

What is missing from analytic-inspired contemporary discussions of akrasia

O que está faltando nas discussões contemporâneas de inspiração analítica sobre akrasia

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exercise in conceptual engineering, the philosophical practice of analysing concepts, identifying their actual and/or potential limitations, and designing new ones. In engaging in conceptual engineering, one aims to improve a concept's clarity, usefulness, or alignment with certain goals. In this paper, I tackle the concept of akrasia that has been deployed by contemporary analytic-inspired philosophers in recent decades, people such as Donald Davidson, Richard Hare, Alfred Mele, and others. I argue two things. First, that the contemporary discussion of akrasia among these scholars has progressively moved away from the original discussion of akrasia amid the ancient sources, whereby reference to akrasia is first found. Second, that the concept of akrasia deployed by contemporary analytic-inspired discussion suits the goals of this discussion, which is primarily concerned with explaining how akrasia is possible or why it is not; but it does not suit the goals of understanding what akrasia is.

Keywords: Akrasia. Weakness of willpower. Contemporary philosophy. Inquiry-based epistemology. Conceptual engineering.

RESUMO

Este artigo é um exercício em engenharia conceitual, a prática filosófica de analisar conceitos, identificar suas limitações reais e/ou potenciais e projetar novos. Ao se envolver em engenharia

conceitual, busca-se melhorar a clareza, utilidade ou alinhamento de um conceito com certos objetivos. Neste artigo, abordo o conceito de *akrasia* que vem sendo empregado por filósofos contemporâneos de inspiração analítica nas últimas décadas, pessoas como Donald Davidson, Richard Hare, Alfred Mele e outros. Eu argumento duas coisas. Primeiro, que a discussão contemporânea sobre *akrasia* entre esses estudiosos se afastou progressivamente da discussão original sobre *akrasia* entre as fontes antigas, onde as primeiras referências à *akrasia* são encontradas. Segundo, que o conceito de *akrasia* empregado na discussão contemporânea de inspiração analítica se adéqua aos objetivos desta discussão, que se preocupa principalmente em explicar como a *akrasia* é possível ou por que não é; mas não se adéqua aos objetivos de entender o que *akrasia* é.

Palavras-chave: Akrasia. Fraqueza da força de vontade. Filosofia contemporânea. Epistemologia da investigação. Engenharia conceitual.

Preliminary Remarks

The topic of weakness of the will, or *a-krasia* (whereby *a-* means “lack” and *kratos* means “power”, or “strength”) in philosophy is a very old one, reaching at least as far back as Plato’s *Protagoras*. In this dialogue, the character Socrates discusses it in terms of the following puzzle (351a-358d): sometimes a person recognize what is best to do but end up doing something else instead. What is actually going on there? Are they really choosing to do what they deem worse, or is this rather that they couldn’t have done otherwise? In this dialogue, Socrates famously argued that, whereby it appears that a person knows what is good to do but does something different instead, what is actually going on is that the person is ignorant. This person doesn’t know what the good is. Putative cases of *akrasia*, thus, are actually cases of ignorance, that have not been described correctly. “No one,” Socrates says, “who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course” (358b-c)¹.

Philosophers’ motivations to engage in discussions of *akrasia* have varied enormously throughout the history of western thought. In contemporary philosophy, interest appears to have arisen when scholars observed that the very idea of weakness of willpower poses a challenge to certain theories of action they wish to defend. Those are theories that in some way or another entail a form of motivational internalism, the idea that judgments about action correspond directly with motivation, or are sufficient to motivate. *Akrasia* challenges such theories because it presents the possibility of a person evaluating a certain course of action as being best overall, and yet not being motivated to take it.

One of such philosophers is Donald Davidson, insofar as the idea of one’s acting against one’s better judgment challenges the theory that reasons both rationalize and cause actions, developed by him in “Actions, Reasons and Causes” (1963). Another one is Richard Hare, whose theory of moral prescriptivism devised in *The Language of Morals* (1952) and in *Freedom and Reason* (1963) is defied by the idea that one can act in a certain way while judging it is best to act differently. And another one is Alfred Mele, who took an interest in the topic not because it

¹ The doctrine appears to have been abandoned later on or, at least, substantially revised. The character Socrates from the *Phaedrus* seems to no longer hold that knowing what is good to do suffices for actually doing it, since he admits that sometimes a person knows what is good to do but is not capable of doing it (*Phaedrus* 237d-238b).

challenged his theory of action, but rather because he wanted to develop a theory of action that took the possibility of akratic action seriously from the very beginning. This was what he set out to do in *Irrationality* (1987), a book that came about as a corollary of what he had been doing in previous works².

Though these scholars endorse very different theories of action, and in fact very different broad philosophical views, what is common among them is that they approach akrasia from an action theory standpoint. They are concerned with, as Davidson puts it, an “analysis of the logical form of action sentences” (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 97). For those purposes, they equate akrasia with a single and detached episode of one’s acting against their better judgment, and are set out to explain either *how* this episode is possible or *why* it is not.

