

## Reason and Appetite in the Aristotelian Soul: A Metaphysical Solution

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THE POSSIBILITY of *akrasia* (incontinence), or willful action against what one knows to be good, presents a major problem for ancient Greek philosophy. On a Socratic view, if I truly know that something is the best alternative, then surely I will desire that good and hence act to achieve it. If I do not desire the good, then I must not understand that it is good, since all good is desirable. In either case, *akrasia* is impossible. This Socratic view, in which the faculty of desire is subject to reason's apprehension of the good, seems opposed to Aristotle's theory—that it is appetite, not reason, which moves us to act. On the other hand, Aristotle to some extent agrees with Socrates, making incontinent action impossible for the fully knowing agent. This apparent contradiction has sparked considerable debate about the relationship between desire and reason in Aristotle's psychology. After detailing Aristotle's two apparently conflicting views and analyzing them in light of his discussion of *akrasia*, I shall argue that the key to resolving this conflict is found in Aristotle's metaphysical conceptions of form, actuality, and substance.

### I. The Slave of the Passions

Aristotle seems to align appetite with sensation in order to make appetite the source of action. He claims appetite is necessarily connected

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to sensation: if something possesses sensation, it has “necessarily also imagination and appetition; for, where there is sensation, there is also pleasure and pain, and, where these, necessarily also desire” (*De anima* II.2 413b20–22).<sup>1</sup> In fact, Aristotle equates appetite and avoidance, when actual, with sensation:

To perceive then is like bare asserting or knowing; but when the object is pleasant or painful, the soul makes a quasi-affirmation or negation, and pursues or avoids the object. To feel pleasure or pain is to act with the sensitive mean towards what is good or bad as such. Both avoidance and appetite when actual are identical with this: the faculty of appetite and avoidance are not different, either from one another or from the faculty of sense-perception; but their being is different. (*DA* III.7 431a8–15)

Thus appetite is analogous to affirming that something is good, except that when the sensitive faculty experiences something good, it automatically excites the soul to pursue that thing (Charles 85). While the sensation of something good and the appetite for that thing are distinguishable in definition (and hence different in being), they always occur together. The motive for the soul’s action, then, is appetite—which seems to be based solely on the sensitive faculty’s perception of pleasure and pain.

Therefore, while mind can be practical, it seems to have no inherent ability to move the soul to action; it derives this ability from appetite. Although Aristotle acknowledges that both mind practical and appetite can originate movement, and even that the two can conflict (*DA* III.9–10 433a1–10), he still makes appetite the more fundamental of the two, since “that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of mind practical; and that which is last in the process of thinking is the beginning of the action” (*DA* III.10 433a16–17). On this account, mind merely helps to find the way to fulfill the demands of appetite. In fact, mind can oppose appetite only by setting against it another appetite. For “appetites [to] run counter to one another, which happens

<sup>1</sup>*De anima* will henceforth be referred to as *DA*, *Ethica Nicomachea* as *EN*, and *Metaphysica* as *Met*.

when a principle of reason and a desire are contrary," is possible "only in beings with a sense of time (for while mind bids us hold back because of what is future, desire is influenced by what is just at hand . . .)" (DA III.10 433b5–9). Here reason merely connects present and future pleasures and pains. While it thus makes a greater number of good and bad things available to the appetitive faculty's "consideration," mind appears impotent to cause action toward these things itself. Reason seems to be, as Hume would put it, a slave of the passions.

