

HOW TO PROVIDE A CONSISTENT ACCOUNT OF AKRASIA

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How to Provide a Consistent Account of Akrasia

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## Thesis Abstract

Sefa Geyik, “How to Provide a Consistent Account of Akrasia”

The aim of this thesis is to provide a consistent solution for the philosophical problem of akrasia. Akrasia, a Greek word, is translated into English as “lacking command over oneself” or “weakness of will”. The question it deals with is this: how can a rational agent, while knowing the best option for him, go for the less beneficial, or harmful course of action?

In the thesis, solutions of both ancient and contemporary philosophers are analyzed in detail, and drawing inspiration from Aristotle, an alternative solution is provided. The idea behind the solution is that it is impossible to go for the less beneficial course of action knowingly while you are actively thinking about the action itself. However, it is argued that when you are not actively thinking about the action itself while doing it, it is possible to go for the less beneficial course of action knowingly.

## Tez Özeti

### Sefa Geyik, “Tutarlı Bir Akrasia Teorisi”

Bu tezin amacı, felsefi bir problem olan akrasia için tutarlı bir çözüm geliştirmektir. Yunanca bir kelime olan akrasia, Türkçeye “kendine egemen olamama” ya da “irade zayıflığı” şeklinde çevrilmektedir. Cevaplamaya çalıştığı soru ise şudur: bir rasyonel aracı, kendisi için en iyi seçeneğin ne olduğunu bildiği halde, nasıl olur da daha az yararlı, ya da zararlı olan eylemi gerçekleştirebilir?

Tezde, antik ve modern filozofların çözümleri ayrıntılı bir biçimde incelenmiş ve Aristoteles’ten ilham alan bir çözüm sunulmuştur. Çözümün altında yatan fikir, bir eylemi yaparken, o eylem hakkında aktif olarak düşünüldüğü takdirde, bilinçli bir şekilde daha az faydalı olan yolun seçilemeyeceği yönündedir. Öte yandan, bir eylemi yaparken, eylem hakkında aktif olarak düşünülmediği takdirde, bilinçli bir şekilde daha az faydalı olan yolun seçilebileceği savunulmaktadır.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, my main objective is to determine whether it is possible to give a consistent account of akrasia, and if so, to provide my own formulation of it. In doing this, I'll consider two main different solutions: Plato's, Aristotle's and Davidson's solutions on the one hand, which are strikingly similar to each other, so much that each one seems like a slightly modified version of the former; and on the other hand, we are going to have John Searle's solution, who, having developed a different theory of rationality from that of the above-mentioned trio, also has a quite different solution to the problem. Also, in supporting Davidson's theory, and in laying the groundwork of the problem, I will need to discuss the problem of free will briefly. Because without a solid account of free will, as we shall see further in the thesis, the problem of akrasia is not a philosophical issue at all, but merely a side effect of the "causes" which underlie and determine our actions. Indeed if we accept that we are causally determined, then it does not make much sense to talk about akrasia. It is just a matter of identifying the causal determinants which caused the agent to act the way he did. In that part, I will call for Robert Nozick's aid, who has provided a most noteworthy account of free will.

In addition, before making the very long leap from the ancients to the contemporaries, I will consider the views of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who did not deal with the problem exclusively, but whose illuminating views on the "will" are going to contribute to the groundwork of the problem, given that akrasia is frequently translated into English as "weakness of the will". Of course it should be clear that a detailed and

meticulous examination and clarification of the concept is essential for this project and that's why a considerable amount of effort will be spent on it.

David Ross, who provided a translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translates 'akrasia' into English as "incontinence". Other common translations include "weakness of the will", "moral weakness" and "lacking command over oneself". Throughout the thesis, the words 'incontinence', 'weakness of the will' and 'akrasia' are going to be used interchangeably.

To put it very crudely, the problem of akrasia deals with an agent's choosing the worse course of action, although he is aware that there is a better course of action available to him which he can act on freely and voluntarily; thus acting against, or failing to act according to his best judgment. By "the better course of action", Plato and Aristotle mean the "morally better" course, while most modern philosophers, including Davidson construe this as "the most beneficial course for the agent", carrying the sphere of akratic action beyond morality. I agree with Davidson that the problem of akrasia is not limited with morality, indeed one can think of cases of akratic action where ethics is not the least bit concerned; Davidson's own example is an agent's deciding whether or not to brush his teeth. It should be noted here that the moral implications of the problem are not my primary concern in the thesis; what I am mostly concerned with is how and why akratic actions happen, if they can, so Davidson's "divorcing" akrasia from morality is of significant importance for me here. At the heart of the problem concerning akrasia lays the tacit conviction that a rational agent always acts according to his best judgment, provided that he has formed the judgment deliberately, intentionally and with proper knowledge regarding his choices. We are going to see, when examining Searle's views on incontinence (and Nozick's views on free will, for that matter) that this conviction may turn out to be the main

problem. Indeed, if we come to accept the theories of rational agency proposed by thinkers like Searle and Nozick then the phenomenon of akrasia does not strike us as bizarre after all. We shall also see that thanks to his theory of rationality, Searle has a more satisfactory solution of the problem than all others, although not entirely satisfactory in my opinion. All in all, I aim to produce a consistent solution of the problem, refuting many others. Now let us proceed chronologically and evaluate the views of above-mentioned thinkers.

## CHAPTER 2

### AKRASIA AND (FREE) WILL

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the views of various philosophers on akrasia, and free will, which is a prerequisite for studying akrasia, thus providing a ground which I later will use to provide my own solution for the problem.

#### Plato's Akrasia: A misunderstanding of the common man

The problem of akrasia makes its grand entrance into philosophy in Plato's *Protagoras*, where a relentless Socrates argues against (or rather, *seems* to argue against) Protagoras the Sophist's claim that virtue can be taught. Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates lays down the problem when he says: "For no wise man, as I believe, will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonorable actions; but they are very well aware that all who do evil and dishonorable actions do them against their will."<sup>1</sup> These words, spoken in the midst of a lengthy discussion, at first do not lead to the recognition of the problem; for Socrates does not go on to inquire how it is possible for a man to act against *his own will*, nor does he acknowledge the existence of men who voluntarily do evil. Later in the dialogue, Socrates inquires with Protagoras about the state called "being overcome by pleasure". He maintains that the majority of men hold the belief that knowledge may be overcome by passions, "as if knowledge were a slave, and might be dragged about anyhow." He furthers the discussion by asserting that the evil inherent in the

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. n.d. *Protagoras*. trans. B. Jowett. Available [online]: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/protagoras.html> [26 June 2009].

actions of the so called “man who is overcome by pleasure”<sup>2</sup> is not an immediate, but a consequential one, that is, the actions performed against one’s better judgment are evil in that they produce undesirable consequences. He then states that as the same thing appears larger when nearer, so does immediate pleasures seem greater than future pleasures, for one who lacks the necessary knowledge to analyze and measure them accurately.

The conclusion of Socrates’ argument is plain and simple; it entails that the notion of *akrasia* is absurd, for no one with the *proper* knowledge would choose evil over good. The reason why some people do so is because their knowledge is defective, and by knowledge, he means not knowledge in general, “but of that particular knowledge which is called measuring”. So according to Plato (or Socrates, for that matter), the *akrates* (incontinent man) is ill equipped with the tools of analysis so much that he fails to see that the course of action he follows will result in his disadvantage. The very own words of Socrates concerning the solution of the problem are: “This, therefore, is the meaning of becoming overcome by pleasure; -- ignorance, and that the greatest.”

Of course, this somewhat shallow solution of the problem is extremely problematic, for it totally ignores the cases in which the agent considers the actions available to him, forms a judgment, and then goes for the less beneficial course. To suppose that the evaluative faculties of the *akrates* are deficient due to lack of knowledge seems like a hasty solution. I for once, do not deem the cases where the agent does not have the proper knowledge of the situation as examples of *akrasia*. The account I am defending is that the agent, although maybe somewhat clouded by irrational faculties of the soul, has proper knowledge of the situation at hand.

Let us now proceed by discussing Aristotle’s view.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the translator’s choice for *akrates*, the incontinent man.

