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AKRASIA AND ORDINARY WEAKNESS OF WILL^{*}

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Abstract

This article offers an account of *akrasia* as a primary failure of intentional agency in contrast to a recent account of weakness of will, developed by Richard Holton, that also points to a kind of failure of intentional agency but presents this as both separate from *akrasia* and more fundamental than it. Drawing on Aristotle's work, it is argued that the failure of intentional agency articulated by the concept of *akrasia* is the central case, whereas the phenomenon Holton's account is after, referred to as 'ordinary weakness of will', is best understood as an unsuccessful attempt to tackle *akrasia* and, more specifically, a secondary failure of intentional agency.

Key words: *akrasia*, Aristotle, blameworthiness, intentional agency, inverse *akrasia*, motivation, practical syllogism, reasons for action, planning, value, weakness of will.

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Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una explicación de la noción de *akrasia* como una falla primaria de la acción intencional, por oposición con una reciente propuesta sobre la debilidad de la voluntad desarrollada por Richard Holton, que también apunta a un tipo de falla en la acción intencional, pero la presenta tanto separada de la *akrasia* como más fundamental que ella. Con base en la obra de Aristóteles, se arguye aquí que la falla en la agencia articulada por el concepto de *akrasia* es el problema central, mientras que el fenómeno tras el cual va la descripción de Holton, denominado 'debilidad ordinaria de la voluntad', se entiende mejor como un intento frustrado de explicar la *akrasia* y, más específicamente, como una falla secundaria de la agencia intencional.

Palabras clave: *akrasia*, Aristóteles, acción intencional, *akrasia* inversa, motivación, silogismo práctico, razones para actuar, planear, valor, debilidad de la voluntad.

The aim of this paper is to put forth an account of *akrasia* as a primary failure of intentional agency and to clarify how it relates to the account of weakness of will developed by Richard Holton that also points to a kind of failure of intentional agency but presents this as separate from *akrasia* and more fundamental than it (1999; 2009, 70–96). In particular, I shall argue, drawing on Aristotle's work, that the failure of intentional agency articulated by the concept of *akrasia* is the central case, whereas the phenomenon Holton's account is after, let us call it 'ordinary weakness of will',¹ is dependent upon *akrasia* as a condition for its possibility. By this I mean that ordinary weakness of will is best understood as an unsuccessful attempt to tackle *akrasia*, that is, a secondary failure of intentional agency which follows and is partly explained by the primary failure it tries to redress.

The paper consists of three parts. In the first, I provide an initial sketch and then flesh out the proposed account of *akrasia*. Since the purpose of this analysis is not exegetical, relevant texts by Aristotle

¹This is to reflect Holton's central claim that his account, unlike alternatives, does justice to ordinary, untutored intuitions about weakness of will (1999, 241).

will be given close consideration; however I shall not engage directly with the rich interpretative literature on the subject of *akrasia* but selectively refer to it. In the second part, I set out some challenges for ordinary weakness of will that come to the fore if we compare this phenomenon with the so-called inverse *akrasia*. In the final part, I propose a way to address these challenges by grounding ordinary weakness of will in the account of *akrasia* developed here and then briefly contrast both conceptions with a more familiar one, according to which *akrasia* amounts to acting against one's better judgment.

1 The concept of *akrasia*

In this section, I shall begin to articulate the structure of the concept of *akrasia* as it emerges from Aristotle's discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 7 and further relevant texts.² In doing so, my first objective will be to clarify the sense, in which *akrasia* can be said to involve a failure of intentional agency. For the sake of clarity, the logical form of *akrasia* will be outlined at the start of the discussion, which will then expand on individual features and their possible implications. This form is as follows.

Akrasia is a failure of intentional agency that involves a particular kind of inner conflict, which is unnecessary in the sense that it should not have arisen in the first instance and which also gets poorly resolved; as a result, it keeps on coming back.

This schema grounds a number of central features. Firstly, *akrasia* covers both a specific behaviour and a related character disposition. Secondly, it is fully intelligible only from a temporarily extended perspective. Thirdly, a hierarchy of different kinds of values as possible ends of action is a further prerequisite for understanding *akrasia*. Fourthly, *akrasia* does not stem from an actual conflict between different kinds of values. Fifthly, the motivational conflict experienced by the *akratic* agent is due to his immaturity as a valuer (henceforth: evaluative immaturity). Sixthly, this evaluative immaturity makes *akrasia* an appropriate target for blame. And seventhly, *akratic* actions are best understood as pre-intentional.

