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## Two Varieties of *Akrasia*

### 1. Introduction

*Akrasia* is the Greek term for the human shortcoming often referred to as “weakness of will,” “moral weakness,” or “incontinence.”<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers, theologians, and psychologists over the centuries have offered analyses of how and why *akrasia* occurs, although these have often conflicted with one another in certain parts of their explanations and even regarding the definition of the phenomenon to be explained.<sup>2</sup> However, most attempts to analyze *akrasia* have agreed on at least the following core understanding:

An instance of *akrasia* can be said to occur when an agent honestly believes they should do some action identified by them as obligatory or best, but at the moment of action fails to follow through on this belief and instead does some alternative action which is motivated by desire, and the doing of which precludes doing the action that was previously identified as obligatory or best.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Weakness of will” is the most common translation of *akrasia*, although, strictly speaking, this can be anachronistic when referring to analyses of *akrasia* by the Ancient Greeks. The will is not clearly identified as a separate faculty of mind until after the period of classical Greek philosophy (see N.W. Gilbert, “The Concept of the Will in Early Latin Philosophy,” pp. 32). I avoid these issues by using “*akrasia*” throughout the paper instead of a specific English translation.

<sup>2</sup> This article will focus on a philosophical analysis of *akrasia*. For readers who wish to explore the psychological literature on the topic (usually referred to as self-control failure, self-regulation failure, or ego-depletion), I recommend: R. Baumeister and T. Heatherton, “Self-Regulation Failure: An Overview,” R. Baumeister, *et. al.*, “Ego Depletion: Is the Self a Limited Resource?,” A. Fishbach and J.Y. Shah, “Self-Control in Action: Implicit Dispositions Toward Goals and Away from Temptations,” W. Hofmann, *et. al.*, “Everyday Temptations: An Experience Sampling Study of Desire, Conflict, and Self-Control,” and A.C. Moller, *et. al.*, “Choice and Ego-Depletion: The Moderating Role of Autonomy.”

<sup>3</sup> One might add here the additional condition that the agent reverts to her ordinary belief after committing the akratic action, and thus comes to regret having done the action. The argument

Of course, we are left wondering why an agent would fail to follow through on a belief that she honestly holds and instead act in a contrary way. Almost all disagreement among scholars on the subject of *akrasia* centers on differences in how they explain this apparent conundrum. I will argue that there are two general types or varieties of *akrasia*, differentiated by the answers they each give regarding what transpires at the moment of action. Specifically, we will see that the crux of the difference lies in whether an agent does or does not retain access at the moment of action to their normal belief about what is obligatory or best.

## 2. General definition of *akrasia*

It will prove helpful to put the above account of *akrasia* into the form of a more structured definition. Let us begin by laying out the terms that will be utilized in this definition and throughout the remainder of this paper.

### Terms utilized:

A = human agent

$\alpha_o$  = obligatory action (*i.e.*, the action normally believed by the agent to be obligatory or best)<sup>4</sup>

$\alpha_f$  = faulty action (*i.e.*, the akratic action)<sup>5</sup>

${}^t\alpha_o$  = time at which obligatory action should be done (or should have been done)

${}^t\alpha_f$  = time at which faulty (akratic) action is done

Using these terms, an akratic action can be defined as one for which each of the following conditions obtain:

- (1) Prior to  ${}^t\alpha_f$ , A believes that A ought to do  $\alpha_o$  at  ${}^t\alpha_o$
- (2) A desires to do  $\alpha_f$ <sup>6</sup>
- (3) A's doing  $\alpha_f$  at  ${}^t\alpha_f$  entails A's not doing  $\alpha_o$  at  ${}^t\alpha_o$
- (4) A does  $\alpha_f$  at  ${}^t\alpha_f$
- (5) A's doing  $\alpha_f$  results from A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$

for adding this condition is that if the agent did *not* regret her action after the fact, then (according to Aristotle's classification of character states in Bk. VII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example) the agent might be thought to be in the grip of vice rather than *akrasia* (see, for example, *N.E.*, p. 1818). In this paper, however, our focus will be on analyzing what goes wrong up through the moment of action. Therefore, belief states of the agent after the commission of the akratic action (*e.g.*, those that support remorse or regret) will be omitted from our core definition.

