**Akrasia in Epictetus: A Comparison with Aristotle[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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# Introduction

The problem of *akrasia* plays a prominent role in both Plato and Aristotle’s ethics. And yet, any reader of Stoicism will note that *akrasia* seems to not concern the Stoics in the same way. In *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, Brad Inwood does an excellent job of explaining whythis is the case.[[2]](#footnote-2) Inwood distinguishes between two types of weak will. First, there is weak will in the strict sense, in which the agent acts knowingly against his own best judgement. This is presumably what occurs in Leontius of Plato’s *Republic,* who knows that he should abstain from observing the corpses, but cannot help doing so, and thus observes them with a sense of shame and guilt, knowing that what he does is wrong.[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, there is a broad sense of weak will, which occurs when ‘an agent fails to stand by a previous decision about what he will do or by some general plan or programme of action’.[[4]](#footnote-4)For example, suppose one decides to undertake a diet. However, when later confronted by delicious cake, the agent either has forgotten their previous plan or revokes their commitment to healthy foods, and eats the cake.

In both cases, the agent acts against a previous practical decision they held to be true and best. The important difference is that strict weak will involves the individual acting against their best judgement while simultaneously holding that judgement and being conscious of its truth. In the case of broad weak will, the agent does not act against a judgement that is simultaneously recognized in that moment to be true, either because they have forgotten it, or they have dismissed it.

Inwood quickly notes that there is no problem for the Stoics to allow weak will in the broad sense, and quickly turns to the strict sense as the more philosophically interesting question given his project of understanding human action in Stoicism. After all, it is the strict sense of weak will which is focus of ancient debate. It is endorsed by the Plato of the *Republic*, and arguably Aristotle, while also being dismissed by the Socrates of the *Protagoras*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to Inwood, the reason the Stoics do not discuss weak will in the strict sense is that a theory has no way to account for the phenomenon if its psychology requires a necessary connection between practical decisions and actions. In other words, if all self-directed imperatives must be obeyed then there is no possibility for the agent to simultaneously act in a way contrary to these imperatives. Thus the only way to allow for weak will in the strict sense is if there exists a power in the soul which may interfere with the power of practical reason, driving a wedge between practical decisions and actions, and thus severing the necessary connection between them.[[6]](#footnote-6) Stoicism denies the existence of such a power, and thus rejects the strict sense of weak will as a psychological impossibility on theoretical grounds.

I agree with the picture Inwood has provided concerning weak will in the strict sense. However, for this paper I wish to turn attention to the neglected phenomena of weak will in the broad sense. This kind of weak will is of major philosophical significance concerning moral education, as weak will is a problem for the student. It affects the individual who is progressing towards virtue, and wants to be good, but is failing. This was understood by no Stoic better than Epictetus, who lived as an educator.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate two main points. First, that the phenomenon of weak will, understood in the broad sense, is not irrelevant to Epictetus’ Stoicism, but rather of central importance. In fact, it is Epictetus’ notion of weak will which informs and determines a major portion of Epictetus’ educational program.

The second aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Epictetus’ conception of weak will is deeply similar to that of Aristotle. This is perhaps surprising, given their vastly different conceptions of moral psychology. Because of this connection, an understanding of weak will in Epictetus is improved by first exploring the topic in Aristotle. The first section of this paper will discuss Aristotle’s treatment of *akrasia* and the akratic individual in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* Section two will then explore weak-will in Epictetus, showing it to be a central component of his theory while highlighting the many similarities to Aristotle’s position.

# The Aristotelian Background

In Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we find an extensive discussion of weak-will, including a discussion of its causes, its potential cure, and its moral position in relation to other states of character. The incontinent or weak willed individual is introduced simply as one who ‘knows that his actions are base, but does them because of his feelings’.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is contrasted with the continent or strong willed individual who ‘knows his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

What separates the weak willed individual from an intemperate or vicious one is that the weak willed individual recognizes that what they do is wrong. Thus they are prone to regret, and are more easily cured.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nonetheless, this recognition is not sufficient to motivate the weak willed individual to restrain themselves, because their feelings motivate them to act contrary to reason.

Aristotle goes on to identify and describe two types of incontinence: weakness and precipitancy.[[10]](#footnote-10) Precipitancy is when the individual fails to deliberate, or invoke reason, and is thus lead by feelings. Presumably what separates the precipitant from the vicious individual is that they would act correctly if they were to consider the situation rationally, but they fail to do so. The weak incontinent deliberates, knows the right thing to do, but acts contrary to reason anyway and performs the wrong action in spite of their knowledge.