## Aristotle's Akrasia: Impaired knowledge

Aristotle deals with akrasia in the book VII of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, although in the beginning of the whole work, he slightly touches upon the issue when he says that knowledge provides no benefit for the incontinent man.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the book VII, he provides an analysis of akrasia, explaining in detail what kind of objects it is concerned with, the types of akrasia, whether it is a vice, and so on. He characterizes the incontinent man as having strong passions, indeed it seems that a slight trace of pity finds its way around his heart when he talks about the akrates.

He says that pleasure the incontinent man fails to resist is physical pleasure, and is concerned mostly with the faculty of touch (In the case of eating or drinking this is so too, for the food or drink “touches” the mouth and the tongue). He then goes on to distinguish between the licentious man and the incontinent man, the former holding what he chases after not to be wrong, thus having made it his general principle, while the incontinent man knows what he does is wrong.

So in book VII, he begins the discussion by rejecting Socrates' view for being “glaringly inconsistent with observed facts.”<sup>4</sup> However, he provides very little explanation for his accusation, asserting only that the incontinent man *knows* that he ought not to follow the less profitable course of action, before actually doing it. Nevertheless, like most philosophers dealing with akrasia, he is drawn to deal with the akratic agent's knowledge;

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that what Aristotle has in mind when saying this, is that the incontinent man is somewhat unable to utilize his knowledge to do what is better for him.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. trans. J. A. K. Thomson, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 173.

whether he has it, or if he does, what kind of knowledge it is. His views regarding the akratic agent's knowledge are the following:

The incontinent man has the universal premise corresponding to his action; but the particular premise he either does not have or fails to exercise. I believe, by introducing the universal premises versus particular premises into the discussion, Aristotle complicates matters unnecessarily. Also it is evident that this solution accomplishes very little, for the important question Aristotle must answer is how one fails to exercise his knowledge, not whether he has knowledge or not, and of what kind. To better understand what Aristotle means by having the universal premise but not the particular premise, we should look at his ideas regarding the "prudent man" (or "the man of practical wisdom", in some translations). Prudent man is a person who need not have the universal premises corresponding to his actions, that is, he need not excel in theoretical knowledge as to have general principles for his actions, but somehow, he grasps the connections between his actions and some particular elements, factors involved in them and has (or forms) the particular premises corresponding to his action. Aristotle claims on quite a few occasions that one cannot be prudent and incontinent at the same time, for example, while furthering his arguments about incontinence in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that "It is impossible for the same person to be at the same time prudent and incontinent."<sup>5</sup> So not having the universal premise while having the particular premise may be a state close to that of the prudent man's, and the incontinent man's case is the exact opposite. This main solution of Aristotle will be mentioned later when discussing Davidson, or to be more precise, when reconciling Davidson with Aristotle. I believe that any lingering doubts, if there are any, will be erased by then.

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, p. 189.

His second main assertion is that the Akrates has the knowledge, but in a peculiar sense; he is “in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk.”<sup>6</sup> Thus although the incontinent man seems to have the necessary knowledge to make the right decision, this knowledge is nothing more than talk, for it does not lead to action. So, he concludes, the knowledge of the akrates is not *knowledge proper*, but *apparent knowledge* (i.e., he seems like he has the knowledge, but he has it in the sense of “drunk man muttering the verses of Empedocles”), since he does not act according to it. So according to Aristotle, the akrates does what he does because he does not have knowledge proper. But how do we know that he does not have proper knowledge? Because he does things he knows he should not do. I believe the circularity of his argument is evident from the way I put it. Also, this solution puts him uncomfortably close to the Platonic account which he was so eager to dismiss at the beginning of the discussion. Aristotle himself admits this when he says, about this conclusion that “it does appear that the conclusion is that which Socrates tried to establish.”<sup>7</sup> Because, he says, what is “dragged about like a slave” is not knowledge proper but apparent knowledge, and there is no logical difficulty in supposing that.

These are the main solutions Aristotle provides. However, he talks about something very interesting before he discusses these solutions, something very similar to what I want to assert as my solution after evaluating all the thinkers mentioned in the introduction part. This is about having, but not reflecting upon the knowledge one has at the time of akratic action. In Aristotle’s words:

But since we use the word ‘know’ in two ways (because a person who *has* knowledge but does not *use* it is said to know, as well as the person who does use it), it will make a difference whether a person does wrong while having but not reflecting upon his knowledge, or whether he does wrong while reflecting that he is

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

doing wrong. The latter is felt to be shocking; but it does not shock us if he does wrong without reflecting upon it.”<sup>8</sup>

So according to Aristotle, an agent’s doing the wrong while reflecting on the knowledge that it is wrong is impossible; however, doing wrong while not reflecting on it seems possible, to say the least. Aristotle does not dwell upon this solution in detail; rather he sees the former two as providing a sufficient solution for the problem. This solution will be discussed thoroughly while providing my own solution, so I am going to leave it at this for now.

So my opinion regarding Aristotle’s solution of the problem is that it seems to miss the real question, and (the second main solution I discussed) is uncomfortably close to the Platonic account, although it seems a much more mature solution than that of Plato’s. Although he provides a solution, such a solution leaves a lingering doubt in the mind regarding the oddity of this so-called “apparent knowledge”. Also, the account of *akrasia* I’m defending is that the agent has proper knowledge of the situation in hand; since Davidson has shown us that there can indeed be cases of *akrasia* in which the agent has perfect knowledge of the corresponding situation, and yet fails to act according to it, that is, to his benefit. To be less obscure, yes, if we suppose that the incontinent does not have proper knowledge, we solve the problem; but one may ask, what about instances in which he didn’t have apparent knowledge, or he had the universal *and* the particular premise? Is it not possible for akratic action to happen in those instances? According to Aristotle, it seems that it is impossible. I however, believe that this is not the case, I think that as Davidson argues, there may be instances of *akrasia* in which the agent has the proper knowledge regarding the situation, but does not act in his best interest. I believe Aristotle’s solution merely misses the real problem, and I believe if we are to provide a consistent solution to the problem of *akrasia*, the instances we must take into consideration are those in which the agent has the

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, p. 173.

perfect knowledge corresponding to the situation, but fails to act in the most beneficial way nonetheless, and this is exactly what I am going to do.

Another peculiarity of Aristotle's discussion is that, although he solves the problem by appealing to the (severely) impaired knowledge of the akrates, he also acknowledges the "weak will" or "strong appetites" of the incontinent man. This, of course, raises the question of whether the solution to the problem of akrasia lies within the strength of the will *or* the knowledge of the incontinent man, or both, to some extent. While akrasia is concerned both with the will and the knowledge of the agent, I think that the former plays a more important role. In my (and Searle's) opinion akrasia is a problem that arises from a peculiar feature (peculiar not to inanimate objects but to beings that are capable of making free decisions as regards their actions) of the decision making process, and this is nothing other than free will.

Having said all these, one must of course acknowledge some of the merits of Aristotle's arguments. For one, he claims that akratic actions are voluntary rather than involuntary. There are three kinds of action, according to him, which he discusses in the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To summarize, an action is voluntary when the moving principle (the origin of action) lies within the agent. An action is involuntary if it is done through ignorance or under compulsion, and by compulsion he means that "(the action) has an external origin of such a kind that the agent contributes nothing to it; e. g. if a voyager were to be conveyed somewhere by the wind or by men who had him in their power."<sup>9</sup> Then of course there are actions of the mixed type, as in the example of the captain of the ship who throws his cargo into the sea due to the coming storm. Although the moving principle is within the captain as he jettisons the cargo, according to Aristotle "considered absolutely (the action) is involuntary, because nobody would choose to do anything of this

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, p. 50.

sort in itself.”<sup>10</sup> This reminds me of Taylor’s distinction of “wanting as inclination” as opposed to “wanting as preferential choice”.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the captain is inclined to keep the cargo on board, but he chooses to throw it away. This distinction of Taylor’s will be mentioned again while discussing Davidson. Of course Aristotle does not deem akratic action even as an action of mixed character, for he says that the incontinent man acts voluntarily, and he states that very clearly, without leaving any room for doubt. Deeming the akrates as acting voluntarily and thus culpable for his actions puts him in a better position to discuss akrasia than even some contemporary philosophers, like Hare. As I have said before, he also mentions the difference between an agent’s reflecting upon his knowledge while doing the act, and not reflecting on his knowledge while doing the act; the latter of which does not strike us as “so shocking”. This idea is very important for the sake of the solution I want to provide later in the thesis, for I will try to explain why an agent’s doing wrong while not reflecting on the corresponding knowledge is not so shocking. I will also argue that an agent’s doing wrong while reflecting on the corresponding knowledge is impossible.

