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Emotions and the Intelligibility of Akratic Action

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As is clear from the writings of Plato and Aristotle, emotions have traditionally been regarded as largely responsible for irrational actions and, more specifically, for akratic actions, which are taken to be paradigmatic of practical irrationality.¹ Consider Paolo and Francesca, the two unlucky lovers described by Dante.² On the traditional conception, their passionate love is to blame for their adultery, an act which we can suppose they committed against their better judgement, that is, in spite of judging that, all things considered, it would have been better to abstain. Recall that Francesca's jealous husband promptly killed the two lovers, thereby sending them to hell and eternal turpitude. Following Plato, one could say that Francesca's behaviour is compulsive: her emotion forced her to act against her better judgement.³

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¹ See Plato, *Protagoras*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. VII.

² See Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inferno*, canto v.

³ This would at least seem to follow from the claim that 'no one willingly goes to meet evil or what he thinks to be evil' (Plato, *Protagoras* (1961 edn.), 358c–d). For a more recent defence of the claim that emotions force us to act against our will, see Hare 1963: 78–9.

Alternatively, one could think with Aristotle that, given her emotion, Francesca was not in a position fully to take into account the danger that was involved; her emotion prevented her from forming the full-fledged judgement that the planned action was to be avoided (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1147^b).

At first glance, the traditional way of conceiving akrasia seems to contrast with most contemporary accounts. On those accounts, it is thought possible freely to act against a full-fledged better judgement. Moreover, emotions seem to play no role at all in such accounts. As is clear from the definitions of akrasia one finds in the contemporary literature, the only mental states that are generally taken to be involved are judgements, desires, and possibly intentions. At best, emotions are claimed to have a causal role: they are among the different possible causes of the akratic break. Given this, most contemporary philosophers working on akrasia seem happy to accept the traditional claim that emotions are nothing but blind and potentially disruptive forces.

As recent work on emotion shows, however, emotions should not be thought of merely as factors which tend to interfere with reason. The general recent trend has been to stress their indispensability for both practical and theoretical rationality.⁴ My main aim here is to determine what role, if any, emotions actually play in akratic action. I shall develop my view by contrasting it with the account offered by one of the only contemporary philosophers to claim that emotions have an important role to play in akrasia, namely Ronald de Sousa (1987).⁵ Given that de Sousa presupposes Donald Davidson's conception of akrasia, I will start with a presentation of that conception. After having raised a number of questions about the arguments de Sousa offers, and after having presented what I take to be its main problem—a problem that actually comes from the Davidsonian framework it presupposes—I shall present an alternative conception.

As will become apparent, my approach is quite close to de Sousa's, for it also makes use of the important insight that emotions involve patterns of attention. However, it gives emotions a more than merely causal role. I shall argue that since emotions can be seen as perceptions of values—a view that de Sousa actually shares—they have the capacity to make akratic action intelli-

⁴ De Sousa 1987 was a principal milestone of this new trend. See also the essays by de Sousa, Rorty, and Greenspan in A. Rorty 1980a, as well as Damasio 1994 and Frank 1988.

⁵ Frank Jackson distinguishes between passionate and non-passionate cases of akrasia and gives an account of the passionate cases (Jackson 1984). Peter Goldie claims that emotions 'can ground a certain sort of weakness of the will' (Goldie 2000: 110). See also Jones forthcoming.

gible, as distinct from merely causally explainable. Given this, the role of emotions with respect to action is not merely that of a disruptive force. Indeed, akratic actions based on emotions can actually be more rational than actions that follow the agent's better judgement. Moreover, it will turn out that akratic actions that do not involve emotions are more of a puzzle than the ones involving emotions. Or so I shall argue.⁶

Davidson's Account of Akrasia

Akratic actions can be defined as free and intentional actions performed despite the judgement that another course of action is better, all things considered. Following Davidson, such actions can be characterized more precisely as follows:

- (1) An action x is an akratic action iff the agent judges at time t that, all things considered, it is better to do some alternative action y rather than action x at time t , and the agent is or believes herself to be able and free to do y at time t , but she freely and intentionally does x at time t .⁷

As Davidson points out (1970a: 22), there seem to be actions corresponding to this definition. We can quite easily imagine Francesca's action along these lines. It certainly seems that her making love with Paolo could have been both free and intentional. We can suppose that though Francesca was aware that some risk was involved, she did not expect that they would be discovered and killed. Had she known that this was likely and nonetheless committed the adultery, it might have been suspected that her action was compulsive. But if we imagine that she was only considering that some kind of risk was involved, there is no reason not to suppose that she could have refrained. Moreover, we can imagine that at the very moment she committed the adultery, she judged

⁶ It should be noted that I concentrate on akratic action, thereby leaving aside what Richard Holton argues is properly called 'weakness of will', namely cases in which agents fail to act on their intentions (Holton 1999).

⁷ Davidson's own definition is the following: '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 ' (Davidson 1970a: 22). The main difference with my definition is that Davidson does not require that akratic action be free. Note also that it might be sufficient that the agent believe that the akratic action is an alternative one.

that, all things considered, it would have been better to refrain. There seems to be no reason to suppose that she could not have formed such a judgement.

The problem is that such an action appears to conflict with the idea that intentional actions are done in the guise of the good, or, to put it in Davidson's words, that 'in so far as a person acts intentionally he acts in the light of what he imagines (judges) to be the better' (1970a: 22). More precisely, the existence of akratic actions seems incompatible with what could be called the *principle of intentionality*:

- (2) If an agent judges at time t that it is better to do x than to do y at time t , and she is able and free to do x at time t , then she will intentionally and freely do x at time t , if she does either x or y intentionally at time t .⁸

As Davidson argues, both this principle and the claim that there are akratic actions are plausible. Davidson's solution to the puzzle is to argue that the evaluative judgements involved in (1) and (2) are of different kinds. According to Davidson, the evaluative judgement that plays a role in the definition of akrasia is not simply a judgement that tells us what to do and is the outcome of deliberation. Rather, the judgement in question is relational. The logical form of such a judgement is $pf(x \text{ is better than } y, r)$, where the 'pf' operator is a relational one positing a relation between a set of reasons, r , and the comparative judgement (cf. Davidson 1970a: 38–9). One can paraphrase such a judgement as follows: in light of the set of reasons r , action x is better than y . The judgement bears on what is better relative to a given set of reasons—all the reasons that the agent judges relevant in the case of an all-things-considered judgement—and not on what is better *tout court*. It tells us not what we ought to do, but what our reasons indicate we should do. It has the same structure as an evidential judgement, such as the judgement that what I perceive indicates that p .

