

Orexis as Rationality in Aristotle

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ARISTOTLE'S *DE ANIMA* clearly and emphatically refutes the (at that time) widespread notion of the soul as a multipartite substance. Plato, for example, characterized soul in *The Republic* as consisting of three parts; these were separate, but parts of the same soul, and independent, but able to act on each other. This characterization, and others in which the soul must be both divided and united, is clearly problematic. Aristotle wisely rejects such models, and asserts the total unity of the soul. But in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *Ethics*) Aristotle finds himself exercised to explain the phenomenon of a man acting against what he knows is best, a phenomenon he characterizes as reason being overcome by some desiderative element. But, if reason and desire are in conflict, how can the soul be unified? I will argue that Aristotle explains this phenomenon (*akrasia*) and still maintains the unity of the soul by expressing the desiderative elements in an unconventional manner. Desire has a role in intrapersonal conflict, without requiring a separate ontological status, because it includes a primitive rationality.

First, we must examine the apparent conflict between the *De Anima* and the *Ethics* on the issue of appetite. Aristotle notes in Book I of the *De Anima* that a partitioned soul would have to be held together by something—a soul, presumably—about which one could again ask if it had parts or not. If soul is multipartite, then this soul would itself be partitioned and would require something to hold it together, and so on

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ad infinitum (*De Anima* III.9). This sort of logical difficulty leads Aristotle to reject the idea of a partitioned soul. He, instead, marks the so-called “parts” of the soul as its differing functions: we can speak of the reasoning and non-reasoning parts of the soul as separate only in the sense that we are speaking of the differing activities the soul engages in. Aristotle insists that speaking of the soul *as if* it had parts is useful only in determining the proper work and excellence of each of the capacities of the soul (Broadie 61).

In the *Ethics*, however, in the course of making some useful distinctions between moral types, Aristotle’s language suggests exactly the separation he had so painstakingly rejected. He distinguishes between those who do not experience untoward desires and those who do, between those who control their untoward desires and those who do not, etc. Here, as in other places, he defines as *akratic* those who cannot control, or who are overcome by their appetites, passions, or desires (*Ethics* VII 1145b 13–14; 1149b 13–16; 1142b 18–20), and describes the *akratic* person as “a man whom passion masters” (*Ethics* VII 1151a 21–2; see *Ethics* VII chapters 1–10). In short, the *akratic* is one who reaches a practical decision about what to do, but is led by desire or appetite to act contrary to what practical reason has dictated. But this characterization of *akrasia* pits, in a fairly direct way, reason against the desiderative. It presupposes exactly the psychical split he tried to avoid in the *De Anima*, for it seems we cannot talk coherently about reason’s being “controlled” or “mastered” by desire if the two parts are not, in some important sense, separate from one another. But if they *are* separate, then the soul cannot be the unity that Aristotle has so strongly insisted upon. To decide whether or not Aristotle’s accounts of soul and *akrasia* contradict each other, we need to look more closely at what Aristotle says about the faculty at the heart of the conflict—the desiderative.

Aristotle discusses the non-rational element as a faculty (not a part) of the soul at some length in the *De Anima*. The term *orexis*, translated “desire” or “appetite” is the general term Aristotle uses here, and seems to consistently capture Aristotle’s general idea of whatever aspect of the soul he does not identify with reason. *Orexis* includes all the traditionally non-rational elements: the will (*thumos*), anger (*orge*), physical appetites (*epithumia*), and emotions (*ta pathe*) (Kenny 14, Leighton 160–61). We will discuss *orexis* in its general form. As defined in the *De Anima*, *orexis* refers to that faculty of the soul which is moved

toward something deemed pleasant (*De Anima* III.9 431a 8–14). But *orexis*, as the movement-toward, is inseparable from reason. Since there can be no movement except toward or away from something deemed pleasant or painful, the *orexis* is the fundamental precursor to all voluntary action (*De Anima* III.7 431a 8–14; 433a 23). But this priority is logical, not ontological, for the movement-toward or the movement-away cannot be undertaken without the faculty of reason. An object can be designated pleasant or painful, to be pursued or avoided, only due to some form of judgment, or “faculty of thinking” (III.7 431b3–5). Without that judgment there would be nothing for desire to be moved toward.

