

Aristotle on *Akrasia**

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*Here wonnes Acrasia, whom we must surprise,
Els she will slip away, and all our drift despise.
(Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene II. xii. 381)*

I START from two problems that I find in Aristotle's account of *akrasia*.¹ The first is this. Aristotle provides two syllogisms: one of them arguing in favour of eating a sweet, the other arguing against eating it.² Suppose I eat the sweet, despite having a reason for not doing so. How do we know that this is the weak willed thing to do? After all, the damage done by eating a single chocolate may well be insignificant as compared with the pleasure derived from it.³ Aristotle tends to assume that eating the sweet is weak willed because eating the sweet gives me immediate pleasure, whereas refraining from eating it will at most increase my pleasure in the future. That is quite unreasonable. But it is hard to see what else he could do, since he does not give any other way of deciding which course of action is weak willed and which is strong willed. As others have pointed out,⁴

* I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Oxford Workshop 'Work in progress in Ancient Philosophy'.

1 ἀκρασία is a derivative of the adjective ἀκρατής which means (according to ⁹LSJ s.v.) 'impotent, powerless' in a general sense but 'without command over oneself or one's passions, incontinent' in a moral sense (which is the predominant sense in Aristotle's ethical writings).

2 *Nicomachean Ethics* VII. 3. 1147a32-35: 'Suppose, then, that someone has (a) the universal belief, and it hinders him from tasting; he has (b) the second belief, that everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet, and this belief (b) is active; and he also has appetite. Hence the belief (c) tells him to avoid this, but appetite leads him on, ...' (Terence Irwin's translation)

3 In his *Routledge GuideBook to Aristotle on Ethics*, pp.159–164, Gerard Hughes (2001) sidesteps this problem by supposing that the acratia question is a diabolic.

4 See, for example, Davidson 1969.

Aristotle needs a third syllogism in which the agent puts everything together and decides which course of action he prefers. I think to myself: Eating a sweet would give me so much pleasure, but it will do so much damage to my teeth. On the whole I prefer to avoid the dental damage than to have the pleasure of the sweet. Or alternatively: On the whole I prefer the pleasure of the sweet to reducing the chance of damage to my teeth. And then either course of action, eating the sweet or not eating it may be the weak willed thing to do, depending on my overall assessment of what is the best thing to do.

Why didn't Aristotle introduce this third syllogism? For at least two reasons. The first is that a syllogism of this sort looks much more complicated than the other two. It involves a logic of relations or a logic of preference. And logic won't be much help in deciding which alternative is better or which I prefer – it just depends on how I weigh them up.⁵ A second possible reason why Aristotle did not make this move is this. Suppose that on the whole I prefer the pleasure of the sweet to the avoidance of damage to my teeth, but I nevertheless refrain from eating the sweet. What possible explanation could there be for my doing this? If conversely I prefer avoidance of damage to teeth to the pleasure of the sweet, but nevertheless eat the sweet, then Aristotle has an explanation for this: pleasure (and pain), especially immediate pleasure (and pain), punches above its rational weight; rationally speaking it should not lead me to eat the sweet, but it does. But in the case where, against my better judgement, I abstain from immediate pleasure for the sake of a long-term advantage, this explanation is not available. There are of course other explanations available: lurking subterranean puritanical qualms, cranky health fads, and so on. Why did Aristotle not consider such things as this? One reason, I think, is his general belief that when human beings go astray, they do so only in virtue of their lower nature, the nature they share with other animals: their bodily urges. And lower animals do not have puritanical qualms and health fads. It is, however, a mistake to hold our animal nature solely responsible for all our wrongdoing,

5 As Davidson (2001, 107) says, 'nothing could be more obvious than that our third "practical syllogism" is no syllogism at all; the conclusion simply doesn't follow by logic from the premises.'

though Aristotle is not of course the only offender. Pursuit of wild-eyed ideals or devotion to a supposed duty can do far more harm than indulgence of one's animal urges. To take a simple example: someone might steal in order to satisfy their own desires. But they might steal in order to satisfy the desires of others, a Robin Hood programme, or they might steal in order to bring about the collapse of the property system, inspired, say, by the belief that property is theft. And such ideals, supposed duties, or whatever, might well play a part in motivating *akrasia*, acting against one's better judgement.

