

The Akratic Gap.
Remarks on the Book VII of Nicomachean Ethics in Walter
Burley's Commentary

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Walter Burley's Commentary to the Nicomachean Ethics is commonly considered little more than an expositio littere. Nevertheless, in some notanda he raises open questions about the crucial gap between the conclusion of the practical syllogism and action. Within the interpretative framework of Saarinen's and Wood's works, I will focus on Burley's analysis of akrasia in book VII. The first point will be some questions related to a notandum, concerning the gap between intellect and will as typical of akrasia. Secondly, I will analyze it in the light of Burley's semantics, where conceptual tools developed in one science prove useful in solving problems of another discipline, in this case ethics. Finally, I'll address the Commentary's brief gloss about heroic virtue, as example of Burley's first steps in the use of measure languages in ethics, by analogy with the Oxford Calculators' techniques.

Keywords: *Walter Burley, Akrasia, Aristotle, Practical Syllogism, Semantics.*

1. Introduction

In his 1999 article *Walter Burley on akrasia: Second Thoughts*, Risto Saarinen complained about the little scholarly attention devoted to Burley's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹. Twenty years later, the situation has not changed much: a critical edition of the *Expositio super libros Ethicorum Aristotelis* (dated around 1333-1341) is still sorely needed – despite the fact that we do have an excellent manuscript tradition – and the secondary literature is equally lim-

¹ A sincere thanks to Laura Rosella, for her collaboration in the drafting and reviewing of the English version of this text.

Risto Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia: Second Thoughts*, «Vivarium», 37 (1999) 1, pp. 60-71: p. 60. On *akrasia* and weakness of will in Walter Burley and the fortune of his commentary to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see also Fabrizio Amerini, *14th-century Reactions to Burley*, in Alessandro Conti (ed.), *A Companion to Walter Burley. Late Medieval Logician and Metaphysician*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013, pp. 377-409; Iacopo Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, in Conti, *A Companion to Walter Burley*, pp. 321-46; Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought. From Augustine to Buridan*, Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 1994, pp. 131-46; Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 30-1; Rega Wood, *Willing Wickedly: Ockham and Burley Compared*, «Vivarium», 37 (1999), 1, pp. 72-93.

ited. In more recent times, however, the studies of Saarinen, Wood and Costa have at least promoted a renewed appreciation of the importance of this text, which remained part of the university *curricula* until the 16th century².

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on some key aspects of a *notandum* included in Burley's commentary on book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It focuses on the akratic's practical syllogism as formulated by Aristotle, but more broadly concerns the issue of acting against one's own best judgement. Burley's goal is to provide an *expositio littere* as faithful to Aristotle's text as possible, and effective for university teaching³. While this is certainly true, the commentary presents a two-tiered structure: in addition to the paraphrastic exposition, a dense apparatus of *notae*, *dubia* and *addendae* offers a critical and often original perspective on key points of the text. Certainly, Burley follows here the same pattern of previous commentaries, such as that by Eustratius of Nicaea and other Greek commentators⁴; but other aspects do not depend on these sources.

The *notandum* at hand is exemplary in this respect, also for the significance of the issue it raises: namely, the problematic but crucial relationship between the propositional level and the pragmatic context within the logical procedure of practical syllogism, i.e. between the level of language and that of action. In the structure of syllogism, action has indeed the role to connect the two levels, by determining a conclusion that should function as a rule of acting. In this paper, I firstly shall therefore outline the terms of the issue; secondly, I'll try a new interpretation providing a reading of the question in the light of Burley's semantics. For it is the latter that is at stake, when the relationship between the necessity of logical conclusions and the necessity of practical acting is put under scrutiny – or, in other words, when the semantic relationship between propositions and their ontological grounding is investigated. Finally, I shall propose a reading of another Burley's note about heroic virtue – at the end of the same book 7 focused to akratic phenomenons – within the context of the *Calculatores'* cultural *milieu* in the first half

² Cfr. Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, pp. 321-2; James A. Weisheipl, *Repertorium Mertonense*, «*Mediaeval Studies*», 31 (1969), pp. 174-224.

³ Cfr. Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, p. 91.

⁴ Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, p. 328.

of the 14th century⁵, to confirm the theoretical legacy of the apparatus of notes in the *Expositio super libros Ethicorum Aristotelis*.

2. Non de necessitate sequitur opus: judgment, choice, and action in akrasia

Burley's commentary on book 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics* is almost entirely devoted to the problem of *akrasia* (*incontinentia* in the text and in Latin sources). His account closely follows the Aristotelian text, in which the Greek philosopher established the framework of reference on *akrasia* that was subsequently accepted and discussed by all medieval commentators.

According to Aristotle, the akratic is the person who, under the influence of passions and sensible desires, performs an act she knows to be evil. She has *prohairesis* (the capacity to make rational choices) and *boulesis* (the desire in accordance to reason that puts the deliberation of *prohairesis* into practice), but the force of her *epithumia* (sensible desire) is such that it prevents her from turning deliberations into action⁶. While aware that action *x* is preferable to action *y*, the akratic chooses to do *y*, thus failing to perform the practical syllogism. She does not place the particular judgement "this thing is sweet" under the universal premise "Do not taste any sweet thing", as the rules of logical inference would require, but under the opinion "all sweet things procure pleasure", thus acting contrarily to the judgement issued by intellect⁷.

Aquinas' *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, on which Burley's text is based, was grounded on the belief that *akrasia* is essentially a cognitive matter – a belief warranted by Aristotle's text itself⁸. Although Burley

⁵ Cfr. Daniel A. Di Liscia, *Introduction*, in Id., Edith Sylla (eds.), *Quantifying Aristotle. The Impact, Spread and Decline of the Calculatores Tradition*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2022, pp. 1-19; Daniel A. Di Liscia, *Perfections and Latitudes: The Development of the Calculators Tradition and the Geometrisation of Metaphysics and Theology*, in Id., Sylla, *Quantifying Aristotle*, pp. 278-327; Sylvain Roudaut, *La mesure de l'être: Le problème de la quantification des formes au Moyen Âge (ca. 1250-1370)*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2022; Edith Sylla, *The Oxford Calculators in Context*, «Science in Context», 1, 2 (1987), pp. 257-79.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1145b8-1145b20.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1147a25-1147b1-5.

⁸ Thomae Aquinatis *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, in Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia*, Vol. XLVII, 1-2, pp. 379-87. On *akrasia* in Thomas Aquinas, cfr. Riccardo Fedriga, Roberto Limonta, *Debolezza di volontà e libertà del volere in Tommaso d'Aquino*, «Giornale Critico della filosofia italiana», VII (2017), vol. XIII, Fasc. III, pp. 468-86; Riccardo Fedriga, Roberto Limonta, *Vivo ego iam non ego. Un singolare caso di incontinentia in Tommaso d'Aquino e le sue fonti*, in Fulvia