently less well judged alternative; ii) the perception of a close proximity of a reward brought about by the less well judged alternative; iii) the consequent modification of the agent's attentional condition in such a way that his motivation to pursue the nearer reward associated with the less well judged alternative is enhanced whereas his motivation to pursue the more distant reward associated with his better judgment is attenuated; iv) the failure to exert self-control (Mele 1987, p. 85).

Mele's explanation is in fact an attempt to create a synthesis between the cognitivist and the hedonistic views. On the one hand, he does keep the cognitivist idea according to which there is an intermediate step between practical reasoning and action that consists in the formulation of a best judgment about how to act; on the other hand, the concept of motivation is partially detached from

the concept of desire and is also independently applicable to the outcomes of judgments. But in so doing, he ascribes to the motivational aspect a sort of autonomy that comes quite close to hedonism. In this sense, his explanation abandons the terrain of cognitivism almost entirely.

As a consequence, and as the examples by means of which he illustrates his approach make it clear, Mele's attempt to solve the problem of incontinence doesn't seem to differ substantially from the hedonistic approaches that describe cases of incontinence as cases of succumbing to temptation. As a matter of fact, his suggestion boils down in the end to tying down incontinent action to an inability to avoid going for immediate or, at least, proximate gratification, despite a conscious intention of the reasoning self to work for a more distant and better good.

This proposal has two obvious drawbacks. On the one hand, it is too vulnerable to Watson's objection that cases of inability to avoid seeking immediate or proximate gratification are classical cases of compulsion. Of course, if this objection is right, the condition that the agent is free is not really satisfied. The justified belief the agent is supposed to have that it is in his power to act in agreement with his better judgment is, under these circumstances, nothing else but a delusion. On the other hand, even assuming that a satisfying answer to these objections can be found within Mele's framework, his proposal restricts unnecessarily the range of actions that can conceivably be performed against the agent's better judgment. In so doing, it leaves cases such as case B above out of the picture. In reality, in case B the performance of the incontinent action and the pursuit of immediate or proximate gratification seem to be clearly detached.

The third cognitivist attempt to deal with the problem of incontinence, and the most interesting, from my standpoint, is Donald Davidson's. Davidson's main insight concerning incontinent action is that a distinction has to be drawn between conditional judgments determining what is the best action to perform on the basis of *all* relevant reasons and judgments that determine the action to be performed on the basis of only a *subset* of all relevant reasons. Having done this distinction, Davidson proceeds to characterize

incontinent action in the following way. An action is weak willed or incontinent if and only if it is the outcome of a judgment that is based on only a subset of the agent's reasons, and if, at the same time, such an action is judged by a conditional judgment based on all relevant reasons or on a larger subset of all relevant reasons, to be worse than some other alternative action (Davidson 1980b). That is, the incontinent agent is an agent that *neglects* or *does not attend to* a relevantly important part of his own beliefs. And this is what turns his action into an irrational action. However, he does attend to some of them. And this is what makes it an intentional action. The situation in which the incontinent agent finds himself in is, according to Davidson, similar to the situation in which an inductive reasoner finds himself in when violating Carnap's requirement of total evidence. Note that such a requirement is a *directive* regulating sound inductive reasoning but is not itself a *rule* of inductive reasoning. Therefore, no contradiction is involved in violating it. Davidson calls the analogon of such a requirement in the domain of practical reasoning "principle of continence" (Davidson 1980b, p. 41). This principle urges the agent to perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons. A weak willed or incontinent action is thus an action done in a way such that the agent violates this principle.

Compared with the two other suggestions previously reviewed, Davidson's suggestion seems to be able to avoid the drawbacks that were pointed out above. As a matter of fact, his characterization of incontinence is not made to depend on an inability to avoid seeking immediate or proximate gratification; and it does not prevent the incontinent or weak willed agent from being able to see how he could have acted in accordance with his own best judgment. In short, Davidson's characterization of incontinence seems to find a way to accommodate the possibility that agents perform incontinent actions within the causal approach to belief-desire action explanation. In particular, it seems to be able to account for case B above.

