Early Stoicism and Akrasia

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I am overcome by evil, and I realize what evil I am about to do, but my passion controls my plans.
Euripides, Medea

1. Introduction

Let us say that an agent, Medea, is akratic if and only if she freely, knowingly, and intentionally performs an action $\Phi$ against her better judgment that an incompatible action $\Psi$ (which may only be refraining from $\Phi$'ing) is the better thing to do. This form of succumbing to temptation Pears calls last ditch akrasia; a more extreme and more contentious thesis, which I shall not attend to, would hold that Medea also intends to $\Psi$ (at the time of $\Phi$'ing). Many have held, and continue to hold, that akrasia is incoherent and does not occur. But on these skeptics falls the burden of failing to save appearances: akrasia certainly seems to occur — Euripides’ play doesn’t appear to involve an incoherent philosophy of action, and surely we all experience something which the above definition appears to capture. Its occurrence is not confined to the heat of Greek tragedy of course; Austin draws attention to its commonplace status:

I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. We often succumb to temptation with calm and even finesse.

1 The translation of these famous lines (1078-9) is contentious. See C. Gill, “Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?”, Phronesis 28, 1983 for excellent discussion.
2 Throughout this paper I use the variables $\Psi$ and $\Phi$ for actions; sometimes, however, I slip between using them to stand for nouns and using them for verbs. So I might talk of “the action $\Psi$” (the action running) while on another occasion say “she intends to $\Psi$” (she intends to run).
4 A note in passing: Medea almost certainly would not count as akratic if this clause were added.
From Augustine until quite recently, something close to the later Platonic view of akrasia has dominated. The human soul was divided into faculties, one of which was designated “the will”. The strong distinction between the will and the rational faculty meant that akrasia, though needling, was not an overwhelming problem: rationally judging that \( \Psi \) is the best action was considered conceptually, and to some degree causally, isolated from desiring to \( \Psi \). So long as this distance is in place the problem of akrasia looks less daunting. But mid-century British philosophers, especially Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*,\(^6\) threw “the will” into philosophical disrepute. In a new form, the Socratic connections between judging \( \Psi \) good and pursuing \( \Psi \) (between reason and action) have been reforged, and the reconnection has provoked more discussion on the topic of akrasia than the philosophical world has seen since the Ancients. In a curious way we find ourselves suddenly back where we started, prompted to examine the Greeks’ treatment of the topic not merely as an historical exercise, but as part of a pressing modern philosophical problem. This paper is devoted to an examination of the treatment of akrasia by the Stoics: one of the few philosophical systems situated after 300 B.C. (therefore able to reflectively synthesize the views of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) and before Augustine (therefore untainted by the Judaeo-Christian conception of the will). The Stoic treatment of akrasia is particularly interesting, for, in a sense, they side with Socrates as well as the dominant trend in philosophy of action in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, in that their system would appear to rule out the possibility of akrasia. Unlike Socrates, however, but like most of us, the Stoics are, perhaps, not entirely sanguine about this feature.

The object of this paper is to present an analysis of akrasia which fits consistently into the wider Stoic philosophy. Methodologically, I shall take Chrysippus as my focus, assuming, perhaps contentiously, that he is representative of early Greek Stoicism in general. By largely ignoring the divisions amongst the Greek Stoics, I do not mean to deny them; they are sidestepped merely in order to avoid distraction. Philosophical conclusions I draw do not depend on the accuracy of Chrysippus serving as Stoic representative. As a preliminary, I must also say something concerning the status of my conclusion: Is the account of akrasia with which I credit Chrysippus that which I believe he really did hold, or is it one which I think was available to him, consistent with everything which we know he did endorse, but one which it seems unlikely that he explicitly formulated (one, perhaps, that he *should* have held)? At the risk of sounding equivocal, I wish to refrain from so adjudicating. The available primary material is so frag-

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