

Aristotle on Actions from Lack of Control

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aristotle's puzzle about lack of control in *NE 7.3: the philosophical problem Nicomachean Ethics 7.3*¹ is constructed as a solution to Aristotle's first (and perhaps most important) puzzle (*aporia*)² concerning lack of control,³ namely, "whether uncontrolled people [act] knowingly or not, and in what way knowingly" (*NE 7.3, 1146b8–9*).⁴ This puzzle arises out of a conflict between two views of lack of control. There is the ordinary view according to which the uncontrolled agent knows, while she acts, that her action is bad. She acts as she does because she is overcome

1. The main ideas of this article are derived from part of my doctoral dissertation, which was submitted to Princeton University in 2008. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation advisers John M. Cooper and Hendrik Lorenz for their many insightful comments, suggestions, and astute criticisms that were of invaluable help to me both in writing the dissertation and in developing my ideas further into their present form. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Comenius University (Slovakia), University of Toronto, and UC Irvine. I would like to thank the audiences for their comments and questions, especially Rachel Barney, David Bronstein, Tomáš Čana, David Charles, Sean Greenberg, Róbert Maco, Casey Perin, Martin Pickavé, Ladislav Sabela, and Jennifer Whiting. I would also like to thank the following people who have provided me with many useful comments at various stages of this paper: Stewart Duncan, Brad Inwood, Ben Mitchell-Yellin, John Palmer, and Naly Thaler. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at the *Philosopher's Imprint* for their many excellent comments and Daniel Ehrlich for his help with final editing.
2. In *NE 7.2* Aristotle raises a number of additional puzzles. These additional puzzles are discussed in *NE 7.4–10*.
3. In modern philosophical literature, "akrasia" (now an English word found in the OED) has come to refer to an intentional and free action contrary to one's better judgment. For Aristotle, however, in order to act with *akrasia* the agent must act on her non-rational desire (appetite) and against her decision (*NE 3.2, 1111b13–5; 7.8, 1151a6–7*) rather than against mere judgment, and she must experience an internal psychological conflict between the decision and a non-rational desire (e.g., *NE 1.13, 1102b13–25*). In the Aristotelian sense, *akratic* actions are blameworthy and ethically problematic, but *akratic* actions in the modern sense need not be either of these. In order to avoid confusion, I translate the Greek word "akrasia" as "lack of control," reserving the English word "akrasia" for the modern conception.
4. Aristotle's dialectical method starts from collecting the relevant phenomena that prominently include the views of other experts on the relevant subject (*endoxai*). When the phenomena conflict, they give rise to puzzles (*aporiai*). These puzzles provide Aristotle with starting points for investigation. For an account of Aristotle's dialectical method in *NE 7.1–2*, see Cooper (2009).

by pleasure (NE 7.1, 1145b12–4).⁵ And there is Socrates' view according to which it is impossible to act against knowledge.⁶ Consequently, it is impossible to perform an action that one knows is bad when one has (and knows that one has) some other, better action, available (NE 7.2, 1145b23–7). Since, on this view, knowledge cannot be overcome, an uncontrolled action is done out of ignorance of the true value of the pleasure at which the action aims. These two views contradict each other insofar as one of them holds, while the other one denies, that the uncontrolled agent acts knowingly when she acts without control.⁷

Aristotle's solution to the puzzle is, however, less clear than his statement of it. Perhaps the most striking difficulty concerns Aristotle's claim, at the very end of NE 7.3 (1147b13–7), that his solution preserves

5. This view is characterized as being that of ordinary people (or, rather, of "the many") by Plato at *Prot.* 352b–c. But it is also a view expressed, for example, by Euripides. Thus Medea says: "I understand the evil deed I am about to commit, but my passion (*thumos*), the cause of the greatest evils that men do, is stronger than the purposes of my deliberate thoughts (*bouleumatōn*)" (*Medea* 1078–80).
6. This view is articulated by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras* at 358c–d.
7. The puzzle cannot arise, as it is often taken to arise, merely from Socrates' own position being contradictory to *phainomena* understood as some given facts of experience since Socrates' position is an explanation of that experience. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates is not denying that there is a certain kind of experience people have that they call "being weaker than oneself" (*to hēttō einai hautou*) (*Prot.* 358c) wherein people fail to do the best thing available to them while knowing or believing (*Prot.* 358c–d) (although perhaps only beforehand) that it is available to them: "Come with me then to try to persuade people and to teach them what is this experience (*pathos*) which they call being overcome by pleasures and because of which they fail to do the best things, when they know what they are" (*Prot.* 352e4–353a3). Rather, Socrates denies the truth of a particular kind of explanation of this experience that suggests that people act so because they (*i. e.*, their knowledge or beliefs) have been overcome by pleasure. Aristotle's own interpretation of Socrates' position as denying that there is lack of control needs to be understood in this light, *i. e.*, as denying that people are ever overcome by pleasure in that way. When he says that Socrates' view "manifestly contradicts the phenomena," the *phenomena* in question just are the views about the nature of lack of control he has already mentioned in NE 7.1, and not any obvious facts about how things are. On this point, see Owen (1967) and Cooper (1999). For a view that constructs the puzzle (including Socrates' own position in the *Protagoras*) differently, see Corcilius (2008).

Socrates' account of uncontrolled actions. In the chapter, this claim is anticipated and reflected in Aristotle's repeated insistence that acting against actively held knowledge would be unintelligible, describing such (impossible) cases as terrible (*deinon*) (1146b34)⁸ and astonishing (*thaumaston*) (1147a9–10).⁹ Similarly, when Aristotle introduces his well-known pattern for explanation of action (practical syllogism) at 1147a24–31, he asserts that once its two premises, the universal one (representing the agent's decision or desire) and the particular one (representing the agent's knowledge or awareness of the salient features of her situation), are put together, the agent necessarily and immediately asserts and believes the conclusion or, in the case of beliefs about doing things, necessarily and immediately acts (1147a26–8).¹⁰

Aristotle is thus committed to the view that one cannot act against one's actively held knowledge (or beliefs)¹¹ while one is aware that the knowledge applies to one's situation. But he makes it equally obvious (in NE 7.3 and elsewhere) that he thinks that uncontrolled actions (understood as actions against one's knowledge) exist: the uncontrolled agent is one who acts on her non-rational desire and against her decision (*prohairesis*).¹²

8. That the meaning of *deinon* in NE 7.3 is "terrible because impossible" is clear from NE 7.2, 1145b23, where Aristotle uses it — in reporting Socrates' view that acting against one's knowledge is impossible — to express the idea of impossibility. A similar use of *deinon* can be found in Plato's *Theaetetus* at 184d. See Burnyeat (1976, 30).
9. That the meaning of *thaumaston* (which can simply mean puzzling without any implication about the intelligibility of what is puzzling) is "astonishing because impossible" is clear from its correlation with *atopon* (absurd) in the same sentence.
10. A different interpretation of the passage, according to which the agent can fail to act even when she puts the two premises together, is defended by Charles (1984, 128–32). I discuss his view in section 3 below.
11. One needs to keep in mind that although Aristotle continues to speak about knowledge, the puzzle arises on his view equally with belief. His argument is meant to apply to actions against both knowledge and belief (1146b25–32).
12. See NE 3.2, 1111b13–5; 7.8, 1151a6–7. In NE 7.3, the term "decision" (*prohairesis*) comes up in the opening passage at 1146b22–4, where Aristotle characterizes the distinction between the intemperate (*akolastos*) and the uncontrolled

It is significant that Aristotle conceives of the uncontrolled agent as acting against her decision rather than mere judgment. Decisions are not mere prescriptions or thoughts about what one should do. They are desires¹³ that result from successful deliberation (*NE* 3.3, 1113a2–5; 6.2, 1139a23; *EE* 2.10, 1226b17) about what action would best promote an end that is desired in virtue of its being conceived of as good by the agent. An end of this sort is the object of a rational kind of desire that Aristotle calls wish (*boulēsis*).¹⁴ Wish is a desire, which one

agent in terms of decision: the intemperate agent does, whereas the uncontrolled does not, decide to pursue the pleasure at hand. That the uncontrolled agent does not decide to do so is obvious to Aristotle from the fact that he does not think or believe that he should pursue it. Note that believing or thinking that one should do something is here treated as a necessary condition for deciding to do it.

13. Some commentators deny that *prohairesis* is a desire. For example, Sarah Broadie has argued that decision “as such does not carry an inherent psychological power or forceful tendency to suppress or push past recalcitrant elements within the soul” (Broadie and Rowe [2002, 43]). On her view, decision is “more like a judgment than it is like a desire” (Ibid.). There is perhaps no single passage which can decide the issue but there seems to be cumulative *prima facie* evidence for the view that decision is a desire. First, Aristotle defines it as a certain kind of desire, in particular a “deliberative desire” (e.g., *NE* 6.2, 1139a24) and puts it on a par with other desires as something that can make an animal move (e.g., *MA* 701a4–5). Second, when he argues, in *NE* 1.13, that the human soul has two distinct aspects or parts, one rational and one non-rational, he appeals to the presence of two contrary impulses in the uncontrolled agent (1102b21). One of these impulses originates in reason (see, for example, *DA* 432b27–33a3, 433b5–10, 434a12–5; *EE* 1224a32–b21, 1247b18 for the identification of the reason’s command as an impulse or a desire) and, in the uncontrolled agent, this rational impulse “fights against and resists” (1102b14) the other one, which comes from a non-rational source of motivation (Cf. *Republic* 439c–441c). Third, when Aristotle describes the case of self-control at *DA* 433a1–5, he portrays the self-controlled person as acting (in this case, resisting) on her thought against her appetite. The case of self-control is significant, since the issue turns on whether we need to invoke, in explaining the self-controlled agent’s action of resisting her bad desires, anything besides her rational commitment or beliefs. Aristotle does not appear to suggest that we do (see also note 18 below). For a detailed discussion of the issue, see Dahl (1984, 35–99; 188–200).
14. On most interpretations, wish (or, at any rate, the virtuous person’s wish) is ultimately grounded, in one way or another, in the agent’s conception of *eudaimonia*; if something is to be considered good by the agent, it must be the case that she thinks that it contributes to her *eudaimonia* (although she need

has when one believes, and takes oneself to have a *reason* to believe, that something is good for oneself (*NE* 3.4, 1113b23–7). Decisions are thus conative psychological states that are expressive of the agent’s sincerely held beliefs or knowledge of what is good and bad. They carry rational conviction (*pistis*)¹⁵ and exhibit what Aristotle calls the strength or vehemence of supposition (*sphodrotēs hupolēpseōs*).¹⁶ One can usefully conceive of them as sincere resolutions or commitments to action that one has made with full knowledge or understanding of why one does them.

The problem of the uncontrolled agent is that although she has made her decision and is convinced about the course of action she has decided for, when the time comes, she fails to stick to it and instead does something else — typically the very thing that she decided not to do. One could attempt to solve the problem by claiming that people who act in this way retract their previous decisions, and having changed their minds, make a new one. But this kind of solution does not work for Aristotle: it would require him to change the assumption that uncontrolled people can and do have full knowledge or understanding of why they should act in the way they decided to act.¹⁷ Only if their knowledge were in some sense incomplete, would it make sense to think that they could have come to see something (say, some pleasure) as a reason for changing their minds. The assumption of full knowledge, however, requires that no such further reasons, as

not know explicitly in what way it does so). For an overview of the different interpretations of wish (including views that oppose accounts that ground wish in *eudaimonia*), see Pearson (2012, 141–67).

15. *Pistis* (conviction) is tied to persuasion by reasoning (*DA* 428a16–24). As Aristotle says: “Some people are convinced about what they believe no less than others about what they know” (1146b29–30). See also *EE* 2.10, 1226b21–30. This is why Aristotle remarks that it does not matter whether the state (which one should not be able to act against) amounts to knowledge or belief (1146b24–31).
16. Here I follow Burnet (1900, 299). See *Top.* 4.5, 126b25–7.
17. See *NE* 7.1, 1145b10–4; 7.8, 1151a20–9.

far as they are concerned, exist. Aristotle's uncontrolled agents do not change their minds and neither do they retract their decisions.

But how are we, then, to understand Aristotle's claim that the uncontrolled agent acts against her decision and on a mere non-rational desire? Given Aristotle's own assumptions, an action of this sort should not be possible. The challenge of any interpretation lies in finding a satisfying answer to how, on Aristotle's account, an uncontrolled agent can both act against her decision (or knowledge) *while* knowing that she should not be doing that (1146b31) and yet not violate Aristotle's claim that acting against actively held knowledge (*i. e.*, decision) is impossible.¹⁸

18. One might wonder about the way in which a rational state (such as decision or wish) can initiate (or prevent) bodily movement. Given that Aristotle tells us that what is required for movement is some form of "heating and chilling" (*MA* 701a35), one might form the view that only non-rational desires can initiate movement. One might think this because the processes of heating and chilling are connected with bodily pleasures and pains and these pleasures and pains can take the form of various affections or feelings (*pathē*). Thus when Aristotle tells us that affections prepare the bodily parts (702a18) which then perform the actual movements, one might form the view that it is only the non-rational desires that can initiate actual movement. In view of this, one might then further think that decisions must be more like mere judgments or commands that have to be carried out by non-rational desires which, being receptive of such commands (although being so receptive with a varying degree of enthusiasm) are in a position to initiate the appropriate bodily movements (Cf. *MM* 2.7, 1206b8–29). This is a cogent line of thought. However, since Aristotle's distinction between rational and non-rational desires is a distinction between different ways in which we can come to desire things (and so between different kinds of desire insofar as their intentional objects are concerned) but not between different ways in which desires (rational or non-rational) initiate movement, this line of thought need not be adopted. First, notice that although a rational desire (such as a wish) is or can be characterized as a desire without pain (*Top.* 146b2), this can mean only that it does not arise from and is not grounded in a previous "painful" state of lack as non-rational desires are. Aristotle never says that it is a desire whose satisfaction is without pleasure. He is in fact quite clear that the rational pleasures *are* real pleasures (*e. g.*, *NE* 1168b28–69a8, *EE* 1224b16–9), and that they are motivationally efficacious. They are what can make us do, or refrain from doing, things (1175a30–b25). The fact that they do not involve restoration of a bodily lack to some natural state does not imply that they do not involve any bodily activities at all. Second, the processes of heating or chilling which are required for the *pathē* which initiate movement (*MA* 702a17–9) to occur are produced by thought or *phantasia* (701a35, 703b13–5) and *not* by desire.

1.2. The problems of interpreting *NE* 7.3: the exegetical problem

Although *NE* 7.3 promises the answer, it poses difficult exegetical problems that make determining the answer exceedingly difficult. The core of Aristotle's discussion is divided into two parts: the first part which runs from 1146b31 to 1147a24, and the second part, which Aristotle calls a "physical" (*phusikōs*) account, and which runs from 1147a24 to 1147b12.¹⁹ In the first part, Aristotle introduces three ways in which someone can have but not use knowledge in action. These three ways are introduced as objections to Socrates' view that while acting without control, the uncontrolled agent cannot be acting against her knowledge and so she must be ignorant of the fact that what she does is wrong, instead believing that it is, at least at the moment she acts, the best thing to do (*NE* 7.2, 1145b23–32). Of the third way of having but not using knowledge (1147a10–7) – the way in which people who are mad, drunk, or asleep have but do not use it – Aristotle asserts that it is the way in which the uncontrolled agent has but does not use her knowledge while she acts without control.²⁰ In the second part (the physical account), Aristotle makes use of syllogistic apparatus with the overt purpose of illuminating the causes of uncontrolled action. The

Desires (whether rational or non-rational) are already accompanied by (or involve) heating or chilling (it is in fact what they in part are) and that is why they can produce the *pathē*. Desire (*orexis*) is already a reaching out – it is what leads one from thought, *phantasia* or perception to the affection that then extends to an actual movement of the limbs. It is important, in fact crucial, to see that the *pathē* that are said to prepare the organic parts for movement in the *MA* are not emotions (such as love, hate, or fear) but, rather, alterations (701a5, 701b11–32) in the animal (in or around the heart) that are productive of the appropriate movements. For a discussion that is critical of the kind of view adopted (but not defended) here, see Corcilius 2008d, 160–207.