However, cases of incontinence are supposed to be defined in terms of a perceived contrast with normal, continent, action. Continent action is, in turn, supposed to be rational. And Davidson's

view of rational continent action is a view according to which, before acting, the agent should exhaustively search through the whole of his belief set in order to make sure that all relevant reasons are appropriately weighed and taken into account in forming his own best judgment. But this is pure unbounded rationality!

I take it that such a theory of continent action cannot be psychologically plausible. Davidson himself seems to have been at least partially aware of the consequences of his view, given the fact that in the most famous of his papers on this topic he also classified continence as a “virtue” (Davidson 1980b, p. 41). But even virtues are supposed to be exercised, even if sporadically. However, given the sheer size and diversity of our belief systems we don’t stand any chance of not neglecting some of the evidence at our disposal before acting. But if this is the case, all our actions will *ipso facto* turn out to be incontinent and we’ll cease to have any term of comparison by reference to which it will make sense to classify any particular action as being, in fact, incontinent. This concept will thus lose any theoretical relevance whatsoever.

4. Bounded Rationality and Incontinence

The question we need to raise is the following. Does the concept of incontinence still do any useful work within a standpoint of bounded rationality? Or does such a concept just result from a misguided intuition originating out of a psychologically unrealistic theory of rationality?

I think this is a relevant concept. My tentative suggestion for showing this is the following. Suppose we keep the Davidsonian insight according to which intentional action may result from two causal sources rather than one. However, instead of dividing these two causal sources into conditional judgments determining what is the best action to perform on the basis of *all* relevant reasons and into judgments that determine the action to be performed on the basis of only a *subset* of all the relevant reasons, let us re-identify these two sources as being, on the one hand, judgments resulting from explicit processes of deliberative reasoning, whatever the in-

ferential strategy underlying their production may be, and, on the other hand, judgments that result from the deployment of some fast and frugal heuristics.

Fast and frugal heuristics have been studied extensively by Gigerenzer, Todd and the ABC Research Group. These heuristics are simple procedures that can be modelled computationally and that are used to search for information, stopping that search and make decisions, and thus solve problems, under limitations of time, knowledge, or computational power or, usually, all of them. These rules exploit the evolved abilities of the organism that harbours them. This means that, given those abilities, following the procedures that implement a given heuristics is easy for the organism in question. They exploit the environmental structures in which the decisions take place as well. This means that, within the context of such structures, the following of these rules under the appropriate circumstances originates decisions that trigger behaviours that are effective in those circumstances. This explains why the proponents of this approach call the set of heuristics an organism is endowed with the organism's "adaptive toolbox" (Gigerenzer, Todd & the ABC Research Group 1999, pp. 3–34; Gigerenzer & Selten 2001, pp. 37–50).

Now, for the sake of simplicity, let us call the former kind of judgments *slow judgments* and the latter kind of judgments *fast judgments*. Furthermore, let us assume that the mind has a modular arrangement and suppose that slow judgments and fast judgments originate in different structures of the mind. Under this assumption, we may conceive of cases in which the two get mobilized for responding to the same problem. For instance, suppose that, in a situation in which he is faced with a particular problem, an agent forms by means of explicit deliberation a best slow judgment on how to act and that he intends to act on such a judgment; however, given both the domain the problem belongs to and the structure of the environment, a particular sort of heuristics that the agent has at his disposal in his adaptive toolbox is also triggered when the moment of action approaches. As a result, a new judgment (a fast judgment) is quickly formed and, without having given up his slow judgment, the agent acts in a way that is not the one he

contemplated as a result of his explicit deliberative reasoning. Thus, we might say that the agent acted against his own better judgment.

Let me illustrate the above-mentioned hypothesis with another, very simple, example. Suppose you are attending a conference in a foreign country and, at lunch, after having eaten the main course, you are lining up for dessert. There are two choices, only one of them is known to you. It is a sort of fruit that is also common where you come from. You are not particularly fond of it but you do not dislike it either. The other dessert is a sweet. You are under no dietary restrictions, you like sweet desserts and feel like having one. But this sweet is new to you. Although some of the ingredients are recognizable and you know you like them, there are others you don't recognize. It looks appetizing though. Suppose now that you engage in a trend of deliberate reasoning in order to make your choice. While still queuing, you make up your mind and decide that you'll take the sweet; after all, if, after buying it, you realize that you dislike it, you'll lose a couple of dollars and miss dessert, none of which are particularly tragic events. But if the dessert turns out to be tasty then you'll finish your meal pleasantly, and this prospect seems highly appealing to you now. However, when it is your turn to reach out for dessert you pick up the fruit. You realize what went on, but it nevertheless comes as a surprise to you.

