Akrasia Rough Notes

Irwin's Interpretation

The disputed passage on akrasia in Aristotle is VII.3§9-14. According to Irwin, Aristotle's illustration at §10 should be understood as a description of the agent prior to akratic action. This person has some unspecified universal premise "do not taste anything pleasant", and the particular premise "everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet". Irwin denotes the former as the "good major premise" and the latter as the "good minor premise". The good minor premise is active, in the sense that the agent contemplates it, attends to it, or has it clearly before his mind. The good conclusion from the good major premise and the good minor premise is that the agent must not taste the sweet thing. From §9, it seems it is then necessary for the agent to not taste the sweet thing. But the agent has an appetite (non-rational desire) for pleasure, which is a desire of the emotive part of the soul, and since the emotive part of the soul, like the rational part of the soul, is capable of initiating action, this appetite moves the agent to taste the sweet thing. It seems that prior to akratic action, the rational wish for what is best and the good line of reasoning defeat appetite and the akratic line of reasoning "everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet". At the moment of akratic action, the akratic agent fails to know, in the strong sense, the good minor premise as such. In other words, the akratic agent fails to contemplate, attend to, or have clearly before his mind, the premise "everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet" as a premise of the good major argument. In other words, "the good minor premise becomes disconnected from the good major premise, and no longer constitutes the good minor premise". Instead, the akratic agent knows, in the strong sense, "everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet" as an akratic line of reasoning. Then, the good line of reasoning is incomplete, the agent fails to draw the good conclusion, and is not moved by his rational wish for what is best to not taste the sweet thing. Instead, the akratic line of reasoning is complete, the agent draws the akratic conclusion that it is pleasant to taste the sweet thing, and is moved by his appetite to taste the sweet thing.

So genuine knowledge, which Aristotle and Plato consider to include only knowledge of universals, is not mastered by anything else in the akratic agent and "dragged about like a slave". The akratic agent does not know what is best in the sense that he does not know, in the strong sense, the good minor premise, so the akratic agent does not act contrary to what he knows is best.

Bostock's Interpretation

According to Bostock, Aristotle's account of akrasia is as follows. Feeling in the akratic agent blocks knowledge, in the strong sense, of the particular premise in the good line of reasoning. This is analogous to the effect of being drunk, asleep, or mad. A person who is drunk, asleep, or mad knows some fact in the weak sense of merely possessing knowledge of that fact, but does not know that fact in the strong sense of contemplating it, attending to it, or having it clearly before his mind. (§5-7) Aristotle then discusses how we are moved to act. In the case of theoretical reasoning, where a universal premise and a particular premise yield a single conclusion, it is necessary for the soul to affirm what is concluded. In the case of practical reasoning, where a universal premise and a particular premise yield a single conclusion, it is necessary for the soul to "act at once on what is concluded". So it seems we are moved to act by a complete line of practical reasoning. (§9) Bostock's interpretation deviates most from Irwin at §10. According to Bostock, Aristotle here has in mind two lines of reasoning, the good line of reasoning and the akratic line of reasoning. The good line of reasoning is "do not taste x things", "this thing is x" so "do not taste this thing". The akratic line of reasoning is "everything sweet is pleasant", "this thing is sweet" so "taste this thing". Aristotle tells us, of the akratic line of reasoning that "this is active". Presumably, this implies a contrast, that the good line of reasoning is not active. Aristotle does not explain at §10 why this is so, but it seems reasonable to fill this in as follows, drawing on the earlier discussion. The akratic line of reasoning is active because it is known, in the strong sense, by the agent, whereas the good line of reasoning is not since its particular premise is blocked or obscured by feeling. Since the akratic agent has an appetite (non-rational desire) for pleasure, belonging to the emotive part of the soul, which is equally capable of initiating action as the rational part of the soul, his appetite and the complete akratic line of reasoning are sufficient to move him to act akratically. In contrast, although the akratic agent has a rational wish for what is best, because the good line of reasoning is not complete, he is not moved to act in the best way.