Now I turn to my second problem, which has been implicit in what I've said so far. It is this: in the examples Aristotle gives of *akrasia*, there is usually no good reason for not performing the action that he regards as akratic. What I mean is that except in unusual circumstances eating one sweet does not do one any appreciable harm. What does the harm is eating lots of sweets, too many sweets. But usually the akratic does not decide to eat lots of sweets all at once, but just one sweet at a time. This is a feature of many cases of weakness of will. Not of all, of course. Sometimes one acts on a sudden impulse, overcome by something like temporary insanity.⁶ But more commonly one gets on a slippery slope, a series of actions, each of them seemingly innocuous, but which in their aggregate do significant damage.⁷ For example, one stays at a party too long despite having a paper to write, because at each stage one says to oneself that another 10 minutes won't make any difference. And usually that's true: another 10 minutes won't make any significant difference. And again usually there is no sheer drop, no straw that will break the camel's back, no midnight at which one's clothes will turn to rags and one's coach to a pumpkin. Even acts that seem to involve a sheer drop can be broken down in this way. Take adultery for example. Sometimes it no doubt occurs on a sudden impulse, a moment of madness. But in other cases, at least as far as I recall from the film *Fatal Attraction*, it takes place by a sequence of individually

6 This is the type of *akrasia* that Aristotle calls 'impetuosity' (*propeteia*) in contrast to 'weakness' (*astheneia*) in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1150b19-28. For a discussion of the distinction, see e.g. Kraut 2014.

7 On the logic of slippery slope arguments, see e.g. Lamb 2013 and Walton 1992.

innocuous steps. It's not the same as staying at a party too long. It isn't just a smooth, slippery slope. There is a steep dip, before which adultery has not taken place and after which it has. But one's steady decline down preceding slope is such that it is difficult to stop short of the steep dip – one thinks, 'Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound. Now I've gone this far, I may as well go the whole hog.'

Now this characteristic of certain cases of *akrasia* enables us to give an explanation of them that Aristotle did not consider. What I believe I should not do is to commit adultery, eat the whole box of chocolates or stay at the party all night. And I do not decide to do any such thing. I do not act on a syllogism of the type: 'Eating all those chocolates, staying at the party all night, sleeping with Mrs Bloggs would be fun. So I'll do it'. What I do can be represented as a sequence of syllogisms of the type: 'Another chocolate, another ten minutes, another lunch date will do no significant harm, but will give me significant pleasure. So I will take that step.' And each of those syllogisms looks reasonable and probably is reasonable. The premises are true and the conclusion is reasonably drawn from them. None of these little syllogisms directly conflicts with the overall big syllogism on the other side against eating all the chocolates, etc. So this big syllogism does not put an effective brake on the series of little syllogisms.

So what is there to put a stop to *akrasia*? One possible move is this. We might suggest that each little syllogism has a false premise. It says that the little step it advocates does no significant harm. But that may not be true, because the first little step may lead to addiction, the formation of a habit that is difficult to break. Thus cigarette packets often warn us not to start smoking, because it becomes addictive. That may be true, but what is not true is that one cigarette turns one into an addict. Each cigarette makes only an insignificant contribution to the onset of addiction. What if anything becomes addictive is, not smoking or chocolate eating or whatever, but the type of argument that leads one to take the first step. Suppose we try that then. We can take account of the addiction to little syllogisms and add it to the disadvantages. We can't add it to the disadvantages, such as they are, of consuming the first chocolate or cigarette. It is not the

consumption of the chocolate or cigarette that leads to this addiction but the use of the argument that persuades me to consume the chocolate or cigarette. So I have to move up the ladder, reflect on my own thought processes and reason as follows: 'If I use a little syllogism to justify eating a chocolate, I shall have equally good reason, or almost equally good reason, to use a further little syllogism to justify eating a second chocolate, and then a third little syllogism to justify eating a third chocolate, and so on, until eventually I come to a result which I want to avoid – eating too many chocolates. So at some point I should stop using little syllogisms to justify eating chocolates even though there will be no good reason for stopping at that point and in fact good reason to continue beyond that point.'