Additionally, rationality is required to actually accomplish the movement toward the object of appetite: “For that which is the object of appetite is [also] the stimulant of mind practical; and that which is last in the process of *thinking* is the beginning of action” (III 433a 16–18; my emphasis). So thought is also a source of action.¹ The thought, the rational analysis of the object of desire and the requirements to reach it, is an element of the pursuit of pleasure. So though Aristotle defines *orexis* as simply that part that is moved toward the pleasant, the movement-toward cannot occur without the influence of reason. In this situation it is clear that even if rationality and desire can be partitioned definitionally, practically speaking they are not separable.

Aristotle defines *orexis* in the *Ethics* as well, but, almost Platonically, as “the non-reasoning” aspect of the soul. This does not, however, necessarily mean that appetite is ontologically separate from reasoning. For in his discussion of *orexis*, Aristotle notes that “the appetitive, and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in [a rational principle] in so far as it listens to it and obeys it” (I 1102b 30–32). That is, appetite shares in rationality in some sense because it *responds* to rationality. That is an interesting point in itself, but implies more than is stated here. For rationality is a necessary condition for responding to rationality. We do not reason with those who do not have a rational faculty—animals or infants, for example—because they are not capable of responding to it. So the fact that *orexis* responds to the persuasion of

¹Aristotle, we know, notes that there are cases in which appetite prompts action against the influence of reason (III.9 433a 1–3). Such cases will be discussed momentarily.

rationality implies not only a relationship between desire and reason, but an actual capacity for rationality within *orexis* itself. So rationality is included in both of Aristotle's definitions of the desiderative.

The strongest claims in favor of a partitioned Aristotelian soul depend on Aristotle's various discussions of the effects of appetite. Even here, however, we will find that reason and desire are indissociable in a manner that imputes rationality to the *orexis*. When Aristotle describes appetite as somehow overcoming the dictates of reason, he does not describe it as independent of or separable from rationality. He offers two explanations of the possibility of *akrasia*, but I will focus on the strongest:

When, then, the universal opinion is present in us forbidding us to taste [something unhealthy], and there is also the opinion that 'everything sweet is pleasant' and that 'this is sweet' and when appetite happens to be present in us, the one opinion bids us avoid the object, but appetite leads us towards it . . . so that it turns out that a man behaves incontinently (in a sense) of a rule and an opinion, and of one not contrary in itself, but only incidentally . . . to the right rule. (*Ethics* VII3 1147a 32–1147b 2)

This account of succumbing to the force of appetite offers a different picture than the standard, multipartite, intrapersonal-battle model of incontinence. Aristotle here suggests that it is not appetite and rationality at war, but two different kinds of practical syllogisms. The first, standard model of practical reasoning notes that unhealthy things should not be eaten, that this piece of cake is unhealthy, and that therefore this piece of cake should not be eaten. The second, *akratic* display of practical reasoning notes that all sweet things are pleasant, that this piece of cake is sweet, and that therefore the piece of cake should be eaten. The latter syllogism rather myopically focuses on immediate gratification, whereas the former manifests the kind of careful concern for universal and long-term effects that exemplifies "right reason" for Aristotle. Hence anyone who acts according to the latter is weak-willed and *akratic*, and can be said to be succumbing to *orexis* (*epithumia*, in this case). But *both* are practical syllogisms, neither is more valid or logically sound than the other. So in the case of *akrasia*, the strongest evidence for a multipartite soul, the influence of *orexis* consists in its offering an

argument contrary to right rule, not in its undermining or overcoming rationality proper. Even when it “overcomes” reason, *orexis* is a form of reasoning.