## II. The Rule of Reason

This hardly seems true in the *Ethica Nicomachea*, where Aristotle's account of virtue depends on the ability of reason to rule the passions. Aristotle's good man<sup>2</sup> is the man who acts virtuously—the man whose choices are "determined by a rational principle" (EN II.6 1107a1). The good man's choices follow reason, not appetite. After all, virtue and vice are "states of character . . . in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions" (EN II.5 1105b25–26). But the fact that we can respond to the passions in different ways at all shows that they by themselves do not totally determine behavior. The "rational principle" obviously has some control over the way that we experience these pleasures and pains. Aristotle even says that the appetitive faculty "listens to and obeys" reason (EN I.13 1102b32). Of course, this could just refer to the fact that reason, being able to calculate future pleasures and pains, serves to educate the appetitive faculty's desires. However, Aristotle cites the example of the incontinent man to show that the opposition between reason and appetite is not so easily dispelled:

For we praise the rational principle of the continent man and of the incontinent, and the part of their soul that has such a principle, since it urges them aright and towards the best objects; there is

<sup>2</sup>While I will try to avoid such sexist language in this essay, for clarity's sake I will use it when Ross's translation of Aristotle does so. In particular, I will follow Ross in using terms like 'the good man', 'the incontinent man', etc., so as to remain consistent with Aristotle's terminology.

found in them also another element naturally opposed to the rational principle, which fights against and resists that principle. (*EN* I.13 1102b15–20)

If the “best objects” toward which reason directs a person were simply those most desired by appetite, it is hardly likely that appetite would rebel against reason in the case of the incontinent man. In direct opposition to his earlier account of action, Aristotle seems to be affirming that mind must itself be capable of opposing and even ruling the appetites.<sup>3</sup>

### III. The Struggle: *Akrasia*

If there is any place where Aristotle should be clear about the relationship between reason and appetite, it is in his account of *akrasia*, which is where the two faculties directly oppose one another. The account hinges on the claim that incontinent behavior is possible only because the mind's knowledge is somehow not completely actual. Aristotle regards knowledge as the actualization of a potency of the soul, a “motion” from one contrary to another. This allows for intermediate kinds of knowledge:

We can speak of something as ‘a knower’ either (a) as when we say that man is a knower, meaning that man falls within the class of beings that know or have knowledge, or (b) as when we are speaking of a man who possesses a knowledge of grammar; each of these is so called as having in him a certain potentiality, but there is a difference between their respective potentialities, the one (a) being a potential knower, because his kind or matter is such and such, the other (b) because he can in the absence of any external counteracting cause realize his knowledge in actual knowing at

<sup>3</sup>Of course, an easy solution to this contradiction would be to say that Aristotle changed his view between the time *De anima* was written and the time of *Ethica Nicomachea*. But even in *De anima*, reason can oppose the passions and is even said to be “more authoritative” than desire (*DA* III.11 434a14). So the contradiction is not just a matter of Aristotle's changing his mind.

will. This implies a third meaning of 'a knower' (c), one who is already realizing his knowledge. (DA II.5 417a23–29)

Thus, between the mere potential for learning and the actual conscious exercise of knowledge, Aristotle finds a more passive knowledge available to, but not already present in, cognition.

This inactive knowledge gives Aristotle the leeway he needs to account for *akrasia* without sacrificing reason's supremacy. "But . . . since we use the word 'know' in two senses . . . it *will* make a difference whether, when a man does what he should not, he has the knowledge but is not exercising it, or *is* exercising it; for the latter seems strange, but not the former" (EN VII.3 1146b30–34). *Akrasia* happens when one's knowledge of the good remains only latent.

This suggests that *akrasia* constitutes some sort of cognitive breakdown. Normally, action results from a reasoning process which Aristotle calls a "practical syllogism," in which reason determines that a general principle is applicable in a particular situation and therefore acts according to that principle. For example, "If you conceive that on a particular occasion no man ought to walk, and that you are a man, you immediately remain at rest. In this action follows unless there is hindrance or compulsion" (*De motu* 701a13–16; qtd. in Charles 91). But for the *akrates*, there is such a "hindrance"—the appetites (Charles 131). Aristotle says that "outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness" (EN VII.3 1147a15–17). The passions produce a temporary madness which keeps our deliberation from reaching the conclusion to which our right principles would ordinarily lead us.