²In the following, I shall refer to the treatise by the standard abbreviation, *EN*.

Let us start to unpack this sketch of a concept by looking in some detail into the first feature, the fact that *akrasia* covers both a specific behaviour and a related disposition (Grgic 2002). An immediate implication is that the assessment of an action as *akratic* cannot be done in isolation, but requires some kind of intrapersonal comparison: an *akratic* action is always one in a series of similar actions performed by a particular agent at different moments in time (link forth to the second feature).

This becomes clear if we think about the kind of inner conflict that characterizes *akrasia* (link back to the underlying schema). In *On the Soul* 3.10, it is described as a motivational conflict between two kinds of objects of attraction, the one immediately present, the other being at some distance.³ This conflict is finally resolved in favour of the first, immediately present object. This winner is an apparent good in both senses of the word 'apparent': it is conspicuous and it is not exactly what it seems. Drawing on *EN* 7.4–6, things that could play such a role have to have a direct appeal to us as sentient beings, that is, to be within the resort of a natural appetite. The unmediated, essentially visceral attraction that they exercise explains both their salience and potential ambivalence. This is reflected in the underlying understanding of pleasure as an apparent good.

It is tempting to construe the second kind of object, the distant good which is the looser in the *akratic* contest, as more of the same in the future, a bigger reward that could be obtained by postponing immediate gratification. This is consistent with the idea that *akrasia* is a problem only for agents having a sense of time (second feature).⁴ However, it cannot fully account for the inherent ambivalence attributed to the apparent good that the *akratic* goes for. Furthermore, it is at odds with the central view that *akrasia* is a shameful rather than just suboptimal conduct.⁵ So the trouble cannot be only that *akratic* agents overrate present rewards. The problem seems to be deeper and more complex altogether: namely, that pleasure as unchecked appearance of the good is effectively employed as currency for selecting be-

³433a27–b10. Henceforth, I shall employ the standard abbreviation of the title, *DA*.

⁴*DA* 433b5–10. On the links between preference inconsistency over time and practical irrationality, see Elster (1999).

⁵*EN* 7.4, 1148b5–7. Compare *EN* 7.1, 1145a15–17; 2, 1146a13–22; and 8, 1151a1–40.

tween separate kinds of goods. Yet, pleasure in this sense is one of the kinds to choose from and, usually, the least choiceworthy one. An important indication to this effect is given in *EN* 2.4 where the possible aims of human action are classified in connection to three different types of valuable objects: immediately pleasant, advantageous, and good without qualification.⁶ Having this distinction in mind, the distant good that gets neglected because of an apparent one could belong to either of the two latter categories – advantageous or good unqualified. These include abstract and complex objects of attraction, such as intricate intellectual pursuits and collaborative activities. This suggestion is supported by the central role that the capacity of deliberative representation (*phantasia bouleutikē*) plays in explaining both *akrasia* and more successful forms of human action.⁷ Hence, the apparent good does not have to be physically present, at hand, so to speak. It may also be immediately present to the mind's eye, because it is extremely easy to grasp as an objective as opposed to more sophisticated goals. Getting a drink versus creating a historical novel represents well this contrast. *Akrasia* can now be appreciated as a threat to both the scope and nature of the projects that a person can possibly pursue, not just an imprudent attitude to prospective rewards (third feature of *akrasia*).

Let us now turn to the core suggestion that *akrasia* presents an unnecessary kind of inner conflict. The thought is that the opposition between apparent and distant good stems from a distorted or, rather, underdeveloped evaluative perspective and can be avoided once this is corrected. In other words, only things that are either good without qualification or contributive to such a good can be unambiguously pleasant (Rogers 1993; Lear 2006). The conflict, experienced by *akratic* agents, is of their own doing. The three kinds of goods or goals of action are fundamentally compatible and could be integrated into a coherent whole, without any genuine loss. Importantly, this insight is not alien to the *akratic* agent who, in a way, knows what he should choose; however, this knowledge is neither actively used, nor fully integrated. *EN* 7.3 clearly expresses this idea by two complementary analogies: the knowledge of an *akratic* is like that we have when we are

⁶*EN* 1104b30–5a1. See also Burnyeat (1980).

