

Robinson
Richard Robinson, "Aristotle on
Akrasia", in Otfried Höffe (ed.)
Die Nikomachische Ethik. Berlin:
Akademie Verlag (1995).

Richard Robinson

Aristotle on Akrasia (VII 1-11)

Aristotle asks himself in Book VII of his *Nicomachean Ethics* how a man can do what he knows to be wrong. Doing what one knows to be wrong is what he calls *akrasia*. On the one hand, it seems evident that *akrasia* occurs from time to time. On the other hand, Socrates declared that knowledge ought to rule in the soul and not be dragged about like a slave. He concluded from this authority of knowledge that in reality *akrasia* never occurs. Whenever we seem to see a man doing what he knows to be wrong, the truth is that the man does not know that his act is wrong; he is in error about the right and the wrong. This constitutes a difficulty or *aporia*. The common sense view that we sometimes do what we know to be wrong appears to contradict the Socratic view, itself also very convincing, that knowledge is commanding.

How does Aristotle resolve this problem? Evidently he did not write nearly a whole book on *akrasia* in order to deny that it ever occurs. On the contrary, he always retained the common view that we sometimes do what we know to be wrong. This is probably what he is saying, though not without a certain ambiguity, in the passage where he first introduces the Socratic thesis, when he writes (1145b28) that this doctrine obviously goes against appearances and that the akratic clearly does not think so until he is in the passion – meaning, I suppose, that the akratic does not think that his act is permissible until he is in the passion.

But what is the meaning of the mysterious words that come between the two phrases which I have just translated: "it being necessary to ask about the passion, if it comes about from ignorance, what sort of ignorance is involved"? Are they to be

interpreted by reference to the Socratic thesis or by reference to the explanation of *akrasia* which Aristotle is going to develop in what follows? If we refer them to the Socratic thesis, we suppose that Aristotle is meaning to say to Socrates: "Since you hold that what we call *akrasia* is really ignorance, you ought to have told us what kind of ignorance we have here." If we refer them to the view which Aristotle is about to set out we suppose that Aristotle is here saying, though so succinctly as to be almost incomprehensible, that he is going to satisfy Socrates by saying that there is a certain ignorance in *akrasia*, but at the same time he is going to distinguish the nature of this ignorance so as to preserve the doctrine that the acratik knows that his act is wrong.

Aristotle rejects as unacceptable that solution of the difficulty which consists in saying that the acratik does not *know* that his act is wrong but only *believes* that it is (1145b31ff.). Aristotle takes this to mean that belief involves a less strong and sure conviction than does knowledge and that it is the weakness of the acratik's conviction which makes it possible for him to disobey it. Aristotle rejects this solution on the ground that the man whose conviction is weak is pardoned, whereas the acratik is blameworthy. He seems to think that this solution amounts to another way of denying that *akrasia* in the proper sense can occur.

In Chapter 3 [VII 5], Aristotle returns to this supposed solution and rejects it again, but now for a different reason. He now declares (1146b24ff.) that the distinction between knowledge and belief does not necessarily involve any difference of certainty or conviction. Some who only believe are as certain as some others who know. With the humour that occasionally lightens the sombre theme of this book, Aristotle instances Heraclitus as a man who was perfectly certain although he did not know.

These two ways of rejecting the solution are consistent with each other. One of them attacks the premiss. The other attacks the inference, implying that it is an *ignoratio elenchi*.

Finally Aristotle gives us the four solutions which he considers correct. The first depends on distinguishing the time when we possess a certain piece of knowledge but are not

using it from the time when we both possess and are using it. The latter is also called *theôrauta*, contemplating. Aristotle gives no example of what he has in mind; but no doubt he would have accepted the following. As I begin this sentence, you possess but are not using the knowledge that Greece is an arid land; as I end it, you are using it as well as possessing it, because I have recalled it to your minds. This is part of his great doctrine of potentiality and act, although he uses the word *energei* only twice in this chapter. To say that a man knows something is not to say that he is always thinking of it, nor that he is thinking of it now. Aristotle appears to mean that the acratik knows that his act is wrong in that he *possesses* this knowledge, but he can do the act because he is not at the time *using* this knowledge, not contemplating it. I hold that Aristotle accepts this solution and believes it to contain virtually everything necessary for the explanation of *akrasia*, since it shows how the acratik both knows and does not know that his act is wrong. He knows it, in that it is part of his permanent and general intellectual equipment. He does not know it, in that he does not use or contemplate it at the moment when he needs to do so, the moment of his acratik act. However, Aristotle adds three more solutions.