In order to properly understand this phenomenon, Aristotle sets out to determine what exactly it is that that weak incontinent can be said to ‘know’, and how it is possible to act contrary to this knowledge. Aristotle’s conclusion is a very controversial topic among interpreters, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed picture, so a brief sketch must suffice. Roughly speaking there are two accounts interpreters endorse concerning the matter: the intellectualist account and the non-intellectualist account. The intellectualist account is that Aristotle believes that the individual fails to act properly, because the individual lacks the practical knowledge of how to act in the situation.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is different from ignorance of the matter because, on the intellectualist view, the weak willed individual possesses knowledge at a general level in the form of general propositions: ‘I should not steal’, ‘cake is bad for me’. However, poorly trained appetites impede the rational faculty of the weak willed individual in some way, and thus the individual fails to make a proper inference from a general moral truth, to a particular practical judgement concerning oneself. As such, the cause of moral failure is still a form of ignorance, but it is ignorance at the particular level. Thus they can still be said to know what they did is wrong in some way, differentiating them from the ignorant. The intellectualist account believes that Aristotle rejects the idea of weak will in the strict sense, and ultimately agrees with the Socrates of the *Protagoras*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The non-intellectualist account takes Aristotle to believe that the individual does, or at least can, know the correct action at the particular level, but fail to act upon it. On this interpretation, Aristotle holds weak will in the strict sense to be possible. While there are different versions of this account all of them take desire to be the force which drives a wedge between self-directed imperatives and practical action. [[13]](#footnote-13) On one such interpretation, referred to as the Humean interpretation by Charles, practical knowledge requires both good judgement and good desire. So the weak incontinent individual possesses good judgement, but lacks good desire and thus does not act in accordance with this judgement. [[14]](#footnote-14) On another account, desire is a motivating force separate from, but analogous too, rational cognition, which is sufficient for perceiving an object as good and motivating the agent to act in pursuit of it. [[15]](#footnote-15)

While this debate is of interest, and the similarities between Epictetus and Aristotle are even greater if the intellectualists are right, it is a complicated debate, and an answer is unnecessary to discuss the parallels between Aristotle and Epictetus. As such, this paper will put aside this question, and instead highlight aspects of weak will in Aristotle that are unambiguously the case, regardless of if we side with the intellectualist, or non-intellectualist account. The remainder of this section shall explore three features of weak will in Aristotle that find their way into Epictetus.

1. ***Weak will involves a universal premise, considered by the agent to be true, failing to be effective at motivating an action in accordance with that premise.[[16]](#footnote-16)***

At the beginning of his discussion of incontinence, Aristotle notes that incontinence involves acting in opposition to what the agent considers to be true or best. This is the difference between the intemperate individual and the incontinent. For example, the intemperate person thinks they are right to pursue that which is pleasant, where-as the incontinent person thinks they are wrong to pursue it, but pursue it anyway.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is in this way that the weak-willed individual is understood to be acting against their reason.

Aristotle dismisses as unimportant the question of whether the weak-willed individual’s judgement ‘that it is wrong to pursue what is pleasant’ is in fact true, and thus is knowledge and not mere belief. What matters is that the agent holds it to be true, yet still fails to act in accordance with it. Aristotle then goes on to provide an explanation for how such an incredible seeming occurrence might be possible.

A distinction is made between two types of premises: those of a universal and those of a particular nature.[[18]](#footnote-18) A universal premise concerns types. ‘Dry things benefit all human beings’, and ‘I am a human being’ are given as examples. A particular premise concerns an individual case, such as ‘*This* dry thing here, will benefit me now’. It is only particular premises which may be acted upon and actualized.

On this view, an agent can be said to know something about object X of type Y, at least in a certain sense, as long as they possess a universal premise concerning type Y. So to endorse the universal premise ‘dry things benefit all human beings’ is to know something about *that* particular dry thing. However an agent will not act in accordance with this belief unless both:

1. They infer the correct particular premise (in this case that ‘this particular dry thing will benefit me’).

And,

1. The particular premise is rendered active and motivates their behavior.[[19]](#footnote-19)

If both of these conditions are not met, then the agent will not act in accordance with their endorsed universal premise. As such, the weak-willed individual can rightly be said to both possess knowledge about object X, and fail to act in accordance with that knowledge.

The nature of the incontinent is tightly linked to this idea of a universal premise. To be incontinent is to possess a universal premise, but fail to render it effective at motivating our behavior. If we are not acting against a universal premise, we cannot be incontinent. This is why Aristotle says ‘beasts are not incontinent, because they have no universal supposition, but [only] appearance and memory of particulars.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. ***There are two types of incontinence: Precipitancy and Weakness***

One type of incontinence is impetuosity, while another is weakness. For the weak person deliberates, but then his feeling makes him abandon the result of his deliberation; but the impetuous person is led on by his feelings because he has not deliberated. (NE 1150b20-24)

For one type of incontinent person does not abide by the result of his deliberation, while the volatile [impetuous] person is not even prone to deliberate at all. (NE 1152a18-19)

As the above passages demonstrate, Aristotle identifies two different types of incontinence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Given that two criteria must be met in order for an endorsed universal premise to motivate an agent’s actions, these two types of incontinence correspond to the failure of a different particular criterion.

First, there are those who do not deliberate at all. We shall refer to this type of incontinence as precipitancy.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is a failure of criterion A). The agent does not deliberate, and thus fails to infer the proper particular premise from the universal premises she is committed to. She arrives at a contradictory premise, and acts upon it, without realizing it is in conflict with her other commitments. For example, imagine an individual who believes that ‘stealing should be avoided’. They then come across someone else’s property and they take it for themselves without taking the time to deliberate and realize that such an action is an instance of stealing. It is of no surprise why the precipitant individual will feel guilty for what they have done.[[23]](#footnote-23) After their action, they will take the time to deliberate and realize that it was in conflict with their commitments. They will realize that they have acted against their previous plan of action, a plan which they are still committed to.

