Akrasia Reading

Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing

- VII.1 Virtue, Vice, and Incontinence
  - §1 There are three conditions of character to be avoided: vice, akrasia, and bestiality. Opposed to these are virtue, enkrateia (continence), and saintliness. §2-3 Aristotle here writes about bestiality and saintliness, but does not make the meaning of these entirely clear. The idea seems to be that bestiality consists in being inhuman in a bad way while saintliness consists in being inhuman in a good way. §4 Aristotle plans to discuss akrasia first, and warns that we should not simply think of akrasia as a vice and enkrateia as a virtue. §5 Aristotle plans to discuss akrasia by presenting the common beliefs about akrasia. Puzzles arise when we find apparently compelling arguments from the common beliefs to inconsistent conclusions. A plausible account of akrasia vindicates all, if not the most important, common beliefs and explains why the false common beliefs appear attractive.
  - §6-7 Aristotle presents the common beliefs about akrasia. (1) Akrasia is blameworthy and enkrateia is praiseworthy, (2) the enkrateic person acts in accord with rational deliberation but the akratic person does not, (3) both the akratic and enkrateic persons know some action is base, the former so acts because of his feelings, the latter does not so act because of his reason, (4) there is a relationship between temperance and enkrateia, but this relationship is not known precisely, (5) likewise with the relationship between prudence and enkrateia, and (6) people are akratic about spirit, honour, and gain.
- VII.2 Puzzles About Incontinence
  - §1 According to common belief (3), the akratic person, in some sense, knowingly acts wrongly. But Socrates rejects that a person can knowingly act wrongly. "For it would be terrible, Socrates used to think, for knowledge to be in someone, but mastered by something else, and dragged about like a slave". §2 It is uncontroversial that at least before the akratic person acts wrongly, he knows that so acting is wrong. Aristotle aims to find some sense in which the Socratic claim is true.
  - §3 One strategy for resolving this puzzle is to accept the Socratic claim that a person never knowingly acts wrongly, and understand akratic action as action that one merely believes, but does not know, to be wrong. §4 This strategy is unattractive because a person may only have a very weak belief, and a person does not seem blameworthy if he acts contrary to a weak belief because of a strong feeling, but we think akrasia is blameworthy.
  - §5 On another account of akrasia, knowledge is overcome by prudence. But this is implausible because we think intuitively that the prudent person does not act akratically. And on Aristotle's account of prudence, the prudent person never acts contrary to knowledge of what is best.
  - §6 Another puzzle about incontinence is that the enkrateic person seems to resist strong base appetites since it would not be praiseworthy to resist either weak or good appetites and we think enkrateia is praiseworthy. Then, the enkrateic person must have strong base appetites, but the temperate person would not have such appetites. So, contrary to common belief (4), there is no relationship between enkrateia and temperance.
  - §7-9 If the enkrateic person acts in accord with his beliefs about what is right, and the akratic person acts contrary to such beliefs, then it seems a foolish person with mistaken beliefs, if he is also akratic, acts well.
  - §10 The intemperate person who acts in accord with his deliberations to pursue pleasure could be cured if he were brought to deliberate differently, but the akratic person who acts contrary to his deliberations seems, in a sense, more incurable. So akrasia seems worse than intemperance.
  - §11 There seem to be different things a person could be akratic about, so it is not obvious what is meant by unqualified akrasia.
- VII.3 Incontinence and Ignorance
  - §2 Aristotle begins by considering whether akrasia and enkrateia are meaningful sorts of conditions of character. The key conceptual risk is that akrasia and enkrateia are no different from intemperance and temperance. The range of akratic actions coincides with the range of intemperate actions. Akrasia cannot consist simply in being inclined towards the actions that satiate one's appetites since akrasia then is no different from intemperance. So akrasia consists in acting contrary to deliberation while temperance involves acting in accord with deliberation.
  - §3-4 Aristotle turns to the problem posed by the Socratic claim. Whether akratic action is action contrary to knowledge or action contrary to true belief is irrelevant (for Aristotle's argument here) since "some people's convictions about what they believe are no weaker than other people's convictions about what they know" so it

