

AKRASIA, WEAKNESS OF THE WILL AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOOD

PhD. Roberto Parra DORANTES,
Associate Professor at Universidad del Caribe,
MEXICO,
Email: rdparra@ucaribe.edu.mx

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of akrasia (committing wrong actions while knowing them to be wrong, also known as weakness of the will or incontinence) has puzzled philosophers at least since the time of Socrates, who nevertheless concluded that it is never instantiated in reality, since according to him any person who has knowledge of the good will always act rightly, and thus the only reason people ever commit wrong deeds is ignorance. Many other philosophers, including Aristotle, have thought that acrotic actions exist and are actually quite frequent, and they have tried to explain akrasia in a way that stays true to those appearances. In this article the position of Aristotle on this topic is presented and then contrasted with that of Donald Davidson; after finding similarities in both approaches, a hypothesis about the relation between akrasia and the emotions is defended, and temporary forgetfulness is proposed as the underlying mechanism through which this phenomenon operates.

Keywords: *Akrasia; weakness of the will; Aristotle.*

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle defines the incontinent man, or *akrates*, as one who commits wrong actions knowing them to be wrong, thus departing from the judgment of reason. Common sense and experience seem to prove conclusively that such cases exist: briefly put, people often do things they know they should not do. Socrates, however —as Aristotle explains—, stated that if knowledge is present in the agent, it and only it can be able to govern his deeds, being impossible for any other principle to dominate knowledge possessed by the subject of the action “and drag it around like a slave”. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145b; it is a quote from Plato, *Protagoras*, 352b) From this statement it follows that, according to Socrates, no one ever really does evil knowingly since all wrong actions are performed because of ignorance and *akrasia* does not really exist. Aristotle is ready to point out that this theory “manifestly disagrees with the facts”, and takes this problem as the starting point for his analysis.

Note that this problem is similar to what Augustine calls *concupiscentia*, and is a problem that generalizes to questions about sin and faith. For one who knows righteous conduct, is sin possible? For one who has sincere faith, is even momentary doubt possible?¹

1. ARISTOTLE ON AKRASIA

¹ Augustine, for example, says “‘To will is present with me, but to do that which is good I find not.’... These are the words of a man set under the law and not yet under grace. He who is not yet under grace *does not do the good he wills but the evil which he does not will*, being overcome by concupiscentia . . . There is nothing easier for a man under the law than *to will to do good and yet to do evil*.” (*Ad Simplicianus*, letter 1; quoted by Ann A. Pang-White in “The Fall of Humanity: Weakness of the Will and Moral Responsibility in the Later Augustine”, 2001, 58; emphasis added).

Aristotle's study of *akrasia*, which occupies most of sections 2-10 of *NE*² book VII, can be interpreted in at least two different ways: as an attack on Socrates' theory to prove that it is possible for someone to knowingly act in a wrong way, or as an attempt to find a way to fit Socrates' theory with the "facts" (people often seem to act wrongly knowing that they are doing so) and thus save it. Aristotle's goal when introducing this study is clearly stated by himself before starting the discussion:

Our proper course with this subject [*akrasia*] as with others will be to present the various views about it, and then, after first reviewing the difficulties they involve, finally to establish if possible all or, if not all, the greater part and the most important of the opinions generally held with respect to these states of mind; since if the discrepancies can be solved, and a residuum of current opinion left standing, the true view will have been sufficiently established. (*NE*, 1145b)

As we can observe from this, then, that Aristotle's stated strategy consists simply in trying to solve the difficulties posed by the most authoritative opinions received on this matter after all the facts about it have been presented, and if that is possible, his goal—to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of *akrasia*— will have been achieved.

Aristotle explores the possibility that the ignorance that allows incontinent or *akratic* action, which Socrates speaks of, is of a special kind. He draws a distinction between two forms of "knowing"; first, as possessing knowledge, and, second, as making use of knowledge. It is possible for someone to possess knowledge and not make use of it, that is, not consider it when acting (*NE*, 1146b). Although Aristotle does not use an example to clarify this point, it would seem to be a situation of the general type in which someone momentarily forgets a certain fact or norm that he knows when performing a certain action, such as leaving home and forgetting his keys. The agent knew he would soon need to enter his home again and for this he would need his keys; he knew this in the sense that he possessed this information but did not use it in acting. Thus, Aristotle states that it is not surprising at all that someone does what he knows to be wrong if he does not make use of that knowledge and consider it to be wrong at that time.

