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Aristotle's *Akrasia*: The Role of Potential Knowledge and Practical Syllogism

ABSTRACT: In *Nicomachean Ethics VII* Aristotle describes *akrasia* as a disposition. Taking into account that it is a disposition, I argue that *akrasia* cannot be understood on an epistemological basis alone, i.e., it is not merely a problem of knowledge that the *akratic* person acts the ways he does, but rather one is *akratic* due to a certain kind of habituation, where the person is not able to activate the potential knowledge s/he possesses. To stress this point, I focus on the gap between potential knowledge and its activation, whereby I argue that the distinction between potential and actual knowledge is at the center of the problem of *akrasia*. I suggest that to elaborate on this gap, we must go beyond the limits of *Nicomachean Ethics* to *Metaphysics IX*, where we find Aristotle's discussion of the distinction between potentiality and actuality. I further analyze the gap between potential and actual knowledge by means of Aristotle's discussion of practical syllogism, where I argue that *akrasia* is a result of a conflict in practical reasoning. I conclude my paper by stressing that for the *akratic* person the action is determined with respect to the conclusion of the *practical syllogism*, where the conclusion is produced by means of a 'conflict' between the universal opinion which is potential and the particular opinion which is appetitive.

KEY-WORDS: *akrasia*, knowledge, potentiality, actuality, action, sources of action, practical syllogism, appetitive desire.

Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*¹ VII states that *akrasia* (incontinence) is a disposition (*hexis*)² whereby one possesses the knowledge of how (one ought) to act, yet this knowledge cannot be exercised.³ As Devin Henry suggests, traditional approaches to Aristotle's treatment of the issue can be divided into two main camps: "those that believe he reduces all *akrasia* to some form of culpable ignorance; and those that believe he allows for genuine cases of *akrasia* in

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. by Ross, D., Oxford University Press, New York 2009.

² *Idem*, 11451a32-34.

³ *Idem*, 1147a10-18.

which the agent acts against full knowledge”.⁴

My aim in this paper is not to offer a solution to the question “*what is Aristotle’s position concerning akrasia?*” rather, in agreement with Filip Grgic, who argues that “*the explanation of akrasia can by no means be exhausted by the explanation of the akratic’s knowledge*”;⁵ I want to draw attention to the multilayered discussion that surrounds the problem of akrasia. I, too contend that insofar as *akrasia* is a disposition, it cannot be understood on epistemological basis alone, i.e., it is not a problem of knowledge that the incontinent person acts the way she/he does, but rather one is *akratic* due to a certain kind of habituation whereby the person is not able to exercise the knowledge s/he possesses.

Focusing on this point, I argue that the gap between potential knowledge and its activation is at the center of the problem of *akrasia* - and to elaborate this gap, I suggest that we must go beyond the limits of *Nicomachean Ethics* to *Metaphysics IX*, where we find the distinction between potentiality and actuality.

Finally, I make some conclusions in my paper with a discussion on the role of the practical syllogism, where I argue that the gap between potential and actual knowledge must be understood on the basis of a conflict of practical reasoning.

Aristotle stresses the gap between the possession of knowledge and its activation in the following passage: ‘*since we use the word ‘know’ in two senses (for both the man who has knowledge but is not using it and he who is using it said to know), it will make a difference whether, when a man does what he should not, he has the knowledge but is not exercising it*’, [NE, 1146b31-36 (emphasis not mine)]. According to the above passage, one is said to know in two senses, when one possesses the knowledge but is unable to exercise it, and when one acts according to the knowledge one possesses. In the context of the *akratic* person, there is the capacity (potentiality) to act according to one’s knowledge, but this capacity remains inactive, it cannot be activated or exercised. In other words, one’s potential knowledge is not actualized. I argue that the distinction between “having knowledge” and “exercising knowledge” Aristotle makes in the above passage can be better grasped in relation to his discussion of potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*energeia*) in *Metaphysics IX*.⁶

As I will demonstrate, the knowledge that is possessed, but not yet activat-

⁴ Henry, D., “Aristotle on pleasure and the worst form of akrasia”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 5 (2002), 256.