cannot be that akratic agents act contrary only to true belief (so the Socratic claim is true), since this could be internally indistinguishable from knowledge (so an akratic agent would also act contrary to knowledge).
    - §5 A person can be said to know some thing in the sense that he possesses knowledge of that thing, but also in the sense that he both possesses knowledge of that thing and attends to this knowledge, or has it in clear view. §6 In practical reasoning, there are universal premises and particular premises. It seems quite plausible that a person could act contrary to his knowledge of what is best if he possesses both the universal and particular premise of the right line of reasoning but only attends to the universal. §7 The failure of the akratic to know (in the sense of both possessing and attending, or having in clear view some fact) is similar to the failure of the asleep or mad or drunk. Strong feelings, like being asleep or mad or drunk, disturb knowledge and the body. §8 The akratic person may utter the particular premise that he allegedly does not know in the strong sense, but this is not evidence that the akratic person in fact knows this particular premise, since even the drunk can "recite demonstrations and verses of Empedocles", and novices can recite what they have learnt without understanding.
    - §9 Aristotle argues from his understanding of human psychology. In the case of a theoretical syllogism consisting of some theoretical universal premise and some theoretical particular premise, it is necessary for the soul to affirm the conclusion of this syllogism. In the case of a practical syllogism consisting of some practical universal premise and some practical particular premise, it is necessary for one to "act at once on what has been concluded".
    - §10-11 The interpretation of Aristotle's argument here is controversial. One intuitive interpretation is as follows. Suppose some person has the universal belief "do not taste pleasant things" and the particular belief "everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet", and he attends to, or has in clear view, this particular belief. Then, the conclusion of this practical syllogism is that this person should not taste this thing. But this akratic person is moved by his appetite (a non-rational desire) for pleasure to taste the sweet thing.
    - §12 The ignorance is resolved, and the akratic person recovers his knowledge in the same way that the drunk or asleep person recovers his knowledge. §13 The akratic person, in acting akratically, is ignorant of the "last premise", which is a particular, and so is not genuinely knowledge. §14 Then, in the akratic person, what is genuinely knowledge is not mastered by anything else and "dragged about like a slave". (See Irwin's discussion in the notes.)
- VII.4 Simple Incontinence
    - §1 Aristotle explores whether persons can be unqualifiedly akratic, or can only be akratic about some specific things. In other words, can we describe a person as simply akratic, or does it only make sense to describe a person as akratic about x or akratic about y. "First of all, both continence and resistance and incontinence and softness are evidently about pleasures and pains". §2 We necessarily find such things as food and sex pleasant. We do not necessarily find such things as victory, honour, and wealth pleasant. These latter things are choiceworthy in themselves. Akrasia involving an appetite for the latter sorts of pleasure is qualified akrasia. §3 Akrasia involving an appetite for the former sorts of pleasure is unqualified akrasia. §4 These sorts of pleasure are the sorts of pleasure that the intemperate person pursues in accord with deliberation. §5 People are not blamed for having an appetite for choiceworthy (or neutral) sources of pleasure, but are blamed for having an excessive such appetite. §6 Aristotle argues that being moved by an excessive appetite for such choiceworthy or neutral things to act against one's reason is not truly an instance of akrasia since being so moved is not blameworthy but akrasia is.
- VII.5 Bestiality and Disease
- VII.6 Incontinence and Related Conditions
- VII.7 Incontinence, Intemperance, and Softness
- VII.8 Why Intemperance is Worse than Incontinence
- VII.9 Continence
- VII.10 Answers to Further Questions About Incontinence

Bostock, 2000

Bostock, D. (2000) Aristotle's Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 123-139.

- Aristotle recognises two varieties of akrasia, namely impetuosity and weakness. The weak person deliberates, but is moved by feeling to abandon the result of his deliberation. The impetuous person does not deliberate and is simply moved by feeling.
- Akratic action is essentially action that the agent knows to be wrong.
- Aristotle's method in the discussion of akrasia involves a review of the common beliefs about akrasia, a statement of the difficulties these common beliefs give rise to, and an attempt to resolve these difficulties.
- Socrates argues that akrasia is not possible since a person's knowledge of what is best cannot be mastered by something else in him and "dragged about like a slave". So when akrasia appears to occur, the agent is in fact ignorant of what is best.