As noted by Salles, this aspect of Aristotle’s discussion of incontinence is often neglected.[[24]](#footnote-24) Presumably this is because it is not an example of weak-will in the strict sense, and is thus of less relevance to those interested in such a phenomena. But to those interested in the connections between Stoicism and Aristotle, it is of great importance.

The second type of incontinence we shall refer to as weakness.[[25]](#footnote-25) According to the passage quoted above, this occurs when the agent deliberates, but abandons the result of that deliberation and does not act upon it. What exactly abandoning the result of deliberation entails is very controversial, and constitutes the bulk of the disagreement between intellectualist and non-intellectualist readings of Aristotle. On the intellectualist account, abandoning the result of deliberation is taken to mean that we infer the correct particular premise ‘I should not take that object’, but we do not endorse it as true. We abandon the result of deliberation in that we recognize this premise was derived rationally, but we choose to endorse or stand-by a different premise, perhaps ‘I should take this object’.

On the non-intellectualist account, we arrive at the proper particular premise and endorse it as true, but this endorsement is not sufficient to motivate our behavior. Perhaps because the action required from us is in conflict with our desires or feelings. Thus we abandon the result of our deliberation by not acting in accordance with it. Our action is instead directed by a causal force besides reason that is present within us.

Regardless of what the correct interpretation is, on both accounts weakness does not satisfy criterion B). The particular premise that corresponds to our universal commitments, although correctly inferred, is not rendered active or is unable to motivate our behavior. If the non-intellectualists are right, then this is an example of strict weak will.

1. ***There is a difference between being aware of a truth, and fully knowing it***

Upon considering these examples, there emerges for Aristotle an apparent difference between kinds or degrees of understanding. At first, we may just be ignorant of how to conduct ourselves. From there we may be taught how it is best to behave. If we are eager to learn we will endorse these lessons as true, and be able to recite them. But there is a difference between possessing principles of conduct and coming to fully understand or know these principles:

Saying words that come from knowledge is no sign [of fully having it]. For people affected in these ways even recite demonstrations and verses of Empedocles. And those who have just learned something do not yet know it, though they string the words together; for it must grow into them, and this takes time. And so we must suppose that those who are acting incontinently also say the words in the way that actors do. (NE 1147a19-24)

According to Aristotle, fully knowing something requires it to grow into us, a process which takes time. Until then we are like actors, those who play a part but do not fully endorse the truth of what we are saying. It seems then that incontinence is caused, at least in part, by knowing something in a way that is not complete or full. Aristotle provides no examples of what gaining a full understanding consists of, but we can infer some potential candidates for both types of incontinence.

In terms of precipitancy, perhaps one possesses a universal premise that is impoverished in some way, which impedes their ability to infer correct particular premises. So I know that ‘I should not steal’, but I lack a proper understanding of property or ownership, and thus I fail to accurately recognize what constitutes an instance of stealing.

In reference to weakness, we could imagine that if one had an impoverished major premise, it would be less likely to motivate us to act in accordance with it. So an agent could correctly identify that ‘this is stealing, so I should not do this’, but if she does not know why stealing should be avoided, or the ways in which it harms both the perpetrator and the victim, then this premise is less likely to motivate her.

These are just potential options, but the point should be clear that for Aristotle incontinence can be counter-acted, at least in part, by gaining a fuller understanding of our plans of actions, and why we are committed to them. We do not want to be like actors in a play, following and reciting things that other people have told us. Rather we should strive to be fully knowledgeable agents who have an intentional plan of action and an informed understanding of why this is the plan they wish to follow.

# Epictetus on *Akrasia*

Having outlined some features of incontinence in Aristotle, let us turn our attention to the Stoic Epictetus. Epictetus retains the orthodox position concerning Stoic psychology, in that he conceives of the self as being wholly rational. However, he is particularly adamant concerning the persuasive power the appearance of truth has over the individual. This results in his endorsing a particular kind of intellectualism, described by Long as an ‘optimistic rationalism’. This is the view, inspired by Socrates, that the individual has a natural love of truth and must necessarily assent to any impression that seems true to him.[[26]](#footnote-26) If we assent to a certain type of impression as true, those concerning value judgements for example, then this causes an impulse and we are motivated to act. As such, Epictetus holds that we are necessarily drawn towards and must pursue that which seems good to us: ‘As it is impossible to assent to an apparent falsehood, or to deny an apparent truth, so it is impossible to abstain from an apparent good.’[[27]](#footnote-27)

It follows from this that if the agent’s reason perceives an action to be the best or the good thing to do, then the agent will necessarily pursue this course of action, because assent is sufficient for the impulse to act. Such a picture, as Inwood makes clear, does not leave any room for weak-will in the strict sense. The agent cannot simultaneously have the practical decision to do X and act contrary to that decision, for actions are exclusively motivated by the judgement that a certain action is best. In fact, we can reverse engineer, as Epictetus often does,[[28]](#footnote-28) the true state of an agent’s beliefs by observing his actions. If an agent acts in a certain way, this can be taken as proof that the agent’s reason believes this action to be best. This is why weak-will in the strict sense has no place in the philosophy of Epictetus.