Now I have said a lot of things about weakness of the will, but as regards will, I have said very little. If we are to tackle the problem of akrasia, we should have a good understanding of the will. Please note that when I talk about will, I almost always have in mind free will. For without free will, there can be no problem of akrasia, that is, if our actions are causally determined by certain factors outside our control, then incontinence is not a problem at all. It is merely a result of different factors, which cause the agent to take the less beneficial course of action. Of course, I don’t believe that this is the case, and will get help from Nozick to prove otherwise.

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> C. C. W. Taylor, “Plato, Hare and Davidson on Akrasia,” *Mind, New Series*, vol.89, no.356 (Oct. 1980), pp. 499-528.

But before Nozick, it is useful to consider the views of (St.) Augustine and (St.) Aquinas, who give us a taste of free will, which they need in order to deem individuals culpable for their sins. Regardless of their motives, their views are useful in bridging the gap between the ancients and the contemporaries.

Let us discuss them now.

### Augustine on will

Saint Augustine (354 - 430) has a different method of dealing with philosophical problems; he doesn't provide precise arguments for his numerous theses and his approach to problems that can be considered philosophical is mostly dogmatic. Also, his account of the will is scattered throughout his works, most noteworthy ones being mentioned in his *On the Trinity*. In the beginning of the book, he asserts that the mind of man was created in the image of God, or "Imago Dei." He makes this assertion most clearly in the twelfth book of *On the Trinity*, where he writes: "man was made in the image of God, not according to the form of the body, but according to the rational mind."<sup>12</sup> Since God is a unity of a trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit), man's mind is also a unity of a trinity, namely; memory, understanding and the will. Understanding is concerned with learning, memory pertains to the remembering of the learned, and finally, the will puts the learned things into use. According to him, will is an active power of the human mind, which converts thought into action. In his own words: "But the third one, use, lies in the will which disposes of those

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<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *On the Trinity*. trans. Stephen McKenna,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 91.

things that are contained in the memory and the understanding, whether it refers them to something else, or rests satisfied in them as an end.”<sup>13</sup> He then goes on to identify the role of the will in sense perception. His account of the function of the will in sense perception is strikingly similar to that of Kant’s *spontaneity*, as maintained by him in his first Critique. As you may recall, the job of spontaneity (of the faculty of representation) is to synthesize the manifold given by the sensibility. In doing that, spontaneity gives itself the rules of synthesis, thus being by nature its very own law giver; it is by the *activity* of spontaneity that we don’t cease to synthesize the manifold. This last feature of spontaneity is what makes it similar to Augustinian will. For Augustine first distinguishes between three elements of sense perception, and explains how they can fit together in a unity. The first of the elements is “the form of the body that is seen”, the second one is “its image impressed on the sense” and the third one is “the will of the soul which directs the sense to the sensible thing and keeps the vision itself fixed upon it.”<sup>14</sup> The first of the elements belongs to the world outside the perceiver, second belongs to both the body and the soul, but the third one is “proper to the soul alone, because it is the will”. So, while maintaining that will alone directs the attention of the sense to the sensible object, he also asserts that the will is a power of the soul, and only the soul. I don’t think I would be mistaken if I called the Augustinian will a prerequisite for subjecthood, something like a necessary feature of a rational agent. It should also be clear from the text that he believes that the will is a kind of a unifier, the medium between the sensing agent and the sensible object.

Augustine also speaks of weakness of the will, starting from the book twelve of his *On the Trinity*. He begins the book by differentiating between the “inner” and the “outer” man, the latter being the body and the sensible faculties of the man, or to be more precise,

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

those faculties which man has in common with beasts. The inner man, on the other hand, is what is peculiar to men, and refers to the rational faculties of man alone. Having thus differentiated between the inner and the outer man, he goes on to say "...and if his head gives its consent, that is, if that which presides as the masculine part in the watch-tower of counsel does not check and restrain it, then the inner man grows old among his enemies."<sup>15</sup>

What I understand from this assertion is that, if the will constantly yields to the demands of desires, then reason weakens and wanes "among his enemies". Augustine then goes on to assert his views on weakness of the will, where he deems the akrates culpable for his sins. He says that: "For the mind cannot decide both that a sin is to be thought of with pleasure and also to be carried into effect, unless that intention of the mind which wields the sovereign power of moving the members to action or restraining them from action (I construe this sovereign power as the will) also yields to and becomes the slave of the evil deed."<sup>16</sup> So his view is that when succumbing to sin, it is not the case that desires beat the reason, rather, the will which is the highest executive faculty of the human mind, decides in favor of the appetites, and consents to the doing of the evil deed. Thus Augustine deems the individual culpable of his actions. Also, his thesis in his *On Free Choice of the Will (De libero arbitrio)* confirms this view. There, he says: "But you are perhaps about to ask whence the will's movement comes to be; for the will is, indeed, moved when it turns from the unchangeable good to the changeable good... Yet since this defect (the defective movement of the will) is voluntary it lies within our power."<sup>17</sup> So in general, Augustine maintains that when choosing the good or choosing the evil, the agent chooses voluntarily, that is, intentionally. The account of will which had been asserted very briefly by Plato in

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, quoted in Robert Meagher, *Augustine: On the Inner Life of the Mind*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1998), p. 176.

*The Republic* seems to be furthered here, where will is the governor of both the desires and the reason. This becomes clearer in his definition of happiness, where he states that: "...he alone is happy who has all that he wills, and wills nothing wrongly."<sup>18</sup> Having had our taste of free will, let us now consider Aquinas, who, having read both Aristotle and Augustine, laid down his account of the will in his *Summa Theologica*.

### Aquinas on will

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) was a priest in the Dominican order, as well as being an influential philosopher. Unlike St. Augustine, he states his arguments in a very systematic way in his most famous work, *Summa Theologica*. Throughout the work, Aquinas frequently quotes from Aristotle, who he calls "The Philosopher", and Augustine, who he sometimes refers to as "The Theologian". Throughout his long-winded work, he deals with various topics, including God's existence and nature, the creation of the world, the nature of man (which I'm concerned with), the personality of the Christ.

His inquiry into the nature of man and his account of the will (which is proper to man) begins in the second volume of the *Summa*. He talks about man's ultimate end (which is happiness) and the means to attain it, which is nothing other than "certain movements of works which are called merits". Also, he states that happiness cannot be attained without a right will, or "rectitude of the will is necessary for happiness".<sup>19</sup> Then, since to attain happiness requires some actions to be performed by man, he goes on to distinguish between

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<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), p. 614.

voluntary and involuntary actions. After a discussion, he concludes that: "...it is essential to the voluntary act that its principle be within the agent, together with some knowledge of the end."<sup>20</sup> He then goes on to distinguish between perfect and imperfect knowledge, which is very reminiscent of Aristotle's distinction between apparent and proper knowledge in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Aquinas, perfect knowledge is proper only to man, and implies "not only apprehending the thing which is the end, but also knowing it under the aspect of end and the relationship of the means to that end", whereas imperfect knowledge of the end "consists in mere apprehension of the end, and is exercised by irrational animals, through their senses and their natural estimative power."<sup>21</sup>

So, he concludes, perfect knowledge of the end leads to the perfect voluntary, and imperfect knowledge leads to the imperfect voluntary, which even the irrational animals, are capable of. On the same page, he states something very brief, yet of utmost importance regarding my solution of the problem of akrasia. He writes: "The fact that man is master of his actions is due to his being able to deliberate upon them." This seems to suggest that an action is under full control of the will only if some reflective thought is going on about the act, but I will examine this in detail in the solution part.