While developing this point, Aristotle turns to the explanation of action using the concept of a practical syllogism. (*NE*, 1147a) This syllogism is composed of two premises, namely, a universal one which states that there are certain kinds of things that are in some way desirable (because they are healthy, or pleasurable, or good) and a particular one which claims to be in the presence at that time of such a thing. The conclusion or consequence of such practical syllogism—just as for a theoretical syllogism is assent— would be an action. Thus, Aristotle affirms that it is possible for the *akrates* to possess both premises of syllogism, to have knowledge of them, and not apply them, that is, not make these premises operative in his reasoning at the time. It is even possible for someone in that situation, internally dominated by his passions, to speak at the same time "the language of moral knowledge" without actually making use of it, in a disposition analogous to the insane or the drunkard who correctly recites the verses of the wise Empedocles.

Moreover, it is not only possible for those who do evil not to follow the appropriate practical syllogism which they could employ if their passion did not dominate them, but it is also possible for them in that case to follow a different practical syllogism, one based on some other desire (it was already mentioned that the major premise of the practical syllogism

² *Nicomachean Ethics*, henceforth abbreviated as *NE*. The edition used is *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1934.

according to Aristotle needs only to state that something is desirable in any way) that moves the agent away from what reason dictates. Aristotle says:

When therefore there is present in the mind on the one hand a universal judgement forbidding you to taste and on the other hand a universal judgement saying ‘All sweet things are pleasant,’ and a minor premise ‘Yonder thing is sweet’ (and it is this minor premise that is active), and when desire is present at the same time, then, though the former universal judgement says ‘Avoid that thing,’ the desire leads you to it (since desire can put the various parts of the body in motion. (*NE*, 1147a)

This is how, according to Aristotle, it is possible for *akrasia* or incontinence to be practiced “under the influence of reason and an opinion [which is] contrary to that reason, but not in itself, but only by accident, for *it is the appetite and not the opinion* which would actually contradict it”. (*NE*, 1147b, emphasis added)

This explanation achieves the objectives set by Aristotle at the beginning; on the one hand he has explained how it is possible to act wrongly knowing that one acts wrongly, and, on the other, he has in a way rescued Socrates’ theory, explaining that in these cases there is a special ignorance that does not conflict with the fact that the agent possesses, before, after and during his action, the relevant knowledge. Recognizing this special type of ignorance is what distinguishes Aristotle’s position from that of Socrates.

This kind of ignorance does not consist simply in temporarily misjudging a wrong action as a good one and then proceeding to execute it. That would be mere ignorance. Something that distinguishes the incontinent man from the unbridled man is that only the first one judges rightly, before acting, his action as wrong. The same thing happens at a later moment, when the *akrates*, after having executed the action, again correctly judges it as bad. This distinguishes the incontinent from the unbridled too, for only the first one, and not the latter, repents of his action. Aristotle says: “If we ask how the unrestrained man’s ignorance is dissipated and he returns to a state of knowledge, the explanation is the same as in the case of drunkenness and sleep, and is not peculiar to failure of self-restraint.” (*NE*, 1147b) Making use of an analogy borrowed from medicine, Aristotle says that being unbridled is a continuous disorder, like tuberculosis. Incontinence, on the other hand, is not continuous but episodic, like epilepsy.

We can notice Aristotle’s explanation is not complete, even if he achieved what he set out to do. In the end we are left with no account of exactly how it is that knowledge and reason can be overcome by an appetite in incontinent action. Moreover, we can wonder, based on this account, how the particular mechanism that allows for this type of incontinent ignorance to which he refers is activated, or why after the incontinent action knowledge systematically returns like a hangover. Borrowing some terms from present-day technology, Aristotle’s explanation amounts to this: the knowledge the subject possesses is like the information stored on a computer’s hard drive. This information cannot be useful (is not operational) unless it or some portion of it is accessed and converted into RAM, or random-access memory, where it is temporarily held in order to be actively used. The *akrates* possesses all the relevant information, but in acting wrongly he omits the important step of making this relevant information operational, of taking it through reflection and deliberation to the place where it can actually be used. Well, even assuming that this analogy is correct, it has not yet been explained why it is that the *akrates* fails to operationalize that knowledge.³