So the akratic agent does not know, in the strong sense, what is best, and does not act against knowledge of what is best. Knowledge of what is best is not "dragged about like a slave" and mastered by anything else in the akratic agent. What is genuinely knowledge is not overcome. But the akratic agent knows in the weak sense, what is best, and so acts against what he knows is best, as we commonly believe.

Bostock's Alternative Interpretation

Bostock offers an alternative interpretation of Aristotle's account of akrasia. On this account, the akratic agent does not fail to know, in the strong sense, the particular premise of the good line of reasoning, but fails to know its conclusion. This interpretation is supported by some textual evidence. Aristotle writes "where these two beliefs result in one belief" (§9), referring to when the universal premise and particular premise together yield some theoretical or practical conclusion, and "the last premise", referring to what it is the akratic agent is ignorant of when he acts akratically (§13)

The alternative interpretation is motivated by the thought that under Bostock's first interpretation, Aristotle fails to see an obvious objection. Under the first interpretation, it is not clear how akratic action is possible where the good line of reasoning and the akratic line of reasoning share a particular premise. Then, if the agent does not know this particular premise in the strong sense, his appetite fails to move him because the akratic line of reasoning is incomplete, so he does not act akratically. If instead the agent does know this particular premise in the strong sense, his rational wish for what is best succeeds in moving him because the good line of reasoning is complete. So akratic action is impossible.

Bostock rejects this alternative interpretation on two grounds. First, Aristotle, in the closing paragraphs (VII.3§13-14) of the disputed passage, writes that what the akratic fails to grasp is the "last premise", and uses the Greek "protasis" which more plausibly refers to a premise rather than a conclusion. Second, Bostock interprets Aristotle's discussion of theoretical and practical reasoning (VII.3§9) as arguing that the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is not a belief but an action. So it does not make sense to say that the akratic person fails to attend (in the same way that the drunk or asleep or mad person fails to attend to knowledge) to the conclusion of the right line of practical reasoning when he acts akratically.

Bostock's Objection

Bostock objects to Aristotle's account of akrasia, under either interpretation, on the ground that the akratic need not be suffering from any kind of ignorance. It is unrealistic to think that desire obscures some part of the right line of reasoning in the akratic agent. For example "even as I bite into the eclair I may well be thinking to myself 'I should not be doing this'. And there is no reason at all to say that I fail to understand these words that I think to myself; I do know perfectly well that I should not be doing what I am doing." It seems that Aristotle is committed to describing enkrateic action symmetrically. When we act enkrateically, the akratic line of reasoning fails to move us because the rational wish for what is best obscures some part of the akratic line of reasoning. But again, this is entirely unrealistic. "When my desire for chocolate and cream is defeated, it is not because I have lost my grip on how it could be satisfied." Further, if the akratic line of reasoning is in some way obscured at the moment of akratic action, it seems the akratic person would not experience any inner conflict in acting akratically. But we think akrasia involves such an inner conflict, and Aristotle concurs elsewhere. Aristotle's account of akrasia and enkrateia involves desire (or wish) on one side defeating reasoning on the other, "by preventing it from coming fully to the agent's consciousness." "This explanation, however, is wholly unconvincing. It would be better to say that the desire on the one side defeats the desire on the other, but the reasoning in each case is quite unaffected". It seems there can be no philosophical explanation of why one desire defeats the other.

Aristotle's Account

Aristotle's account of akrasia is (in part) intended to reconcile the Socratic claim that knowledge (of what is right or best) in a person is not mastered by anything else and "dragged about like a slave", and the apparent reality of akrasia, i.e. instances of acting against what one knows (at the time of so acting) is right or best. Roughly, Socrates thinks that all persons wish for what is best, so if they know what is best, they must be moved by this wish (rational desire for what is best) to so act. Then, akrasia does not exist because a person never knowingly acts wrongly. So when a person appears to act akratically, we must think that this person merely appears to know that so acting is wrong, but does not in fact know this. But we think intuitively that akrasia does exist, and we can quite easily imagine if not recall situations where persons, including ourselves, appear to have knowingly done wrong. Aristotle is explicit that his aim in VII is (in part) to solve this "puzzle" about akrasia by offering an account of akrasia that leaves as much of the "common beliefs" standing as possible. "For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs are left, it will be an adequate proof."