In so doing, they work from a characterization of akrasia that construes it against a background of inconsistent principles, the classic so-called “akrasia puzzle”, which comprises the following three principles:

P1. If an agent wants to do X more than he wants to do Y and he believes himself free to do either X or Y, then he will intentionally do X if he does either X or Y intentionally.

P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do X than to do Y, then he wants to do X more than he wants to do Y.

P3. There are akratic actions (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 95).

There has been, roughly, three routes out of this puzzle: to reject **P3**, denying the actual occurrence of akrasia; to reject **P2**, denying that the connection between evaluation and motivation is as straightforward as it seems; and to spell out the three principles again in alternative forms, showing that they can be consistent, after all. Hare, much like Socrates, took the first path, rejecting **P3**; Mele took the second one, rejecting **P2**, and Davidson took the third one, re-stating the principles in a way that they no longer contradict one another.

Those strategies hinge, of course, on how the concept of *akratic action*, deployed in **P3**, is interpreted. For the set of principles to be a puzzle, in the first place, akratic action has to be interpreted as satisfying the conditions for being an action, of course, and it has to be interpreted as a special type of action, one that necessarily makes it impossible for one to accept both **P1** and **P2** at the same time. Thus we have an elementary definition of akrasia underpinning the puzzle. Call it “the action-based concept” of akrasia, or simply **AKRASIA_{ab}**.

AKRASIA_{ab}

An action X is an akratic action if and only if (a) X is intentional; (b) the agent believes that there is an alternative action Y open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do Y than to do X (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 94; 1980, p. 22)³.

Now, there is a couple of things we must observe about **AKRASIA_{ab}**.

² For instance, in a paper called “Akrasia, Reasons and Causes” (MELE, 1983), which is a direct discussion with Davidson (1963), as well as in other papers, such as Mele (1986).

³ Most of the definitions of akrasia found in philosophy papers in the Anglo-American tradition are inheritors of Davidson’s definition, and ever so slightly modified versions of it. See instance, Audi (1979, p. 185), Bratman (1979, p. 153), and Mele (1983, p. 347).

Peculiarities of AKRASIA_{ab}

The first thing to be noticed about AKRASIA_{ab} is that it represents akrasia as a property of actions rather than a property of persons. In fact, some things (good and bad) about conducts and behaviours are ascribable to actions better than they are ascribable to persons – qualities such as “adequate”, “moral”, and “irrational”. Other predicates, however, are ascribable to persons better than they are ascribable to the actions themselves. We don’t say, for instance, that an action X was patient, or that X was an episode of patience. We say rather that, in doing X, John was patient; or that John acted patiently. In any case, patience is a quality of John, that his action makes visible.

The same appears to hold true of predicates that refer to weaknesses and strengths. Typically, we don’t say that action Y was strong, or weak. We say that Mary, who did Y, was strong (or weak), and that her strength (or weakness) was made visible through Y. One of the earliest philosophers to conceptualize weakness of the will, Aristotle, deployed this distinction (between qualities of persons and qualities of actions), upon observing that strength is something a person either has or doesn’t have, and that strength is acquired by consistently performing certain specific acts⁴. Others, in the contemporary tradition, have also acknowledge that, e.g., Mele, who observes that “Akrasia, strictly speaking, is not a type of action, but a condition of a person which may be manifested in action” (MELE, 1980, p. 360). Nevertheless, AKRASIA_{ab} locates the problem of akrasia at the level of actions, and not at a personal level.

A second thing to be observed is that AKRASIA_{ab} interprets akrasia as being a matter of single and isolated *episodes* of performing one action that doesn’t conform to one’s judgment all-things-considered. Such an interpretation is considerably stipulative, since it involves ascribing mental states to a person, and mental states that are synchronic (simultaneously present at a certain moment), as a point of departure for analysis. The building blocks of action theory, as we know it, are concepts such as “intention”, “belief”, “judgment” and “desire”, which are taken to refer to mental states. So scholars discussing akrasia from an action theory standpoint operate by stipulating that, if a subject S has an intention *i* and a judgement *j* at *t*, and if S performs action *a* at *t*, whereby *a* is in accordance with *i* but contrary to *j*, then *a* was an akratic action, and what has been described was an episode of akrasia. The ascription of *i* and *j* to S is stipulative.

How is that a problem? Certainly it is not a problem if what one wants is to know akrasia’s conditions of possibility – since for akrasia to be possible we have to have a person and this person needs to have certain beliefs and perform certain actions. But it becomes a problem if what one wants is to attain is knowledge of *what akrasia is*⁵. That’s because, in stipulating that any action that fits the abovementioned description will be an akratic action, AKRASIA_{ab} portrays akrasia episodically. But weakness of willpower is typically not episodic (though it is true that, if you only look once, i.e., at one detached action, it will of course look like an episode, because all you’re seeing is one action). This point has been acknowledged by people like Amélie Rorty, who stresses: “Of course it [akrasia] can in principle occur as a single momentary event, a kind of motivational or epistemic sneeze, a single absent-minded lightfingered questionable bond sale or an isolated flare of rage. But it rarely does” (RORTY, 1997, p. 649). Typically, it is a “chronic”

⁴ Book II of the Nichomachean ethics contains a discussion of whether it is correct to say that in order to acquire a personal trait, such as justice, men must do actions that are themselves instances of those qualities (i.e., just acts). He concludes by saying that this is indeed an accurate description.

