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Ἀκρασία and desire

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1. Introduction

In book seven of the *Nicomachean ethics*,¹ Aristotle takes up the challenge presented by Socrates in the *Protagoras*, namely that “no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil”² (358c-d). This is, in fact, a very typical way of proceeding for Aristotle starting with common

¹ All citations from the *Nicomachean ethics* are from the Martin Ostwald translation.

² All citations from the *Protagoras* are from *The collected dialogues of Plato*, ed. B. Jowett, Charlottesville 1993.

opinion (ἔνδοξα) followed by an examination of opposing claims. In this way, his aim in book seven is to examine the commonly held opinion that men can and do act against what they know to be best. This essay will continue that task along with Aristotle, reviewing some of the approaches that various Aristotelian interpreters have taken in an attempt to more clearly appreciate the problem of ἀκρασία as it occurs in the *Nicomachean ethics*. With this in mind, it will emphasize the role of desire both in terms of deliberation as well as in action with regard to the behavior of the ἀκρατής, making the argument that it is desire which causes him to abandon what he reasons to be the proper conduct for a given situation. To this end, this essay will begin with a summary look at the problem and resolution as presented by Aristotle. Next, it will review in detail Aristotle's example syllogism, taking each of the premises in turn, arguing that desire functions as both universal and particular premises. It will then turn to the "three elements in the soul which control action and truth," looking at the relationship between appetite and intellect in order to more clearly present the factors that move a soul to act. Lastly, it will conclude by arguing that it is the desire (or lack thereof) associated with virtuous behavior that leads one to become either the ἀκρατής or the ἐνκρατής.

2. Defining the problem

To begin, it can be seen that after listing some common opinions concerning the morally weak man³ in Book VII of *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle then turns to the crux of the problem, pointing out that "[while Socrates] claimed that no one acts contrary to what is best in the conviction that what he is doing is bad, but through ignorance of the fact that it is bad, ... [this] theory is plainly at variance with the observed facts. [Thus] one ought to investigate the emotion involved in the acts of the morally weak man... for evidently a man who is morally weak in his actions does

³ Following Ostwald, I will occasionally translate ἀκρατής as "morally weak man", ἀκρασία as "moral weakness", and ἐνκρατής as "morally strong."

not think that he ought to act the way he does before he is in the grip of emotion” (1145b27-30). Here, in contrast with the claims of Socrates, Aristotle makes it clear that he believed the emotions (i.e. the passions) to have some capacity to corrupt or prevent a man from acting on the conclusions of his deliberation. Correspondingly, he sets himself against Socrates’ argument, implying that it is possible for a man to fail to stand by the conclusions of his deliberation not through any fault of ignorance or reasoning, as Socrates might claim, but rather because such a man’s passions have impeded him from taking the course of action as dictated by reason. This raises for Aristotle the important question of how, or in what way, the emotions are involved in the deliberative process that results in action. For Socrates, the question is simply non-sensical; there is no way in which the emotions could possibly affect reason’s capacity to deduce the proper action in a given circumstance. Were this possible, it would imply that reason could be dragged about like a slave to the passions, as Plato writes in *The Protagoras* (352b). Consequently, Socrates proposes that it is not the emotions which affect a man’s judgement, but rather a lack of knowledge concerning what is best. Nevertheless, Aristotle writes that “this is plainly at variance with the observed facts” and therefore demands some explanation.

In order to resolve this apparent paradox, two solutions may be proposed: (1) affirm the claim that the ἀκρατής does *not* truly know what is best but only appears to know (more or less the Socratic position) or (2) explain how a man can fail to act on his knowledge of what is best. It should be no surprise that Aristotle attempts to address both of these positions in the *Nicomachean ethics*, beginning in VII.3, where he dismisses the idea that the failure of the ἀκρατής is due to the relative strength of his knowledge: “Accordingly, if we are going to say that the weakness of their belief is the reason why those who hold opinion will be more liable to act against their conviction than those who have knowledge, we shall find that there is no difference between knowledge and opinion. For some people are no less firmly convinced of what they believe than others are of what they know” (1146b27-30). In this way Aristotle immediately disqualifies the relative strength or weakness of one’s knowledge as

a possible source of akratic behavior in order to focus instead on the role of knowledge per se in deliberation and action.

