

ΑΚΡΑΣΙΑ¹

The problem of ἀκρασία is specifically dealt with by Aristotle in book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This problem, closely related to moral knowledge, presents, however, features the analysis of which is not free from difficulties such that Aristotle's solution does not always appear to satisfy. It is my intention in this article to analyze some of the most relevant Aristotelian claims so as to clarify and understand his attitude towards the problem of ἀκρασία.

I. The ἀκρατής acts voluntarily.

When Aristotle, in the first chapter of book III (*NE*), analyzes the concepts of voluntary (ἐκούσιος) and involuntary (ἀκούσιος), he seems to pay more attention to the latter, and to characterize the former largely by opposing it to the latter. The references to what is voluntary are the following: a) voluntary (and involuntary) refers to the moment in which the acts are carried out (1110 a 14); b) the act is voluntary when the moving principle of the instrumental members is in the who carries it out (1110 a 15-16); c) something is voluntary when the principle is in he who carries it out and he knows the particular circumstances of the act (1111 a 22-24); d) the act moved by appetite is also voluntary (1111 b 1-3). If we assign the above-mentioned features to children and animals (that also share in the voluntary 1111 b 8-9), Aristotle must suppose that there is in them: 1. a moving principle, and 2. particular knowledge of the act circumstances. But, is it not difficult to support this second feature for children and animals? If, however, we understand the term 'voluntary' assigned to children and animals in the sense of 'voluntary' attributed to acts of passion, then what children and animals do that is voluntary is that acts moved by passion are typical of them and these are some of the cases of voluntary acts. When is an act voluntary? Possibilities: 1. always: when the movement starts from the agent; 2. and when the particular circumstances of the act are known; 3. and / or when it is passion-moved.

Both in the case of the ἀκρατής and in the case of children and animals, the acts are product of passion, voluntary but not chosen. Voluntary acts can be

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divided, then, into chosen and not chosen (1135 b 9, 11), depending on whether they are object of a previous deliberation or not. From that we can deduce the following: children and animals carry out voluntary, not chosen acts since, as they are not endowed with reason (in the case of children we must add 'as yet'), they do not deliberate. What happens to the ἀκρατής? In fact, what happens is the same as to children: reason is pending in them. He does not deliberate (I will come back later to this topic) and therefore, he does not chose. However, unlike children, he *can* reason. So, we can formulate a set of queries. Does not ἀκρατής deliberate in any case? If somebody does, and afterwards carries out an action, led by passion, would he not be incontinent? and in the case that somebody deliberated, chose properly and then did not carry out what he had chosen, would it not be as if he had neither deliberated nor chosen, since finally, he was moved by passion? We are now going to leave these queries aside without answer in order not to lose the thread of our analysis. In the face of the behaviour of the ἀκρατής, Aristotle reaches the conclusion that (1136 b 5-9) he does not do the best thing he could do for himself, but acts badly, since he does what he believes he must not do. But this is not voluntary, because he acts against his will (rational appetite). The ἀκρατής does what he is convinced he must not do. We may call it *the duality principle in the ἀκρατής*. If the ἀκρατής believed in what he does, he would be ἀκόλαστος; if he did what he believes: σώφρων; and if, finally, he did what he believes "in spite of wrong passion", he would be ἐγκρατής. Therefore, the ἀκρατής does not do himself well involuntary, although his act is voluntary.

II. The ἀκρατής does not choose the act he carries out.

I am going to try to justify Aristotle's affirmation resorting to four arguments that appear dispersed through the *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1. If the objective of the choice is the act that we want to carry out (1139 a 30-31), and true choice does not exist without putting into practice what was chosen, the ἀκρατής (supposing that he deliberated, and that his incontinence is not a result of mere impulse), who does not put into practice the results of his deliberation, did not really choose: there was not choice since his act was the result of following the pressure of appetite, not reason or deliberation. If we support the existence of deliberation, not choice, we may suppose that the decision (κριθέν) that mediates between one and the other did not take place (1113 a 3-4). Supposing that the *choice* was the *act*, the ἀκρατής would not be said to choose this deliberation and his act move into different directions.