⁵ “Knowing what a thing is” is what some scholars have termed erotetic knowledge, cf. Abath (2022).

condition in certain people, or at least this is how it is typically portrayed in the classic examples, drawn from ancient literature, that will be discussed soon.

In short: if one's goal to attain knowledge of what akrasia is and one works with **AKRASIA_{ab}** as plausible answer, **AKRASIA_{ab}** will misinform them, to the extent that it will mislead them into forming wrong beliefs about what akrasia is, such as the belief that akrasia is episodic. Another way of seeing this is by observing that, in stipulating that subject *S* had an intention *i* and a judgment *j* at *t*, one is in fact stipulating that action *a* (that action that *S* ends up taking, at *t*) is akratic. And because it has been stipulated that *a* is akratic, we won't know whether *a* is an action of the same type or of a different type of any putative action in our lives and in the lives of those around us. That is, for any action *a'* in our lives, or in someone else's life, we won't know, at the end of the day, if any *a'* is an instance of weakness of willpower, or if it is just something that looks like one, and that has been misleadingly described as being one.

Because of that, even if episodes do exist in which weakness of willpower is made noticeable through an isolated action, venturing explanations of how those episodes are possible, or of why they are not, is a theoretical endeavour that progressively takes away the possibility of making sense of weakness of willpower in the real world. "The akratic man", Van den Beld, puts it, "is not a theoretical construction; he belongs to the real world" (VAN DEN BELD, 1985, p. 504). If somebody has an interest of trying to understand what goes on with akratic people, their real, concrete experience (rather than having the goal of trying to accommodate the possibility of akrasia within one's preferred theory), working from **AKRASIA_{ab}** will not take them very far. The reason why it won't take one very far is that **AKRASIA_{ab}** is an impoverished concept, for those purposes. It makes no reference to a variety of aspects of the phenomenon of weakness of willpower that are phenomenologically salient, and therefore relevant for a proper understanding of what akrasia is.

Specifically, I'll go on to argue that two aspects of akrasia that are fundamental for an understanding of what it is are absent from **AKRASIA_{ab}**: diachronicity, and vacillation. Those aspects are meant not as necessary and sufficient conditions for akrasia, but rather as prototypical traits of the phenomenon; whereby the prototypes are the examples of weakness of willpower found in the ancient literature – the ones that fixed the reference of the very idea of akrasia. Highlighting these two elements will make it clear that akrasia is more than **AKRASIA_{ab}** enables us to see.

Diachronicity

It appears as though the biggest problem akrasia poses in our concrete lives, the biggest reason why it is a problem to philosophers, stems from it being a diachronic phenomenon, that is, something that typically extends itself *over time*, in some way. Akrasia shows itself across a certain time slice. As Aristotle, one of the earliest philosophers to conceptualize akrasia, remarked: it is an "intermittent evil" (ARISTOTLE, Nic. Eth. 7.8.1).

In general, it is not much of a problem if a person who deems it best to stick to a healthy diet, for instance, indulges herself at a time, or from time to time. The real problem arises when it becomes a lifestyle. Construing akrasia episodically misses this point entirely⁶. Consider two people, both of whom have formed a plan to diet. One of them slips out of line at the odd dinner

⁶ This aspect is highlighted and extensively discussed by Snellen (2018) in her much inspiring PhD dissertation. According to Snellen, construing akrasia episodically focuses solely in its synchronic aspect (doing A while *at the same time* judging it would be best to do B instead), and leaves its diachronic aspect aside.

party, but then gets back on track the next day; whereas the other does not have any consistency in their meal choices. Following **AKRASIA_{ab}**, both of these people are guilty of akrasia, and the difference between them might be only of degree (the latter person has been guilty of akrasia more times). But it appears as though the latter person is in a different type of trouble. Whilst the former falls to temptation once, and is capable of getting back on track, the latter is not. He or she falls to temptation every day, or nearly every day – not being capable of getting back on track became a part of who they are. So it appears as though the latter person deserves the label of “weak”, or “weak-willed” much more so than the former one, if the former deserves it at all.

This aspect of akrasia is an ethical dimension of the phenomenon, that is, it makes it salient that akrasia has ethical implications. “Practical reasoning”, Hoffman says, “is not a disembodied calculation. It does not have a sharply definable beginning and a clear-cut end, but rather extends over time” (HOFFMAN, 2008, p. x-xi). By virtue of its power to extend over time, akrasia “infects” one’s practical reasoning, and in so doing it infects one’s life. It turns one’s life into something worse than it could otherwise be; and it turns us into worse people than we could otherwise be, precisely because it becomes a part of who we are.

