AKRASIA AND THE METHOD OF ETHICS*

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The discussion of the phenomenon of akraia carried on by Aristotle displays, as one knows, several difficulties, which have caused reiterated debates amongst contemporary interpreters. These controversies are not just concerned to side issues, but they touch, as it turns out, central issues. In this essay I shall focus my attention on an issue that is mainly a methodological one. My main interest is to understand the role that the Socratic thesis plays in Aristotle’s discussion of the topic. It still is an issue of debate what Aristotle’s position regarding the Socratic doctrine exactly is: does he simply expose it, or does he adopt it—and, in the latter case, up to what extent? There is place, however, for a more initial, and stronger, astonishment: why does Aristotle busy himself with it at all? After all, Socrates denied altogether the possibility of the weakness of will, and Aristotle not only wants to tackle this problem in a dialectical context in which akraia is, on the contrary, taken as existent (so that the Socratic thesis is seen as something clearly opposed to the accepted opinions), but he has also a much more natural explanation of it, *i.e.* an explanation in terms of a conflict between reason and affection (*pathos*), which can be expressed regardless of Socrates’ thesis and in fact is conceived of as opposed to the Socratic intellectualism. My main point is rather methodological, and a preliminary one, but it seems to me to be crucial in order to decide what is Aristotle’s own thesis: what role does Socrates’ position play in the Aristotelian investigation on the nature of akraia?

1. Akraia as a practical conflict between reason and appetite

To begin with, one should note that the phenomenon of the weakness of will does not offer any great difficulty to the Aristotelian perspective. As Aristotle conceives the action to be in the intersection of two

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distinct faculties, the rational (practical) one and the irrational part of
the soul that is able to consider reason, *akrasia* explains itself naturally
as a conflict between what the agent knows (on a practical standpoint)
and what he desires at a certain moment, or, more precisely, what he
has an appetite (*epithumia*) for. I may know that smoking is harmful
to health and, nevertheless, I may wish to smoke a cigarette; in this
conflict between practical reason and appetite, now one course of
action imposes itself and now another, leading the agent in one or
another direction: the agent may smoke, if the appetite prevails, or
he can avoid smoking, if he has got the strength of will commanded
by the practical reason. Apparently, there is nothing mysterious here.
It could be argued that human action ought not to be thought as a
conflict between appetite and practical reason; however, if the action
is so considered—and Aristotle seems to have considered it as such—,
the phenomenon of *akrasia* naturally explains itself in the intersection
of those two faculties. It is worth noticing that in saying so, one does
not claim the necessity or inevitability of the conflict, but only its possibility;
the desire can be in intimate harmony with practical reason, so that
the agent acts without any conflict, but there can also be a disharmony
between appetite and practical reason, so that the subject acts under
the mark of the conflict.

According to Socrates, however, the possibility of a conflict between
reason and emotion does not properly describe what happens within
human action. In the Socratic perspective, explaining an action requires
referring exclusively to the subject’s beliefs. Perhaps beliefs are in some
way linked (furthered, thwarted etc.) to pleasure and emotions in general;
notwithstanding, action is governed by the beliefs the agent has in
the moment he acts, so that it can be treated under a mere epistemic
perspective. According to this perspective, one who *knows* acts well:
knowledge is a sufficient condition for the good action. Obviously,
the knowledge here referred to is not the *theoretical* knowledge, but it
is the *moral* knowledge, the knowledge of all good and evil involved
in practical matters.¹ This moral knowledge has a privileged role in

¹ In *Laches* 193c, the going down into a well without knowing is seen as something
courageous, whilst the going down with knowledge is disqualified; in *Prot.* 350 a–c it is
said that who goes down into a well with knowledge is bolder and *eo ipso* more coura-
geous than who goes down without knowledge. The use of the very same example to
illustrate opposite cases may be surprising at first glance, but one should notice that,
in *Laches*, the referred knowledge is clearly described as only a technical or theoretical
knowledge (*cf.* the knowledge of the soldier in 193 a), while the knowledge to which