Aquinas then goes on to distinguish between involuntary acts and incontinence, for which Davidson will give him credit some 700 years later. He argues that some things done through strong emotions such as fear or anger are "of a mixed character", i. e., partly voluntary and partly involuntary. What Davidson makes of this is that Aquinas sees these kinds of actions (those which are done under the influence of strong emotions) to be "involuntary to some extent" thus distinguishing them from truly incontinent actions.

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<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, p. 617. Please note that his distinction of voluntary versus involuntary action is very close to that of Aristotle's.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Davidson uses this to argue against Hare's claim that there are in fact no incontinent actions.<sup>22</sup> This will be understood more clearly when discussing his view of incontinence. In the seventh article of the sixth question, Aquinas argues that concupiscence does not cause involuntariness. He says that the effect of concupiscence is to "make something to be voluntary rather than involuntary."<sup>23</sup> He explains this more clearly when he says that "he who acts from concupiscence, e. g. an incontinent man, does not retain his former will whereby he repudiated the object of his concupiscence; for his will is changed so that he desires that which previously he repudiated." Another noteworthy point of the article is that Aquinas accepts that desires impair knowledge, but not to the extent that the act be deemed involuntary. Also, he writes here something similar to Aristotle's solution of akrasia, namely, akrates' having the universal premise, but not the particular premise pertaining to his action; although he does not present it as a solution to anything. He mentions that in incontinent acts sometimes "the power of knowing is not taken away entirely, but only the actual consideration in some particular possible act." Nevertheless, according to him these kinds of actions are voluntary, "according as voluntary we mean that which is in the power of the will."

Then he goes on to define will as the "rational appetite" and says that in order for the will to tend to anything, it is necessary that it be perceived as good. He also mentions that the will can be moved by both reason and the sensitive appetite, and quotes Aristotle in *De Anima* who says that the will is a "mover moved." So will is influenced by reason and desires, and, in turn, moves the "other powers of the soul to their acts." Of course, according to Aquinas, incontinent actions occur when the will is moved by evil desires. As to the

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<sup>22</sup> Hare states, in his *Freedom and Reason* that akratic actions, because they are performed under the effect of desires, are unfree (involuntary), thus denying that they exist. See: Richard Hare, *Freedom and Reason*. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 78-85.

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, p. 621.

answer of how the will can be moved by the inappropriate powers which shouldn't have moved it, he again quotes Aristotle from his *Politics*, stating that the will moves the other powers of the soul not in a despotic manner "like a master ordering his slaves around", but in the way in which "a governor rules free men."<sup>24</sup> So, sometimes, the will can be influenced by the irrational powers of the soul and move the other powers irrationally.

Finally, in the third article of the tenth question, Aquinas acknowledges the possibility of akrasia and offers an analysis, but he does not deal with the problem of how akratic action happens. He states that sometimes the will judges something to be good, but does so under the influence of passion. According to him, this influence can occur in two ways: in the first case, man's reason is totally bound, so that he has no control over his actions, e. g. people who are consumed by bloodlust to the extent that they attack everything on sight. In the second case, however, reason is clouded, but not dominated by passion so that "the judgment of reason retains, to a certain extent (to an extent that allows the individual to be deemed culpable for his action), its freedom."<sup>25</sup> He then goes on to argue that, in such cases, it is in the power of the will not to give consent to desires. I believe that the latter type of "influence" on the will fits perfectly the instances of akratic action I am willing to discuss under the type "akrasia proper." For in cases of akrasia, it is often the case that the agent's choice is influenced by his appetites (and other mental states, for that matter), but is not determined by them, for it is a requirement of an action's being wholly determined by appetites that the agent does not retain his free will (like having gone berserk).

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<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, p. 630.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 635.

The last thing I am going to mention about Aquinas' account of the will is that, through the questions 13 – 16, he gives a detailed analysis of how an agent forms an intention and acts according to it. He mentions three stages, namely, choosing, consenting (to the choice), and using (executing the choice). All three, he says, are acts of the will, although various faculties in the process influence the will.

So, after having mentioned a “weak will” on numerous occasions, we have an idea as to what the “weak” element in those discussions may be. To summarize, will is mainly construed as the link between inner states and action; to put it more clearly, it is thought to be that faculty which is influenced by all the rational, irrational and non-rational elements of the mind and consents to one course of action, and urges the self to execute (or, ultimately, fails to urge the self to execute) the action.

So, the cases of weakness of the will are called so because the will, which is ‘proper to man’ and generally believed to be a rational faculty in essence, consents to a course of action that it (morally or otherwise) shouldn't have, deciding in favor of the irrational elements rather than the rational ones. Of course, when rational versus irrational elements are introduced into the discussion; the problem of akrasia gains a moral aspect, for what is rational is generally thought of as what is moral. The moral aspect of the problem presents no additional difficulties, however it should be noted here that I don't believe akrasia is a moral problem at all. The elements that effect the will in the decision making and the execution process need not be rational versus irrational, although they can be. This view will be expanded when discussing Davidson, for it was he who divorced akrasia from morality.

To get back on track, I believe that the most important contribution of the saints is that they prove that akratic actions are voluntary, i.e., free rather than unfree, thus refuting Richard Hare's claim that, under the influence of the strong passions, the incontinent agent

is *psychologically unable* to make the right choice. Hare's argument is that, every person who (sincerely) assents to an imperative, if it is in his power to do it, acts according to it. He maintains that it is not in the akrates' power to act according to his imperative.<sup>26</sup> The absurdity of this view is apparent, for it is in the power of the will to do, but as Augustine asserts, it is in the power of the will not to do; performing or not performing an act is almost always within the power of the agent. We cannot deem somebody psychologically (or otherwise) unable, simply because he failed to act according to his best judgment. Therefore, I do not believe in psychological impossibilities to act, unless the agent is mentally deranged.

Now let us discuss Davidson's solution, and in doing that, divorce akrasia from morality.

#### Davidson's Akrasia: A logically possible concept

Davidson begins his paper, very conveniently, by defining akrasia. It is a clear definition, and one worth quoting: "An agent's will is weak if he acts, and acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgment."<sup>27</sup> He then shows the inconsistency of akratic action using three propositions:

P1. If an agent wants to do  $x$  more than he wants to do  $y$  and he believes himself free to do either  $x$  or  $y$ , then he will intentionally do  $x$  if he does either  $x$  or  $y$  intentionally.

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<sup>26</sup> Hare, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 21.

P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do  $x$  than to do  $y$ , then he wants to do  $x$  more than he wants to do  $y$ .

So, he maintains, taken together, P1 and P2 are inconsistent with:

P3. There are incontinent actions.<sup>28</sup>

His dealing with the possible criticisms regarding P1 and P2 are inconclusive and obscure, and P2 seems plainly false,<sup>29</sup> but let us accept them for the moment, since his solution seems a notable one.

Before jumping from these propositions to the conclusion, I want to discuss his other contributions. First of all, he “divorces” akrasia from morality. Now this is an issue that has to be dealt with properly, for I have asserted earlier that akrasia is not a moral problem, although it may have moral implications. To further clarify what I’m trying to say, there may be akratic actions that have moral implications, and there may be akratic actions that are not at all concerned with morality. One may decide between cheating on his wife and not cheating on her, and despite knowing that the former option will eventually result in his disadvantage, he may still choose to cheat on his spouse; or one may, as in Davidson’s example, choose to brush his teeth and thus condemn himself to a sleepless night, although being perfectly aware that not brushing his teeth this time has a negligible effect on his dental health. The point I want to stress is, what akratic actions have in common is not that they all have moral implications, but that they involve an agent’s choosing a less beneficial course of action, despite being aware of a more profitable course of action available to him. Therefore, the translations of akrasia, such as ‘incontinence’ and ‘weakness of will’ must

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<sup>28</sup> And there *are* incontinent actions according to Davidson, thus arises the contradiction.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor points out that, the ‘wanting’ in P2 is restricted to wanting as preferential choice, as opposed to wanting as inclination. See: Taylor, p. 503.

not fool the reader, for I am using them simply to avoid repeating the same word over and over again. Amélie Rorty, who is more sensitive about this subject, refrains from using any word other than *akrasia*, after agreeing with Davidson's claim that *akrasia* is not "necessarily a problem of moral psychology, that the best or most preferable course need not be thought morally the best."<sup>30</sup> So all in all, I don't believe that *akrasia* is a moral problem and even in some cases it may have moral implications, I don't wish to discuss them, my main aim is to provide a consistent account as to how and why the *akratic* actions happen. Of course, having said all these about *akrasia* and morality, I must assert here that I am dealing with individual cases of *akrasia*, for if an agent's *akratic* actions follow a pattern, it is clear that the problem posed by his actions is also concerned with ethics. But the ethical implications *akratic* actions have when following a pattern are not my concern here, as I have argued earlier.