This ethical dimension of akrasia is salient in the many accounts the notion has been given throughout the history of western thought. Ancient and medieval philosophers viewed akrasia primarily as a problem that falls within the domain of ethics (rather than a logical problem, or a problem that falls within the domain that we would nowadays call action theory). They saw it as a character trait that gets in the way of an ethical ideal, such as living a virtuous life, or a life exempt from sin (SNELLEN, 2018, p. 14-15). Renaissance, in turn, saw it as a sort of curse, something associated with disgrace and tragedy in one’s life (VASILIAUSKAS, 2016). The crucial thing to be observed is that those ethical consequences of akrasia only become visible because akrasia is diachronic. Nevertheless, in representing akrasia as an isolated event, **AKRASIA_{ab}** is blind to its ethical consequences, that are bound to seem unimportant or even non-existent.

In fact, some contemporary philosophers even went on to argue that setting ethical implications aside is important for a philosophical treatment of akrasia. Davidson, for instance, thinks that in discussing akrasia we should dwell on the cases where moral or ethical considerations “simply don’t enter the picture”, so we do not succumb to the temptation of reducing akrasia to such “special cases” (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 100). In other words, he holds that the ethical side of weakness of the will is not essential to what akrasia is. He believes not all cases of weakness of willpower have ethical implications, because he believes it is episodic; and he wants to focus on the cases that do not have ethical implications because he is interested in understanding how weakness of the will is possible, not *what* it is.

In Davidson’s view, cases pertaining to which some ethical consideration is relevant are only a small set of special cases of the phenomenon (and obviously he doesn’t want his theory to apply to such special cases only, because those cases are rare). They seldom occur, in one’s life, if they occur at all. Yet he thinks that akrasia (of the sort he is interested in) happens every day. It is a much more ordinary thing than we tend to imagine. What he might be failing to appreciate, though, is that the small things that we do every day might harm us, in the long run, as much as big dramatic errors that only happen once in a blue moon, if they indeed happen every day.

Davidson might contend that although akrasia of the sort he is interested in indeed happens everyday, it need not happen to *you* everyday. He admits that some cases (the special cases) are marked by an appearance of consistent reoccurrence, but insists that this “is not essential [...], for the ‘weakness’ may be momentary, not a character trait: when we speak of ‘weakness’ we may merely express, without explaining, the fact that the agent did what he

knew to be wrong" (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 96-97). His picturesque example of an ordinary (non-special) and momentary case of weakness of will is that of the person that forgets to brush his teeth on a certain night:

I have just relaxed in bed after a hard day when it occurs to me that I have not brushed my teeth. Concern for my health bids me rise and brush; sensual indulgence suggests I forget my teeth for once. I weigh the alternatives in the light of the reasons: on the one hand, my teeth are strong, and at my age decay is slow. It won't matter much if I don't brush them. On the other hand, if I get up, it will spoil my calm and may result in a bad night's sleep. Everything considered I judge I would do better to stay in bed. Yet my feeling that I ought to brush my teeth is too strong for me: wearily I leave my bed and brush my teeth (DAVIDSON, 1969, p. 100).

If that person forgot to brush their teeth before going to bed once (and therefore had to deal with the dilemma of getting up to brush them versus staying in bed just once in his entire lifetime), how is that even a problem? It surprises me that this is even worth discussing, to be fair. We might as well just say that he was deceiving himself in thinking that he had a certain opinion (that all things considered, he should not bother getting up to brush his teeth), whereas in reality his opinion was different⁷. Or that he simply acted out of habit, when he got up to brush his teeth. He might have done that just because that is how he is used to proceed, just like, for instance, reaching out for the gear stick with your left hand, when driving a car (borderline case of rationality). It is not clear that, at that time, the subject acted rationally – unless, of course, it has been stipulated that he did. But then, is it legitimate to make such stipulation, if what one wants is to understand the phenomenon? If the only thing indicating that that subject getting up to brush his teeth was a proper action (i.e., the result of certain intentions and desires) is the stipulation that that was an action, then concrete, real life cases that look like the toothbrushing case on the outside, but in which the stipulation is absent *could* involve no proper actions, in which case they wouldn't be worthy of philosophical attention, even from action theorists.

The sort of case in which the person does appear to be suffering from some form of weakness, and therefore the sort that does pose a real problem, are those in which there is iteration. i.e., those whereby the person is forgetting to brush his teeth time and time again, and in every time it happens, his struggle before the dilemma (of getting up versus staying in bed) is the same. In those cases, we wouldn't be able to posit that the subject's getting up to brush his teeth was a matter of habit (we wouldn't be able to say that the subject had habit to start with, since he forgets to do it so often). Is Davidson's toothbrush case a case that involves iteration? Might be. Maybe the situation described in the excerpt is one that does happen to the subject every other night. But surely this wasn't made clear in the example, where the reader gets the impression that what is being described is a one-shot occurrence.

