

Aristotle on the Structure of Akratic Action

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Abstract

I argue that, for Aristotle, akratic actions are against one's general commitment to act in accordance with one's correct conception of one's ends overall. Only some akratic actions are also against one's correct decision to perform a particular action. This thesis explains Aristotle's views on impetuous *akrasia*, weak *akrasia*, stubborn opinionated action and inverse *akrasia*. In addition, it sheds light on Aristotle's account of practical rationality. Rational actions are coherent primarily with one's commitments to one's conception of the good and only secondarily with one's decisions to perform a particular action.

Keywords

Aristotle; *akrasia*; ends; *prohairesis*; practical rationality

1. Introduction

Akratic action is a puzzling and philosophically enticing phenomenon in part because it is hard to capture its fundamental structure. According to some, akratic actions are actions against one's best judgement.¹ According to others, they are actions against one's knowledge and according to others still they are actions against one's intentions.² For Aristotle, akratic actions are against the agent's correct *prohairesis* (*NE* 3.2, 1111b13-15; *NE* 7.8, 1151a5-7; *NE* 7.8, 1151a29-33).³ Most interpreters take this to mean that akratic actions go against one's decision to perform a particular action.⁴ The paradigmatic Aristotelian akratic decides to abstain from a tasty dessert – yet she eats it.

¹ Davidson 1980.

² For the former, see e.g. the reconstruction of Aristotle's view in Wiggins 1978, for the latter see Holton 1999.

³ I leave '*prohairesis*' untranslated throughout the paper, as my main thesis is that '*prohairesis*' can be used narrowly to capture a decision to perform a particular action and also broadly to capture the agent's commitment to act on her conception of her ends overall. I use the term 'choice' to refer to decisions that are not *prohairesis* (narrowly or broadly understood).

⁴ See Irwin 1986; Wiggins 1978, 264; Davidson 1980, 25 n. 7; more recently Müller 2015a.

In this paper, I challenge this interpretation. I argue that *akrasia* is characteristically against one's general commitment to act on one's conception of one's ends overall. My starting point is the distinction between weak *akrasia* and impetuous *akrasia* (*propeteia* and *astheneia*, NE 7.7, 1150b18-28).⁵ I begin by showing that impetuous akratics do not form a decision to perform a particular action (NE 7.8, 1150b19-23). I argue that Aristotle nonetheless describes impetuous akratics as acting against a *prohairesis*, because he employs a broad notion of *prohairesis*. This notion captures the agent's commitment to act on her conception of her ends even when this commitment does not issue in a decision to perform a particular action. Impetuous akratics act against their commitment to abide by a conception of their ends overall. Weak akratics also act against a commitment of this sort, but through deliberation they turn it into a decision to perform a particular action.

In the second and third section, I turn to stubborn opinionated action and inverse *akrasia*. In general, stubborn people are similar to enkratic people because they stick to their beliefs. Stubborn opinionated people (*idiognōmones*), however, are more similar to akratics than enkratics (NE 7.9, 1151b5-16). The thesis that *akrasia* is characteristically against one's commitment to act on one's conception of the end explains why this is the case. Stubborn opinionated people are as irrational as akratic people because they act against their commitment to their conception of the good and the end.

Related considerations explain Aristotle's account of inverse *akrasia*. The paradigmatic example of inverse *akrasia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the tragic hero Neoptolemus (NE 7.9, 1151b18-22). I argue that Neoptolemus acts against a choice to lie that is not a *prohairesis*. However, his action is in accordance with his commitment to act on his conception of his ends. He is not an akratic both because his action is good and because he acts in accordance with his commitment to the ends he correctly endorses as good.

This analysis of the fundamental structure of akratic action captures the requirement of practical rationality that *akrasia* violates. On this view, practical rationality is primarily characterised by the coherence between one's actions and one's commitment to act on one's conception of one's ends overall. Acting in accordance with a decision to perform a particular action matters for practical rationality because it is a consequence of this broader kind of coherence. Hence, stubborn opinionated people act irrationally (i.e.

⁵ Aristotle also distinguishes between *akrasia* with respect to spirit and *akrasia* with respect to appetitive desire (NE 7.6, 1149a24-b2) and between *akrasia* with respect to intemperate pleasures and *akrasia* with respect to other pleasures (NE 7.4). Here I only consider impetuous and weak *akrasia* because my aim is to elucidate the relationship between akratic action and *prohairesis*. My analysis, if correct, may be used to shed light on the reason why *akrasia* with respect to spirit follows reason more than *akrasia* with respect to appetitive desire. It may be the case, for example, that *akrasia* with respect to spirit is more coherent with the agent's commitment to her overall conception of her ends, and hence less irrational. Developing this point is beyond the scope of this paper: see Pearson 2011.

against their commitment to a conception of the good) even if they stick to their beliefs and to old choices they ought to revise. Similarly, it is more rational (i.e. more in accordance with one's commitment to act on one's conception of one's ends) for some inverse akratics to act against a misleading choice than in accordance with it.

2. Impetuous Akratics

At *NE* 3.3, 1113a10-11, Aristotle describes *prohairesis* as a deliberative desire for things that are up to us.⁶ It is preceded by deliberation (*bouleusis*) because one forms a *prohairesis* to do the things that promote one's end (*ta pros to telos*) on the basis of deliberation (*NE* 3.3, 1113a1-15). Ends are the first principles and the starting points of ethical deliberation (*EE* 2.10, 1227a5-12; 2.11, 1227b23-33; *NE* 7.8, 1151a15-19). Ends are also the objects of one's rational wishes (*boulēseis*, *NE* 3.4, 1113b3-5). Each agent presupposes her ends to be good in some sense, either because she judges them to be so or because they merely appear good to her (*NE* 3.4, 1113a23-b2). Hence, *prohairesis* to perform a particular action that promotes one's ends are formed through deliberation from one's wishes and one's presuppositions about the end. Sometimes one forms choices to act in a certain way by deliberating about how to fulfil one's non-rational appetites. These choices, however, are not *prohairesis*, because they do not derive from a rational desire based on the agent's conception of her ends. Hence, akratics never act on a *prohairesis* even though sometimes they deliberate about how to fulfil their non-rational desires and act on the result of these deliberations (*NE* 6.9, 1142b18-20; 7.3, 1147a30-5; 7.6, 1149a24-b2; 1149b14-20).⁷

Aristotle recognises that there is a close relationship between *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, presuppositions about ends and wishes, but he also insists that they are distinct. We wish to be healthy, but we do not form a *prohairesis* to be healthy. Rather, we form a *prohairesis* to do things that make us healthy, like going for a walk, or eating light food (*NE* 3.2, 1111b29-30). The account is similar in the *EE*, where the end is not the object of a *prohairesis*, but of wish and opinion (*EE* 2.10, 1226a10-19). Thus, *prohairesis* to perform a particular action are neither opinions about one's ends nor wishes, even though they result from them (*EE* 2.10, 1226b2-3).⁸

⁶ As I argue below, *prohairesis* is not always used in this way.

⁷ For this account of *prohairesis* see Irwin 1988, 598 n. 22; McDowell 1980, 361; Anscombe 2012 *contra* Charles 1984, 154-5 and Pearson 2012, 167.