But as Norman Dahl points out, such an explanation suffices only for one of the two main types of *akrasia* Aristotle acknowledges:

Of incontinence one kind is impetuosity, another weakness. For some men after deliberating fail, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion. (EN VII.7 1150b19–22)

The problem with making *akrasia* a failure to draw the conclusion of the practical syllogism (Dahl calls this the "traditional interpretation") is that it denies the possibility of self-conscious *akrasia* (145). Passion may

prevent me from using my knowledge, but in doing so it also prevents me from realizing what has happened. This contradicts Aristotle's claim that "vice is unconscious of itself, incontinence is not" (*EN* VII.8 1150b37). Thus, the "traditional interpretation" can account for impetuosity, the failure to deliberate because of passion, but not for weakness, the failure to act according to one's deliberated choice.

Dahl is right to assert that any account of *akrasia* must account for this second kind; not all incontinence is simply a matter of unthinking abdication to one's passions. Rather, the weak *akrates* intentionally violates her own principles, all the while declaring that she knows better. For this to be true, it is essential that the *akrates* reach a conclusion as to how she should act. In such a case, appetite must be able to prevent the soul from acting on that conclusion, thus "drag[g]ing reason] about like a slave" (*EN* VII.2 1145b25). Incontinence becomes a "revolt" of appetite against mind, the rightful ruler of the soul (Charles 130).

But Aristotle remains unwilling to claim that thought, in its fully actual form, could be overthrown. In *De anima* he claims that "by nature the higher faculty is *always* more authoritative and gives rise to movement" (*DA* III.11 434a14). Thus, incontinence involves a perversion of man's natural condition. Therefore, incontinent people "must be said to be in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk" (*EN* VII.3 1147a17–18), lacking real knowledge:

[For] even men under the influence of these passions utter scientific proofs and verses of Empedocles, and those who have just begun to learn a science can string together its phrases, but do not yet know it; for it has to become part of themselves, and that takes time; so that we must suppose that the use of language by men in an incontinent state means no more than its utterance by actors on the stage. (*EN* VII.3 1147a20–24)

Drunks spouting scientific proofs, students using unfamiliar terminology, actors on a stage—all remain at the level of language, without fully comprehending the realities which that language represents. Their minds do not receive the form of these realities, as they must in order to know. Similarly, then, even the fully conscious *akrates*, who says he knows better even as he gives in to passion, cannot have real knowledge; he has knowledge only in the trivial sense in which "having knowledge [does]

not mean knowing but only talking" (*EN* VII.3 1147b11–12). But if the weak *akrates* can know what he should do without doing it, what kind of knowledge is it that he cannot have?

Aristotle's comparison of such a person with "those who have just begun to learn a science" (*EN* VII.3 1147a22) suggests an answer to this question. Aristotle elsewhere explains such a student's problem:

What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience. . . . Indeed one might ask this question too, why a boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist. Is it because the objects of mathematics exist by abstraction, while the first principles of these other subjects come from experience, and because young men have no conviction about the latter, but merely use the proper language, while the essence of mathematical objects is plain enough to them? (*EN* VI.8 1142a12–20; qtd. in Dahl 208)

Acquaintance with the objects of a science requires time and experience, even though young men can quickly gain familiarity with science's conclusions in the abstract. A young man may quickly learn that any two objects will fall at the same speed in a vacuum, but his intuition will tell him that a feather will fall slower than an anvil until he sees the experiment done a few times—until he has incorporated that knowledge into his beliefs about the world around him. Similarly, the weak *akrates* may not lack any intellectual knowledge of what she should do; what she lacks is the experience which makes that otherwise sterile knowledge an integral part of the way she approaches the world (Dahl 209). But knowledge of the right rule together with experiential knowledge of the particulars of right action is just *phronesis* (practical wisdom).<sup>4</sup> This fits

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle says, "*Phronesis* is not about universals only. It must also come to know particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is concerned with particulars" (*EN* VII.7 1141B14–16; qtd. in Reeve 67). This suggests a resolution to the apparent circularity in Aristotle's definition of virtue: Aristotle

with Aristotle's account; he himself says that *phronesis* "is the strongest of all states" (*EN* VII.3 1146a5) and cannot be overcome by the appetites. I can know what I should do and still not do it (weak *akrasia* is possible), but only when my knowledge has not yet become so ingrained in me as to make obedience a matter of course.