How can you explain this behaviour? Note that, in this case, your evaluation of your reasons and their motivational force were in mutual alignment. That is, you chose both against your better judgment *and* your motivation, if we are to use Mele's vocabulary. In other words, your action was weak willed because you were *unable to succumb to temptation*, so to speak, not because you were unable to resist it. Assuming this story makes sense, you need a different sort of explanation for the relevant facts. Before going any further in my talk, let me make it clear that I'm not particularly interested in explanations of the Freudian type.

Rather, what I suggest is the following. One of the simplest heuristics studied by the ABC Group is recognition heuristic (Gigerenzer, Todd, and the ABC Research Group 1999, pp. 37–58). Recognition heuristic consists of a very simple rule for

choosing between two options, one of them is known to you and the other isn't. It tells you to select the option that you recognize. Gigerenzer, Todd and the ABC Group have shown that, in an important number of decision environments, following this heuristics will be an adaptive procedure. Moreover, they have made a convincing case for the thesis that people very often use this sort of heuristics in their everyday life. One of the domains in which recognition heuristics seems to be more adaptive is precisely the domain of food choice (it is known that rats use it for precisely this purpose). Let us therefore assume that this heuristics was also used by humans in the course of their evolutionary history in order to select their food among the natural items available in their environment and is therefore a part of their adaptive toolbox. This would explain the triggering of this heuristic in the context of a lunch in foreign territory. On the other hand, the artificial environment of a twenty-first century conference lunch is probably not the sort of environment in which implementing a fast judgment originating in such a heuristic procedure is likely to be appropriate. This would account for the fact that the action was indeed performed against the agent's better judgment.

The recognition heuristic is only one of the types of fast and frugal heuristics that have been identified by Gigerenzer, Todd and the ABC Group. Another interesting type is social heuristics. Gigerenzer maintains that, when acting within a group, agents quite often use additional heuristic tools of a specifically social nature (Gigerenzer & Selten 2001, p. 48). Now, lots of people perceive some of their actions, undertaken *qua* group members, in a way that is also best described as actions performed against their own better judgment. My bet is that in lots of these cases such actions will also be illuminatingly accounted for as resulting from fast judgments originating in the triggering of social heuristics. So this account may generalize in ways that are far from trivial. But, returning to case B above, it seems to me to be entirely plausible to account for it in terms of a similarly fast and frugal mechanism for the choice of problem solving strategies that tells people to stick to the strategies they are most familiar with.

Now, assuming that my story is plausible, two questions remain.

First, is an action resulting from a fast judgment intentional (i.e., can we say that the agent acted for a reason)? Second, was the agent free not to have acted according to it (i.e., are fast judgments sufficiently dissimilar from instincts, compulsions, and the like)? I suppose there is no general answer to any of these questions. But I don't need one either. I need only find cases in which it can plausibly be argued that actions caused by fast judgments *were* intentional and that it was in the agent's power *not* to have performed them.

At least some of the fast and frugal heuristics that have already been studied by the ABC Group *do* seem to originate fast judgments, in my sense, that are judgments *for* a reason or a set of reasons (as the dessert case above illustrates), even if, in some cases, the agent may not be conscious of them (which is a different question). Similarly, not all heuristics are mandatory. There certainly are cases of inner conflict in which the agent is capable of going against his fast judgment and does follow his slow best judgment (sometimes to his own disadvantage). As a matter of fact, if this weren't so, there'd be no point in claiming that, under the right circumstances, fast and frugal heuristics can be prescriptive, as the proponents of this research program do. They claim, moreover, that the prescriptive character of fast and frugal heuristics under the appropriate set of circumstances is a hallmark of their research program. It is, namely, one of the hallmarks that distinguish it from the heuristics-and-biases research program. But you don't prescribe what people end up doing anyway.