On one (Bostock's) interpretation of Aristotle's account, Aristotle reconciles the Socratic claim with the apparent reality of akrasia by attributing to the akratic a qualified sort of ignorance. In some sense the akratic knows what is best and acts against what he knows to be best. But in another sense, the akratic does not know what is best, and so does not act contrary to knowledge in this sense. On this interpretation, Aristotle begins his account of akrasia in VII.3 by introducing a series of distinctions. First, Aristotle distinguishes between merely possessing knowledge (knowing in a weak sense), and both possessing and activating knowledge (knowing in a strong sense). By the latter Aristotle means to attend to a fact, to contemplate it, or to have it clearly before one's mind. Second, Aristotle distinguishes between the universal and the particular premise in a practical syllogism. For example, in the practical syllogism "dry things are good for every human being, this is a dry thing and I am a human being" the premise before the comma is universal while the premise after the comma is particular. Third, Aristotle distinguishes between the agent term and the object term in a practical syllogism. In the above syllogism,

"every human being" is the agent term in the universal premise and "dry food" is the object term in the universal premise. These terms are particularised by the composite particular premise. Fourth, Aristotle identifies a subcategory of knowledge in the weak sense. This is the sort of knowledge of the asleep, mad, or drunk person. Such persons' being asleep, mad, or drunk affects their bodies but also their minds, preventing them from knowing certain facts in the strong sense. Aristotle then writes that when an agent completes a practical syllogism, he necessarily acts accordingly, provided he is able and not prevented. Aristotle then applies these resources in an account of akrasia. The akratic agent knows, in the weak sense, both a right practical syllogism and a wrong practical syllogism. At the moment of akratic action, feeling obscures (part of) the particular premise of the right practical syllogism from the mind of the akratic. This particular premise is then known only in the weak sense. So only the wrong practical syllogism is known in full, in the strong sense. Then, appetite (non-rational desire) or spirit makes the wrong practical syllogism effective, since the emotive part of the soul, like the rational part of the soul, is capable of initiating action.

On this interpretation, Aristotle finds some truth in the Socratic claim. Knowledge of universals, which is genuinely knowledge, is not mastered by anything else in the akratic person and dragged about like a slave because it is the particular premise of the right practical syllogism that is obscured by feeling. Aristotle also validates the common belief that akrasia in fact exists. The akratic agent knows, in the weak sense, what is right and best, and acts contrary to this.

Inner Conflict Objection

Aristotle apparently cannot account for the feeling of an inner conflict in the akratic person at the moment of akratic action. We think intuitively that at the moment of akratic action, the akratic agent feels an inner conflict. But this sort of inner conflict seems possible only if the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action, fully recognises that he is acting against his rational wish for what is best. According to this account, the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action knows that he is acting poorly, at best, in the weak sense, i.e. he does not attend to, contemplate, or have before his mind the fact that he acts poorly. Granted, the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action could suspect that he acts poorly in the same way a person can feel like he has forgotten something without attending to, contemplating, or having before his mind, the fact that he has left his keys behind. But a feeling of suspicion is very different from the much stronger feeling of inner conflict we think the akratic person experiences. The akratic agent does not merely feel suspicious or anxious that a conflict is possible, but feels that there is an actual conflict. If Aristotle's account cannot explain the feeling of inner conflict involved in akrasia, one fears Aristotle's account is not an account of akrasia but of something else.

The feeling of an inner conflict in the akratic person at the moment of akratic action can be explained as a vestige of the genuine feeling of conflict in moments prior. Prior to the moment of akratic action, it is possible that the agent knows in full, in the strong sense, both the right practical syllogism and the wrong practical syllogism. Aristotle is not explicit about whether this is possible or about how such an agent would act, but it is quite natural to think that such an agent would be, in a sense, paralysed. A rational wish for what is best and knowledge in the strong sense of what is best would prevent the agent from acting wrongly. Similarly, a non-rational desire and knowledge in the strong sense of how this desire could be satisfied (or something similar in the case of spirit) would prevent the agent from acting rightly. Prior to the moment of akratic action then, the akratic agent can feel a genuine inner conflict because his full knowledge of both practical syllogisms reveals a conflict between the rational and emotive parts of his soul. Then, plausibly, at the moment of akratic action, the akratic agent feels an inner conflict as a vestige or trace of the genuine conflict felt in prior moments. Indeed our other feelings have a similar sort of permanence. We continue, at least momentarily, to be upset at a person who we think has hurt us, even after we discover that this person in fact had nothing to do with our injury. So Aristotle can account for the feeling of inner conflict in the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action.