Secondly, Davidson says that, in discussing *akrasia*, he has adapted the account of the will as advocated by Plato in *The Republic*; namely, will as the governing force of both reason and inclinations. Plato distinguishes between the three "parts" of the soul; one being the rational element, another being the appetitive one, and a third one, the spirited element.<sup>31</sup> It is widely argued that Plato's account of the will in *The Republic* is not sufficient to make use of. Well, we have discussed the accounts of two major Christian philosophers, and their accounts of the will boil down to this simple explanation, reason on one hand, desires on the other, and the will, as the governing force on both, assenting or not assenting to a certain course of action and executing the action. The greatest advantage of this view is that it enables us to deem the *akratic* action as free rather than unfree, thus deeming *akrasia* a real

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<sup>30</sup> Amélie Rorty, "Where Does the *Akratic* Break Take Place," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 58, no.94, (Dec. 1980), pp. 333-346.

<sup>31</sup> See: Plato, *The Republic*. trans. R.E. Allen, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 138-140.

philosophical problem. The last important point before discussing the conclusion is that Davidson, though not very openly, provides an account of *akrasia proper*, when he rejects all of his predecessors' solutions and asserts:

...does every case of incontinence involve one of the shadow-zones where we want both to apply, and to withhold, some mental predicate? Does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgment that my action is not for the best, all things considered, and yet where the action I do perform has no hint of compulsion or of the compulsive? There is no proving such actions exist; but it seems to me absolutely certain that they do. And if this is so, no amount of attention to the subtle borderline bits of behavior will resolve the central problem.<sup>32</sup>

I believe this is "akrasia in its strictest form", so this account of akrasia is the one which I have to deal with exclusively, since it is more refined and the problem posed by akratic action is most clearly understood in this form.

So Davidson's solution of the problem is basically this: Let us suppose that there is an agent *A*, who is to choose between actions *x* and *y*. Although he believes *x* is the better course of action, he does *y*. According to Davidson, his belief corresponding to action is "*all things considered, x is better than y*" which is a relational judgment, and cannot logically, contradict with an unconditional judgment, so at the same time, an agent can hold the belief that "(unconditionally) *y* is better than *x*". To be more clear, I shall quote Davidson: "...Intentional action, I have argued in defending P1 and P2, is geared directly to unconditional judgments like 'It would be better to do *a* than to do *b*.'" "...But now there is no (logical) difficulty in the fact of incontinence, for the akrates is characterized as holding that, *all things considered*, it would be better to do *b* than to do *a*, even though he does *a* rather than *b* and with a reason. The logical difficulty has vanished because a judgment that

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<sup>32</sup> Davidson, p. 29.

*a* is better than *b*, all things considered, is a relational, or *prima facie*, judgment, and so cannot conflict logically with any unconditional judgment.”<sup>33</sup>

It seems evident that Davidson’s solution accomplishes nothing more than proving the logical possibility of akratic action. He does not say that, for instance, prior to akratic action, the agent *A*, who believes that “all things considered, *x* is better than *y*”, also maintains “*y* is better than *x*”. He only says “there is no paradox in supposing it.” He asserts that at this point, he sees his view of akrasia as very close to that of Aristotle’s, showing G. E. M. Anscombe’s *Thought and Action in Aristotle* as a reference. What kind of a similarity he sees between his view and Aristotle’s is not clearly, nay, at all stated in the article. Anscombe tries, in her article to reconcile an inconsistency in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The inconsistent triad arises from the following statements:

-In the Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1134a) Aristotle states that choice is what is determined by deliberation.

-He also mentions on various occasions that the akrates (Anscombe translates ‘akrates’ as “the uncontrolled man”) does not act from choice.

- However, in Book VI, he (although very briefly) states that the akrates “will achieve by means of his calculations the end that he sets before him, and will therefore be in a position of having deliberated correctly.”<sup>34</sup>

The inconsistency should be clear from the way I put it. Anscombe solves this problem by suggesting that according to Aristotle choice is not “*simply* determination by

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<sup>33</sup> Davidson, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, p. 158.

calculation or deliberation.”<sup>35</sup> Rather, she says that according to him, choice is something determined by deliberation, complying with the chooser’s “ends” – ends being things like “being honored, health, the life of virtue, enjoyment of knowledge or sensual pleasure.”<sup>36</sup> The incontinent man does not have sensual pleasures as his general objective, so when, let’s say he’s trying to seduce his neighbor’s wife, he merely has, according to Anscombe, the “particular purpose of seducing her”. So, seducing his neighbor’s wife is not a choice per se, but a quasi-choice that contradicts his general beliefs. Now I had mentioned earlier (in section 3) that one of the solutions of Aristotle to the problem is that the akrates has the universal premise, but not the particular premise corresponding to action. So it seems that when Davidson finds his view of akrasia close to Aristotle’s, he has that in mind; for he says that it is not paradoxical to suppose one has (general) beliefs supporting a course of action, but that he does not choose to act so in a particular instance.

So, all in all, the questions of how and why the agent acts contrary to his best judgment remain. As the title of the article suggests, Davidson merely answers the question: “How is weakness of the will *possible*?” Of course, it should be noted that even the proof of the logical possibility of akratic action is a valuable one; so it is up to me to fill the gaps left by Davidson. So all things considered, I find his views and solution inspiring. Let us now, before discussing Searle’s solution of the problem, consider Robert Nozick’s view on free will briefly, which is going to help us ground Searle’s ‘gap’ better.

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<sup>35</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, “Thought and Action in Aristotle,” in *New essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 144.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

## Robert Nozick: An account of free will

I have argued earlier that the problem of akrasia cannot exist as a problem worth discussing without a solid account of free will, for if our actions are causally determined, we can easily dodge dealing with the problem by referring to what *causally determined* then, and since these causes are out of our control, we could easily discard the problem.

Now determinism claims that “in case of everything that exists, there are antecedent conditions, known or unknown, which, because they are given, mean that thing could not be other than they are. More loosely, it says that everything is causally determined.”<sup>37</sup> This view, despite successfully explaining most of the phenomena regarding rational agency, unfortunately deprives us of our free will.

Nozick comes into the picture at this point; he says that “without free will, we seem diminished, merely the playthings of external forces” and that determinism “seems to undercut human dignity, it seems to undermine our value.”<sup>38</sup> So he defends free will, not because he wants to hold an agent responsible for his actions (although he discusses the issue of retributive punishment in detail later in the book) but because he wishes to restore the dignity that determinism takes away from us.

Now in proving that the actions of an individual are not causally determined, the theorist of free will must show that, the actions in question are not random happenings, for if

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, quoted in Murat Baç, “Causal Determinants, Reasons, and Substantive Autonomy: A Critical Approach to Agency,” *Problemos*, vol. 72, (2007), pp. 135 – 144.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 291.

they are, this adds no value to us human beings at all. What he proposes is that, in “considering the reasons (reasons for doing something), mulling them over, one arrives at a view of which reasons are more important, which ones have more *weight*.”<sup>39</sup> These bestowed weights, in time, “set up a framework within which we make future decisions, not eternal but one we tentatively are committed to.”<sup>40</sup>

Nozick says that *after* the choice, even we ourselves may think that we were caused to act by the considerations which were more weighty. However, this is an illusion<sup>41</sup>, for had we chosen one of the many other alternatives (and we could have, and that’s an important point), we would have viewed the reasons as having caused *that* course of action. He maintains that we “can have an explanation and understanding of why something occurred even when we do not know any reason why it, *rather than something else*, occurred that time, in that instance.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus his account of free will boils down to what Searle will use to solve the problem of akrasia; namely that in any given situation (with the exception of being under the influence of strong emotions, like being overcome by rage), an agent’s action, is caused, but not causally determined, for he could have *decided differently*. Such an action is not causally determined, because even if all the elements in the decision making process were the same, it could have occurred differently, and it is not random, to the extent that it is connected to the weigh(t)ed reasons. Also, in the end, it is the rational agent who performs the action, rather than the internal and the external elements corresponding to it. A free agent does not

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<sup>39</sup> Nozick, p. 294.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>41</sup> I will dwell on this illusion later in the thesis, while discussing my solution.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

merely watch things while he is caused to act in this or that way, rather, he is the active element and carries out the decision by initiating and continuing the action.