⁸ The close link between wish and *prohairesis* has led Burnet to think that wish is a constituent of *prohairesis* in his Burnet 1900, 132. For a critique see Mele 1984, 152-5. Cooper 1975, 46-56 and Sorabji 1973, 107-12 have taken these passages to suggest that the objects of *prohairesis* are general policies and goals, not particular acts. These views, however, struggle to account for Aristotle's distinction between *prohairesis* and wish. Furthermore, they struggle to make sense of the fact that *prohairesis* is the proximate cause of particular actions (see *NE* 6.2, 1139a31 and Charles 1984, 139-40). The view that *prohairesis* are for general policies does not solve the problem created by impetuous *akrasia* I set out below. The impetuous akratic

Although *prohairesis* to perform a particular action and presuppositions about ends are not the same thing, the former depend on the latter. *Prohairesis*, as Aristotle puts it at *EE* 2.11, 1227b36-7, is always of something for the sake of something. It refers back to the decider's conception of her ends and to the decider's wishes for her ends, which is why it reveals the nature of her character (*Rhet.* 1.8, 1366a14-16). If you form a *prohairesis* to take your friend to the hospital in order to help her, your *prohairesis* reveals your goals and your character disposition. If it were made for the sake of having a day off work, the *prohairesis* would not be the same and it would be indicative of a very different character.

Since *prohairesis* are character revealing, they cannot go against the grain of the agent's character. A plausible explanation for this view is that *prohairesis* depend on the agent's conception of the good and the end overall. This thesis finds support in Aristotle's view that *prohairesis* require a character state (*NE* 6.2, 1139a30-b4) and are for the sake of acting well:

Acting well is the goal, and desire is for the goal. That is why *prohairesis* is either understanding combined with desire or desire combined with thought; and this is the sort of principle that a human being is.⁹

This passage implies that the goal a *prohairesis* refers back to is not any old goal, but it is acting well.¹⁰ Acting well, as we know from *NE* 1.2, 1095a19-20, is commonly equated with happiness or *eudaimonia*: one's conception of acting well is one's conception of happiness, or one's conception of the good overall. On this view, *prohairesis* depend on the agent's conception of the good overall, which is in turn constituted by her rational wishes. This does not necessarily mean that each *prohairesis* is formed with the end of acting well explicitly in view, for the conception of one's good overall may be merely implicit in deliberation.¹¹ However, it does mean that *prohairesis* cannot refer back to mere momentary appetitive desires or even to rational desires that are not constitutive of one's conception of the good overall. Hence, *prohairesis* are indicative of character,

does not deliberate, hence she forms neither a deliberated *prohairesis* to perform a particular action nor a deliberated *prohairesis* to follow a policy.

⁹ *NE* 6.2, 1139b1-5: ἡ γὰρ εὐπραξία τέλος, ἢ δ' ὄρεξις τούτου. διὸ ἢ ὀρεκτικὸς νοῦς ἢ προαίρεσις ἢ ὄρεξις διανοητική, καὶ ἡ τοιαύτη ἀρχὴ ἄνθρωπος. This, and all translations of *NE* in this paper, are based on Irwin 1999.

¹⁰ This view is originally defended in Anscombe 1965, 147 and it is endorsed, with some modifications, by Mele 1984, 143-6; Cooper 1975, 47-8, n. 59; McDowell 1980, 361. Pearson 2012, 167 objects to this interpretation, but the objection relies on the thesis that inverse akratics act against a *prohairesis*. I argue against this view in the last section.

¹¹ See Mele 1984, 143.

because one cannot form a *prohairesis* that is against one's conception of the good overall or 'out of character'.

With this account of *prohairesis* in mind, we can set out to look at the structure of *akrasia*. For Aristotle, akratic agents act against their *prohairesis* (*para tēn prohairesin*, NE 7.8, 1151a5-7, 29-33). In some cases, the description of the akratic's behaviour suggests that she acts against the *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. For example, the gluttonous akratic forms the *prohairesis* to avoid a particular sweet and nevertheless eats it (NE 7.3, 1147a34). However, Aristotle's description of impetuous *akrasia* (*propeteia*) gives us reason to doubt that this account extends to all forms of *akrasia*:

One type of *akrasia* is impetuosity, while another is weakness. For weak people, having deliberated, do not stick to what they deliberated, because of their affection; but impetuous people are led on by their affection because they have not deliberated. For some people are like those who do not get tickled themselves if they tickled someone else first; so if they see and notice something in advance, and rouse themselves and their rational calculation, they are not overcome by their affection, no matter whether it is pleasant or painful. Quick-tempered and melancholic people are most prone to be impetuous akratics. For in quick-tempered people the affection is so fast, and in melancholic people so intense, that they do not wait for reason, because they tend to follow *phantasia*.¹²

In this passage, impetuous akratics are contrasted with weak akratics. Impetuous people follow their non-rational desires and emotions without deliberating. They do not wait for deliberation and they act straight away because their appetites are intense and fast to arise. Since a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action is preceded by deliberation and impetuous akratics do not deliberate, it seems plausible to assume that they do not act against a *prohairesis* of this kind. Hence, acting against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action is not a necessary condition for *akrasia*.

In order to avoid this consequence, interpreters have taken a different perspective on this passage. For example, according to Heda Segvic, impetuous people act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action even if Aristotle says that they do not deliberate.¹³ On this view, the discussion of impetuous *akrasia* employs a non-

¹² NE 7.7, 1150b18-28: ἀκρασίας δὲ τὸ μὲν προπέτεια τὸ δ' ἀσθένεια. οἱ μὲν γὰρ βουλευσάμενοι οὐκ ἐμμένουσιν οἷς ἐβουλεύσαντο διὰ τὸ πάθος, οἱ δὲ διὰ τὸ μὴ βουλεύσασθαι ἄγονται ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους· ἔνιοι γάρ, ὥσπερ προγαργαλίσαντες οὐ γαργαλίζονται, οὕτω καὶ προαισθόμενοι καὶ προϊδόντες καὶ προεγείραντες ἑαυτοὺς καὶ τὸν λογισμὸν οὐχ ἠττῶνται ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους, οὐτ' ἂν ἦδὲ ἢ οὐτ' ἂν λυπηρόν. μάλιστα δ' οἱ ὄξεις καὶ μελαγχολικοὶ τὴν προπετὴ ἀκρασίαν εἰσὶν ἀκρατεῖς· οἱ μὲν γὰρ διὰ τὴν ταχυτῆτα οἱ δὲ διὰ τὴν σφοδρότητα οὐκ ἀναμένουσι τὸν λόγον, διὰ τὸ ἀκολουθητικοὶ εἶναι τῆ φαντασίᾳ.

¹³ Segvic 2011, 160-8.

technical notion of deliberation, one that is meant to capture solely the explicit rational calculation of the consequences of one's action. Aristotle's technical account of deliberation, however, is wider in scope. It involves other kinds of explicit rational redirecting of one's desires, for example the kind of redirecting that follows the re-assessment of one's goals. Hence, the impetuous akratic can count as acting against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action even if she does not reflectively assess the consequences of her actions and she merely re-evaluates her goals. Colloquially one might say that she has not deliberated. However, a closer and more technical analysis shows that some deliberating has occurred.

Segvic's account of the nature of technical deliberation is in its own right persuasive. However, the thesis that Aristotle has in mind a non-technical account of deliberation in his discussion of impetuous *akrasia* is not plausible. The account of impetuous *akrasia* comes right after a careful comparison and contrast between *akrasia* and vice and it precedes a technical analysis of stubbornness and inverse *akrasia*. Throughout the discussion, we find theory-laden terms such as *prohairesis*, right reason (*orthos logos*) and the technical term for deliberation (*bouleusis*). It would be odd and confusing if Aristotle switched without warning from a non-technical account of deliberation to a technical account of vice, virtue, *enkrateia*, *akrasia* and *prohairesis*. In addition, there seem to be no other instances in the Aristotelian corpus of this non-technical account of deliberation.¹⁴

A different interpretation, defended by Terry Irwin, suggests that impetuous akratics reach a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action in advance and not just before action. For example, before going to a party, impetuous akratics deliberate and decide to avoid the unhealthy cakes that will be on offer. However, when they get to the party and see an unhealthy piece of cake, they eat it straight away without pausing to deliberate again. Like weak akratics, impetuous akratics act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Unlike weak akratics, impetuous akratics make this *prohairesis* way in advance, not just before action.¹⁵

This interpretation is difficult to defend. It is implausible to assume that all impetuous akratics have deliberated and decided against pursuing each and every unhealthy pleasure that they might encounter in the future. Presumably, some of the temptations they succumb to are such that they have not foreseen them in advance. Perhaps this unpalatable consequence can be avoided, for impetuous akratics need not form a series of *prohairesis* to perform particular actions in advance. Their correct wishes, their correct presuppositions about their ends and a correct deliberation may lead them to a *prohairesis* that matters beyond the circumstances in which it was formed. For

¹⁴ My own solution to the problem relies on a broader notion of *prohairesis*. This solution, unlike Segvic's, is however justified on the basis of the use of a broader notion of *prohairesis* elsewhere in the corpus.