The second of these four solutions consists in introducing his doctrine of the practical syllogism. According to Aristotle the motion of the human animal is sometimes governed by a syllogism. When such a motion constitutes a *praxis*, that is an action in the proper sense, it is perhaps always governed by a syllogism. Aristotle is never very precise in explaining this syllogism. For example, its conclusion sometimes seems to be an action, but at other times a statement. It is certain enough, however, that the premiss has two parts, one of which is *katholou* or universal and the other *kath' hekaston* or particular. The universal premiss gives us a practical principle, such as "Every sweet thing should be tasted". It is expressed sometimes by means of the verb *dei* or the verbal adjective in *-teon*, but sometimes also by a simple descriptive phrase such as "Dry things are good for every man", or even "Everything sweet is pleasant".

Aristotle's second solution consists in pointing out that it is

possible for an agent, while *possessing* both premisses, to *use* only the universal premiss. Such an agent may do an act forbidden by the syllogism. Yet he possesses the forbidding principle, and therefore it is correct to say that he knows that the act is wrong.

Aristotle adds that one can distinguish even more finely. Since the universal premiss will often contain two terms, such as, for example, "man" and "dry" in the premiss that "Dry things are good for every man", it will need as it were two particular premisses to particularise each of these universal terms. Hence it can happen that an agent particularises one of these terms but not the other. This agent will use both the universal premiss and a part of the particular premiss, and still not do the act which the syllogism prescribes.

We see that the second solution as well as the first consists in showing that the acratist both knows and does not know that his act is wrong. He knows it in that he possesses the principle in virtue of which his act is wrong. He does not know it in that he does not use this principle, or he does use it but he does not use the particular premiss that would put the principle into action, or he even uses part of the particular premiss but not the whole of it.

Let us pass to the third solution. It is again a distinction, a subdivision. Aristotle now subdivides his "possessing but not using". A sleeping man and a waking man may both possess the practical principle. But, says Aristotle, the sleeping man possesses it "in a manner other than those just mentioned" (1147a10); he "both possesses and does not possess it in a way". Aristotle adds that such is the condition not merely of the sleeping but also of the mad and the drunk and the acratist. He assimilates *akrasia* to medical cases. (His ethics has a tendency to turn into medicine.) The acratist can even utter the words which express the knowledge and yet not be using it. For a moment Aristotle almost seems to want to say that during his act the acratist simply does not know; for he uses the expression *isati d' oupō* ("they do not yet know"). At any rate, this third solution amounts to saying that during his act the acratist possesses the knowledge that it is wrong only in a most attenuated way.

Thus we find Aristotle tending for the third time to deny that the acratist fully knows the nature of his act while he is committing it. He seems to tend to believe with Socrates that knowledge cannot be outraged, and that it can be disobeyed only when it is not fully present. If we think, as some interpreters do, that in the end Aristotle is going to present *akrasia* as involving throughout perfect knowledge that the act is wrong, then this third solution at any rate is absolutely absurd and irrelevant. There remains, however, the following substantial difference between Socrates and Aristotle, that Socrates, as far as we know, never entertained the idea that the acratist's state of knowledge might change importantly during the course of the transaction, in that he knew the nature of his act perfectly both before and after but not during the commission of it.

Let us turn to the fourth and last solution. Here is no further distinction of senses of the word "know". Aristotle begins by expanding somewhat the nature of the practical syllogism. He brings out now the aspect of necessity in this syllogism. Once the premisses have become one, he says, it is necessary, *anankē*, to act, to realise the conclusion at once. What a paradoxical thesis! And what a very Socratic thesis! I think it the most Socratic sentence in this fundamentally Socratic chapter. Even if we add, as Aristotle does not, that the agent knows the two premisses and is thoroughly convinced of them, the sentence remains extraordinary. In proceeding to illustrate it he greatly weakens it, for he says now that the act is necessary "if one has the ability and is not prevented" (1147a30); but it remains pretty Socratic and pretty extreme.