But at what point should I stop? One answer might be: 'Don't start in the first place. Don't get onto a slippery slope, because once you get on there's no way of getting off.' But that is wrong. In the first place, the use of little syllogisms is not usually very addictive. I can stop at any point. I will have as good a reason for stopping at some later point as I have for not starting in the first place. Secondly, given this, it would be unreasonable to stop earlier, even at the very beginning, rather than at a later point. I would miss some harmless pleasure that I could otherwise have – and harmless pleasure is not to be underrated. And thirdly, we can't avoid slippery slopes. We are on them much of the time. I am on one now in fact. How long shall I go on speaking (in the context of an oral presentation⁸)? There is no definite answer. There are other brakes in this case, besides my own resolution: my voice will give out, my audience will drift away, and so on. But I could, I think, go on for too long, before these brakes apply. Or take the case of the woman who died from drinking 65 glasses of water. We all have to drink water, but we are on a slippery slope whenever we do so. Yet somehow we usually manage to stop short of disaster. So my conclusion is that I should adopt the policy that bidders at auctions are said to use – they fix a price beyond which they will not bid for an object they want. You resolve not to bid more than, say, half a million pounds for the object, even if you think you might get it for five hundred and one thousand pounds and would be

8 See footnote with the asterisk.

pleased to have it at that price. Because if you don't fix such a cut-off point you will likely end up paying too much for it. Naturally many of our deadlines or cut-off points are more hazy than that. It would be too finicky to resolve in advance to eat precisely 6 chocolates or precisely 30 peanuts or to finish my paper at exactly 5:45. But the general principle is the same.

Is all weakness of will to be explained as a slide down a slippery slope? No. I've already mentioned the case where you act on a sudden impulse. But I think there are also non-impulsive cases of *akrasia* that can't be explained in this way. It is easier to think of such cases where what is involved is pain rather than pleasure. For example, I offer someone a million pounds or even a billion pounds in return for letting me extract all their finger nails. There will be no long term irreparable damage, just 10 minutes of excruciating pain. I have sometimes made this offer to students – only as a thought experiment, of course, since I am not rich enough to do it in reality. They agree that it is a good offer, a good package – they would be pleased afterwards if they had accepted it. They would also be pleased later if I inflicted the pain on them without their consent and then compensated them handsomely afterwards. Nevertheless, though some of them say they would accept the offer, others say firmly that they would not. Those who reject the offer are akratic.⁹ But in the way I have presented it, there is no slippery slope involved. (I might have made a different offer in which I begin by inflicting a mild, easily endured pain, and gradually increase the pain until it becomes excruciating. That would have presented my subjects with a slippery slope predicament. But that isn't the offer I made.) Pain, intense pain, differs in this respect from pleasure, even intense pleasure. Pleasure is more resistible. If I were to offer people 10 minutes of excruciating pleasure or, as an alternative, one billion pounds, then leaving aside a mad impulse, almost everyone who agreed that the money was worth more than the pleasure would forgo the pleasure and take the money.

Aristotle has something to say about the difference between pain and pleasure. He asks the question why pain or the prospect of pain

9 This is the type of *akrasia* that Aristotle calls 'weakness' (*astheneia*). See note 4 above.

excuses a wrong action, whereas pleasure or the prospect of pleasure does not.¹⁰ His answer is that it is because if one enjoys doing something, one does it voluntarily. But this is an inadequate answer for two reasons. First, one may well enjoy doing something that one did not choose to do and that one would stop doing if one could. Still more obviously one might enjoy having something forcibly done to one, something that one would discontinue if one could. Secondly, one may enjoy the pleasurable activity, but not enjoy doing what the pleasure leads one to do. For example, I may reveal official secrets because of some pleasure that I am offered. But it does not follow that I will enjoy revealing the secrets. There is nothing so far to forbid us from denying that I reveal the secrets voluntarily and therefore that my revealing them is excusable.

My suggestion is that the reason why pleasure does not excuse a wrong act in circumstances where pain, or the threat of pain, *would* excuse it, is that pleasure is resistible. If there were such a thing as an irresistible pleasure – a pleasure such that the promise of it, or the threat to discontinue it, invariably had the same power over us as does the infliction or threat of intense pain, then pleasure, or at least *this* pleasure, would excuse wrong acts. But there is no such pleasure – or if there is I'd be grateful to anyone who tells me about it. By contrast, it is quite plausible to say of certain pains that most people cannot resist them – that they will do virtually anything to avoid it or to get it to stop.