¹⁵ See Irwin 1989, 59; Irwin 1999, 294.

example, it is sufficient for them to wish to be healthy and to form in advance a *prohairesis* to avoid unhealthy sweets. They do not need to foresee the exact circumstances in which they will be tempted by unhealthy pleasures. Even this version of the view, however, seems to misconstrue some characteristics of impetuous *akrasia*. Aristotle argues that some people avoid *akrasia* by rousing themselves and their rational calculation in advance (*proaisthanomai*, *prooraō*, *progeirō*, see *NE* 7.7, 1150b18-28, quoted above). These people are *contrasted* with impetuous (and weak) akratics, which suggests that impetuous akratics do not deliberate and form a *prohairesis* in advance.

Another possibility is to argue that impetuous akratics count as acting against their *prohairesis* to perform a particular action even if they do not deliberate. They form a *prohairesis* that is backed up by a hypothetical or counterfactual deliberation.¹⁶ On this view, a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action may present itself as an answer to a practical problem even if one has not taken the time to deliberate. This *prohairesis* counts as a deliberative desire because one is able, *ex post*, to reconstruct the steps of the deliberative process that would have led to it.

This interpretation, however, is as problematic as the previous ones. Aristotle's description of impetuous akratics does not suggest in any way that the correct *prohairesis* presents itself to them as the obvious solution to a practical problem without the need for deliberation. Impetuous akratics are not in the position to identify immediately the correct course of action, because they are overcome by blinding passions.

In addition, both in the *Eudemian Ethics* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the deliberation that precedes a *prohairesis* is explicit and time consuming, rather than hypothetical and reconstructed *ex post*: at *NE* 5.8, 1135b19-25, sudden unjust acts prompted by anger are not from a *prohairesis*; at *EE* 2.8, 1224a4, Aristotle states that nobody forms a *prohairesis* to perform sudden acts, although sudden acts might come from wishes.

Elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle may be taken to imply that some *prohairesis* to perform particular actions are (exceptionally) not deliberated:

That is why someone who is unafraid and unperturbed in sudden alarms seems braver than [someone who is unafraid] in foreseen alarms; for his action proceeds more from his state of character because it proceeds less from preparation. One might decide on foreseen actions by reason and rational calculation; but sudden actions [one decides on / are] in accord with one's state of character.¹⁷

¹⁶ This interpretation can be developed on the basis of some reconstructions of Aristotle's account of deliberation and decision, see e.g. Cooper 1975, 7-10 and Broadie 1991, 118-19 n. 11.

¹⁷ *NE* 3.8, 1117a17-22: διὸ καὶ ἀνδρειοτέρου δοκεῖ εἶναι τὸ ἐν τοῖς αἰφνιδίοις φόβοις ἄφοβον καὶ ἀτάραχον εἶναι ἢ ἐν τοῖς προδήλοις· ἀπὸ ἕξεως γὰρ μᾶλλον ἦν, ὅτι ἦττον ἐκ παρασκευῆς· τὰ προφανῆ μὲν γὰρ κἂν ἐκ λογισμοῦ καὶ λόγου τις προέλοιτο, τὰ δ' ἐξαίφνης κατὰ τὴν ἕξιν.

Aristotle argues that foreseen actions are decided upon (*proelito*, from *probaireomai*) on the basis of reasoning. Hence, they are based on a *probairesis*. Then he adds that sudden actions are in accordance with one's character, implying that one does not deliberate about them. He does not specify whether or not one forms a *probairesis* to perform a sudden action. For this reason, the passage may be taken to imply that sudden actions are in accordance with one's character, yet not in accordance with a *probairesis*.¹⁸ However, it may also be taken to imply that one forms a *probairesis* to perform sudden actions in accordance with one's character without deliberating. Even if Aristotle were admitting here that some particular brave actions are based on hypothetical *probairesis*, this would not shed light on the case of the impetuous akratic. While it may be plausible to think that undeliberated *probaireseis* to perform a particular action smoothly follow from an unconflicted brave character, it is much less obvious that the same applies to the impetuous and conflicted akratic. In the akratic's case the sudden action and the alleged sudden *probairesis* conflict with each other and the agent's mind is clouded by strong passions.

Perhaps, however, a close cousin of the view that the akratic forms an undeliberated *probairesis* to perform a particular action is viable: impetuous akratics may act against a *probairesis* to perform a particular action they are merely *disposed* to make. This is the *probairesis* they would form if they had the time to deliberate on the basis of their overall conception of their ends and their wishes.¹⁹ This view captures some aspects of the impetuous akratic's psychological make-up. As I show below, all akratics, including the impetuous ones, preserve a commitment to act on the correct principle, i.e. a correct conception of their ends overall (*NE* 7.8, 1151a20-6). However, in order to describe impetuous *akrasia*, it is not necessary to go beyond the agent's commitment to act on her conception of her ends overall and introduce dispositional *probaireseis* to perform a particular action.²⁰ In saying that akratic agents act against a *probairesis*,

¹⁸ The interpretation requires supplying 'are' or 'occur' instead of 'are decided upon' at 1117a22: see Price 2016, 444.

¹⁹ See Scaltsas 1986, 375-6 and Mele 1981, 416-18. I thank Dhananjay Jagannathan for pointing out this view to me.

²⁰ For Aristotle, dispositional *probaireseis* of this kind are characteristic of virtue, which is a state that issues in *probaireseis* (*hexis probairetikē*, *NE* 2.6, 1106b36-1107a2). One may think that introducing dispositional *probaireseis* to perform a particular action is necessary to explain why at *NE* 7.10, 1152a25-30 Aristotle argues that melancholic impetuous akratics are more easily cured than weak akratics. On this view, impetuous akratics are more curable because they are disposed to make the *probairesis* to perform the right action. If this disposition is actualised it leads to correct action. Even if this interpretation were plausible, however, it would only apply to melancholic impetuous akratics and not necessarily to quick-tempered impetuous akratics. Furthermore, the textual evidence on the curability of *akrasia* is controversial, for in the following lines Aristotle specifies that akratics by habit (*dia ethismou*) are easier to cure than akratics by nature (*dia tōn physikōn*), thus implying that the curable kind of melancholic impetuous *akrasia* is habitual and not natural. This, however, is in tension with the treatment of melancholia as a natural disposition

Aristotle may mean to describe agents who act against a commitment to abide by the conception of their ends overall, whether or not this commitment issues into a decision to perform a particular action through deliberation.

Aristotle clearly thinks that both the impetuous and the weak akratic act against a *prohairesis*. For example, at *NE* 7.10, 1152a17-19, the akratic is said to form a decent *prohairesis*. Immediately after, Aristotle distinguishes between akratics who stick to their deliberation (i.e. weak akratics) and akratics who do not deliberate at all (i.e. impetuous akratics). If we take this *prohairesis* to be a deliberated decision to perform a particular action, we struggle to see why it belongs to both the impetuous akratic and the weak akratic.