Thus, I think it makes clear sense to appeal to slow judgments in order to mark out the lines that define continent action. Moreover, I contend that the formulation of these judgments typically involves the mobilization of the resources of the agent's language faculty; in general, this also means their being accessible to consciousness. As a consequence, when he acts continently, the agent feels no surprise towards his own behaviour. On the other hand, fast judgments determined by fast and frugal heuristics are geared to action in a more straightforward way than judgments based on explicit deliberative reasoning; and people are typically unaware of the heuristics they themselves deploy, that is, the latter are typi-

cally independent both of the language faculty and of consciousness. Thus, when he acts incontinently, the agent has a feeling of surprise towards his own action.

5. Conclusion

I believe this reconstruction of the concepts of continent and incontinent action satisfies two of the most relevant aspects of the Davidsonian treatment of weakness of the will. One is that these cases are frequent in real human action and cannot simply be disposed of in terms of an inability of the agent to avoid “succumbing to temptation”. The other is that when he acts incontinently the agent typically experiences surprise and finds it difficult to understand himself.

It avoids what I take to be its two major drawbacks too. These are a view of continent action that falls prey to a totally unrealistic, if not biologically impossible, concept of psychological rationality, and a conception according to which incontinent action necessarily involves a dimension of essential irrationality. As a matter of fact, according to Davidson, although it is true that when the agent acts incontinently he acts for a reason, and thus intentionally, it is also the case that he has no reason not to let his better reason prevail. This is why, according to his words, in the case of incontinence “there is something essentially surd in his intentional behaviour” (Davidson 1980b, p. 42) and “the attempt to read reason into behaviour is necessarily subject to a degree of frustration” (Davidson 1980b, p. 42). This I take to be plainly wrong.

Fast and frugal heuristics are adaptive mechanisms that, when triggered in the relevant contexts, produce appropriate solutions for the problems the agent has to face. Obviously, there are plenty of contexts in which the structure of the environment is so modified that originally adaptive mechanisms may originate maladapted solutions, which are conveniently replaced with solutions obtained through explicit deliberative reasoning. But in the right contexts fast judgments may play an important corrective or preventive role in regard of the outcome of explicit deliberative reasoning. That is,

in some contexts, incontinent action may be the objectively rational action, whereas the corresponding continent action would originate, if undertaken under those circumstances, an objectively irrational action. That this is so is something that *can* be retrospectively recognized by the agent himself just as it can be perceived by an external observer of his behaviour. Therefore, and contrary to Davidson's view, from the surprise of the agent and from his difficulty in understanding himself at the moment he acts, nothing follows concerning the rational or irrational character of his actual behaviour.

If my analysis is right, weak willed or incontinent action can be given a proper place within the explanatory framework of human agency. Considered from the standpoint I presented here, incontinent actions can be made to make sense as behaviours of creatures whose cognitive systems, rather than being equipped with a unitary general-purpose problem solver, evolved differently structured mental mechanisms in order to better deal with distinct adaptive problems.

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Keywords

Action-explanation, bounded rationality, continence, fast and frugal heuristics, incontinence, intentional action.

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Resumo

Neste artigo, sugiro uma reconstrução dos conceitos tradicionais de ação continente e incontinente. Essa reconstrução procede de acordo com um ponto de vista de racionalidade limitada. Minha sugestão está de acordo com alguns aspectos relevantes do tratamento que Davidson dá a esse tópico. Um desses aspectos é que a ação incontinente é tipicamente sinalizada pelas duas experiências subjetivas seguintes: uma sensação de surpresa com respeito à própria ação e uma dificuldade de compreender a si mesmo: uma outra é que não se pode simplesmente descartar a incontinência em termos de alguma incapacidade do agente de evitar “sucumbir à tentação”; uma outra ainda é a concepção de que a ação incontinente é comum nos assuntos humanos reais. Mas minha sugestão também discorda de outros aspectos relevantes do tratamento que Davidson dá à incontinência. Em particular, evita o que considero ser duas de suas grandes desvantagens. Essas são uma concepção de que a ação continente é presa de um conceito completamente irrealista de racionalidade psicológica e a idéia de que incontinência necessariamente envolve uma dimensão de irracionalidade essencial.

Palavras-chave

Explicação da ação, racionalidade limitada, continência, heurísticas rápidas e frugais, incontinência, ação intencional.