⁷*DA* 3.11, 434a6–15. See also: Labarrière (1984); Canto-Sperber (2001); and Destrée (2007).

asleep; and the knowledge of beginners who know the correct conclusions, but not the argument that leads to them (Pickavé and Whiting 2008; Charles 2009). These two analogies shed further light to the ways in which the choiceworthy alternative is conceived as remote by the *akratic*. Firstly, its appeal is not as clear-cut. An effort is already involved in paying attention to it as the *akratic* accepts that this is something choiceworthy, but does not understand why. In other words, he recognizes that this is something attractive, but does not feel attracted to it. Secondly, this alternative seems much harder to obtain or realize than the apparent good. These two features make the immediate experience of the choiceworthy good uncomfortable and perhaps even unpleasant. Thus, the remoteness of the worthy objective may translate not only into motivational detachment, but also into active avoidance that plays even further in favour of the uncomplicated apparent good. An additional danger is that, by going for the apparent good, the *akratic* reinforces the immature evaluative stance, from which the pursuits of good and pleasure appear to be antagonistic (forth feature of *akrasia*).

This brings us to the point that *akrasia* not only starts with an unnecessary inner conflict, but also provides a poor resolution to it. A comparison with *enkrateia*, or self-control helps clarify that *akrasia* is essentially a failure even with respect to the pursuit of immediate pleasure. As outlined in EE 2.8 *akrasia* leads to an ambivalent experience.⁸ There is some pleasure associated with the consumption of the apparent good; yet, it is already then mixed with, on the one hand, anticipated displeasure for compromising one's chances to achieve the choiceworthy, but forgone good and, on the other hand, anticipated shame. The element of disappointment is built-in and this makes the *akratic* satisfaction fundamentally incomplete. In contrast, *enkrateia* provides a good resolution to the same kind of unnecessary conflict. Certainly, it is also ambivalent, because an *enkratic* agent regrets the unavailability of instant pleasure, whilst at the same time enjoying the right choice he makes. Yet, this motivational gap is not only easier to bridge, but also different in kind, for the *enkratic* has chosen the genuinely pleasant option. The frustration he experiences is just as short-lived as the *akratic* pleasure. This is why *akrasia* is deemed to be

⁸EE 1224b16–22.

a dangerous, unhealthy character disposition, analogous to chronic illnesses of the body, whereas self-control is not (fifth feature).

The idea that *akrasia* provides a poor resolution to an initial motivational conflict is directly related to the fact that *akratic* actions, although voluntary, are not done out of choice. *EN* 7.8 points to two scenarios: according to the first, the agent goes for the apparent good on an impulse, without taking the time to properly assess the situation. Alternatively, he defects from the right course of action that was previously identified.⁹ Crucial to both cases as instances of *akrasia* is the fact that the two more demanding categories of good that get neglected for the sake of the apparent one, are within the reach of the *akratic* as a valuer and an agent. In other words, an *akratic* person is in a position to both appreciate and engage in pursuits that are either good without qualification or contributive to such pursuits. Yet, he fails to do so. This may lead to the suspicion that *akrasia* is not a distinctive phenomenon, but could be reduced to either fully intentional, or blameless wrongdoing. In the first case, *akrasia* would become indistinguishable from vice; in the second – it would amount to a non-voluntary kind of behaviour, which, although regrettable, cannot be attributed to the agent in a morally relevant sense. Yet Aristotle's account avoids both options. *Akrasia* is deemed shameful and blameworthy, but nevertheless very different from a state of moral depravity. In order to appreciate this claim, we need to look in more detail into the sixth feature of the logical form I sketched earlier, for, as we shall see in the second part of this inquiry, it is crucial that we locate correctly the focus of blame for both *akrasia* and related phenomena.

The blameworthiness of *akrasia*

Building on the preceding observations, we are in a position to see that blame does not attach to *akrasia* as a failure of self-mastery in the sense of being unable to carry out any plan to which the agent has previously committed, independently of whether this plan is worth pursuing or not. This becomes clear if we consider a paradox posed by the so-called inverse *akrasia* and, more precisely, if we reflect on the issue why this paradox does not arise for the proposed account of

⁹*EN* 1151a1–40.

akrasia. Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder define inverse *akrasia* as follows:

The most commonly discussed examples of *akrasia* centre around wrongdoing of one sort or another, in which desires override judgment: one is on a diet, but somehow cannot help but eat the slice of cake; one is resolved to tell an awkward truth, but somehow a lie slips out. In the cases of interest to us, however, *akrasia* results in what, for lack of a better word, might be called rightdoing of one sort or another. That is, the *akratic* course of action is superior to the course of action recommended by the agent's best judgment. Because these cases reverse our usual expectations from *akratic* action, we call them cases of inverse *akrasia*. (1999, 162).

