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Aristotle's Concession to Socrates: A Unified View of *Akrasia*

One of the greatest enigmas within the realm of ethics persists as the debate into what motivates us to do evil. At the heart of this debate is the question of what compels us to intentionally act against our best judgment. This dilemma is known as *Akrasia* and is defined by the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates and Aristotle as the state of going against reason as a result of some *Pathos*¹ (Kraut). The concept can be illustrated by the following example: Imagine that you decide to embark on a health journey, which you believe is good for you, and make a conscious effort to steer clear of sugary food as part of that journey. However, at a dinner party, you are faced with the temptation for sweets in the form of a delicious strawberry pastry. Despite your knowledge that indulging in sweets is harmful to your health goals, you give in to your strong cravings and happily consume several pieces. You were aware of the potential consequences, but your desire for the taste and pleasure of sweets overcame your rational decision-making and self-control, leading you to act against your better judgment. In this example, the *Akratic* – the person experiencing *Akrasia* – is you, and the *Pathos* that clouds your judgment of what is best is the pleasure or desire for sweets. So, how, and why, does your desire for sweets cause you to indulge in the strawberry pastry even if you had the knowledge that it was bad for you?

Throughout the rest of this essay, I will present Socrates's argument – developed in the *Protagoras*² – that *Akrasia* is nothing other than ignorance or a lack of knowledge. I will then

¹An emotional state or passion.

²A dialogue by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato that depicts a conversation between Socrates and the sophist Protagoras.

explain Aristotle's view of *Akrasia*, described in *Nicomachean Ethics*³ and interpreted by Justin Gosling in his paper "Mad, Drunk, or Asleep? – Aristotle's Akratic", that *Akrasia* occurs when some *Pathos* restricts the *use* of a person's knowledge of what is best. Finally, I will argue that, although Aristotle's view of *Akrasia* appears to disagree with Socrates, Socrates's view is actually a subset, or part, of Aristotle's view.

Socrates's "Akratic"

Within *Protagoras*, Socrates argues that there is no such thing as *Akrasia*, and instead, explains the phenomenon as just a lack of knowledge – or ignorance. Socrates begins by arguing that there is no possible way in which "evil can be explained as other than pain, or good as other than pleasure" (Plato *Protagoras*, 355a). Using this rationale, he concludes that it seems irrational that someone would knowingly do something evil because they are overcome by what is good and pleasant (Plato *Protagoras*, 355b). Finally, through the support of the previous conclusions and an analysis of how humans err in their choice of good and evil through a lack of knowledge, Socrates argues that if someone knowingly chooses an evil while in the presence of a good, they must lack knowledge or understanding about what is good and evil (Plato *Protagoras*, 356d-e). In other words, Socrates concludes that knowingly choosing an evil while "being overcome by pleasure" means that you are in a state of ignorance rather than *Akrasia*. On a closing note to his argument, Socrates also reasons that "it is not in human nature, apparently, ... to wish to go after what one thinks to be in evil in the presence to the good; and when compelled to choose one of two evils, nobody will choose the greater when may the lesser" (Plato *Protagoras*, 358d). From this, Socrates's deduction is apparent: A person always acts in what they perceive to be in their

³A work by Aristotle that deals with the nature of human happiness, virtue, and the good life.

best interest, and if they make a decision against their self-interest, it must be because they made an error in their measure of what is good and thus lack knowledge regarding what is good.

When applied to the previous example with your insatiable desire for sweets, Socrates would argue that you, in fact, did not really know or understand that sweets are bad for you. You might have thought that you understood that sweets would be disastrous for your health goals, but when faced with overwhelming pleasure (a delicious strawberry pastry), you knowingly choose to gorge on the pastry disregarding the consequences. Therefore, you must have not known or understood that sweets would hurt your health goals because if you had, you would not have made an error in your decision of what is good for you.

Socrates's view proposed in *Protagoras* is that you can never act against your reasoning as a result of some *Pathos* and, instead, the incorrect choice you make is due to faulty knowledge regarding what is best for you and the decision you are trying to make. Thus he does not believe that *Pathos* makes an impact on your rationality and explains the phenomenon of *Akrasia* as just an instance of ignorance. In his eyes, the *Akratic* is just the ignorant.

Aristotle's Akratic

Aristotle's view, however, varies from Socrates's view in that he claims that *Pathos* is able to cloud reasoning and *Akrasia* as a phenomenon *does* exist. If *Pathos* is able to cloud reasoning, however, then a new problem arises: how is *Pathos* able to prevent the *Akratic* from accessing their knowledge of what is best to help their reasoning? This problem is precisely what Justin Gosling seeks to solve in his interpretation of Aristotle's *Akrasia*⁴.

The crux of Gosling's interpretation lies in the idea that the *Akratic* still has the knowledge of what is best, but is unable to *use* it due to some "psychological change". His

⁴ In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

reasoning proceeds as follows: Given some practical syllogism⁵, if an *Akratic* has knowledge of all the premises and does not act, then they must not fully understand or know a premise.

However, if they are within a state of *Akrasia*, then it must be that they know that premise. Thus, it would seem that some change in “psychological state” renders the *Akratic* incapable of fully using the knowledge of what is best for them (Gosling). This explanation might seem unsatisfying as there is little obvious difference between not having knowledge and not using it. Aristotle, however, maintains that difference exists within the *Akratic’s* ability to regain the use of the knowledge after they have awakened from that “psychological state” (Gosling).