If we take the *prohairesis* to pick out more broadly the agent's undeliberated commitment to abide by her conception of her ends overall, this problem disappears. All akratics are committed to act on their conception of their ends overall. This conception is at least partially correct.²¹ At *NE* 7.8, 1151a20-6, *akrasia* in all its forms is better than vice precisely because akratics are persuaded that they should act in accordance with correct reason (*orthos logos*).²² Each akratic somehow preserves the correct principle (*archē*). Hence akratics are better than vicious people, who have the wrong principle. Having the wrong principle means having a false conception of one's goals, for the principle states the goal, or 'that for the sake of which' an action is done (*NE* 7.8, 1151a11-19).²³

Even if all akratics preserve at least to some extent a commitment to act on a correct conception of the good, they act against it. Both the impetuous akratic and the

elsewhere (see *Div.* 1, 463b7). A possible way to ease the tension is to see Aristotle as envisaging different kinds of melancholic impetuous *akrasia*: a curable habitual kind and an incurable natural kind (see van der Eijk 2005, 150 and the platonic precedent at *Rep.* 9, 573c7-9). In any case, if this is right, the curability of melancholic impetuous *akrasia* may not depend on the fact that it involves a dispositional *prohairesis*, but on the fact that it is habitual and not natural. I thank Anthony Price for pushing me to answer this objection.

²¹ The akratic's conception of her goals is not fully correct, because she is not fully virtuous (*NE* 6.12, 1144a32-4). Perhaps the akratic lacks a full understanding of the reasons why her principles and goals are worth pursuing. Alternatively, the akratic's conception of the good could be partial.

²² On the exact meaning of *orthos logos* in the *NE*, see Moss 2014.

²³ This account of the difference between the akratic and the vicious relies on the thesis that vicious people in *NE* 7 have a false or mistaken conception of their ends. It is notoriously difficult to find coherence in Aristotle's account of vice in *NE* 7 and *NE* 9.4. However, with the exception of Müller 2015*b*, most interpreters agree that in *NE* 7 the vicious person has a mistaken conception of her ends, or that she is wrong about what is good or bad. See Irwin 2001; Annas 1977, 554; Nielsen 2017. Müller's account is based on a close analysis of the relevant texts to which I cannot devote the due attention in this context. However, as Nielsen 2017, 19-23 and Elliott 2016 independently argue, his view is problematic because it introduces a notion of *prohairesis* that applies exclusively to the vicious. According to Müller, the vicious *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, unlike other *prohairesis*, does not reflect the agent's conception of her ends. Since, in *NE* 7, the akratic and the vicious differ with respect to their *prohairesis*, it is implausible to think that Aristotle is switching between two different accounts of *prohairesis* in his discussion of the two states.

weak akratic are committed to try to be healthy, for example, because they think health is good for them. The impetuous akratic does not deliberate and does not turn this commitment to her ends into a decision to perform a particular action. The weak akratic deliberates and decides, say, to go for a jog after work. Despite all her efforts, however, she ends up sitting on her couch just like the impetuous akratic.

The thesis that Aristotle employs a broad notion of *prohairesis* in describing akratic action explains why he takes both impetuous and weak *akrasia* to be against a *prohairesis*. The broader use of *prohairesis* is justified because an agent's commitment to abide by her ends overall has a crucial role in determining the nature of *prohairesis* more narrowly understood, i.e. a deliberate decision to perform a particular action. All *prohairesis* to perform a particular action derive from the agent's commitment to act on her conception of her ends overall. Whether or not the *prohairesis* is good crucially depends on the correctness of this conception. In addition, the broader notion of *prohairesis* is not limited to *akrasia*, but it resurfaces in Aristotle's account of friendship in the *Eudemian Ethics*.²⁴

At *EE* 7.2 1236b2-3 and 1237a31-4, the best kind of friendship requires a mutual *prohairesis* (*antiprohairesis*). This mutual *prohairesis* involves choosing one another's company and it is the counterpart of mutual affection (*antiphilia*). In addition it involves a shared pursuit of things that are absolutely good and pleasant:

But if active friendship is a mutual *prohairesis* with pleasure in one another's acquaintance, it is clear that in general the primary friendship is a mutual *prohairesis* [to pursue] the absolutely good and pleasant because it is good and pleasant.²⁵

In this passage, friends characteristically form a mutual *prohairesis* to pursue good and pleasant things because they are good and pleasant. In some cases, it makes sense to take this *prohairesis* to be a shared *prohairesis* to perform the same action for the sake of a shared end. For example, at *EE* 7.7, 1241a31-3, friends in a political community form the same *prohairesis* concerning who should rule and who should be ruled, because they have a shared conception of the good for their state.

However, the shared mutual *prohairesis* in favour of the good and pleasant that is characteristic of friendship is not always a *prohairesis* to perform the same particular action. In fact, for Aristotle, friends typically form *prohairesis* to do different things for the sake of one another: at *NE* 9.8, 1169a25, a friend may die, give up her wealth,

²⁴ I thank two anonymous referees for this suggestion and for help in the analysis of the passage I discuss below.

²⁵ *EE* 7.3, 1237a30-4: εἰ δὲ τὸ κατ' ἐνέργειαν φιλεῖν μεθ' ἡδονῆς ἀντιπροαίρεσις τῆς ἀλλήλων γνωρίσεως, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ ὄλως ἢ φιλία ἢ πρώτη ἀντιπροαίρεσις τῶν ἀπλῶς ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἡδέων, ὅτι ἀγαθὰ καὶ ἡδέα.

honour and power for the sake of her friends. It would be impossible for a good friend to share her companion's *prohairesis* to die for her sake. Someone who sacrifices her life for the sake of her friend shares her friend's commitment to a conception of the good overall and is willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of this conception. However, she does not form a shared *prohairesis* to perform a particular action.²⁶ Hence, in describing the mutual *prohairesis* characteristic of friendship, Aristotle picks out the friends' shared commitment to act on a conception of the end and of the good, which may or may not give rise to the same decision to perform a particular action.

If the discussion so far is right, in Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* and friendship, *prohairesis* is used broadly to pick out the agent's commitment to act on her conception of her ends. Akratic action, impetuous or weak, is characteristically against the agent's commitment to act on her overall conception of her ends.

One might doubt that this account can make sense of the fact that *akrasia* involves motivational conflict (*DA* 3.9, 432b26-433a38). Aristotle often implies that this conflict is between a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action and a non-rational desire, i.e. a spirited desire or an appetitive desire (*NE* 1.13, 1102b13-25). If impetuous akratics do not form a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, only weak akratics are conflicted in this way.²⁷ However, impetuous akratics may experience a desiderative conflict of a different sort. Impetuous akratics, like all akratics, are committed to act on their conception of their goals overall, even if they have not deliberated and formed a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action to fulfil this commitment. If they have the commitment to act for the sake of a correct conception of the goal, then they must have a correct wish for this goal (*NE* 3.2, 1111b25-6). This wish, in addition, is not idle, because it is for a goal for the sake of which the agent commits to act.²⁸ Hence, impetuous akratics experience a conflict between an active wish and a non-rational desire without having formed a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. In fact, Aristotle twice describes the struggle experienced by the akratic as a struggle between a wish and a non-rational desire: at *EE* 2.7, 1223b4-17, the akratic is someone who does not do what she wishes, because of a non-rational appetitive desire. At *NE* 9.4, 1166b7, the akratic is described as having wishes and appetitive desires for different things.²⁹ As these examples suggest, akratics can be conflicted even when they do not form a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action.

²⁶ See further *EE* 7.8, 1241a16-18 and Sherman 1987, 597-8.

²⁷ See e.g. Moss 2009, 149; Pickavé and Whiting 2008, 359-65; Charles 1984, ch. 3.

²⁸ Idle wishes include wishes for impossible things or things that one cannot bring about (*EN* 3.2, 1111b20-6).

²⁹ In this passage, wish is used interchangeably with *hairesis* (choice), but it is clear that Aristotle has in mind wishes for general ends. Here, Aristotle suggests that akratics and vicious people act against their wishes, which is in tension with his discussion of vice in *NE* 7 (see n. 23 above).