³ A different and interesting approach is put forth by Robinson (1975). Aristotle is assuming that (right) moral principles and judgments are a proper object of knowledge. However, we can also think of them not as truths to get right or discoveries to be made, but consider them instead as resolutions or norms to be adopted. Practical

2. DAVIDSON ON WEAKNESS OF THE WILL

Donald Davidson's approach to this issue (1980), presented in his article "How is Weakness of the Will Possible", is fundamentally similar to Aristotle's, albeit with some qualifications. For Davidson, the most important thing in characterizing weakness of the will (the term he uses for what Aristotle calls *akrasia*) is not if the agent acted rightly or wrongly, with or without true knowledge, but simply the fact that the agent acted against what he himself judged to be best. Davidson attempts to circumscribe the problem within the area of philosophy of mind and philosophy of action, without resorting to ethical considerations, or even considerations of pleasure and pain or prudence, which have traditionally been seen as essentially linked to the problem of incontinence.

To make this clear he uses an example of incontinent action that has nothing to do with morality or even pleasure: someone, after a busy day, finally goes to sleep but then remembers that he has not brushed his teeth. This person weighs his reasons for and against getting out of bed to brush them. Taking into account that his teeth are strong and that getting up would probably cause him to lose sleep and then perhaps not be able to sleep at all, he judges that overall it is better to stay in bed. But he then gets up to brush his teeth nonetheless. Examples of this kind are not uncommon: on many occasions we sacrifice what we judge best in favor of courtesy, shyness, costume, guilt, etc. Irrationality is what interests Davidson here, and what seems irrational in such cases, he says, is just the fact that the agent acts against his own assessments, even if in the end the agent ends up doing something he judged to be, in a certain way, desirable but not preferable.

According to Davidson, any explanation of intentional action which makes reference to the agent's reasons for acting must allow the conflict of reasons, which in turn must allow the conflict between the agent's desires or motivations. Thus, a person may have reasons to perform an action but at the same time have reasons against that action, or reasons for other courses of action that are incompatible with the first. Davidson points out that Aristotle's proposal of a practical syllogism which has as its conclusion an action (or an intention) seems not to allow for that, since it is sufficient for the agent to have a certain desire and a certain appropriate belief for a practical inference to occur, and thus also action or at least intention, to spring immediately.

Davidson instead represents desires and reasons that allow for such conflicts in the form of *prima facie* judgments, that is, different judgments that may identify the same thing at the same time as both desirable and undesirable, for different reasons, which are not contradictory. Action does not spring merely from coming to believe that a certain action falls in the category of being desirable. The connection between reason and action cannot be merely logical, but must be somehow causal. Thus, it is possible (as anyone facing a difficult decision can testify) for sets of reasons that are directed to incompatible actions to coexist within the mind of the agent coexist, and in the end only one of these sets determines the resulting action. Weakness of the will then, according to Davidson, occurs in the context of a conflict between reasons. The desires or motivational states that support those reasons are represented as judgments that support certain action in a conditioned, *prima facie* manner.

principles, in this view, do not tell us how the world is constituted, but instead are a vehicle by which the agent takes a stance on the world. From this perspective, the *akrates* is not someone who acts based on an alleged contradiction in his soul; he is instead someone who acts against a generalized decision he himself has taken previously, and who is likely to later regret his action for that reason. Aristotle gets close to this approach when he compares the *akrates* to a city that promulgates all the right laws, but does not enforce them, while the evil man is like a city that enforces its laws, but those laws are wrong. (*NE*, 1152a)

What we call our “best judgment” is something that results from the process of having considered all the reasons that may be relevant, and takes the form of “after all considerations have been made, it is better to do x than y ”, but this is *still* a *prima facie* judgment. If the reasoning uses *prima facie* judgments as premises, the operation of removing the *prima facie* clause from the conclusion invalidates the reasoning. On the other hand, the judgments that are necessary to form an intention (which is in turn necessary for there to be intentional action) are not *prima facie*, but unconditional judgments, of the type “ x is better than y ” simpliciter.

Therefore, says Davidson, there is no error that can be properly called logical in not using the best judgment as the determinant for action, because there is no proper deductive procedure to find out what set of reasons, when there is a conflict, must have primacy. From deliberating about the comparative value of his various reasons, the agent may arrive at an “all relevant considerations taken in to account” conditional judgment which states that “reason x is, *prima facie*, better than reason y ”. But there is nothing that logically precludes the possibility of the agent forming anyway an unconditional judgment to the effect of saying that “ y is better than x ”, and guide his action with the latter.