19. It is often thought that since Aristotle says that the exposition in the second half of *NE* 7.3 contains a *phusikōs* account, the first part of the chapter must contain a *logikōs* account even if Aristotle does not explicitly say so. I am not committed to the view that the first part of Aristotle's discussion is *logikōs* in the technical sense of the term. For the contrast between *phusikōs* and *logikōs* (or *analutikōs*) methods see *Phys.* 264a7, *GC* 316a11, or *DA* 403a2.
20. The claim is repeated at *NE* 7.10, 1152a14–6.

problem is that it is neither clear how the two parts are related to each other, nor what the theory (or theories) in each of them is.

Some scholars have taken at its face value Aristotle's claim, in the first part of the chapter, that the uncontrolled person's state of mind is like that of people who are drunk, mad, or asleep, but concluded that it leads to an implausible theory since it would mean that the uncontrolled agent's mind is clouded. David Bostock describes it in the following way: the "desire or other emotion involved simply blocks one's ability to take in and keep in mind the relevant facts."²¹ Some scholars have accepted that this is Aristotle's view, but concluded, along with Bostock, that it is "a wholly incredible account"²² since it reduces uncontrolled actions to outbursts of uncontrollable emotions.²³ As they saw it, such "general obfuscation"²⁴ of the mind would entirely undermine the claim that the uncontrolled agent knows what she is doing in any (still plausible) way at all.

Most scholars have thus focused on the physical account, treating the previously introduced three ways of having but not using knowledge as mere preliminary distinctions.²⁵ The problem is that the physical account appears inconsistent. It describes the state of mind of the uncontrolled agent by means of a practical syllogism which Aristotle introduces at 1147a24–31. The first challenge is that according to the central passage of the account, the so-called "two-syllogism"²⁶ passage

21. Bostock (2000, 127).

22. Ibid.

23. See Austin (1979, 198) for an example of an interpretation of Aristotle (and Plato) along these lines.

24. Kenny (1966).

25. The traditional view has been to see them as the first three of the gradually more refined solutions, so that only the physical account is in fact the actual solution. See, for example, Gauthier and Jolif (1970, 605); Joachim (1955, 223); and Robinson (1969, 141). A similar approach has been recently championed by Whiting and Pickavé (2008). An alternative proposal (one more akin to the interpretation I argue for in this paper) has been put forward by Corcilius (2008a), who argues that the first part is concerned with knowledge of the uncontrolled agent whereas the second part with the uncontrolled action.

26. I call it the "two-syllogism" passage because it has been thought to contain

at 1147a31–5, the uncontrolled agent draws the good conclusion (that she should not taste). But according to the immediately preceding passage which introduces the practical syllogism, the agent should not draw the good conclusion because if she had done so, she would not have acted without control.

The second challenge is that in the "two-syllogism" passage Aristotle clearly says (at 1147a33) that the particular premise "this is sweet" is active. But further down in the chapter (at 1147b9–12) he says (or it seems plausible to think that he says) that it is the particular premise that the uncontrolled agent either lacks²⁷ or does not use when he acts without control. If both passages describe uncontrolled action, it seems that Aristotle is contradicting himself. It also seems natural to connect the later passage (1147b9–12) with the passage at 1146b35–1147a10 (the second of the three ways of having but not using knowledge) according to which one can act against a universal premise or proposition if one does not have or does not use one's knowledge of the particular proposition. On the basis of these two passages, one may well think that Aristotle suggests, despite the contradictory appearances in the "two-syllogism" passage, that while acting without control the agent does not have or is not using the relevant particular premise.

1.3. *The main interpretative strategies*

The interpretative strategies²⁸ that have been explored in the literature divide according to whether they do or do not allow the uncontrolled

two competing practical syllogisms: one good (representing the decision) and one bad (representing the uncontrolled action). I am not committed to the view that there are in fact two distinct practical syllogisms described in the passage.

27. Some scholars have argued that the "last proposition" refers to the conclusion of the practical syllogism, rather than to the particular premise. I discuss the issue in section 3.

28. The brief overview of interpretations of *NE* 7.3 that follows is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of the literature on Aristotle's theory of lack of control. Given the number of interpretations available as well as the complexity and difficulty of the issues, philosophical and exegetical, involved, such discussion is not possible within the constraints of a single article.

agent to draw the good conclusion. According to the first strategy, the uncontrolled agent fails to draw the good conclusion since, if she did, she would not have acted without control. Because Aristotle says that an agent must draw the conclusion when both the universal and the particular premises are present, the uncontrolled agent's failure to do so is generally explained by her failure to grasp, or actively hold in mind, one of the relevant premises. In other words, the cause of the uncontrolled action is to be located in a cognitive failure. The traditional approach has been to argue that the agent fails to grasp the particular premise.²⁹

All interpretations based on this strategy run into a similar set of problems. First, they need to explain why the particular premise is said to be active in the "two-syllogism" passage and, in fact, the agent appears to be drawing the good conclusion. One solution is to argue that the active premise is not the one leading to the good conclusion, but to the bad one (*i. e.*, there are in fact two particular premises, although only one of them is mentioned explicitly).³⁰ The uncontrolled agent acts as she does, because she is solely focused on the attractive feature of what she desires, ignoring or not being aware that the object also has a feature that made her decide against it. The problem is that it seems perfectly conceivable that one can be attracted and not attracted to the same thing in the very same respect. One may have an appetite for deep-fried things, precisely because their being deep-fried makes them pleasant to eat. But one may have also decided not to eat deep-fried things because they are unhealthy. It is mysterious how one could notice that something is pleasant but not that it is unhealthy, if it is perceived to be both precisely in virtue of its being deep-fried.

Another solution has been to argue that the premise is active, but not in relation to one's decision, but only to one's appetite, having been "hijacked" by it. One problem with a view along these lines is that it is unclear how the uncontrolled agent can use the same

particular premise with one universal premise but fail to use it with another, given that she is supposed to be actively attending to all the premises in question.³¹ These two versions of the first strategy are thus exegetically difficult, since the former has to postulate the presence of an additional premise,³² and the latter has to appeal to the ability of appetites to selectively hijack premises away from reason's (although not the agent's) awareness.³³

31. There are a number of similar interpretations, each with significant individual variations. For some of the classic versions, see Joachim (1955, 228); Hardie (1981, 258–93); and Gauthier and Jolif (2002, 602–17).
32. Gosling (1990, 33–7) also argues that the uncontrolled agent fails to use a particular premise, but it is not the particular premise "this is sweet" (which is needed to draw the good conclusion) but, rather, the other particular premise distinguished earlier at *NE* 7.3, 1146b35–1147a10 that concerns the agent and that is also needed if one is to act according to the universal premise. The agent fails to realize that she is the sort of person whom the decision concerns since appetite makes the agent forget that. The upshot is that although the agent may perfectly well know all the good premises and the good conclusion, they lose any practical import for him. I may know that one should not eat sweets (and so one should not eat the sweets that I see in front of me) but that would only apply to me if I was interested in my health. In the uncontrolled action my appetite makes me temporarily lose interest in health (or forget that I am interested in it) and so I will take some sweets while still being perfectly well aware of my previous reasoning. Gosling's solution faces various problems. First, if I drink wine despite my decision not to drink wine when driving because I am currently unaware of the fact that I am the driver, then it is not clear why my action is not to be classified as a case of absentmindedness rather than of lack of control (see my discussion of 1146b35–47a10 below). Second, why would the agent be thinking (other than by chance) of the universal premise (as the physical account suggests she does), if she does not know or has forgotten that it applies to her?
33. Sarah Broadie attempts to deal with this problem by proposing that in *NE* 7.3 the expressions "knowledge is used" and "knowledge is active" (or "contemplated") are not interchangeable (Broadie and Rowe [54–57; 391–94]). She interprets "used" as meaning "used as it should be used," and "active" as meaning "to be acted upon." Hence, when at 1147a33 Aristotle says that "this is sweet" is active, it is still an open question whether it is also used as it should be used. In fact, it is not used as it should be used since the agent acts wrongly upon it (instead of avoiding the sweet, she goes for it). But this interpretation cannot be supported by the text *NE* 7.3. When drawing the first distinction between having and using and having but not using one's knowledge (1146b31–35), Aristotle switches freely from "use" (*chrēsthai*) to "contemplate" (*theōrein*) and the text gives no incentive to interpret "contemplate" otherwise

29. Examples include: Price (2006); Grgić (2002); Gosling (1990); Mele (1985).

30. For a classic statement of this view, see Robinson (1969).

Even in putting these issues aside, however, there are two difficult problems that tend to undermine most, if not all, interpretations along these lines. First, there is no viable explanation of how the uncontrolled agent suddenly becomes unaware or unable to grasp the relevant premise — especially since it is quite possible (as well as highly probable) that the agent has made her decision (*i.e.*, the universal premise — say, not to eat sweets) in view of her awareness that there are some sweets available (*i.e.*, the particular premise). Second, the lack of the relevant particular premise threatens to render the uncontrolled action involuntary: if the agent does not know or is not aware that the object she wants (or the action she is to take) has the feature that made her decide against it (say, being sweet), then her engaging in the action under that description (say, eating sweets) is not voluntary.³⁴

In view of these problems, a recent approach, developed by Jennifer Whiting and Martin Pickavé, takes the cognitive failure to concern the universal proposition (*i.e.*, the agent's decision) rather than the particular one.³⁵ On their view, the agent's appetite impedes her knowledge of the universal belief prohibitive of the uncontrolled action. She consequently does not or perhaps cannot bring this knowledge from the first to the second actuality and so is unable to refrain from the action. In other words, the agent temporarily forgets about her decision on account of her appetite. One problem with this interpretation is that the uncontrolled agent does not act against her decision in the way in which her action would qualify as a case of lack of control — as opposed to, for example, a case of mere forgetfulness,

than as an alternative expression for "use." In the next passage (1146b35–1147a7), Aristotle says that it is not strange to act against one's knowledge (*i.e.*, one's universal premise) when not *using* the particular premise that goes with it (1147a2–3). After giving an example of the premise ("this here is such and such") he says that the agent either does not have or does not *activate* (*energein*) it (1147a7). It is quite clear that "activate" and "use" are used interchangeably in this passage.

34. One could take the view that the uncontrolled action is involuntary, but this is not Aristotle's view (1152a14–6).

35. Whiting and Pickavé (2008).

or fickleness. Another problem concerns the way in which appetite is supposed to make the agent forget her decision. One way in which it could do so is by making the agent ignore the relevant particular premise.³⁶ But then, similarly to the preceding case, we need an explanation of how appetite can make one unaware of some feature of one's situation if that feature could just have served as the basis of one's deliberation and decision.

All interpretations based on the first strategy solve the problem of how an uncontrolled agent can both act against her knowledge *while* knowing that she is doing so and yet not violate the *dictum* that acting against actively held knowledge is impossible by making the agent ignorant (in one way or another) of the fact that, at the moment she acts, she is acting against her knowledge. Although this is a possible account of uncontrolled actions, it comes too close to the Socratic denial of uncontrolled actions and moves too far away from Aristotle's claim that the uncontrolled agent knows, even if only *in a way*, that what she does is wrong (1152a14–6).

The second strategy tries to avoid this problem by arguing that although the agent knows that she is acting in that way, her knowledge is somehow not full-fledged: it is, one might say, merely theoretical. The failure is thus motivational rather than cognitive. This strategy begins by arguing that the uncontrolled agent draws the good conclusion (*i.e.*, she does not lack any of the premises) but that, despite doing so, she does not act on it. Interpretations along these lines have an easier time explaining the content of the "two-syllogism" passage since they can take it at face value.³⁷ But they face another problem — why does the agent not act on her conclusion? One prominent interpretation claims that it is because her mode of holding that conclusion is in some way

36. Whiting and Pickavé (2008, 335).

37. However, they then have to argue that Aristotle is not committed to the view that if the agent has and actively attends to both premises then he must *necessarily* act on them, as the passage preceding the "two-syllogism" passage appears to claim (1147a24–31). I discuss this passage in section 3.

“off-color.”³⁸ She draws the good conclusion, but lacks the motivation to carry it out.

The problem with this interpretation is that it works well as a characterization of the uncontrolled agent’s general condition but not as an explanation of her uncontrolled action. The uncontrolled agent’s knowledge seems to be “off-color” all the time, not only on the specific occasion of the uncontrolled action, since not all her desires reflect her knowledge of what is best for her to do. But *NE* 7.3 makes clear that the general condition of the uncontrolled agent is not sufficient to explain particular uncontrolled actions: it tells us that during the uncontrolled action, the agent is in some abnormal or impaired cognitive condition from which condition the agent recovers after the uncontrolled action (1147b6–9).³⁹

1.4. The main theses

In this paper, I argue for three main theses. First, I argue that the first part of *NE* 7.3 (the so-called “logical” account) is not a mere preliminary stage in Aristotle’s investigation but that it contains the description of the *overall* state of mind of the agent *while* she acts without control. The core of Aristotle’s solution lies in an analogy between the uncontrolled agent and people who are drunk, mad, or asleep, which, however, does not commit Aristotle to the view that the uncontrolled agent’s state of mind is clouded or unclear in the way in which it has been thought to do so in the literature. But in order to reconstruct the precise point of the analogy, one needs to follow the trail of the various non-standard cognitive states of mind in Aristotle’s psychological writings.⁴⁰ As it turns out, the uncontrolled agent, while acting with-

38. The best example of this interpretation is developed in Charles (1984, 109–160). See also Charles (2009) and Dahl (1984).

39. One possibility would be to argue that the agent’s knowledge or decision becomes “off-color” only on the relevant occasion. But then there must be something that explains what made it “off-color” at that time in the first place. In other words, pointing to the “off-color” nature of the knowledge at the time of the action is a way of describing the phenomenon, but not of explaining it.

40. My interpretation relies on connecting the textual evidence in the chapter to

out control, is in possession of her knowledge but she is unable to use it *as* knowledge due to the temporary disablement of her reason by appetite (I will explain this in section 2). In this sense, she knows but also does not know (1147a14–5). Although the inability to use her knowledge *as* knowledge has little impact on her ability to act in general, it does inhibit her ability to be motivated to act by her knowledge (and so by her own decisions). Second, I argue that the physical discussion provides an analysis of the *particular* mental state from which the uncontrolled action issues. The “two-syllogism” passage (*NE* 7.3, 1147a31–5) is a description of the uncontrolled agent’s state of mind *before* the uncontrolled action and not, as it has been traditionally understood, a description of her state of mind *during* the uncontrolled action.

