

DECONSTRUCTING THE ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT OF AKRASIA IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

If there can be an agreement amongst all humans on one thing, it would definitely be on the issue of Good Life. Without exception, all beings on this planet aspire to achieve a Good Life, even though; the very nature of Good Life being aspired may vary immensely across the board. A great deal of analysis on the issue has happened since antiquity and philosophers and thinkers of different traditions and orientations have come forth with their conceptualizations on the matter but we are still far away from any universal definition of the idea of Good Life. Aristotle is one such philosopher of Greek Tradition who has undertaken the analysis of this question and attempted to offer a rational explanation of its form and nature. However, more than Aristotle's conception of Good Life, it is his views on the obstructions that prevent us from achieving this goal, that are more important to understanding his ethical theory. The Greek term for this phenomenon is 'Akrasia', which may be translated as 'Weakness of the Will' or 'Lack of Self-Control'. In this paper, this Aristotelian concept of 'Akrasia' will be deconstructed to understand its meaning as well its implications in the contemporary perspective.

Keywords: *Good Life, Akrasia, Eudaimonia, Highest Good, Aristotle*

Introduction:

Aristotle wrote two major ethical treatises i.e. Nichomachian Ethics and Eudemian Ethics. The titles were not assigned by Aristotle himself but are taken from the names of the persons who edited these works. In the first case, it was Aristotle's son, Nicomachus while in the second case, it was his friend, Eudemus who was the editor of these books. In either case, the treatise starts with the discussion on the issue of 'Eudaimonia' which is the Greek term for Happiness. Aristotle realized and understood the fact that all human beings at their very core aspires for some kind of Happiness in life and that it formed the fundamental principle which determined their concept of Good Life. However, Aristotle is not merely interested in forming a purely theoretical model of the Good Life because a theory can be formulated simply by listing the items which are called as Good by people namely; being healthy, having friends and family, having money and means etc. For him, the bigger problem is to find the

highest form of good, a good that is not desired with the purpose of achieving other goods; rather all other forms of good are desired for the sake of this good.

In his attempt to determine and define the highest form of good for human beings, Aristotle delves deeper into understanding the essence of being human. Aristotle looks for the essential characteristics that separate humanity from other species and enable and empower us to live a more organized and more ethical life. He believes this essential feature separating us from other animals is our capacity to use reason to guide our lives. Whereas the lower beings have a nutritive soul responsible for growth and reproduction, a locomotive soul for motion, and a perceptive soul for perception, human beings as a species alone have a rational soul for speculation. This leads Aristotle to make a distinction in the case of humans that, unlike animals, we have an additional aspect of our soul which is rational in nature and which enables us to function in accordance with virtue. This is what forms the foundation of Aristotle's Virtue ethics and also the answer to the question of the 'Good Life'. Humans are expected to use their faculty of reasoning to lead a virtuous life and a life lived in this manner may be termed as 'Good Life', a life that is well-favored by Gods.

The focus on rationality and its role and significance in living a virtuous life is not unique to Aristotle. The discussion on these issues began with Socrates himself who gave the famous dictum of 'Knowledge is Virtue'. Socrates believed that true knowledge leads to ultimate good. Plato was the first to mention the Rational and Irrational aspects of the soul and he established a hierarchy of these aspects with the rational soul reigning supreme over other elements. Aristotle also followed a similar approach and believed that good lies in the dominance of reason. However, due to his pragmatic approach to ethics, he was confounded with a problem that could not be resolved within an existing theoretical framework. Aristotle could not ignore the fact that there were people in society who acted against common reason and with complete knowledge of the adverse consequences of their actions. This apparent inconsistency in the functioning of reasoning which is supposed to help us lead a virtuous life, made Aristotle think of the issue from a different perspective than his predecessors. Finally, Aristotle determined that the root of this problem lies in the phenomenon of 'Akrasia', a concept which is first described by Plato in his dialogue, *Protagoras*.

In this dialogue, Socrates says that Akrasia is impossible as 'No one willingly goes towards the bad'.¹ According to him, no one can intend an action to be better or worse than the other and still go for the bad one. In other words, if a man reasons well that a certain action is good then he will certainly and actively pursue that action and

¹ Plato, *Protagoras*, 352c 4-7 and 358d 1-2. NE 1146 24---26.

if a person still does something bad for him, then he is either ignorant of the facts or his knowledge is faulty. On the other hand, Plato believes in the possibility of Akrasia and attributes it to be the outcome of the victory of the irrational part of soul over the rational part.² However, in the case of both Socrates and Plato, the basic assumption that reason leads to ultimate good is not challenged and the emphasis is laid on application of reason rather than on understanding the causes of its breakdown.