However, all this considered it would be too hasty of a judgement to dismiss the possibility of an Aristotelian form of weak-will in Epictetus. If we expand our conception of weak-will to include it in the broad sense, then weak-will in an Aristotelian form emerges as central to the philosophical program of Epictetus. Recall that weak-will in the broad sense is when the agent, presented with a certain situation, goes back on a previous plan of action. Weak-will in this sense is a prevalent issue in Epictetus, and takes on the same three features as in Aristotle.

1. ***Weak will involves a universal premise, considered by the agent to be true, failing to be effective at motivating an action in accordance with that premise.***

All examples of weak will in Aristotle have in common that the agent is acting contrary to a universal premise she takes to be true. This is what makes them examples of weak-will, and it is why the agent is prone to regret. We find the same disconnect between universal premises and particular premises discussed as the source of moral failure in Epictetus:

This is the cause of everyone’s troubles, the inability to apply common preconceptions to particulars. Instead the opinions of men as to what is bad diverge. One thinks that he is unwell, when it’s nothing of the kind; the problem is that he is not adapting preconceptions correctly. One imagines that he is poor, another that he has a difficult mother or father, still another that Caesar is not disposed in his favour. This is all caused by one and the same thing, namely, ignorance of how to apply one’s preconceptions.

Who, after all, does not have a preconception of ‘bad’, to the effect that it is harmful, that it should be avoided, and that we should use every means to get rid of it? One preconception does not conflict with another, conflict arises when it comes to their application. What is this ‘bad’, then, which is also harmful and needs to be avoided? One says it’s not being Caesar’s friend: he’s off the mark, he’s not applying preconceptions properly… (Disc. 4.1.42-45, Trans. Dobbin)[[29]](#footnote-29)

Additional references to misapplied preconceptions exist throughout the *Discourses*.[[30]](#footnote-30) Epictetus takes all individuals to have correct preconceptions concerning general moral truths. Examples are ‘that which is bad is harmful and to be avoided’, and ‘that which is good is beneficial and should be pursued’. It is because of these true universal premises that we do not voluntarily pursue that which is bad, understood as bad, or reject that which is good, understood as good.[[31]](#footnote-31)

If we were able to correctly identify which particular objects fall into these general types, then we would be free of trouble. We would pursue that which is good and avoid that which is bad. Unfortunately for us, we are the kind of beings that are poor at applying these universal types to particular objects. We categorize particular objects incorrectly and then we suffer. We take Caesar’s friendship, an object of indifferent value, and we categorize it is a good, and its absence as a bad. Then when fate fails to provide us with Caesar’s approval, we mistakenly take ourselves to be harmed and lament.

This suffering and the incorrect actions which accompany it are both due to the fact that we did not correctly infer the particular premise that is in accordance with our universal premise. We are committed to pursue what is good and avoiding what is bad, but a failure to render a correct particular premise means we experience an impulse to act which is opposite to that commitment. The cause of this impulse is ignorance of the actual moral harm or benefit of particular objects.

The question that must be answered then is the cause of our ignorance. Why do we fail to apply our preconceptions properly and thus fail to come to a correct understanding of the world around us? Epictetus believes this occurs in one of three ways. First the individual may be perpetually and naturally unreflective and thus unreceptive to reasoning, arguments or demonstrations. Such people are called maniacs by Epictetus[[32]](#footnote-32) and are to be viewed with contempt.[[33]](#footnote-33) Maniacs accept and act upon first appearances and live without reference to a plan of action. Maniacs are perhaps best understood to take the analogous position to individuals in a bestial state as described by Aristotle.[[34]](#footnote-34) Both the maniac and the beast are worse than the normally vicious individual, and while they are of interest as an anomaly and as an example of what to avoid, they seem to also be beyond the reach of moral education. They are also not examples of weak-will, because neither is acting contrary to plan of action they previously held.

As such, while referencing maniacs may be used as an educational tool by Epictetus, they are not the focus of his program. He is more concerned with the cause of ignorance in those who want to get better or those who are trying to be good Stoics but failing. So a more relevant concern for Epictetus is why the Stoic in training, who is actively trying to correctly apply preconceptions to particulars, fails. Epictetus outlines two answers to this question, which coincide with the two kinds of weak will in Aristotle.

1. ***There are two types of incontinence: Precipitancy and Weakness.***

*A) Precipitancy.* The first reason the Stoic in training might fail to make a correct inference from his universal beliefs to a particular premise is precipitancy (*propeteia)*.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here Epictetus adopts the same terminology as Aristotle[[36]](#footnote-36) and, like Aristotle, uses the term to refer to when the agent acts against their previous plan of action because they are unreflective and do not make use of reason. In the case of Epictetus, it refers to when we assent to an impression without taking sufficient time to consider its truth. For example, we may hastily assent to the impression that Caesar’s opinion of us is a good, without taking sufficient time to reflect on if it actually qualifies as such. According to Epictetus, precipitancy occurs more often when we are confronted by situations that matter to us:

When we want to judge weights, we do not judge at random; when we want to judge whether things are straight or crooked, we do not do so at random…But where the first and only cause is concerned of either acting rightly or going wrong, of happiness or adversity, or success or failure, there only do we act rashly and at random. Nowhere anything like a balance, nowhere anything like a standard, but some impression strikes me and I instantly act on it. (Disc. 1.28.28-30 Trans. Hard)[[37]](#footnote-37)

He then goes on to compare such an individual to the Maniac discussed earlier:

Who then, do you think is a man who takes no trouble over this matter? What do we call those who follow every impression that comes to them?