Many other purported examples of akrasia that we find in Anglo-American literature are similar to Davidson's toothbrushing example in structure, in the sense that they depict situations that don't pose a real problem if they only happen once. Audi (1979, p. 173), for instance, offers the example of a person who gets carried away reading a book, because he is too comfortable

⁷ This is how Richard Hare interprets cases that appear to fall under the description of akrasia given by proponents of causal theories of action, such as Davidson. Here is what he says: "If a man does what he says he ought not to, though perfectly able to resist the temptation to do it, then there is something wrong with what he says, as well as with what he does. In the simplest case it is insincerity; he is not saying what he really thinks. In other cases it is self-deception; he thinks that he thinks he ought, but he has escaped his own notice using 'ought' in an off-colour way" (HARE, 1977, p. 82-83).

where he is sat, and postpones doing other tasks until the next day. Bratman (1979) offers the example of Sam, a man who is sitting by a bottle of wine. "Suppose Sam", he says "knows that if he drinks the wine he will suffer a bad headache in the morning and further that, given the late hour, he must go right to sleep if he is to be fully rested for an important job he must do the next day. [...] He then reaches for the wine, pours it into a glass and proceeds to drink it" (BRATMAN, 1979, p. 156). Those cases are meant to fit with, or to illustrate, **AKRASIA_{ab}**. But they look like, if anything, cases of a person indulging him or herself one time. For the reasons I've exposed, they don't help us much if our goal is to achieve knowledge of what akrasia is⁸.

Vacillation

Another aspect that seems to be crucial for a proper understanding of what akrasia is (and of how it is different from other phenomena), but that is nearly entirely absent from action theory-based discussion, is consideration of the fact that, in akrasia, agents struggle in the face of a dilemma. Akrasia is, precisely, an attitude people undertake when they find themselves before dilemmas, of both small and big proportions. As Shakespeare warns us in *The Merchant of Venice*: "If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces" (2.1.11-12). That is to say, knowing what needs to be done is easy, doing it is difficult. Why is it difficult? Because you keep being confronted with the fact that alternatives are open: you can do what needs to be done, but you can do something else instead. This is what vacillation is.

For present purposes, let's define dilemma as being any situation in which a choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, and this choice is experienced as difficult, so it brings vacillation. If we turn to the literature and look into the classical examples of akrasia – the ones that are the least stipulative, and, therefore, the ones that are more concrete, in essence, insofar as they are meant to portray a situation that someone went through –, we see the prevalence of vacillation. Typically, the examples feature a person cornered within a delicate situation whereby they cannot see an obvious solution, or an easy way out, even though technically speaking they should be able to see the solution as obvious, or the way out as easy. They should be able to see the way out as easy because they have (the akratic person has) a general understanding that tells them what the best course of action is; a guideline, say. But they have other inclinations that are strong too, so the situation presents them with a fundamental difficulty. It does not simply "result" in action that violates that guideline. What happens, rather, is that the person dwells in a type of internal conflict.

For instance, take Alcibiades, in Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades is probably the first character in western literature that is meant to represent a real life case of a person suffering from weakness of willpower (CARTLEDGE, 1987; ALLEN, 1993; CALLARD, 2014, 2016). An extravagant man with great love of power and a propensity towards excesses, he is made to feel ashamed of himself and of the flamboyant life he had been living, upon hearing Socrates speech on the value of living a simple and virtuous life (216a-b). He then "vacillates between the 'good' that he had previously taken to be an accurate measure of his life, and the good of virtue that

⁸ Some examples, however, are a little bit different, as, e.g., Jackson's (1984). He offers as an example of akrasia the case of a person who accidentally dents someone's car, and then drives away quickly, even though he knew that the right thing to do was to leave a note with his telephone number. His might not have been a good action, and certainly it is an action that causes damage, even if it only happens once – but it is difficult to see how the damage here would have been a matter of willpower. That is to say, it is not at all clear how this case is different from making a moral mistake one time.

Socrates helps him to see" (SHANAHAN, 2019, p. 137). Alcibiades stresses: "I know perfectly well that I can't prove him [Socrates] wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment that I leave his side, I go back to my old ways" (216b).

As Shanahan remarks, the passage also demonstrates that Alcibiades "has the ability to re-evaluate the quality of his life [...] but, there is still an internal conflict between this new good that Socrates has shown him and the old 'good'" (SHANAHAN, 2019, p. 137). The conflict is so intense and it upsets Alcibiades so much that he declares, in the passages following that speech, that he couldn't help the feeling that he would rather die. So not only is Alcibiades described as rocking back and forth with his inclinations, he is also described (or rather describes himself) as experiencing tremendous distress on account of that.