Relational evaluative judgements are different from what one could call unconditional evaluative judgements. Davidson speaks of judgements *sans phrase*, which he contrasts with conditional or prima facie evaluative judgements. An unconditional evaluative judgement bears on what is better independent of the reasons the agent has. One can suppose that such a judgement is the outcome of deliberation; this is at least what is often the case. However, even if it is based on the different reasons that are available, as a conclusion it is so to speak detached from these reasons.

⁸ This principle brings together the two principles put forward at Davidson 1970a: 23.

According to Davidson, the principle of intentionality concerns the unconditional judgement, not the relational one. It is the former, and not the latter, which is tied to action. One can say that, for Davidson, what happens in cases of akratic action is that the agent makes the two following judgements:

- (1) the reasons I have indicate that this other action y is better than action x ;
- (2) action x is better than y .⁹

If the principle of intentionality is true, that is, if it is true that the second kind of judgement results in action, the agent will do x if she does either x or y ; she will be akratic.

On this account, the error of the akratic agent is that although she judges that her reasons indicate that the alternative action is better, she does not judge that this is the better action. As Davidson points out, this is not a logical mistake. The two judgements are logically compatible. For, quite unfortunately, the fact that the reasons we have indicate that one action is better than another is perfectly compatible with the fact that, in reality, the reverse is true. Nonetheless, once an agent has judged that her reasons indicate that action y is better than action x , she clearly ought to make the unconditional judgement that y is better than x . As Davidson puts it, an agent ought to judge, and hence act, on the basis of all available reasons (Davidson 1970a: 41). This is what the so-called *principle of continence* requires. Thus, the akratic agent makes an error in her reasoning; she fails to abide by the principle of continence.¹⁰

The question is whether this account of akrasia is fully convincing. I shall return to this question. But first, let us consider where emotions would fit into this picture.

Emotions and the Reasoning Error

According to de Sousa, it is an emotion which is responsible for the reasoning error that characterizes akrasia on the Davidsonian picture. The reason why

⁹ In Davidson 1970a, Davidson never claims that the akratic agent explicitly makes these judgements. However, this follows from the thesis that intentional action is done in the light of what is judged to be better, when put together with the thesis that akratic action is intentional.

¹⁰ Actually, given this interpretation of Davidson, the breach of the principle of continence is an epistemic failure. Although the akratic agent judges that all the reasons he has indicate that p , he makes a judgement which is incompatible with p .

the agent comes to the erroneous conclusion that the akratic action is better than the other one is that she does not ground her conclusion on the relational evaluative judgement, which involves all available reasons, but on a partial judgement, that is, a judgement which only takes into account a limited number of reasons. According to de Sousa, this error is due to the presence of an emotion. To echo de Sousa, one could say that an emotion plugs the partial judgement into the motor system (de Sousa 1987: 200). Thus, if Francesca commits adultery contrary to her better judgement, it is her passionate love that is to blame. We can suppose that her emotion causes her to move from the relational judgement that sexual intercourse with Paolo is better than abstinence relative to a subset of reasons—its being exceedingly pleasant, say—to the unconditional judgement that that action is better than abstinence.

As it stands, this claim about the role of emotions is very strong, given that it requires that some emotion be involved in every case of akrasia. Thus, in cases where there is apparently no emotion involved, we have nonetheless to suppose that some emotion is at work. Consider Davidson's famous tooth-brushing case (Davidson 1970a: 30). Don relaxes in bed after a hard day when he realizes that he has forgotten to brush his teeth. He comes to the conclusion that, all things considered, it would be better to stay in bed: getting up might spoil his calm, for instance. Still, he gets up and brushes his teeth. Where is the emotion? One could surely come up with some suggestion—maybe it is an emotional concern for his teeth or a mild fear of feeling guilty which is at work. But it has to be acknowledged that, in such cases, there is a difficulty for the claim that all cases of akratic action involve an emotion.¹¹ There seem to be both cases of emotional akrasia and cases of what could be called 'cool akrasia', namely, akrasia that does not involve emotions.

The question is why we should believe that akratic actions involve emotions. As far as I can see, de Sousa offers two arguments for this claim. The first is an argument that works by eliminating all other possibilities, and the second is based on a claim linking emotions to attention. I shall consider them in turn, starting with the first.

De Sousa's first argument. Let me introduce a bit of terminology. I shall call whatever is responsible for the reasoning error Davidson postulates the 'akratic cause'. Now the important premiss in the first argument is that the akratic cause can be neither a 'merely physiological factor that is in

¹¹ In conversation, Ronald de Sousa suggested that habit might be the cause of such actions.

itself arational', nor a desire, nor a belief (de Sousa 1987: 200). Thus, what is needed to fit the bill is a cause that is neither a belief nor a desire, but that nonetheless allows for rational assessment. Emotions, which are states that cannot be reduced to beliefs and desires, are just what we need—or so we are told.

Why couldn't the akratic cause be a belief or a desire? De Sousa argues as follows. The akratic cause cannot be a belief or a desire, for, by hypothesis, all reasons, be they cognitive or desiderative, have been taken into account. De Sousa concludes that 'whatever tips the balance cannot be another reason' (de Sousa 1987: 200). This argument seems less than convincing. It is difficult to see why any of the beliefs or desires that have been taken into account by the agent could not cause the reasoning error. The fact that a mental state plays a role in the justification of an all-things-considered better judgement, and thus possibly has a causal effect on that judgement, hardly seems to prevent that same mental state from having other causal roles. Thus Francesca's belief that making love with Paolo would be exceedingly pleasant could well cause the reasoning error. Moreover, it could also be the case that some belief or desire which is not among the reasons the agent considered could be the cause of the error. Maybe it is the belief that she is about to become 30 that causes her to judge that intercourse with Paolo is better than abstinence, a belief which we can suppose did not play any role in her deliberation.