Madmen.

Are we, then, doing anything other than that? (Disc. 1.28.33 Trans. Hard)[[38]](#footnote-38)

When the precipitant agent allows themselves to assent to impressions without reflecting upon their truth, they act like a maniac. Fortunately, they are different from the maniac, for the maniac is necessarily unreflective, where-as the precipitant agent is responsible for his or her precipitancy and is able to change for the better.[[39]](#footnote-39) The precipitant agent simply acts analogous to a maniac in that instant.

This kind of unreflective state is criticized necessarily, even if it accidently yields assent to a true impression. Given that wisdom is identified as the good by Epictetus,[[40]](#footnote-40) cultivating virtue requires more than just assenting to the correct impressions, because this could happen by accident or for the wrong reasons. Becoming virtuous requires a kind of active participation, in which the agent reflects upon why a certain impression is correct, and assents to its truth as a fully understood truth. Proper virtue is going to demand constant reflection upon our faculty of assent. Indeed, Epictetus believed that is better to abstain from assent altogether, than to commit precipitancy, saying that ‘…the first and greatest task of a philosopher is to put impressions to the test and distinguish between them, and not admit any that has not been tested...’[[41]](#footnote-41)

The adoption of Aristotelian precipitancy as a means to explain weak will seems an intuitive move for an intellectualist such as Epictetus. It is a simple picture that does not require additional causal forces such as desire to explain why the committed and informed student will make mistakes. The student might possess the correct theories, and have studied the correct lessons, but if they are not careful they will unreflectively assent to how a situation appears to them, and act in contrast to their theoretical commitments. Still, this seems insufficient to explain all kinds of weakness of will. What of the individual who reflects, understands what they are doing is wrong in some sense, but acts anyway?

*B) Weakness.* In order to explain these kinds of situations, Epictetus is going to outline a process that is extremely similar to Aristotle’s Weakness. This may seem surprising, given that Weakness is typically closely associated with *akrasia* in the strict sense, and desire as a causal force which overpowers or somehow interferes with reason. Such an understanding of Weakness would conflict with Epictetus’ intellectualism and psychology. However, Weakness does not necessarily need to occur because of the intervening force of desire.

If we recall our previous discussion, Weakness is when the conclusion of a practical syllogism is derived correctly, but it is rendered ineffective at motivating our behavior.[[42]](#footnote-42) In the Aristotelian picture, it may be that we are able to take this practical premise as true, but still do not act upon it due to desire or emotion being in conflict with our reason. Such an explanation is not possible in Epictetus. This is because his intellectualism holds that we must assent to that which seems true to us, and his psychology holds that assent is necessary and sufficient for action. It is thus impossible, in Epictetus’ view, for the agent to simultaneously consider a course of action to be best, and not act. This leaves no room for Weakness in Epictetus, if we are referring to *akrasia* in the strict sense.

However, there is plenty of possibility for Weakness in the broad sense of *akrasia*. Once again, the broad sense of *akrasia* is when we act contrary to a previous plan of action. Construed in this way, Weakness can be made to fit into Epictetus’ intellectualism if we understand it in the following sense: the agent engages in a practical syllogism with the intention of acting upon the conclusion, however once the correct practical premise is inferred, the agent does not take it to be true, perhaps even false, and thus they do not act in accordance with it. In this case, the agent has inferred correctly the result of their practical syllogism, but still finds it unable to motivate them because they do not assent to it as true.

We see this exact process, I argue, represented in Epictetus through the metaphor of vomiting:

Those who have learned precepts as mere theory want to vomit them up immediately, just as people with weak stomachs do with their food. Digest your precepts first, and you will not vomit them up in this way; otherwise they really do turn to vomit, tainted matter unfit to eat. Then show us some change that results from those precepts in your own ruling faculty… (Disc. 3.21.1-3. Trans Hard)[[43]](#footnote-43)

…If talk should arise amongst laymen on some philosophical principle, remain, for the most part, silent; for there is considerable danger that you will immediately vomit up what you have not yet digested… (Ench. 46. Trans Hard)[[44]](#footnote-44)

In these examples Epictetus is now using precepts (*θεωρήματα*), general rules for how to act in certain situations, as the universal premise. The student would be educated on various precepts throughout their training. However if a precept is learnt as ‘mere theory’ there is a risk that, when confronted with a situation that demands we act in accordance with this precept, we shall ‘vomit’ it up. The agent will reject this precept as false, fail to act in accordance with it, and thus fail to demonstrate a virtuous change in their ruling faculty.

What Epictetus is describing here is a process of Weakness. He is criticizing those who know how to act properly, and want to act properly, but find that they are unable to do so and instead reject their precepts when the time comes to act upon them. The metaphor of vomiting makes it clear that this not a passive process like precipitancy. It is an active event that involves an awareness of a conflict in our beliefs.