If what makes *akrasia* blameworthy is lack of self-mastery as specified above, instances of the phenomenon described by Arpaly and Schroeder become paradoxical, for in such instances, a person fails to act as he planned to or thought should act¹⁰ (lack of self-mastery), yet the action is not blameworthy, but to his credit.

A possible solution is to distinguish, following Arpaly and Schroeder, between practical rationality and moral praiseworthiness and to argue that the former is not a prerequisite for the latter. As we shall see in the second part of the paper, a similar route appears to be taken by Holton's account, for it locates the 'stigma' attached to ordinary weakness of will in that it presents an unreasonable revision of one's intention (practical irrationality) independently of whether this intention is worthwhile carrying out on moral or even prudential grounds (praiseworthiness). For the time being, however, let us focus on clarifying the issue of why the paradox of inverse *akrasia* does not arise for the account of *akrasia* presented here. As mentioned earlier, this has to do with the fact that the failure of intentional agency captured by the concept of *akrasia* is not primarily a failure of self-mastery in the sense of carrying out with one's resolution, whether good or bad. This point becomes clearer, if we consider a case which is explicitly addressed by Aristotle in *EN* 7 and also credibly matches

¹⁰I shall come back to the question on whether these two options are that different from each other in the concluding section of this paper.

the description of inverse *akrasia* set out by Arpaly and Schroeder. In fact, Arpaly and Schroeder refer to it as 'perhaps the earliest recorded' occurrence of inverse *akrasia*, in which a person 'does the right thing, but does so against his best judgment' (1999, 162). The reference point is an episode at the centre of Sophocles' tragedy *Philoctetes*, in which Neoptolemus, a young Greek prince, finds it unbearable to carry on with a dishonest stratagem, to which he has earlier consented at the insistence of his mentor, Odysseus, and has a last minute change of heart. Aristotle comments on this case both at the start and at the end of the discussion on *akrasia* in *EN* 7.¹¹ More precisely, he warns against treating *akrasia* and the Neoptolemus' case as relevantly similar. The thought is that the analogy between the two is rather misleading. For the feature that they have in common – acting against one's better judgment or prior resolution – is insufficient to understanding the nature and significance of either phenomenon. An *akratic* action is at odds with the agent's correct assessment that this kind of action is intelligible on reflection. Conversely, Neoptolemus' action goes against a mistaken prior resolution. The fact that it is commendable clearly indicates that it has nothing to do with *akrasia*. A further reason to reject a possible concept of inverse *akrasia* that Aristotle points to is that it leads to confusing, sophistic claims, like the thesis that foolishness combined with *akrasia* amounts to virtue:

For, because of *akrasia*, the person acts in the way contrary to that in which he supposes he should act; and because he supposes that good things are bad and that he should not do them, he will do good actions and not bad ones.¹²

In other words, the conjunction between practical irrationality and praiseworthiness that defines instances of inverse *akrasia* is excluded on Aristotle's account of *akrasia*, for practical irrationality and blameworthiness are two inseparable aspects of the phenomenon. This becomes clear if we relate the preceding observations to the earlier discussion on the fifth component of the conceptual schema of *akrasia*, evaluative immaturity, reflected by the fact that an *akratic* pur-

¹¹*EN* 7.2 1146a18–22; 9. 1151b17–23.

¹²*EN* 1146a28–31.

suit is partly defined by being an obviously wrong thing to do.¹³ This brings us to the seventh and final feature of the conceptual schema drafted at the start: the pre-intentional character of *akratic* agency.