This response is unsatisfying because it still unintuitively denies the occurrence of an inner conflict at the moment of akratic action. We think intuitively not only that the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action feels an inner conflict, but also that, at least in some cases, there is in fact an inner conflict. These are cases of hard akrasia, where an agent acts with a complete and perfect understanding that his so acting is wrong. Aristotle is apparently unable to account for hard akrasia because of his deference to Socrates and his idea of the practical syllogism. Because Aristotle aims to find as much truth as is possible in the Socratic claim that knowledge in a person is not mastered by anything else and dragged about like a slave, i.e. if a person knows what is right or best he necessarily so acts, Aristotle is committed to attributing a sort of ignorance to the akratic agent, such that the akratic agent does not in fact know what is right or best. Aristotle also writes that a person who completes a practical syllogism necessarily acts accordingly provided he is able and not prevented. So Aristotle apparently must think that the akratic agent fails to complete the right practical syllogism. If hard akrasia in fact exists and Aristotle cannot account for it, we should reject Aristotle's account of akrasia.

Aristotle would reject that hard akrasia exists, i.e. that there is any inner conflict at the moment of akratic action. That persons recite truths while acting akratically is no reason to think they in fact understand the truths they recite. The akratic person, like

the drunk person (to whom Aristotle makes an explicit comparison), the student, and the actor, is capable of reciting words that he does not in fact understand. So an akratic person's reciting, even to himself, at the moment of akratic action, that his so acting is wrong, and the right practical syllogism that forbids his so acting, is not conclusive evidence of his in fact fully understanding that his so acting is wrong. This argument goes some way to undermine our intuition that hard akrasia exists.

- Hard akrasia could be understood as the essential form of weak akrasia.

[I would place Bostock's objection here instead of the following two paragraphs.]

Aristotle's response is sufficient reason to think that the akratic person at least in some instances fails to attend to, contemplate, or have clearly before his mind the right practical syllogism. But it is not sufficient reason to think that the akratic person fails to do so in every instance of akratic action. It is still entirely unintuitive to think that we never act wrongly with perfect understanding that so acting is wrong. For example, consider the akratic person indulging in a chocolate eclair despite having deliberated and knowing full well that so indulging is bad for his health and so not for the best. This akratic person, as he bites into the eclair, could very well think "I should not be eating this". When we imagine ourselves in the position of the akratic agent, we imagine that we could know full well that so indulging is not for the best.

Aristotle can argue that an akratic agent always fails to have perfect understanding of the wrongness of his act by drawing on his idea of the practical syllogism. Aristotle could argue that it is essential to practical knowledge that if it is perfectly understood, and "active" (energei), it "thrusts toward action. It is quite natural to think that this is the essential difference between theoretical and practical knowledge. In other words, what makes practical knowledge practical and not theoretical is that it can be activated or used in a way such that actions spring from it. Then, if knowledge in the strong sense of a practical syllogism requires this sort of activation and use, an akratic agent, by definition of knowledge in the strong sense, at the moment of akratic action, fails to know in full the right practical syllogism. This account is consistent with Aristotle's argument in VII.3 that when an agent has completed a practical syllogism, he necessarily acts accordingly, and also with Aristotle's use of "energei" in the disputed passage VII.3§10. One worry about this solution to the puzzle posed by the Socratic claim is that it is ad-hoc, and solves the puzzle "by definition". But this solution is in fact motivated by Aristotle's idea of the practical syllogism, and the distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge more generally. Aristotle is consistent in defending such a distinction, and does not appear to endorse such a distinction simply because it offers an attractive solution to the Socratic puzzle.