To this end, he advances a theory of knowledge as understood in terms of potency and act, stating that “the verb to know has two meanings: a man is said ‘to know’ both when he does not use the knowledge he has and when he does use it” (1146b31-34). Aristotle further qualifies this statement showing “that ‘having’ a characteristic has different meanings. There is a sense in which a person both has and does not have knowledge, for example, when he is asleep, mad or drunk. But this is precisely the condition of people who are in the grip of the emotions” (1147a11-15). Such a person is capable of “repeating geometrical demonstrations and verses of Empedocles” (1147a19) but without any indication that this knowledge is of any use to them. That is, his knowledge cannot be put into practice and is nothing more than simple recitation. This implies a practical difference between the man whose knowledge is merely mimetic and the one who has internalized such knowledge and is consequently capable of applying it. An example of the former can be seen in the student of geometry who has memorized Euclid’s conclusion that “the three internal angles of every triangle taken together are equal to two right angles” but who has not internalized its significance.⁴ Such a student is neither capable of producing a proof for this knowledge nor is he able to apply it in further geometrical algorithms or demonstrations. In contrast, the learned geometer is capable not only of recalling the dictum, but of applying it to particular concrete situations as well as giving a demonstration of its validity. For this reason, he may be said to have truly learned the meaning of the dictum unlike the student who has merely memorized a certain mathematical conclusion.

Like the student, the man in the “grip of the emotions” is also incapable of making use of his knowledge. However, unlike the student, such a man must be capable of applying his knowledge to particular situations

⁴ See book 1, proposition 32 in Euclid, *The first six books of the Elements of Euclid, in which coloured diagrams and symbols are used instead of letters for the greater ease of learners*, transl. O. Byrne, London 1847, p. 33.

because it is only in this way that may he be said to have knowledge as opposed to mere recollection. His knowledge *must* be the knowledge of the geometer, not the student. For this reason, Aristotle qualifies his definition of the problem, stating that “a man who is morally weak in his actions does not think that he ought to act the way he does before he is in the grip of emotion” (1145b29-30). Clearly, such a man must be capable of applying his knowledge if he is able to recognize that a particular situation calls for a certain response. One must suppose then that the morally weak man is capable of applying his knowledge when he is not overcome by the passions (like the geometer), for if he cannot, then neither can he be said to know in any practically meaningful way (like the student whose “knowledge” is nothing more than recollection). This means that the emotions are capable of preventing a man from making use of his internalized knowledge. Thus, even though he may be able to recall the universal premises of such knowledge (e.g. that “the three internal angles of every triangle taken together are equal to two right angles”), he is unable to apply it to any particulars (e.g. finding the angle of a vertex of a triangle when given the angles of its other two vertices).

Accordingly, the challenge for Aristotle will revolve around explaining both (1) where in the reasoning process such an incapacitation occurs as well as (2) why the passions have such an effect. In an effort to resolve these quandaries, Aristotle makes use of what is known as the practical syllogism, highlighting the interaction between the universal and particular premises and their role in the subject’s action. He writes that “in the practical syllogism one of the premises, the universal, is a current belief while the other involves particular facts which fall within the domain of sense perception. When two premises are combined into one, i.e. when the universal rule is realized in a particular case, the soul is thereupon bound to affirm the conclusion and if the premises involve action, the soul is bound to perform this act at once. For example, if the premises are: ‘Everything sweet ought to be tasted’ and ‘This thing before me is sweet’ (‘this thing’ perceived as an individual particular object), a man who is able to taste and is not prevented is bound to act accordingly at once” (1147a20-30). That is, the combination of the universal premise

“Everything sweet ought to be tasted” with the particular premise “This thing before me is sweet” ought to move the soul to the realization of the universal premise in the particular, concrete circumstances of a present and sweet thing.