As for the idea that the akratic cause is not rationally assessable, we are told that this is wrong because, first, this is not the kind of thing which can cause a judgement in the appropriate way. The claim is that only states that are rationally assessable can be the proper causes of judgements, that is, causes that result in rational judgements. Simplifying a bit, this is what de Sousa calls *Elster's principle of autonomy*.¹² It may be that there is indeed a principle along these lines, though one would need to be careful not to exclude cases in which judgements are caused by perceptual experiences. However, the problem is that, as far as I can see, nothing prevents us from saying that the akratic agent's unconditional evaluative judgement fails to satisfy this requirement. The judgement is in any case claimed to be irrational given that it violates the principle of continence. There is no harm in supposing that it also falls foul of (some plausible version of) the principle of autonomy. For this surely does not

¹² See de Sousa 1987: 200, 174; Elster 1983: 15–16. Elster's suggestion is to 'evaluate the broad rationality of beliefs and desires by looking at the way in which they are shaped', beliefs or desires counting as irrational if 'they have been shaped by irrelevant causal factors' (Elster 1983: 15–16).

entail that the unconditional evaluative judgement fails to be a genuine judgement.

This brings us to the second reason to believe that the akratic cause cannot be non-rational. The claim is that ‘it becomes unclear whether the action is an intentional act of the subject’s at all’ (de Sousa 1987: 200). This is far from obvious. The thought is probably that if a judgement is caused by a non-rational state, such as a sensation, perhaps, it cannot serve as a proper reason for the action. To accept that such an improperly caused judgement could make an action rational would be akin to saying that an unjustified belief can justify another belief. It might well be that this is false—that only justified beliefs have justificatory force. However, it is less than clear that such a principle applies in the case of intentional action. Even if a judgement is inappropriately caused, and hence irrational, it does not seem ruled out as a reason for the action.

All in all, this first argument to support the thesis that the akratic cause is an emotion hardly seems effective.

De Sousa’s second argument. Let me now consider a second argument for the claim that the akratic cause is an emotion. Actually, this is more a quick suggestion in de Sousa than it is a full-fledged argument. However, I believe it contains the seed of a convincing case for the claim that at least some akratic actions involve emotions. De Sousa’s suggestion is that emotions are ‘perfectly tailored for the role of arbitrators among reasons’ because ‘their essential role lies in establishing specific patterns of salience relevant to inferences’ (de Sousa 1987: 200). The thesis de Sousa advocates is that emotions direct our attention, in that they involve what he calls ‘species of determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies’ (de Sousa 1987: 196).¹³ In short, the emotions we experience determine the content of our beliefs and desires. In de Sousa’s words, ‘emotions limit the range of information that the organism will take into account, the inferences actually drawn from a potential infinity, and the set of live options among

¹³ A similar hypothesis has been put forward by the neurologist Antonio Damasio. On his view, what he calls *somatic markers*, that is, emotions and feelings that ‘have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios’ (Damasio 1994: 174), make up for the shortcomings of pure reason. These somatic markers assist the deliberation and decision process by highlighting options as dangerous or favourable; they function as a ‘biasing device’ (Damasio 1994: 174) which forces attention on the negative or positive outcomes of options, so that the number of considered options is reduced. As Damasio puts it: ‘a somatic state, negative or positive, caused by the appearance of a given representation, operates not only as a *marker for the value of what is represented, but also as a booster for continued working memory and attention*’ (Damasio 1994: 197–8).

which it will choose' (de Sousa 1987: 195). In this way, emotions can be seen to have an important practical function. According to de Sousa, it is in virtue of emotions that we can avoid the sad destiny of the robot sitting outside a room containing a bomb, busily analysing an infinity of irrelevant information, such as the impact of its options on the price of tea in China, instead of running for what it would consider its life.¹⁴

Intuitively, the suggestion that emotions involve a particular focus of attention is highly plausible. Suppose you encounter a wild and fierce-looking dog while alone in the woods. You will register every movement and sound it makes, waiting for it to attack you. Your attention will be almost entirely concentrated on the object of your emotion and its fear-inspiring features, such as its rolling eyes and bared teeth. Moreover, the claim that emotions and attentional phenomena are closely related is also supported by empirical evidence. A great number of psychological studies tend to confirm the claim that emotions and, more broadly, affective phenomena such as anxiety or depression influence attention.¹⁵

Moreover, it is natural to think that the pattern of attention that comes with an emotion could have an important role to play in akrasia. It seems plausible that given Francesca's passionate love, her attention is focused on certain aspects of her situation—Paolo's charms, the expected pleasure of sexual intercourse with Paolo, and so on. More precisely, her attention will be focused on the positive traits of the akratic action. No wonder she will fail to abide by the principle of continence; thoughts about danger or duty are surely not salient in her mind.¹⁶

As this example suggests, and as many philosophers have underlined, it seems true that akrasia at least often involves a particular attentional bias.¹⁷

¹⁴ See de Sousa 1987: 192–4. The example is from Dennett 1984.

¹⁵ The psychologists Gerald Matthews and Adrian Wells write that 'states of emotions influence both the contents of consciousness and performance on tasks requiring selection of stimuli or intensive concentration' (Matthews and Wells 1999: 171). See also Wells and Matthews 1994 and Mogg and Bradley 1999, as well as Faucher and Tappolet 2002, for a survey.

¹⁶ As Dante tells us, the two lovers were reading a book narrating the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. It is clear that this activity was instrumental in the production of the pattern of attention characteristic of their passionate love.

¹⁷ See Bratman's claim that the reasoning error which the akratic agent is guilty of is due to the fact that his attention is focused on the positive aspects of the akratic action (Bratman 1979: 168). Similarly, Peacocke notes that some imaginative or perceptual asymmetry related to attention makes the akratic action more intelligible (Peacocke 1985: 55–6, 72); and Mele claims that many strict akratic actions can be explained in part by the perceived proximity of the rewards of the incontinent alternative and the agent's attentional condition (Mele 1987: 92).