I think that Nozick's account is a reasonable one, for I too believe that an individual could always have acted differently even if all the elements remain the same. Also, few would disagree that the active element in carrying out a decision is none other than the agent himself. Now let's see how this idea develops into a most brilliant solution to the problem of akrasia in Searle's thought.

#### Searle's Akrasia: Not only possible, but also common

John Searle deals with the problem of weakness of the will exclusively in his *Rationality in Action*. His main claim is that akrasia is not so bizarre and uncommon a phenomenon after all, but it seems so in some theories of rationality, which he deems as 'classic'. The main aim of the book is to introduce a new theory of rationality; one Searle believes we desperately need.

Here, I won't examine in detail every aspect of his theory, but the features that are crucial to an examiner of akrasia.

Searle begins his book by laying down six assumptions of the "classical" model of rationality, and providing counter-thoughts to each one of them. The first of his mentioned ideas, the one, which is also the main support beam of his theory, is that "rational actions are not *caused* by beliefs and desires."<sup>43</sup> Here, it must be said that 'cause' for Searle means

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<sup>43</sup> John Searle, *Rationality in Action*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 12.

‘efficient cause’ such as “the explosion caused the building to collapse”, much similar to what Nozick calls ‘causal determination’. The essence of his argument here is that beliefs and desires underlying an action are never causally *sufficient* for that action, provided that the process was voluntary and rational. He introduces the “gap” a short time thereafter. Now if one is to understand Searle’s theory of rational decision making, he has to have a good understanding of the gap, for he mentions in *Rationality in Action* that the whole book is in fact about the gap. According to him, there are (at least) three gaps: one is between “the reasons for making up one’s mind, and the actual decision he makes”, the second one is the gap between decision and action, and finally, the third one is between the initiation of an action and its continuation to completion.

Of these three, the gap between the decision made and the corresponding action interests me the most. Now, what exactly is this gap? Searle mentions that the gap has been traditionally called: “the freedom of the will”. In the third chapter of the book, where his inquiry of the gap is the deepest, he gives two (one forward looking, one backward) descriptions of the gap: “Forward: the gap is that feature of our conscious decision making and acting where we sense alternative future decisions and actions are causally open to us. Backward: it is that feature of our conscious decision making and acting whereby the reasons preceding the decisions and actions are not experienced by the agent as setting causally sufficient conditions for decisions and actions.”<sup>44</sup> So according to Searle, decision making process and acting according to decisions is not a process that can be totally explained by underlying reasons, because there is the freedom of the will which is a constant manifestation of the ability to do something else. He states that, forming a decision to act is not enough, you still have to perform the action yourself; you cannot possibly expect it to

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<sup>44</sup> Searle, p. 62.

play out on its own. His view is that what you deem as the reasons why you did something and not another, did not cause you to act in the way you did; rather you, being a rational and a conscious agent, were aware of the reasons, chose one, and acted on it. In Searle's opinion, where there is a rational and voluntary action, there is always this gap; where the gap doesn't exist, he says, there is non-rational or coerced behavior. He gives the example of people consumed with rage or drug addicts as examples of gapless actions. On these occasions, these people have no sense of alternative possibilities, so their actions can be perfectly explained by their respective antecedents. As to what may be filling the gap, Searle answers that there is no such thing. Human behavior is ultimately unpredictable, and because we sense the freedom of the will, underlying reasons are not enough to make sense of a rational agent's action in the way that we make sense of a machine's action.

So, what do we make of this theory of rationality? Searle does not only give examples of the gap but also goes on to deal with *akrasia* exclusively. He lays down the problem when he says: "How could there be cases where an agent forms an all-out inclusive, unconditional intention to do something, nothing prevents him from doing it, and yet he still does not do it?"<sup>45</sup> He says that this problem's being a problem results from theories of rationality according to which if the psychological antecedents of the act are all in order, then the act must *necessarily* follow. He quotes Mill as a typical example of the idea, who says that: "A volition is a moral effect, which follows the corresponding moral causes as certainly and invariably as physical effects follow their physical causes."<sup>46</sup> As I have made clear in the preceding pages, this is the kind of view that Searle set out to refute in the first place.

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<sup>45</sup> Searle, p. 219.

<sup>46</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, quoted in Searle, p. 220.

He then goes on to criticize Hare and Davidson's views on akrasia, but concentrates mostly on Davidson, because he is the more contemporary one. I have mentioned earlier that according to Hare, akratic actions are involuntary, and my strong belief is that this is not the case. I, having drawn inspiration from Aquinas, believe that it is within the power of the agent not to perform the akratic action, and although the agent's judgment may be clouded, the akratic action itself is performed voluntarily enough to the extent that it poses a genuine philosophical problem. So Searle, after mentioning Hare briefly, goes on to deal with Davidson. It is worth saying here that, contrary to what Searle believes, Davidson accepts that there are cases of akrasia in its strictest form, which Hare denies. Certainly, neither author (Hare and Davidson) acknowledges the existence of a gap in the Searlian sense, and both of them assent to some form of causal necessitation between the action and its psychological antecedents. This, of course is what Searle will claim to be the genuine problem. He relentlessly attacks the weak spots of Davidson's solution. In the previous section, I had suggested that what Davidson accomplished was merely to prove the logical possibility of the phenomenon of akrasia. He doesn't, for example, say that the agent who has the belief "all things considered x is better than y" also holds that "unconditionally, y is better than x". Searle criticizes this by saying that "if this is supposed to be an empirical hypothesis, it is an astonishingly ambitious claim made in the basis of little or no empirical evidence."<sup>47</sup> He also asserts that the solution of Davidson is in fact circular, for according to him all weak-willed actions are preceded by conditional judgments; and the argument for the thesis is that the actions were akratic, and therefore "must have been preceded by a conditional rather than an unconditional judgment". He then argues that Davidson has no basis in supposing the judgment preceding the akratic action *prima facie*, that is, conditional. His picture of what is really going on is that prior to the weak-willed action, the agent can

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<sup>47</sup> Searle, p. 225.

have, and often has an unconditional judgment; nevertheless, he did not act on it. According to Searle, it is not the case that “when you have made up your mind and you really want to do something, you necessarily do it”. He explains this by referring to his gap; he states again that intentional causation is in certain crucial respects unlike two colliding billiard balls moving each other, for between them there is no gap, but between thought and action there is a gap. He says that if this were not the case, if psychological antecedents necessarily caused the action, then we could sit back and wait for our intentions to act by themselves. His view of how akratic action happens is this: the rational agent A made up his mind to perform the action x, which he believes (and which really is) the most beneficial course of action for him. Then because he has a sense of infinite possibilities open to him at any given moment, he had been considering (consciously or semi-consciously) other possible options. When the time came to perform the action x, one of the alternatives, y, seemed more attractive to him and he performed y. So, as he had a reason for choosing to perform x, he also had a reason for performing y. These reasons by themselves did not necessitate action, that is, *whatever happened did not have to happen*, which is a proposition very reminiscent of Nozick. Rather, the agent A chose a reason and acted on it.