In contrast with the previous example there then follows a second practical syllogism, again with both universal and particular premises, in which the subject (i.e. us) fails to abide by the demands of reason. “Now, suppose that there is within us one universal opinion forbidding us to taste things of this kind [sweet things], and another universal opinion which tells us that everything sweet is pleasant, and also a concrete perception, determining our activity, that the particular thing before us is sweet; and suppose further that the appetite for pleasure happens to be present. The result is that one opinion tells us to avoid that thing, while appetite, capable as it is of setting in motion each part of our body, drives us to it. This is the case we have been looking for, the defeat of reason in moral weakness” (1147a31-37). This may be simplified as follows:⁵ (a) Everything sweet is forbidden to be tasted; (b) Everything sweet is pleasant; (c) This thing before us is sweet; (d) *This thing before us ought not to be tasted* (conclusion drawn from (a) + (c)); (e) *This thing before us is pleasant* (conclusion drawn from (b) + (c)); (f) We desire pleasure; (g) *We desire this thing before us* (conclusion drawn from (e) + (f)). Now, since this syllogism is a bit complex, it will help to examine each premise individually, working towards the final premise. The first, (a), is fairly straightforward and states a “universal opinion” (i.e. a universal premise). However, because it is universal, it cannot be the motivating force of action because it lacks any concrete particularity; that is, only “when the universal rule is realized in a particular case” will the soul be bound to action.⁶ Premise (b) is also universal and consequently cannot move the subject to action. Unlike (a) and (b), (c) is particular and thus potentially

⁵ For the sake of clarity, the conclusions of the syllogism are in italics.

⁶ Aristotle also adds at 1147b9, “The final premise, consisting as it does in an opinion about an object perceived by the senses, determines our action.” Here, Aristotle is referring to the final premise (i.e. the conclusion) which involves particulars and so determines one’s action. Universals, which are abstract by nature, do not involve particulars and therefore cannot precipitate action.

grounds for action. Aristotle calls this a “concrete perception, determining our activity” and so, as in the first example syllogism, the union of the universal and the particular compels us (*viz.*, the subject of the second syllogism) to act. In the first syllogism, this union demands that the subject taste the thing before him. In this second syllogism, conclusion (d) (the union between premises (a) + (c)) ought to prevent us from tasting the thing before us.⁷ However, the union between (b) + (c), here referred as conclusion (e), makes it clear that the thing before us is pleasant. Now, if there were no other premises the corresponding action would be obvious: We ought not taste the thing before us. However, Aristotle adds that “the desire for pleasure happens to be present” which has been included as premise (f): “We desire pleasure.” This means that an additional conclusion can be drawn from the union of conclusion (e) + premise (f), stated explicitly as (g): “We desire this thing before us.”

Now, given the way in which the premises of the second syllogism have been parsed out, one may be inclined to treat premise (f) as either a universal or a particular. What it is in reality remains somewhat unclear, a point that will be discussed in the next section. Here, what is important to note is that reason does not appear to be the only element within the soul capable of moving an individual to action. This may be inferred from Aristotle’s inclusion of the clause, “and suppose further that the appetite for pleasure happens to be present... for appetite, capable as it is of setting in motion each part of our body, drives us to [the sweet thing]” (1147a30-35). It seems then that the practical syllogism alone is not sufficient motivation for action and that something more must be added. With this in mind, B. J. Stoyles writes that “as Aristotle presents them in NE 7, each syllogism [is] composed of a rule indicating a moral obligation ([i.e. a universal such as] all men ought to...) and knowledge of the person’s particular situation ([i.e. a particular such as] I am in a situation

⁷ Because it is not obvious that the omission of an act is an act (*i.e. not* tasting the sweet thing), one might say that conclusion (d) moves the soul to avoid such circumstances that would compel it to taste the sweet thing. Thus, instead of moving towards something (*e.g.* the sweet thing), the soul would move away. In either case, the soul acts.

to...). If this were all there is to practical reasoning, however, none of us would ever be moved to act, for intellect itself, Aristotle tells us, “moves nothing” (1139a37). On Aristotle’s view, only desire moves us to act. With this, he must have thought that practical reasoning only results in action when desire is somehow involved or attached to the process of reasoning represented by the practical syllogisms.⁸ Nevertheless, as Stoyles points out in a subsequent footnote, this does not necessarily imply that the practical syllogism is incapable of initiating action but rather that desire is an integral part of the process leading to action.⁹ It appears to be for this reason that Aristotle adds the clause that indicates the presence of an appetite for pleasure. It is the contention of this essay that the inclusion of this phrase is meant to implicate the active role that desire can and does play in the practical syllogism since, as Aristotle himself writes, “thought alone moves nothing; only thought which is directed to some end and concerned with action can do so” (1139a35).