In summary, for intentional action to be possible, Davidson says, an agent must have a desire and a belief that relate in the appropriate manner forming a reason which then causes that action. For the agent there may be different reasons or sets of reasons leading to incompatible potential actions. The “best judgment” of the agent will always be that which weighs in all the reasons (for and against) a certain action, but an action does not always need to be based on such a “best judgment”. An agent can still make use of any of the other conflicting reasons or sets of reasons in order to act; such an action is possible, and explainable.

3. MOTIVATION AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOOD

Davidson’s explanation of weakness of the will, although more sophisticated, is not very different to that of Aristotle, who concluded that the *akrates* can possess knowledge and yet not use it in his actions. Davidson and Aristotle, each in their own way, solve the logical difficulty which apparently underlay the proper approach to the problem of explaining the possibility of *akrasia*. Resolving this issue is an important and necessary step in explaining *akrasia*, but the most fundamental question, about motivation, remains: why do we sometimes act against our best judgment?

In Davidson’s approach, incontinent action can be characterized as a case in which an agent acts intentionally reasoning from a more limited set of his own reasons for action rather than from another more complete set of his own reasons for action, which is equally available to him. We can ask now: can the explanation of why this type of reasoning occurs (which evidently has something that sounds irrational, or at least not rational) include the ingredient that the agent intentionally chooses to reason from a more limited set of reasons?

The answer is no. Examine this example written in second person but loosely based on real events that happened to the author of this paper: you are rushing to an important appointment, a job interview on which the future wellbeing of you and your family could depend, and along the way you find in a park a group of fragile senior citizens who ask you for help to find the way to a nearby museum. Your reasons for getting to the appointment as soon as possible are pressing; on the other hand, these senior citizens, although lost, do not seem to be in danger and most probably will be helped by someone else if you don’t. You know that if you stop even for a moment, it is possible you will end up walking with them all

the way until they find the museum in question. You think about this for a second. You remember your important appointment and judge it would be best to not stop under the circumstances. But then you stop and help them anyway. This action is intentional, voluntary and purposeful, but it is contrary to your “all things considered” best judgment.

According to the explanation of incontinence we have given, the person in this case reasoned from a more limited set of reasons (for example, “we must help those who need it whenever possible”) than a more complete one that was at his disposal (for example, “we must help those who need it whenever possible, unless doing so may bring serious harm to ourselves and not doing so will probably not bring serious harm to that person; moreover, we must also look after the wellbeing of our loved ones, especially our own family”). He helps the group of senior citizens intentionally, but did he intentionally choose to act upon a more limited set of reasons rather than upon the best and more complete reasons that were available to him?

If it were possible to make such a choice (to act upon a more limited set of reasons rather than upon a more complete set), making that choice itself would count as a distinct instance of *akrasia* or weakness of the will, an acratia reasoning, which then in turn would have to be explained in a similar way, and thus *ad infinitum*. In the example, the person did not choose to reason defectively; he simply chose to help the group of senior citizens, by reasoning defectively. This shows that, although particular incontinent actions are intentional, choosing to reason defectively and hence act incontinently cannot be intentional (it cannot be a new case of incontinence to reason in the manner that leads to incontinent action). If the error of reasoning from a more limited set of reasons than the best available consisted in somehow judging that in this case it is better to reason from the more limited set than from the more complete set after making a comparison between the two options and weighing in the reasons in favor of each (for example, reasoning that “it would be boring or mechanical to always and necessarily conform to our best rules of practical reasoning, sometimes you have to reason in another way under specific circumstances”), that, it seems, would turn our reasoning that leads to an incontinent action into an intentional choice of acting incontinently. A prominent alternative explanation of how making that error is possible, without any comparative judgment between which set of reasons we are to reason upon, is *temporary forgetfulness*, or a special kind of temporary forgetfulness: we forget for a while that there is an alternative (and better) way of reasoning that would lead to a different conclusion. By “temporary forgetfulness” I am referring here to those cases in which, when recalling the relevant information after the crucial moment has passed, we are sincerely authorized to say that we *knew better*, and that we should have remembered or kept it in mind at that relevant moment; for example, when we left home without bringing the keys with us. This kind of forgetfulness can be due to a deficiency in our attention (which was at the relevant moment focused on something else), which caused us not to take into account an aspect we consider relevant. This lack of care may be similar to the one displayed when one acts under some kind of pressure or coercion or stress or threat, or under the effect of some drug. In cases of weakness of will, however, we must discard these and similar circumstances, because, by definition, it is a requirement of incontinent action to have been performed freely, intentionally and for a purpose.