Given this, there is good reason to think that emotions have an important role in at least some cases of akrasia. However, one should be careful not to overstate the claim that the akratic agent is focused on what speaks in favour of the akratic action. For it has to be kept in mind that the agent also makes a better judgement in favour of the alternative action. The emotion does not achieve a complete blackout of the reasons that speak against the akratic action. Still, it can be agreed that the reasons in favour of the akratic action are in the foreground.

But why should we conclude that emotions are involved as causes of the reasoning error postulated by Davidson? The question is whether emotions and the focus of attention they involve are bound to come into the picture as akratic causes or whether they could play a different role. Before I address this question, let me first present a deeper worry with de Sousa's approach. Once we have cleared away this problem it will be easier to see where emotions fit into the picture.

In fact, the real problem with de Sousa's approach comes from the Davidsonian framework he makes his own. As many have argued, Davidson's conception of akrasia seems wrong. Akratic action is better conceived of as action contrary to an unconditional evaluative judgement.¹⁸ The agent acts while judging that an alternative action is better, or at least while judging that, all things considered, there is good and sufficient reason for her not to perform the action she performs, where this all-things-considered judgement results from her deliberation, but does not merely state what the reasons she has indicate.¹⁹

Why should we believe this? The best method to argue for this conception of akrasia—and it might well be thought that it is not an absolutely compelling method—is by way of examples. There seems to be nothing wrong with imagining a case like that of Francesca along these lines. On the contrary, it is quite natural to describe Francesca's case in this way. Francesca has reasons both for and against making love with Paolo. She not only judges that her reasons speak in favour of refraining from making love with Paolo, but also

¹⁸ Cf. Mele's definition of what he calls 'strict incontinent actions' (Mele 1987: 7). The possibility of someone's making the reasoning error postulated by Davidson cannot be denied. Moreover, given the impact of emotions on attention, it is likely that they are the source of this kind of error. However, such an agent simply seems bad at reasoning, rather than akratic in the strict sense.

¹⁹ As David Wiggins says, the expression 'all things considered' has here its ordinary sense (Wiggins 1980: 241 n. 4).

judges that it would be better to refrain. However, as the story goes, she nonetheless opts for having intercourse with Paolo.

Moreover, and more importantly for our purpose, it seems plausible to suppose that she does not judge that it would be better to make love with Paolo. As Michael Bratman notes, it seems quite false to suppose with Davidson that the akratic agent judges it better to perform the action she actually performs (Bratman 1979: 160; Charlton 1988: 124). If we asked her, she would certainly deny that she judges that making love with Paolo is a better course of action than abstinence. And there seems to be no reason to hold that she is insincere. What happens in akratic action is that the agent judges that another course of action is better, but the desire for the akratic action turns out to be the strongest from the point of view of its motivational force. Briefly put, the judgements that are involved would seem to be the following:

- (1) the reasons I have indicate that action *y* is better than *x*;
- (2) action *y* is better than *x* (all things considered).

And yet the agent does not choose *y*, but the alternative action *x*. Contrary to what Davidson seems to claim, it is false to suppose that this requires that the agent judges that action *x* is better.

If this is on the right track, we have to conclude that emotions are not to be identified with akratic causes. And the reason for this is simply that there are no such causes. Obviously an akratic action will always be caused by something or other. But what does not necessarily exist is something causally responsible for the reasoning error which Davidson postulates. Even though the agent surely judges that, in some respects, action *x* is better than action *y*, she does not wrongly infer that the akratic action is better than the envisaged alternative *sans phrase* (to use Davidson's formulation). Hence, it is not necessary to postulate a mechanism that could explain the error of making this judgement rather than a judgement that would conform to the principle of continence.

It follows that the second argument I considered, the one which was based on the claim that emotions involve specific patterns of attention, cannot be taken to show that emotions are akratic causes. However, it would be wrong to infer that emotions do not play any role at all. If at least some akratic actions are characterized by a certain pattern of attention, and if emotions involve such patterns of attention, then there is good reason to believe that

emotions at least sometimes have a role to play in akrasia. The question is what role that could be.

The first suggestion that comes to one's mind is that although emotions are not involved as the causes of the reasoning error, they can nonetheless play a causal role with respect to akratic action. There are different points at which an emotion could have a causal influence. It could be an emotion that causes the agent to act on the reason she considers to be insufficient for the action. Francesca's love might ensure that the thought that the envisaged action is exceedingly pleasant is acted upon. A slightly different possibility is that the emotion directly causes the akratic action: Francesca's love might simply get her to perform the fatal deed. It could also be that the emotion causes a lack of motivation. Consider a depressed agent, Anna. Given her sadness, Anna might lack any motivation to act in accordance with her better judgement. In all these cases, the emotion is hypothesized to have a merely causal role; it either brings about the akratic action or interferes with the agent's motivational set so as to prevent the action which corresponds to her better judgement. And in all these cases, the causal influence of the emotion could be explained in terms of the impact of emotions on attention. Though these seem to be the main possibilities, there might be other possible causal routes from emotions to akratic action.

Now there is no doubt that emotions could have a causal role with respect to akratic action. The question is whether this is the only role emotions could have. As I shall argue in the next section, the answer is 'no'.

Emotions as Perceptions of Values

As is often underlined in recent work, emotions can be the objects of rational or cognitive assessments. These assessments can be of quite different kinds. Emotions can be more or less rational from a strategic point of view: some emotions interfere with our ends, while others are essential to furthering those ends.²⁰ Emotions can also be more or less rational depending on the rationality of the beliefs or judgements upon which they are based. A feeling of joy based on an irrational belief, such as a belief caused by wishful thinking, will be deemed no more rational than the belief that gave rise to it. More

²⁰ Robert Frank argues that being prone to some emotions, like anger, can make for an advantage in interactions with rational agents (Frank 1988).

importantly for our purposes, an emotion can be said to be more or less appropriate with respect to the evaluative features of its object: an emotion of fear directed towards something completely innocuous would be inappropriate, whereas fear felt with respect to something dangerous would be judged to be appropriate. Depending on the importance of the danger, the intensity of the fear can also be more or less proportionate: intense fear would be disproportionate with respect to a minor threat, which only warrants mild fear.²¹

The fact that emotions can be evaluated in terms of their appropriateness and proportionality invites us to think of emotions as we think of perceptual experiences. In particular, it is natural to understand the appropriateness conditions for emotions as analogous to the correctness conditions for perceptual experiences. In the same way that perceptual experiences are assessed with respect to what they represent, it seems emotions can be assessed in terms of how they fit evaluative facts.²² Emotions could have the same function with respect to values as perceptual experiences have for colours and shapes, so that we could say emotions are perceptions of values.²³ Consider again fear. When nothing interferes with its proper functioning, that is, when the conditions in which it is felt are favourable, my fear allows me to track danger.