Aristotle takes a different and more practical approach by attempting to define rather than deny the problem. He accepts the phenomenon as an empirical fact of life that cannot be ignored or overlooked by any amount of theorization to the contrary. ‘Weakness of the will’ or ‘Lack of Self Control’ are only one of the two ways in which this phenomenon is translated but there are suggestive enough to make everyone realize their vulnerability to them. Even the most enlightened and accomplished amongst our race have succumbed to Akrasia at some point in their lives. Evidence to this effect is too numerous to quote and can be easily found scattered in the pages of any Autobiography. It, therefore, becomes all the more important that we understand the concept and accept its effect on our lives so that we can rise above the problem. Here again, Aristotle can show us the way through his deliberations on the issue.

The account of Akrasia and the classification of its different forms as given by Aristotle can be found majorly in Nicomachian Ethics. It seems that Aristotle believes Akrasia lies in the middle ground between Virtue and Vice and thus plays a vital role in the process of ethical reasoning. He begins by distinguishing between impetuous and weak Akrasia and between Akrasia that is caused by ‘Thumos’ and the Akrasia that is caused by bodily desires. He says,

*“Akrasia about Thumos is less shameful than the Akrasia about bodily desires, for "Thumos appears to hear reason a bit, but to mishear it. It is like those overhasty servants who tend to run out before they have even heard all their instructions and thus carry them out wrongly.”*³

Regarding the second distinction, he says,

*“One type of Akrasia is impetuosity and the type is weakness. For the weak person deliberates but his own feelings make him abandon the result of his deliberations.”*⁴

² Plato, *Republic* 439a-440b.

³ NE 1149a 25-30.

⁴ NE 1150b 20-23.

These distinctions need to be unpacked and understood from a wider perspective. For this purpose, a reference to other quotes from Aristotle on this very issue is warranted. In the same book, *Nicomachian Ethics*, at one place Aristotle says,

*“In the Akratic i.e. weak-willed and Enkrates i.e. self-controlled, we tend to praise the reason, because he exhorts these correctly and towards that which is best; but they also have in them something else that is by nature apart from reason, clashing and struggling with reason.”*⁵

Here Aristotle appears to be attributing *Akrasia* to some element in our being, our soul which influences our reasoning and leads us away from the Good. Some scholars have referred to this kind of argumentation by Aristotle as the ‘motivational conflict account’ which appears to be derived from Plato’s theory of conflict between irrational and rational aspects of our soul. Sometimes irrational impulses overcome and move rational thinking, as one sphere tends to move another sphere or as desire influences another desire which is the case when *Akrasia* occurs. This can be further explained through the example of an Alcoholic. There is no apparent reason to doubt that an Alcoholic is unaware of ill effects of his drinking habits. The rational thinking part of an Alcoholic is convinced of the benefits of not drinking. However, the desire or the urge of the body for alcohol motivates an alcoholic person to drink again and again, overpowering all rational thinking and creating a conflict in their being.

A different account for this phenomenon is given by Aristotle in another place in same book where he attributes the reason for *Akrasia* to ignorance rather than motivation. He says,

*“We should say that Akratic people have the knowledge in a same kind of way to these people like the mad and the drunken etc. Saying the words that arise from knowledge is clearly no sign of fully understanding those words. For those people who are affected in this way even recite verses and demonstrations of Empedocles, and those people who have just begun to learn do not yet know it even though they string the words together. So we must assume that those who are acting Akratically can also say the words in the way that actors do.”*⁶

This explanation of *Akrasia* by Aristotle has been termed as the Ignorance account by scholars and is believed to be closer to the Socratic understanding of the concept. As per the explanation of this account, an Akratic person seems to possess knowledge

⁵ NE 1102b 15-19.

⁶ NE 1147a 20-25.

while it is actually not the case. The knowledge that an Akritic person supposedly has is only superficial or verbally acquired just as an actor learns their lines before a performance. There seems to be no real understanding of the words being spoken by an Akritic because if that was the case, there was no possibility of acting against one's rational judgment. Another example will make the distinction more clear. Let us consider the case of a person who indulges in overeating. The said person may be considered eating a second and then third helping of cake while simultaneously saying that they should not be doing so as it is not good for their health. This person seems to suffer from cognitive failure as there is no correlation between their actions and words. They are saying one thing and doing something totally opposite as if they are not even aware of what they are saying but simply repeating the things as part of a social habit.