#### IV. A Metaphysical Solution

This conception of *akrasia*, together with Aristotle's metaphysics of the soul, allows Aristotle to let reason rule without contradicting his claim in *De anima* that all action is motivated by desire. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes three senses of substance: the form, the compound of matter and form, and this compound taken universally (*Sim* 54).<sup>5</sup> Edward Halper argues that since the form unifies the various material elements which compose something, and since Aristotle says that "the substance or form is actuality" (*Met.* IX.8 1040b2), actuality is what unifies the material elements of a thing. That is, "the various material parts are one because they act together"—because their various potencies are united in the single actuality (Halper 4). Further, when the actuality is an activity rather than a product, substance becomes the functioning together of the parts (5). Therefore, when Aristotle says that the soul is "a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it: and, equivalently, "the first grade of actuality of a natural body having life potentially within it" (*DA* II.1 412a20, 29), he means that soul is a certain organization or ability to function together had by the parts of the body. Since soul is thus a

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defines virtue as a state of character involving action according to the "right rule" of practical wisdom, meanwhile asserting that practical wisdom must be cleverness with its ends determined by virtue (Dahl 63). But because *phronesis* involves two sorts of knowledge, the circle is broken: virtue involves action in accordance with the *universal* rules dictated by *phronesis*, and *phronesis* depends on experience with *particular* moral action (i.e., virtue) to make the human subject want the good at which that rule aims.

<sup>5</sup>These senses of substance may not be consistent with Aristotle's earlier account in the *Categories*. However, it is nonetheless clear that he uses them in both *De anima* and *Ethica Nicomachea*.



potential to function, "the parts of the soul are themselves the powers of the living creature to execute certain functions, and hence the parts are as distinct as the functions" (Walsh 82). The soul is the *first* grade of actuality because a besouled body *can* exercise the functions of a living thing, but does not always do so. When a soul acts, the second grade of actuality is achieved.

However, because the different faculties of the soul can be actualized independently of each other, there is a sense in which, even when a person acts, the entire soul is not actualized (Halper 7). Of course, it would be absurd to say that all the potencies of the fully actual soul are realized continuously, just as it would be absurd to say that the matter of the body simultaneously realizes all of its potencies continuously. Since matter has contrary potencies, this would be impossible. Rather, the matter of any body has potencies which become actual in accordance with the form (or substance) which unifies that matter. Now the faculties of the soul, like the parts of the body, admit of change and are not separable (Walsh 81). This means that the soul, like the body, needs some further organizing principle to explain how its different potencies should be actualized. Halper suggests that reason serves as the form unifying the various potencies of the soul into a single activity—happiness (7). This illuminates the following obscure passage:

Since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, (1) a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the class, (2) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former, as e.g. an art to its material), these distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul. (*DA* III.5 430a10–14)

Aristotle seems to be saying that the soul itself must have a matter and a form. He says that mind plays both these roles; in a sense it becomes all things, and in another sense it makes all things. Reason, then, provides a form for the soul, which explains why "the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle" (*EN* I.7 1098a7).

Aristotle's conception of soul as actuality is central to his moral theory. For instance, it explains how one can become virtuous by doing virtuous acts; the soul is potentially organized by a rational principle,

and so every time one subjects oneself to reason, one actualizes that potentiality to some extent. This is why *phronesis*, action according to the right rule, implies the virtues (EN VI.13 1145a2); virtues are the actuality of the soul as following a rational principle. On the other hand, since a rational being's potency to realize some actuality is also the potency to realize the contrary of that actuality, one can also actualize one's soul in a way contrary to reason, thus producing vice. And since the soul as it descends into vice is actually becoming unreasonable, it is understandable that it should lose its ability to discern what is good. Thus, the true good (happiness, or the actuality of the soul according to reason) is the "object of wish to the good man, while any chance thing may be so to the bad man" (EN III.4 1113a26–27). Furthermore, since the soul has the *potential* to be actualized according to reason, but may not actually realize that potential at a given point, this account still allows for authentic conflicts between reason and appetite; that is, it does not abolish or trivialize Aristotelian *akrasia*.