Understood this way, the two parts of *NE* 7.3 are answers to two different questions. The first part provides an answer to the question about the possibility of uncontrolled behavior in light of Aristotle’s assumptions about the impossibility of acting against one’s knowledge or decision. The second part identifies the local or immediate causes of uncontrolled action (appetitive desire and perception of something that would satisfy it) as they must be present in the uncontrolled agent’s mind before the uncontrolled action occurs (*i. e.*, before the agent slips into the state in which he acts without control). Aristotle needs both accounts to capture the uncontrolled agent since neither the account of her state of mind during the uncontrolled action nor of her state of mind before it are distinctive of her (the former applies also to other agents, such as those who are mad, drunk, or asleep, and the latter applies also to self-controlled agents). This explains the presence of both accounts in the chapter (assigning them distinctive and important roles) and avoids the various exegetical problems I have mentioned above.

Third, I argue that Aristotle does *not*, in *NE* 7.3, offer an account of the transition from the state before the uncontrolled action (*i. e.*, a

other texts and passages to which Aristotle alludes in *NE* 7.3. As Myles Burnyeat (2002, 31–2) remarks, the cross-references in Aristotle’s works can offer “guidance as to how a particular stretch of a writing should be read.”

state in which the agent is still sticking to her decision and resisting the uncontrolled desire) to the state in which she already acts without control. In other words, he does not explain what tips the scales and prompts the agent to succumb to the non-rational desire. However, in referring the reader to “physiologists” (1147b9) for this account, he provides us with a vital clue to understand what his account is (or would be) and why it is not present in his discussion of uncontrolled action in *EN*. In particular, the account does not involve any psychological state that would constitute the agent’s choice to abandon her decision and give in to her desires. The transition proceeds on a purely physiological level.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I discuss the first part (1146b31–47a24) of Aristotle’s discussion of uncontrolled action in *NE* 7.3 in which Aristotle introduces three ways of knowing but not using one’s knowledge. I argue that the third way is the clue to Aristotle’s theory of the state of mind of the uncontrolled agent during her uncontrolled action. In section 3, I discuss the “physical” part of Aristotle’s discussion of lack of control (1147a25–b5). I focus on the famous “two-syllogism” passage, arguing that it is best interpreted as Aristotle’s description of the state of mind of the uncontrolled agent before her uncontrolled action. In section 4, I discuss and explain Aristotle’s claim (1147b13–7) that Socrates’ account also “comes about” in his theory. In section 5, I conclude with a brief discussion of the voluntariness of uncontrolled actions as Aristotle conceives of them.

2. The first part of Aristotle’s discussion (1146b30–47a24)

2.1. *The first two ways of knowing but not using knowledge* (1146b30–47a10)

Aristotle starts solving the puzzle (1146b8–9) by distinguishing three ways of having but not using knowledge (1146b31–1147a24). These distinctions are introduced as objections to Socrates’ view that while acting without control, the uncontrolled agent cannot be acting against her knowledge but, rather, must be ignorant of the fact that what she

does is wrong, believing that it is, at least at the moment she acts, the best thing to do (*NE* 7.2, 1145b23–32).

According to the first way (1146b30–5), one can act against one’s knowledge that what one does is bad provided one fails to use or attend to it at the relevant time. Here is an example: Vrinda decides not to drink wine at a party because, once the party is over, she has to drive a car. But she gets so caught up in a conversation that she absentmindedly pours herself a glass of wine and drinks it, not realizing that she does what she decided she would not do. Her mind was too intent on the current activity and so she failed to make the appropriate connection. Socrates’ view needs to be modified to accommodate cases of this sort: it is impossible to act against one’s knowledge, unless one does not use or attend to the knowledge at the time one acts. However, this distinction is compatible with the view that uncontrolled action is impossible. One could maintain that if Vrinda were not absent-minded and attended to the fact that what she is about to drink is wine, she would not have poured herself a glass. And if she poured herself a glass without being absent-minded, this could be best explained by her re-evaluating her original decision.

According to the second way (1146b35–47a10), one can even act against knowledge that one uses or attends to at the time one acts. Aristotle distinguishes between two different kinds of propositions (*protaseis*) that are operative in one’s action.⁴¹ On the one hand, there are universal propositions that represent one’s knowledge or beliefs about what one thinks is good or bad to do (and so also one’s decisions), such as one’s belief that drinking is impermissible for those who drive. On the other hand, there are particular propositions, which represent one’s knowledge or awareness of various particular facts relevant to

41. Aristotle sometimes distinguishes propositions (*protaseis*) that serve as premises from those that are the conclusions from those premises and uses the term *protasis* (as opposed to *sumperasma*) to refer to the premises in those contexts. As nothing in what I say depends on whether we translate *protasis* as premise or proposition, I continue to use both terms as translations of *protasis*, depending on what seems the best in the context. See Charles (1984, 120) for a discussion of this problem.

one's action (e.g. that one is the driver, or that the beverage in one's glass is alcoholic). As Aristotle explains, one can end up acting against a universal proposition (to which one might well attend at the time) if one fails to use some relevant particular proposition. The above example can be modified to fit this case. The conversation Vrinda gets caught up in concerns drinking and driving. She fiercely defends her view that one should never drink before driving, yet she drinks a glass of wine, because she temporarily forgets (being too intent on arguing her case) that she herself has to drive later that day. She thus acts against knowledge to which she is actively attending.⁴²

Socrates' view needs to be modified further. It is possible to act against one's knowledge, provided that either one does not use or attend to it at the time one acts, or that, although attending to it at the time one acts, one is unaware that it is applicable to one's situation in the relevant way. Although this distinction allows for action against *active* knowledge, it is still compatible with the view that uncontrolled action is impossible. One could maintain that if Vrinda recalled, at the crucial moment, that she is a driver that evening, she would not have poured herself a glass. And if she did, this would be best explained by her re-evaluating her original decision.

In neither of these two distinctions does Aristotle specify any particular reason why one does not attend to the relevant piece of knowledge or premise at the time one acts. It is left open whether it is because the agent does not know, temporarily forgets, or some cognitive failure is in place. Actions in which one acts against knowledge in this way can thus include cases of forgetfulness, absentmindedness, distraction, confusion, excitement, or simple ignorance. But uncontrolled action does not involve lack of knowledge or lack of awareness of the

42. Commentators often think that the particular proposition in which the universal term refers to the agent is irrelevant, on the grounds that in the *MA* Aristotle says that the particular premise which refers to the agent, is obvious and thought "does not stop to consider it" (701a 25). But as my example makes clear, it is possible not to know some relevant facts about oneself, or not attend to them, and to act against the knowledge one is actively attending to because of that. For a discussion, see Kenny (1979, 156–7). See also Perry (1979).

fact that one's knowledge is applicable. On the contrary, it involves acting as one knows or believes one should not act *when* one knows one should not act that way (e.g., 1146b34).⁴³

2.2. *The third way of having but not using knowledge (1147a10–7)*

Aristotle thus introduces yet another way of having but not using one's knowledge that is now explicitly supposed to illuminate the case of uncontrolled action:

(1) But human beings also have knowledge in a different way from the ones described. For we see that in having but not using, the state (*tēn hexin*)⁴⁴ can differ, so that someone both has [knowledge] in a way and also does not have it, as with someone who is asleep, mad, or drunk (*ton katheudonta kai mainomenon kai oinōmenon*). But those who are in affective states are in fact in that condition. For spirited desires, sexual appetites, and some such experiences clearly disturb the body as well, and even produce fits of madness in some people. It is clear then that we should say that the state of uncontrolled people is like the state of these people. (1147a10–7)

The passage makes several crucial claims. First, one can have but not be using one's knowledge in such a way that one can be said both to have it (in a way), but also not to have it. Second, this sort of way of having but not using one's knowledge is characteristic of people who

43. Irwin (1988) suggests that the uncontrolled agent is initially unaware of her future bad appetites and so fails to anticipate them. She thus makes a decision in which the presence of those appetites is not taken into account. It is, of course, possible that sometimes one's decisions are of the sort Irwin describes. But it seems that often when one makes a decision not to do something one does so because one anticipates that one will feel like doing it in the future. It seems highly unlikely that the uncontrolled agent would be continuously unaware of her own bad desires that she is repeatedly trying to resist.
44. Alternatively, *hē hexis* could mean "the having." In that case what differs would be the having: it is possible to have, while also, in a way, not to have the knowledge that one does not use.

are drunk, mad, or asleep. Third, people who are in the grip of emotions are also in such a condition.⁴⁵ As Aristotle says, various emotional states, such as spirited desires and sexual appetites, can, in some people and on some occasions, alter a person's bodily condition, and thus also his state of soul or mind.⁴⁶ Fourth, since uncontrolled people follow their non-rational impulses or feelings against reason, Aristotle concludes that their state of mind (with respect to knowledge) is like that of the people in the grip of emotions. When they act without control, they have, but are not using, their knowledge in the way in which drunk, mad, or sleeping people also have but are not using it.⁴⁷

When Aristotle asserts that the uncontrolled agent's state of mind is like or similar (*homoiōs*) to that of people who are drunk, mad, or asleep, he can mean that there is only a resemblance between those states. But it is more likely that Aristotle means that the same account⁴⁸ of the way in which one can have but not be using one's knowledge applies to all of them. A mention of mere resemblance (without specifying any further details) between the states would not be illuminating. However, the passage does not offer any further explanation of the relevant way of having but not using knowledge that pertains to

45. Obviously not all people who experience emotions are controlled by them. But Aristotle's point is that people sometimes experience emotions which are such that they disturb their bodies and minds to the extent that they can sometimes "even produce fits of madness." In saying this, he makes clear that he has in mind cases in which emotions have decisive influence over the agent's rational abilities.
46. I take it that in *kai to sōma* at 1147a16 the *kai* points to soul, or mind (alternatively one can supply knowledge as that is the subject of discussion, but it seems to me preferable to supply soul as the counterpart of body).
47. This claim is repeated again at *NE* 7.10, 1152a15 and should be compared with *MM* 1201b9–23.
48. There are many passages in which *homoiōs* can be translated as meaning "in the same way." See, for example, *DA* 402b8, 404b6, or 407a25. Of course, Aristotle is not saying that their overall states of minds are exactly the same; if he wanted to, he could have said, for example, that their minds are all in the same way (*ton auton tropōn echei*). His point concerns only the way they have but do not use their knowledge.

the states of mind it mentions.⁴⁹ We must thus look for illumination elsewhere. We can begin with a passage in the *Physics* which contains a useful remark on the state of mind of the people in the conditions mentioned in *NE* 7.3:

(2) Further, just as with someone who has passed from being drunk, asleep, or being sick (*ek tou methuein ē kath-eudein ē nosein*) into its contrary, we do not say that he has become knowing again, despite the fact that he was previously not able to use his knowledge. (*Phys.* 247b13–5)

Despite some terminological differences, the states of mind that Aristotle mentions in this passage are identical to the conditions mentioned in the passage in *NE* 7.3. In the *NE* 7.3 passage (as well as at *NE* 7.10, 1152a15), Aristotle uses the verb *oinoomai* (to be drunk or tipsy) to describe the drunk agent. It is sometimes thought that the fact that the word *oinōmenos* can be used to describe people who are merely tipsy (rather than dead drunk) is of significance in the context of the discussion of lack of control. However, in the *Physics* passage, in what surely appears to be the articulation of the same thought, Aristotle

49. Perhaps the only obvious point of the analogy is that it compares or likens the ways in which the people in the grip of passions (and so also the uncontrolled people) on the one hand, and the mad, drunk and sleeping people on the other hand, relate to their knowledge. The analogy leaves it, however, quite undetermined what the nature of the relationship to one's knowledge is supposed to be like. If taken in isolation, it forces the interpreter to supply an answer which can, however, very well make the analogy strained. For example, Corcilius (2008a, 153–4) suggests that the uncontrolled agent's emotions are not in the right relation to her knowledge. But it is difficult to see not only why one should think that it is a significant feature of the drunk or sleeping people that their emotions are not in the right relation to their knowledge but also why that should have any explanatory power in relation to their inability to use that knowledge. What is at stake is not the fact that emotions hinder the uncontrolled agent from using her knowledge. Aristotle takes that for granted and so he includes, without any argument, the uncontrolled agent among those who are in the grip of emotions. What is at stake is an elucidation of the way in which this can happen. Aristotle uses the analogy between people who are in the grip of passions and those who are in the mad, drunk, or sleeping state, in order to clarify the case of lack of control which, in his view, falls into the broader category of people in the grip of passions.

uses the stronger word *methuō* (to be drunk) and the same stronger verb is also used in *MM* at 1202a1–7 (translated below), where Aristotle (or the author of *MM*) draws another analogy between the drunk and the uncontrolled agent. Even if one doubts the *MM* passage, the passage in the *Phys.* is sufficient to show that it is highly unlikely that Aristotle would use these two words, in the same contexts, to mark distinct states.⁵⁰ In any case, my interpretation of the analogy does not require that the agent is dead drunk (in fact, this would undermine it), but only that she is sufficiently under the influence of wine that she is no longer sober and this condition can very well be described by both words. Rather than the mad (*mainomenos*) agent in *NE* 7.3, we have now someone who is sick (*nosein*). But these two words can be taken as equivalent since both words (in Greek) can signify temporary “disease” of the mind due to rage, passion, or desire.

According to passage 2, people sometimes end up in conditions, such as being drunk, mad, or asleep in which they temporarily cannot use their knowledge. When passages 1 and 2 are put together, they imply that the uncontrolled agent while acting without control is also in such a condition: she *cannot* use her knowledge which she nevertheless still possesses.⁵¹ This is the first and the most obvious point of the analogy and one clearly attested by textual evidence.

Another point becomes clear once one focuses on a notable feature

50. These two words are used synonymously by Plato at *Leg.* 775b–d: “To drink to the point of inebriation (*eis methēn*) is not proper at any place, except for the feasts of the god who made us the gift of wine, and it is dangerous too, and so especially for those who take marriage seriously. ...it is necessary that procreation not be performed when the bodies are dissolved by inebriation (*hupo methēs*)... But one who is drunk (*diōnōmenos*) moves and is moved around in every way, raging both body and soul.” Similarly, Euripides uses *oinomai* in *Bacchae* (685–90) to mark the stronger state of inebriation. It is true, of course, that *oinomai* can be and often is used to express a moderate state of being drunk, whereas *methuō* is more exclusively tied to being visibly drunk. Both can, however, be used to simply denote a general state of not being sober. If Aristotle wanted to contrast being drunk with being merely tipsy, he could have used other, more exact words. So, at *Prob.* 875a29–875a40, one who is *methuōn* is contrasted with one who is *akrothōrax*, which word unambiguously means “slightly drunk” or “tipsy.” See also note 71 below.