Moreover, there is reason to think that the evaluative content of an emotion is of the same kind as the content of perceptual experiences in that it is non-conceptual.²⁴ This is suggested by the fact that emotions are to a large extent isolated from our higher-order cognitive processes and thus from our

²¹ Though they disagree on how to understand this claim, almost all philosophers who write on emotions accept that emotions can be assessed in terms of their appropriateness. See, among others, Brentano 1889/1969: 22 ff.; de Sousa 1987: 122; Mulligan 1998; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000a. For the claim that an emotion's *intensity* can be also be assessed, see Broad 1954: 293; and more recently D'Arms and Jacobson 2000a: 73–4 and Jones forthcoming.

²² This claim goes back to the moral sense theorists Shaftesbury (1711/1964), Hutcheson (1738/1971) and possibly Hume (1740/1978), and to the turn-of-the-century philosophers Scheler (1913–16/1973) and Meinong (1917/1972). More recently, see McDowell 1985b; Wiggins 1987; de Sousa 1987: 45, 2002; Tappolet 1995; 2000, ch. 6; d'Arms and Jacobson 2000a,b; Johnston 2001; and Wedgwood 2001b.

²³ This claim is obviously compatible with value realism, but it does not entail it; it is even compatible with the claim that there are no evaluative properties out there.

²⁴ See Tappolet 1995, 2000. See also Johnston 2001 for the claim that what he calls 'affect' involves 'pre-judgmental disclosures of values' (Johnston 2001: 182). Work in neuroscience by LeDoux shows that the brain structure responsible for an emotion such as fear, the amygdala, receives crude stimulus information directly from the sensory thalamus (what LeDoux calls the 'low road'; LeDoux and Phelps 2000: 159), that is, before it is processed by the sensory cortex.

deliberative faculty.²⁵ As we all know, it is possible to experience fear while judging that what one is afraid of is not dangerous. One can thus say with Karen Jones that ‘our emotions can key us to the presence of . . . reason-giving considerations without necessarily presenting that information in a form available to conscious articulation and even despite our consciously held and internally justified judgement that the situation presents no such reasons’ (Jones forthcoming).

More should be said to explain and defend this conception of emotions as perceptions of evaluative facts, but this would take us too far afield from the topic of *akrasia*. Instead, I shall simply assume that such an account is broadly on the right track.

As should be obvious, the claim that emotions are perceptions of values is compatible with the thesis that emotions influence our attention. Indeed, these two claims go hand in hand.²⁶ For if anything can be said to attract and also in general to merit our attention, it is whatever falls under some evaluative concept or other, such as the concepts of the dangerous, the disgusting, the shameful, the irritating, the attractive, the admirable, or the love-worthy. It is thus to be expected that (one of) the mechanisms that get us to focus our attention on certain features of our environment is involved in our grasp of the evaluative aspects of that environment.²⁷ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how fear could begin to make us aware of the danger in some situation without also directing our attention to the object of our fear.

Now if emotions are perceptions of values, actions caused by emotions can be explained in terms of the perceived value.²⁸ The value that is perceived, whether correctly or not, makes the action intelligible. Suppose a bear attacks me. The fear I experience does not only save my life when it causes my

²⁵ See Greenspan’s arguments against the claim that emotions are evaluative judgements (Greenspan 1988). And see Griffiths 1997 for the claim that emotions are cognitively encapsulated.

²⁶ As we have seen, Damasio claims that ‘a somatic state . . . operates not only as a *marker for the value of what is represented, but also as a booster for continued working memory and attention*’ (Damasio 1994: 197–8).

²⁷ One way to see the relation between the perception of the evaluative fact and the focusing of attention is to claim that the former is the source of the latter. See Johnston 2001, n. 2, for this suggestion.

²⁸ See Johnston 2001 for the claim that the special intelligibility that ‘affect’ confers on desires and actions can only be explained if one adopts a perceptual model of such affective states. Note that the claim that the value in question makes the action intelligible is neutral with respect to the issue of whether reasons are internal or external. The danger I perceive can be a reason to flee either because the danger is a reason to flee whatever my beliefs and desires, or because given my desires (or, more broadly, my motivational set) and my beliefs, that fact is a reason for me.

running away; it also makes the action intelligible. The danger which my fear allows me to track explains why I run away. And this is so even if there is actually no danger involved: although I haven't realized this, the bear is behind a thick glass wall, for instance. Given my fear, my action is still intelligible. The reason why I run away is that, although there is no danger, I nonetheless perceive the situation as dangerous. Things appear to be the same in cases where there is a conflict between the emotion and what the agent judges to be the case. Suppose I judge, be it correctly or incorrectly, that there is no risk involved and that my fear is irrational. It would seem that my running away could still be explained in terms of the danger I perceive, be it correctly or incorrectly. Again, the reason why I run away is that although I judge that there is no danger, I perceive the situation as dangerous. Given its relation to evaluative facts, the emotion thus plays an important role, in that it makes the action intelligible.

This claim can be generalized to cases of akratic action. Suppose I am about to cross a narrow rope bridge hanging high up on a deep shaft. Though I feel fear, I judge that all things considered I ought to cross the bridge; I judge it to be sufficiently safe and going back would make for a much longer hike. If I end up not crossing the bridge, it will not be difficult to make sense of my action: the perceived danger, be it real or not, readily explains why I didn't cross the bridge. Or consider again Francesca and her passionate love for Paolo. On the claim under consideration, this love consists in the perception of Paolo as a worthy object of love. Now this cannot directly make Francesca's action intelligible, for it does not involve a perception of the value of the action itself. But it is surely an important part of what makes it intelligible. The value that Francesca perceives makes her desire to make love to Paolo intelligible and thus indirectly makes her action intelligible. If this is right, emotions are not only causally involved in cases where we act against our better judgement; they make the action intelligible, even though we judge that another course of action would have been better all things considered.