Let me conclude by returning to the slippery slope. Does Aristotle have any awareness of it, awareness, that is, of *sorites* arguments? The nearest he comes to it, as far as I know, is in his consideration of the millet seeds. This occurs in *Physics* VII, where Aristotle is discussing the relationship between forces and the movements they bring about.¹¹ For example, suppose that 100 men can move

10 *Nicomachean Ethics* III. 14. 1110b10-13: 'But suppose someone says that pleasant things ... force us, since they are outside us and compel us. ... [I]f we are forced and unwilling to act, we find it painful; but if something pleasant or fine is its cause, we do it with pleasure.' (Irwin's translation)

11 *Physics* VII. 5. 249b30-250a22: 'Now since wherever there is a movent, its motion always acts upon something, is always in something, and always extends to something (by 'is always in something' I mean that it occupies a time: and by 'extends to something' I mean that it involves the traversing of a certain amount

an object weighing 20 tons for one mile in one hour. Then, assuming that each man exerts the same force, then 50 men will be able to move an object weighing 10 tons for one mile in an hour. But it does not follow that 50 men will be able to move an object of 20 tons for half a mile in an hour or for a whole mile in two hours. They might not be able to move it at all. If it followed that they could, then it would also follow that one man could move a ship, since one man and his motive power is as much a constituent of the 100 men and their combined motive power as 50 men are. Then Aristotle rejects Zeno's argument that any portion of millet seed whatsoever makes a sound when it falls: the fact that a bushel of millet seed moves enough air in falling to make a sound does not entail that a single millet seed could do so.

of distance: for at any moment when a thing is causing motion, it also has caused motion, so that there must always be a certain amount of distance that has been traversed and a certain amount of time that has been occupied). Then, A the movement have moved B a distance G in a time D, then in the same time the same force A will move $1/2B$ twice the distance G, and in $1/2D$ it will move $1/2B$ the whole distance for G: thus the rules of proportion will be observed. Again if a given force move a given weight a certain distance in a certain time and half the distance in half the time, half the motive power will move half the weight the same distance in the same time. Let E represent half the motive power A and Z half the weight B: then the ratio between the motive power and the weight in the one case is similar and proportionate to the ratio in the other, so that each force will cause the same distance to be traversed in the same time. But if E move Z a distance G in a time D, it does not necessarily follow that E can move twice Z half the distance G in the same time. If, then, A move B a distance G in a time D, it does not follow that E, being half of A, will in the time D or in any fraction of it cause B to traverse a part of G the ratio between which and the whole of G is proportionate to that between A and E (whatever fraction of AE may be): in fact it might well be that it will cause no motion at all; for it does not follow that, if a given motive power causes a certain amount of motion, half that power will cause motion either of any particular amount or in any length of time: otherwise one man might move a ship, since both the motive power of the ship-haulers and the distance that they all cause the ship to traverse are divisible into as many parts as there are men. Hence Zeno's reasoning is false when he argues that there is no part of the millet that does not make a sound: for there is no reason why any such part should not in any length of time fail to move the air that the whole bushel moves in falling. In fact it does not of itself move even such a quantity of the air as it would move if this part were by itself: for no part even exists otherwise than potentially.' (R.P. Hardie & R.K. Gaye translation)

Simplicius explains this in his commentary on the *Physics*.¹² Zeno attempted to prove that the senses give us no clue to reality but only to appearance. One way in which he did this was by arguing that whereas on the face of it a single millet seed makes no sound when it falls, it must in fact make a sound that is in the same proportion to the sound made by the whole bushel to which it belongs as the weight of the single seed is to the weight of the bushel. Aristotle's reply looks correct to me; a single millet seed makes a contribution to the sound made by the bushel, but that contribution need not itself be a sound. A single seed does not rise above the audibility threshold. In fact it need make no sound at all, whether audible or inaudible.

Now let me apply this to a case of *akrasia*, say, staying at a party too long when I have a paper to write or something of that sort. As I've already said, I don't want to avoid parties altogether for fear of slithering down a slippery slope. Going to the party for a time may well invigorate me for my task and make a positive contribution to the composition of the paper. But after a time, the party begins to make a negative contribution. There isn't any precise damage threshold, it's just somewhere between 10:00 and 11:00. If one takes a very short period of time, say, 5 seconds, then obviously it does not, taken on its own, do any damage nor does it give me any pleasure. It makes a *contribution* to the damage done by longer periods and to the pleasure they give, but it does not on its own cause significant damage or pleasure. If we take a longer period, say, an hour, then it not only makes a contribution to the total damage and the total pleasure. It