<sup>4</sup> The term "obligatory" here is not to be understood as meaning "required of the agent by some outside person or entity," although it *may* be thus required, but rather as being normally understood by the agent himself or herself as being the correct or right thing to do.

<sup>5</sup> The term "faulty" is used here to mean generally understood *by the agent* to be wrong, less praiseworthy, or less desirable, than some action judged by the agent to be superior or obligatory ( $\alpha_o$ ).

<sup>6</sup> *N.B.*:  ${}^t\alpha_f$  may be the same as  ${}^t\alpha_o$ , although not necessarily so.

There is admittedly some ambiguity in terms of what exactly is meant by “prior to  $\alpha_f$ ,” and, unfortunately, the major historical treatments of *akrasia* do not do much to clear this up. Are we to understand “prior to  $\alpha_f$ ” to mean the seconds leading up to the akratic action? Minutes before? Hours or even days before? Most treatments avoid this issue by simply drawing a distinction between the beliefs that the agent holds most of the time and the beliefs that they hold at the instant in time wherein they commit the akratic action. Although not highly precise, this may be as precise as we need to be and as precise as the psychological phenomena involved will allow.

Although one can imagine an agent succumbing to *akrasia* only once in a long while, it is often the case that akratic action forms a repeating pattern. That is why, for example, Aristotle treats it as a character state in the same way that virtue and vice are character states, being a relatively stable and predictable disposition or inclination to act in certain ways. Our concern here is with what brings about an individual akratic action, but it should also be remembered that, unfortunately, what happens in one instance is likely to repeat itself, thus often magnifying the overall detrimental effects of *akrasia* for both the individual and society.

Now that we have set out the general definition, let us turn to the issue of how *akrasia* occurs in human agents.

### 3. Two types of *akrasia*

The central philosophical question is what happens at the time of action such that A does  $\alpha_f$  instead of  $\alpha_o$ . In other words, why does the agent deviate from what they normally hold to be obligatory or best and instead do a contrary and incompatible action? I argue that there are two types or categories of answer that can be given.<sup>7</sup>

The first type of answer is that, at the moment of action, A experiences some sort of *failure of belief* such that they momentarily come to regard  $\alpha_f$  as acceptable or, indeed, even as being the best action to perform. Several variations on this type of answer have been proposed by philosophers, differing from each other primarily in terms of what exactly is said to cause the failure of the agent’s normal belief at  $\alpha_f$ . The analyses given by Socrates (470-399 B.C.) in several of Plato’s dialogues and by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) rely on the failure of belief.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, I will take the liberty of calling this first type of an-

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<sup>7</sup> The present author introduced and argued for the idea of there being two general types of *akrasia* in his 2006 book *Understanding Moral Weakness* (Amsterdam: Rodopi). To my knowledge, all prior analyses assumed that *akrasia* was a unitary phenomenon, such that one explanation or model would cover all instances if that correct explanation or model could be found.

<sup>8</sup> Plato’s main treatment of *akrasia* is in the dialogue *Protagoras*. Therein Socrates denies the existence of the phenomenon if it is understood as acting against knowledge (for commentary, see E.J. Lemmon, “Moral Dilemmas,” p. 144, and T.M. Penner, “Socrates on the

swer “Greek *akrasia*,” without asserting categorically that all Ancient Greek thinkers agreed with it.

The second possibility is that, at the moment of action, the agent's normal belief structure remains unaltered, but rather they experience a failure at the level of another mental faculty, namely a *failure of will*. In this case, A retains the belief, even at the moment of action, that  $\alpha_o$  is a superior option overall to  $\alpha_f$ , and yet wills to do  $\alpha_f$  anyway. I will call explanations of this second type “Augustinian *akrasia*,” since St. Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) focused centrally on the role of the will in either committing an akratic action or resisting the desire to do so.

The most memorable example that Augustine gives of such failure at the level of will is to be found in the famous story in his autobiographical *Confessions* of how in his youth he participated in stealing a load of pears from a neighbor's tree. Tellingly, he says that it was the very wickedness of the act that made it delightful for him, suggesting that he knew full well at the moment of action that the theft was wrong or “wicked.” In other words, as Augustine recalls it, his belief that such theft was wrong was not clouded or otherwise obscured by desire, but rather was clearly present to his mind even as he participated in the theft.<sup>9</sup> He attributes this moral failure to his will being crooked or bent by sin, such that he could desire to do moral wrong even as he was fully cognizant that it *was* wrong, and indeed to desire it even more *because* it was wrong.