In the virtuous soul, all desires and powers are regulated by reason, so that we are made to "delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought" (EN II.3 1104b12). As Dahl argues (83), this explains why "virtue and vice respectively preserve and destroy the first principles" (EN VII.8 1151a15; qtd. in Dahl 82) instead of merely having different first principles. The very idea of a first principle implies reason, since only reason can grasp universal principles. But the vicious man's soul is actualized in a way contrary to reason, thus aligning his soul against all principles whatsoever. Thus, "any chance thing" may be the object of wish for the vicious man.

The link between soul and actuality explains how mind can be supreme even though all action is motivated by desire. Any desire is for something which the soul does not possess or is not doing but has a potential to do or to have. Thus, any pleasure will be the actualization of some capacity of the soul, or at least will be incident upon that actualization. This is exactly the account of pleasure Aristotle gives in the *Ethica Nicomachea* (VII.12 1153a12; X.4–5). But this means that each faculty of the soul can have its own distinctive pleasures, and hence desires. Indeed, Aristotle seems to have this in mind even in *De anima*, where he argues from the fact that appetites can conflict that therefore "the things which originate movement are numerically many" (DA III.10 433b5–12). While human action always stems from some appetite, there

are "numerically many" faculties of the soul which, because they have different potentialities, may produce different appetites.

Aristotle's word choice supports the claim that he considers appetite to be a very broad category. As Martha Nussbaum notes, words already existed for the particular desires associated with the senses and with the mind; Aristotle's *orexis* (the word he uses for 'appetite') was not in use as a noun before his time. Since he created a new term based on a verb meaning "to reach out or grasp," it makes sense to think that he means the term to apply generally to any case of aiming at an end (Nussbaum 273-76). So when Aristotle says, "That which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of mind practical" (DA III.10 433a17), he may just be saying that mind practical always finds means to some end. That end need not be given by the senses alone.

Admittedly, some of the *De anima* passages cited at the beginning of this essay seem to indicate that appetite is, in fact, solely sensory in origin. However, in context these passages do not necessitate this interpretation. When Aristotle says that appetite is not different from the faculty of sense perception (DA III.7 431a13; see above), he might not be talking about *all* appetite. This statement comes in a discussion of sense perception, in which it would be natural to limit one's discussion to sensory appetites. Aristotle may simply be making the point that there is no separate faculty of desire; desire is a consequence of the perceptual faculty's potential to be actualized in various ways. Indeed, Aristotle repeatedly makes this same point: appetite cannot be considered a separate part of the soul, but rather it is a faculty active in every part of the soul. "It is absurd to break up the last-mentioned faculty [of desire] . . . for wish is found in the calculative part and desire and passion in the irrational; and if the soul is tripartite appetite will be found in all three parts" (DA III.8 432b5-7). And while to modern ears, the claim that "mind bids us hold back because of what is future" (DA III.10 433b7) seems to imply that mind merely anticipates future sensory pleasures, all Aristotle has actually said is that the appetites of reason are not confined to the moment as are sensitive desires. Aristotle seems consistently committed to the efficacy of both intellectual and sensory appetites. Sensory appetite does not have unconditional authority over the human soul.