If this is on the right track, cases of akrasia caused by emotions involve a conflict between a value perception and an evaluative judgement that can be compared to perceptual illusions such as the Müller-Lyer illusion, in which one sees the lines as being of a different length even though one judges or even knows that they are of the same length. This is particularly easy to see in cases in which one judges that one's emotion is not appropriate, such as when I fear something while I judge that there is no danger and nonetheless act on my fear. But even in cases where the agent does not judge that the emotion is

inappropriate—the agent might realize that the planned action is dangerous but judge this to be insufficient reason to refrain from performing it—the value that is experienced conflicts with the agent’s better judgement. Given her emotion, the agent experiences the akratic action as being the one to be performed while she also judges that there is insufficient reason for this action all things considered. Note that contrary to the case of perceptual illusion, it need not necessarily be the emotion that gets things wrong. Maybe the fear was appropriate and the judgement that there is no danger utterly wrong. If so, the fear that the agent felt, and which made her refrain from the action judged to be better all things considered, could well have saved her life.

Some Objections

Some will think that the claim that emotions can make akratic action intelligible given that they are perceptions of values is nothing more than an emphatic way to put something rather trivial. Emotions are what Davidson calls ‘pro-attitudes’ (Davidson 1963). Now pro-attitudes in general (plus appropriate means–end beliefs) rationalize actions; they make actions intelligible. Thus, it might seem that there is a much faster and philosophically safer route to the claim that emotions can make actions intelligible. And then there is really no surprise in finding out that emotions can also make akratic actions intelligible. Since akratic actions are intentional, we already know that they are susceptible of an explanation which makes them intelligible; though there is no reason to choose the akratic action instead of the option judged to be better all things considered—or so the agent believes, at least—the akratic action is done for a reason.

The problem with this reasoning is that it is not clear that all of the very different items that are in general counted as pro-attitudes—Davidson mentions desires, urges, promptings, moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, goals, emotions, sentiments, moods, motives, passions, and hungers—really have the power to make an action intelligible. As Warren Quinn’s example of an urge to turn on radios shows, a mere behavioural disposition does not make the behaviour it causes intelligible.²⁹ A tendency to behave in a certain way is of no help in understanding why an action is undertaken. Things seem different in the case of what we ordinarily

²⁹ Quinn 1993: 236–7. See also Scanlon 1998, ch. 1; Dancy 2000*b*, ch. 2; and Johnston 2001.

call a desire, such as my morning desire for an espresso. Such a desire is an attitude characterized by its felt qualities and which thus counts as an affective or emotional state. There is no doubt that such a desire can make an action intelligible. The lesson to draw is that in so far as a state makes an action intelligible, it is more than a mere behavioural disposition. In any case, if one counts behavioural dispositions among pro-attitudes, a state can be a pro-attitude without being of any help with respect to the intelligibility of actions. Thus, the above-mentioned line of argument starts with a false premiss. Given this, the argument I gave to the effect that emotions can make actions intelligible is not dispensable.³⁰

Another objection is that the claim that emotion can make akratic action intelligible is based on an unbalanced diet of examples. What about mad and disruptive emotions, it will be asked? As Michael Stocker has underlined (Stocker 1979), emotions such as anger, envy, jealousy, frustration, and despair can make us feel less motivated to seek both what is and what is believed to be good; indeed, such states can get us to desire both what is and what is believed to be bad. When Othello kills Desdemona out of jealousy, his action aims not at a good, but at something he knows to be bad. So how could it be claimed that jealousy makes the killing intelligible? The jealousy, it would seem, is just a causal factor that explains Othello's madness.

One should, I think, grant that some emotions are just too insane to make any behaviour intelligible. But this is no less true of judgements. One's practical judgements might be so insane that they hardly make any behaviour intelligible. However, it should be clear that in many cases in which an action is and is believed to be bad, and in which the emotion which motivated the action was inappropriate, the action is nonetheless made intelligible at least in some minimal sense. Given his emotional state, destruction and death seemed desirable to Othello, and though we cannot applaud his action, it seems we can understand it. Perhaps there are people whose emotions fire off so randomly that these latter can no longer be thought of as perceptions of values. Such emotions would just be too unreliable to make sense of anything. But in most cases, it seems that we better understand even an action as mad as Othello's if we know that it was caused by an emotion such as jealousy.

³⁰ One might reply that only states which can rationalize action should count as pro-attitudes. In that case the route to the conclusion that emotions can make akratic action intelligible could start with the thesis that emotions are reasons. The problem is that this would not be a quick route: one would have to argue for the claim that emotions can be reasons.

Another worry that might arise is whether akratic action grounded in emotion could be free. There is, of course, a debate about whether action against one's better judgement can be free or whether there is no difference between such actions and compulsion.³¹ Given that the issue is the role emotions play, let me assume for the sake of argument that action against one's better judgement can indeed be free. Now the first important point to note is that non-akratic action caused by an emotion need not be unfree. Though some behaviour caused by emotion is certainly compulsive—one might think of flight behaviour caused by panic, for instance—most cases of emotional action are such that an agent could have resisted the emotion's pull. I could have resisted the fear I experienced and crossed that bridge, for instance. Given this, there is no more reason to think that an akratic action caused by an emotion is unfree than to think that an akratic action caused by some other state, such as a desire or a judgement, is unfree. One can well suppose that Francesca, to go back to our example, could have acted otherwise. For even if emotions, like judgements and desires, are not directly subject to the will, it is nonetheless true that one is often able to take the steps necessary to resist them. Like Ulysses, Francesca could have asked to be tied to a ship's mast during her encounter with Paolo. In a more realistic vein, she could have tried to concentrate on the danger that she and Paolo were in.