What was his purpose in introducing it? Surely not in order to go on to say that one can do an act while possessing and fully using a syllogism that forbids that act. It is now very improbable that the fourth solution is finally going to reject the Socratic doctrine. I believe on the contrary that he introduces this practical necessity in order to prove that the acratist must do the wrong act because of a syllogism which imposes this wrong act upon him. For he speaks now of the complicated case where four things are present at once in the soul. (1) First, there is in the soul a universal premiss which forbids the man to "taste", where to "taste" is probably to commit the acratist

act, while the phrase, "there is in the soul", *enê(i)* (1147a32), probably means that he possesses this premiss but is not using it. (2) Second, there is also in the soul another universal premiss to the effect that everything sweet is pleasant; and this premiss is actual, *energei*. (3) Third, there is also the particular premiss that this thing is sweet, a premiss which can set the second universal premiss into action. (4) Fourth, there happens to be a desire, *epithymia*, in the soul.

What according to Aristotle is the result of this combination of four things in the soul? He seems to indicate three consequences. First, the first universal premiss orders the man to shun this thing; second, desire carries him away; and, third, it thus results that the acratice act accords in a way with a *logos* and an opinion being opposed to the correct *logos* only accidentally, and not in itself.

This short and vague account makes us ask the following questions. What exactly does the first universal premiss say (for Aristotle does not tell us)? What is the particular premiss belonging to this first universal premiss (for he does not say that either)? And is the first and right syllogism completely actual in the soul of the acratice at the time of his act, or is it not?

I answer as follows. In the other three solutions, and also in the early sentences of this fourth solution, it seemed clear enough that Aristotle was thinking that at the time of his act the acratice is not using in complete actuality every part of the right syllogism. I will suppose, therefore, that here too he thinks that the acratice is not using every part of the right syllogism, provided that the text allows me to do so. Does the text allow me? I see only one phrase that has any appearance of forbidding it, namely the phrase *hê men oun legei pheugein touto*, "the [first universal premiss] tells [him] to shun this" (1147a34). But it is not necessary to hold that by these words Aristotle intends to tell us that he is now supposing the right syllogism to be completely actual. The word *legei* is vague enough to mean no more than that the right universal premiss *tends* to forbid the act, and *would* forbid it if joined to its own particular premiss in actuality.

It follows from this interpretation that the particular premiss belonging to the right universal premiss is not the same as

the one belonging to the wrong universal premiss. For the latter particular premiss is actual in the acratice's soul. Hence, if the two particular premisses were the same, the right syllogism would be actual in his soul, which on this interpretation it is not.

The particular premiss of the right syllogism is not the same as the particular premiss of the wrong syllogism. What then, is the particular premiss of the right syllogism? We cannot tell. We can only conjecture. Similarly, therefore, we can only conjecture what is the universal premiss of the right syllogism, which also Aristotle does not tell us.

The fourth solution continues with a remark about animals, and why they cannot be acratice (1147b4). I confess that I do not see the relevance of this. Possibly there is something hidden in this sentence which would disprove my interpretation if it were revealed.

However that may be, my interpretation is strongly supported by the next phrase, "how the ignorance is dissipated and the acratice resumes his knowledge" (1147b6). For this phrase undoubtedly implies that some kind of ignorance exists during the acratice act; and one can hardly suppose that it refers merely to the first three solutions. It must imply that this ignorance also occurs in the circumstances supposed in the solution which stands nearest to it in the text, and that is the fourth solution.

The next sentence begins with the words "Since the last premiss" (1147b9). It seems a little odd to talk of a last premiss when there are only two. Perhaps Aristotle is thinking of a sorites or chain of syllogisms, such as could easily be constructed out of examples which he gave earlier (1147a6-7). In such a chain there would be more than two premisses altogether. In any case this "last" premiss would be a particular premiss; and Aristotle now tells us that the acratice while "in the passion" either does not have this premiss or has it only as the drunk has the verses of Empedocles. This is another affirmation of the Socratic thesis that some kind of ignorance occurs during the acratice act; but it is not a strong piece of evidence for the interpretation of the fourth solution, because now, by mentioning the drunken man reciting Empedocles,

Aristotle refers us back to the third solution; and he could have forgotten by now the intervening fourth solution.

Aristotle does not say explicitly what the man will do if he has both syllogisms completely actual in his mind, nor whether such a state of mind is possible.