I have argued that akratic actions are against a *prohairesis* in the sense that they are actions against one's commitment to act on the overall conception of one's goals, whether or not one also forms a decision to perform a particular action for the sake of this conception. This commitment to abide by one's conception of one's ends is related to one's wishes and suppositions about the good. Yet, unlike a supposition about the good and a wish, this commitment cannot be motivationally inert or idle.³⁰ On this account, *prohairesis* can be used broadly to pick out a general undeliberated commitment and also narrowly to pick out a deliberative desire to perform a particular action. These two uses of *prohairesis* are related: the narrow *prohairesis* to perform a particular action is the deliberative specification of the broad commitment to act on one's overall conception of one's ends.

This interpretation captures the principle of practical rationality that *akrasia* characteristically violates. Practical rationality requires one's actions to be coherent with the commitment to act on one's overall conception of one's goals. Hence, impetuous akratics count as irrational agents even if they do not act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. As I show in what follows, Aristotle's account of stubborn opinionated action chimes in well with this requirement of practical rationality. A stubborn opinionated action is performed against the agent's commitment to act on her overall conception of the goal. Hence, it is as irrational as an akratic action.

3. Stubborn Opinionated Enkratics

For Aristotle, the opposite of *akrasia* is *enkrateia*, or self-control. At *NE* 7.9, 1151a29-34, the analysis of *enkrateia* is introduced by the question of whether enkratics abide by any *prohairesis* and any reason (*logos*), or by the true reason and the correct *prohairesis*. Aristotle's answer is based on the thesis that *akrasia* and *enkrateia* are distinctively moral phenomena: *akrasia* is blameworthy, *enkrateia* is praiseworthy. He argues that, strictly speaking, enkratic and akratic people respectively abide and fail to abide by true reason and correct *prohairesis*, as opposed to any kind of *prohairesis* and reason (*NE* 7.9, 1151a32-5). Hence, someone who acts on her *prohairesis* to go for a swim for the sake of her health despite the desire to watch TV all day is enkratic. Someone who, despite the occasional desire to swim, acts on her *prohairesis* to stay on her couch in order to avoid physical fatigue is not enkratic strictly speaking.

Aristotle does not discuss the possibility of enkratic agents who act in accordance with their commitment to a conception of the good without deliberating. However, if he takes *enkrateia* to be the specular opposite of *akrasia*, we may think that there is room in his account for impetuous *enkrateia*. The action of a potential impetuous

³⁰ Hence, like its narrower cousin, this broader notion of *prohairesis* is neither a wish nor a supposition about the good. In addition, it is not a commitment about the end or for the end, but a commitment to act in accordance with the end. Hence, like a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, it is not about the end but toward the end (*pros to telos*, *EE* 2.10, 1226a7-9; *NE* 3.2 1111b26-30).

enkratic, unlike impetuous akratic action, would be against the agent's non-rational fears and desires, not in accordance with them. Thus we might think that if an enkratic does not form a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, she is not motivated enough to act against her irrational desires and emotions. However, in some circumstances the enkratic's commitments to act on her overall conception of the end may be enough to guide her behaviour. For example, consider an enkratic who rushes to stop the bleeding of a victim of an accident despite her fear of blood. Just as in the case of impulsive virtuous agents at *NE* 3.8, 1117a17-22, this enkratic's commitments may be enough to lead to action without the need for deliberation, especially if her non-rational fears are mild and allow her to keep a clear mind.³¹

Aristotle is silent on impetuous *enkrateia*, but he discusses a close cousin of *enkrateia* that becomes very interesting if seen through the lens of the previous analysis of practical rationality and *prohairesis*. This *enkrateia* look-alike is the case of the stubborn opinionated agent (*idiognōmōn*). In general, stubborn agents (*ischurognōmōnes*) are in a state that looks like but really is not the same as *enkrateia*.³² Stubborn people are similar to enkratic people because they abide by their beliefs and choices. However, they differ from true enkratics because they are not open to revise their beliefs and choices when faced with new evidence. Rather, they take pleasure in sticking to their beliefs and choices even when they should change their mind (*NE* 7.9, 1151b5-13). Aristotle distinguishes between three different types of stubborn agents:

The stubborn include the opinionated, the ignorant and the boorish. The opinionated are as they are because of pleasure and pain. For they find enjoyment in winning [the argument] if they are not persuaded to change their views, and they feel pain if their opinions are voided, like decrees [in the Assembly]. Hence they are more like akratic than enkratic people.³³

Some stubborn people stick to their beliefs because they do not have the resources to change their mind. These include the 'ignorant' and 'boorish'. Other people, the 'opinionated' (*idiognōmōnes*), stick to their beliefs and choices because they take pleasure in winning arguments and they suffer when their choices are voided. The opinionated, like all kinds of stubborn people, are similar to enkratic people because they stick to their

³¹ If I am right, the tragic hero Neoptolemus is similar to an impetuous enkratic, for he acts in accordance with his commitment to his conception of his goals overall, but against his choice to perform a particular action. This choice is not a *prohairesis* because it does not refer back to Neoptolemus' conception of his goals. See the next section.

³² My discussion of these states in what follows is indebted to Broadie 2009.

³³ *NE* 7.9, 1151b13-17: εἰσὶ δὲ ἰσχυρογνώμονες οἱ ἰδιογνώμονες καὶ οἱ ἀμαθεῖς καὶ οἱ ἄγροικοί, οἱ μὲν ἰδιογνώμονες δι' ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην · χαίρουσι γὰρ νικῶντες ἐὰν μὴ μεταπειθῶνται, καὶ λυποῦνται ἐὰν ἄκυρα τὰ αὐτῶν ἢ ὥσπερ ψηφίσματα · ὥστε μᾶλλον τῷ ἀκρατεῖ εἰκόσιν ἢ τῷ ἐγκρατεῖ.

beliefs and choices. Nonetheless, in this passage the opinionated are distinctive because they have more in common with the akratic than with the enkratic. This remark is, at first sight, quite puzzling. Since they take pleasure in sticking to their false beliefs and incorrect choices, the opinionated seem closer to vicious people than akratic people.³⁴ Just like the vicious, the opinionated are not conflicted at the moment of action.

This problem disappears, however, if we take into account the thesis that akratic people act against their *prohairesis* understood as their commitment to abide by an overall conception of their ends. Presumably, unlike the boorish and the ignorant, the opinionated have the intellectual resources to see the force of arguments against the opinions and choices they formed in the past. After all, they are characterised by their passion for arguments and debates. They understand the importance of sticking to true beliefs and correct choices (as opposed to any belief and any choice they happen to have formed in the past) and they recognise that it is worthwhile to be responsive and persuadable by new arguments. Nevertheless, they abandon their commitment to these ends in favour of the irrational pleasure of leaving their beliefs and their choices unchallenged.

The opinionated are interesting because they display an unusual discrepancy between their commitment to an overall conception of their ends and some of their beliefs and choices. This discrepancy is possible because their choices to perform a particular action, originally formed with a view to the overall conception of their ends, come to be in tension with these ends due to a change in circumstances. In *NE* 7.9, Aristotle does not mention stubborn opinionated *prohairesis*. Instead, he refers to stubborn 'beliefs' (*doxai*). Perhaps he does so because these stubborn choices are in tension with the stubborn agents' commitments to act on their conception of the end. Thus, stubborn opinionated choices are not *prohairesis* to perform a particular action, because *prohairesis*, broad and narrow, refer back to the agent's conception of the end.