The above two accounts given by Aristotle as reasons for Akrasia may seem contradictory to each other on the surface. Whether it is the desires which make a person go against their better judgment or is it this judgment that is at fault because it arises out of ignorance. A person may get confused about the root cause for their Akritic behavior which may prevent them from overcoming the problem. This dilemma needs to be resolved or at least better understood for a long-lasting resolution of the issue. Both the Ancient as well as the contemporary commentators on Aristotle have worked on many different strategies to overcome the difficulty. Some of these thinkers, who are more influenced by the Socratic Method and Aristotelian formulation of Practical Syllogism, have tried to undermine the motivational conflict account by downplaying the role desires play in the process of decision-making.⁷ It is generally expected that a person makes their decision after a rational and logical evaluation of all consequences and if there is any error in the final outcome, it must be due to the breakdown in the process for lack of knowledge or ignorance.

This kind of reasoning has been more popular in the past when rationality played a dominant role in all intellectual discourse. The narrative has however changed in recent years with the focus shifting to the cognitive aspect of our behavior. The computational model of cognitive functioning has once again highlighted the role played by desires in our decision-making process. Thinkers favoring Aristotle's desire-based explanation of practical reasoning tend to believe that differences in the valuational judgments between an Akritic and virtuous person can be explained by the differences in their desires.⁸ Many such models are being presented by contemporary thinkers and philosophers who have tried to present a modern-day perspective of the

⁷ Cf. Moss 2009 and Lorenz 2006.

⁸ Wiggins 1980 and Charles 1984.

problem. In this paper, two such models shall be briefly examined to give a glimpse of the thought process involved in the building up of the current narrative.

First is George Ainslie's concept of hyperbolic discounting. George Ainslie was a psychologist and behavioral economist who developed the theory of hyperbolic discounting where he argues that we make different judgments when we are close to achieving reward than when we are further away from it. In his book 'Breakdown of Will', Ainslie presents many examples of self-defeating activities and also uses the term *Akrasia* to define this self-defeating behavior. He observes that "people indeed maximize their prospective rewards, but they discount their prospects using a different formula from the one that is obviously rational."⁹ Ainslie terms this phenomenon as Hyperbolic Discounting with emphasis on the fact that it is empirically verifiable. He further observes, "There is extensive evidence that both people and lower animals spontaneously value future events in inverse proportion to their expected delays." So, Ainslie claims that all animals including humans are psychologically programmed to go for immediate rewards even if they are less in quantity rather than long-term benefits of much larger proportion. This can explain the behavior of a smoker or alcoholic who prefer immediate gratification over future health benefits.

Next is Donald Davidson's treatment of the problem. He expands the scope of *Akrasia* to include any judgment that is reached but not fulfilled, whether it is on account of an opinion, a real or imagined good, or a moral belief. According to him, *Akrasia* occurs when an agent seeks to fulfill a desire but ends up making a choice that was not their preferred decision. Davidson frames the problem as that of reconciling an inconsistent triad with the following premises.

1. If the agent believes A to be better than B, then they want to do A more than B.
2. If the agent wants to do A more than B, then the agent will do A rather than B.
3. Sometimes an agent acts against their better judgment.

Davidson solves the problem by suggesting "when people act in this manner, they believe that the worse course of action is better because they have not made an all-things-considered decision but only a decision based on a subset of possible outcomes."¹⁰ This may appear to be a conflict between reason and emotion, where emotion overpowers reason so that a person may believe that they should do A rather than B but still end up wanting to do B more than A. Thus there are different kinds of motivation at play which are in conflict with each other and a person is left to make a

⁹ Ainslie, George, *Breakdown of Will*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.28

¹⁰ Davidson, Donald, *How is Weakness of Will Possible*, Oxford University Press, 1969, p.21-42

choice. And more often than not, we discover that the choices made by us are on the basis of emotion rather than reason.

Conclusion:

A lot has been written on the Aristotelian concept of Akrasia and the present paper is a small attempt to deconstruct the issue in a contemporary perspective. As mentioned in the beginning itself, a good life is a life lived happily. Happiness is the ultimate goal to aspire for but the means to achieve this goal shall be carefully chosen. Aristotle has laid the yardstick of reason, both as a tool and the method to reach this goal in life. While he establishes reason to be the highest virtue, he also acknowledges that this virtue may not be directly attainable for all. The old definition of men being rational, social, animals need a modification. The emotional aspect of our being should find a suitable place and expression. Today, there is a much wider realization and acceptance of this aspect as can be seen from emphasis on measuring EQ or Emotional Quotient along with IQ or Intelligence quotient of aspiring candidates to a job. Therefore Aristotle accepts and in fact advocates the need for other virtues in life. Friendship, courage, and empathy are some of the virtues that will definitely enrich a person's life. It is true that at every step in life, a person would be facing Akrasia, a temptation to make a shortcut, a desire to take an easier option, a lure of immediate gratification but there is hope in that fact that with knowledge and with reason, the will can be made stronger and the self-control can be regained.