2. We are going to suppose that deliberation is not possible in the case of ἀκρατής either. Proper deliberation without an objective, which is a practical benefit, does not exist. That is to say, by the objective we mean an attainable benefit to him who deliberates. If we consider proper deliberation, absolutely



speaking, as that aiming at the attainment of the major benefit for men (1141 b 12-14), we must then wonder, does the incontinent man deliberate properly? The answer is negative since the target of his reckonings is not the major practical benefit for him and the ἀκρατής knows it. Both, the ἀκρατής and the ἀκόλαστος —if they are clever with their reasoning— reach what they aim at but their apparent ‘deliberation’ correct in form does not lead them to benefit. According to what Aristotle asserts in 1142 b 27, to mistake is to be found in the objective (δεῖ), in the way (ὥς) or in the time (ὅτε) of deliberation since the good deliberation deals with these three factors in accordance with what is proper. With regard to the ἀκρατής and the ἀκόλαστος, Anscombe² notices the following: in spite of the difference that separates them —since the former does not choose but acts with appetite, not with will, and the ἀκόλαστος, however, chooses— there is the symmetry of deliberation between them. Both ‘aim’³ at the attainment of a pleasure and, although they differ in the form of that aim, they share the same deliberation on how to reach it.

3. In 1134 a 20-22, choice is opposed to passion: “For a man might even lie with a woman knowing who she was, but the origin of his act might be not deliberate choice but passion. He acts unjustly, then, but is not unjust”. Aristotle supposes that choice only occurs when there is a completely acquired disposition in one direction: that is to say, a habitual disposition. Moderation and the lack of it are virtue and vice respectively and people who have either the former or the latter choose by virtue of a disposition or habit. The continent man chooses, but the ἀκρατής does not. Only habitual disposition is caused by reason. He in whom passion prevails, cannot choose. This statement, however, leads us to wonder whether ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια are also habits. According to the claim that we find in 1152 a 29-32, there are two types of ἀκρατής, the natural (ἐθισμοῦ) and the habitual (φυσικόν). If we keep to the habitual, we can not sustain the first distinction mentioned in this paragraph, since if we agree that each habit is caused by reason, in the case of ἀκρασία habit we must assert that it is caused by passion. There is still another possibility, and it is that Aristotle uses the verb ἐθίζω (ἐθισμοῦ)⁴ in a different sense from ἔξις, giving to the latter a sense of rootedness deeper in nature.

4. The objects of deliberation and choice are the same (1113 a 3-6) since the choice is the same as the conclusion of deliberation. According to Aristotle, our ruling part is what chooses. What happens in the case of the ἀκρατής? If his

2. Thought and Action in Aristotle. What is a Practical Thought? in *New Essays On Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by R. Bambrough, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, pp. 146-147.

3. In order to refer to ἀκρατής decision, Aristotle uses —Anscombe remarks— the verb προτίθεται ‘proposes’, a verb that implies volition, but to which Aristotle pays no special attention.

4. *EN* VII, 10, 1152 a 31.

behaviour is passion-moved, it is not the governing part in him that leads his behaviour. And if the governing part is that which chooses, it seems necessary to conclude that the ἀκρατής does not choose. A man is called ἀκρατής or ἐγκρατής depending on whether his mind prevails over his behaviour (1168 b 34-35), since basically, man is his mind: “Again the incontinent man acts with appetite, but not with choice: while the continent man on the contrary acts with choice, but not with appetite” (1111 b 13-15). The ἀκρατής makes it clear through his acts that he is passion-moved but his behaviour is voluntary. Could this be understood in the same sense as the mixed acts? The ἀκρατής is voluntarily led by passion, but he does not choose since, if he ‘could’, he would choose to act according to reason. While voluntary, he is responsible for his act, but while there is conflict in him (1102 b 17-18) since appetite is opposed to reason (moreover there is knowledge of this conflict), what is done, is not chosen since without the attraction of the appetite he would choose not to carry it out (or simply, he would not choose). Furthermore, the ἀκρατής, who acts passion-moved, would, if he could choose to be moved by reason or to follow reason. In the ἐγκρατής, however, it can be said that there is choice because, when he does what he does, if he could do another thing, he would not do it, he would not choose it. In this text, Aristotle contrasts choice with appetite, as both can be opposed (1111 b 15-16) as it is clear in the case of the ἐγκρατής. Whenever there is not harmony or the action is led by appetite, there is voluntariness but not choice. If the act moved by passion was chosen, children and animals would also choose. Are, then, children similar to the ἀκρατής? Yes, they are similar to the ἀκρατής from the point of view of his acts wilfulness and the lack of choice. But, they are not, according to the fact that in the former there is neither knowledge nor awareness of lack of harmony and in the latter there is a clear knowledge of the situation. And, in animals, there is not the possibility of choice either, since they lack a ‘rational principle’.