1.1. The pre-intentionality of *akrasia*

As outlined earlier, *akratic* actions are voluntary but not done out of choice. This is the central feature that I propose to capture by the notion of pre-intentionality. The reason for this is as follows. As indicated in *EN* 3.3, choice involves a mental state, in which both goal and corresponding course of action are fully specified and endorsed.¹⁴ Thus understood, choice appears to be relevantly similar to intention in the demanding sense of having a plan rather than having only a goal (Bratman 1984). For entertaining and even working towards incompatible goals does not imply the kind of inner conflict that I suggested is central to the concept of *akrasia*. Moreover, by treating choice as a kind of intention, we are in good position to appreciate Aristotle's insistence that *akrasia* does not include instances, in which a person acts in accord with his choice, which itself contradicts this person's correct discernment or opinion about the right thing to do.¹⁵ In fact, the possibility to have both correct opinions and good discernment on moral matters without acting accordingly is briefly considered in *EN* 3.2. It is then dismissed as a philosophically uninteresting case of moral depravity, whereby the agent consistently chooses unworthy options. In contrast, *akrasia* is deemed to present a genuine problem because it does not instantiate the agent's choice but nevertheless leads to actions that fully engage his responsibility. This problem appears particularly pressing in light of Aristotle's observation that

¹³An additional indication in the same direction is offered by the contrast between *akrasia* in the strict sense, which is confined to plain pleasures that appeal to us as mere sentient beings, and *akrasia* qualified, which relates to inappropriate behaviour due to more complex motivation, such as anger: cf. *EN* 7.4, 1147b23-35. These latter cases are deemed possibly excusable since the inappropriateness of the resulting behaviour is not as clear-cut as in cases of *akrasia* unqualified. In a similar vein, Aristotle distinguishes *akrasia* from disproportionate attachment to otherwise worthy objectives, such as excessive interest in the well-being of one's family and friends: *EN* 1148a24-33.

¹⁴*EN* 1113a10-14.

¹⁵Compare *EN* 7.2, 1146a13-22; and *EN* 8, 1151a20-24.

choice is more intimately related to an agent's character than his actions and is therefore to be taken as an ultimate indicator of his moral worth.¹⁶ Thus, in order to be persuasive, an account of *akrasia* as involving pre-intentional agency should be able to explain not only how it differs from vice (wrongdoing out of choice) but also from non-voluntary actions for which a person cannot be held accountable.

The schema of *akrasia* suggests a plausible way forward, for it points to the fact that *akrasia* consists of a poor resolution to an unnecessary inner conflict. Both conflict and resolution can be explained by a pluralistic account recognizing that human agents act in at least two distinct ways, as indicated in *DA* 3.9–11 and *On the Movement of Animals* 6–8.¹⁷ The first way of acting is unique to human beings. It involves capacities, such as a good-oriented volition (*boulēsis*), deliberation (*bouleusis*), discernment (*dianoia*), deliberative representation (*phantasia bouleutikē*) and choice (*proairesis*). These capacities allow human agents to exercise a considerable degree of control over their behaviour. In particular, they are capable of selecting their objectives, which are merely given to non-human agents.

Yet, humans can also act in a second way, that is, as mere sentient beings. Along with other animal self-movers, they can respond directly to present incentives and orient themselves by the perceived pleasantness, or painfulness in their surroundings (Furley 1980). This more primitive mode of action is generally beneficial to human agents. It enables them to successfully perform simple and routine tasks which are better handled by instinct rather than conscious effort and planning. Moreover, the specifically human mode of action builds upon the preceding, elementary one. As indicated in the earlier discussion of *EN* 2.3, the reason for this is twofold. Firstly, perceived pleasures have stronger motivational impact on human agents than the two other sources of attraction to which they are capable to react, namely, things advantageous or good without qualification. Thus, unless properly educated, the perception of an apparent good, that is, an accessible pleasure may lead to drastic changes in our physical condition that actually block or falsify the intuition of the two less apparent kinds of goods. Secondly, human agents mostly experience the latter through the medium of pleasant or painful experiences. Hence, an-

¹⁶*EN* 1111b5–7.

¹⁷Hereafter cited as *MA*.

ticipated pleasure may be used as an indication whether to pursue a particular kind of good or not.

This leaves us with a distinction between, on the one hand, intentional agency, which is both planning and responsive to reasons, and on the other, a rudimentary, pre-intentional kind of agency which is open to us *qua* sentient beings. *Akrasia* is clearly associated with the latter kind of agency, for it involves an unreasonable reaction to apparent incentives as opposed to reasons and not a response to invalid reasons.

An immediate objection to address is that the preceding explanation of *akratic* pre-intentionality, although making sense of *akratic* pursuits whose object is readily available, will be hard pressed to accommodate instances of *akrasia* where planning is apparently needed. Examples include cases, like those brought up in *EN* 7.6, where *akratic* agents seem to engage in strategic behaviour in order to indulge their appetites. To sharpen the point of the objection: if planning is the distinguishing feature of intentional agency whereas *akrasia* points to a rudimentary or pre-intentional kind of agency, how are apparent instances of *akratic* planning to be accounted for?