The only plausible alternative that remains open to be the cause of this kind of forgetfulness (that there is a better way to reason) in clear cases of weakness of the will is one that has to do with an interesting aspect of emotions. Emotions share the characteristic of frequently making the agent focus an unproportioned amount of his attention on a partial

aspect of a situation, overestimating that aspect.⁴ I think it's important to note here that someone can act influenced by an emotion without necessarily acting in a wild, passionate, agitated way. Someone can fail to act (that is, perform an omission) influenced mainly by an emotion, such as when disappointment causes someone to lose enthusiasm for a project.

The example that Davidson puts together in a more or less artificial way to make it clear that an action can be incontinent without going against the moral or prudential considerations of the agent or be performed in some wild or agitated manner (his example is about someone brushing his teeth), is described by him as something that seems to be closely linked to emotions: the man who incontinently brushes his teeth in Davidson's example, does so because "his feeling that he should brush his teeth is too strong for him". I suggest that this is not an accident, and that in any example of incontinent action (whether or not it has to do with morals) some emotional element that plays an important role can be found.

We can easily admit that recognizing the reliability of our beliefs and the correctness of certain reasoning available to us are not always the factors that drive us to act; many times we let ourselves be led to action by those alternative desires that are attractive to us for other reasons, for example, because they cause us certain emotions (even very calm or delicate emotions, such as benevolence or aesthetic delight), without there being in us even a trace of a calculation of possible benefits to obtain or harms to avoid compared to our other options, and thus circumventing even the most basic instrumental rationality that accords to our own judgments and values.

Clear instances of incontinent action would then be due, if this explanation is correct, to the fact that certain beliefs (broadly speaking, including perceptions and other cognitive states) have a power of casing in us certain feelings or emotions that make us focus our attention on some partial features of the situation and temporarily forget relevant considerations (specifically, that there are alternative and more complete ways of reasoning). In helping the group of senior citizens in the example above the person does so because some emotion in him makes him temporarily focus his entire attention on their present problem and their circumstances, and for a moment that constitutes his universe of reasons to act; he does not forget at that moment that he has an important appointment, but he does temporarily forget that having that important appointment is a good reason for in this case reasoning in an alternative way and not stopping.

CONCLUSION

Aristotle and Donald Davidson ultimately explain *akrasia* or weakness of the will in a similar way, by saying that at the time of action the incontinent agent loses touch with the knowledge he has, or with his own best judgment.

Neither of them, however, gets to the bottom of the question on how the mechanism that allows *akrasia* to happen is set into motion. According to the hypothesis that has been presented and argued for in this paper, that mechanism is a temporary forgetfulness that is brought about by the power that emotions can have to make parts of a situation appear more important than they are.

⁴ Descartes reflects on this aspect of emotions when he writes in *The Passions of the Soul* (section 138): "the passions nearly always exaggerate the size and importance of the goods and evils they represent, inciting us to pursue the goods and flee from the evils with more ardour and zeal than is appropriate. Likewise, we see that beasts are often deceived by lures, and in trying to avoid small evils they throw themselves into worse ones. That is why we must use experience and reason to distinguish good from evil and know their true value, so as not to take the one for the other and not to rush into anything immoderately." (Translation by Jonathan Bennett.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1.] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. In *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, translated by H. Rackham. (1934) Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd.
- [2.] Davidson, Donald. How is Weakness of the Will Possible? In Davidson, D. (1980). *Essays on Actions and Events*. Clarendon Press.
- [3.] Descartes, René. *The Passions of the Soul*. Translated by Jonathan Bennett. (2017). Retrieved from: <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/authors/descartes>
- [4.] Pang-White, Ann A. (2000). The Fall of Humanity: Weakness of the Will and Moral Responsibility in the Later Augustine. *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 9(1), 51-67.
- [5.] Plato. *Protagoras* in Cooper, J. M., & Hutchinson, D. S. (Eds.). (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing.
- [6.] Robinson, Richard. Aristotle on *Akrasia*, in Barnes, J., Schofield, M., & Sorabji, R. (1975). *Articles on Aristotle: Ethics and Politics*, Duckworth.