In other times and contexts within the ancient world, vacillation in the face of a dilemma continued to be salient as an important feature of what is going on with people that have been latter described as suffering from weakness of willpower. Take, for instance, Saint Paul's struggle between knowing and doing recounted in his Letter to the Romans. He says: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom. 7: 19); and "[...] I delight in the Law of God, concerning the inner man: But I see another law in my members, rebelling against" (Rom. 7: 22-23). This example is later discussed by Saint Augustine as a case of weakness of willpower regarding sexual drive (STOWERS, 1994, p. 279; STENDAHL, 1976, p. 78-96). What Saint Paul is dealing with is a dilemma, in the sense that the choices that are required of him present themselves as being difficult to make. It is not easy for him to choose wisely, i.e., in accordance with what he believes a faithful Christian should do. Even if in the end of a certain occasion he ends up doing what he deems right, refraining from giving in to temptation and lust, his will proves itself too weak to prevail across situations, inasmuch as new opportunities to sin continue to present themselves, and in each of those opportunities he has to seek the means to resist temptation all over again.

Another emblematic example of akrasia from the ancient literature, perhaps the most emblematic of all, is the case of the protagonist in Euripides' play *Medea*. Medea murders her own two children in response to Jason's betrayal. Just before the deed, though, she deliberates about whether or not to proceed, in a long monologue (lines 1021-1080 of the play)⁹. Here is how second-century medical writer Galen described Medea's akrasia as it is made visible through the monologue:

She knew what an unholy and terrible thing she was doing, when she set out to kill her children, and therefore she hesitated... Then anger dragged her again to the children by force, like some disobedient horse that has overpowered the charioteer; then reason in turn drew her back and led her away, then anger again exerted an opposite pull, and then again reason (GALEN, 1978, §3.3., p. 14-16).

This is, if anything, a person vacillating in the face of a tremendous dilemma. Of course we don't *know* whether or not Medea's struggle during her deliberation was like this, because Medea is a fictional character, for one thing; and because it is Galen saying that that is how it would have been. So we are accepting a stipulation. But this is a collateral point here. The point here is that this sort of description played a role in fixing the reference of the term "akrasia" as well as in delimiting the scope of the concept, for it is by virtue of the salient trait I've called attention to (vacillation) that Medea's case, as well as Saint Paul's and Alcibiades', have been

⁹ The lines corresponding to Medea's monologue are some of the most controversial and most studied parts from all of Euripides' work. For a summary analysis of some of the main hermeneutical issues, see Reeve (1972).

identified by ancient sources as cases of *akrasia*. In the play, Medea changes her mind four times before she ends up perpetrating the killing. And that became known as one of the most, if not the most, famous example of *akrasia* from the ancient world (IRWIN, 1983)¹⁰.

So it appears as though, originally, this is what *akrasia* would refer to – it would refer to situations whereby one would find themselves in need of making a choice and they hesitate, vacillating between alternatives for a while (even though they already had a general rule, or a guideline, about what the best overall option is); until they eventually end up picking the “wrong”, or the “worse” option. They might have been able to pick the “right”, or the “good” option in past occasions, but that doesn’t keep temptation from coming back¹¹.

It’s noteworthy that the individuals in all those examples (Alcibiades, Saint Paul and Medea), different as they might be, face a clash between opposing inclinations. They hesitate. Sometimes it looks as though they are changing their mind and then changing it back again. Again, many contemporary examples of *akrasia* from Anglo-American literature that are considered classic in this literature are blind to this aspect. Take, for instance, the famous example of weakness of willpower given by Austin:

I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. We often succumb to temptation with calm and even finesse (AUSTIN, 1956; 1979, p. 198).

Here Austin, like Davidson, depicts weakness of willpower as being a mundane phenomenon, which might be appropriate; but he depicts it as something that simply *happens* to the agent, i.e., a situation that unfolds almost as if it was a natural and instantaneous consequence of his predilection for ice cream. The subject in Austin’s example doesn’t experience dilemma at all. He doesn’t deliberate between having one serving of the bombe or two servings; he simply reached out and grabbed two. He might have known that it was wrong, but this knowledge (or belief, or judgment, however we might want to call it) didn’t play a part in the experience, nor exerted a “pull” in his process of choosing. Plus, it is not clear that the person in Austin’s example went against his principles, nor that that involved any disturbances. If you go against your principles undisturbed, that raises suspicion of whether you actually possess said principles (although you might think you do). The same holds true about Davidson, Bratman and Jackson’s examples, mentioned before¹².

¹⁰ This point is controversial, nonetheless, specially because some scholars advocate excising lines from Euripides’ play. For a different approach, see Rickert (1987).