Even though they know they ought to, the opinionated do not revise their choices, because they suffer too much when proven wrong. This explains why they resemble both akratic agents and enkratic agents. Opinionated people are similar to akratic people because they act against their commitment to an overall conception of their ends, i.e. against a *prohairesis* broadly understood. They are similar to enkratic people because they stick to their old beliefs and choices to perform particular actions. This does not make them enkratic strictly speaking, however, for *enkrateia* requires action in accordance with one's commitment to an overall conception of the end, not with choices that were formed in the past and now ought to be revised. On this view, stubborn opinionated action is irrational for the same reasons *akrasia* is irrational: it is in tension with the agent's commitment to act on an overall conception of the end. This suggests that when one's commitment to an overall conception of the end and one's

³⁴ See Broadie 2009, 168 on this point.

choice to perform a particular action come apart, acting in accordance with the former is more rational than acting in accordance with the latter.

4. Neoptolemus Reconsidered

Akratic actions are not necessarily against one's *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Neither is acting against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action sufficient to act akratically, for Aristotle thinks that akratic actions are, strictly speaking, actions against *true* reason and *correct prohairesis* (NE 7.9, 1151a34-5). Hence, when we act against a bad *prohairesis* (a phenomenon sometimes called 'inverse *akrasia*'), we have something in common with truly akratic agents, but we do not count as acting akratically.

It is hard to see why exactly Aristotle denies that inverse *akrasia* is strictly speaking *akrasia*. In the list of puzzles (*aporiai*) that introduce the topic (NE 7.2), he suggests that the possibility of inverse *akrasia* gives rise to two challenges. First, the challenge that inverse *akrasia* is a good or even an excellent state. Secondly, the sophistic challenge that foolishness combined with inverse *akrasia* is virtue (NE 7.2, 1146a27-33).

However, denying that inverse *akrasia* is *akrasia* seems unnecessary as a response to these challenges, for the challenges are ill-posed. First, it is hard to believe that actions against one's bad *prohairesis* are comparable to excellent virtuous actions. Aristotle has already argued before his discussion of *akrasia* that virtuous actions are in accordance with and not against a *prohairesis* (NE 2.4, 1105a31-2). Furthermore, the majority of inverse akratics are in a bad and blameworthy state. At NE 3.2, 1111b5-6, we judge someone's character on the basis of their *prohairesis* and the goals for the sake of which these *prohairesis* are made. Inverse *akrasia* is characterised by *bad prohairesis*. Normally, bad *prohairesis* stem from a false conception of one's goals, which explains why the agent who forms them is in a bad state.

Secondly, since virtue requires practical wisdom, foolishness cannot become virtue if one combines it with the tendency to act against one's bad *prohairesis*. A foolish agent's lack of practical wisdom is reflected in her actions. For example, imagine a foolish agent who forms the *prohairesis* to harm someone and fails to act on it. This failure to act does not lead her to perform compassionate virtuous actions. A foolish person who acts against her *prohairesis* will be more likely to act like people who possess natural virtue, i.e. the natural inclination to avoid bad actions that we share with children and non-human animals. Just like natural virtue, foolishness combined with the tendency to go against one's *prohairesis* is not full virtue, because it is blind (NE 6.13, 1144b1-13).

A study of the exemplary case of inverse *akrasia*, the tragic hero Neoptolemus, can explain why Aristotle argues that inverse *akrasia* is praiseworthy and hence is not really *akrasia*. He is not concerned with every instance of inverse *akrasia*, but more specifically with the possibility of an action that is against one's choice,³⁵ yet in

³⁵ Neoptolemus' resolution to lie is not a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. See below.

accordance with one's commitment to a correct conception of one's goals overall. An action of this kind is both praiseworthy and rational. However, by Aristotle's own standards this action is not akratic, for it is in accordance with the agent's commitment to her conception of her goals.

Neoptolemus is introduced as someone who deserves praise even though he abandons a reasoned belief:

If *akrasia* makes someone prone to abandon every belief, there will be an excellent type of *akrasia*, like in the case of Sophocles' Neoptolemus in the *Philoctetes*. For he is praiseworthy for his failure to abide by what Odysseus persuaded him to do, because he feels pain at lying.³⁶

In Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus to lie to the injured Philoctetes. Odysseus's plot is to steal Philoctetes' bow and bring him to Troy against his will. Neoptolemus, however, just cannot bring himself to lie and confesses the plot to Philoctetes.³⁷ As Aristotle emphasises, Neoptolemus is praiseworthy. He is praiseworthy, presumably, not only because he does the right thing and ends up telling the truth, but also because he acts on good motives and for the sake of the right goals. Had Neoptolemus been motivated to say the truth by the fear of being attacked by Philoctetes, say, we would agree that he did the right thing, but we would certainly not *praise* him.³⁸ Aristotle's further description of the Sophoclean hero confirms this interpretation:

There are also some people who do not abide by their beliefs but not because of *akrasia* – Neoptolemus, for instance, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Though certainly it was pleasure that made him abandon his belief, it was a fine pleasure; for telling the truth was fine to him, but Odysseus had persuaded him to lie. [He is not akratic;] for not everyone who does something because of pleasure is either intemperate or base or akratic, but only someone who does it because of a shameful pleasure.³⁹

³⁶ NE 7.2, 1146a18-21: καὶ εἰ πάσης δόξης ἢ ἀκρασία ἐκστατικόν, ἔσται τις σπουδαία ἀκρασία, οἷον ὁ Σοφοκλέους Νεοπτόλεμος ἐν τῷ Φιλοκτῆτι· ἐπαινετὸς γὰρ οὐκ ἐμμένων οἷς ἐπέισθη ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὀδυσσεύως διὰ τὸ λυπεῖσθαι ψευδόμενος.

³⁷ Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, 895-915.

³⁸ See also Purshouse 2006, 210. At EE 2.1, 1219b19, Aristotle emphasises that praise (*epainos*) is correctly directed to agents, not actions.

³⁹ NE 7.9, 1151b18-22: εἰσὶ δὲ τινες οἱ τοῖς δόξασιν οὐκ ἐμμένουσιν οὐ δι' ἀκρασίαν, οἷον ἐν τῷ Φιλοκτῆτι τῷ Σοφοκλέους ὁ Νεοπτόλεμος· καίτοι δι' ἡδονὴν οὐκ ἐνέμεινεν, ἀλλὰ καλὴν· τὸ γὰρ ἀληθεύειν αὐτῷ καλὸν ἦν, ἐπέισθη δ' ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὀδυσσεύως ψεύδεσθαι. οὐ γὰρ πᾶς ὁ δι' ἡδονὴν τι πράττων οὐτ' ἀκόλαστος οὐτε φαῦλος οὐτ' ἀκρατής, ἀλλ' ὁ δι' αἰσχροῦ.

Neoptolemus is persuaded that he should lie, but he ends up telling the truth. He is motivated to tell the truth against his resolution by a fine pleasure (*hēdonē kalē*). Since telling the truth is fine for him, he acts on good motives.⁴⁰ In addition, these good motives are close cousins of the good wishes that motivate a virtuous person to avoid lying. For Aristotle, it is characteristic of the good person to act for the sake of the fine (*to kalon*) and to take pleasure in her action (*NE* 3.7, 1115b12-13; 4.1, 1120a23-5).

It is hard to determine whether or not Neoptolemus' desire to tell the truth is a full-fledged rational wish based on the right conception of truth-telling as a worthwhile goal. One might be inclined to treat it as a rational wish, because Neoptolemus is an articulate being and because a desire to tell the truth is beyond the reach of non-rational animals.⁴¹ However, these considerations do not prove the point conclusively. Humans have non-rational desires for things that go beyond the cognitive range of non-rational animals. For example, humans might have non-rational desires for sophisticated foods, or for musical entertainment.⁴² The fact that Neoptolemus is guided by the fine is not conclusive either: he might, for example, have a natural inclination for a fine thing (honesty) without desiring it *because* he takes it to be fine.