Further, because reason is not simply one of many faculties of the soul, but also the substantial form which unifies them, Aristotle is not

stuck with the Kantian opposition of reason and inclination (Dahl 126). Reason and inclination are both basic parts of the human constitution, whose goals often conflict. For Kant, these parts are static, so that morality can never achieve more than choosing to follow reason in spite of one's inclinations. But for Aristotle, reason is not confined to overpowering irrational desires; it can win them over. Reason provides the pattern according to which the many different potentialities of the soul actualize themselves so as to form a harmonious whole. Thus, to the extent that the soul is informed by reason, reason *does* find means to fulfill the ends of the passions, but only "as one ought" and "when one ought" (*EN* II.3 1104b27). In a certain sense it is true that the passions are the basis of the mind's deliberation—not as its master, but as its matter. If there were no other appetites (and thus no other potentialities in the soul), reason would be a matterless form—an organizing principle without anything to organize. Reason can go beyond determining the best means to an end to determining ends themselves not merely because it has its own ends (which could outweigh other sensory ends), but because as the soul acts according to reason's ends, it takes on a new, rational form. Since the form of the soul determines the way in which its various potentialities work together, this transformation changes the way individual faculties actualize themselves. But this means a change in ends, since an end is nothing but the actuality at which a potentiality aims.<sup>6</sup>

The dual function of reason in the Aristotelian soul explains Aristotle's position on *akrasia*. For the fully actualized rational soul, *akrasia* is impossible. Such a soul has *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, to recapitulate, has

<sup>6</sup>It is essential for reason to determine one's ends if reason is to be more than instrumental. This imperative leads Dahl to attribute two roles to *phronesis*: first, that of reasoning from ends to means, and second, that of inducing one's real ends from one's past *apparent* ends (Dahl 52). This second function is what allows reason to stand above the passions. On the view I am proposing, reason need not intuit the ends at which it aims (which seems too self-conscious for Aristotle's talk of habituation). Rather, by choosing rational acts, the soul moves toward a rational state. Aristotle's metaphysics of potentiality and actuality allows a correct choice of means to influence future ends without the conscious redirection for which Dahl (but not Aristotle) argues.

two elements which make *akrasia* impossible: a general knowledge of the “right rule” and an experiential knowledge of particulars. One gains *phronesis* by experience with moral action, which solidifies the desire to act morally.<sup>7</sup> These two aspects of *phronesis* correspond exactly to the two functions of reason in the soul. Reason has its own appetite—following the “right rule”—which may or may not overpower other appetites. But to the extent that one’s rational appetites prevail to produce virtuous action, the soul becomes actualized in such a way that its desires fit more with the form required by reason.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the person with *phronesis* cannot act incontinently, because her desires have been shaped so that they no longer conflict with reason.

However, *akrasia* and even vice remain possible for those who have not yet achieved the ideal of *phronesis*. For such a person, sensory desires may still be out of sync with reason’s dictates. These desires may interfere with the reasoning process, thus producing impetuosity, or they may “rebel” against its conclusions, producing weak *akrasia*. This leads us to Aristotle’s position: *Akrasia* is certainly possible, but not in the presence of fully actual knowledge. It is an intermediate stage, where the passions are not wholly ordered by reason, but where they do not yet interfere with reason so much as to cause it to systematically mistake its aims. Such systematic interference is vice. As the soul, through wrong action, becomes less and less rational, it loses sight of the rational form which constitutes its “true” aim and may take some other pleasure (probably from the senses) to be its end. For such a soul, reason—in its weakened and warped state—may actually work to uphold ends ultimately destructive to itself.

The Aristotelian notions of potency, actuality, and form pervade Aristotle’s psychology and ethics. Understanding soul as a combination of potencies suggests a general conception of pleasure and *orexis* which

<sup>7</sup>See note 4 above.

<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that the “form” supplied by reason may be anything but “purely formal” in a modern sense. Aristotle may not believe in transcendent forms, but he does believe that humanity has quite a determinate good at which it aims. Translated into metaphysical terms, this means that it has a form which it should come to embody. This form may include much more than the internal consistency of formal logic.

can ground all action without making reason the slave of the passions. Furthermore, understanding the soul as a group of potencies potentially informed by reason preserves the possibility of *akrasia* and vice, without sacrificing the hope of a virtue beyond the reach of such corruption.

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