ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF AKRASIA. TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY ANALOGY

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Abstract: The purpose of the present paper is twofold. First of all, I set forth the objective of exploring and analyzing, taking into consideration some commentators of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, his account of akrasia. The path I will follow could be broken down into a series of steps: I will begin by stating the relevance of Aristotle's discussion of incontinence in the context of this book and I will also highlight the method which he will use in tackling this issue, namely the dialectical one. Afterwards, I will focus on the four solutions of the puzzle, proposed by him in the Nicomachean Ethics. Last but not least, in the final section of my paper, I wish to explore whether it would be possible to construct an analogy between Aristotle's fourth solution and George Ainslie's concept of hyperbolic discounting.

Keywords: Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, akrasia, George Ainslie, hyperbolic discounting.

1. Some preliminary questions: Why does Aristotle talk about akrasia?

What method does he employ?

Before answering the questions I've put forward, I believe that a short historical note is in place, a note which represents a commonplace in the history of ideas. When Aristotle wrote his Nicomachean Ethics, what we might call the “status quo” opinion regarding akrasia was that this phenomenon represented an impossibility. For Socrates and Plato it was absurd to assert that a person would act immoral knowingly. As Amelie Rorty reveals, we can talk about three main theses of this Socratic position: (i) a person can't act immoral voluntarily, (ii) he who acts virtuously does so because he knows what is Good and also (iii) the object of moral knowledge is the Good. As a consequence, there is a necessary connection for Socrates and Plato between knowing the Good purpose and acting correctly from a moral point of view. Or, as Valentin Mureșan asserts, summing up their position, if someone acts immoral “he does it unknowingly. As a consequence, all forms of moral failure are caused by ignoring the good purpose, by a defective functioning of the phronesis.” Aristotle however opposes this view. He develops his own position regarding this matter in Nicomachean Ethics, Book


2 Mureșan, Valentin, Comentariu la Etica Nicomahică, Humanitas, București, 2007, p. 248
with a discussion of other hexis which are neither vice nor virtue: incontinence and brutishness.

First and foremost however, why is he interested in this topic? For example, Valentin Mureșan considers that Aristotle's discussion regarding akrasia is not at all accidental. As he points out, the exploration of the theme of incontinence represents a follow-up of his analysis from his previous book, On the Soul (De anima). Back then, Aristotle's purpose was that of inquiring about the particular purpose of the rational part of the soul in relation with virtue. His goal was that of highlighting the importance of phronesis in choosing the correct goal. Amelie Rorty confirms this conjecture: "Once Aristotle has tied virtue to phronesis, he must face the question of whether he is committed to a version of the Socratic position: the wrongdoing involves a failure of practical wisdom (phronesis) that essentially involves ignorance of what is good". Gerald Hughes accepts this interpretation, but introduces the concept of moral training. According to him, Aristotle wants to resolve the puzzle which was set forward by Plato and Socrates, because it has something to do with his concept of training to be virtuous: "after all, his account of moral training is much less narrowly intelectualist than that offered by Socrates. If we need to train our emotions before we can rely on our moral judgments ( since practical wisdom and moral virtue depend upon each other), then a lack of good moral training would lead to our being unable to form correct moral judgments".

What about the second question though, regarding what method does Aristotle employ? Quite similar to the discussion from the previous paragraph, critics concur that in the Nicomachean Ethics' book dedicated to incontinence we have the clearest example of the use of the method which he says from the beginning that he will employ, namely the dialectical one. In his own words, "We must, as in all cases, set the apparent facts before us, and, after discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about this affections of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently"(1145b, 3-8). After answering these questions, let us proceed to a more thorough analysis of Aristotle's perspective on incontinence and the four solutions he advances.

2. Aristotle's account of akrasia

In the previous section I've carried forth the idea that Aristotle employs the dialectical method in his exploration of akrasia. A useful manner to frame the consequences of this approach is advanced by Valentin Mureșan, which highlights the fact that Aristotle wishes to solve the following paradox (aporia) between two thesis:

(a) the Socratic denial of the possibility of akrasia (1145b, 25-30);
(b) incontinent actions are an empirical observable fact (1145b, 28).