III. How does passion affect ἀκρατής?

From Aristotle’s claim in 1150 b 18-21, we can deduce that there are two types of ἀκρασία, distinguishable by its cause. Ἀκρασία is impetuosity (προπέτεια) or weakness (ἀσθένεια). In the former cases there is not deliberation, since the violence of passion prevents it. In the latter, however, there is deliberation, but the ἀκρατής does not act upon it. Despite this difference (which even makes the degree of attributable responsibility different in each case), when what the ἀκρατής knows or does not know is analyzed, Aristotle does not point to any additional difference between both examples of ἀκρασία. Passion affects knowledge overruling its use although not its possession⁵. Aristotle distinguishes be-

5. Considering, as Prof. Dent suggests, that this always occurs or happens in some cases, we would

tween having knowledge and making use of it on the one hand, and having it without using it on the other hand. What is the meaning of “having knowledge and not using it”? I think it means that knowledge is had but this is not reflected in the act. Knowledge is not *assigned* to the act because the outset of passion is unprepared for. Knowledge refers to the major and minor premise (1147 a 1-5) and in the case of ἀκρατής, having them both, does not use the knowledge of the particular one since the act refers to the particular. The minor premise belongs to the power of the senses (“his food is dry” in 1147 a 6), to perception and he who is passion-moved (a) has no opinion of the particular or (b) has it in the sense of being able to express it, but not to have it. Passion, therefore, affects knowledge of particular, which is in the fields of practical action, but it does not affect the universal. For Aristotle “having knowledge and making use of it” would mean having knowledge of major and minor premisses from which goes up a conclusion including both. “Having knowledge” would be to understand major and minor premisses and “making use of it” would be its expression in the conclusion (supposing the conclusion may express how the agent actually acts).

IV. Ἀκρασία and regret.

In order to deal with this last section, I am going to consider the three moments of the relationship between the ἀκρατής and the act he is carrying out, namely, his situation before carrying out the action, while he was doing it, and after it.

1. *Before.* The situation prior to carrying out of the act differs considerably if we refer to the ἀκρασία due to impetuosity or to weakness. In the former, the existence of moral knowledge and of a ‘theoretical⁶ decision’ to act virtuously, in men, should be supposed. However, due to the power of passion that affects men, without the intercession of deliberation, an act of ἀκρασία is carried out: and it is the attitude in the face of what is not expected that measures the virtue of a character. The behaviour of ἀκρασία, for this reason, indicates a lack of education of appetite and, therefore, before an unexpected situation the character that is revealed is just that of the lack of order between reason and appetite. In the

say that the knowledge that is prevented by passion, though it does not prevent its use, is the knowledge expressed by the major premise because it refers to a universal. In the case of knowledge expressed by the minor premise we should perhaps distinguish two kinds of passion: a passion which annuls the use of knowledge expressed by a minor premiss, but not its possession, and a passion which prevents the possession of knowledge.

6. By ‘theoretical decision’ I mean a decision within a given situation, which the subject has no need to face: and if it does, it only takes into account rational knowledge, without the intervention of passion. That is to say, the only important element in the judgement of a ‘theoretical’ situation is the rational one.

case of ἀκρασία from weakness the problem is different. The reflection before a real, concrete situation, the object of deliberation, must be added to the situation we called 'theoretical'. Passion also takes part, in this case, but less powerfully than in the other type of ἀκρασία, since here there was a margin of time devoted to considering the situation. However, as Aristotle says (1151 a 1-3), this type of ἀκρασία is worse than that caused by impetuosity since, despite the presence of a certain amount of reflection, the upsurge of passion cannot be avoided.

2. *While the action is being carried out.* How does the ἀκρατής feel when he acts against what he rationally believes? Faced with this question, two answers are possible. Either we support a duality (in carrying out the act) between reason and appetite, a duality that characterizes the ἀκρατής, or we may suppose that, while the action is carried out, passion is so dominant that, momentarily, the reason discrepancy is lost⁷. If we rely on the first possibility, it is easier to support in the case of ἀκρασία from weakness, since, prior to passion's irruption, the reflective element was there, and we may suppose that, perhaps it is not lost while the action is taking place. On the other hand, in the case of ἀκρασία from impetuosity, the duality is more difficult to maintain since passion, being more powerful, is the only present element. In both cases, however, if we assert the duality, certain concomitant uneasiness in the carrying out of the act and a willingness as well as unwillingness in what is done, is to be supposed. However, experience seems to show that this duality present before succumbing to passion, appears again after the act, but while it is carried out, it disappears and almost becomes consigned to oblivion.