Let us consider an example of how this process may occur. Suppose the student has learnt that all objects and events external to the use of their faculty of reason are morally indifferent. This theory is followed by the precept that we should thus consider all external objects and events in our own lives as being morally indifferent. Suppose then that the student is faced with a difficult situation where they must try to act in accordance with this precept. Suppose they receive news that a parent has passed away. The student then has the following practical syllogism:

Major Premise: All external objects and events in my life are morally indifferent.

Minor Premise: The passing of my parent is an external event.

Correct Conclusion: The passing of my parent is morally indifferent.

What occurs then, when the agent suffers from weakness, is that the agent correctly arrives at the proper conclusion, but cannot endorse it as true. This could be because of various other beliefs and moral commitments, or because they do not actually endorse or understand the major premise as true. But the syllogism is valid. Thus, a false conclusion entails a contradiction, and once this is recognized by the agent either the minor or major premise must be rejected as false. The likely candidate in this situation would be the major premise, as it concerns value, and the agent then rejects the major premise as false, despite being committed to living by it moments earlier.

The important point here is that this process, which I am calling Weakness, involves a kind of awareness that precipitancy does not. The agent recognizes the contradiction in their beliefs and this makes the process more violent and disruptive than precipitancy, hence the metaphor of vomiting. We can see both processes described in the following passage:

Now every rational soul is naturally averse to contradiction: but so long as a person fails to understand that he is involved in a contradiction, there is nothing to prevent him from performing contradictory actions, but when he has come to understand it, he must necessarily renounce and avoid the contradiction, just as bitter necessity makes a man renounce what is false as soon as he perceives that it is false, though as long as he does not have that impression, he assents to it as true. (Disc. 2.26.3. Trans. Hard)[[45]](#footnote-45)

The individual unaware of the contradiction is the precipitant. The individual made aware of a contradiction in their beliefs, and then rejects that which is true, is the individual suffering from Weakness. There are two things that should be noted in the above passage. First is that, somewhat ironically, it is our love for truth that causes us to assent to what is false. Given Epictetus’ intellectualism, we cannot knowingly sustain a contradiction and thus must reject one belief as false. Secondly, this process does not necessarily have to result in us holding onto false beliefs and the vomiting our precepts. We could presumably use the same process to eliminate false beliefs. If a precept is in conflict with a belief we hold, recognizing this could cause us to reform this particular belief to be in accordance with the precept. The question then, is why do we suffer from weakness in some instances and not in others? Why do we sometimes take the conclusion to be true, and other times reject it as false and the precept along with it?

1. ***There is a difference between being aware of a truth, and fully knowing it***

This leads us to the third and final Aristotelian feature of *akrasia* present in Epictetus. The cause of this variation is how well or fully we understand the precept. There is a difference for Epictetus, between being aware of a precept, and having come to fully understand it and the implications it entails. Let us return to the passage quoted in full previously:

Those who have learned precepts as mere theory want to vomit them up immediately, just as people with weak stomachs do with their food. Digest your precepts first, and you will not vomit them up in this way. (*Disc*. 3.21.1-3. Trans. Hard)

Epictetus differentiates between learning precepts as ‘mere theory’ and digesting them. Staying faithful to this metaphor, for Epictetus digesting precepts is the means by which we both prevent vomiting them, and render them useful to us.[[46]](#footnote-46) The reason for Weakness then, is trying to act on a precept without having digested it. The agent suffering from weakness is like an athlete who expects to gain nutrients from a meal they have just eaten. Fully understanding a precept, and rendering it able to change our actions, cannot be done immediately. As such, we are encouraged by Epictetus to be self-aware of our own weakness, and how well we have digested our theories. And we should take care to act in a way that is appropriate to our current level of progress:

The first step, therefore, towards becoming a philosopher is to become aware of the true state of one’s ruling faculty; for when a person knows it to be in a weak state, he will not immediately employ it in great matters. But as it is, some, who can scarcely swallow a morsel, buy, and set themselves to eat, whole treatises; with the result that they vomit them up again, or suffer indigestion… (*Disc.* 1.26.15-16, Trans. Hard)[[47]](#footnote-47)

In other words, for Epictetus the good student recognizes their weakness, which results from their impoverished understanding, and works to improve that understanding slowly. In contrast, the poor student thinks they can digest and act in accordance with an entire treatise immediately, and fails accordingly. Recall that Aristotle too, acknowledges the important role that time plays in understanding:

Saying words that come from knowledge is no sign [of fully having it]. For people affected in these ways even recite demonstrations and verses of Empedocles. And those who have just learned something do not yet know it, though they string the words together; for it must grow into them, and this takes time. (NE 1147a19-24)