In summary, it can be said that in Greek *akrasia* there is a failure of belief, whereas in Augustinian *akrasia* there is a failure of will. Each of these two possibilities calls for further analysis. I will first consider Greek *akrasia*.

### Definition of Greek *akrasia*

For a human agent A, an action  $\alpha_f$  is Greek-akratic just in case the following conditions obtain:<sup>10</sup>

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Strength of Knowledge,” p. 128). Socrates holds that true knowledge is impervious to any sort of weakness or faltering and thus would always be a reliable stalwart against *akrasia*. However, he then proceeds to give an analysis of how it is possible to act against even strongly held true belief that falls short of knowledge. This analysis is what interests us here. Socrates’ discussion of the parts of the soul and the interplay between them in Plato’s *Republic* also has implications for understanding *akrasia* in terms of desire overcoming one’s ordinary beliefs and commitments at the moment of action. Aristotle’s main treatment of *akrasia* is in Book VII of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Therein he discusses *akrasia* both in terms of how it relates to other character states such as virtue, moral strength, and vice, and explains how failure of belief occurs at the moment of action by utilizing what he calls the “practical syllogism,” a model for reasoning that concludes in action rather than simply in propositional belief.

<sup>9</sup> See Augustine’s *Confessions*, 2/e. Hackett, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> These conditions are here presented in the temporal sequence in which they would occur, taking us from times prior to the akratic action until the moment of the commission of the action itself ( $\alpha_f$ ).

- (1) Prior to  $\alpha_f$ , A believes that they ought to do  $\alpha_o$
- (2) A desires to do  $\alpha_f$
- (3) A's doing  $\alpha_f$  at  $\alpha_f$  entails A's not doing  $\alpha_o$  at  $\alpha_o$
- (4) At  $\alpha_f$ , A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  causes A ...  
 to generate the belief that doing  $\alpha_o$  is not obligatory or best after all  
 OR  
 to generate the false belief that doing  $\alpha_f$  does not in fact entail not doing  $\alpha_o$   
 OR  
 to shut off access to the belief that A ought to do  $\alpha_o$ , thus allowing for the belief that A is free to  
 do  $\alpha_f$
- (5) A does  $\alpha_f$  at  $\alpha_f$

Step (4) is the crux of the matter, where something goes wrong, even if only momentarily, with A's beliefs or access thereto. As indicated, one thing that could go wrong is that, at  $\alpha_f$ , A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  causes A to generate the belief that doing  $\alpha_o$  is not obligatory or best after all. A second possibility is that at  $\alpha_f$ , A retains the belief and access thereto that doing  $\alpha_o$  is obligatory, but A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  causes A to generate the additional, false belief that doing  $\alpha_f$  does not in fact entail not doing  $\alpha_o$ . In this case A thinks momentarily and incorrectly that they can somehow manage to do both  $\alpha_o$  and  $\alpha_f$ .<sup>11</sup>

A further possibility is that A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  can lead at  $\alpha_f$  to A momentarily suppressing or shutting off mental access to their belief that they ought to do  $\alpha_o$ .<sup>12</sup> This allows A to act on their desire to do  $\alpha_f$  without the restraint that might otherwise follow from the presence of the belief that they ought to do  $\alpha_o$  instead. This is essentially the analysis of *akrasia* given by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he introduces what he calls the "practical syllogism," a model for reasoning that results directly in action rather than simply in propositional belief as is the case with the syllogistic reasoning that he discusses in his works on logic.<sup>13</sup> According to Aristotle, what occurs in the akratic moment  $\alpha_f$  is that the sequence of reasoning that would ordinarily culminate in A doing  $\alpha_o$  is cut off midstream, such that the conclusion of that practical syllogism is never reached. Meanwhile, the alternative practical syllogism which

<sup>11</sup> These two explanations of what might go wrong are considered by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras* (see 345d-e, 352c, and 358c-d). For analysis of Plato's position on what goes wrong at the moment of action, see A.R. Mele, "Socratic Akritic Action," p. 149, T.M. Penner, "Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge: *Protagoras* 351b-357e," p. 128, J. Gosling, *Weakness of the Will*, p. 149, and T.M. Penner, "Knowledge vs. True Belief in the Socratic Psychology of Action," p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> See J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 94, J.J. Walsh, *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness*, p. 157, and D.S. Hutchinson, "Ethics," pp. 216-217.