Before beginning his discussion of *akrasia*, Aristotle had made some remarks on the character that the discussion ought to have (1145b2-7). These five lines are neither the only nor the longest passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle teaches us what sorts of study ethics and politics are or ought to be. But they illuminate best the method that he tried to follow and the result that he wished to attain. He wishes to establish, if possible, all received opinions, *endoxa*. If that is not possible, he wishes to establish as many as he can of the more important received opinions. He limits himself to the removal of difficulties, and leaves standing every opinion that he is not compelled to reject. He will accomplish this design in three stages. First, he will list the opinions. That is to "posit the appearances" (1145b3); and he performs it in the last part of the first chapter of Book VII [VII 2]. Secondly he will raise the difficulties, *tas aporias*. He does that in the second chapter [VII 3]. Finally, he will resolve these difficulties, if possible without rejecting any received opinion; in any case he will reject as few of these opinions as he can. He does this in Chapters 3 to 10 [VII 4-11; 1146b5-1152a5], which constitute the whole of the rest of his discussion of *akrasia*, and by far the largest part of it.

It is a very modest programme. No grandiose construction. No metaphysic of morals. Aristotle does not look down on common sense. On the contrary, he subjects himself to common sense almost entirely. He thinks of his work as justifying rather than as superseding common sense. He ventures only to raise certain "unpleasantnesses", *dyscherê*, and to make a few alterations in order to remove them.

He carries out this programme in regard to *akrasia*. He notes and accepts the common opinion that *akrasia* occurs from time to time. That is to say, from time to time men do acts which they know to be wrong, owing to some passion. Then they are "ecstatic of reason", as he puts it once; and this

is a blameworthy state. But he notes also the opinion, maintained in the most striking way by Socrates, that the knowledge a man possesses cannot be overcome, or dragged about like a slave, by anything else in his soul. The words in which he here reports Socrates (1145b24) remind us strongly of the thesis that *epistêmê* (knowledge) is something that leads (*hêgemonikon*) and rules (*archikon*), which Plato had made his "Socrates" maintain in his *Protagoras*, 352 B. Aristotle accepts this opinion too. What he does not accept is the view that the Socratic thesis is inconsistent with the ordinary opinion that *akrasia* occurs from time to time. He confines himself to showing, by means of his doctrines of potentiality and of the syllogism, that the two propositions are consistent, so that we are not obliged to reject either of them. He removes the difficulty and leaves the received opinions standing. That is in his view a sufficient demonstration (1145b7). For the solution of the difficulty is a discovery (1146b7). No more extraordinary discovery is to be looked for in this matter.

Objections to this interpretation

Several objections have been made against this interpretation. In the first place, it is objected that, if Aristotle had explained *akrasia* as I have said he did, he would have left unexplained the most essential and most paradoxical kind of *akrasia*. For pure essential *akrasia* occurs, it is said, when a man does wrong although he understands perfectly and completely, at the very moment of doing the act, that it is wrong. That, precisely, is the essence of *akrasia*, and also the only kind of *akrasia* that needs explaining. But on my interpretation it appears that the only kind of *akrasia* that needs explaining is precisely the only kind that Aristotle does not explain. For on my view every one of the four solutions amounts to saying that the akratic, at the time of his act, does not have fully in mind all the parts of the practical syllogism that ought to govern it. And, it is said, one cannot believe that Aristotle was so stupid.

My answer consists of two remarks. I remark first that everyone agrees that the first three solutions consist in saying

that, in one way or another, the acratia does not keep all the parts of the syllogism active in his mind throughout. If then it is true, as the objection declares, that this sort of *akrasia* does not need to be explained, Aristotle has been in any case pretty stupid in introducing these three solutions. In fact, these interpreters are embarrassed by these solutions, because in their opinion they do not bear on the real question. They are obliged to use the word "dialectically", and to declare that Aristotle is here speaking dialectically and when he speaks dialectically he is not serious. But what good reason could Aristotle have had to introduce into his discussion a page that was not serious? I think we do better to suppose that Aristotle is serious in his first three solutions as well as in his last. And from this supposition it follows that Aristotle himself did not consider it superfluous to explain the case in which the practical syllogism is wholly present in the mind of the man who does a wrong act. I believe on the contrary that he would rather have been stupid if he had tried to do that, because this case does not occur. It is a wholly imaginary case, whereas Aristotle wished to explain realities. It does not happen that a man sets himself to consider, in its totality and all its parts, an argument forbidding him to do a certain act, while at the same time he yields to a strong desire and does as the desire wishes. The human mind is not adapted to do two things at the same time while giving full attention to each. During the crisis of his passion the acratia can hardly even remember the words that would express the argument. If by exception he does still remember the words, he does so only like a drunken man reciting verses by Empedocles without understanding them, as Aristotle remarks.