51. For this point, see also Zingano (2007).

that the conditions of being drunk, mad, and asleep have in common: they are global conditions affecting the agent’s knowledge indiscriminately and across the board. In other words, Aristotle is not likening uncontrolled action to a case of forgetfulness (*amnēmosunē*), self-deception (*heautōn exapatān*),⁵² inattentiveness (*aproxia*), or any other such condition which makes one unable to use or to focus on some specific piece of knowledge. This comes up clearly in passages in which Aristotle makes the various conditions we discussed so far (*i. e.*, sleep, disease, emotions, desires) responsible for disabling one’s mind (*nous*) or reasoning (*logismos*) across the board:

(3) And because *phantasiai* persist in us and are similar to perceptions, animals often act according to them, some because they don’t have mind, like the brutes, some because the mind is temporarily covered over (*epikaluptesthai*) by emotion, or disease, or sleep, like human beings. (*DA* 3.3, 429a4–8)

(4)⁵³ For it is so in the case of persons who are drunk (*methuontōn*). For those who are drunk, when the drunkenness (*methē*) has passed off, are themselves again. Reason (*logos*) was not expelled from them, nor was knowledge, but it was overcome by the drunkenness; and when they have got rid of the drunkenness, they are themselves again. So, then, it is with the uncontrolled person. His affection (*pathos*) gains the mastery and brings his reasoning (*logismos*) to a standstill. But when the affection, like

52. See *Pol.* 1260a25 for the use of this expression. Aristotle’s account of lack of control is interpreted as a case of self-deception by Corcilius (2008a).

53. Although it is generally not the best practice to use doctrines from *Magna Moralia* as evidence, in this case it seems to me that we are entitled to do so because the doctrine it spells out is fully consistent with textual evidence from elsewhere, and it makes explicit a point which other passages contain implicitly.

the drunkenness, has passed off, he is himself again. (*MM* 1202a1–7)⁵⁴

In passage 3, Aristotle tells us that the mind (*nous*) (rather than some specific belief or thought) is “covered over” as a whole since it is not the case that we continue to guide our actions by its cognitive power at all, but, as he says, by *phantasia*. In passage 4, the affection (drunkenness or appetite) brings reasoning to a standstill.⁵⁵ We must conclude that Aristotle thinks that the agents in the various conditions he mentions cannot access or make use of their knowledge *because* those conditions (sleep, disease, emotions, and appetites) can and sometimes do render one’s rational faculties inoperative: they temporarily “cover over” the mind.⁵⁶

According to these passages, then, Aristotle thinks that an action due to lack of control involves general incapacitation of one’s reasoning abilities. There is much work to be done before this idea can be

54. The translation is that of St. G. Stock in J. Barnes (ed.), *Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, 1984), modified.

55. In his discussion of pleasure in *NE* 7.11, Aristotle discusses the reasons why some people think that pleasure is not a good. One of the reasons is that pleasure impedes one’s ability to think and that, in the case of certain pleasures (sexual ones) it makes it impossible to think at all: “Further, pleasures are an impediment to thought (*empodion tō phronein*), and more so the more one enjoys them. For example, no one can think about anything while enjoying the pleasures of sex (*oudena gar an dunasthai noēsai ti en autē*)” (*NE* 7.11, 1152b16–8). This passage is problematic as evidence for any view held by Aristotle, since it is a report of an argument by other people. However, when Aristotle later rebuts this argument (*NE* 7.12, 1153a20–3), he does not deny that some pleasures can impede thinking (*i. e.*, make it hard or even impossible for the one who feels the pleasure to think). Rather, he says that no state is impeded by pleasures that are proper to it. There are pleasures arising from study and learning and those will make us study even more. But the possibility that pleasures alien to the state can impede it is left open.

56. See also *NE* 3.12, 1119b8–10: “For when someone is without understanding the desire for the pleasant is insatiable and indiscriminate, and the activity of appetite increases what he had from birth and if the appetites are large and intense they even drive out reasoning (*ton logismon ekkrouousin*).” Although this passage focuses on the vicious or intemperate people, it nevertheless provides evidence that Aristotle thinks that appetites or desires have the ability to disable one’s capacity to reason.

made intelligible as an account of lack of control. But before doing so, I want to address two immediate worries. First, one might think that any such general incapacitation of reason or mind would require a rather intense onset of emotions and that this would severely restrict the kind of uncontrolled behavior Aristotle’s theory (as I interpret it) can explain. Second, one might think that the very idea of the incapacitation of reason is implausible as an explanation of any kind of uncontrolled action.

The first worry might lead one to point to *NE* 7.6, where Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of uncontrolled agents. On the one hand, there are the weak uncontrolled agents who “having deliberated do not stick to the results of their deliberation on account of affection (*pathos*)” (1150b21–2). On the other hand, there are the impetuous uncontrolled agents who “are led by their affection on account of not having deliberated” (1150b22–3). So, when Aristotle says that the weak uncontrolled agents succumb to pleasures or temptations smaller (1151a1) than the impetuous agents, it might be thought that the appetites of the weak uncontrolled agents are just not strong enough to produce the kind of disablement required for my account. Right from the start, then, my account of the meaning of *NE* 7.3, 1147a10–7 would be well-suited only for the impetuous type of the uncontrolled agent in whom appetites are quick or intense (1150b27).

The proper answer to this objection can only be given once my account is fully on the table and I will come back to it at the end of section 3. But it is important to notice that Aristotle himself does not, in any of the passages quoted above, presuppose that the particular affection that is responsible for bringing one’s reasoning to a standstill is marked by particularly strong intensity. In fact, he does not say that the passions that are required to produce the impetuous kind of uncontrolled action need to be particularly strong or intense either. Rather, he says that certain sorts of people, only some of whom have intense desires, are likely to suffer from that kind of lack of control:

(5) The quickly excitable and the volatile people are most likely to suffer from impetuous lack of control because the former's [appetites] are so quick and the latter's so intense that they do not wait for reason on account of their tendency to follow *phantasia* (*dia to akolouthētikai einai tē phantasia*). (NE 7.7, 1150b25–28)

The passage clearly makes room for other kinds of agents (than the excitable and volatile) who can sometimes be prone to instances of impetuous uncontrolled action⁵⁷ and these agents need not have particularly intense desires. The passage mentions people who have quick rather than strong appetites and who can act without control on that account. Moreover, it is not even clear that the weak uncontrolled agent's desires are weaker than those of the impetuous one to begin with since all Aristotle says is that the weak agent succumbs to smaller ones because (one can assume) he has already tried to calm them down in his deliberation. In fact, every form of lack of control is characterized by the fact that it is succumbing to pleasures that "most people can resist" (1150b14). In other words, lack of control is not characterized by strong and, *for that reason*, uncontrollable emotions or desires, but as a condition in which one fails to control desires which are normally controllable. Their uncontrollability is not necessarily explained by their intensity (see 1150b6–12), but by the agent having become such (through habituation) that even relatively weak desires cause him to lose control over them.

Finally, my account does not require that the uncontrolled agent's appetite is particularly intense — it only requires that it be capable of bringing about the suspension of reason in the particular agent (who is, in the case of the uncontrolled agent, particularly susceptible to its influence). What counts is not so much the appetite's intensity but the agent's overall preparedness to deal with her appetites. The

57. Notably, even the good can act in this way at MM 1203a30–6, if they are of the right kind (warm) temperament.

uncontrolled agent's reason gets suspended not because of the intensity of her appetite, but because she has failed to habituate herself, including her reason, to the point at which she can resist them. Even a mild storm can sink a boat with a negligent or inexperienced crew.

The second worry originates in the modern conception of *akrasia* which begins from the assumption that in acting *akratically* one *intentionally* and *voluntarily* acts against one's better judgment. It is then assumed that intentional and voluntary action entails, among other things, that one's capacity to reason, deliberate, or perform logical inferences has not been compromised. In view of this conception, the claim that the uncontrolled agent's reason is temporarily disabled during uncontrolled action might strike one as intuitively implausible, perhaps even a non-starter.⁵⁸ There are, however, several points that should significantly reduce this initial reaction.

First, Aristotle's claim might not have struck ancient Greek readers as odd (or implausible) in the same way as it does us. In his *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds not only correctly identifies Aristotle's claim at 1147a10–7 as entailing a temporary suspension of one's (rational) mind,⁵⁹ but also traces the quite general view that various kinds of irrational, unwise, paradoxical or otherwise unaccountable acts are due to a temporary suspension of one's mind all the way back to Homer. In Homer (especially in the *Iliad*), such actions are the results of blindness of judgment or delusion (*atē*), which are usually due to various external agencies (such as gods).⁶⁰ Moreover, despite the attribution of such actions to external agencies, the pre-Platonic writers nevertheless clearly thought that at least sometimes people who acted in such ways (*i. e.*, as a result of *atē*) were not automatically exempt from responsibility or blame.⁶¹

By the time we get to Aristotle's view about lack of control (which is

58. See section 1.2 for interpretations of Aristotle's theory along these lines.

59. Dodds (1951, 185).

60. *Ibid.*, 5.

61. See the illuminating discussion in Williams (2008, ch. 3).

a kind of irrational or unwise action), this temporary suspension is no longer exclusively due to such external agencies (I will say more about Aristotle's view in section 2.5 below); and in the cases in which it is due to factors over which an agent is expected to have control, the responsibility for the action is placed squarely on the agent.⁶² Aristotle's view (which is, as we shall see, neither identical with the ordinary view that we sometimes do what we know is bad while knowing — actively and perfectly well — that it is bad, nor with Socrates' view that we never act that way) is thus a view which has some basis in the preceding history of thinking about human psychology and which would, therefore, also have, to his contemporaries, a certain amount of intuitive appeal.⁶³

Second, one should *not* understand Aristotle's claim to mean that the uncontrolled agent, while acting without control, is not able to use or attend to his knowledge or beliefs *at all* or that he cannot think (in a broad sense) at all. As passages 2 and 3 indicate, when people are in states such as being asleep, drunk, or in the grip of emotions, they are not governed by reason but, instead, by their non-rational desires (appetites) and *phantasia*.⁶⁴ That this account applies to uncontrolled people is confirmed most explicitly by passage 5. This passage (as well as other passages in which Aristotle suggests that people in certain

states, such as being asleep or drunk, follow their *phantasia* against, or instead of, their knowledge or reason)⁶⁵ should be read in connection with other passages, such as *NE* 1.3, 1095a2–10 in which people are said to follow their affections or feelings rather than reason. The cumulative evidence of these passages strongly suggests that when Aristotle says that one's mind or reason (*nous*) is temporarily disabled and that one, in such a state, follows *phantasia*, he is not denying beliefs (in a broad sense) or coherent trains of thoughts to the agent but rather something more specific. In the next two sections, I will bring out the meaning of Aristotle's claim that the uncontrolled person "follows *phantasia*" rather than reason by drawing attention to Aristotle's discussion of the way in which sleeping people (*i. e.*, one of three sorts of people used in the analogy at 1147a10–7) "follow *phantasia*" while dreaming. I will argue that Aristotle operates with a sufficiently rich notion of non-rational cognition to allow him to account for the relevant phenomena in connection with uncontrolled actions. As I will argue, Aristotle's uncontrolled agent is not prevented from using her knowledge, or from having beliefs (in a broad sense of the term) about any relevant facts. Her problem is that she cannot use her knowledge *as* knowledge or form and hold beliefs on the basis of reasons (*i. e.*, forming them by treating some other facts or beliefs as what makes them believable). The idea can be, perhaps less confusingly, expressed by saying that the uncontrolled person has at her disposal all the information that would normally constituted her knowledge, but she temporarily cannot use this information in the way in which its use would qualify her as having *understanding* (rather than mere knowledge) of what she is doing.

62. I argue for this view in "Agency and Responsibility in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*," forthcoming in *Phronesis* 60: 206–51.

63. See for example Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, especially sections 16–19, where he discusses the love as the cause of her adultery since love, just like fear, can "extinguish and expel thought" (*houtōs apesbese kai exēlasen ho phobos to noēma*).

64. My interpretation of this aspect of Aristotle's theory of lack of control is in partial agreement with the interpretation developed by Moss (2012). Perhaps the main difference is that, on my account, there is no perceptual (or evaluative) illusion taking place, as Moss suggests, since there is no distortion of appearances taking place at all. In fact, given the very striking similarities that her interpretation bears to my account, there should be no need to for such distortions since the work is done by the disablement of reason and not by perceptual or evaluative illusions. I suspect that the main reason she needs something like evaluative illusion to take place is that although she also claims that the uncontrolled agent follows *phantasia* because of the disablement of reason (113), she does not offer an account of what this disablement of reason might be, why it occurs, or what cognitive resources are still available to the agent.

65. Perhaps most strikingly at *DA* 433a10–1. See also *Insomn.* 459a1–8 (translated below). There is an instructive passage in *Prob.* 903b29–26: "Why are those who hesitate in their speech melancholic? Is it because being melancholic they quickly follow *phantasia* (*akolouthein tē phantasia*), and this is characteristic of those who hesitate in their speech. For the impulse to speak rushes before their ability to do so, just as the soul too quickly follows *phantasia* (*tō phanenti*). The same thing happens with those who lisp. For the parts [responsible for speech] are too slow. A sign of this is that people who are drunk (*oinōmenoi*) become lispers, since then they follow *phainomena* most of all (*malista tois phainomenois akolouthousi*) and not their mind."

2.3. *Uncontrolled action and phantasia*

According to Aristotle, people affected by drunkenness, fits of madness, or sleep can and sometimes do behave in clever, cognitively rich ways. A drunken person may correctly recite verses. A sleeping person may be trying, while dreaming, to memorize something using a mnemonic system that she has previously learned (*Insomn.* 485b15–25). Although these people use their knowledge, their use of it is irrational in the following sense: they act in a way that, in a given situation, they would themselves think inappropriate under normal circumstances (*i. e.*, if they were *not* drunk or in a fit of madness). A drunken person can sing a drinking song that she has previously learnt on an occasion (say, a memorial service) that is not suitable for it according to the person's own beliefs. This way of acting reveals that one's rational powers are not properly operational. We see the madman or the drunken person as behaving irrationally because they behave in ways in which they should not and would not behave in the light of their own knowledge or beliefs about what they should or should not be doing. A description along these general lines fits the uncontrolled agent. We see her behavior as irrational from the point of view of her own knowledge and beliefs. She acts against her decision, which is expressive of her knowledge about what she thinks is good for her.

Passages 3 and 5 suggest that the explanation of why the uncontrolled agent's action seems irrational is that instead of acting according to her knowledge or rationally grounded beliefs she "follows *phantasia*."⁶⁶ A clue to understanding this expression is given in a passage in the *De Insomniis*, where Aristotle considers the view that although people who are asleep cannot be perceiving (strictly speaking), their perceptual capacity can nevertheless be affected by the remnants of sensory perception (*i. e.*, *phantasiai*). When that happens, their beliefs and emotional states "follow the *phantasia*":

66. Aristotle's most systematic exposition of his theory of *phantasia* is in *DA* 3.3. That discussion is, however, too obscure to be analyzed here in detail and, in any case, the relevant features of his theory are available elsewhere. I take *DA* 3.3 to be compatible with my account of lack of control, but the defense of that claim has to be made separately.

