ARISTOTLE ON THE CAUSES OF AKRASIA*

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The conception and explanation Aristotle gives us concerning the phenomenon of akrasia appears to present a real paradox. On the one hand, Aristotle seems to accept the common definition of akrasia as a lack of self-control owing to a weakness of a person’s will, or rational desire (what Aristotle calls boulēsis). Thus, paraphrasing Aristotle’s famous example, I may perfectly well know, in a general way, that eating sweets is bad for my health, and I may know in a particular way that this cake is bad for my health, and I eat it anyway, because I lack the strength of will to refrain from eating it. My resolution to refrain from eating sweets, which implies refraining from eating this piece of cake on the table in front of me, finds itself ‘canceled’ by the desire I have to eat the piece of cake. Such a conception is found in certain passages of Book VII of the Nichomachean Ethics (NE), where Aristotle says that the akratic person acts against his own decision not to eat the cake and, in other passages in his works, notably in De Anima (DA), where akrasia is presented as a conflict between two desires (III 11, 12–14). On another hand, though, Aristotle appears at times to defend (particularly in NE VII 3)1 a strongly intellectualist idea of akrasia: an akratic action isn’t caused by a lack or weakness of will, but by a lack of knowledge. If I give in to my desire to eat the piece of cake, then at the moment when I eat it I ‘have lost’ in some way or other the knowledge which was stopping me from eating sweets.

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1 I follow convention in attributing this text to the NE. It belongs to one of three books which the two ethics have in common, and judging strictly in terms of style these three books are in many regards closer to the books of EE, and might all be cited as belonging to the EE.
In the early chapters of Book VII, this paradox crystallizes around the figure of Socrates. According to Aristotle, Socrates denies that akrasia is possible, understood as a conflict between reason and desire, to the extent that the bad choice is always caused by ignorance. If I eat this piece of cake, it’s because at the moment of eating, I don’t have (or no longer have) the ethical knowledge that would forbid my eating that kind of sweet. But such a notion of ethical fault, which thus would be nothing but a lack of knowledge, seems totally at odds with ordinary experience, which is why Aristotle rejects it categorically: ‘To say this is to say something at odds with what patently appears to be the case’ (2, 1145b27–28). But throughout Book VII, many times, Aristotle continues to say that akrasia is in some way or other a lack of knowledge. At the end of Chapter iii/5, he even speaks to some extent approvingly of Socrates in this regard (1147b13–17).

Since the 19th century, interpreters have made attempts to resolve this paradox with Socrates at the centre, by taking sides with one or the other branch of the text. Partisans of the intellectualist interpretation either take VII, 3 and completely neglect other, less intellectualist passages (closer to the common understanding of the matter), or they accuse Aristotle of having given two incompatible accounts of akrasia. By contrast, the defenders of the non-intellectualist interpretation take seriously the Aristotelian texts which accredit the everyday notion of akrasia, and attempt to minimize the problematic of ignorance by interpreting it in a quasi-metaphorical sense as a lack of desire. The first group maintains that Aristotle ends up approving Socrates’ position, while the second group’s members think the reference to Socrates in VII, iii/5 must be understood as ironic.

I would like to defend a conciliatory position. Aristotle, I claim, is trying to reconcile antinomian positions by correcting first one and then the other. He accepts the commonplace which sees a lack, or weakness

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2 In this group we find Robinson (1977), Joachim (1951), Gauthier-Jolif (1970), and more recently Timmermann (2000), Grgic (2002), Bostock (2000) and Vergnières (2002). This reading was already common among Greek and Latin commentators. Robinson, Joachim, Timmermann, Grgic and Vergnières do not even mention the other, apparently contrary texts, while Bostock accuses Aristotle of contradicting himself (following, already, Ross 1923, 244).

3 In this group, with differences of degree, and a fair amount of variation in the details of their arguments, the most influential studies are Dahl (1984) and Charles (1984). I note that the premises of this type of interpretation are particularly evident in the commentary of Burnet (1900).

4 Space will not permit us to enter here into the details of the famous methodological