- One strategy for responding to the Socratic claim that knowledge of what is best is never overcome is to accept this claim and argue that what is overcome is the agent's belief of what is best.
  - Aristotle objects to this strategy. First, if a person's weakly held beliefs are overcome by strong feelings, we would not blame him for acting contrary to his beliefs, but akrasia is always blameworthy. Second, there are beliefs held with strong conviction and facts known with weak conviction. And belief and knowledge held with equal conviction seem to be internally indistinguishable. So if feeling, or anything else in a person, cannot overcome knowledge, there seems to be little reason to think that it can overcome belief. Then, even on this account, akrasia never occurs.
  - What is required to meet the difficulty posed by the Socratic claim is an explanation of how it is possible to act against one's convictions.
- Aristotle's Account of Akrasia (VII.3)
  - Aristotle first distinguishes between on the one hand mere possession of knowledge and on the other hand contemplating what one knows, attending to it, or having it clearly before one's mind.
  - Aristotle then argues that practical reasoning that leads to action employs universal premises and particular premises.
  - Aristotle then identifies a category of instances where a person merely possesses knowledge but does not contemplate it, attend to it, or have it clearly before his mind. This category is of instances where a person cannot attend to the knowledge he possesses, and includes instances where a person is asleep, mad, or drunk.
  - An akratic person, then, like the asleep, mad, or drunk person, is unable to attend to some knowledge that he possesses. In the akratic person, it is feeling that prevents his so attending.
- One objection to Aristotle's account of akrasia is that the akratic person could speak the facts that Aristotle alleges his feelings prevent him from attending to.
  - Aristotle responds that the akratic person's utterances are not evidence of his attending to these facts. There are many cases of people who utter what they do not understand, including the drunkard, the young pupil, and the actor.
- Bostock interprets the disputed passage in Aristotle (VII.3§10-14) as follows. Aristotle argues that both theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning involve a universal premise and a particular premise. The conclusion of a line of theoretical reasoning is affirmed by the soul, and the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is "done" at once. Aristotle then presents an example. According to Bostock, Aristotle has in mind two lines of practical reasoning. The "right" line of practical reasoning is "do not taste x things" "this is an x thing" therefore "do not taste this". The "akratic" line of practical reasoning is "everything sweet is pleasant" "this is sweet" therefore "taste this". Then, the desire for what is pleasant blocks the right particular premise, so the person knows, in the strong sense, both premises of only the akratic line of practical reasoning. Then, because the person has an appetite (non-rational desire) for pleasure, and the emotive part of the soul (to which this appetite belongs) like the rational part of the soul (to which the wish for what is best belongs) can initiate motion, the person "does" the conclusion of the akratic line of practical reasoning.
  - Aristotle also remarks that the premises of the akratic line of reasoning are not in themselves opposed to "the correct logos' but only coincidentally so. According to Bostock, what Aristotle means is that the premises of the akratic line of reasoning are not inconsistent with those of the right line of reasoning.
  - Aristotle adds that because akrasia involves reasoning from a universal premise, only humans (and not animals) can be guilty of akrasia, and the akratic's ignorance is dispelled in a way that is analogous to how the drunk or asleep person's ignorance is dispelled.
  - Then, since the akratic person is ignorant only of the particular premise in the right line of reasoning, not of the universal premise in the right line of reasoning, the akratic person's failure is not a failure of genuine (according to Aristotle and Plato) knowledge, since (according to Aristotle and Plato) only knowledge of universals is genuine knowledge. So genuine knowledge is not mastered by anything else in the akratic person and "dragged about like a slave".
- One objection to this first interpretation is that it makes no sense if the universal premise in the right line of reasoning is instead filled in as "do not taste sweet things". Then, the right line of reasoning and the akratic line of reasoning share a particular premise
- An alternative interpretation of Aristotle is as follows. The akratic's failure consists in a failure to derive the conclusion of the right line of reasoning, i.e. a failure to complete the right line of reasoning, rather than a failure to attend to the particular premise of the right line of reasoning.
  - 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.