I turn to the second objection to my interpretation. It is in a way an attempt to revive part of the first objection, by saying that, however absurd it may seem to us to set out three solutions that are not serious, Aristotle himself tells us that he has done this, when he introduces his fourth solution with the word *physikós*. The fourth solution is indeed described as *physikós*. We are told that this implies that the first three failed to reach the nature or *physis* of the thing. And this in turn implies that we must not interpret the fourth solution as introducing

once more the feeble idea that the acratia does not have the syllogism wholly present in his mind.

I reply as follows. When we read in the works of Aristotle the eleven cases of *physikós theôreîn* etc. listed by Bonitz (1870), we find that a paragraph or a thought is sometimes called *physikós* by Aristotle in order to mark some very general difference between this thought and the preceding ones, although it concerns the same topic. The preceding thoughts are sometimes contrasted as *logikós* or *katholou*, though not in our chapter. We find also, I admit, that Aristotle sometimes seems to be suggesting that the *physikós* thought is a better thought and provides a point of view from which the topic appears more distinctly. But I do not find that *physikós* thought is *always* better than *logikós* thought according to Aristotle. I find rather that he meant that *physikós* thought is better when one is dealing with physics, and that he sometimes wished to reproach certain philosophers for having treated physics rather as philosophers than as physicists, a criticism which his own eminence as a physicist gave him the right to make. I do not find him thinking that *physikós* thought is also the best in inquiries other than physical. It seems probable to me that Aristotle would have held that, just as it can be dangerous to trust to *logikós* thinking in physics, so it can be dangerous to trust to *physikós* thinking in logic.

In our chapter the first three solutions are *logikós*, though Aristotle does not say so. They give us no information about nature (though the third has much appearance of doing so). Instead of this, they offer us logical distinctions, between having and using, between the two premisses, and finally between two levels of having. And that is what counts in this matter. To explain how a man can do what he knows to be wrong, although knowledge is powerful or even omnipotent, we need, not facts about human nature, but a logical division of the sense of the word "know".

Aristotle adds a *physikós* explanation, not in order to get down at last to the question, but rather to satisfy those unfortunate persons who cannot distinguish philosophy from psychology. If you ask me, he says in effect, for information about the acratia's state of mind, I will give you some: the acra-

tic often has in mind a kind of *logos*, a syllogism of sorts, not indeed the one he ought to have, but another one, favourable to his act. Though Aristotle does not say so, I think I hear him adding under his breath: "But this pretty psychological story has nothing to do with our question, the answer to which still resides in the logical distinctions I have drawn between the different kinds of knowing." We note that a little later he refers us to "the physiologists", if we wish to know "how the ignorance is dissipated and the acratia resumes his knowledge" (1147b6-9). That is physics, not ethics.

I pass to the third objection. We have been told in Book III, chapter 1, that an act is involuntary, *akôn*, if the agent does not know all the particulars of his act. Let us take the case of Oedipus. Aristotle seems to be telling us here that Oedipus killed his father *akôn*, in that he did not know that the man he killed was his father. The objector infers from this that on my interpretation the acratia act is involuntary, because the absence of the minor premiss is the absence of the knowledge of a necessary particular. But an involuntary act is innocent, whereas the acratia act is blameworthy. A contradiction! The objector proposes to remove the contradiction by denying my view that Aristotle maintains throughout that in *akrasia* the important syllogism is not fully present.

I reply as follows. Oedipus' ignorance about the man he killed was not the ignorance of a moment or merely of the last degree. Oedipus did not, as soon as the man was dead, come to his senses and exclaim: "I have killed my father". It was not until many years afterwards that he learned for the first time that the man was his father. Thus his parricide was genuinely involuntary. He had never known the important fact. The acratia, on the contrary, knows the important fact perfectly well before he commits his act, and he will know it again as soon as the act is done and the desire assuaged. He *has* this essential knowledge, in the technical sense that Aristotle gives to *echein*, throughout the duration of his act, and before it, and after it. He also *uses* it, *chrêtai*, before and after his act. During his act he does not use it. He is blameworthy nevertheless, because he *has* the knowledge all the time.