It seems then, that a unity should be maintained in the ἀκρατής while the act is being carried out, in order that only in that interval of time any kind of internal lack of harmony would not exist, because of the presence of the passion. Following this possibility, we obviously reach the conclusion that if this is the way and not another, while the act is being carried out, ἀκρατής, σώφρων and ἀκόλαστος are not different in anything at that time, but, the unity dominates over everything in the three of them. Nevertheless, if we consider it from the point of the pleasure that the carrying out of a given act, can we be assured that the person who chooses to carry out an act gets the same pleasure as the one who does not choose it? Let's consider an example. I am not sure whether to go and watch a football match of my favourite football team, that is played at home for the very first time during the League, or to keep my word and go to the doctor's with my friend. After having thought about it, I decide to go to the football match. Can I

7. We will distinguish the three following points: (a) the intensity of passion removes temporarily the capacity of reasoning (in this case there is not any rational judgement); (b) passion coexists with the capacity of reasoning (there is rational judgement); (c) passion deforming rational judgment. In my explanation I have just considered the two first cases.



be assured that I am going to enjoy the match in the same way as if I had decided to go without any other possibility to set against it? Since we are talking about an ἀκρατής and not an ἀκόλαστος, the answer seems negative. Whereupon we may say that at least in the case of ἀκρασία from weakness, the duality, which would prevent, in our example, to enjoy the football match completely, is present during the carrying out the action⁸.

3. *Afterwards*. Aristotle refers to regret (μεταμελητικός: 1150 b 29-30) as the state which the ἀκρατής often feels after acting moved by passion. The reflection, that had disappeared or remained in the middle distance while the act was being carried out, appears again in order to condemn the act, uncovering the reasons against the act just carried out. Moral knowledge is used in this case retrospectively. Both premises, major and minor, are present now. Aristotle reasonably refers (1152 a 16) to the behaviour of the ἀκρατής as of one being asleep or drunk, since, just as sleep or drink stop their knowledge temporarily. The ἀκρατής does not act according to what he believes when he is dominated by passion. The regret is precisely a sign of the existence of that knowledge that has not been used while the act was being carried out⁹, and at the same time it shows the possibility of a change of behaviour in the individual, since the ἀκρατής is “not bad without qualification, for the best thing in him, the first principle (ἀρχή) is preserved” (1151 a 24-25). In spite of the fact that, because of a lack of character upbringing, the ἀκρατής allows himself to be moved by passion, the knowledge that his behaviour must be different —ἀρχή— exists, since it has not been completely and irreversibly overshadowed by passion as in the case of ἀκόλαστος.

‘Acratic’ behaviour is due to the lack of moderation in the natural inclination of appetite towards sensitive goods. Reason feels impotent to restrain the impulse of passion. Following Aristotle’s explanation, we can bring up in order to reach a conclusion, some reflections that Aristotle indirectly questions or leaves with no answer: 1. Can the ἀκρατής through a habitual behaviour become ἀκόλαστος? The question raises the possibility that the moral knowledge or principle, which exists in the ἀκρατής although sometimes it is not used, can disappear or be modified by the constant appearance of passion. If it was this way, ἀκρασία would become a means of acquiring the vice or state in which the will would share the appetite aims. 2. Which is the way to correct the ἀκρατής? Ignorance is overcome by knowledge, but as Aristotle says (1146 b 1): “When water chokes,

8. This is only an approach to this subject which is more complicated.

9. By explaining the idea of regret I do not intend to work out all the causes that give rise to different kinds of such feelings. As Prof. Dent suggests, it may happen that the agent “changes his mind” of whether what he did is still an act as good as it was when he did it. Nevertheless, I think that this kind of regret (which supposes a changing attitude) is different from what a person feels while doing something which is not the result of his/her choice.



what is one to wash it down with”? The ἀκρατής is a convinced man with moments in which he forgets about his convictions, since he acts against his thinking. 3. The state assigned to the ‘decision’ of carrying out an action against one’s own moral convictions, is difficult to characterise. Despite the considerations that Aristotle gives to choice, the truth is that, apparently, the ἀκρατής seems to choose his behaviour, since, master of his acts and passions, he establishes a close union between the former and the latter, leaving reasons aside. Nevertheless, the ἀκρατής is apparently responsible for his acting so, because in Aristotle’s analysis, free choice is an act of deliberation which is not so in the case of the ἀκρατής, whose acts do not actually show that he would choose without the presence of passion. 4. From my point of view, the more basic questions about this subject are still to be asked: How is it possible for a convinced man to do just the opposite of what he is convinced of? How can we understand a man not being able to dominate a part of him? Or, how is it possible that the importance of passion in the determination of human practical activity is underestimated even if it can overpower reason? All these questions emphasize again the difficulty in explaining ἀκρασία, but the last question, in particular, reveals something else, the need to remember Aristotle’s words when he asserts that “choice is either desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire, and such an origin of action is a man” (1139 b 4-6).