- 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.
- Bostock notes that Aristotle is committed to such an account of akrasia (under which desire defeats reasoning rather than desire in the akratic and enkrateic agents) because of Aristotle's view that the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is action. It follows from this that if an action is not done, the corresponding line of practical reasoning cannot have been completed. Aristotle could instead have maintained that the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is a decision or choice, and whether a decision or choice leads to the corresponding action is a separate question, generally it does, but it does not in the case of akrasia.
  - One possible reason Aristotle would reject this alternative is that in our ordinary explanations of a person's actions, we find it sufficient to explain a person's desires and beliefs, and do not add a further explanation of why the decision that results from these desires and beliefs are sufficient for action.
  - Aristotle may instead accept that the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is an action because it is natural to distinguish between theoretical and practical reasoning along these lines, and a distinction between the two sorts of reasoning is essential to Aristotle's thinking about the intellectual virtues. In other words, what makes a line of reasoning practical rather than theoretical is that it is about a person's goals, and our goals are what we act towards, so a completed line of practical reasoning must issue in action. "Akrasia can only be explained, then, by saying that the alleged goal was not truly a goal of the agent, or by saying that the reasoning to show how it could be achieved was somehow thwarted." And Aristotle would not say that the goal of eudaimonia was not truly a goal of the akratic agent.
- Bostock argues that Aristotle's account of akrasia is ultimately a product of Aristotle's method in the ethics, and Aristotle's deference to Socrates. According to Bostock, Aristotle's "avowed method predisposes him to find some truth in what Socrates said when he denied the possibility of akrasia."
  - Aristotle's claim that the akratic person has knowledge but does not attend to it is clearly an attempt to harmonise the Socratic claim that the akratic person is in some way ignorant of what is best with the apparent truth that the akratic person knowingly acts wrongly. The Socratic claim is "insulated" from the appearance that the akratic person knowingly acts wrongly in two ways. First, the akratic person is ignorant only of particulars. Second, the akratic person is ignorant only in the sense that he does not attend to some fact, not in the sense that he does not possess knowledge of that fact.
  - It is not clear what reason there is to suppose that desire obscures only particulars and not universals from the mind of the akratic, so Aristotle's motivation here seems quite clearly to be an attempt to harmonise Socrates's views with the other common beliefs.
  - Ultimately, Bostock's diagnosis is that Aristotle "is (without noticing it) accepting a Socratic preconception: the desire for what is good is universal, goes without saying, and need not be considered; so if anything goes wrong it must be with the reasoning and not with the desire behind it."

Plato, 1991

Plato (1991) Protagoras. Translated by C. C. W. Taylor. Clarendon Press, 351b-357a.

Price, 2005

Price, A. W. (2005) "Acrasia and Self-Control," in R. Kraut (ed.) The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 234-254.