How thought is directed to some end and concerned with action is made clear in Aristotle’s discussion of choice in book VI, where he clarifies the roles of thought and desire with regard to action, indicating the direct role of desire. “There are,” he writes, “three elements in the soul which control action and truth: sense perception, intelligence, and desire. Of these sense perception does not initiate any action”¹⁰ (1139a18-19). Now, while Aristotle explicitly denies that sense perception may initiate action, one may infer from its inclusion here that it plays some kind of role related to action even if it is not an initiating one. Some indication of this has already been seen in the example syllogism where Aristotle adds “a concrete perception, determining our activity, that the particular thing before us is sweet.” Certainly, without such a perception no amount of thought

⁸ B. J. Stoyles, *Aristotle, akrasia, and the place of desire in moral reasoning*, „Ethical Theory and Moral Practice” 10 (2007), p. 203–204. Stoyles also remarks in a footnote that in *De Anima* 3.9 (433a), “we are told that mind is never found producing movement without some desire.”

⁹ Cf. B. J. Stoyles, *Aristotle, akrasia...*, op. cit., p. 204, n. 29.

¹⁰ In a footnote on this quote, Martin Ostwald explains that “throughout the *Nic. Eth.*, Aristotle uses *praxis* (‘action’) as equivalent to ‘moral action,’ ‘conduct’” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, transl. M. Ostwald, Upper Saddle River, 1999, p. 145).

(“intelligence”) or desire could move one to act. Even so, Aristotle states that sense perception alone is not responsible for initiating action. This leaves intelligence and desire as the only remaining candidates capable of moving the soul to act. However, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, in fact, may be seen to work in concert. “What affirmation and negation are in the realm of thought, pursuit and avoidance are in the realm of desire. Therefore, since moral virtue is a characteristic involving choice, and since choice is a deliberate desire, it follows that, if the choice is to be good, the reasoning must be true and the desire correct; that is, reasoning must affirm what desire pursues. This then is the kind of thought and the kind of truth that is practical and concerned with action... But in intellectual activity concerned with action, the good state is truth in harmony with correct desire” (1139a21-1139a30). Choice here seems to be concerned with both thought and desire, with the former ratifying the latter. Aristotle continues, writing that “choice is the starting point of action: it is the source of motion but not the end for the sake of which we act, i.e. the final cause. The starting point of choice, however, is desire and reasoning directed toward some end... Now thought alone moves nothing; only thought which is directed to some end and concerned with action can do so. And it is this kind of thought also which initiates production. For whoever produces something produces it for an end. The product he makes is not an end in an unqualified sense, but an end only in a particular relation and of a particular operation. Only the goal of action is an end in the unqualified sense: for the good life is an end, and desire is directed toward this. Therefore, choice is either intelligence motivated by desire or desire operating through thought, and it is a combination of these two that man is a starting point of action”¹¹ (1139a31-1139b5). “The starting point of action” (1139a31), is therefore “intelligence motivated by desire or desire operating through thought” (1139b4). In either case, it is desire which initiates the process towards action, with reason either affirming or denying the end which desires seeks. The question raised by the problem

¹¹ For a more detailed treatment of choice and desire, see M. L. Rivera, *Voluntad y akra-sia*, „Saga” 11 (2005).

of ἀκρασία therefore is whether it is possible for reason to deny what desire seeks and yet fail to prevent that desire from resulting in action.