Weak Akrasia Objection

Another objection to Aristotle's account is that it fails to explain weak akrasia. A weak akratic has deliberated and acts contrary to his deliberation. In contrast, an impetuous akratic has not deliberated. The thought is that a weak akratic has deliberated, and so knows, in the strong sense, what action is right or best. But on Aristotle's account, the akratic agent does not know, in the strong sense, the right practical syllogism, since (at least part of) the particular premise of this syllogism is obscured from his mind by feeling. Aristotle is committed to such an account of akrasia because of his aim to find as much truth as possible in the Socratic claim, and his idea of the practical syllogism.

Aristotle would respond that the weak akratic knows, in the strong sense, what action is right or best, only until the moment of akratic action, when at least some part of the right practical syllogism is obscured from the mind of the akratic by feeling. This is entirely ordinary. Consider for example, the anxious teenager, who has deliberated and made up his mind to make his feelings known to a classmate on Valentine's Day, thinking that there is no better time. When the day comes, we imagine it quite possible that this teenager fails to present clearly to his mind the considerations that earlier made this seem like such a good idea. His nerves get in the way of his acting on the result of his earlier deliberations. So Aristotle can quite easily accommodate weak akrasia.

(Aristotle can account for this sort of weak akrasia, but it seems, not hard akrasia.)

Impetuous Akrasia Objection

Another objection to Aristotle's account alleges that impetuous akrasia is not akrasia at all. The thought is that the impetuous akratic has not deliberated, and so does not know in any sense that acting as he does is wrong, and also does not experience any inner conflict. The impetuous akratic acts more or less impulsively. For example, suppose that an impetuous akratic indulges in an unhealthy chocolate eclair because he does not stop to think about whether so indulging is for the best. We imagine that this impetuous akratic, as he bites into the eclair, has hardly a thought in his mind. Then, it seems, he does not indulge in the eclair knowing that this is wrong, i.e. he does not akratically indulge.

Aristotle would maintain that the impetuous akratic acts contrary to what he knows is right or best in the sense that he acts contrary to how the right practical syllogism (which he possesses the universal premise of) would require him to act. In the

case of the impetuous eclair indulger, he knows in the weak sense that he should not be indulging in unhealthy foods, in the sense that he possesses this knowledge but does not have it clearly before his mind prior to or at the moment of akratic action. So this impetuous akratic knows he should not be eating unhealthy foods, and eats the eclair anyway. He knowingly (in this sense) acts wrongly. Perhaps then, it can be said that the impetuous akratic is in fact akratic.

But knowing, in such a weak sense, that one acts wrongly hardly seems sufficient for akrasia. The impetuous akratic, it seems, certainly would not feel any inner conflict, either prior to or at the moment of akratic action. The impetuous akratic knows that he acts wrongly in an extremely weak sense. First, the impetuous akratic fails to have before his mind at the moment of akratic action the right practical syllogism. For example, the impetuous eclair indulger fails to clearly present to himself the thought "eating unhealthy foods is bad for human beings, I am a human being and this eclair is unhealthy". Second, the impetuous akratic fails to have this thought before his mind at any point prior to the akratic action.

- We think intuitively that at the moment of akratic action, the akratic agent feels an inner conflict. But this sort of inner conflict seems possible only if the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action, fully recognises that he is acting against his rational wish for what is best. According to this account, the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action knows that he is acting poorly, at best, in the weak sense, i.e. he does not attend to, contemplate, or have before his mind the fact that he acts poorly. Granted, the akratic agent at the moment of akratic action could suspect that he acts poorly in the same way a person can feel like he has forgotten something without attending to, contemplating, or having before his mind, the fact that he has left his keys behind. But a feeling of suspicion is very different from the much stronger feeling of inner conflict we think the akratic person experiences. The akratic agent does not merely feel suspicious or anxious that a conflict is possible, but feels an actual conflict.
- Further, the impetuous akratic cannot feel an inner conflict at the moment of akratic action as a vestige of a genuine inner conflict at prior moments, since at no prior moment does the impetuous akratic have both the right practical syllogism and the wrong practical syllogism clearly before his mind.