¹¹ Renaissance also has picturesque examples of *akrasia* in its literature, that corroborates our hypothesis here. One of such examples is Macbeth’s killing King Duncan in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. In spite of having decided that it was best not to, he keeps being haunted by thoughts of regicide. When Lady Macbeth actually voices a proposal for regicide, Macbeth replies “We will speak further” (1.5.88). He didn’t reply “No way”, but he did not say “Let’s do it” either. As Shugar notices, this evasive swerve is the indication that Macbeth’s reasons for opting against killing King Duncan are “a source of discomfort, or embarrassment, to him” (SHUGAR, 2006, p. 54). He has formed a resolution not to kill, but is not completely at peace with this resolution. He is hesitating (and it’s not before much later on that he ends up doing exactly what he had decided not to do). For an interesting discussion of Macbeth’s *akrasia*, see Bristol (2011).

¹² There are exceptions, however. Mele (1983) came up with an example that appears to be concrete and to involve the two other components I’ve been arguing are typical (length and vacillation): “John’s present Biology 100 lab assignment is to determine what his blood type is by pricking one of his fingers with a needle and examining a sample of his blood under a microscope. Although John does not mind the sight of his own blood, he is averse to drawing blood from himself. John weighs his reasons in favor of carrying out the assignment against his contrary reasons and judges that, all things considered, he ought here and now to prick his finger with sufficient force to release an appropriate amount of blood for the experiment. But his reasoning does not stop here. He judges unconditionally that this is the best thing to do, i.e., he intends to prick his finger at once; and he moves the

In virtue of this, one cannot help but notice the contrast between these types of examples of akrasia, found in contemporary analytic-inspired philosophy and the examples found ancient literature, abovementioned. Should that be a small detail, unimportant, that in the ancient examples we see an agent vacillating in the face of a dilemma, whereas contemporary analytic-inspired examples are blind to this phenomenological aspect? That is certainly one way of seeing it. But is one that oversimplify things a little bit.

It actually gets a little more complicated than that. It's not just that the akratic person experiences a dilemma, but that she experiences a dilemma *that she shouldn't be experiencing*. Think like this: if you have a general guideline for living, or a better judgment regarding how to go about when it comes to some particular matter, and according to that judgment the right thing for you to do is A, and yet you struggle when you find yourself in a situation in which you can do either A or B, then this is a dilemma you shouldn't be facing. If you have *really* committed yourself to a general guideline, it's admissible that you hesitate for one second, maybe two, but that's about it. That's the most lingering your dilemma should be, were you to behave as an impeccably reasonable person who always abides by your principles. An impeccably reasonable person is one who already got over the point in life where option B offers real temptation.

Nevertheless, many times people have not got over that point in life. They're still living in that place where they are tempted by option B, in spite of seeing themselves as committed to a principle according to which the right choice is A. The fact that one has not got past this point is a red flag in terms of the strength of their will, even if in the end they end up choosing in accordance with their general principle. The crucial intuition I'm trying to extract here is the following: weakness of the will has to do with being caught up within dilemmas *for longer than you should*. What makes it a problem is that a choice that should be quick and easy for you (since you already have your own guideline) ends up being lingering and difficult. And you succumb to the "wrong" option at the end.

I'm not trying, obviously, to stipulate a maximum duration for one's struggle in the face of a dilemma in seconds. What I'm saying, from a very pragmatic standpoint, is that there must be a *reasonable* limit for vacillation. There must be a point in your dealing with a dilemma such that, once you go past this point without having achieved success (resolution), you begin to be considered unreasonable. So unreasonability of the relevant kind, of the kind that makes it a *weakness*, is marked by exceeding this point. If you have sincerely committed yourself, for instance, to the principles of a Catholic monastic life but then you keep finding it difficult to comply with celibacy rule, being tormented by temptations beyond that reasonability point (wherever and however the bar turns out to have been set), what happens is that after a while we begin to suspect there is something wrong with you. Either your adhesion was not really collected and sincere, or you lack the will power to actualize it in action. If your adhesion was indeed collected and sincere, then you lack the power to actualize it in action. You are akratic.

Notice that what makes you akratic here is the interplay of the elements we have been discussing: you were weak (rather than weakness being a property of your action); it has happened for a while, or it happened a number of times (diachronicity), and it showed up in the form of vacillation in the face of a dilemma (instead of just picking the option that happened to disagree with your own previously formed resolution). Remove one or two of those elements, and your case not only look moves away from the original reference examples of akrasia, but

needle toward his finger with the intention of drawing blood. However, as he sees the needle come very close to his skin he stops. It is more difficult than he thought to carry through. He decides that if he did not look at the needle, it would be easier to complete the task. And he tries again, this time without looking. But when he feels the needle touch his finger, he stops" (MELE, 1983, p. 349).

also to look vague, i.e., something that could as well instantiate other things *instead* of akrasia. Things such as ignorance (as suggested by Socrates in the platonic dialogues), hypocrisy and self-deception (as suggested by Hare in *Freedom and Reason*), vice (as suggested by Aristotle in book VII of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, as briefly alluded to before), or borderline cases of rationality that are not especially problematic. Those aspects, it is worth mentioning again, are meant not as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather as prototypical traits.