3. Appetite, Reason, and Desire

In the second example syllogism above, what Aristotle discovers is that ἀκρασία is indeed possible insofar as two opposing conclusions are reached: (d) *This thing before us ought not to be tasted*; and (g) *We desire this thing before us*. Thus, as Aristotle writes, “one opinion tells us to avoid that thing, while appetite, capable as it is of setting in motion each part of our body, drives us to it. This is the case we have been looking for, the defeat of reason in moral weakness” (1147a34-35). In this way, at least as far as Aristotle’s example syllogism represents a common experience, ἀκρασία is shown to be a reality. A man may know through the use of his reason which course of action he ought to take and yet fail to take it. Nevertheless, what is most interesting about this second syllogism is that the latter of the two conclusions is not arrived at through the sole use of reason. Desire also plays a role in determining one of the opposing conclusions, seemingly making use of reason in the process; for without having recognized conclusion (e) – drawn from the universal premise (b) and the particular premise (c) – conclusion (g) could never have been realized. Likewise, just as universal premises cannot motivate a subject to act, neither can a desire without an object or end since a desire is always directed *towards* something. That is, a desire without an object lacks the necessary particularity needed for its realization in the same way that a universal premise without relation to concrete circumstances (as perceived through the senses) cannot be realized. Accordingly, premise (f) functions like a universal premise and once it has been combined with the particular premise (e) compels the subject to act.

All this is possible, however, only if the divide between the appetitive part of the soul and the rational part is not quite as distinct as otherwise might be thought. Reason, along with sense perception, appears to provide appetite (i.e. the source of corporeal desires) with both particular premises it needs to satisfy its desire. *Viz.* reason unifies the universal premise

(b) *Everything sweet is pleasant*, with the particular premise provided by sense perception (c) *This thing before us is sweet*. Finally, reason concludes that (e) *This thing before us is pleasant*, itself a particular premise insofar as it regards a particular. Once this conclusion has been reached, appetite then has everything it needs to satisfy its desire for pleasure since it is now possible to recognize that (g) *We desire this thing before us*.

Thus it seems that reason can be made to serve the interests of appetite to the extent that it is the former which recognizes which circumstances warrant which emotional responses. This seems dangerously close to admitting that reason may be dragged about like a slave by appetite, a conclusion which Socrates considers absurd. Nevertheless, it seems there is some kind of relationship between the two, however unclear it might be. Writing with a particular emphasis on the emotions (passions) as opposed to appetite, Nancy Sherman contends that Aristotle viewed the former as taking part in reason insofar as it “has cognitive content of its own.” She writes that “it is hard to dismiss the common sense view of things, here, that akratic ignorance is motivated – that recalcitrant interests can cause an all things considered judgment of what is best to be forgotten. That is, desire might still drag reason around by being the *cause* of its malfunction. Moreover, in the case of recalcitrant emotions as opposed to recalcitrant appetites, Aristotle seems to think the emotions themselves allied in certain ways with reason. The point comes up in a difficult passage at *Nicomachean ethics* VII.6. Aristotle is talking about akratic anger and how its expression is less morally objectionable than acting on akratic appetites. The gist of his argument is that emotions, in general, involve a constitutive cognitive content and a kind of reasoning that is not as clearly part of the content of appetite. [...] The implicit claim is that an emotion like anger, whether akratic or not, ‘partakes’ of reason in that it has cognitive content of its own. As we would put it, anger has as its reason and cause the belief or construal that we have been insulted.”¹² Now

¹² N. Sherman, *Is the ghost of Aristotle haunting Freud's house?*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J. J. Cleary, G. M. Gurtler S. J., vol. 16, Boston 2000, p. 65–66.

while it is clear that Sherman's emphasis is on the cognitive content of the emotions as opposed to the appetites, this essay argues that both necessarily include at least some degree of reason in their function. However, the way in which the two involve reason appears to be inversely related. That is, with regard to anger, reason first ascertains that a particular situation justifies an angry emotional response and thus the corresponding emotion ensues. Diego S. Garrocho Salcedo and others refer to this as *appraisal theory*, which "describes the emotions as conscious states which are the consequence of a value judgment that requires the collaboration of specific rational faculties. In this way, every emotion is composed of a judgment in which the individual evaluates a given circumstance as worthy of compassion, shame, or anger."¹³