⁵ Grgic, F., “Aristotle on the akratic’s knowledge”, *Phronesis*, 47 (2002), 337.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Sachs, J., Green Lion Press, Santa Fe, 2002.

ed, is potential knowledge, whereas the knowledge that is exercised is actual knowledge. According to Aristotle, as stressed in *Metaphysics IX*, each potentiality is a potentiality of its actuality, since “what is at work always comes into being from what is in potency”.⁷

Let us consider this point with an example: one is able to speak German, because one possesses the knowledge of German in his/her soul, however, it is only when the person speaks German that his/her knowledge of German is actualized. That is to say, the actualization of knowledge refers to an activity in conformity with the possessed knowledge, which is potential in character before it has been actualized. This point further confirms my argument that the *akratic* person has potential knowledge but cannot activate that knowledge, since the activation of that potential knowledge would amount to acting in accordance with one’s knowledge.

Therefore, what is important to notice in this regard is the fact that each potentiality (*dunamis*) is capable of both being and not-being, since, as Aristotle stresses, “*what is capable of being admits both of being and of not being*”.⁸ Hence, it is possible that the potential knowledge is not actualized. To put it differently, not every potentiality is necessarily actualized since the term ‘*dunamis*’ precisely refers to this inactive state of being which has both the capacity of remaining inactive as well as to be activated.⁹ Hence, the question that needs to be addressed in the context of *akrasia* is this: why is there a gap between these two kinds of knowledge in the *akratic* person? Or better stated: why is the potential knowledge of the incontinent person not activated? As Aristotle notes, it is because of his/her “appetitive desires”¹⁰ that the *akratic* person cannot activate his/her potential knowledge.¹¹

Before discussing the role of the passions in relation to the practical syllogism, I want to focus more specifically on the gap between potential and actual

⁷ *Idem*, 1049b26.

⁸ *Idem*, 1050b12-13.

⁹ Charlotte Witt emphasizes the importance of inactive *dunamis* for Aristotle: ‘It is important to see that what is at issue between actualist and is not the existence of *dunamis*, but the existence of inactive *dunamis*’, Witt Ch., *Ways of being, potentiality an actuality in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Cornell University, Ithaca, 2003, 18.

¹⁰ According to Aristotle, in NE I.13, the soul has three parts; rational, vegetative and appetitive. Appetitive part is also referred to as “the desiring element” of the soul (*NE*, 1102b30-31). According to Hendrik Lorenz, Aristotle formulation of appetitive desires are those “desires which arise independently of one’s thoughts about what is best to do”, since they are simply directed to that which is pleasant or pleasurable, see Lorenz, H., *The brute within, appetitive desire in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, 122.

¹¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, D., Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, 1145b12-14

knowledge in order to account for the force of appetitive desire in the determination of action. According to Claudia Baracchi, we find a gap between potential and actual knowledge in the *akratic* person, because the potential knowledge that is possessed is not a result of experience. In other words, knowledge is detached from experience and so it is unable to make one “hold together and harmonize” “*one’s logos (reason and judgment) and one’s emotions and drives*”.¹² In *Met.* XIII.10 Aristotle states that potential knowledge is about the universal and is indeterminate, whereas actual knowledge is of something determinate. This statement confirms Baracchi’s assessment that the knowledge of the *akratic* person is detached from experience. It is detached from experience precisely because it is about the universal and not the particular, and insofar as it is about the universal and indeterminate, it fails to determine the action. A reading that incorporates *Met.* XIII.10 into the discussion of the gap between having knowledge and exercising knowledge suggests that the potential knowledge that is possessed by the *akratic* person is universal and not determinate, and because of that, it cannot determine a specific action. The distinction between the universal and the particular in relation to the problem of *akrasia* will become clearer as we now look at the next passage about the practical syllogism. Aristotle writes: ‘*since there are two kinds of premiss, there is nothing to prevent a man’s having both premisses and acting against his knowledge, provided that he is using only the universal premiss and not the particular; for it is particular acts that have to be done*’, (*NE*, 1147a1-4).