Aristotle thus distinguishes between two types of impoverished understanding. There are those who recite lines, with no effort to understand them, and those who are trying to understand but have not had sufficient time for the knowledge to ‘grow into them’. For Epictetus, bad students are like the first kind. Except instead of Empedocles they recite Chrysippus.[[48]](#footnote-48) Epictetus mocks these students and criticizes them for taking the entirely wrong approach to philosophy.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Good students suffering from weakness are analogous to the second type. They can say the precept, and even endorse the precept, but they do not yet know it fully because they have yet to digest it. While Epictetus is vague as to what exactly digestion entails, it is not hard to imagine. Often we make commitments to a plan of action without realizing that many of our particular beliefs are in opposition to this. It is fine to endorse the precept that external objects are indifferent when I am in an academic setting, and the extent to which I value my family, or even certain possessions, is not fully apparent to me. To digest a precept then is to examine and explore the implications such a precept will have on the rest of one’s beliefs, and to eventually have these other beliefs come into accordance with that precept. It seems that this cannot be accomplished by more studying, so digestion requires we undertake various kinds of practically oriented exercises.[[50]](#footnote-50)

While digestion is necessary to act properly in all situations, we can still assent to a precept before we have digested it. The precept then establishes our commitments, and our plan of action. The student aspires to act in accordance with this precept in all future circumstances. Nonetheless, unless the precept has been fully digested they will fail in certain situations, and they will act against their previous plan of action. It is in this way that such instances qualify as *akrasia* in the broad sense.

# Conclusion

This paper has examined extensively the similarities between Aristotle and Epictetus’ accounts of *akrasia*. In doing so, it has attempted to help clarify what I take to be two potential misconceptions about *akrasia* in Epictetus:

A) That *akrasia* cannot play a large role in the ethics of Epictetus, because he is a Stoic.

B) That *akrasia* in Epictetus must look significantly different than it would in someone like Aristotle, who does not share the same psychological commitments.

A) is true if we consider only *akrasia* in the strict sense. But once we expand our conception to *akrasia* in the broad sense, it becomes apparent that this a phenomenon of significant interest and importance to Epictetus, especially considering his profession as a teacher, in which he deals primarily with those attempting unsuccessfully to achieve virtue.

The bulk of this paper was dedicated to demonstrating B) to be false, through exploring three features of *akrasia* in Aristotle which are prominent in Epictetus as well:

1. Weak will involves a universal premise, considered by the agent to be true, failing to be effective at motivating an action in accordance with that premise.
2. There are two types of incontinence: Precipitancy and Weakness.
3. There is a difference between being aware of a truth, and fully knowing it.

There are undoubtedly many differences between Aristotle and Epictetus’ positions. Most notably, the role that Aristotle attributes to emotions and desires in causing *akrasia* is missing from Epictetus’ account entirely. However it seems that these psychological differences only make the incredible similarities between them all the more fascinating.