(6) Then could it be true that one [*i. e.* the dreamer] is not seeing anything, yet not true that the sense is in no way affected? Is it possible, rather, that both sight and the other senses are affected somehow, and that each of these impinges in some way upon perception, as with a waking person, though not in the same way as with a waking person? And does belief sometimes say that it is false, as it does for waking people, while at other times it is held in check and follows the *phantasia* (*akolouthei tō phantasmati*)? (*Insomn.* 459a1–8)⁶⁷

In the passage, Aristotle contrasts two cases: on the one hand, seeing someone in a dream and, on the other hand, having an illusion of that person while being awake. In the former case, while one has a dream in which one sees Coriscus, one also forms a belief that Coriscus is really present. In the latter case, when one is awake and one's power of forming beliefs is not held in check, one declares the appearance to be false. The reason why one declares the appearance of Coriscus false in the latter case is that, while awake, one is able to evaluate whether there are, in addition to the appearance of Coriscus, any *reasons* to believe that Coriscus is really there. Since, presumably, there are no such reasons (as the example presupposes), one declares the appearance false.⁶⁸ In contrast, while one is asleep, the belief is formed without employing any such considerations. The sleeping person's judging faculty is held in check and she can only form beliefs or judgments according

67. The translation is that of D. Gallop, *Aristotle: On Sleep and Dreams* (Warminster, 1996), slightly modified.

68. In *DA* 3.3, Aristotle explains how we can have a false appearance of something and simultaneously a true supposition (*hupolēpsis*) about it: the sun can appear to us to be a foot across, but we suppose it to be larger than the inhibited world (428b1–4). Supposition is to be distinguished from mere *phantasia* because it involves conviction (*pistis*) and so also persuasion and reason (*logos*) (428a20–5). It thus involves taking something to be true because one has or thinks that one has some reason for taking it to be so over and above how it appears to one.

to what merely appears to be the case — she takes her dreams at their face value.⁶⁹

When Aristotle then says that some agents, including uncontrolled ones, “follow *phantasia*” in their actions (1150b25–28), he means that they act on the basis of how things appear to them, rather than on the basis of any *reasons* (over and above the appearance) that they would have for their actions.⁷⁰ In order to make sense of this idea, we need to distinguish between reasons in a broad or loose sense and reasons in the strict sense. In the loose sense, the uncontrolled agent has reasons to do what she does when she acts without control. She has a desire for some pleasure (*i. e.*, her appetite) and it appears to her that the desire can be satisfied. But simply having a desire for something and it appearing to be the case that now is the time and place to satisfy it are not “reasons” for acting in the strict sense. Reasons for believing or doing something in the strict sense require that one recognizes something as making one’s belief believable or one’s (proposed) action advisable independently of one’s desire to believe it or to do it.

In the case of belief, this requirement is clearly discernible in the passage from the *De Insomniis* quoted above. The judgment that what appears to one is false (say, that Coriscus is there) is made on the basis of one’s knowledge of some further facts about Coriscus or one’s situation that make the belief in the reality of the appearance of Coriscus untenable (say, that one has just seen Coriscus leave the town). This judgment is not dependent on one’s desires concerning Coriscus: in fact, one *has* to form the appropriate belief in view of the facts and despite the appearance (*DA* 427b21–2). This contrasts with cases (*e. g.*, when asleep) in which an appearance is accepted without any

consideration of reasons (over and above the appearance) for believing it. In such cases, one’s reaction to the appearance corresponds to (or reflects) one’s particular state, desires, habits, or character (*Insomn.* 460b3–15). In the absence of reasoned oversight (as when asleep or drunk), what people recognize as salient features of their situations are not features that are (or would be) salient according to their reasoned judgments or knowledge but, rather, what seems salient are those features that are recorded as motivationally significant in their experience and that are, in some relevant way, connected to their current condition. What stands out as salient about a given situation to an amorous man (when he is in amorous passion) is what is, in his experience, connected to the object or objects of his love (*Insomn.* 460b3–15). The amorous person will think, on the basis of mere resemblance, that he sees someone he loves, even if there are no reasons to think that.⁷¹

In the case of uncontrolled action, the idea is that the uncontrolled agent “follows *phantasia*” insofar as she acts on the basis of the mere appearance of something as pleasant rather than on the basis, reflected in her decision, of her reasoned judgment about what she should do (*DA* 433b5–10). She does not act on her decision that she had

69. See also *Insomn.* 460a32–b27; 461a25–462a8; and 485b15–25.

70. As Schofield (1991, 270–1) says, “It is evidently because sleep and fever impair the operation of our faculties in general, leaving *phantasia* alone efficacious, that the will has no control over what appears to us in such conditions.” In the *De Insomniis* 460b3ff, Aristotle asserts that the same account is true also of those who are in love, have appetites, are angry, have fever, or are sick. *De Somno*’s discussion (456b28–457a21) of the effects of various soporific agents like wine or poppy yields the same result for those who are drunk or drugged.

71. It is in this sense that one needs to understand Aristotle’s reference to people who are drunk as well. What he wants to point out is that when drunk people make judgments, they make them on the basis of appearances rather than on the basis of deliberation or reflection, and that they do this *because* of their state. There is a very instructive passage in the *Problems*. In the passage, people who are drunk but still can judge are said to be unable to judge well because of their drunkenness: “Why is it that one who is tipsy (*akrothōrax*) behaves more badly than one who is more drunk (*mallon methuontos*) and more than [even] the sober man? Is it because the sober man judges well (*eu krinei*) but one who is completely drunk (*pantapasi methuōn*), on account of his senses being blocked, is unable to bear the heaviness, does not judge [at all], and so because he does not judge, he is not behaving badly, but one who is tipsy judges but on account of the wine, judges badly so that he behaves badly. And so he is just like Satyrus of Clazomenae who was fond of abuse and so when he was defendant in a lawsuit, in order that he might speak to the matter at hand and not be abusive, they blocked his ears so that since he would not hear, he would also not turn to abuse. But as his adversary was about to stop, they uncovered them and he, having heard but a few words, could not keep away from speaking badly because he could now perceive but judge only badly” (875a29–875a40).

previously made because she temporarily cannot employ reasoned oversight over her situation and actions. The temporary suspension of reason leads her to move from sticking to that decision to following the appearance of pleasure (*i. e.*, to following her *phantasia*) which is now accepted at its face value.

But why does the temporary suspension of one's power of reasoning make the uncontrolled agent's decision ineffectual? Why cannot the agent simply go on sticking to it? It does so because decisions are essentially connected to deliberation and so to having and being *actively aware* of the reasons for one's action as what makes the action good for oneself. In principle, of course, even pleasure could serve as the relevant reason. But in the case of lack of control, the uncontrolled agent's decision (*i. e.*, decision against which the agent acts) is characterized by the fact that in making it, the uncontrolled agent decided to act on the basis of reasons that were independent of her non-rational desires and feelings of pleasure. In fact, they were contrary to those desires and so also contrary to what she finds pleasant. This means that the decision must have been made with a view to some good (such as health or honor) that the agent has adopted (and that she aims at) on other grounds than pleasure since, in the other case, it would not be a decision contrary to her desires.⁷² But in order to adopt X as one's end independently of one's non-rational desires, one must have reasons (other than mere pleasure) that identify what it is about X that makes it good and good for oneself. For example, in order for one to aim at justice independently of pleasures or pains associated with just or unjust behavior, one must have some reasons for believing that justice is good and good for oneself (*DA* 3.10, 433a9–26). Otherwise, in the absence of some pleasant (or painful) consequences, one would have no motivation to pursue justice. A mere claim of the form "justice is good" is not motivational unless it is either connected with pleasures (rewards) and pains (punishments) or with *reasons* that make it clear why justice is good for oneself. So, in order for the uncontrolled

72. In that other case, we could have a clash between two different pleasant options, but not a case of lack of control.

agent's decision to have any traction, the agent must have and must be actively aware of the reasons that explain to her why the unpleasant action that she decides on (say, refraining from eating sweets) is good (over and above pleasure) and good for her.

This requirement comes out most clearly in an important passage in *EE* 2.10 wherein Aristotle tells us that human beings are sometimes in states in which they cannot make or have active decisions because they cannot, in those states, deliberate. Although Aristotle does not say what kinds of states these are, it is reasonable to assume that he means the states mentioned in the passages cited above, such as being drunk, mad, asleep, or in the grip of emotions or non-rational desires (including being uncontrolled):

(7) So decision is not present in other animals, not even at every period of [human] life, nor in a human being in all states: for neither is deliberation nor a supposition about the why: nothing prevents that many people might well have a belief (*doxa*) about whether to do or not to do something but [have it] not through reasoning (*di' logismou*). For that part of the soul is deliberative which is capable of contemplating a cause: for that for the sake of which is one of the causes – for cause is anything because of which [something comes about]. We say that cause is that for the sake of which something is or comes to be—for example, the recovery of money is a cause of walking, if it is for the sake of that that a man walks. That is why people who have no goal (*skopos*) before them are not deliberative. (*EE* 2.10, 1226b21–5)

In the passage, Aristotle connects the capacity for decisions to the ability to contemplate (*i. e.*, be actively aware of) a cause (which in the case of action just is, as he explains, the reason for one's action) *as* being that which makes and explains the action as good for oneself. One decides on an action because one believes that the action stands

in the right relation to some goal one has and the nature of the goal provides one with reasons to perform *this* (rather than some other) action. For example, if one wants to promote one's health, then one needs to start from a conception of what health is (its nature), in order to figure out what action, if any, could be taken. In the following passage from the *Metaphysics* 7.7, Aristotle makes clear that deliberation involves, at each step, the recognition of the salient or essential feature (or features) of what it is that one plans to achieve and an appropriate selection of the means to achieve it:

(8) All other [*i. e.*, non-natural] comings-to-be (*geneseis*) are called productions (*poiēseis*). And all productions are either from art (*apo technēs*) or from a capacity (*apo dunameōs*) or from thought (*apo dianoias*). ...from art come to be the things of which the form is in the soul. By form I mean the essence of each thing and its primary substance. ...health is the ratio (*logos*) and the knowledge (*epistēmē*) in the soul. The healthy thing, then, comes to be as the result of the following train of thought: since *this* is health, if the thing is to be healthy *this* must first be present, *e. g.* a uniform state of body, and if this is to be present, there must be heat; and one goes on always thinking in this way until one brings the matter to a final step which he himself can produce. Then the process (*kinēsis*) from this point onward, *i. e.* the process towards health, is called production. (*Met.* 7.7, 1032a28–b11)

Thus decisions that rest on more than an appearance of pleasure depend for their motivational power on the agent's grasp of the reason(s) why the action on which she decides is good both in the sense of being good for some desired goal as well as in the sense of being good for the agent as being done for that goal. But it is precisely the ability to grasp such reasons that is, according to Aristotle, suspended while an

uncontrolled agent acts without control since, as his analogy tells us, the agent's reasoning power is suspended across the board.

2.4. Knowledge vs. experience

Although a disablement of reason of this sort has direct consequences for the agent's ability to be motivated by goodness (as opposed to mere pleasure), it has far less serious consequences for the agent's ability to act in cognitively complex ways. In other words, although the agent needs to be able to grasp and be actively aware of reasons for her *decision* in order to stick to and act from it, she does not need to grasp and be actively aware of the reasons why certain ways of acting or doing things lead to some desired results in order to act so as to achieve those results.⁷³ It will be helpful to distinguish two ways of finding an action useful which do not involve the grasp of the "why" but which nevertheless involve awareness of how one can achieve some desired goal.

At the most basic level (BL), one can become aware, on the basis of one's experience, that doing certain things reliably leads to some desired result while, at the same time, not having any conceptual grasp of the connection between the result and one's action. This way of finding an action useful is available even to small children or animals. So, a

73. It should be noted that Aristotle is happy to allow that some agents can stick to their decisions *even* while their reasoning power is suspended. But in such a case, they are not strictly speaking acting on the decision itself (*i. e.*, they are not acting *from* reason). Rather, they are acting in such a way because they *enjoy* something that acting in such a way brings, such as victory in contests. These are especially the stubborn people (*ischurognōmes*) who superficially resemble the self-controlled people but differ from them precisely because they do not act on their decisions themselves but stick to them only for the sake of some pleasure which is gained by so acting and which is incidental to the decision itself. Thus they are in fact a kind of uncontrolled people. See *NE* 7.9, 1151b4–17. One can also imagine a scenario in which one's reason becomes disabled on account of one's emotions (say, anger) but, despite that, one does not end up acting against one's decision or knowledge because one's experience (*i. e.*, what one finds pleasant) just is what one thinks is good in the first place. This would be the case of a virtuous person who can rely on her sensibilities to not lead her astray even while her rational thinking is inhibited.

cat can discover that repeated meowing near the pantry leads to food and so act that way any time she desires food. But we usually do not suppose that the cat grasps her meowing *as* a means to her goal or that she grasps anything about the reason why it leads to the usual result.

At a more complex level (CL), one can learn that a certain action leads to a desired result and grasp, in addition, that the action is a means to that result. In this case, one grasps the action *as* useful. This stage is a vast improvement over the previous one since one now becomes aware that one could try other means should the current one that one uses become ineffectual. In the basic case, we merely described a child or an animal as thinking or treating something as useful without implying that it was grasped by the child or the animal as such. The cat does not grasp the meowing as a means to her end even though she acts that way — she does not see it as one among various possible alternatives of getting the food. Nevertheless, notice that even at this more complex stage, one still need not grasp the reason *why* the action is useful for the goal. For example, one might think that ibuprofen is a means to relieving headache without knowing the reason why it does so. The fact that one does not know that does not prevent one from alternating the means should ibuprofen not be available (say, by taking acetaminophen).

This second way (CL) of grasping something as useful (or as a means) is both highly complex and, according to Aristotle, quite common in human behavior. On his view, human beings have at their disposal a sophisticated system of memories in which they can make complex judgments in a systematic albeit non-rational way. Aristotle calls this system “experience” (*empeiria*).⁷⁴ Experience arises through repeated perception of the same thing and subsequent structured accumulation of the corresponding memories (*Post. An.* 100a2–5). The retained sensory impressions that constitute one’s memories are *phan-*

74. The relevant aspects of Aristotle’s theory of non-rational cognition can be gleaned from *Met.* 1.1 and *Post. An.* 2.19. In my explanation of Aristotle’s theory of *phantasia* and experience, I follow Frede (1996). For an account of *phantasia* consistent with my account of lack of control, see Lorenz (2009, 148–73).

tasiai (*Mem.* 451a14–7). Once one accumulates many memories of a certain sort, they give rise to experience (*Post. An.* 100a2–5). Experience is, then, a certain kind of acquaintance or recognition (*gnōsis*) which arises once one accumulates sufficient amount of memories of the same thing and formulates thoughts (*Met.* 981a5–7).

The simplest example of experience at work involves identification of something that one perceives. For example, seeing a figure resembling Coriscus, one forms the belief that there is Coriscus approaching. This judgment is not the work of reason since it does not involve any inference.⁷⁵ It is achieved through the application of one’s memories to what one perceives on the basis of similarity.⁷⁶ But the build-up of experience leads to more than just the ability to identify things one perceives. It also results in the formulation of general thoughts (such as “light meats are healthy”) and rules (such as “when having a headache, take a red pill”). In fact, human experience can achieve such high degree of complexity and precision that it is, for practical purposes, almost equivalent to knowledge or understanding. As Aristotle says: “With a view to action experience does not seem to differ from craft, and we even see those with experience succeeding more than those who have theory without experience” (*Met.* 981a13–5).⁷⁷

In the following passage, Aristotle explicitly distinguishes between grasping something in the light of mere experience and grasping it in the light of knowledge (*i. e.*, grasping the reason why):

(9) For to have a supposition that when Callias was sick of this disease this benefitted him, and so also to Socrates and so in many individual cases, is a matter of experience. But to suppose that it benefitted all people of a certain kind, marked off according to one form, when they

75. See Cashdollar (1973) for a discussion of non-rational cognitive achievements.

76. In *Mem.* 451b10–452a4 Aristotle introduces three ways or rules of association that govern the orderings of one’s *phantasiai*: similarity, opposition, and proximity.