Aristotle could assimilate impetuous akrasia into weak akrasia. On this account, the impetuous akratic acts wrongly because he completes a wrong first-order practical syllogism and fails to consider at all the right first-order practical syllogism, but this is not what his akrasia consists in since this is not sufficient for a feeling of inner conflict. The "impetuous" akratic's akrasia consists in his knowingly, wrongly, failing to consider the right first-order practical syllogism, i.e. his failure to know in a strong sense and be moved by a right second-order practical syllogism that issues in the action of deliberation, that he nonetheless knows in a weak sense. For example, consider the "impetuous" eclair indulger. He eats the eclair because he completes some wrong first-order practical syllogism like "all sweet things are pleasant and this eclair is sweet" and is moved by appetite for pleasure to eat the eclair. This appetite is effective, and the wrong first-order practical syllogism results in action because the eclair indulger is not prevented from eating the eclair by some right second-order practical syllogism like "eating unhealthy things is bad for human beings, this eclair is unhealthy and I am a human being". He is not so prevented because he fails to deliberate about how best to act, i.e. the right first-order practical syllogism does not come to mind. But this is not what his akrasia consists in, since this mental state is insufficient for a feeling of inner conflict. His akrasia is in a sense second-order. The "impetuous" eclair indulger fails to deliberate about how best to act because he fails to complete some right second-order practical syllogism like "a potential glutton should think carefully about whether it is best to eat something tasty, I am a potential glutton, this eclair is tasty". He knows the universal and particular premises of this practical syllogism in a weak sense, but not in a strong sense, so the rational wish for what is best fails to be effective. Some part of this practical syllogism is obscured from his mind by feeling, namely the appetite for pleasure. Then, the eclair indulger knows, in a weak sense, that he should deliberate, but fails to do so. This explains the feeling of inner conflict in the "impetuous" akratic. This account of "impetuous" akrasia could be motivated by the thought that when we imagine an impetuous akratic (perhaps ourselves, acting impetuously), we imagine the sort of inner conflict felt is something like "I don't know if this is right, I really should have given it some thought".

Of the other sorts of apparently impetuous akratics, it is perhaps best to describe their failure as one vice or another, they are impatient, thoughtless, or lacking practical wisdom.

Responsibility Objection

Another objection to Aristotle's account of akrasia is that it is inconsistent with Aristotle's account of responsibility. According to Aristotle's account of responsibility in III, an action is praiseworthy or blameworthy, i.e. an agent is responsible for his action, only if that action is voluntary, and an action is voluntary only if the agent does not so act because of some ignorance of the particulars. Aristotle apparently intends a contrast between ignorance of universals and ignorance of particulars. So, for example, a person is responsible for his injuring another if he did so because he was ignorant of the fact that wilfully injuring another person for no good reason is wrong, but not if he did so because he was ignorant of the fact that the spear he had been practicing with was not a blunt practice spear but a sharpened one. On Aristotle's account of akrasia, the akratic agent

fails to act rightly because the particular premise in the right practical syllogism is obscured from his mind by feeling, so he fails to know some particular. It seems then that the akratic action is involuntary. But Aristotle is explicit that akratic action is blameworthy. So there seems to be a contradiction between Aristotle's account of akrasia and Aristotle's account of responsibility.