Since Aristotle specifically directs our attention to Sophocles' characterisation of Neoptolemus, we can understand his desires better by looking at his character in the play. Neoptolemus is a young man whose fine desires come from a good nature (*physis*), not from rational reflection.⁴³ His desire to tell the truth may be the result of natural inclination, but it is not a blind urge.⁴⁴ At *Philoctetes* 906, the belief that lying makes him look like a shameful person leads Neoptolemus to tell the truth. Hence, Neoptolemus' fine desire is similar to a virtuous person's wish, because it is based on a preliminary understanding of fine and shameful behaviour. Unlike a virtuous person, Neoptolemus wishes only to appear praiseworthy without wishing to *be* praiseworthy.⁴⁵ This suggests that Neoptolemus' fine desire is a rational wish, though it is not a fully virtuous one. It is based on the commitment to honesty as a worthwhile goal, even though Neoptolemus has not fully grasped the reason why honesty is worthwhile.

⁴⁰ Irwin 1999, 267 reads *hēdu* instead of *kalon* at 1151b20. This reading is compatible with my interpretation: it is characteristic of the virtuous person to take pleasure in her actions. See e.g. *NE* 9.9, 1170a8-11.

⁴¹ See Purshouse 2006, 209-13.

⁴² *NE* 3.11, 1118b8. See further Pearson 2012, 171-3.

⁴³ See *Philoctetes* 95-100, 85-95, 900-5.

⁴⁴ *Contra* Purshouse 2006, 213.

⁴⁵ At *Rep.* 2, 360b-d, Plato uses the story of Gyges' ring to bring out a similar difference between the desire to be good and the desire to appear good.

Neoptolemus' wishes and his commitment to a conception of his ends raise a question concerning his choice to lie. For Aristotle, *prohairesis* to perform a particular action are formed following one's overall conception of one's ends and one's wishes. It is hard to see how Neoptolemus could form a *prohairesis* to lie, because lying is in tension with his own goal to be an honest person. The tragedy offers further clarifications on the nature of his choice. At *Philoctetes* 100-20, Odysseus argues that Neoptolemus will gain great profit (*kerdos*) for himself if he lies. Neoptolemus will be decisive in the siege of Troy and he will be considered wise and good. Neoptolemus is momentarily persuaded to lie for the sake of these gains and he forms his choice by deliberately ignoring the shame of lying. He says: 'I'll do it then, and put all shame aside.'⁴⁶

Neoptolemus fails to bring his commitment to honesty as a good to bear on his choice. Hence, misled by Odysseus' arguments and authority, he forms a bad choice that frustrates instead of satisfying his good wishes and his conception of the good. Agents like Neoptolemus struggle to employ their commitment to their conception of the good in deliberation. They are thus easily misled to make choices to act in ways that go against their own ends and thereby against the grain of their character.

In the first section of this paper, I noted that *prohairesis* to perform a particular action is indicative of character and refers back to the agent's overall conception of her ends. Since Neoptolemus' choice to lie frustrates his own ends and is against the grain of his character, we have good reason to think that it is not, strictly speaking, a *prohairesis*. We may appeal to two distinct arguments to explain this thesis. Perhaps the choice to lie is not a *prohairesis*, because, even if it is formed on the basis of a deliberative process guided by Odysseus' advice, the starting-point of the deliberation is not a rational wish based on Neoptolemus' conception of the good, but a more basic desire for advantage or gain (*kerdos*). Hence, Neoptolemus' choice is similar to the action guiding belief that some akratics act upon (*NE* 6.9, 1142b18-20; 7.3, 1147a30-5; 7.6, 1149a24-b2; 1149b14-20). After all, at *NE* 7.4, 1147b29-31, some akratics go to excess to pursue non-rational desires for honour and victory.⁴⁷ Like these deliberative akratics, Neoptolemus may not form a *prohairesis* to lie, because the starting point of his deliberation is a non-rational desire for gain, advantage or honour in battle.

Another possibility is that Neoptolemus' choice to lie is not a *prohairesis* even if its starting point is a rational wish. This is because *prohairesis* characteristically stem from the agent's overall conception of her goals and they are for the sake of acting well. Hence, an agent who, like Neoptolemus, sets aside his own conception of the good in

⁴⁶ *Philoctetes*, 120: Ἴτω·ποίησω, πᾶσαν αἰσχύνην ἀφείξ.

⁴⁷ See also *NE* 3.1, 1111a31 and *Rhet* 1.10, 1370a25-7 on how health, honour, victory and even learning can be the object of appetitive desires (*epithumiai*).

deliberating about what to do cannot form a *prohairesis*, even if the deliberation is guided by a rational wish.⁴⁸

In absence of an explicit discussion of the starting point of Neoptolemus' decision to lie in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is difficult to decide between these two options. However, they both point toward the same conclusion. Neoptolemus does not act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action and he acts in accordance with his commitment to his conception of the good. This explains why Aristotle denies that Neoptolemus is an akratic. Even if he acts against a deliberate choice, he does not act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. In fact, according to the broad notion of *prohairesis* that Aristotle employs in his account of impetuous *akrasia*, Neoptolemus acts in accordance with a *prohairesis*. Telling the truth is in accordance with his commitment to abide by his conception of the goal.⁴⁹

For Aristotle, *akrasia* involves acting against one's commitment to a correct conception of one's goals overall and it is also a fundamentally bad state. People who act against a bad *prohairesis* to perform a particular action also act against their commitment to an incorrect conception of the goal. However, these people are not in a good state: they resemble vicious people because their desires are oriented toward bad and shameful things. Even if they display a psychological make-up similar to the one of the akratic, they certainly are not praiseworthy akratics.

However, some people form bad choices that conflict with their commitment to act on a correct conception of the goal. When these people, like Neoptolemus, end up abandoning their choices in order to act on their commitments, they are in a sense praiseworthy: they are not virtuous, because they do not take their correct goals into account in their deliberations, but at least they are guided by a correct moral outlook and by correct desires.⁵⁰

If we follow Aristotle in thinking that *akrasia* involves most fundamentally acting against one's commitment to one's conception of one's goals, we will see why Neoptolemus is not an akratic. He acts in accordance with his commitment to his

⁴⁸ I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify this point.

⁴⁹ This explains why Aristotle is reluctant to call the resolution abandoned by Neoptolemus a *prohairesis* and calls it a belief (*doxa*) instead (*NE* 7.9, 1151b18-22). The fact that Neoptolemus feels no regret for telling the truth is further proof that this is the correct interpretation (*contra* Pearson 2012, 151-2). Truth-telling is in line with his deepest desires and wishes (see also Broadie 2009, 169-72). *Contra* Broadie, however, I do not think that Neoptolemus abandons his choice to lie because of a switch in what he thinks he should do. At the moment of action he is still conflicted. Immediately after having revealed the truth, he refuses to give the bow back to Philoctetes and he says: 'what is right and advantageous make me obey those in command' (τῶν γὰρ ἐν τέλει κλύειν | τό τ' ἔνδικόν με καὶ τὸ συμφέρον ποεῖ, *Philoctetes* 925-26). This suggests that at some level he still thinks he should obey and should have obeyed Odysseus, even if by the end of the play he completely rebels against his commander (*Philoctetes* 1220).