12 For this reason he refutes as well the argument of Zeno the Eleatic, which [Zeno] posed to the Sophist Protagoras: "Why, tell me, Protagoras", he said, "does one millet seed produce a sound when it falls, or a ten-thousandth of a millet seed?" When [Protagoras] stated that it did not produce [a sound], [Zeno] said, "Does a medimnus of millet seeds produce a sound when it falls, or not?" When [Protagoras] stated that a medimnus did make a sound, Zeno said, "Well, then, is there not a ratio [*logos*] of a medimnus of millet seeds to one [millet seed] and to a ten thousandth of one?" When [Protagoras] asserted that there was, Zeno said, "Well, then, will not the ratios of the sounds to one another be the same? For as the things making the sounds are, the sounds are too. This being the case, if a medimnus of millet seed makes a sound, one millet seed and a ten-thousandth of a millet seed will make a sound too." (1108.18-1108.27. Translated by Charles Hagen in *Simplicius: On Aristotle Physics 7*)

also gives a certain amount of pleasure and causes a certain amount of damage, when taken on its own. The problem arises with periods of middling duration – 5 minutes or 10 minutes. Such a period of delay gives me an appreciable amount of pleasure, but it does not do any significant damage.

That, I think, is where the problem lies – that the pleasure threshold and the damage threshold are out of line with each other, that the pleasure threshold is lower than the damage threshold. That is why the little syllogisms work: they pick on lengths of time, or for that matter chocolates, which lie below the damage threshold but have risen above the pleasure threshold. So the pleasure they give outweighs the damage they do.

But if you add together a sufficient number of these small stretches, making, say, an hour, then the damage outweighs the pleasure. That is why the big, overall syllogism works.

And that is why *akrasia*, or one type of *akrasia*, comes about.

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⁹*LSJ*: H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones (R. McKenzie), *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford, 1940.

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Παρατηρήσεις πάνω στην αριστοτελική έννοια της *ἀκρασίας*

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Περίληψη

Ο ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΗΣ θεωρεί ότι προκύπτει *ἀκρασία*, διότι δεν αποδίδει στο δρων υποκείμενο έναν τρίτο 'συλλογισμό' σχετικά με το ποιο είναι συνολικά το καλύτερο (στο πλαίσιο μιας επιλογής). Το δρων υποκείμενο μπορεί να σκεφτεί ότι το καλύτερο είναι να φάει ένα γλυκό, αφού η ζημιά που προκαλεί ένα γλυκό είναι αμελητέα· σοβαρή ζημιά προκαλείται από την *υπερβολική* ποσότητα γλυκών.

Το γεγονός αυτό υποδεικνύει ότι η *ἀκρασία* ίσως να εξαρτάται από επιχειρήματα τύπου σωρίτη ή από διολισθαίνουσα επιχειρήμα-

τολογία: ‘Ένα παραπάνω γλυκό δεν αλλάζει τίποτε’ κ.λπ. Προτείνω τρόπους για να αποφύγουμε τη διολίσθηση.

(Ωστόσο, κάθε ακρασία δεν προκύπτει από διολίσθηση. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, στον πραγματικό ή επαπειλούμενο πόνο φαίνεται πως δεν μπορώ να αντισταθώ. Ο Αριστοτέλης δεν διαγιγνώσκει σωστά τη διαφορά ανάμεσα στην ηδονή και τον πόνο. Στην ηδονή μπορώ πάντα να αντισταθώ, στον έντονο πόνο συνήθως όχι.)

Ο Αριστοτέλης προσεγγίζει τη συλλογιστική τύπου σωρίτη στα *Φυσικά* VII: ακόμα κι αν πολλοί άνδρες μαζί μπορούν να κινήσουν ένα πλοίο και κάθε άνδρας ξεχωριστά συμβάλλει στην αθροιστική κινητήρια δύναμη, αυτό δεν συνεπάγεται ότι ένας άνδρας μόνος του μπορεί να μετακινήσει ένα πλοίο για κάποια απόσταση· με ανάλογο τρόπο (κι αντίθετα προς τον Ζήωνα) αν πολλοί σπόροι κεχριού ηχούν, καθώς πέφτουν, και κάθε σπόρος ξεχωριστά συμβάλλει στον ήχο αυτό, δεν συνεπάγεται ότι ένας σπόρος που πέφτει βγάζει ήχο. Ο Αριστοτέλης δεν εφαρμόζει αυτή τη συλλογιστική στην ακρασία: ένα γλυκό συμβάλλει στη ζημιά που προκαλούν τα πολλά γλυκά, αλλά μεμονωμένα το ένα γλυκό προκαλεί ασήμαντη ζημιά, ενώ δίνει σημαντική ηδονή. Ως εκ τούτου θεωρεί ότι προκύπτει ακρασία.