It is simply not the case that the two accounts are inconsistent. First, the sort of knowledge relevant to responsibility seems to be knowledge in the weak sense, not knowledge in the strong sense. The akratic agent possesses knowledge of the relevant particulars such as "this eclair is unhealthy", but merely fails to attend to it, contemplate it, or have it clearly before his mind at the moment of akratic action. In contrast, in the example Aristotle gives, of one person wounding another with a sharpened spear the former had mistaken for a blunt one, the agent not only failed to attend to this knowledge, but failed to possess it altogether. A second but related difference between akratic action and ordinary involuntary action from ignorance brings out the relevance of distinction between knowing in a weak sense and knowing in a strong sense to responsibility. Aristotle is explicit that actions in ignorance but not from ignorance are voluntary actions, and akratic actions are such. Aristotle illustrates this with the example of the drunk person. The drunk person is ignorant of particulars, so when he acts wrongly, he acts in ignorance, but because his ignorance is the result of his drunkenness, he acts not from ignorance but from drunkenness. The idea seems to be that the drunk person does not excuse himself by saying "I didn't know that" because we would respond "you didn't know that only because you were drunk, so you are still responsible for acting as you did". In VII, Aristotle explicitly compares akrasia to drunkenness (and being mad and being asleep). The akratic agent fails to attend to the relevant particular because this is obscured from his mind by feeling. So it seems the akratic person does not excuse himself by saying "I didn't know that" because we would respond "but you did know, you simply failed to consider it when you were acting because you were too spirited or too eagerly attempting to satisfy your appetites, and that is on you". Akratic action is action from feeling, rather than action from ignorance, so it is voluntary. The worry that Aristotle's accounts of akrasia and responsibility are incompatible rests on a superficial understanding of the latter.

Common Particular Premise Objection

One objection to Bostock's interpretation in particular is that Aristotle, on this interpretation, fails to anticipate an obvious objection, that the right practical syllogism and the wrong practical syllogism share a particular premise.

- One objection to the above interpretation is that it leaves Aristotle open to an obvious objection. The particular premise of the line of reasoning which urges the akratic person to act rightly could be the same premise as the particular premise of the line of reasoning which leads the akratic agent to act akratically. (Bostock, 2001, p. 131) If the akratic agent does not act rightly because he fails to contemplate this common particular premise, it is not clear what leads the agent to act akratically. Suppose that, in Aristotle’s example, the universal premise in the right line of reasoning were filled in as: “do not taste sweet things”. If the akratic agent does not act rightly because he fails to contemplate or attend to the particular premise in the right line of reasoning (because this is obscured by appetite or spirit) and this is also the particular premise of the alternative line of reasoning which urges akratic action, the agent fails to complete either line of reasoning, and is not led by either to “act at once on what is concluded”.

On an alternative interpretation, akratic agents fail to know, not the particular premise of the right practical syllogism, but its conclusion.

- This suggests an alternative interpretation where the “last premise” (1147b10) which “the incontinent person does not have when he is being affected” (1147b11-12) is not the particular premise of the right line of reasoning, but the conclusion. Under this interpretation, the akratic agent could contemplate or attend to the universal and particular premises in both the right line of reasoning and the alternative, but only contemplates or attends to the conclusion of the latter line of reasoning, and thus acts akratically. This interpretation also succeeds in resolving the Socratic puzzle and fits well with Aristotle’s subsequent remarks. Aristotle tells us that “the last term does not seem to be universal”. If by “the last term” is meant the conclusion of the right line of reasoning, for example, “taste this”, this makes sense. Further, Aristotle and Plato do not consider knowledge of particulars to be “properly” knowledge. (1147b14-16) Since the conclusion is particular, what is overcome in the akratic agent is not “genuine” knowledge, (genuine) knowledge is not “dragged around like a slave”. Under this interpretation, what the akratic agent fails to “know” when acting akratically, is the conclusion of the right line of reasoning, and this consists in a failure to attend to this conclusion.

This alternative interpretation is not consistent with Aristotle's earlier remarks in VII.3 which seem to mean that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is not a belief but an action, hence not something that an agent could simply fail to know, in either the weak sense or the strong sense.

- While the alternative interpretation solves the Socratic puzzle and fits well with some of Aristotle’s subsequent remarks, it does not fit well with the preceding discussion in VII.3. Aristotle tells us that “where [universal premise and particular

premise] result in one belief, it is necessary, [in the case of theoretical reason] for the soul to affirm what has been concluded, but in the case of [practical reason], to act at once on what has been concluded." (1147a25-32) The point of this opening contrast seems to be that the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is not a belief but an action and hence not the kind of thing an agent could possess but fail to attend to. (Bostock, 2001, p. 132) Further, it is not clear what role the distinction between universal and particular premises presented earlier in VII.3 would serve in this alternative account of akrasia.