In contrast, unlike the emotions, appetitive desire may be present without a particular existing object of desire, as is the case as presented by Aristotle in the second syllogism above where he writes that "the appetite for pleasure happens to be present."¹⁴ Nevertheless, reason, in cooperation with sense perception, must determine that a particular, concrete object is capable of satisfying a desire. If either of the two fail in their own particular tasks or in working together to determine conclusion (e) *This thing before us is pleasant*, appetitive desire would be incapable of overcoming the proper dictates of reason since it would not be capable of realizing its ends insofar as it would not recognize the present object as able to satisfy its desire. Reason, both with regard to anger as

¹³ D. S. Garrocho Salcedo, *La dimensión cognitiva de las pasiones: la vigencia de Aristóteles en la psicología moral contemporánea*, „Éndoxa: Series Filosóficas” 31 (2013), p. 17–18. In the original Spanish: “La teoría evaluativa (M. Arnold, R. Lazarus, N. Frijda) describe las emociones como estados de conciencia que son consecuencia de una estimación valorativa y que requieren, por ello, el concurso de disposiciones psíquicas específicamente racionales. De este modo, toda emoción quedaría constituida por un juicio en el que el individuo evalúa una circunstancia dada como digna de compasión, vergüenza o ira.”

¹⁴ It is entirely possible for an appetitive desire to arise through a corresponding awareness that an object is desirable. This would be analogous to the case described by Sherman concerning the emotions insofar as the desirable object gives rise to the appetitive desire. For example, a glutton may not experience the desire for food until he finds himself face to face with a cherry cheesecake, which awakes his appetite.

well as appetitive desire, must intervene through either the recognition that a particular situation calls for a certain impassioned response, or in acknowledgement that a particular object satisfies an existing appetitive desire. Accordingly, both the passions and appetitive desire require reason for their proper functioning.

4. The role of desire in Ἄκρασία

Concerning the problem of ἄκρασία, the question raised at the end of the first section sought to determine whether it was possible for reason to deny what desire seeks and yet fail to prevent that desire from resulting in action. The second example syllogism seemed to confirm that it is indeed possible for a man to deliberate the correct course of action and yet, because of desire, be led to act against his reason. In the second section the argument was advanced that desire plays an integral role in the deliberative reasoning process analogous to a universal or particular premise, thus affecting the concomitant conclusions. This seemed to imply that there might be a way in which desire is capable of dragging reason around like a slave, which then lead to a closer examination of the interaction between the two. There, a relationship was shown in which desire provided some of the raw elements used in the syllogism (e.g. “the appetite for pleasure happens to be present”) which helped reason reach its conclusions. Correspondingly, insofar as choice is the starting point for action and the starting point for choice is “desire and reasoning directed toward some end”, it appeared as though desire presents the ends to be pursued or avoided while reason ratifies them as good or bad.¹⁵

The problem of ἄκρασία, however, concerns the breakdown of this process in which reason rejects the goodness of a particular end while the soul is moved to act towards this end as a result of a present desire. Aristotle responds to this dilemma by arguing that the ἀκρατής acts like the man “asleep, mad, or drunk” inasmuch as he has knowledge, but that such knowledge is of no use to him. Again, like the student of geometry,

¹⁵ Cf. 1139a21-1139a30.

the *ἀκρατής* may give the impression that he knows a particular moral maxim (e.g. “adultery is wrong”) and yet act against it because his desires have rendered him unable to apply such knowledge to his particular situation. In this way, such a man may be said to “know” that certain actions are wrong while remaining ignorant of the fact that he is engaged in committing those very acts. John Cleary comments on this, asserting that, “When [Aristotle] addresses the problem of *akrasia* in EN VII, however, he is just as puzzled as was Socrates on being confronted with the common phenomenon of people who know the right thing to do, yet still do the wrong thing. Although Aristotle finds it disturbing that reason can be dragged around like a slave by the passions, yet (unlike Socrates) he admits that something like this may be happening within akratic souls whose irrational desires are governing their actions. It is not unqualified ignorance that is responsible for this but rather some kind of qualified or temporary ignorance caused by the passions blinding the rational part of the soul that normally governs actions within virtuous and self-controlled people.”¹⁶ Unlike the unqualified ignorance of the student of geometry who cannot apply his knowledge in any circumstance, the *ἀκρατής* is capable of applying his knowledge when he has not been overcome by his passions and unable to do so when he has. His ignorance must be qualified, therefore, with regard to the state of his passions and desires. Some, such as Devin Henry, refer to this kind of “qualified or temporary ignorance” as drunk *ἀκρασία* insofar as the knowledge of the *ἀκρατής* is of no use to him, like that of men “asleep, mad, or drunk.” This is in contrast with what he calls genuine *ἀκρασία* which occurs when the *ἀκρατής* knows not only that certain kinds of acts are wrong but that he is presently committing one of those acts. In no way, therefore, can the genuine *ἀκρατής* be said to be ignorant of what he does. Accordingly, Henry writes that “all forms of drunk-*akrasia*, then, can be accounted for in terms of an intellectual error, a failure to

