Mad, Drunk or Asleep? – Aristotle’s Akratic

JUSTIN GOSLING

In what follows I propose to discuss a problem about Aristotle’s treatment of akratic knowledge in Book VII of the Nicomachean Ethics, especially 1146b31-1147b19. Put briefly the question is whether Aristotle’s account of off-beat knowledge there allows the akratic to know what they are doing without clouding of intellect. I shall be discussing this question on certain non-obvious assumptions. I shall be assuming i. that in the passage from 1146b31 to 1147b19, Aristotle is treating of just one general type of weak akratic; ii. that Aristotle holds that use of one’s knowledge of the universal premmiss together with use of the particular premmiss of the practical syllogism is sufficient for action (the most usual interpretation of 1146b35-1147a10, 1147a25-31); iii. that in akrasia something goes wrong with the agent’s knowledge of the particular premmiss, – it is here that their knowledge is off-beat; in other words ‘teleutaia protasis’ refers to the particular premmiss throughout. Given these assumptions, it has commonly been felt that Aristotle is committed to allowing of akrasia only by attributing some befuddlement of wits to the akratic, so that they do not really know that what they are doing is wrong. There are two main props to this conclusion: first, there is a natural way of taking the contrast between having and using knowledge, and secondly there is the analogy with those mad, drunk or asleep. I shall take these in turn and argue that given that we reject the first, the second is not enough to produce the required conclusion.

Having and using knowledge

One natural way to take the contrast between having knowledge without using it, and using it, is via the following consideration: there are numberless things that I know, such as that there are Maoris in New Zealand, or that Plato wrote the Phaedo, which at any given time lie unconsidered in my memory. I have the knowledge, but it lies dormant, though ready for use. At any time during the waking day it might be brought to mind, with understanding and assent, and then it is no longer dormant; what was there potentially is now actualised. One

Phronesis 1993. Vol. XXXVIII/1 (Accepted September 1992)
of Aristotle's ways of talking of use is in terms of actualisation, and so it is attractive to suppose that he is in this way contrasting a dispositional with an occurrent form of the attribution of knowledge, along the lines of the Aviary model of Plato's *Theaetetus* (197-199). So to actualise my knowledge I must advert to it with understanding and belief/assent. If we approach the akatic with this form of the contrast, then we may have someone who is using their knowledge of the universal premiss that dry food benefits humans, of the particular information that they are human, and the general information that, say chicken is dry food. What they cannot be doing, according to Aristotle, if they do not act on their knowledge, is using their knowledge that this is chicken. Yet if they are to be akatic, they must in some way be adverting to or entertaining the thought that this is chicken. Given the above account of use/actualisation, it follows that either they do not fully understand this information, or do not really believe it/assent to it: their grasp of it is somehow inadequate, and this is easily read by analogy with a drunkard. The more standard case of knowing without using would be where the subject dispositionally understands and believes the proposition, but is not at the moment entertaining it. It is because any plausible account of the akatic must attribute some entertaining of the proposition, and even drawing of the conclusion, that one or both of the other conditions must fail, and this suggests some clouding of the intellect.

The above account of use of knowledge notoriously gives rise to difficulties for interpreting Aristotle, which arise from his own example of a case of *akrasia* at 1147a31-34. For if that example is to be at all plausible, we must suppose the akatic to use their knowledge that it is wrong to taste sweet things; but Aristotle is quite explicit that they use their knowledge of the particular information that this is sweet, and that should be sufficient for abstention, given the assumptions above. So how can Aristotle allow them to choose the sweet thing?

It is now fairly widely held that Aristotle has a different account of use whereby my use of a particular premiss is always relative to some universal one: I cannot simply use my knowledge that this is sweet on its own; to use it I have at least to put it together with some other piece of knowledge to draw a conclusion: in other words I use it as a premiss in some argument. In the example, the akatic uses it in conjunction with the knowledge that all sweet things are pleasant, but fails to use it as the particular premiss of the syllogism whose universal is *e.g.* *taste nothing sweet*. Given this version of use the conditions given earlier are clearly not sufficient for use. One cannot therefore infer from an agent's failure to use their knowledge, in conjunction with their entertaining it, that they either did not fully understand it or did not really believe it at the time. One or other of these conditions might, of course, have failed, – and so muddy-eyed *akrasia* is possible, – but it is not necessary. This leaves open the possibility that they did fully understand and believe it, that their akatic action was clear-eyed.