Searle’s thesis has the advantage of clarity, and his position regarding akrasia is stronger than those of Plato, Aristotle and Davidson. His advantage to Plato is that he does not solve the problem by merely referring to the impaired evaluative faculties of the incontinent man. He is in a better position than Aristotle, because he acknowledges the existence of akrasia in its strictest form, that is, the instances in which the agent has proper knowledge corresponding to the situation but acts contrary to it. As for Davidson, Searle’s account of rationality enables him to explain the phenomenon of akrasia in a more sensible fashion, as we have seen. But while deeming akrasia as a perfectly natural result of the

existence of the gap between the antecedents of an action and the action and therefore not a strange phenomenon after all, he does so by appealing to a really mysterious thing, namely, the gap itself. I for one, admit that there are genuine instances of akrasia, and it seems indeed a result of a gap between thought and action. But the way Searle puts it, it is the essence of chaos itself, so unpredictable is human behavior that we cannot appeal to underlying reasons of a behavior as sufficient causes. While I believe his notion of the gap has a good deal of truth in it, I also think that in trying to make sense of an akratic action, we have nothing else to consider than the antecedents of the action. Introducing the gap really seems to solve the equation, but in my opinion it merely compresses the unsolvable elements into itself. Nevertheless, Searle's solution seems more consistent than that of Plato, Aristotle and Davidson's, and; it has inspired me greatly by providing an alternative view for the solution of the problem, other than appealing to the agent's knowledge or the nature of his judgments. Let us now finally arrive at my solution of the problem.

#### My solution: Into the switch

Having discussed so many solutions, let us lay down the problems of each. Plato's solution requires the agent to have flawed evaluative faculties, that is, according to him the akrates is not able to determine which course of action will turn out to be the more beneficial for himself. While there may be such cases, it does not apply to akrasia in general; an agent may evaluate the alternatives perfectly, yet still choose the akratic alternative.

As for Aristotle, I don't consider his apparent (seeming) knowledge as knowledge proper; also if one does not have the particular set of knowledge corresponding to a

situation, I may as well consider him as unaware of the consequences. Neither Plato nor Aristotle can provide a solution for akrasia proper. However his other solution, the one that he dwelled on so briefly requires special attention. Why does an agent's reflecting on the knowledge corresponding to the situation and doing wrong at the same time strike us as "shocking", but his doing wrong while not reflecting upon the knowledge does not? This seems to suggest that Aristotle's line of thought is similar to mine as regards whether the agent's reflecting on the knowledge or not doing so really makes a difference. I will discuss this issue in detail later, let us for now continue.

As for Davidson, he does not do anything more than supplying a logical possibility for the problem, which is not very satisfying. Also, his solution is almost impossible to apply empirically, as Searle has pointed out.

Now Searle's solution is an entirely different matter, but before that I am going to define akratic action in my own terms; I shall call it akrasia proper, or akrasia in its strictest form. So this is my account of akrasia (or akratic behavior) in its strictest sense. There is a rational agent A, when confronted with a situation, having all available knowledge in hand, makes an unconditional judgment to do x. He is not hindered in any way, although, of course, he is influenced by many factors. He arrives at the conclusion to choose x (which, by the way is the best possible option for him and A knows that). Having chosen thus, the agent does y.

Now how on earth is this possible and plausible? To understand this, we must presuppose an account of free will, which in turn will enable us to view the difference between human action (which is free, that is, not causally determined) and other happenings in the physical world. Now why do we tend to view our actions as causally determined by external factors? To expand on Nozick's illusion which I mentioned when discussing his

views, let us recall Kant's transcendental illusion, as maintained by him in his first Critique. There he says that because pure reason can really *know* something, it falls into the illusion that it can know some stuff (like the existence of God etc.) which it can merely speculate on. Now when the idea behind transcendental illusion is applied into human action, we get an idea as to why we are so tempted to deem the factors contributing to an action as causal determinants of it. The idea is that, we really can find the causal determinants behind some events, and discern the laws that govern them. Take a basic chemical reaction for example. A carbon atom and two oxygen atoms react to form carbon dioxide. Now had the elements been different, they wouldn't have formed CO<sub>2</sub> but some entirely different molecule. If, however, a carbon atom and two oxygen atoms react in a controlled environment, they will always yield the same molecule, carbon dioxide. Now we, after having successfully determined the causes of an event, fall into the illusion that we can apply the same thing to human action. So *after*<sup>48</sup> having acted in a certain way, when we look back, we are tempted to view the elements which contributed to us acting in that certain way as what *caused* the action. But the main difference between free action and others is, as maintained by Nozick and Searle, that even if all the elements leading to the action were the same, the agent could still have acted differently. But then how is that possible? There should indeed be a gap between thought and action as Searle argues, but can't we shed more light into this "gap" to reveal its mysteries at least a bit? Well, by introducing "the switch", I will try to.

"The switch" I am talking about is between the reflective consciousness and non-reflective consciousness. To give brief examples, my non-reflective consciousness is my typing the words on a computer, without thinking about the act itself. My reflective

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<sup>48</sup>This evaluation's being after the action is of significant importance, for it is only after the action that we find the courage to try to discern the causal determinants of it. I believe there are, if any, very few cases of individuals who think like "OK, these and these conditions will causally determine my action in this and this way".

consciousness is active when I'm typing the words, and also thinking about the action of typing (thinking that I'm bored with typing, thinking that I can type faster, slower etc.). In conscious life, we constantly switch between the reflective and the non-reflective. The switch from reflective to non-reflective goes unnoticed by the agent, for evident reasons. A person decides to eat a hamburger, and when he starts eating it, if he switches from reflective to non-reflective consciousness, he does not realize that he has stopped reflecting on the act itself. Note that while performing the act of eating, the agent does not have an *empty* mind; he can think of something, he almost always has a feeling about the act (suppose he is enjoying the meal, because it is tasty). What is missing is thoughts related to the eating of that hamburger; the agent does it without thinking about it. To clarify matters further, what I mean by switching into the non-reflective is not pausing the thinking process altogether. The crucial thing is that you stop thinking about what you are doing and just do it. The switch from non-reflective to reflective consciousness is realized, you can almost hear the switch tick. Indeed this is a time for realizations, the agent questions the act he is (or was) doing and evaluates the changes that have occurred during the non-reflective period. As we shall see, the switch from the reflective to non-reflective is more important for the sake of my solution, so let me try to expand on how it happens. I believe that, after having weigh(t)ed reasons, and after having formed the intention to act in a certain way, immediately prior to the execution of the action, we switch into the non-reflective. For example, you wanted to water your flowers in the garden, you took all the steps leading to the forming of the intention, and you just got the hose and finished the task. When you look back, did you reflect on watering the flowers throughout the act, or did you just pay attention only enough to water them properly, while thinking about different things all the while? And wasn't there a difference between the consciousness of the person thinking that he should water the flowers, and the one actually watering them, regarding the act of

watering the flowers? I believe there is. For what if the person, with the hose in hand, going to the garden had seen something interesting on television when passing by it? Would he continue the action, or would he simply sit down and watch TV instead? It is really difficult, nay almost impossible to tell, for he is in the midst of executing an action, and as I shall argue later, not *fully* in control of what he is doing at that moment. By not being *fully* in control of what he is doing, I don't mean that his actions are involuntary like knee-jerks, or he is not in a similar condition to people with the alien hand syndrome. It is just that his actions cannot be determined by laws, like the results of a chemical experiment are determined. Had he been reflecting on the act the whole time, he would be fully in control, that is, we would be able to determine exactly what he would or would not do. So what if that very same person, while thinking that he should water the flowers, saw that same interesting thing on TV? What would he do then? Well if the flower watering was urgent, he would turn off the television and go do the watering, if it was not so urgent, he would put down the hose and watch TV instead. If he told us (sincerely) his reasons for following a course of action or another, I believe we would be able to discern exactly which course of action he would pursue. The agent with the former state of mind is not nearly that predictable however. Now it is apparent that there is a difference between the states the agent is in prior to performing the act, and while performing the act. The switch is merely the name I give to the transition from one state to another, namely, from reflective consciousness to the non-reflective, and vice versa. If it makes sense that we operate in (at least) two types of consciousness, then a transition must have occurred somewhere.

Also, I need to mention that the switch from reflective to non-reflective is not necessarily accompanied by a transition from rational to the non-rational. For what if, the agent, while going to water the flowers burst into dancing wildly, singing and laughing

hysterically all the while? How are we to explain this? I believe that there is in this case a transition from the rational to the non-rational, as well as a transition from the reflective to the non-reflective. In the case I mentioned earlier, however, the only transition is from the reflective into the non-reflective, and this transition (which I call the switch) is not accompanied by a transition from the rational to the non-rational. Also, I believe I have made it clear that the akrates retains his rationality. To use Nozick's terminology, he acts within the sphere of his weigh(t)ed reasons. The case of the dancing man is different; his behavior is not akratic, but erratic. His action need not have ties to his weigh(t)ed reasons, and if it does, I believe it is coincidental. Please also recall that the definition of my "akrasia in its strictest sense" requires the agent to retain his rationality.