77. A similar point is made also at *NE* 6.7, 1141b15–23.

were sick of this disease (for example, to phlegmatic or bilious people when burning with fever), is a matter of craft. (*Met.* 981a7–13)

According to this passage, a person of experience can formulate a number of propositions, such as “treatment T helped Callias when he had fever.” He can, on the basis of these propositions, also form a rule: “If people have a fever, apply treatment T.” An experience-based rule of this sort provides a quick, reliable, and clear guidance to one’s actions. On this account, a number of daily activities (including those associated with crafts and occupations) do not require any exercise of reason in the strict sense in which it involves deliberation and the grasp of reasons. When one does them, one does them on the basis of one’s acquired habits or experience (*Met.* 1.1, 981b5).

It is crucial to recognize that the temporary suspension of reason that Aristotle attributes to the uncontrolled agent during her uncontrolled action does not concern either of these two non-rational (in Aristotle’s sense of the term) forms of practical cognition (BL and CL) since neither of them involves an active grasp of the *reasons* in the strict sense for thinking or believing that doing something would lead to some desired result. In this sense, the uncontrolled agent can draw on all her experience and, in fact, on all her already acquired knowledge that does not require, in order to be applied, any further deliberative processes. Thus, although she cannot deliberate (in the strict sense) during her uncontrolled action, she can nevertheless think about how to accomplish her goal even while she acts. She can think about how to achieve it on the basis of her experience (just like one can think about how to combine spices to make a tasty meal without engaging in deliberation about it).

It is time for a quick summary. Aristotle tells us that when the uncontrolled agent acts without control, she is like people who are mad, drunk, or asleep insofar she temporarily cannot exercise her knowledge. She cannot do so because her reasoning power has been temporarily disabled by her appetite. As a consequence of the disablement of

reason, she temporarily cannot act on her decision since acting on her decision requires that she is actively grasping the reasons on which her decision is based – that is, she is able to contemplate the cause. In the absence of such an active grasp, her decision ceases to be an active conative psychological state and the way is cleared for bad appetite to issue in action. In acting on her appetite, the uncontrolled agent “follows *phantasia*” both in the sense that she is acting on the pleasant prospect that aroused her appetite, and in the sense that her active cognition is now limited to various forms of non-rational cognition (such as experience). These forms of cognition are rich enough to enable her to act in a way she desires, but they lack the ability evaluate the uncontrolled course of action independently of her appetitive desire. Thus she now acts according to how the situation appears to her – namely, as pleasant.⁷⁸

If the interpretation so far is along the right lines, then Aristotle distinguishes between, on the one hand, merely having thoughts (or a train of thoughts) and, on the other hand, having thoughts while also contemplating the explanatory and inferential or conceptual connections between one’s thoughts (or propositional contents). In other words, the distinction he is drawing, in introducing the third way of having but not using knowledge is *not* between possessing some knowledge but not having it currently in mind (as when one knows some fact but one is not attending to it at the moment) and possessing and also having it currently in mind. Rather, the distinction is between

78. Destrée (2007) argues that the motivating force of a *phantasia* is given by the degree of pleasure that is associated with it. The uncontrolled agent is characterized by having a strong *phantasia aisthêtikê* (which, on Destrée’s view, represents things as pleasant) and a weak *phantasia logistikê* (which represents things as good). During the uncontrolled action, the agent’s faculty of *phantasia logistikê* is disabled by the strong *phantasia aisthêtikê*. His view is attractive but it faces a number of problems. In *DA* 434a6–7, which contains the reference to *phantasia logistikê*, Aristotle does not specify its content. It might simply be a representation of different courses of action to oneself according to one’s deliberation without representing them as good – that determination can still be the work of rational judgment. It is also not clear that *phantasia logistikê* is a separate kind or faculty of *phantasia* which can be disabled independently.

having some information or thought currently in mind but not being able to contemplate or use it *as* knowledge (for example, as standing in explanatory and/or conceptual connection to other thoughts) and having this information in mind and also being able to attend to it *as* knowledge in this sense.⁷⁹ It is only this latter, quite specific way of manipulating thoughts or propositional contents that Aristotle denies to the uncontrolled agent during the uncontrolled action. The former case is, as I tried to show, compatible with the agent still being capable of highly complex cognitive operations (ones we would normally call thinking) and might well be, as far as Aristotle is concerned, even the dominant way in which we normally operate.⁸⁰ Normally, however, we are capable of rational control over such behavior whereas in the case of lack of control, the rational oversight is suspended.

It is sometimes objected, to the kind of account that I have been developing, that it implies that the uncontrolled agent does not know what she is doing when she acts without control. It should be clear by now that this objection can be true or false, depending on how one understands the phrase “she does not know.” If it means that she at the moment lacks *understanding* — an intellectual grasp — of the reason why she should or should not be doing what she does, then the objection is correct but it does not succeed as an objection since Aristotle would agree with it. But if it means that she does not know what she is doing in the sense that she would not be able to tell what actions she is performing and what she is trying to achieve, the objection is false.

79. Since for Aristotle having knowledge ordinarily denotes the latter condition (*i. e.*, having understanding), he can and does express this thought by saying that the agent both has knowledge in a way, but also does not have it (1147a12–3).

80. Leibniz held a view similar. In *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace*, he claims that the difference between reason strictly speaking and a certain semblance of reason (which is an exercise of a highly developed capacity of memory) is that the former, but not the latter, is concerned with causes and explanations. The non-rational cognition is common to both human beings and animals, and we rely on it most of the time. See: G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, vol. VI, edited by C. I. Gerhardt. (Berlin, 1875–90), reprint: Hildesheim, 1965, 600.

That my interpretation so far is along the right lines is well supported by the next passage in *NE* 7.3 in which Aristotle compares uncontrolled agents to early learners:

(10) Saying words that come from knowledge proves nothing. For people in these affective states can recite the demonstrations and verses of Empedocles, and those who have learned something for the first time string together words, but do not yet know it. For they must absorb it and that requires time. In this way one must suppose also uncontrolled people speak, just like actors do. (*NE* 7.3, 1147a18–24)

The passage considers an obvious objection to the previous claim that the uncontrolled agent’s state of mind is like that of people who are mad, drunk, or asleep: the uncontrolled agent can report not just what she is doing, but also her previous deliberation and its conclusion (and so the content of her decision) that what she does is wrong. There thus seems to be a reason to believe that she *knows* what she is doing and *knows* that it is bad.

Aristotle replies that merely saying words that might express something is not a sign of knowledge or understanding. People affected in certain ways (for example, drunk or mad) can recite verses without having any understanding of what they say. Similarly, people who have begun to learn something can string the words together that express what they are learning, but be doing so without having real understanding of what they say. Obviously, it is not the case that an early learner does not understand what she is saying *at all*. A student can write out Kant’s argument leading to the formulation of the Categorical Imperative. She might also very well understand the words that Kant uses to formulate the Imperative and in fact, even understand the individual claims. And she can use this knowledge to report it (say, on an exam). But being able to do this does not presuppose

that she in fact understands the argument and the logical connection between its steps.

The uncontrolled agent, while acting without control, is like an early learner insofar as she has knowledge but is unable to use it *as* knowledge (in the sense I explained above). She knows what her goal is and she can draw on her experience to get to that goal. What she cannot do, when she acts without control, is to reflect on whether there are any reasons to get what she wants. She can perfectly well say, *e.g.* “this thing here is sweet and I should not eat it since I have decided not to eat sweets” and perfectly well understand the meaning of what she is saying. But this thought will not count as a piece of *knowledge*, or as a piece of knowledge that is actively attended to, since when she says it, she is not grasping the prohibition to eat sweet things as being *implied* by her knowledge. She is like an early learner who recites the correct steps in a proof, but does not grasp how one step follows from another.

This is, in essence, the meaning of Aristotle’s analogy between the uncontrolled agent and people who are mad, drunk, or asleep. If this interpretation is along the right lines, it suggests that Aristotle conceives of reason and thinking (and so of rationally grounded and guided action) as a highly specific ability that binds together the ability to construct and understand rational explanations and reasons and the ability to be motivated to act by one’s understanding of such explanations and reasons — *i.e.*, to make and execute decisions. Although this way of thinking and acting is specifically human, it is not the usual *modus operandi* of human beings. Most people, most of the time, simply follow their feelings (*NE* 1.3, 1095a2–10).

Before moving on, I have to address a worry about my interpretation that an attentive reader of the *NE* might have. Aristotle tells us that the uncontrolled agent can deliberate about her uncontrolled desire (*NE* 6.9, 1142b18–22) and one might wonder how this claim fits with my interpretation. The answer is that it fits well since, on my view, there is no reason to deny that the uncontrolled agent can deliberate about her uncontrolled desire. The uncontrolled agent can and presumably

is tempted by her uncontrolled desire and might well deliberate about what it would take to satisfy it and whether satisfying it would be permissible.⁸¹ She can achieve a high level of sophistication in figuring out the ways in which she can do so, being an agent exhibiting the quality of cleverness (*deinotēs*), which is the ability to find out how to promote a goal quite in general (*EN* 6.12, 1144a25–8), independently of its being good or bad. After all, if there was a way to satisfy her desires in a way that would be acceptable to reason, she could have it both ways and so she has motivation to invest energy into such thought processes. This much is clear both from *NE* 6.9, 1142b18–22 itself, as well as from *NE* 7.10, 1152a7–16 where lack of control is said to be often associated with cleverness.

However, such deliberation presumably occurs *before* she acts without control (since the point of deliberation of any sort is to figure out what to do before one acts) and the result of her deliberation as a whole is a decision *not* to satisfy that desire. The disablement of reason that I have been arguing Aristotle attributes to the uncontrolled agent concerns only the time during which the agent acts without control, not the time *before* the action during which deliberation occurs. It is aimed to explain how the uncontrolled agent can act against her decision without having reconsidered the decision. This disablement does not prohibit the uncontrolled agent from making use of her previous deliberation even during the uncontrolled action, although it temporarily prevents her from using it *as* part of her overall knowledge (in the way I already explained).

It should also be noted that my view is compatible with the agent interrupting her uncontrolled action in order to deliberate about how to get to her goal. This can happen if her experience turns out not to be sufficient (*e.g.*, if she comes across unexpected problems). This might in fact be quite a common occurrence and Aristotle’s theory can accommodate it. But such deliberation would presumably trigger her decision (since it would trigger her reasoning capacity) and so it might

81. See *NE* 3.11, 1119a12–21 for an example of deliberation of this sort.

enable her to refrain from her uncontrolled action or, alternatively, she can succumb again. An example would be a smoker who has been trying to resist his urge to smoke but finally, late at night, gives in — only to discover that he has run out of cigarettes. When he tries to figure out how to obtain some, he is forced to deliberate (since it is too late to use any of the usual ways to obtain them). But instead of deciding for some way of getting them, he now reinstates his commitment not to smoke. Luck helped him to stick to it.

2.5. *The transition from sticking to one's decision to acting without control*

Although we now have an explanation of how it is that the uncontrolled agent acts *during* uncontrolled action (*i. e.*, we now know what his state of mind is), we still do not know *why* such temporary suspension occurs in the first place. Why does the uncontrolled agent end up in a condition of this sort? And how does she move from resisting and sticking to the decision to acting without control? We can begin by looking at what Aristotle says about the causes that lead to the temporary disablements of reason in the other conditions he mentions. Some of them happen as parts of people's natural day-cycle (such as sleep), but some are the results of various external influences or internal imbalances. When one reads about the causes and processes that are involved in the transitions from being in possession of one's rational faculties to their disablement, one gets a story about different flows of exhalations, heat, and blood in one's body that cause the disablement of one's cognitive faculties (*Insomn.* 460b28–61a25, *De Somno* 456a30–b28). Sometimes these processes are caused by the intake of food (as in sleep), sometimes by the intake of wine (as in being drunk), sometimes by illness.

As Aristotle sees it, all emotions, feelings, and non-rational desires are alterations or affections that come about because of thoughts, *phantasiai*, or perceptions that present to one's consciousness things as having certain appropriate motivational features, namely as being pleasant or painful (*MA* 8, 701b33–7). As Aristotle further tells us, the cognition of something as pleasant or painful, whether it comes from direct

perception, memory or anticipation is always accompanied by "heating and chilling" (*MA* 8, 701a1). Hence, all feelings and non-rational desires involve the processes of heating and chilling (whatever the precise mechanics of these processes are), even though, as Aristotle remarks, this can escape notice if they are small enough. They are all bodily alterations (*MA* 7, 701b16–32).⁸² But it is also precisely these *kinds* of material or physiological processes that are the causes of sleep, madness, or drunkenness and, hence, also of the incapacitations of one's rational capacities that Aristotle describes in the *De Somno* and *De Insomniis*.

Aristotle's thought, then, is that the disablement of reason in uncontrolled action is brought about by the material processes associated with the agent's occurrent appetites. The uncontrolled agent does not choose to do what the non-rational desire inclines her to do. She does not choose to abandon her decision and act on her bad desire. She acts on a desire (the bad one) that was present all along and this desire, in and of itself, causes her action. But she does not perform any mental act that would constitute her choosing to do so (or rejecting her decision). This feature of Aristotle's theory makes it significantly different from *akratic* or weak-willed action as it is traditionally understood in the contemporary literature. Ordinarily, philosophers try to explain why one would choose, form an intention, or draw a conclusion to do something which one has some reasons to do (since one, for example, desires it) but which one has overriding reasons not to do.⁸³ Alternatively, they try to explain why one re-evaluates one's intentions when confronted by the very temptations that one intended to resist.⁸⁴

82. See also Aristotle's famous description of the material side of anger as "the boiling of the blood and hot matter around the heart" (*DA* 1.1, 403a29).

83. For example, Bratman (1979, 168) describes Sam, a weak-willed agent, who does not draw the inference that he should not drink, which is the right one in view of his own evaluative commitments, "but, rather, focuses his attention on the former evaluative commitment and infers from it a practical conclusion in favor of drinking."

84. Richard Holton explains weakness of will (as opposed to *akrasia*, which he understands along the lines explained in note 1 above) as involving an abandonment of a resolution not to act on one's future inclinations. See in Holton (1999, 259).

In both cases, there is some mental act the *akratic* or weak-willed agent performs such that that act (of choosing, forming an intention, refocusing one's attention, etc.) is different from the basic desire that motivates her action. This additional psychic act is the cause of the *akratic* action. On Aristotle's view, however, the original (bad) desire is an impulse which can cause an action on its own (NE 7.3, 1147a35).

This explains why Aristotle is not trying to explain (in NE 7.3) how or why it is that the uncontrolled agent moves from acting on or maintaining the good decision to acting on the bad desire. As he asserts, one should consult the physiologists for the explanation (1147b9). On his view, there is an explanation of how it happens, but that explanation does not refer to any psychological acts such as decisions. Rather, the explanation is to be given in terms of certain physiological processes. Notice that these physiological processes are not, as he says, peculiar to the condition of the uncontrolled agent since they are also found in people who are (in the process of becoming) mad, drunk or asleep. In some sense, then, we have not yet arrived at the full account of uncontrolled action since we do not yet have the right sort of grasp of the difference between uncontrolled actions and actions performed in other non-standard states of mind. As I will now argue, Aristotle completes his account and finally "captures" the uncontrolled agent, in the second part of NE 7.3.