- Price interprets Aristotle's account of akrasia as follows.
  - Aristotle first offers a series of distinctions. First, Aristotle distinguishes between two senses in which a person can be said to know a fact. A person can know a fact in a "weak" sense of merely possessing knowledge of the fact, or in a "strong" sense of contemplating it, attending to it, and having it clearly before his mind. Second, Aristotle distinguishes between the universal premise and the particular premise in lines of reasoning. Aristotle remarks that a person can know both premises of some line of reasoning in the weak sense and still act contrary to the line of reasoning if he knows only the universal premise in the strong sense. Third, Aristotle distinguishes between universal premises that apply to the agent and universal premises that apply to the object. Fourth, Aristotle identifies a subcategory of knowledge in the weak sense, described as "both to have in a way and not to have" knowledge. A drunk, asleep, or mad person has this sort of knowledge because his drunkenness, being asleep, or madness prevents him from attending to facts that he knows in the weak sense. Aristotle adds that this is the condition of the akratic person. This is Price's interpretation of VII.3§1-8.
  - Price interprets VII.3§9-14 as follows. At VII.3§9, Aristotle argues that the conclusion of a line of theoretical reasoning is belief and the conclusion of a line of practical reasoning is action. Practical premises necessitate an accordant action, but crucially, only when the agent is "able and not held back". Price imagines that the agent could be held back by inhibiting considerations, such as "a realisation either that one lacks the ability or opportunity, or that there is sufficient reason against it."
  - Price argues with Kenny and contrary to Bostock that Aristotle at VII.3§10 has in mind a single syllogism, with some universal premise like "a potential glutton should not taste sweet things" and the composite particular premise "all sweet things are pleasant and this thing is sweet, and I am a potential glutton" or "all sweet things are pleasant and this thing is sweet and tasting it is unhealthy".
  - Then, the akratic agent, acting akratically, is ignorant of particulars like "I am a potential glutton" or "so tasting is unhealthy".
  - This interpretation is attractive because it makes full use of the third distinction between agent terms and object terms. This interpretation also yields the result that the causal explanation of akratic action does not involve reasoning that is contrary to the good line of reasoning, which seems to be what Aristotle means in saying "he behaves acratically under the influence in a way of some reasoning and a judgment, but of a judgment that is opposed not in itself but only incidentally."
  - "In Aristotle’s account, knowledge of the major premise escapes both maltreatment (it is not obscured) and disrespect (it is not bluntly disobeyed). Yet an element of ignorance is confirmed later."
- Price hints at an objection to Aristotle's account, so understood. "These statements most easily fit a traditional reading. What is accounted for is a form of soft, not hard, acrasia. Even in cases of what is distinguished from impetuosity as weakness, the agent does not really know as he acts that he is acting wrongly."
- One objection to Aristotle's account, under Price's interpretation, is that it is inconsistent with Aristotle's account of responsibility. According to Aristotle's account of responsibility in III, a person's ignorance of particulars makes that person's acting involuntary, and a person cannot be responsible for his involuntary actions.
  - Aristotle would respond that akratic action is action in ignorance but not action from ignorance, and only the latter sort of action is involuntary. Akratic action is caused by spirit or appetite, and this is also the cause of the ignorance of particulars in akratic action. So akratic action is action from spirit or appetite, and a person is responsible for his acting from such causes. The analogy is to the drunk person, who acts in ignorance, but is responsible for his being ignorant, because it is the result of drunkenness, and ultimately acts from drunkenness.
- Aristotle's account apparently cannot accommodate the experience of inner conflict in the akratic agent. On Aristotle's account, at the moment of akratic action, the akratic agent does not complete the good line of reasoning, and so does not fully recognise that his acting is against his wish for what is best. But intuitively, we think that akrasia involves an inner conflict, and that one is acting against his wish for what is best. Aristotle appears to acknowledge this too, when in De Anima III.11 he writes that sometimes rational desire "defeats and moves" other desire, and at other times is defeated and moved by other desire, when akrasia occurs.
  - Price argues that Aristotle's account can accommodate a feeling of inner conflict up to the moment of akratic action.
  - An alternative interpretation aims to accommodate "hard akrasia" in Aristotle's account, where an akratic agent acts against his wish for what is best, and clearly understands that he so acts. This account takes seriously the potential differences between Aristotle's Greek "chresthai", "theorein", and "energein", which are typically translated as the common "using", "attending to" and "activating". On this (Kenny's) account, practical knowledge is active if it thrusts towards action. "A practical generalisation, a universal premise, will be operative when consequences are drawn from it that are more particular and therefore closer to practical implementation . . . A particular premise will be operative when it leads to a practical conclusion being drawn . . . A practical conclusion, in its turn, is operative when it is actually acted upon."

- The difficulty with Kenny's account is that the akratic agent then fails to activate the universal premise in the good line of reasoning since it fails to thrust toward action. Knowledge of the universal premise, where the particular premise is inactive, gets an agent no closer to action. No "more particular" consequences can be drawn from universal premises like "do not taste sweet things" without some particular premise like "this is sweet". But Aristotle seems to think the akratic agent fails to activate the particular premise, not the universal.