Practical judgments can be attained through the use of a syllogistic method, that is, a reasoning process that has a syllogistic form, where there is a universal premiss, a middle term, which is a particular premiss which is perceptual, and a conclusion. The conclusion is the practical judgment itself. As he notes above, in the case of the *akratic* person, only the universal premiss is properly used and not the particular - hence practical judgment cannot inform the action. Thus, what Aristotle means by “having knowledge” is precisely ‘the having of a universal opinion and this is the sense in which the *akratic* person knows what she/he is doing is bad, because she/he has a universal opinion’ (e.g., not all pleasurable things should be sought).

However, the action cannot be determined on the basis of this universal opinion, since the universal opinion, insofar as it is universal and therefore not determinate, has less force compared to the particular opinion, which is perceptual in character and directed towards the pleasant thing. The particular opinion, then, as it is perceptual in nature and about the particular pleasant thing, is more influential in determining the action, since it is coupled with ap-

¹² Baracchi, C., *Aristotle’s ethics as first philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, 231-232.

petitive/desiring power of the soul. Next, I will further dwell on this point with respect to Aristotle's discussion of the sources of action in *De Anima*.

According to Aristotle in *De Anima* 433a16-20,¹³ there are three main sources for action in relation to a pleasant thing:

- a. a pleasant object (the object of appetite),
- b. the power of appetite (or capacity to desire), and
- c. practical thought (active state of practical mind)¹⁴

The object of appetite starts the movement first by activating the soul's capacity to desire. Soul's capacity to desire, however, cannot be activated without perception, since one needs to perceive the object in order to desire it. This is why, Aristotle stresses that the practical mind cannot produce action without the power to desire and sense.¹⁵

In the same passage, Aristotle also emphasizes that in the process of producing action there is a form of *sylogism* at work in the practical mind, on account of which the action is determined, according to the conclusion of the practical syllogism. In the case of *akrasia* then, what we are concerned with is a kind of action that pursues a pleasant thing (e.g., this here is sweet and therefore pleasant) regardless of the universal opinion that forbids one to do so. In the non-akratic person on the contrary the universal opinion is not in conflict but rather 'harmonized' with the particular perceptual opinion and the person acts in accordance with practical knowledge. Thus, as I have argued along with Baracchi, the gap between potential and actual knowledge is an outcome of one's inability to work together (and harmonize) the capacities such as the practical mind and the desiring/appetitive element of the soul. As a result, in the akratic person there is a conflict between the practical mind and appetite.

What we thus find here with *akrasia* in the cognitive level is an inability to integrate the universal with the particular. This, however, is not a cognitive problem since the cognition here is practical, i.e., the capacity to think or judge well in practical matters is *acquired* and *not natural* as Aristotle points out in *NE II*. This is why *akrasia* is described as a disposition (*hexis*) by Aristotle, as it is a state of character that is acquired through practice. Hence, I contend that the inability to harmonize the universal opinion and the particular perceptual

¹³ Aristotle, "De Anima (on the soul)" in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, McKeon, R., (ed.), trans. Smith, J.A., Modern Library, New York, 2001.

¹⁴ Gerasimos Santas argues that the cause of action is neither thought nor desire alone but the co-presence of the two. Christopher Long on the other hand, following Nussbaum, stresses the role of sense and also of imagination. Santas, G., "Aristotle on practical inference, the explanation of action, and *akrasia*", *Phronesis*, 14 (1969), 170.; Long, Ch.P., *The Ethics of Ontology, Rethinking Aristotelian Legacy*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2004, 140.

¹⁵ Aristotle, "De Anima (on the soul)" in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, McKeon, R., (ed.), trans. Smith, J.A., Modern Library, New York, 2001, 433a17-19.

opinion in the thought process of the incontinent is not a cognitive failure but rather a matter of not knowing how, because the potential knowledge that is possessed by the *akratic* person is not gained through experience, rather it is a universal knowledge which has no determinate character.

To conclude, in the akratic person the action is determined with respect to the conclusion of the practical syllogism insofar as it is the result of the process of deliberation. However, the conclusion of the syllogism is produced by means of a 'conflict' between the universal and particular opinion. Hence, in the *akratic* person, the two kinds of premisses (universal and particular) are in conflict. Yet, they are not in conflict due to a cognitive inability, but precisely because the potential knowledge, which has universal value, is not determined through practice and as a result of which it is the desiring/appetitive element that produces the action.

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