¹⁶ *Studies on Plato, Aristotle, and Proclus: collected essays on ancient philosophy of John J. Cleary*, ed. by J. Dillon, B. O’Byrne, F. O’Rourke, Boston 2013, p. 131 [Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts, 15].

deliberate correctly as the result of culpable ignorance induced by passion (1147a1-b18; cf. *NE* 3.5). However, the same cannot be said for the genuinely akratic man. This agent acts in the presence of full knowledge; he knows in the unqualified sense that what he does is wrong and yet does it anyway. This is what makes genuine akrasia such a hard problem: it is not an intellectual error. The genuinely akratic man is not ignorant of the fact that his desires are wrong when he makes his decision to act on them, and so his failure is not knowledge based”.¹⁷ As a result, an account of genuine ἀκρασία may make no appeal to a failure of reason in its explanation since no such error could have occurred by the very definition of the problem. That is, what separates drunk ἀκρασία from genuine ἀκρασία is that the former may be seen as a result of intellectual error while the latter cannot. In genuine ἀκρασία the ἀκρατής not only correctly deliberates which course of action he ought to take, but also knows in an unqualified way that he acts against what his reason dictates.

Why, then, does the genuine ἀκρατής fail to follow right reason? Henry believes that because both the ἐνκρατής and the ἀκρατής reason correctly with regard to how they ought to behave, the solution to the problem must be found where the two differ, namely, in the corresponding pleasures and pains that each feel according to their actions. In support of this theory, Henry cites a passage from *Eudemian ethics* II: “For the person of self-control [the ἐνκρατής] feels pain now in acting against his appetite, but has the pleasure of hope, i.e. the hope that he will be presently benefited [by abstaining], or even the pleasure of actually being at present benefited because he is healthy. On the other hand, the akratic man is pleased at securing through his akratic behaviour the object of his desire, but he has the pain of expectation, thinking that what he is doing is wrong” (1224b15-17).¹⁸ Henry argues that the presence of the “pain of expectation” in this passage indicates that Aristotle is writing here about the genuine ἀκρατής and not the drunk ἀκρατής. This

¹⁷ D. Henry, *Aristotle on pleasure and the worst form of akrasia*, „Ethical Theory and Moral Practice” 5 (2002), p. 261.

¹⁸ As translated in D. Henry, *Aristotle on pleasure...*, op. cit., p. 265.

is because only the former whose reason is still functioning correctly is capable of recognizing that his present action is wrong and therefore ultimately harmful to him. Accordingly, while the drunk *ἀκρατής* and the *ἐνκρατής* differ in terms of their deliberative capacity (the former having become “temporarily ignorant”), there is no difference between the *ἐνκρατής* and the *ἀκρατής* in terms of their rational functioning when they act. Instead, what sets the two apart are the objects of their corresponding pleasure and pain. The former experiences the pleasure of virtuous activity insofar as he knows he will benefit from such action while the latter experiences the pleasure of appetite.¹⁹ On the one hand, what enables the *ἐνκρατής* to follow the course of action ratified by reason is the pleasure and corresponding desire for virtuous action. On the other hand, what prevents the *ἀκρατής* from following suit is his lack of desire for the virtue of temperance.