We cannot dismiss the importance of the fact that Aristotle does describe desire and reason as conflicting, and even desires themselves as conflicting. The solution to the apparent contradiction between the *De Anima* and the *Ethics* must still allow Aristotle’s *orexis* and reason to conflict. That can still be done, according to Aristotle’s statement that “appetites run counter to one another *only* when a principle of reason and a desire are contrary” (*Ethics* III 433b 5–7; my emphasis). That is, appetites are not the sort of things that can simply run around conflicting with one another, as if they were separate, independent, or random parts of the soul. They can only run counter to each other, Aristotle tells us, when there is a principle of reason in conflict with one of them. That is, unless at least some *orexis* is identifiable with some principle of reason, there can be no conflicting desires. But clearly there are conflicting desires. Therefore, Aristotle equates at least some appetites with principles of reason. The possibility of conflict occurs because,

while mind bids us hold back because of what is future, desire is influenced by what is just at hand: a pleasant object which is just at hand presents itself as both pleasant and good, without condition in either case, because of want of foresight into what is farther away in time. (*De Anima* III.10 433b 5–10)

This hearkens back to the discussion of *akrasia* just completed. Aristotle identified two competing practical syllogisms in the phenomena of *akrasia*—here he has identified those two types of syllogism with his categories of reason and desire. Like the practical reason resulting in the “right rule,” “mind” here encourages the attainment of some long-term good; like the practical reason resulting in *akrasia*, “desire” here encourages the attainment of an immediate pleasure. This implicit correlation supports again the notion of *orexis* as an improper mode of reasoning.

The passage supports more than that, however. The deficiency of *orexis*, and the reason Aristotle initiates criticism of it, is not that it desires too strongly—for the rational, proper, right, future desire is *still* a desire. The problem with what Aristotle has termed *orexis* is that it moves us

toward pleasures without properly weighing future and present benefits. It does not consider that the immediate gratification will cause harm or pain or lack of pleasure in the long run; it is a sort of “nearsighted” reason. In this sense, the difference in this case is not between reasoning and desiring, but between thorough reasoning and incomplete reasoning. The phenomena of desire overcoming reason, then, is more analogous to the detrimental effects of drawing a hasty conclusion than to one part of a soul overcoming another.

But still, the emotive and sensual aspects of the movement-toward are important factors in this form of reasoning, whereas they only minimally affect “right reason”—there are two strikingly different categories of motivation being compared here. It would not be inconsistent to speak of them separately, as *orexis* and reason, as they are experienced so differently and result in different kinds of actions. And in fact, as we have seen, Aristotle does so. The recognition that *orexis* is crucially inseparable from rationality does not imply that the two cannot (or should not) be distinguished from each other.

The manner in which *orexis* influences judgment suggests further that it is inseparable from reason. Aristotle emphasizes in the *Rhetoric* that certain desiderative elements (*pathos*) cause certain judgments to be made and others to be disallowed. In trial, for example, if a judge feels indignation toward the accused standing before him, then by virtue of that indignation “pity will be impossible” (*Rhetoric* 1378b17–21; 1385b 14). In indignation, the judge reasons and judges harshly. Contrarily, if the judge were moved to pity, it would be impossible for him to feel indignation. It is not, presumably, Aristotle’s point that certain emotions are mutually exclusive—for experience teaches us that “mixed emotions” are not only possible but common. No, more likely Aristotle means to assert that certain *judgments* are mutually exclusive, and that judgments are constitutive of (at least some) appetites. For example, one cannot judge that the defendant is deserving of a harsh sentence, and at the same time judge that he is deserving of a light sentence or acquittal—it seems that to feel indignation toward the defendant’s pleas for mercy is to judge him deserving of harshness. Likewise, to feel pity is to see him as deserving leniency. In the same context, Aristotle notes that to be angry is to judge the object of anger as having insulted one, and to be ashamed is to judge that someone has brought dishonor on one—if there is no insult and no dishonor, there is no occasion for anger or

shame (1378a 31–33; 1383b 15–16). Having an emotion is itself a kind of judgment (Leighton 146–47).