Final remarks

To contemporary scholars working in analytic-inspired action theory, it makes no difference whether the occurrence of akrasia unfolds with or without internal struggle, which means with or without vacillation; and it is also of no particular significance to them for how long the akratic agent dwells on their struggle, or whether it is a one-shot occurrence or not. What matters to them is that an action ensues as the unexpected result of the interplay between certain desires, judgments and intentions. Given certain desires, judgments and intentions that the person has, it is expected that they would take action A, but they take action B instead.

The takeaway of the analysis conducted so far is twofold: one, those scholars are working with a different concept of akrasia (different than the original concept, that is deployed in western ancient literature); and two, they are working with a concept that suits the project of understanding the (synchronic) conditions of possibility of akrasia, but that does not suit the alternative project of understanding what akrasia is.

That there are two concepts of akrasia at play is visible from the fact that the examples of things the concept is meant to refer to are radically different in contemporary Anglo-American literature and in the ancient texts. In the ancient texts, cases referred to as being of akrasia are described as fundamentally involving the two traits I've discussed (vacillation in the face of some sort of dilemma and a diachronicity). In the contemporary Anglo-American literature, in turn, those two traits are absent not only from the paradigmatic examples brought up, but also from the discussion itself, and even deemed unimportant by some scholars.

That the contemporary concept of akrasia is inadequate for the project of understanding what akrasia is, in turn, is slightly more complicated to show, because it entails the somewhat counter-intuitive idea that knowing the conditions of possibility of something is not the same thing as knowing what it is. Counterintuitive as it might sound, those are radically different projects.

The inquiry aimed at knowing the conditions of possibility of a phenomenon focuses on the underlying structures that enable the existence or the in-principle occurrence of the thing. This type of inquiry is *a priori* (independent of particular instances), and it seeks universal and necessary conditions. The ultimate goal of an inquiry aimed at knowing the conditions of possibility of akrasia is to see that akrasia can be accommodated within a broader theoretical framework. Knowing what a thing is, in turn, is a matter of describing, defining, or identifying the thing, by means of its relevant characteristics. This type of inquiry is concrete and *a posteriori* (based on observation, or experience). It focuses on the thing as it appears or operates. The ultimate goal of an inquiry aimed at knowing what akrasia is to make sense of particular instances. It is to enable one to look at a particular occurrence, in the world, and conclude "that's akrasia" (or, alternatively, "that's not akrasia").

The contemporary concept does not allow us to make sense of particular instances in this way, because it doesn't allow us to track real world cases of akrasia and akrasia only. **AKRASIA_{ab}**

only sheds light on what is going on in a particular case if it has been stipulated that that case is a case of **AKRASIA_{ab}**. Mele (1986, p. 221) terms this “the cold attribution standpoint”, which is, roughly, ascribing mental states and propositional attitudes to agents. But when we look into the real world, and we want to understand what is going on in a particular case, we don’t adopt the cold attribution standpoint, for what we aim to uncover is precisely whether such attributions make sense.

For instance, you can only make sense of Medea’s case as being a case of **AKRASIA_{ab}** if you add to the tale the stipulation that Medea had certain desires and certain judgments (i.e., the judgment that killing the children was wrong all-things-considered, as well as the desire to kill them), and that she had them *at the same time*, just before stepping ahead and actually doing the killing. But it is not clear that she had all those mental states, much less yet that she had them at the same time. It seems rather possible that she swayed between opposing inclinations, which makes it odd to think that at any time she had a judgment all-things-considered. What it looks like, rather, is that she is caught up in the middle of an everlasting process of “considering”, in which she never manages to grab hold of all things, or all considerations, at once.

This is how Medea’s drama is described in the play. Before 1040 Medea had deliberated and formed an intention to kill the children. Then she looks at her children and they look at her, at 1040, and then Medea starts to hesitate, until she finally abandons her previous decision, and makes another one, namely, the decision to spare the children. At this moment, however, she thinks about the shame and ridicule she will suffer if she gives up on the will to seek revenge. The thoughts of the dishonour that awaits her if she so proceeds overwhelm her. Then she goes back to her intention to kill the children, in 1049-1055. Then she again switches back to the thought that that mustn’t be done, in 1056-1059, without, however, changing her decision. Finally, in the section that runs from 1078 to 1080, Medea announces that she will follow her will to seek revenge even though she is aware of the evils that it involves. It seems rather that Medea oscillates between judgments, not that she had an intention or a desire that is incompatible with her judgment all-things-considered. At least, this is how scholars such as Irvin (1983) interpret it.

One can, of course, withdrawing labels. That is, one can argue that, if this is what is going on in Medea’s case, then Medea’s is not a case of **AKRASIA_{ab}**. And neither is Alcibiades’, Saint Paul’s, and any other case (including cases in the real world, that we experience in our own skin) that is similar to Medea’s case in structure. But the consequence of withdrawing labels is precisely that one loses the ability to understand those cases. If they are not cases of **AKRASIA_{ab}**, then what are they?

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