I pass to the fourth objection, the last objection against my

view that I shall mention. This is drawn from the words which Bywater gives us as follows: *ou gar tês kyriôs epistêmês einai dokousês parousês ginetai to pathos, oud' hautê perikelletai dia to pathos, alla tês aisthêtikês* (1147b15-17). Bywater mentions no other importantly different reading. *Tês aisthêtikês* what? *Tês aisthêtikês* [*epistêmês*], undoubtedly, although this phrase never occurs and virtually contradicts Aristotle's epistemology. Also without doubt, this "aesthetic" or perceptual knowledge is what the minor premiss gives us. The sentence opposes this perceptual knowledge to some other knowledge which is *kyriôs*. Apparently we must conclude that *kyriôs* knowledge is what is given in the major premiss, that is to say, the moral principle which the acratia disobeys. It follows that the first part of the sentence tells us that "the passion", that is the acratia act, does not occur in the presence of the major premiss. Hence it occurs only when the major is absent. Hence it is the absence of the *major* premiss which explains *akrasia* and makes it possible, not the absence of the *minor* as my interpretation maintains.

I reply that the reasoning is correct; but I conclude, not that on account of this one strange sentence we should abandon the view we have collected in reading the whole of the rest of the chapter, but that the text of these strange lines is corrupt and requires emendation. There are two further reasons for thinking that this text is corrupt. (1) The words *dokousês parousês* have a suspicious sound. (2) The sentence as it stands contradicts itself. We have seen that its first part means that *akrasia* is caused by the absence of the major premiss. But its second part denies this: *oud' hautê perikelletai dia to pathos*. That is, *akrasia* does not cause absence of the major premiss. It cannot achieve that. It can only render the minor premiss inactive. The major, which is the real knowledge, remains unmoved during the acratia act.

How are we to emend? I know nothing better than Stewart's (1892) *periginetai*: *ou gar tês kyriôs epistêmês einai dokousês periginetai to pathos*. "The passion does not overcome what seems to be the real knowledge; it is not this which is dragged about by the passion but the perceptual knowledge." With this emendation the sentence no longer conflicts with my interpretation but confirms it.

Criticism of Aristotle on akrasia

It has been objected to Aristotle that his account of *akrasia* tells us nothing about the moral struggle, the struggle that a man wages sometimes against a desire and for a moral principle. This is true. But it was not the intention of Aristotle to do so. What he wished to do here was to analyse how one can act contrary to one's principles, whether this act occurs after a struggle or not. He notices elsewhere that such a struggle is possible (1102b17).

A second objection is that this account explains only one of the two forms of *akrasia*. Aristotle says later (1150b19ff.) that there are two sorts of acratice men, the impetuous, who are carried away by the passion because they have not deliberated, and the weak, who deliberate but, owing to the passion, do not abide by the result of their deliberation. My teacher, Sir David Ross, has written that Aristotle's account of *akrasia* explains at best only the *akrasia* of impetuous men, not also that of weak men. I take him to imply that, whereas according to Aristotle one commits an acratice act only when some part of the relevant practical syllogism is not completely actual in the mind, in weak *akrasia* everything is perfectly actual because the man has deliberated.

I think that this objection fails. The weak acratice has indeed deliberated about everything; but it does not follow that the passion cannot still drive out of his mind the premiss which was in it for a time. Aristotle's view is, I think, as follows. The weak acratice deliberates and actualises the whole of the practical syllogism. But his passion, when it becomes strong, drives some part of the syllogism out of his mind for a moment; and during that moment the acratice commits his act. As to the impetuous acratice, since he never has deliberated, the question how he can do an act that he knows to be wrong does not arise in his case. He has never known that the act is wrong, because he has never realised the minor premiss, because he has not reflected. He is acratice nevertheless, provided that he knows the major premiss, the moral principle, that ought to have operated here.

A third objection, also to be found in Sir David Ross' book

(1949, 224), is that the cause of *akrasia* lies not in lack of knowledge but in weakness of will. It is held sometimes that the Greeks could not explain *akrasia* because they lacked the concept of the will. In rejecting this objection, I make use of an idea drawn from Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949), namely that weakness of will is not the cause but the form of *akrasia*. *Akrasia* is not the effect of weakness of will; it is one of the kinds of weakness of will. To say that *akrasia* is a weakness of will is to explain it neither more nor less than one explains a crow by saying that it is a bird. Such an explanation is certainly worth giving; but this does not entail that the sort of explanation given by Aristotle is either false or superfluous or even inferior. The same thing admits of several kinds of explanation.

A fourth objection seems better founded. It is necessary to criticise questions beginning with the word "How?" or "Pōs?", "How does a man with the right view act acraticeally?" (1145b21). The question "How?" is perfectly proper in practice. "How can I get to Lyons? – By taking a train or a plane, sir." "How do you do that conjuring trick, sir? – Excuse me, madam; it is a secret." These "How's?" are perfectly correct. They are requests to be told the means which someone uses to achieve a certain end. But in intellectual enquiries, for example when one asks how a man can act contrary to the right, it is a different matter. Here we are not supposing that the acratice possesses some wonderful secret which we want to extract from him. We are not supposing that the acratice has at his disposal some superior means of doing wrong. We are simply supposing that the acratice cannot do wrong. "How can he?" is a way of saying "He cannot".