Aristotle's discussion of *orexis*' effects, then, continue to demonstrate its reasoning nature. It influences behavior in a manner that focuses on the sensual aspects of present pleasures—not as pure, naked appetite but as a distorted practical syllogism. In some cases it acts not just as an independent factor in judgment-forming but as a judgment in itself.

There is one final argument in favor of thinking of appetite as a form of reason. Aristotle claims that *orexis* is voluntary, and it cannot be so, unless it includes rationality.

First, Aristotle's discussion of voluntariness and responsibility establishes the voluntariness of emotions. According to Aristotle, any act is voluntary if "the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action" (*Ethics* III 1111a 24). For example, if the agent initiates the action, and knows what he is doing, his is a voluntary act. That is, if a person is picked up by a wind or shaken by an earthquake, that movement is not voluntary; whereas if a person walks by himself down the street—even if he walks at gunpoint—the action is his, and voluntary. Agents are responsible for all voluntary acts that are not coerced, and are (in the moral sense) responsible for their actions initiated in full knowledge of the particulars of their situation (*Ethics* III.1).

The notion of temperance also demonstrates that appetites are voluntary. All virtues, Aristotle claims, as well as all vices, are developed as a result of habit. Socrates aptly demonstrated that defining "virtue" for all cases is a hopelessly complex task. Aristotle avoids that problem by insisting that "virtue" is neither teachable nor definable, but that it can be achieved through, and only through, the continual practice of virtuous acts. A man achieves a virtue by acting as if he had it until it becomes habitual (See *Ethics* II). Given every man's possibility of acting in conflict with his own knowledge of what is right or best to do (the possibility of being weak-willed), the greatest of virtues is temperance. Temperance is the condition of experiencing only the proper and appropriate appetites; if one never desires what he should not have, he will never be faced with temptation nor the possibility of *akrasia* (*Ethics* III 1119a 10–19; VII 1153a 35–36). Appetites "should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose the rational principle . . . and as the

child should live according to the direction of his tutor, so the appetitive element should live according to rational principle" (*Ethics* IV1 1119b 10–15). All other things aside, if appetite can be trained it must contain some sparks of rationality, but let us move on to voluntariness.

If temperance is having "right desire," and temperance is a virtue, and all virtue comes from habit, then it follows that *orexis* is itself the result of habit (cf. Engberg-Pedersen 178–80). Habit is, by definition, voluntary (in adults, anyway), and since any sensible adult knows which sort of habits lead to virtue and which to vice, men are responsible for states of character resulting from habit. So *orexis* is voluntary, and something for which we are responsible.

Aristotle asserts this repeatedly. Even when seemingly "compelled" by appetite, Aristotle feels we should bear responsibility for "being easily caught by such attractions" (*Ethics* III 1110b 7–14). And he contends frequently that we cannot think of appetites as involuntary (*Ethics* 1111a 24; 1111b 1–4). Aristotle's account of action in the *De Anima* assures us that every action initiated by an agent requires some reasoning faculty to establish that toward which or away from which the agent is moving, and so *orexis*, if voluntary, must contain some reasoning (*De Anima* III433a 5–15). It is not clear, in all of this, in what sense *orexis* is voluntary—it is not an action, so the argument from the *De Anima* is not sufficient to establish the rationality of *orexis*. The fact that *orexis* is voluntary does, however, establish that it cannot be separate from reason in any ontological sense.