3. The second (*phusikōs*) part of Aristotle's discussion (1147a25–b5).

Aristotle's "*phusikōs*" discussion of lack of control contains the passage that has been traditionally thought to contain the core of Aristotle's theory (1147a31–5). The passage is commonly thought to describe the state of the mind of the uncontrolled agent while she acts without control. As I will argue in this section, however, the passage is a description of the uncontrolled agent's state of mind *before* the uncontrolled action. I begin with a translation of the immediately preceding passage in which Aristotle introduces the "practical syllogism":

(11) Further, one could also, in the following way, look scientifically (*phusikōs*) at the cause. For one belief is universal, and the other is about particulars, of which perception is in control.⁸⁵ When one [belief] results from them, it is necessary that what has been concluded the soul asserts in one case, and in the case of [beliefs about] producing things that it acts [on it] immediately. For example, if everything sweet must be tasted and this is sweet (some one of the particulars), it is necessary for one able [to do it] and not prevented [from doing it] at the same time to do this. (NE 7.3, 1147a24–31)

The pattern that Aristotle presents as explaining both action and the formation of beliefs contains two relevantly connected beliefs, one universal, one about particulars. Once these two beliefs are put together, that is, once they result in one belief, the agent who holds the beliefs necessarily asserts and believes the conclusion immediately or, in the case of beliefs about doing things, necessarily acts immediately (NE 7.3, 1147a26–8).

Why does Aristotle think that once two such beliefs are put together, one immediately and necessarily acts? In order to explain an action, one needs to show how the action follows from the agent's beliefs

85. There is a question about how to translate "ἡ μὲν γὰρ καθόλου δόξα, ἡ δ' ἐτέρα περὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστά ἐστιν" (1147a24–5). What feminine noun is to be understood with the article ἡ, *protasis* (proposition) or *doxa* (belief)? If we take it to be *protasis*, we should translate "for one proposition is a universal belief, the other is [a belief] about particulars." Taking it the other way, as in my translation, we get: "For one belief is a universal belief." I do not think that much hangs on this issue here. The sentence says in the first clause that whatever the subject is, is a belief. This issue can be important if one wants to argue that when Aristotle later (at 1147b9) uses the expression "the last proposition" (*hē teleutaia protasis*) he refers to a conclusion of the practical syllogism. For if we take the noun that is to be understood with the feminine articles here to be *protasis*, one could argue that Aristotle means to say, in the second sentence, "when one [proposition] results from them..." in which case Aristotle would be referring to the conclusion as to a proposition (rather than, as in my translation, a belief). That would be a good precedent for the expression at 1147b9.

or desires and the agent's perception of her circumstances. Aristotle makes use of two propositions, one of which (the universal) represents the relevant feature of the agent's state of mind (for example, her decision), and the other (the particular) the relevant feature(s) of the environment as the agent perceives it. If this is what Aristotle has in mind, then it is obvious why an action follows inevitably: the two premises represent necessary and sufficient conditions for action insofar as the agent's mind or soul is concerned. The action follows necessarily, just as belief in a conclusion of any correct syllogism or inference does.

On this understanding of the practical syllogism,⁸⁶ the action could be prevented or interrupted in two ways: either the agent changes her mind (*e.g.*, her decision), or some factor external to the agent's mind (*i.e.*, to her beliefs and desires) interferes with the action.⁸⁷ But it cannot be prevented by any factor internal to the agent's mind (*i.e.*, inter-

86. In this paper, I do not defend any particular interpretation of what has become known as Aristotle's theory of the practical syllogism. My interpretation of the syllogistic machinery in passage 11 is an interpretation of that particular passage in the context of *NE* 7.3 where it seems to me clearly introduced as a way of *explaining* action by linking one's relevant universal beliefs (expressing one's desires or judgments about what one should or should not do) with one's awareness or perception of the relevant features to those beliefs in one's situation. This seems to me to be the explicit content of the passage. In the chapter, the syllogistic apparatus is clearly *not* introduced as a way of capturing deliberation (the particular premise is not one that says what needs to happen in order to achieve a goal specified in the universal premise) and so the question of whether or not it can be used that way is not relevant here. Similarly, it is irrelevant whether the agent is explicitly connecting the premises together so as to make an inference to a conclusion. The important point is that the syllogism is a rational reconstruction of what cognitively must have happened in order for an action to happen even if the agent was not explicitly aware of it (although she very well might have been) as constituting an inference. For a discussion of the various interpretations of practical syllogism see Corcilius (2008b) and, for a defense of an interpretation that is largely compatible with the minimalistic account assumed in this article, see Corcilius (2008c).

87. It is important to realize that "external factors" can include more than just factors physically external to the person who acts. The internal/external distinction needs to be understood in relation to the person's mind (as the center of agency). I will explain this as I go along.

nal to her agency, such as a desire) since that would undermine the very purpose of the pattern as a device for explaining actions. It would turn into a mere presentation of available actions with no explanatory power: the agent would act on the two beliefs *unless* she would not want to (or unless she does something else).⁸⁸

However, an alternative interpretation of the passage, developed by David Charles,⁸⁹ claims that the agent can reach the conclusion, yet still refrain from acting on it not only due to some external factor of prevention, but also due to some internal factor, such as an opposing desire. Rather than entering the intricate debates about what the purpose of the "practical syllogism" is, I will concentrate on the relatively simple issue of the sense of *mē kōluomenon* (not being prevented) in the clause "it is necessary for one able [to do it] and not prevented [from doing it] at the same time to do this" (1147a30–1). Does it denote external factors only or can it include factors internal to one's agency (as Charles' interpretation claims)?

The verb *kōluein* can have the general meaning of one thing preventing another from being or doing something, without any implication as to what the relationship between those things is. This use is present throughout Aristotle's works, as in a sentence "even if all A's are B's, and no A is a C, nothing prevents some B to be C" (*e.g.*, *APr.* 30b15) or when he says that wealthy people should be prevented from undertaking expensive public works (*Pol.* 1309a17). However, in the context of action or movement, Aristotle uses the term to denote factors that prevent action or movement and are external to what is properly speaking acting or moving (*e.g.*, *De Caelo* 311a20; *DA* 404a14, 417a28; *HA* 609b21; *Met.* 1148a17). Aristotle thus often uses it to describe the activity of something that compels (*De Motu* 701a16; *Met.* 1015a27, 1023a17) something else to act or move against its own impulse. As he makes clear in both *NE* 3.1 (1110a1–4) and *EE* 2.7–8 (1223a11–4, 1224b12–4), what compels is always something external to the agent, either in the

88. For a similar point see Dahl (1984, 162).

89. Charles (1984, 128–32).

sense of being external physically or in the sense of being external to what makes the agent a distinct, individual agent (this could be either the agent's nature as a being of a certain species or bodily processes that are outside of her control). In fact, this is Aristotle's view of how the agent's good action (sticking to her decision) gets interrupted: by factors external to her own agency (even if they are internal to her body) — namely, the material processes associated with her appetite. Finally, in its passive form (which is the one used in our passage in *NE* 7.3), Aristotle uses the word *exclusively* to describe external factors of prevention (*Phys.* 208b12; *De Caelo* 307a10, 311b16; *MM* 1198b15–6). This is a strong argument in favor of reading the occurrence of *kōluein* in *NE* 7.3 in the way I have suggested. The most natural reading of the passage, then, suggests that the prevention of the action would be due to a factor *external* to the agent's own beliefs and desires, in the way I have explained.⁹⁰

Aristotle now proceeds to use the pattern to describe the uncontrolled agent's state of mind:

(12) So when there is in the agent on the one hand a universal belief forbidding tasting, and on the other hand [the belief] that everything sweet is pleasant, and this is sweet, and this latter is active, appetite happening to be in the agent, then on the one hand [belief] says to avoid this,

90. When the word is used of internal factors (as in *NE* 7.3), Aristotle uses it to denote prohibitions that are put on one's following certain emotions but not to denote being prevented from following them. This use is related to one in which laws (1130b24) or shame (1128b18) as external factors prohibit one's following certain states or emotions. This is the way in which the expression is used in *NE* 7.3 at 1146a14 wherein reason (or knowledge or belief) prohibits one's following of one's appetites (see also Plato, *Rep.* 439c–440a) and, similarly, at 1147a31–4, wherein the agent is prohibited to taste by one's belief; that is, prohibited to follow an appetite (*i. e.*, reason does not prevent appetite from tasting but, rather, forbids or prohibits the agent to taste). The only clear use of the word for emotions preventing reason from exercising its own activity is thus in *MM* 1208a10–23. However, in that passage it is notable that reason and emotions are treated as two agents preventing each other from doing something and so as being external to each other.

but appetite leads one on; for each of the parts can move [the body].⁹¹ (*NE* 7.3, 1147a31–5)

In the passage, the uncontrolled agent is said to have a universal belief, which is not clearly specified, that forbids her to taste something; she has a (universal) belief that everything sweet is pleasant; and she has a particular belief that some particular thing (that she perceives) is sweet. This last belief is said to be active. It also seems that the agent has drawn a conclusion from the universal belief that forbids her to taste to the effect that she should avoid the sweet thing. But the agent has an appetite that goes against this conclusion and leads the agent to eat the sweet thing. The appetite is said to be able to move the agent to do this.

We now take into account two things. First, according to Aristotle at 1147a25–8, if both premises of the practical syllogism are known and actively attended to, the agent necessarily acts according to them. Second, in the “two-syllogism” passage the uncontrolled agent is clearly said to be drawing the good conclusion which means that she is actively attending to both premises. It follows that the passage cannot be a description of the uncontrolled action itself unless Aristotle is grossly inconsistent. It must describe the uncontrolled agent's state of mind before the uncontrolled action when she is not yet acting without control (*i. e.*, when she is still refraining from acting on her appetite and

91. Alternatively: “for it [viz., appetite] can move each of the parts.” In this case “*hekaston tōn moriōn*” would refer to the parts of the body that are responsible for movement (*i. e.*, limbs). This means taking *hekaston* to be the object of *kinein*. As I translated the sentence above, “each” refers to the parts or aspects of the soul that move (appetite, wish, etc.). In this case, *hekaston* is the subject and *kinein* is interpreted as meaning “to cause movement.” This makes more sense, and fits the context well: appetite can move the body, just as decision (reason) and spirit also can do. There does not seem to be anything in the word order to prevent this translation. The interpretation of *tōn moriōn* as referring to rational vs. non-rational part of the soul seems natural in view of the frequent usage of that language in both *EE* (1219b20–20a3, 1224b26, 1202a29) and *NE* (1102b4, 1102b19, 1139a9, b12, 1144a9, 1145a3–7).

sticking to her decision).⁹² This interpretation not only follows from the features of the text, but also offers several exegetical advantages.

First, we get rid of the problem of inconsistency between the “two-syllogism” passage (which claims that the particular premise is active and tells us that the agent draws the good conclusion), and Aristotle’s claim later at 1147b9 that the uncontrolled agent when acting without control does not have (or only has in a way) the final proposition. The latter claim concerns (*as it says*) the uncontrolled action itself, whereas the two-syllogism passage describes what precedes the action. Second, we get rid of the inconsistency between the “two-syllogism” passage and the immediately preceding passage (*NE* 7.3, 1147a25–31), which asserts that if both premises are active, the agent acts according to them. Since the “two-syllogism” passage describes the state of mind of the agent before her uncontrolled action, the agent is still acting according to her decision and so drawing the good conclusion.⁹³

Third, it complements, in an essential way, the third way of having but not using knowledge which pertains to the uncontrolled agent’s state of mind during the action. This third way is not specific to the uncontrolled agent — people in other mental states (drunk, asleep, and

92. It may be objected that when Aristotle says, in the two-syllogism passage that “*hē d’ epithumia agei*” (*NE* 7.3, 1147b34), he means that appetite leads to action, and not merely that it urges the agent to action. As evidence for such usage of *agein* one may point to, for example, *NE* 7.3, 1146b23–4, where the intemperate person is said to be *led* and this must mean, in the context that she *acts* while being led on. However, the general sense of *agein* in practical contexts is to “lead to action,” where it is not necessary that the agent who is “led” also acts. There is a clear passage in the *MM* 2.6, 1201a28–35 documenting such usage. The self-controlled man there is said to be led by his appetite, but to refrain from doing what the appetite leads him to do. The exact sense of *agein* must be then determined by its context. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that there is a period of time, in which the uncontrolled agent feels the pull of appetite, without yet succumbing and this can be well described by appetite *leading* him on. It is only the precipitate uncontrolled agent who acts immediately without a period of such struggle.

93. Rowe (1971, 119) has anticipated me in offering a similar “two-stage” analysis of these passages, such that passage (1) describes the agent *in media* and the latter passage (11) before the action. However, Rowe thinks that, while the agent acts without control, he is unaware of what she is doing (but that she was aware of it beforehand).

so on) are in the same state with respect to their knowledge. What distinguishes the uncontrolled agent from them is the content of her mind before the action — the presence of a good decision and of the contrary appetite. Although this conflicted state of mind is shared with other agents (such as the self-controlled one), taken together, the two states of mind capture the essence of uncontrolled action.

The interpretation also fits nicely with the immediately following passage:

(13) So that it turns out that a man acts without control in a way as a result of reason and belief, but a belief that is contrary not in itself, but only coincidentally to correct reason — for appetite is contrary, not the belief. This is also why animals are not uncontrolled, because they do not have universal supposition, but only appearance and memory of particulars. (*EN* 7.3.1147a35–1147b5)

The passage clearly locates the cause of the uncontrolled action in the agent’s appetite. It also tells us that there is a sense in which she acts on her belief — presumably the belief that everything sweet is pleasant. This belief is, of course, not contrary to her decision since it does not say that she should taste everything that is sweet or pleasant. It is her appetite that is contrary to her decision. Her action, however, is done in accordance with this belief even if not from it strictly speaking (hence, the “in a way” qualification). This is because she acts on her appetite of which the belief is a generalized expression. The agent realizes and so believes that everything sweet is pleasant for her but since she does not believe that everything sweet is good for her, she does not decide to act on her belief about what she finds pleasant. Still, once she acts as she does, the belief that everything sweet is pleasant comes to be in practical contradiction to her good decision since it represents the appetite on which she acted.

There has been much discussion in the literature about the final passage of the *phusikōs* discussion in which Aristotle refers to something he calls “the last proposition”:

(14) Since the last proposition is a belief both about something perceptible and controls action, this is what the uncontrolled agent does not have, being affected as he is, or he has it in a way in which we said having was not a matter of knowing, but of saying, as with the drunk and the verses of Empedocles. (*NE* 7.3, 1147b9–12)

Commentators are split between those who think that “the last proposition” refers to the particular premise (and so the passage has led them to focus on the particular premise as the principal item of ignorance for Aristotle’s analysis), and those who think that it refers to the good conclusion. The arguments for both positions are now well-known.⁹⁴ It seems to me that the important point in the passage is that the way in which the agent has the “last proposition” — which just is the proposition that expresses the belief that would led her to refrain from acting without control — is precisely the same way in which having knowledge is characterized in passages 1 and 9. The agent can be aware of it and report it, but she does not hold it in a way in which it would be supported by some beliefs or facts which she would identify as her reasons for holding it. Thus the good conclusion (if we adopt this interpretation for the sake of simplicity) is on a par with the bad conclusion — the agent cannot attend to reasons (in the sense I have

94. That the phrase refers to the particular premise is the traditional view. For arguments in favor of the view that it refers to the conclusion see Hardie (1981, 287–289) and especially Charles (1984, 120–121). One can argue that there are textual reasons to believe that “the last proposition” does or can refer to the good conclusion. In particular it can be argued that *protasis* could or should be translated as “proposition” and not as “premise.” This allows the meaning of “the last proposition” to be conclusion (*i. e.*, the last proposition of a syllogism). This can be further supported by observing that “the last” should not refer to something that is second in order, but, rather, to something that is, at least, third in order and hence to the conclusion. However, the view seems to me unlikely in view of 1147a25–6 where the particular premise is said to be about particulars of which perception is in control. When then Aristotle says that “the last proposition is a belief about something perceptible and controls actions,” his language seems to point rather straightforwardly to the particular premise. Moreover, since he used the language of conclusion before (1147a27), it is unclear why he should refrain from using it here.

explained them above) for holding or rejecting either of them. But since it is the bad conclusion and not the good one that is associated with pleasure in the agent’s experience, it is the bad one that moves her to act.