<sup>13</sup> See G.E.M. Anscombe, "Thought and Action in Aristotle," p. 154, R.D. Milo, *Aristotle on Practical Knowledge and Weakness of Will*, p.47, and J.M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, p. 46.

culminates in the akratic action  $\alpha_f$  readily steps in to fill the void and can progress through to its conclusion, which is simply the doing of the akratic action.<sup>14</sup>

Over fifteen centuries later, St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-1274) adopted the outline of Aristotle's analysis of *akrasia* but put more emphasis on the role of the agent's mental states, desires, and choices leading up to the moment of action, such that the victory of the akratic syllogism over the morally correct syllogism appears less automatic and mechanical than it does in Aristotle's treatment.<sup>15</sup> According to Aquinas, in the lead up to  $\alpha_f$ , A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  intensifies to the point that all or almost all attention is focused on  $\alpha_f$  and little or no attention resource remains to focus on  $\alpha_o$ . On this account, the agent's culpability for performing the akratic action centers primarily on her allowing desire to intensify to the point where almost all attention is focused on thoughts of the akratic action and its attendant satisfaction. Although A's ability to resist doing  $\alpha_f$  may be greatly diminished at the moment of action, A remains culpable for the action because of A's failure to take appropriate steps to intervene at times prior to  $\alpha_f$ , when effective intervention would have been possible.<sup>16</sup> Failure of will plays a role on Aquinas's analysis, but mainly in terms of allowing desire to increase to the point where it overwhelms one's ordinary judgment and thought processes instead of taking steps to dampen desire before it reaches such intensity.<sup>17</sup>

Let us now turn to the second major type of explanation, namely that which says that *akrasia* is due to a *failure of will* at the moment of action, rather than a failure at the level of beliefs. As indicated above, I refer to this as "Augustinian *akrasia*."

### Definition of Augustinian *akrasia*

For a human agent A, an action  $\alpha_f$  is Augustinian-akratic just in case the following conditions obtain:

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of what goes wrong with the practical syllogism at the moment of action, see A. Kenny, "The Practical Syllogism and Incontinence," p. 176n, J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 94, and R.D. Milo, *Aristotle on Practical Knowledge and Weakness of Will*, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Reilly, "Weakness of the Will: The Thomistic Advance," p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> For further analysis of Aquinas on *akrasia*, see: E. Stump, "Aquinas' Account of Freedom: Intellect and Will," Kretzmann, Norman, "Warring Against the Law of My Mind: Aquinas on Romans 7," G.T. Colvert, "Aquinas on Raising Cain: Vice, Incontinence, and Responsibility," J.A. Barad, "Aquinas' Assent/Consent Distinction and the Problem of Akrasia," T.D. Stegman, "Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Akrasia," and J. Castiello, "The Psychology of Habit in St. Thomas Aquinas."

<sup>17</sup> The sections of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* that are most relevant to the discussion of *akrasia* are: IaIIae, Vol. 17, Questions 6, 10, and 13, and IaIIae, Vol. 25, Questions 74-77.

- (1) Prior to  $\alpha_f$ , A believes that A ought to do  $\alpha_o$
- (2) A desires to do  $\alpha_f$
- (3) At  $\alpha_f$ , A believes that doing  $\alpha_f$  at  $\alpha_f$  entails her not doing  $\alpha_o$  at  $\alpha_o$
- (4) At  $\alpha_f$ , A's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  overrides A's desire to do  $\alpha_o$
- (5) A wills to do  $\alpha_f$  at  $\alpha_f$