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1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Queen’s Graduate Student Colloquium, at Queen’s University, Kingston, in January 2018, the Dominican College Conference in Philosophy and Theology at Dominican College, Ottawa, in February 2018, the Canadian Philosophical Associate at Université du Québec à Montréal in June 2018, and finally at the American Philosophical Association’s Eastern Conference, in New York, on January 2019. I would like to thank all those who contributed to this paper with their helpful questions and comments during these presentations. Additionally, I would like to thank Jon Miller, Stephen Leighton, Daryn Lehoux, and Annie Larivée for their incredibly helpful comments on early drafts, as well as Brian E. Johnson for his advice on relevant sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inwood, 1985, 132-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plat., *Republic*, 439e-40a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Inwood, 1985, 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Arist. *NE* 1145b13-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Arist. *NE* 1150b30-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arist *NE* 1150b20-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Hutchinson, 1995, 216-217; Destrée, 2007; Gerson, 2007, 269-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ‘And since the last term does not seem to be universal, or expressive of knowledge in the same way as the universal term, even the result Socrates was looking for would seem to come about’ (Arist. *NE* 1147b14-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Charles, 2007, for an excellent summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Charles, 2007, 199-201; Dahl, 1983; Charles, 1984, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This position is taken by Charles, 2007, 201-8 to be a distinct possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Arist. *NE* 1146b9-1147b16 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Arist. *NE* 1146b22-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Arist. *NE* 1147a1-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arist. *NE* 1147b10-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Arist. *NE* 1147b4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Gerson, 2007, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Salles, 2007, for further discussion of precipitancy in Aristotle. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Arist. *NE* 1150b31 ‘…Every incontinent is prone to regret’. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Salles, 2007, 250 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Charles, 2007, for an in-depth discussion of weakness in Aristotle. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Long, *Epictetus*, 98-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Disc.* 3.7.15, Trans. Dobbin; For further examples see 3.34; 1.26.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. *Disc.* 1.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι τὸ αἴτιον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντων τῶν κακῶν, τὸ τὰς προλήψεις τὰς κοινὰς μὴ δύνασθαι ἐφαρμόζειν. τοῖς ἐπὶ μέρους. ἡμεῖς δ᾽ ἄλλοι ἄλλο οἰόμεθα. ὁ μὲν ὅτι νοσεῖ. οὐδαμῶς, ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι τὰς προλήψεις οὐκ ἐφαρμόζει. ὁ δ᾽ ὅτι πτωχός ἐστιν, ὁ δ᾽ ὅτι πατέρα χαλεπὸν ἔχει ἢ μητέρα, τῷ δ᾽ ὅτι ὁ Καῖσαρ οὐχ ἵλεώς ἐστιν. τοῦτο δ᾽ ἐστὶν ἓν καὶ μόνον τὸ τὰς προλήψεις ἐφαρμόζειν μὴ εἰδέναι. ἐπεὶ τίς οὐκ ἔχει κακοῦ πρόληψιν, ὅτι βλαβερόν ἐστιν, ὅτι φευκτόν ἐστιν, ὅτι παντὶ τρόπῳ ἀποικονόμητόν ἐστιν; πρόληψις προλήψει οὐ μάχεται, ἀλλ᾽ ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐπὶ τὸ ἐφαρμόζειν. τί οὖν τὸ κακόν ἐστι τοῦτο καὶ βλαβερὸν καὶ φευκτόν; λέγει τὸ Καίσαρος μὴ εἶναι φίλον: ἀπῆλθεν, ἀπέσπεσεν τῆς ἐφαρμογῆς… [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Disc.* 1.2.1-11; 1.22.1-3; 2.11; 2.17; 4.1.61; 4.4.26 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Disc.* 1.26.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Disc.* 1.28.33 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Salles, 2007, 251-2 for an overview of Epictetus treatment of ‘maniacs’. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Arist. *NE* 1148b15-1149a14 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Salles, 2007, for an excellent discussion of precipitancy in Epictetus. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Salles, 2007, 249 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ὅπου βάρη κρῖναι θέλομεν, οὐκ εἰκῇ κρίνομεν: ὅπου τὰ εὐθέα καὶ στρεβλά, οὐκ εἰκῇ… ὅπου δὲ τὸ πρῶτον καὶ μόνον αἴτιόν ἐστι τοῦ κατορθοῦν ἢ ἁμαρτάνειν, τοῦ εὐροεῖν ἢ δυσροεῖν, τοῦ ἀτυχεῖν ἢ εὐτυχεῖν, ἐνθάδε μόνον εἰκαῖοι καὶ προπετεῖς. οὐδαμοῦ ὅμοιόν τι ζυγῷ, οὐδαμοῦ ὅμοιόν τι κανόνι, ἀλλά τι ἐφάνη καὶ εὐθὺς ποιῶ τὸ φανέν. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. τίνες δὲ λέγονται οἱ παντὶ τῷ φαινομένῳ ἀκολουθοῦντες; — μαινόμενοι. — ἡμεῖς οὖν ἄλλο τι ποιοῦμεν; [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Salles, 2007, 251-253 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Disc.* 1.20.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Disc.* 1.20.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Gerson, 2007, 269-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ὅτι τὰ θεωρήματα ἀναλαβόντες ψιλὰ εὐθὺς αὐτὰ ἐξεμέσαι θέλουσιν ὡς οἱ στομαχικοὶ τὴν τροφήν. πρῶτον αὐτὸ πέψον, εἶθ᾽ οὕτω μὴ ἐξεμέσῃς: εἰ δὲ μή, ἔμετος τῷ ὄντι γίνεται, πρᾶγμ᾽ ἀκάθαρτον καὶ ἄβρωτον. ἀλλ᾽ ἀπ᾽ αὐτῶν ἀναδοθέντων δεῖξόν τινα ἡμῖν μεταβολὴν τοῦ ἡγεμονικοῦ τοῦ σεαυτοῦ… [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. κἂν περὶ θεωρήματός τινος ἐν ἰδιώταις ἐμπίπτῃ λόγος, σιώπα τὸ πολύ: μέγας γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος εὐθὺς ἐξεμέσαι, ὃ οὐκ ἔπεψας… [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. πᾶσα δὲ ψυχὴ λογικὴ φύσει διαβέβληται πρὸς μάχην: καὶ μέχρι μὲν ἂν μὴ παρακολουθῇ τούτῳ, ὅτι ἐν μάχῃ ἐστίν, οὐδὲν κωλύεται τὰ μαχόμενα ποιεῖν: παρακολουθήσαντα δὲ πολλὴ ἀνάγκη ἀποστῆναι τῆς μάχης καὶ φυγεῖν οὕτως ὡς καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ψεύδους ἀνανεῦσαι πικρὰ ἀνάγκη τῷ αἰσθανομένῳ, ὅτι ψεῦδός ἐστιν: μέχρι δὲ τοῦτο μὴ φαντάζηται, ὡς ἀληθεῖ ἐπινεύει αὐτῷ. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ench.* 46; *Disc.* 2.9.18 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. αὕτη οὖν ἀρχὴ τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν, αἴσθησις τοῦ ἰδίου ἡγεμονικοῦ πῶς ἔχει: μετὰ γὰρ τὸ γνῶναι ὅτι ἀσθενῶς οὐκ ἔτι θελήσει χρῆσθαι αὐτῷ πρὸς τὰ μεγάλα. νῦν δὲ μὴ δυνάμενοί τινες τὸν ψωμὸν καταπίνειν σύνταξιν ἀγοράσαντες ἐπιβάλλονται ἐσθίειν. διὰ τοῦτο ἐμοῦσιν ἢ ἀπεπτοῦσιν… [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Disc.1.4.9-13. Cf. Cooper, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Cf. Cooper, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Cf. Sellars, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)