Another possible objection would be to question whether actions caused by emotions are really intentional. Such a charge could be based on the idea that only actions which result from deliberation are intentional. As Nomy Arpaly puts it, 'we routinely assume that acting for reasons necessarily involves deliberation' (Arpaly 2000: 505). Thus, an action caused by an emotion could never be intentional. Of course, Francesca does deliberate. The problem, it could be claimed, is that her passionate love is neither a part, nor an outcome, of such deliberation. However, we can agree with Arpaly that this seems too strong a requirement on intentional action. The person who turns on the light when she comes home at night can be said to act intentionally even if no deliberation is involved. She need not think that she wants to see her way around her living room and reflect that the best way to do that is to turn on the light, perhaps mentally comparing that action with other ways of achieving the same end, such as lighting a match or putting fire to the house.

³¹ See Plato, *Protagoras* 352b-358d; Hare 1963, ch. 5; Pugmire 1982; Watson 1977; Buss 1997; as well as Mele 2002.

It is not even necessary that she reflect that if she desires to turn on the light, the best way to achieve this is to turn on the light. To count as intentional, it is sufficient that her action be responsive to the reasons she has. Given this, the action is performed for these reasons. The mistake is to think that for this she needs not only to be responsive to her reasons, but also to have certain propositional attitudes, such as judgements about these reasons.³²

The Rationality of Emotional Akrasia

I have argued that akratic action based on emotion—emotional akrasia—can be made intelligible by the emotion in question. There are two further claims I wish to defend here. The first is that akratic actions based on emotion can actually be more rational than actions which conform to one's better judgement. The second is that akrasia that does not involve emotion—cool akrasia—is much more of a puzzle than emotional akrasia.

It is easy to see that, far from being only disruptive, emotions can also help us to behave more adequately than if we only trusted our deliberative faculty. My belief that there is no danger and that I thus ought to behave in a certain way might be simply wrong, so that it would only be thanks to my fear that I am able to escape the danger that threatens me. As is often noted, the fact that fear allows us to react rapidly and quite independently of higher cognitive processing and deliberation makes for its adaptiveness.

However, there is also reason to think that emotions can be helpful in quite a different way. They can, it seems, make us more rational, in the sense of allowing us to track reasons which we have but which we have neglected in our deliberation. As Alison McIntyre argues, akratic action sometimes seems more rational than action that is in line with our better judgement.³³ One of the examples she uses is Mark Twain's character Huckleberry Finn, who after having helped Jim to run away from slavery decides to turn him in, but when he is given the opportunity, finds himself doing just the contrary.³⁴ Now it can be agreed that it is more plausible to say that Huck's decision not to turn Jim in (although he judges that this is what he ought to do all things considered) is not only morally more admirable, but also more rational, than acting on

³² This claim is incompatible with an intellectualist conception of rational agency, a problem I discuss in the next section.

³³ See McIntyre 1990, as well as Audi 1990 and Arpaly 2000.

³⁴ The example is from Bennett 1974.

his all-things-considered judgement. This is the case because his all-things-considered judgement neglects important considerations, such as Jim's being his friend, Jim's trust and gratitude, Jim's desire for freedom, etc. Those considerations might have produced a change of mind in Huck had he taken them into account, for he would have considered them to be reasons had he properly deliberated. Maybe Huck just overlooked those considerations when making up his mind, or maybe he didn't realize that they were reasons for him. Now, as the story goes, it is his emotional state that leads him to disregard his moral principles. It is his feeling of friendship and sympathy for Jim that prevents Huck from turning him in. Thus, his emotional state can be seen as a response to considerations that militate against turning Jim in, namely, Jim's being his friend and thus making his feelings of friendship and sympathy appropriate, for instance. By interfering with his better judgement, the emotion enables Jim to track reasons he would have neglected had he followed the conclusion of his deliberation.

In the course of her argument for the claim that akrasia can be rational, Nomy Arpaly describes a similar case (Arpaly 2000: 504). Emily's feelings of restlessness, sadness, and ill-motivation, which cause her to abandon a chemistry Ph.D. against her better judgement, are in fact responses to the fact that the programme is ill-suited for her. These feelings can be seen as a response to factors which, given Emily's beliefs and desires, are in fact good reasons for her to abandon the programme. Thus, her emotional states not only make her decision to abandon intelligible, but indeed lead her to act in a more rational way, something which she recognizes later. As Karen Jones says when commenting on this example, such cases show that 'an agent's emotion can be keyed to her reasons in such a way that they enable the agent to track those reasons, while her all-things-considered judgement does not' (Jones forthcoming).

But how can acting against one's all-thing-considered judgement be more rational than acting on such a judgement? Perhaps we should take issue with Arpaly's claim that 'a theory of rationality should not assume that there is something special about an agent's best judgement. An agent's best judgement is just another belief, and for something to conflict with one's best judgement is nothing more dramatic than ordinary inconsistency between beliefs, or between beliefs and desires' (Arpaly 2000: 512).

As Jones underlines, Arpaly's claim is at odds with an influential conception of rational agency, one according to which an agent can be said to be

committed to guiding his action according to the best reasons only if she is committed to following her all-things-considered judgements.³⁵ On this intellectualist conception, rational agency is not simply a matter of correctly tracking reasons; it involves *thinking* that we are properly responsive to reasons. There is, however, an alternative and quite plausible picture which is compatible with what is suggested by the above-mentioned examples. As Jones argues, the commitment to rational agency can be understood ‘as the commitment to the cultivation and exercise of habits of reflective self-monitoring of our practical and epistemic agency’ (Jones forthcoming). The important point here is that the cultivation and exercise of our emotional dispositions is arguably part of what expresses this commitment to rational agency. Given this, acting on the basis of our emotions can be expressing our commitment to rational agency. This will be so when our emotional dispositions are shaped by a process of self-formation; they are not simply mechanisms we happen to find in ourselves, but the outcome of a conscious self-educational process that aims at experiencing emotions when and only when they are appropriate.