Before moving on, it will be useful to return to the distinction between the impetuous and the weak uncontrolled agent. It might be thought that even if my interpretation works well for the impetuous type, it still needs to explain what happens in the case of the weak uncontrolled agent who, after all, is supposed to reason beforehand and make the right decision. Does she then fail to draw the right conclusion from her decision to the right action, or does she somehow fail to know the conclusion even once she has drawn it? What exactly is her failure?

Here, it is important to keep in mind that the interpretation I am arguing for does not explain the uncontrolled agent’s action simply as a (local) cognitive failure to draw, or to know once drawn, a conclusion of a syllogism.⁹⁵ In fact, Aristotle’s explanation of why the uncontrolled agent’s decision loses its motivational efficacy does not concern the uncontrolled agent’s failure to attend to any particular proposition or belief. Rather, he thinks that the uncontrolled agent ends up in a (global) state of mind in which thinking — understood as a highly specific ability that crucially involves critical evaluation or reflection on the basis of reasons — is impeded (due to the physiological processes associated with her appetites) and that in *that* state of mind she cannot be motivated by reasons that go over and above appearances and so, ultimately, over and above pleasure and pain. So, the agent might well be able to draw a conclusion of a practical syllogism, if one wants to speak that way (she can, after all, “reason” in the way in which experience allows one to reason, as I explained above). But that does not mean that she also has, at that moment, active *understanding* of

95. The syllogistic apparatus introduced in *NE* 7.3 is in any case interpreted as representing an explanation of an action rather than an actual process of thought. From this point of view, there is one syllogism that explains the agent’s resistance before the action, and another one that explains her uncontrolled action.

that conclusion in the kind of reflective way which is systematically grounded in her grasp of the relevant conceptual and logical connections that it bears to her other relevant beliefs and values (even if she can recount these connections).

One can describe the uncontrolled agent's failure as cognitive, but doing so is not particularly useful since, on the one hand, her non-rational cognition is working perfectly well and her rational cognition is not operational to begin with. It is also not particularly useful to try to capture her failure by the difference between practical and theoretical cognition, so that the agent would have the latter, but not the former kind of cognition. At the time she acts, the uncontrolled agent does not have a merely theoretical knowledge of her conclusion (or decision) since she has in fact no true understanding of it to begin with (in fact, if she did have theoretical understanding, she would have practical one too). If anything, hers is a failure of character insofar as her ability to guide her behavior in a rational, reflective way sometimes disappears when faced with her appetites. Her behavior is then guided by her accumulated experience (*empeiria*) and habit (Cf. 1152a27–34).

4. Socrates' Account Coming About

At the very end of *NE* 7.3, Aristotle famously returns to Socrates' account and compares it to his own:

(15) And since the last term does not seem to be either universal or as expressive of knowledge as the universal term, also what Socrates was looking for seems to come about. For the affective state does not come about when what seems to be knowledge in the primary sense (*kuriōs*) is present, nor is it this knowledge that is dragged about because of the affective state, but [when] perceptual knowledge [is present]. Let this much, then, be said about knowing and not knowing, and about how it is possible act without control while still being in a state of knowledge. (*NE* 7.3, 1147b13–7)

We are told that what Socrates was looking for in his account also “comes about” and that it does so for two reasons. First, the last term does not seem to be either universal or as expressive of knowledge as the universal term. Second, the affective state (*i.e.*, the state in which the uncontrolled agent is when he succumbs) does not come about when knowledge in the primary or proper (*kuriōs*) sense is present, but only when perceptual knowledge is present. It is also not this knowledge in the primary sense, but (it seems plausible to think) merely knowledge of what one perceives that gets “dragged about.”

The meaning of “the last term” has been well explained by David Charles.⁹⁶ As he argues, it must refer to the term which is introduced as the last one in a syllogism. In a practical syllogism, this must be the subject of the particular premise, which designates “either an action or a particular object to be acted on.”⁹⁷ The two universal terms, one of which serves as the predicate in the particular premise, are introduced in the universal premise that comes first in practical syllogisms. If Charles is correct, it is knowledge of what one currently perceives that gets “dragged about” rather than, say, knowledge of what is good and bad. This is corroborated later in the passage when Aristotle says that it is perceptual knowledge that is present and gets dragged about when the agent acts without control.

The phrase “the affective state does not come about when what seems to be knowledge in the primary sense is present” has looked implausible to many commentators. On most interpretations the only item that, according to Aristotle's analysis, the uncontrolled agent lacks (does not use, does not use properly, etc.) when acting without control is the particular premise that would lead to the good conclusion of the practical syllogism. But knowledge “in the primary sense,” which is generally taken to be universal knowledge (*i.e.* knowledge of the universal premise), was something the uncontrolled agent was supposed to have actively in mind. But that is exactly not what this last

96. Charles (1984, 122–4).

97. *Ibid.*, 122.

paragraph says.⁹⁸ Scholars have thus adopted Stewart's conjecture that instead of "*parousēs ginetai*" in line 1147b16 we should read "*periginetai*."⁹⁹ The sentence then reads "the knowledge that is overcome when someone is in the affective state is not what seems to be knowledge in the primary sense." In this case, what is overcome is knowledge of what one perceives (*i. e.*, the particular premise), and not universal knowledge, which is knowledge in the primary sense.¹⁰⁰

However, we now have a way to preserve the text as received. The idea is that "knowledge in the primary sense" means knowledge that is actively attended to, rather than universal knowledge. As I have argued, such knowledge (*i. e.* actively attended to *as* knowledge) is indeed not present when one acts without control. Because of his current affective state (*pathos*), the agent does not and cannot actively attend to her knowledge as knowledge. That "knowledge in the primary sense" (*kuriōs epistēmē*) is knowledge which is actively attended to, can be clearly seen from *DA* 2.5, 417a21–b2. There Aristotle distinguishes three ways of calling someone "knowing" – either someone is of the genus of beings that by nature possess knowledge, or someone knows because he has learnt and can recall what he knows at will, or he is someone who is knowing *kuriōs*, *i. e.* someone who is "already attending [to his knowledge], and is in actuality and in the primary sense knowing" (*DA* 2.5, 417a28–9). This supports the claim that in our passage in the *NE*, knowledge in the proper sense is knowledge (whatever it might be knowledge of – whether of universal or particulars) that is actively attended to by the one who has it.

98. Stewart (1892, vol. 2, 163–4). Stewart's suggested explanation was that "true ἐπιστήμη, which he (*i. e.* the uncontrolled agent) has – and has consciously – is not in a position to be affected by πάθος, because it is universal, and so does not enter the arena of particular action." Stewart himself admitted that this is to skate on very thin ice, and suggested an alternative reading of the Greek text (explained below).

99. For example: Broadie and Rowe, *ad loc.*; Gauthier and Jolif, *ad loc.*; Robinson (1969, 199).

100. Most commentators think of "knowledge in the primary sense" here as knowledge of the universal premise. Burnet (1900, 305) interprets it as knowledge where all the terms are universals, *i. e.* scientific knowledge.

Thus even what Socrates was saying comes about because, when an uncontrolled action takes place, knowledge in the primary sense (*i. e.* actively attended to) is not present. The uncontrolled agent does not follow his passions against his knowledge while actively attending to it. No such "dragging about" of knowledge happens. The only thing that is "dragged about" (in a way) and interfered with directly is perceptual knowledge. But the perceptual knowledge that is dragged about is also not present *as* knowledge when the agent is in the affective state. If the knowledge that is not present is said to be active knowing, then it is just as true that knowledge of the universal term is inactive as it is that knowledge of the particular premise (perceptual knowledge) is inactive. However, the information contained in the particular premise is utilized by the appetite in the uncontrolled action. Perceptual knowledge is dragged about in this sense.¹⁰¹

5. Are uncontrolled actions voluntary?

Does Aristotle's theory of uncontrolled action manage to avoid the charge of involuntariness? If it cannot, it would contradict Aristotle's claim that uncontrolled actions are voluntary (1152a14–6). Since a proper answer would require a careful interpretation of Aristotle's theory of voluntary action, I will confine my remarks to only the most pressing concerns.¹⁰²

It might be useful to distinguish between two questions: (A) whether the uncontrolled agent's action is voluntary under the description

101. This understanding of the passage is not without its problems. First, it makes Aristotle contrast active knowledge with perceptual knowledge, and that does not seem to be as proper a contrast as that between universal and particular knowledge. Second, on my interpretation perceptual knowledge is not present any more than active knowledge is present contrary to what the text says. It requires that one qualifies Aristotle's claim that only perceptual knowledge is present by adding "but not as knowledge."

102. In particular, I do not address the issue that, in the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle appears to require that the agent has knowledge (in the technical sense) if she is to act voluntarily (*e. g.*, 2.9, 1225b10–7). A view of Aristotle's theory of voluntary action along these lines is argued for in Charles (2012). I argue that this is not in fact Aristotle's view in "Agency and Responsibility in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*," forthcoming in *Phronesis* 60: 206–51.

under which it is uncontrolled and (B) whether the uncontrolled agent acts without control while knowing — in some sense of the word — that what she does is wrong.¹⁰³ As I have already argued, B is true — the uncontrolled agent can be aware that what she does is wrong, even if her awareness of that fact does not count as knowledge, strictly speaking.

Concerning A, we need to ask what the description under which an action is uncontrolled is. There are two options: either (1) the agent acts as she does on account of the very feature that made her originally decide not to act that way, yet she is unaware of this fact; or (2) the agent acts as she does on account of the very feature that made her originally decide not to act that way while being aware that, according to her decision, she should not be acting that way. As I have argued in section 2, actions falling under option 1 need not be cases of lack of control, but also of forgetfulness, inattention, absent-mindedness, and so on. This means that the relevant description is the one in option 2.

According to Aristotle, “Since involuntary action is either forced or [done] through ignorance, the voluntary would seem to be that which has its principle in the agent himself, knowing (*eidoti*) the particulars of the action” (*NE* 3.1, 1111a21–4). On the view I attributed to Aristotle, the uncontrolled action is not forced since its causal origin is in the agent (*i. e.*, the agent’s appetite). The second condition, at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, cannot be understood as requiring that in order to act voluntarily one has to have *knowledge* (strictly speaking) of the particulars since both children and animals act voluntarily (1111a25–30, 1111b5–10). If the condition is, accordingly, understood as requiring that the agent is aware of the particulars, my view satisfies it since the uncontrolled agent is perfectly well aware of the particulars of her situation and action. It is notable that the list of particulars at 1111a2–6 does not include knowledge of the why (*dia ti*).¹⁰⁴ As Aristotle says, “nothing prevents that the many have a belief that something should

103. This obviously does not imply that she knows that she is acting *without control*.

104. It does include knowledge of the result at which she aims, but that is quite different from grasping the *dia ti*.

be done or should not be done, though not through reasoning” (*EE* 2.11, 1226b23–5). One can know that in order to get X, one should do Y, without at the same time grasping (or being capable of grasping), the reason why Y is suitable for X.¹⁰⁵

Still, one might wonder whether the claim that the uncontrolled agent’s transition from adhering to her decision to acting without control is explained by physiological processes rather than any intentional activity is compatible with the agent’s being responsible for what she is doing. Does this mean that the appetite is irresistible to the agent? As Aristotle sees it, there are certain norms (presumably social norms) that govern what adult human beings are expected to resist. Acting in a certain capacity is generally governed by certain norms or standards pertaining to that capacity. For example, if one is acting as a physician, then there are certain standards that one is expected to fulfill. If one does not fulfill them one can be justly held responsible for the failure (unless one fails because of some recognized problem, such as disease).¹⁰⁶ In a similar way, being an adult human being within a society implies certain expectations or norms and failure to fulfill them may be blameworthy:

(16) But since knowing and understanding is of two kinds, one having and the other using knowledge, the man who has knowledge but does not use it could in a way rightly be said to have acted in ignorance, but in another way not; for example, if he failed to use his knowledge because of negligence. Likewise, too, someone would be blamed even if he did not have it, if it is what was easy

105. Cf. *NE* 7.10, 1152a14–6.

106. “Surely then there is a standard (*tis horos*) also for the physician, by reference to which he judges what is healthy for a body and what is not, and towards which each thing is to be done up to a certain extent and [one is] healthy when [it is done] well, but not if more or less [is done]. So it is also for the excellent person concerning his actions and choices of things naturally good but not praised” (1248a21–b2).

or essential that he fails to have because of negligence or pleasure or pain. (12225b10–6)¹⁰⁷

Although the uncontrolled agent might find it subjectively impossible to resist the desire, this subjective experience is not relevant to her being responsible for her action. Unless the agent's nature makes her stand outside of the expected norms, it was her responsibility to take care to not become the kind of person she now is. The uncontrolled agent's condition is not the result of any particular external (overstraining) circumstances since if that were the case, everybody would be uncontrolled in those circumstances. It is the result of a life in which the agent did not apply herself enough to the proper habituation of her appetites. Since habituation is realized not just during childhood, but also (and especially) during adulthood through the conditioning of one's soul through reasoned decisions, it was up to her to take care. The uncontrolled agent's failure to resist is, in a way, equal to a failure to live up to reasonable expectations for a human being: "perhaps he is the kind of person who does not care. But he is responsible for becoming that kind of person, because he has lived not caring" (*NE* 3.5, 1114a3–5).

6. Conclusion

On the interpretation of Aristotle's theory of lack of control that I have developed here, Aristotle's theory contains both decidedly ancient elements as well as elements that ring almost contemporary. The idea that uncontrolled action can be explained by temporary suspension of reason is one of the ancient elements. It was already present in Ancient Greek thought before Aristotle. But it allowed Aristotle to strike a new path between the Socratic theory which denied any overcoming of reason by emotions and the more ordinary view which affirmed such overcoming. However, this ancient element is supported by psychological theory that has a far more contemporary ring to it. That theory

¹⁰⁷. See also *NE* 7.7, 1150b6–15.

recognizes that much of our behavior is not guided by reflective thinking (even if such thinking is the one characteristic of human beings) but rather relies on much more basic processes that may superficially look like thinking (in the strict sense) but are in fact only extremely complex exercises of our capacity for perception and memory. Another striking idea is that the capacity for reflective, deliberative thinking is not separated from bodily processes, even if it is perhaps not bodily itself. On the contrary, purely physiological processes can lead to its inhibition even while they do not inhibit (at least not to the same extent) the more basic cognitive processes. The very human capacity of reasoning which is so powerful is thus, at the same time, characterized by inherent fragility insofar as it is coupled with bodily processes over which it (and so we) have little or no direct control. Aristotle's complex theory of lack of control is thus perhaps the best witness to both the power and the fragility of reason as Aristotle conceives of it.

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