⁵⁰ Their character would not be equally praiseworthy if they were guided by an appetite and not by a wish. Appetites, unlike wishes, do not have to reflect one's moral outlook and principles.

conception of the goal. He may abandon a choice to perform a particular action, but he does not do so because of *akrasia* (*ou di'akrasian*, NE 7.9, 1151b18). The case of Neoptolemus, like the case of the stubborn opinionated and the impetuous akratic, becomes clear in light of Aristotle's views on *akrasia* and practical rationality. Impetuous *akrasia* and stubborn opinionated action suggest that for Aristotle practical rationality is first and foremost a matter of coherence between one's actions and one's commitment to one's conception of one's ends. One can act irrationally, i.e. against one's commitment to one's conception of the end, even when one does not act against a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Accordingly, an action is irrational if it is in accordance with a choice that ought to be revised, but against one's commitment to one's conception of the end. Thus if, like Neoptolemus, an agent forms a choice that is in tension with the conception of the ends she is committed to, the maximally rational action available to her is an action against the choice and in accordance with her commitment. On this view, it is more rational to act against a choice of this sort than in accordance with it.⁵¹

This account of Neoptolemus' case shows that Aristotle is not especially interested in discussing all potential cases of inverse *akrasia*. Rather, he is interested in those cases that might make it look as if *akrasia* is rational and praiseworthy state. Thus, he does not look at the possibility of agents following a fine non-rational desire against a bad *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Perhaps this is because the bad ends and the bad *prohairesis* are sufficient to prove that the agent is in a blameworthy state.⁵² Even if Aristotle does not discuss agents who act on a good appetite against the commitment to a mistaken conception of their ends, we can raise the question whether he would consider these agents akratic. This kind of inverse akratic action, unlike Neoptolemus', is irrational because it is incoherent with the agent's commitment to an overall conception of the good. However, by Aristotle's standards, it would still fail to count as akratic action, because it is a good action motivated by a fine pleasure. Similarly, someone would probably not count as akratic if she acted on a shameful pleasure against a mistaken conception of her ends overall. After all, unlike vicious people akratics characteristically preserve the correct principle, i.e. the correct conception of their goal.⁵³

Aristotle's analysis of Neoptolemus' predicament is a study of the discrepancy between one's commitment to an overall conception of the good and choices that are not formed with a view to this commitment. The case of Neoptolemus is importantly different from cases of discrepancy between one's commitment to a conception of the

⁵¹ On a similar view, see Arpaly 2000.

⁵² The action may be praiseworthy and good even if the agent is in a bad state. Someone who performs a praiseworthy action against a bad wish is still blameworthy because of her bad principles and wishes.

⁵³ NE 7.9, 1151b22 and 7.8, 1151a20-6 quoted above. I thank Jay Elliott for pushing me to clarify this point.

goal and one's *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Unlike Neoptolemus, agents in this condition form a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action with a view to their commitments to their overall conception of the goal. However, due to bad reasoning, these people end up forming a *prohairesis* to perform a particular action that does not promote their goals. Hence, they are not irrational because they disregard their commitments, but because they are bad reasoners. For example, at *NE* 6.13, 1144b1-13 natural virtue is potentially harmful or counterproductive because it lacks practical wisdom. This may mean that people who have natural virtue form bad *prohairesis* to perform particular actions on the basis of the commitment to act on correct goals. For example, they form the *prohairesis* to save a drowning child on the basis of a deliberation that does not take into account their poor swimming abilities.⁵⁴

Bad reasoning can lead from the correct commitments to the wrong *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. However, bad reasoning cannot lead from the wrong commitments to the correct *prohairesis* to perform a particular action. Correct *prohairesis* to perform a particular action require the commitment to a correct conception of the goal (*Rhet.* 1.8, 1366a14-16; *NE* 6.2). At *NE* 6.9, 1142b20-5, someone can reach the right thing to do by means of a bad deliberation. For example, one can decide on the basis of deliberation to give money to charity for the sake of paying fewer taxes. The *prohairesis* is for the right action, but it refers back to the wrong conception of the goal. Here, there may be a discrepancy between the goal actually promoted by the *prohairesis* and the conception of the goal for the sake of which it is made. The agent may be wrong in thinking that giving money to charity is a way to pay fewer taxes. However, since the correctness of the *prohairesis* to perform a particular action depends on the goal for the sake of which it is made (not on the goal it actually promotes), the *prohairesis* is not correct even though it prompts a good action.

5. Conclusion

Aristotle treats *akrasia* as an *ethical* problem and he takes inverse *akrasia* not to be strictly speaking *akrasia*. A contemporary reader might be doubtful about the plausibility of both views. First, *akrasia* does not seem to be a strictly ethical problem. Donald Davidson suggests, for example, that someone who gets up to brush her teeth even if she thinks it would be best for her to lie in bed displays the practical irrationality typical of *akrasia*.⁵⁵ Yet, her action is not suitable for moral assessment, it is neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy.

Secondly, inverse *akrasia* seems to be *akrasia* because characters like Huckleberry Finn and Neoptolemus display the irrationality typical of akratic action even if they act

⁵⁴ Even if they acted against this *prohairesis*, these agents would not be virtuous or praiseworthy akratics because they are bad reasoners and lack practical wisdom.

⁵⁵ Davidson 1980, 29 and n. 14.

well. Hence, we may disagree with Aristotle because we think that the correctness of one's moral judgements does not always matter when we are trying to assess one's practical rationality.

Furthermore, if my argument in this paper is persuasive, Aristotle's view may seem outlandish because he takes akratic action to be against a *prohairesis*. *Prohairesis*, in this context, captures the agent's commitment to act on the conception of her goals overall even when such commitment does not generate a decision to perform a particular action.

Contra Aristotle, we might find it easier to think that *akrasia* is against one's choice to perform a particular action, whether or not this choice derives from the agent's commitment to her conception of her goals overall. A closer investigation reveals, I think, that this temptation should be resisted. Aristotle is interested in akratic actions as failures of practical rationality. He does not think that akratic actions are simply against a choice to perform a particular action, because this description excludes some relevant irrational actions. Sometimes one acts irrationally even if one does not deliberate and one does not resolve to perform a particular action. This is the case of the impetuous akratic. The impetuous action is irrational because it goes against the agent's commitment to her conception of her ends.⁵⁶

In addition, when a choice to perform a particular action does not refer back to one's commitment to one's conception of one's goals, it is more rational to act against the choice than in accordance with it. Neoptolemus' case is exemplary: his choice to lie is incoherent with his commitment to a correct conception of the good; his action is coherent with this deep-rooted commitment. If we had to explain why Neoptolemus is irrational, we would point to the fact that he forms a choice that frustrates his own commitment to his conception of the good, not to his action.⁵⁷

Furthermore, sticking to one's beliefs and to one's old choices without updating them can be irrational. For example, it can be irrational if an old choice is in conflict with one's commitments to one's goals and one sticks to it in fear to be proven wrong. This case is exemplified by the stubborn opinionated, who is similar to both the enkratic and the akratic. She is similar to the akratic because she acts irrationally. She acts irrationally

⁵⁶ See Arpaly 2000, 506-7.

⁵⁷ Similar cases of acting rationally against one's best decision or best belief are discussed in Arpaly 2000, 493-501 and Frankfurt 1988. Arpaly defends the view that acting in accordance with one's best judgement is not always rational, especially when in acting against one's best judgement one acts in accordance with one's other beliefs and desires. Frankfurt suggests that if our intuitions about sanity and insanity matter for our adjudication of the rationality of an action, then sometimes acting against a best judgement is rational. He mentions the example of someone who decides to destroy the earth to avoid a minor injury to her finger, but cannot bring herself to act on this decision. This person's action is way less irrational than it would have been had she acted on her decision. On rational action against one's better belief, see Audi 1990.

because she acts against her commitment to follow valid arguments, rather than any old argument she happened to see as valid in the past.⁵⁸

For Aristotle, all akratic actions are against one's commitment to act in accordance with a correct conception of one's ends. In addition, some akratic actions are also against a decision to perform a particular action that derives from this commitment through deliberation. This account puts him in a good position to capture the irrationality of *akrasia*. His account of *akrasia*, therefore, is simultaneously informed by his ethical theory and by his theory of practical rationality. We may disagree with Aristotle's characterisation of the phenomenon and argue that one is akratic if and only if one acts against a choice to perform a particular action. But if we do so, we will not only admit cases of praiseworthy *akrasia* and morally irrelevant *akrasia*, but also cases of practically rational *akrasia*.⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ On the irrationality of obstinacy, see McIntyre 1993, 396-400.

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