One could say that in so far as our emotional dispositions are our own, acting on the basis of our emotions can be expressive of rational agency. And such action can be expressive of our commitment to rational agency even when it conflicts with the conclusions of our deliberation. For on some occasions such a conclusion would have been distrusted had our self-monitoring dispositions worked properly. As Jones claims, ‘the functioning of such sub-systems does not stop being expressive of our commitment to rational guidance just because there is now an opposing all-things-considered judgement. In many cases that all-things-considered judgement may be such that the agent would distrust it, if her self-monitoring capacities were functioning as they should’ (Jones forthcoming). Thus, though emotions quite often get us to act irrationally, and though this irrationality often involves acting against our better judgements, they can also help us to overcome the shortcomings of our deliberative faculty. And they can do so without making us less than agents committed to guiding our actions according to our best reasons. Thus emotional akrasia can be more rational than acting on a better judgement.

³⁵ See Korsgaard 1997: 222; Raz 1997: 16; Scanlon 1998, ch. 1, esp. p. 25; Wallace 1999b.

Cool Akrasia as Surd

By contrast, it seems *prima facie* that akratic action that does not involve emotions lacks intelligibility. For what happens in cool akrasia is that some consideration which has been judged to furnish insufficient reason for action is supposed nonetheless to be the reason for the action, thus making the action intelligible. The question is how such a consideration can be seen as the reason for the action, given the context. Consider the case of an akratic smoker. Let us suppose she agrees that smoking this cigarette would be pleasant, but judges that this is not a sufficient reason to smoke it, given all the reasons she has not to smoke it. How then can the fact that smoking is pleasant be the reason for her having the cigarette? It is clear that her belief that smoking this cigarette is pleasant can be part of what *causes* her smoking. But what is not clear is whether this belief can help to make sense of her action. The question is how her smoking can be seen as being done in light of the pleasantness of the action, given her overall verdict. The difficulty can be seen if we think of what the agent would say if asked why she is smoking the cigarette. She cannot really say that she is doing it for the pleasure involved, given her other beliefs. It is simply not clear that an agent can aim at a value that she considers to be a bad or insufficient reason for performing the action. It seems in short that a consideration can make an action intelligible only if it is considered to be sufficient (cf. Walker 1989: 670).

But how then can an emotion—or, more precisely, the value that is perceived when we experience an emotion—make an akratic action intelligible? What is the difference between (for instance) *perceiving* the action as pleasant, and *believing* that the action is pleasant, which would allow us to say in the one case that the action has been made intelligible, and in the other not? The difference is simple. In the case of a perception of value, what we have is the workings of a subsystem, that is, of something that works independently of higher-order cognitive faculties, whereas in the case of evaluative beliefs or judgements, we have a state of the same kind as the better judgement. Given this, the reason that is given in one's perception is immune, so to speak, from the overall verdict one makes. That one considers one's fear or the danger to be insufficient reason does not change the fact that an action based on that fear will be intelligible.

Note that if the evaluative belief were itself the outcome of a properly shaped subsystem, such as the agent's emotional dispositions, things would be different. The agent's attraction to the pleasure of smoking might make the

desire to smoke and hence the smoking intelligible. And merely judging, whether correctly or incorrectly, that this attraction is inappropriate or simply keyed to an insufficient reason would not necessarily change this fact. But the evaluative belief alone does not seem to throw any light on why she smokes the cigarette, given her overall verdict on the action.

It might be claimed that everything depends on how the action is described.³⁶ As is generally acknowledged, it is under a description that actions are made intelligible. Given this, one could say that under the description ‘smoking this cigarette though refraining is supported by better reasons’ the action cannot be made sense of, whereas it *can* be made sense of under the simple description ‘smoking this cigarette’. This is perhaps what Davidson has in mind when he writes ‘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’ (Davidson 1970a: 42), adding that the agent has of course a reason for doing the action *a*. Now it is true that the agent has a reason for her action under the description ‘smoking this cigarette’—it is the reason judged insufficient. What I dispute is that this reason is the reason why the action, so described, is done. Even though there is a reason for the action described as ‘smoking this cigarette’, it is not clear that this reason is sufficient to make sense of the action under this description, given the smoker’s overall verdict.

If this is correct, one can conclude that there is an important difference between cases of emotional akrasia and cases of cool akrasia. In contrast with the latter, emotional akratic actions are not really puzzling. Echoing Peacocke’s claim that ‘we do find akrasia especially puzzling when there are no imaginative or perceptual asymmetries’ (Peacocke 1985: 72), it seems that cool akrasia is particularly puzzling. Not only is it not clear that the attentional focus that comes with emotions is present, but the puzzle is that such actions are supposed to be intentional while there seems to be nothing that makes them intelligible. As we have seen, it is difficult to believe that the mere judgement that the action has some attractive feature is the reason for the akratic action, given the agent’s overall verdict. So in the absence of an emotion, there seems to be nothing that can help make sense of the action. Maybe the simple desire to perform the action is sufficient. But then it would have to be shown that that desire is not merely the cause of the action, but

³⁶ I owe this objection to Sarah Stroud.

also a state that can make it intelligible. And it would also have to be shown that that desire is not in fact an emotional state. In so far as it is not clear that acts of cool akrasia are done for a reason, the question of the possibility of cool akrasia still seems to be an open one.

Conclusion

Let me pull the threads together. I raised a number of problems with the argument presented by de Sousa for his claim that emotions get us from some relative better judgement based on a subset of reasons to the unconditional, or *sans phrase*, judgement and thus to action. The main difficulty with this claim is that it assumes Davidson's conception of akratic action. If emotions have a role to play in akrasia, it cannot be that of the akratic cause. For since there is (at least typically) no reasoning error in akrasia, there is nothing which causes such an error. Instead, I suggested that emotions have a more direct and more positive role to play in at least certain cases of akrasia. Emotions can both cause and make intelligible akratic actions. In so far as it makes sense to say that emotions are perceptions of values, we can say that akratic actions caused by emotions are performed in light of the perceived value. Moreover, I argued that akratic action grounded on emotion can be more rational than action that conforms to our better judgement. This is so at least when our emotional dispositions are the result of a process of self-formation. Finally, the comparison between cases of emotional akrasia and cases of cool akrasia suggests that unlike the former, it is not clear that the latter are really done for a reason. The upshot is that it is not clear whether there really is such a thing as cool intentional action done against one's better judgement.