I suggest that this expression is ill conceived, and that it is a somewhat insincere way of maintaining that *akrasia* cannot occur. If someone asks you how a man can do what he knows to be wrong, I suggest that you had better reply as follows: "Experience shows clearly that it is possible to do what one knows to be wrong; so why do you suppose that it is impossible?" By this manoeuvre you will make it clear that it is not you but he who ought to give an explanation. For it is he and not you who has asserted a thesis that contradicts experience.

Therefore it is he who ought to justify himself. He ought to give you some reason to believe his paradox. If he does not, there is no reason in the world why you should accept it. But he does not. On the contrary, by disguising his thesis as a question beginning with "How can?", he succeeds in making you think that it is you who are the debtor and the unreasonable man.

Had Aristotle any reason to believe the paradox that a man cannot do what he knows to be wrong? Yes: he believed, like Socrates, that knowledge is stronger than anything else in the mind of a man. "When knowledge is present, thought Socrates, it is an awful thing that anything else should master it and drag it about like a slave" (1145b23). Like Socrates, Aristotle believed that knowledge is always commanding. Socrates concluded that *akrasia* does not occur. Aristotle tries to show that *akrasia* can nevertheless occur, not without raising certain suspicions. But this is too troublesome a way of attaining the end. The simple and good way is to deny the thesis that knowledge is always commanding. It is evident in our experience that it is not always so. If we do this, we no longer need any question beginning with "How can?" We need this kind of question only when we deny some fact of experience.

Perhaps you will agree with what I have just said and still demand some explanation of *akrasia*. For perhaps you will say that it is not enough to submit to experience and recognise the fact of *akrasia*; we must also understand this strange and repellent fact; we must see something of its place in the totality of human nature. You are right. We must do so; and it will probably be an endless task. For the present, however, I offer you only one thought, a thought which, if true, must help us a little to understand *akrasia*. It is the thought that moral principles are not discoveries but resolutions. When we adopt a moral principle, we are not deciding how the world is made, but how we are going to act. The principle that one ought not to kill, for example, does not reveal the composition of the world, nor the orders of a god. It takes a stand with regard to the world. The adoption of it constitutes a sort of generalised choice.

If this is so, it follows that when a man acts acracially he

acts not contrary to a known fact, so to speak, but contrary to a decision he has taken. *Akrasia* is not like going through a wall by means of a door which one knows does not exist. It is more like visiting Cologne after having decided not to visit Germany.

These considerations make *akrasia* more intelligible by putting it into that huge class of contradictions, hesitations, vacillations, incoherences, and absurdities of every kind, which composes a large part of our practical life. *Akrasia* seemed more mysterious than it is to Aristotle because he assimilated morality to science, in that he regarded the principles of morality as statements of fact, which it would be as impossible to disregard as to disregard a wall that barred our path.

Criticism of Aristotle on *akolasia*

Who is this acolastic man of whom Aristotle speaks in Book VII? I doubt whether such a person exists. He is not the acolastic of whom Aristotle spoke in Books II and III. In those books *akolasia* was not contrasted with *akrasia*, for Aristotle did not mention *akrasia*; it was opposed to temperance, and consisted in pursuing a certain kind of pleasure excessively because one was led on by desire. The acolastic had no principle or *logos*; he was simply led on by desire. And Aristotle did not say whether he afterwards regretted his actions.

In Book VII, on the contrary, the acolastic is contrasted with the acratie rather than with the temperate man; and he appears as a man of principle. He possesses a *logos*; he obeys his *logos*; and he does not regret having obeyed his *logos*.

What is the *logos* of the acolastic? It can hardly be the *logos* that "I ought to pursue excessive pleasures". For if he used the word "excessive" he would be condemning himself; and I think Aristotle would have recognised this. But if he condemned himself he would be acratie and not acolastic. It is the acratie who condemns himself. The acolastic has a clear conscience about himself.

We find in the text the principle that "everything sweet should be tasted" (1147a29). Is this one of the acolastic's prin-

ciples? If it were the acolastic would certainly be a mythical person; for there has never been anybody who adopted the principle that everything sweet should be tasted. But I think that Aristotle is not here intending to tell us one of the acolastic's principles. I think rather that he is giving us one of those inappropriate and even absurd examples which unfortunately are not rare in his work.