So, Aristotle appears to say the following: even though Socrates might make a lot of sense, "to say nobody knowingly does wrong goes against what seems to be the most obvious facts of our experience". In order to attain his goal, he will try to make the two thesis compatible in a coherent manner, changing the Socratic thesis just enough so it could be

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3 From this point onward I will be using David Ross's translation of Nicomachean Ethics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009
4 Rorty, 267
6 Ibid., p. 149
compatible with the factual observation of the existence of akratic actions. As a consequence, Aristotle will try to show just how it would be possible that "someone who does wrong be said to know what they are doing?"\(^7\), and he will develop it in four different solution to the puzzle, in four different instances of akratic action.\(^8\)

The first solution can be found at 1146b, 31-36. It exploits the distinction between possessing knowledge and making use of it and possessing that knowledge and not make use of it. In other words, he considers that at least in some contexts it is possible to do wrong while not bearing in mind certain knowledge. For example, the incontinent consumer of alcohol does know the negative effects of alcohol consumption but, due to a certain type of desire he does not make use of that knowledge so he decides to consume alcohol in excess.

The second solution resembles in a way with the first: the distinction which was presented in the earlier paragraph is introduced in the context of the practical syllogism. In Aristotle's words, "since there are two types of premises, there is nothing to prevent a man having both premises and acting against his knowledge, provided that he is using only the universal premise and not the particular"(1146a, 1-3). The practical syllogism has the following form:

a) *Universal premise (major):* All products which contain tobacco are to be avoided.

b) *Particular premise (minor):* This contains tobacco.

\[\text{c) Conclusion: It is necessary that I should abstain from consuming that product.}\]

In this context, what Aristotle wishes to assert is that, if a person does not reach that conclusion if he has the knowledge regarding the universal premise, than he does not make use of the minor premise. However, this still represents a case of knowing and not knowing in the same time, just like in the first solution.

In 1147a, 10-24, Hughes and Valentin Muresan identify the third explanations for moral failure in the case of incontinent individuals. In this passage, Aristotle discusses other types of situations in which someone might know and do not know at the same time. In his own words, "for within the case of having knowledge and not using it we see a difference of state, admitting the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad or drunk"(1147a, 11-15). As a consequence, as Valentin Muresan observes, he is forced to introduce the distinction between a real possession of knowledge and an apparent one, similar in a way with how an actor interprets a role.

In my opinion, the fourth solution put forward by Aristotle represents the most interesting one, because it shifts towards a psychological explanation for the akratic behavior. Some further remarks are, however, needed. Interestingly enough, as Alferd R. Mele observes, “if, as Aristotle claims, the occurrence of an akratic action implies the presence of a deficiency in the agent's epistemic relation to a particular premise – let us call this a 'P'-deficiency" – then(by contra position) the absence of this deficiency implies the non occurrence of akratic action. Therefore, if the Aristotelian claim in question is correct, there is

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 150

\(^8\) Hughes reveals however that this is not the only interpretation of Aristotle's account. For example, he criticizes Goessling view (in Hughes, p.154) who considers that we don't have four different accounts of akratic actions but four steps in making the problem of incontinence more clear. Due to the scope of my paper I won't insist on this problem, and I will go on assuming that we have four different accounts.
some epistemic condition, concerning a particular premise, which precludes akratic action".9 Furthermore, following the footsteps of Amelie Rorty, we might say that some sort of desire represents the source of this epistemic condition which precludes incontinent acts: "Aristotle's diagnosis of the sources of akratic ignorance picks up one strand of Socratic description of the phenomena: that the person is led by pathe, like a slave, dragged around by (the thought of) pleasure".10

These ideas become more obvious if we take a closer look at 1147a, 30-35: "when, then, the universal opinion is present in us restraining us from tasting, and there is also the opinion that everything sweet is pleasant, and that this is sweet, (now this is the opinion that is active) and when appetite happens to be present in us the one opinion bids us to avoid it, but appetite leads us towards it". It is obvious that Aristotle frames the fourth solution also as a practical syllogism. What is interesting however is the emphasis he places on the psychological impact of desire in determining our actions. Reading the passage, Hughes makes a very interesting point: "the person does know that what he is doing is wrong, at least in some sense of 'know'; furthermore, the person does not straightforwardly assent to a contradiction; but despite knowing how he should have looked at the matter, he still chose to look at it in a different, and unreasonable, light, because, seen in this light, he can give himself a coherent reason for acting which fits in with what he desires".11

Before moving to the last objective of my paper, some intermediate conclusions are in place. First of all, Aristotle goes at length to resolve the paradox which resulted from the application of his dialectical method, namely that incontinence is not possible but in the same time it represents an empirical observable phenomenon. All his four solutions exploit this idea of knowing and not knowing in the same time, but just one highlights, at full length, the importance of psychological factors, namely the fourth one.