Furthermore, Gosling argues that Aristotle seeks to disagree with Socrates and deny the claim that we are only interested in doing what is best for us. Instead, Aristotle claims that we can not combine our desires in an *Akratic* state and we can only actualize one desire at a time – because only one desire’s goal can be achieved to the fullest extent at a time (Gosling). As a result, Gosling argues that “the only sense in which the akratic fails to know is that of failing to put their knowledge of what is best to full use for the achievement of what is best on this occasion” (Gosling). In other words, an *Akratic’s* knowledge of what is best can be restricted by their current actualized desire and that is how they fail to act to their best judgment. Gosling’s interpretation of Aristotle’s *Akrasia* suggests that when we are faced with some *Pathos* it restricts our knowledge of what is best such that we are unable to use it to inform our actions, but we are still aware that what we are doing is wrong.

⁵ A type of reasoning with three prepositions: a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. The major premise is a general principle (universal). The minor premise is a particular statement about a specific situation (particular). The conclusion is about a practical decision or action based on the two premises. For example:

1. Sweets are bad for you
2. I am embarking on a health journey that avoids foods bad for me.
3. Therefore, I should not eat the strawberry pastry.

When applied to the previous example of sweets, this interpretation holds that you really did know that sweets are bad for you. After being presented with the strawberry pastry, you were faced with the desire for sweets that conflicted with your previous desire – to do what is best for you. Once this desire for sweets was actualized, it restricted your use of the knowledge that sweets are bad for you and so you decided to enjoy the sugary dessert – even though you knew in the moment that what you were doing was against the health goals that you had set and believed in. It was only after the craving had subsided, that your knowledge about what is best for you became usable again.

Aristotle's Concessions to Socrates

At first glance, it appears that Aristotle's view of *Akrasia* as an obstruction of knowledge is incompatible with Socrates's view that there is no such thing as *Akrasia*. In fact, at the conclusion of his paper, Gosling says that this interpretation of Aristotle "makes very little concession to Socrates" (Gosling). This, however, is not completely true. Yes, Aristotle might disagree with Socrates that we can desire something other than what is best for us, but that does not mean his entire position disagrees with Socrates's view. Instead, I propose that Socrates's view is a part of Aristotle's that occurs when (1) the *Akratic's* current *Pathos* is to do what is best for you or (2) when some *Pathos* does not impede the specific knowledge the *Akratic* uses in a decision.

To better illustrate the first point (1), envision that in the example of *Akrasia* with the irresistible strawberry pastry, you are no longer enveloped with the desire for sweets. Instead, you maintain the desire to do what is best for you. Under Aristotle's view, you can now use the knowledge that sweets are bad for your health goals while making the decision to eat the pastry.

If you make the decision to eat the pastry then you err in the measure of what is good for you, and thus can not have the knowledge that sweets are bad for your health goals – precisely Socrates’s view. If you act in self-control and resist the pastry, then it is because you have access to the knowledge of what is best for you in that situation. Thus, under Gosling’s interpretation of Aristotle’s view, when your current actualized desire is to do what is best for you, the phenomenon of *Akrasia* is replaced with ignorance. This is an instance where Socrates remains correct. “Being overcome by pleasure” then takes on the meaning of being ignorant while your current actualized desire is to do what is best for you or acting against your best interest while having your current actualized desire be something other than what is best for you.

The second instance where Socrates remains correct (2) is less obvious due to the added complexity of actualized desires. When overcome by a desire that is different from the desire to do what is best for you, there may be some specific knowledge pertaining to what is best for you that is not restricted by that *Pathos*. If you fail to act in accordance with what is best for you pertaining to that specific unrestricted knowledge, then, according to Aristotle you would be *Akratic* and, according to Socrates, you would be ignorant. For example, suppose at the dinner party someone spills their drink on you. You are filled with rage, but you still retain use of the knowledge that sweets are bad for you while influenced by this *Pathos*. If you are unable to resist the strawberry pastry while under this fit of anger, then it would seem that it is not the restricted use of knowledge that causes you to act against your health goals, but rather the lack of that knowledge (since if you had it, you could use it). Although influenced by *Pathos* (the anger), it was ignorance that explains this state of *Akrasia* and thus Socrates’s view remains correct even under Aristotle’s view.

Conclusion

Although the view of *Akrasia* under Aristotle and Socrates appears to be in complete disagreement, they are both correct in their own way. If we agree with Gosling's interpretation, Aristotle argues that the *Akratic* is knowingly restricted from using the knowledge that pertains to what is best for them when faced with some *Pathos* or desire. Socrates, on the other hand, argues that we always pursue what is best for us and thus any state of *Akrasia* is just a lack of knowledge pertaining to what is best. Besides the concession that we can pursue other than what is best for us, Socrates's view of *Akrasia* is a part of Aristotle's view that occurs when knowledge regarding what is best is unrestricted but the *Akratic* still acts against their best judgment. Socrates covers the cases of *Akrasia* where we believed we had some knowledge or understanding, but we actually didn't. Aristotle covers the cases where we actually do have some knowledge, but it is restricted by *Pathos*. This conjoined view helps form a complete theory of *Akrasia* that is able to withstand any *Pathos*, desire, or action contrary to judgment. Perhaps it is this kind of universal theory that is needed to explain why seemingly good people sometimes do evil.

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