Hence the key to understanding genuine *ἀκρασία* lies precisely in the presence or absence of these pleasures and their corresponding desires: for the *ἐνκρατής*, it is the desire for the pleasures of being temperate whereas for the *ἀκρατής* it is the desire for corporeal pleasure. Because the *ἀκρατής* lacks the desire for the pleasures of a temperate lifestyle, he fails to follow what right reason has shown him to be to his best advantage (i.e. living the virtuous life). Therefore, “the reason the genuinely akratic man acts as he knows he should not is that he is *not* prevented from following his appetite by an internal conflict that the desire for the proper pleasure of temperance would create if he could experience it. In other words [...] because he does not experience an emotional pull towards the activity of temperance there is no opposing force to restrain him. This, then, is why after deliberating the genuinely akratic man fails to stand by his deliberation.”²⁰ Knowing how one ought to act (i.e. practical wisdom) is therefore only half of what one needs to live virtuously. One must also have the corresponding desire to live virtuously, which includes finding

¹⁹ For simplicity, I will ignore Henry’s treatment of pain since it is inconsequential to his overall argument.

²⁰ D. Henry, *Aristotle on pleasure...*, op. cit., p. 266.

pleasure in virtue, for as was noted earlier, “if the choice is to be good, the reasoning must be true and the desire correct.”

With Henry’s theory in view, the role played by desire in the practical syllogism becomes more discrete with the presence or absence of a particular desire as a key factor in the final premise. As already discussed, Aristotle’s inclusion of the clause “and suppose further that the appetite for pleasure happens to be present” gives some indication of the importance of desire in the conclusion of the syllogism. Examining the interaction between reason and desire makes it clear, then, that the two must work hand-in-glove in order to move the soul to act. Henry’s analysis of the pleasures of the *ἐνκρατής* and *ἀκρατής* makes the role of desire in action even more explicit by noting the significance of its presence or absence in the corresponding deliberation and actions of both the former and latter.

To conclude, it can be said that while reason is undoubtedly necessary for proper conduct, it must work in concert with desire in order to move the soul to act.²¹ To that end, Aristotle writes that “if the choice is to be good, the reasoning must be true and the desire correct; that is, reasoning must affirm what desire pursues.” Desire, then, produces the ends to which the soul is moved while reason ratifies those desires as either good or bad. The case of *ἀκρασία* demonstrates, however, that the pleasures and pains associated with particular desires have the capacity to enable or prevent one from following the dictates of right reason. Accordingly, the genuine *ἀκρατής* fails to abide by the conclusions of the practical syllogism because an “appetite for pleasure happens to be present” which produces its own, opposing conclusion. Therefore, while fully aware that his actions run counter to his deliberations, the genuine *ἀκρατής* nevertheless follows the conclusion reached as a consequence of his present appetite for pleasure. Correspondingly, it is only in cultivating the desire for the pleasures of virtue, “to like and to dislike what

²¹ Aristotle writes in *De Anima*, [in:] *Aristotle: the complete works. Electronic edition*, ed. by J. Barnes, Charlottesville 1992: “these two at all events appear to be sources of movement: appetite and thought” (433a13).

one should” (1172a22), that he can generate enough opposing force to his corporal desires, follow right reason, and be motivated to proper conduct.

Thus, in the final analysis, both the drunken and the genuine *ἀκρατής* can be held responsible for their failure to abide by the deliberations of reason insofar as they have each failed to cultivate a desire for the good. This failure can be understood as a kind of inadequate education in desire which leaves the *ἀκρατής* without the necessary desires functioning as universal premises in the practical syllogism which enable him to reach the emotional as well as rational conclusion to behave according to the deliberation of right reason. In this way, reason is crucial to the proper moral development of the person insofar as “virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and that it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it” (1106b35-37). Accordingly, an education in virtue is one that develops both a *ξίς* of mind *and* emotion, the former instructing and cultivating the proper disposition of the latter, both of which ultimately form the foundation of the intellectual and desiderative knowledge that serve as the universal premises of the practical syllogism. Therefore, to the extent that one is ignorant in either intellectual or desiderative knowledge, one will fail to do the right thing. However, only when one is ignorant of desiderative knowledge can it be said that one “knows” how he ought to behave and yet fails to do so. Finally, to the extent that a man’s desire forms an integral part of the premises of practical syllogism, Aristotle can agree with Socrates in maintaining that seemingly paradoxical claim that “no man voluntarily pursues evil.”

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