Robinson, 1977

Robinson, R. (1977) "Aristotle on Akrasia," in J. Barnes (ed.) Articles on Aristotle Vol 2. London: Duckworth, pp. 79-91.

- The difficulty that Aristotle contends with in VII.3 is reconciling the following "common beliefs". It seems that we sometimes knowingly act wrongly, i.e. act akratically. But Socrates argued that knowledge of what is right or best, rules in a person, is not mastered by anything else, and is not dragged about like a slave. Then if a person knows what is right or best, he must act in the right or best way. So akrasia does not exist, and when a person appears to act akratically he in fact does not know what is right or best.
- Aristotle rejects an account of akrasia as consisting in action that a person merely believes to be wrong. Such an account is implausible because we think that akrasia is blameworthy, but acting in accord with strong feeling against a weakly held belief is not blameworthy. Such an account also fails to reconcile the Socratic claim with the apparent existence of acting against what one knows is right or best. Since belief and knowledge can be held with equally weak or strong conviction, it seems the two are internally indistinguishable. Then if it is possible to act against one's belief about what is right or best, it seems to follow that it is possible to act against one's knowledge of what is right or best. So this account of akrasia still contradicts the Socratic claim.
- According to Robinson, Aristotle offers four solutions to reconcile the Socratic claim with the ordinary appearance of akrasia.
  - First, Aristotle distinguishes between merely possessing knowledge and both possessing and using knowledge. According to Robinson, Aristotle means this as sufficient to reconcile the Socratic claim with the ordinary appearance of akrasia. The akratic agent possesses knowledge that what he does is wrong, but does not use this knowledge, i.e. does not attend to it, contemplate it, or have it clearly before his mind, when acting akratically.
  - Second, Aristotle distinguishes between the universal premise and the practical premise in a practical syllogism. Then, it is possible for a person to possess both the universal and particular premise of a right line of reasoning but use only the former. If such a person acts akratically, he knows in the weak sense that he acts wrongly, but does not know this in the strong sense. So knowledge in the strong sense is not overcome by something else in him. Additionally, what is overcome is obscured from his mind is a particular premise, not a universal one, so genuine knowledge is not obscured from his mind by feeling.
    - Aristotle adds that a universal premise such as "dry food is good for any man" has an agent term and an object term, and so a practical syllogism will require particular premises which particularise both the agent term and the object term. So a person with only one particular premise, or only one part of a composite particular premise, could fail to complete a practical syllogism.
  - Third, Aristotle identifies the ignorance involved in akrasia as an instance of a "both knowing and not knowing", which includes also the ignorance of the drunk, asleep, or mad person. A person is so ignorant if this person is prevented, by feeling, drunkenness, being asleep, etc. from using knowledge.
  - Fourth, Aristotle elaborates the nature of the practical syllogism, writing that when a line of practical reasoning is complete, i.e. when the relevant universal and particular premises are put together in a single line of reasoning, the agent necessarily acts on what is concluded, provided he is able and not prevented. Aristotle then offers a disputed illustration. According to Robinson, there are four elements in the akratic person, in Aristotle's illustration: (1) a right universal premise prohibiting the akratic action, (2) a wrong universal premise "everything sweet is pleasant", (3) the particular premise "this is sweet", and (4) an appetite for pleasure. Then, the right line of reasoning is incomplete, and the wrong line of reasoning is complete, so the emotive part of the soul to which appetite belongs initiates akratic action, in accord with the conclusion of the wrong line of reasoning.
- Robinson considers objections to this interpretation.
  - First, on this interpretation, Aristotle appears to leave unexplained "hard akrasia", when "a man does wrong although he understands perfectly and completely, at the very moment of doing the act, that it is wrong." On Robinson's view, each of the four solutions attributes some sort of ignorance to the akratic agent in the moment of akratic action, i.e. according to each of the four solutions, the akratic agent in the moment of akratic action does not have fully before his mind all parts of the right practical syllogism that show his so acting to be wrong.
    - Robinson rejects that hard akrasia exists. "It is a wholly imaginary case. [...] It does not happen that a man sets himself to consider, in its totality and all its parts, an argument forbidding him to do a certain act, while at the

