Aristotle on Practical Inference, the Explanation of Action, and Akrasia

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In his edition of the Nicomachean Ethics John Burnet added two appendices as particularly relevant to Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia (weakness). The first appendix, De Anima, III, 10, contains Aristotle’s discussion of how practical reason and want combine to cause movement for the sake of something and how explanations of action can be constructed in terms of these two elements; in the other appendix, De Motu 7, Aristotle casts explanations of actions in the form of practical inferences. The relevance of these passages to Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia is beyond dispute: Aristotle explicitly employs practical inferences to represent the motivations of the akrates (weak man), and he clearly regards the behavior of the akrates as a case of movement for the sake of something, a case of action.

Burnet’s appendices suggest what seems to me the only sound strategy for unraveling and understanding Aristotle’s explanation of akrasia. We must place this explanation within Aristotle’s general theory of the explanation of action and the role of practical inference in such explanation. Akrasia is a difficult case with problems peculiar to it, but all the same it is a case of movement for the sake of something, and in explaining it Aristotle follows his paradigm of the explanation of action.

In this paper I wish to take full advantage of this strategy in an attempt to reconstruct in detail and take a fresh look at Aristotle’s account of akrasia. The dividends of this strategy will show themselves, I hope, as I try along the way to resolve some of the textual and philosophical difficulties in Aristotle’s account, difficulties traditionally and recently raised by commentators.1

1 James Walsh, Aristotle’s Conception of Moral Weakness, (New York, 1963). This is a useful book for its review of literature and problems. An even more recent book-length study is R. Milo’s Aristotle en Practical Knowledge and Weakness of Will (The Hague, 1966). Milo writes clearly (I find his discussion of actual and potential knowledge particularly good, pp. 71-93) but his analysis rarely goes far enough or deep enough. Strangely, Milo seems to ignore or be unaware of half the literature and half the problems reviewed in Walsh’s book, including that book itself published three years earlier than Milo’s study. I have
In the first two sections of this paper I discuss briefly Aristotle's views on practical inference and the explanation of action, and in section III I try to resolve the difficulties just mentioned by trying to unravel the distinctions and relations between practical inference and teleological explanation. Then, on the basis of this discussion and the text of *Nic. Ethics*, Bk. VII I try to reconstruct fully the conflicting motivations of the akrates; and in section V I try to show that Aristotle has a coherent and plausible account of weakness. Finally, I argue that though Aristotle's explanation is an advance over the Socratic explanation of akrasia in Plato's *Protagoras*, Aristotle's account remains essentially Socratic and seems to rely indirectly on an apparently false principle.

I. Aristotle on Practical Inference

We cannot say that Aristotle has a theory of practical inference. We have no systematic discussion of this subject by Aristotle. Questions about the identification of the various logical forms that practical inferences can take and questions about rules for distinguishing between valid and invalid forms are not even raised by Aristotle. All we find in the Aristotelian works are a few examples, some of which are identified by Aristotle himself as examples of practical inference, some theoretical remarks about the premises of practical inferences, and some remarks about how the premises "lead" to action. I will set out the examples and the remarks, discuss how the remarks apply to the examples, and I will bring out the implications for akrasia.

Aristotle's examples of practical inferences:

Ia.

1. [S is to be made healthy].
2. If S is to be made healthy, S's humors must be balanced.
3. If S's humors are to be balanced, S must be heated.
4. If S is to be heated, S must be rubbed.
5. So, I will rub S.

(Metaphysics, 1032b6-10)

benefited by reading unpublished papers by Gregory Vlastos ("Socrates on Akrasia") and by Amelie Rorty ("Plato and Aristotle on Belief, Habit and Akrasia").