Observe that conditions (1) and (2) are the same as in the definition of Greek *akrasia*. The difference between Greek *akrasia* and Augustinian *akrasia* is seen in conditions (3), (4) and (5). In Augustinian *akrasia*, at the moment of akratic action itself ( $\alpha_f$ ), the agent maintains her belief in (and perhaps even knowledge of) the moral superiority of  $\alpha_o$  over  $\alpha_f$  and her cognizance that doing  $\alpha_f$  entails her not doing  $\alpha_o$ , and yet she wills to do  $\alpha_f$  anyway.<sup>18</sup> Contrast this with condition (4) of Greek *akrasia* above, where the agent's desire to do  $\alpha_f$  results in a temporary faltering or obscuration at  $\alpha_f$  of her normal belief structure. Thus, one might argue that a greater degree of irrationality is involved in cases of Augustinian *akrasia* than in instances of Greek *akrasia*. Although both varieties involve degrees of irrationality, it seems intuitively correct to hold that it is more irrational to believe at the moment of action that you should do otherwise than you are doing than it is to allow desire to obscure or distort your ordinary beliefs at the moment of action.

Note that Greek *akrasia* and Augustinian *akrasia* are mutually exclusive regarding any one specific instance. At  $\alpha_f$  either one's desire disrupts one's ordinary belief that  $\alpha_o$  should be done instead of  $\alpha_f$ , in which case one has an instance of Greek *akrasia*, or one maintains one's belief that  $\alpha_o$  is superior, all things considered, to  $\alpha_f$  and yet wills to do  $\alpha_f$  anyway, in which case one has an instance of Augustinian *akrasia*. Importantly, this allows that some actions that satisfy the general definition of *akrasia* stated in Section 2 above will also satisfy the more specific definition of Greek *akrasia*, while other instances that satisfy the general definition will also satisfy the more specific definition of Augustinian *akrasia*, but no one instance will satisfy both specific definitions. Furthermore, each action that conforms to the general definition of *akrasia* must be either Greek-akratic or Augustinian-akratic, since the agent must either be aware or not aware at the precise moment of akratic action ( $\alpha_f$ ) that the action is faulty, inferior, or evil.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For further analysis of what goes amiss in instances of Augustinian *Akrasia*, see: M. Falls-Corbitt, "Plato and Augustine on Doing Wrong Knowingly," N.W. Gilbert, "The Concept of Will in Early Latin Philosophy," A.A. Pang-White, "Augustine, Akrasia, and Manichaeism," and R. Saarinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought*.

<sup>19</sup> If the agent is not aware at the precise moment of action that their action is faulty, this is, as we have seen in our discussion of Greek *akrasia*, due to some factor suppressing or otherwise interfering with the agent's usual judgment regarding the relative worth of the akratic action vs. the action that the agent normally takes to be best or obligatory.

## 4. Conclusion

*Akrasia* has negatively impacted countless lives throughout the ages and has had an overall negative effect on society. It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been a sustained philosophical literature on the topic, as well as a growing number of empirical studies in psychology and illustrations of the phenomenon in history and in fiction. The central question is what goes wrong at the moment of action such that a person acts against their ordinary best judgment regarding what they ought to do. In this paper, I have argued that this can occur due either to a failure of belief or a failure of will. Both involve desire, although in different ways. In the case of failure of belief, which I have referred to as “Greek *akrasia*,” desire obscures or distorts one’s normal beliefs about what action is best to perform. In cases involving failure of will, which I have called “Augustinian *akrasia*,” one’s normal belief about what action is best to perform is retained at the moment of action, and yet one’s desire leads one to will to act against this clearly held belief. Taken together, the analyses of the two varieties of *akrasia* provide some insight into how a seemingly irrational action can occur. The next question that needs to be addressed is what, if anything, can be done to build fortitude against acting akratically. That question is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the above analysis of the types of failure that occur at the moment of action sets a foundation for building approaches to decreasing the occurrence of *akrasia* and thus mitigating its harmful effects.

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### Summary

*Akrasia* or “moral weakness” involves acting contrary to what one normally believes to be the best or right course of action. I begin by offering a general definition of *akrasia* to cover all instances of the phenomenon. I then argue that there are two varieties of *akrasia* that fall under this general definition. The first, which I call “Greek *akrasia*,” involves a failure of belief at the moment of action, whereas the second, which I call “Augustinian *akrasia*,” involves a failure of will. The crux of the matter is whether one maintains one’s ordinary belief about the right thing to do at the moment of action and yet wills to act contrary to that belief, or whether one’s beliefs shift around such that they are obscured or misconstrued at the moment of action.

**Keywords:** *Akrasia*, weakness of will, moral weakness, Greek *akrasia*, Augustinian *akrasia*, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas.

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