We read also that the acratist is not persuaded "that he ought to pursue such pleasures unrestrainedly" (1151a23). Are we to understand that the acolastic, on the contrary, adopts precisely the principle "that he ought to pursue such pleasures unrestrainedly"? The answer, I believe, is more or less yes.

But to answer the question what principle Aristotle attributes to his acolastic the safest passage is 1146b22, where he expressly says that the acolastic "is led on intentionally, holding that one ought always to pursue the present pleasure".

This principle is a bad one according to Aristotle. For the badness of the acolastic consists in his principle's being bad. It does not consist in his disobeying his principle; for on the contrary he obeys it.

Does Aristotle think that the acolastic himself considers his principle bad? He does not explicitly answer this question. But I think he would answer no. For it seems that, if the acolastic himself considered his principle bad, he would thereby too much resemble the acratist, though in a strange and obscure way. So it is only Aristotle who considers the principle bad. The acolastic considers it good.

And which of them is right, the acolastic or Aristotle? If we insist on the "always", it is evidently Aristotle who is right. There is, unfortunately, no practical principle that one can always follow without ever being in the wrong. But, just because this is too obvious, we ought to doubt whether an acolastic of this sort ever occurs. If, on the contrary, in order to avoid making the acolastic into a man of straw, we do not emphasise the "always", it becomes much less certain that it is Aristotle who is right. It seems to me that there are fewer men who on principle seek the present pleasure too much than there are men who on principle seek the present pleasure too little. Against puritanism we need to insist that "we ought to pursue

the present pleasure". This is a duty deriving necessarily from our great duty to alleviate human misery. The duty to restrain our appetite, which of course is often incumbent on us too, also derives from some moral rule justified by the same end, that is, the diminution of human misery.

Aristotle does not discuss the principle with the acolastic. He does not discuss practical principles at all. He hardly even expresses them. I venture to say that this is the greatest defect in his ethics, which nevertheless are magnificent. He did not grasp the fact of moral relativity, the fact, I mean, that sometimes two men, though equally serious and conscientious and obedient to their consciences, nevertheless find their consciences uttering opposed principles. Owing to this fact, we ought to debate moral principles, to discuss them, to defend them, and not to reject other people's principles as evidently false because they do not harmonise with ours. Once we have realised that, among the men who act in ways we disapprove, there are some who do so not because they have no conscience, nor because they flout their own conscience, but because they obey their own conscience and their conscience tells them to act so — once we have realised that, what are we to do? We must not use disapproving words like "acolastic". No. . . . Just we use the medical metaphor, as Aristotle too often does, and regard these men as patients to be cured, and even to be cured against their will. The man whose moral principles conflict with mine is to be neither cured nor insulted, but persuaded. I must reason with him and try to convince him; and I must always admit the possibility that in the end it will be I, and not he, who ought to change.

But Aristotle denies the possibility of a rational discussion of the principles of morality. He declares that there is no *logos* to teach the principles: "neither there nor here can the *logos* teach the principles", where "here" refers to practice (1151a18). He recognises only nature and habituation as teachers of morality. That seems to me a great despair. If one day Aristotle happened to think that perhaps he himself had been ill endowed by nature, or ill trained by his teachers, what would he do to reassure himself, either by confirming his principles or by exchanging them for better ones? According

to his own theory he could do nothing at all. He says that the bad man does not know he is bad (1150b36); what if one day he overheard this "bad" man saying to a friend: "Aristotle does not know that he is bad"?

I believe that we ought to confess our moral principles, and try to make them probable (not to prove them; one cannot prove practical principles), and seek also the reasons against them, and listen to and weigh the principles and reasons of others. By this method we may hope to be always purifying our principles and making them more serviceable for their end, which is the diminution of human misery. It is more or less the same method of approximation as we also follow in the pursuit of the truth about nature. If we adopt this method we continually progress a little towards the end. If we adopt the method of Aristotle we never progress at all, so that, unless we have had the extraordinary luck to be established right on the end by our teachers, we shall never get any nearer to it.

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Der Beitrag ist zuerst erschienen in dem Band von Richard Robinson, *Essays in Greek Philosophy*, London 1969; eine frühere, französische Fassung wurde 1954 als Vorlesung an der Sorbonne in Paris gehalten und erschien in *Revue Philosophique*.