same time he yields to a strong desire and does as the desire wishes. The human mind is not adapted to do two things at the same time while giving full attention to each." Aristotle remarks that the akratic person's "reciting the words" is no evidence of his understanding that what he does is wrong. This undermines one of the reasons to think hard akrasia in fact exists.
    - Second, Aristotle appears to dismiss the first three solutions "when he introduces his fourth solution with the word phusikos".
    - Third, Aristotle's account of akrasia apparently contradicts his account of responsibility. Aristotle writes in VII that akrasia is blameworthy, and in III that persons are responsible for, i.e. can be blamed for, all and only their voluntary actions, and that action is involuntary if a person so acted because he did not know the relevant particulars. But on Robinson's account, the akratic agent, at the moment of akratic action, fails to know the particular premise of the right line of reasoning. Then, it seems, akratic action is involuntary and agents cannot be blamed for acting akratically.
        - Robinson argues that the sort of knowledge relevant to responsibility is knowledge in the weak sense, whereas the sort of knowledge relevant to akrasia is knowledge in the strong sense.
    - The fourth objection Robinson mentions is not in English.
- Robinson considers criticisms of Aristotle's account of akrasia.
    - First, Aristotle fails to illuminate the internal struggle a person feels between a wish for what is right or best and desire.
        - But this was not Aristotle's intention. Aristotle is explicit that the objective of his account of akrasia is to reconcile the "common beliefs", and that if he succeeds in leaving as much of the common beliefs intact and explaining the attraction of the common beliefs he rejects, his account of akrasia is, by his lights, adequate.
    - Second, Aristotle's account of akrasia is apparently an account only of one subclass of akrasia, impetuosity, and not of the other subclass, weakness. The weak akratic has deliberated but does not abide by his deliberation because of feeling. But according to Aristotle, a person acts akratically only because some part of the right line of reasoning is not fully in mind. So it seems the person who has deliberated could not act akratically, and there are no weak akratics.
        - It is possible to have deliberated, and to have parts of one's deliberation driven out of one's mind by feeling at the moment of akratic action.
    - A third objection alleges that the cause of akrasia is not ignorance but a weakness of will.
    - Fourth, Aristotle's account of akrasia seems simply unnecessary. The burden of argument should lie with those who would deny akrasia, which experience apparently reveals to be possible. We should reject the question "how is akrasia possible?" because this seems to be little more than a disguised assertion that akrasia is not. Aristotle should have rejected the Socratic claim.
- Robinson offers an alternative account of akrasia. This account is meant not to reconcile the Socratic claim with the ordinary appearance of akrasia, but to illuminate the nature of akrasia and situate it in human nature. If we reject the Socratic claim and see Aristotle's account of akrasia as unnecessary, it seems we still need an account of akrasia that makes these things clear.
    - On Robinson's account, moral principles are not discoveries but resolutions. "When we adopt a moral principle, we are not deciding how the world is made, but how we are going to act." The adoption of a moral principle constitutes a sort of generalised choice. Akratic action, then, is action contrary to a generalised choice or decision, not action contrary to a fact or knowledge. "It is more like visiting Cologne after having decided not to visit Germany." So there is nothing particularly mysterious about akrasia, it belongs to a broader class of contradictions, hesitations, vacillations, incoherences, and absurdities that make up a large part of human life.

Taylor, 2008

Taylor, C. C. W. (2008) "Plato, Hare, and Davidson on Akrasia," in C. C. W. Taylor (ed.) Pleasure, Mind, and Soul: Selected Papers in Ancient Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 42-61.

Kenny, 1996

Kenny, A. (1996) "The Practical Syllogism and Incontinence," Phronesis 11(2), pp. 163-184.

- Kenny's central argument is that Aristotle's account of akrasia is consistent with the akratic agent's having full knowledge of his acting wrongly at the moment of akratic action.