So how does the switch provide a solution for the problem of akrasia? To clarify things further, I really do agree with Searle in his view that there is a gap between inner states and action. Inner states (knowledge, deliberation, choice, intention, and judgment) do not always translate into action, and sometimes, they just don't translate into action. Now remember that I had mentioned, while discussing Aquinas, a sentence that impressed and inspired me. Aquinas says that man is the master of his actions due to his being able to deliberate about them. He mentions "the ability to deliberate". Let's dismiss the cases where man is not able to deliberate about his actions, like a man experiencing a nervous breakdown. What about when man retains the ability to deliberate on his actions, but just does not do so, due to the nature of the consciousness he is experiencing? Suppose that agent there is an agent A, who is about to decide between having or not having another glass of wine. He is permitted to have one glass of wine every evening, but if he drinks a second glass, he will suffer liver damage, due to some rare disease he has. Let us also suppose that he is not addicted to alcohol, but enjoys drinking wine. In addition, although we know that

an agent almost never has only two options available to him, let us suppose so for the clarity of the argument. A thinks in light of all knowledge available, which is more than enough, forms a judgment that he shouldn't drink this glass of wine under any circumstances, and, when the moment of action finally arrives, he, at the same time holding the judgment that he shouldn't drink the wine, "switches" from the reflective to the non-reflective, that is, he stops deliberating about what he is doing. Being in such a mental state, he takes the wine offered to him and drinks it. His formed judgment will only become active when he re-switches to reflective consciousness, and he will probably end up saying "I shouldn't have drunk that last glass of wine". Of course, while he had better reasons not to drink the wine, he also had reasons to drink the wine, for here we are talking about a man who enjoys his wine. To remember Nozick, the agent A is operating within the framework which he has formed by assigning weights to various reasons; he did not all of a sudden jump on a boat to Canada with the hopes of hunting seals and harvest their furs, he simply drank the wine. What he can do can never be entirely chaotic (as long as he retains his rationality), and as is clear from the example, is not causally determined, for he most certainly could have not drunk the wine. What I argue for is that, if there was always a "What am I doing?" accompanying our actions, then our actions could be determined by laws. Given the situation that a rational agent is in, we could with exact precision know in which way he would act, and akrasia would be impossible. But my belief is that this is not the case. An agent does not always switch to the non-reflective prior to the execution of a decision, but when I think about it, I believe that most of the time, he does.

To see how switch happens, we only need look back and examine our previous mental states. By doing this, we can recall the time when we were reflectively and non-reflectively conscious, and that shift which happens in between them is what I call the

switch. Of course the business of looking back is a tricky one, for only by *reflecting* on our previous mental states can we see that we were non-reflectively conscious of an action at some point. Also, I would like to emphasize that an agent who is non-reflectively conscious does not act in a random and chaotic manner. He retains the weights he had previously assigned to various reasons. Remember the example; the agent A, who drank the wine when he shouldn't have, actually likes wine. It is just that the agent who does something without actively thinking about it is not *fully* in control of his actions, and what I mean by that is his actions are unpredictable to the extent that they cannot be determined by a law, there is always the possibility of his acting differently.

I believe that the switch is a consistent solution, for who can argue against that a person who is (although in a very brief moment) not thinking about what he is doing can act against his best judgment. This solution is also very close to what Aristotle asserted while discussing *akrasia*. Remember that according to him, an agent's holding a belief and at the same time acting contrary to it is not shocking, as long as he does not reflect on the knowledge corresponding to what he is doing. Not only this sort of thing is possible, I believe that it is almost always the case in proper cases of *akrasia*. You form a judgment, set out the act, yet switch into the non-reflective prior to action, and act against (or not according to) that judgment.

The difference between Searle's solution and mine is that he makes use of this "perceived possibility of other options". I agree with him on that we, most of the time, really have that kind of feeling that seemingly endless alternatives seem open to us. I just don't think this has a lot to do with akratic action.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge a sort of a gap between thought and action, and in my opinion, it is because of “the switch”. I also strongly believe that the switch can explain most cases of akrasia, especially those I deem “akrasia proper”.

Now questions may arise as to whether actions done non-reflectively can be said to be free, or voluntary. I answer that, of course they are, for even when just doing something, we retain the ability not to do it.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have tried to provide a consistent solution to the problem of akrasia, namely the question of how is it possible for a rational agent to choose the less beneficial, or harmful course of action, provided that he has proper knowledge of the situation in hand. In doing that I have evaluated the solutions of many philosophers, starting from the ancients and finishing with the contemporaries.

As regards the ancients, I have seen that their solutions were concerned mostly with the agent's knowledge. Plato argued that the evaluative faculties of the akrates are deficient, and Aristotle said that the incontinent man had the universal premise pertaining to his action, but not the particular premise. Or, he went on, akrates looks like he has the knowledge corresponding to his situation, but in fact he doesn't. Although Aristotle provided something very inspirational when he discussed the agent's holding a belief and reflecting or not reflecting upon it, this was not one of his main solutions. So I have argued that none of their main solutions are satisfactory, for there can and there are cases of akratic action where the agent has perfect knowledge corresponding to the situation.

Before jumping 2000 years forward, I have evaluated the views of St. Augustine and Aquinas on will, both for the sake of bridging the temporal gap, and for providing a better ground for the discussion of akrasia, which is frequently translated into English as "weakness of will". The view of both saints is that the will is a faculty of the human mind which facilitates the conversion of inner states into action. The most important contribution

provided by them is that in trying to deem an individual culpable for his sins, they argue that akratic action is free rather than unfree, which is something I must presuppose for the sake of the discussion.

I then went on to consider the views of Davidson, Nozick and Searle. Davidson contributes to the discussion by providing a good definition of akrasia, which I deem later “akrasia in its strictest sense”. He also divorces akrasia from morality, in saying that the “better course of action” need not be, and is not in some cases (cases as numerous as moral cases) “the morally better” course. Indeed I wholeheartedly agree with him on that the problem is not a moral one in essence, although moral instances of it can be provided. Apart from these, he proves the logical possibility of akrasia, which is no small accomplishment, but which is by no means enough.

My discussion of Nozick focused on his account of free will, which is a really strong one. Nozick provides a theory of free action where the free agent is not causally determined by external laws, nor does he behave in a chaotic or an arbitrary manner which provides no more dignity to human beings than being causally determined. He argues that although influenced by certain external (and internal, for that matter) factors, it is the free agent, not those factors who make the decision in the end, and given any situation, the agent could have acted differently.

The last philosopher I discussed before providing my solution is John Searle, who maintains that there is nothing inexplicable with an agent’s choosing the worse course of action, but the problem lies within the theories of agency which insist that thought immediately leads to action. His view is that there is a “gap” between thought and action, and this gap is nothing other than the freedom of the will. His idea is that, thoughts, beliefs and desires are never sufficient to *cause* an action, had it been so, we could sit back and

enjoy the view while we watch our thoughts, desires and beliefs *cause* us to act in a certain way. If there was not a gap between thought and action, that would be the case, but then again, the gap is real, he says.

Having discussed all these thinkers, I tried to provide my own solution by shedding more light onto Searle's gap. Having drawn inspiration from Aristotle and Aquinas, I argued that when we are not reflectively conscious of our actions, it is possible for us not to act according to our best judgment, and this is usually the case in akratic action. I named the transition from the reflective to non-reflective "the switch" and furthered my argument by maintaining that an agent who constantly asks himself the question "what am I doing?" can never fail to act on his better judgment; however this is not the case; we almost always switch into the non-reflective immediately prior to the execution of an action.

So all in all, akrasia turned out to be a problem concerning some theories of rational agency. I sincerely believe that the theories of free agency as advocated by thinkers like Nozick and Searle enable us to have a better view regarding human action, and I think that we can learn much more by questioning deeper that "gap" Searle has presented us. I tried to do my part, but there is a great deal yet to be understood and the field remains an interesting one by all means.

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