3. Towards a contemporary analogy: George Ainslie's concept of hyperbolic discounting

The purpose of the present section is that of exploring whether it would be possible to construct an analogy between Aristotle's conception of akrasia (more exactly his fourth solution) and what the psychologist and behavioral economist George Ainslie named hyperbolic discounting. I do not wish to argue that there is a necessary connection between the two of them, but only that their views might be analogous and compatible. Moreover, this short exercise should be seen as being similar to Valentin Muresan's analogy between Aristotle and Raimo Tuomela's general theory of human action.12

In his book *Breakdown of Will*, while writing about alcohol or drug consumption, procrastination, and the failure of carrying out our plans, Ainslie states that examples of self-defeating behavior abound. He defines this type of self-defeating activities with the term that Aristotle also used, namely akrasia. In contrast to Aristotle's period however, Ainslie benefits from social sciences such as behavioral economics or psychology which are much evolved

10 Rorty, p. 268
11 Hughes, p. 154
12 For a detailed account of Valentin Muresan's analogy see *Comentariu*, pp. 236-245.
and which could shed some light on the problem: "I believe that new findings make it possible to say a lot about the will and the reasons why it succeeds and fails where it does".  

The concept he uses in order to make sense of incontinent actions is that of hyperbolic discounting, namely the empirical observation that "people indeed maximize their prospective rewards, but they discount their prospects using a different formula from the one that's obviously rational". He goes on further to observe that "there is extensive evidence that both people and lower animals spontaneously value future events in inverse proportion to their expected delays. The resulting hyperbolic discount curve is seen over all time ranges, from seconds to decades. [...] it predicts temporary preferences for the poorer but earlier of two alternative goals during the time right before the poorer goal becomes available."  

Let's take one of his examples in order to make things more clearly. If for a certain person the action of drinking a bottle of whiskey is worth 100 points of utility in this moment, and this is coupled with a discount rate of 20% everyday, what Ainslie conjectures is that the idea his action of drinking would have been worth 80 points of utility yesterday, 64 before and so on and so forth. The same type of schemata is applicable to other type of activities. As an instance, he cites another interesting example: in a room full of people, nearly half of them would choose to receive 100$ in cash today than 200$ in cash next year. So, what Ainslie conjectures, is that some people (which Aristotle might have called incontinent), prefer smaller rewards in the present and not bigger ones in the future even though they can, rationally, determine the ratio of benefits. Why does this happen? This is the point where I think Ainslie and Aristotle might meet.  

If we take a closer look at Aristotle's fourth solution and Ainslie's concept of hyperbolic discounting of future rewards I think that we can definitely find a common ground. First of all, both Aristotle and Ainslie consider that incontinent individuals are able to form a concept of what is good to them. In Aristotle's case, he considers that all incontinent persons aspire to eudaimonia, to happiness. For Ainslie, all people with certain addictions, for example smokers, have a preference for health. The key similarity between the two is, I think, the way in which they explain moral failure. Both Aristotle's akratic individual and Ainslie's incontinent individual choose the smaller reward in contrast to the greater one (happiness in one case or health in the other). And they both do it from the same reason, namely because of our weakness of the will and the essential role played by desire.  

To conclude this analogy, just like desire in the case of Aristotle's practical syllogism obstructs us from taking into consideration the major premise (I am referring to the example Aristotle gives at 1147a, 30-35) and paves the way for an akratic action, in Ainslie's conceptual framework it determines us to discount hyperbolically greater future rewards (such as health) at the expense of smaller rewards in the present (the pleasure offered by smoking for example).  

4. Concluding remarks  
As I mentioned in the beginning of the paper, my purpose was that of exploring Aristotle's concept of akrasia and also to construct a contemporary analogy with Ainslie's concept of hyperbolic discounting. I begun first with exploring the answer in relation to a couple of questions, namely why does Aristotle talk about akrasia and what is the method that
he employs. Afterward I presented his account of incontinence, highlighting the four solutions that he advances and emphasizing on the last one, due to its psychological implications. In the end of the paper I tried to construct a minor analogy between Aristotle and Ainslie, namely between Aristotle’s fourth solution and the concept of hyperbolic discounting.

References
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