Aristotle talks of *orexis* as voluntary without revising his definition of "voluntary," so we can assume that a voluntary passion, like an action, is one which originates with the agent and is not externally caused. But this could not be, if *orexis* were independent of reason. To any degree that *orexis* is characterized as ontologically separate from reason, it must be thought of as bare passion, purely emotive, an un-thought, naked response to external stimuli. It would have the moral status of sneezing or blinking in response to strong sunlight. But it is impossible that a stimulus-response should be voluntary! So *orexis*, if voluntary, cannot be a separate part of the soul. Additionally, the stimulus-response view of *orexis*, which follows from any attempt to separate it from reason, requires that desire act on an agent. Insofar as desire "happens to" someone, by Aristotle's own definition, neither the desire nor the action resulting from it can be voluntary, for "if some one were to say that

pleasant and noble objects have a compelling power, forcing us from without, all acts would be for him compulsory; for it is for these objects that all men do everything they do" (*Ethics* III 1110b 8–12). All action, as we have seen, requires the desiderative movement-toward something deemed pleasant. If desire acts independently of reason, then all our actions would necessarily be compelled, involuntary. So if there are any voluntary acts at all (and there certainly are) then the desiderative must be united with the rational; it cannot be a Platonically separate "part" of the soul.

Even if *orexis* is characterized as *including* some reasoning element, it must be divided from reason proper (otherwise it would not need a reasoning element) and, furthermore, as itself divided into a reasoning and a desiderative part. So it is not enough to claim that *orexis*, as a faculty, has some rationality. Again, the soul is unified—it both reasons and desires. The *orexis* must be seen as a faculty of a reasoning soul that focuses on the emotive and sensual pleasures, not as a blind and independent passion.

It is important to note, here, that Aristotle does not ever unequivocally state that emotions are voluntary—though he surely believes it. This reluctance probably stems from the popular belief that appetites are not voluntary, but are responses or knee-jerk reactions to external provocations. This popular view endures prevalently to this day, in spite of evidence to the contrary.² The question, then, is why Aristotle hints and implies so strongly that appetites are voluntary—in fact establishes it—when it contradicts established psychology. The answer provides further support that Aristotle thinks of appetite and reason as essentially the same—in counterpoint to the argument offered above, if appetite is not voluntary, but is something that "happens to" an agent, then the soul must be multipartite. That is, if appetite can act on a man and cause him to do other than reason suggests, then it is separate from, and independent of, that reason. Aristotle refuses to divide the soul,

²The social constructionist theory, popularized in recent years, spurs and was spurred by anthropological research into emotions. It has been shown that many emotions are culturally relative, and consciously controlled. Certainly the evidence in favor of Aristotle's position is growing.

even at the cost of claiming that *orexis* (and its constituents) are voluntary. Aristotle's insistence that appetite can be voluntary establishes not only that he maintains, even in the *Ethics*, the opinion that the soul is a unity, but also that he does not believe there is a division between appetite and reason.

There is clearly room then, for speaking of appetite as overcoming reason without thereby positing a multipartite soul. *Orexis* can be seen as an *aspect* of the rational soul whose unique function can be defined as "that which moves toward the pleasant," but which is not practically separable from the rational faculty. Aristotle's discussions of appetite consistently include the implication of rational processes, or the explicit recognition that rationality relates to the functions of appetite. We can therefore conclude that the soul need not be divided into parts to perform its various functions, for there is no function that *orexis* fulfills on its own. Even in the simplest matters, rationality must be involved. At the same time, we are not committed to abandoning the practical deliberative reasoning that leads to right opinion—we do not need to say that *orexis* is that form of reason. On the contrary, appetite is often precisely imperfect reasoning. This also explains Aristotle's assertion that in temperance the appetites are aligned with right rule—it is not that there is no movement-toward anything at all, but that all of the practical syllogisms lead to the proper conclusion. We do not need to think of either *orexis* or rationality as separate parts of the soul, but we can think of the soul as the sort of substance that is capable of both careful and correct desiring and reasoning, and inappropriate desire and faulty reasoning. The faulty reasoning may impede, hide, or even overcome the more appropriate practical syllogism, but it need not be a separate element to do so.

Aristotle's account of the soul leads to an apparent paradox between his rejection of the multipartate soul and his account of incontinence. This seeming contradiction resolves itself under a particular interpretation of the notion of appetite, wherein appetite is viewed as an aspect of a desiring and rational unified soul.

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