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Περίληψη

Ἡ μελέτη αὐτὴ ἔχει ὡς ἀντικείμενο τὸ πρόβλημα τῆς ἀκρασίας, ὅπως ἀπαντᾷ στὸ Η' τῶν *Ἠθικῶν Νικομαχείων*. Κατ' ἀρχὴν γίνεται διάκριση τῶν ἐνεργειῶν σὲ ἐκούσιες καὶ ἀκούσιες καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖται ὁ συσχετισμὸς τοὺς μὲ τὸν ἀκρατή. Ἐπισημαίνεται ἐδῶ ἡ ὑπαρξὴ ἐνὸς δυισμοῦ, διότι παρὰ τὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι ἡ πράξις τοῦ ἀκρατοῦς εἶναι ἐκούσια, ἀπὸ τὸ ἄλλο μέρος ὅμως, ὁ ἀκράτης ἀκουσίως δὲν πράττει καλῶς, ἐφόσον δηλαδὴ ἐνεργεῖ κατὰ τῆς θελήσεώς του καὶ κάνει ὅ,τι εἶναι πεπεισμένος ὅτι δὲν πρέπει. Στὸ δεῦτερο μέρος ἐξετάζονται τέσσερα ἐπιχειρήματα ἀπὸ τὰ *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια*, μὲ βάση τὰ ὁποῖα δείχνεται ὅτι ὁ ἀκρατής δὲν ἐπιλέγει τὴν πράξις του: (α) ἡ πράξις τοῦ ἀκρατοῦς εἶναι ἀποτέλεσμα τοῦ γεγονότος ὅτι δρᾷ κάτω ἀπὸ τὴν πίεση τῆς ὀρέξεως καὶ ὄχι τοῦ λόγου ἢ τῆς ἀποφάσεως, (β) ὁ ἀκρατής δὲν ἐπιδιώκει τὸ ὕψιστο ἀγαθὸ γιὰ τὸν ἑαυτό του, (γ) ἡ ἐπιλογὴ του ἀντιτίθεται στὸ πάθος, γιὰτὶ αὐτὸ κυριαρχεῖ, καὶ ἀκόμη (δ) ἡ συμπεριφορὰ του δὲν κατευθύνεται ἀπὸ τὸ κυβερνῶν στοιχεῖο στὸν ἄνθρωπο, δηλαδὴ τὸν λόγο. Τὸ τρίτο μέρος τῆς μελέτης αὐτῆς ἀποσκοπεῖ νὰ καταδείξει τὸν τρόπο μὲ τὸν ὁποῖο τὸ πάθος ἐπιδρᾷ στὸν ἀκρατή: ἀναλύονται τὰ δύο εἶδη ἀκρασίας (προπέτεια ἢ ἀσθένεια) καὶ ἐξετάζεται ἡ σχέση πάθους - γνώσης, καθὼς καὶ οἱ διακρίσεις τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλη μεταξὺ τοῦ νὰ ἔχει κανεὶς γνώση καὶ νὰ κάνει ἢ νὰ μὴν κάνει χρῆση τῆς: ἡ τελευταία αὐτὴ περίπτωση, νὰ μὴ γίνε-ται δηλαδὴ χρῆση τῆς γνώσης, ἐρμηνεύεται μὲ τὸ ὅτι ἡ γνώση ὑπάρχει, ἀλλὰ δὲν ἀντανακλᾷται στὴν πράξις. Τέλος, ἐξετάζονται τὰ τρία χρονικὰ στάδια τῆς σχέσης ποὺ ὑφίσταται μεταξὺ τοῦ ἀκρατοῦς καὶ τῆς διεξαγωγῆς τῆς πράξεως του: δηλαδὴ, ἡ κατάστασις ποὺ προηγεῖται, αὐτὴ κατὰ τὴν ὁποία διαρκεῖ καθὼς καὶ ἡ κατάστασις ποὺ ἀκολουθεῖ μετὰ τὴν πράξις. Καταλήγοντας, ἐξάγονται συμπεράσματα μὲ βάση τόσο ἄμεσες ἐξηγήσεις ὅσο καὶ ἔμμεσα ἐρωτήματα τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλη.

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