MA 7 indicates a possible solution. There, Aristotle elaborates on simple, straightforward actions that do not require further planning, but immediately follow from the understanding of their respective goals, just like the conclusion of a syllogism follows from its premises. Examples are taking a walk and, perhaps more surprisingly, building a house, since this second action cannot be performed instantaneously, but is further analyzable to simpler, consecutive actions (Nussbaum 1979, 344). Yet, the building example does not seem to be a mistake. It reappears in the discussion of intellectual virtues in *EN* 6.4 to help clarify the distinction between practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and know-how (*technē*). Building a house is only a production, or secondary action (*poiesis*) and not an action proper (*prāxis*). It does not require the application of practical wisdom, or deliberation, but only know-how. This is because the kind of planning involved in the latter is purely of the means-end variety, whereas deliberation also includes considering eligible courses of action in the context of a person's broader life project. Building on this thought, it becomes apparent that planning proper is inseparable from responsiveness to reasons in the sense of identifying and successfully pursuing worthwhile ends of action. In contrast, planning that boils down to merely iden-

tifying the means to achieving an end, independently of its standing with respect to both existing commitments and potential worthwhile pursuits, is just as derivative as the kind of ‘practical wisdom’ that some non-human animals can be said to employ in securing their survival.¹⁸ In light of the account of *akratic* pre-intentionality set out earlier, instances of *akratic* planning clearly fit the description of the latter, derivative kind. Hence, there is no tension with the idea of *akratic* pre-intentionality or voluntariness without choice. More precisely, *akratic* pursuits that take time and effort rather than reach for instant satisfaction are consistent with the immediacy implied by the idea that *akrasia* presents a reaction to an incentive rather than response to a reason. This is because the relevant kind of immediacy has to do with the way, in which this incentive or apparent good is pursued – without the support of deliberation or planning proper that would have put it into perspective and made it immediately clear how unworthy of pursuing this effectively is.

There is a related concern that we need to address in order to safely establish the claim that *akrasia* involves pre-intentional agency. This concern points to a possible tension between the proposed account of *akratic* pre-intentionality and the role of the so-called practical syllogism in Aristotle’s explanation of *akrasia*.¹⁹ For instance, it may be tempting to think that, if *akratic* actions can be explained as conclusions of faulty practical syllogisms, *akrasia* would involve a conflict of reasons, in which the invalid, yet intelligible one takes precedence over the valid, but insufficiently articulated one. If this is correct, *akrasia* turns out to be just as intentional as wrongdoing out of choice or moral depravity and, in this case, the blame that attaches to *akrasia*, cannot be different in kind from the blame for moral depravity as I previously suggested.

¹⁸This concise presentation should suffice for the purposes of the present inquiry. I have developed this point in some detail elsewhere, see Radoilska (2007, 272–290). On the nature and scope of practical wisdom as employed by non-human animals according to Aristotle, see Labarrière (1990).

¹⁹This concern could build on an interpretation, according to which the practical syllogism has two related functions in Aristotle’s philosophy: the first of an explanatory tool applicable to actions in general and the second of an ideal type or model for rational actions. On the rationale for such an interpretation and its exegetical alternatives, see Corcilius (2008a; 2008b).

Fortunately for my argument, the tension above is only apparent and can be explained away if we look again at MA 7. There, a practical syllogism is employed in order to explain the possibility of voluntary action by both human and non-human animals and the paradigm case chosen is voluntary movement from one place to another. Crudely put, the model is as follows. To start with, an object is perceived (1) and if this object is subsumed under the category of either pleasant or threatening things rather than of no interest (2), and if, in addition, there is no external obstacle (3), then an action follows (4): either to try and get the thing perceived as pleasant, that is, voluntary movement toward the reference object or, conversely, to try and get away from the thing perceived as dangerous, that is, voluntary movement in the opposite direction of the reference object. Since both the occurrence and the nature of the action are determined by the conjunction of the antecedents, it is helpful to consider this necessitation by means of a syllogism whose first or major premise, the conjunction (1) and (2) reads as: "Here is an object for me to pursue/avoid" whilst the second or minor premise (3) reads as: "Nothing stops me from pursuing/avoiding this object." The conclusion (4) is an action of the following kind: trying to get/trying to get away from.

This is a credible model of purposive or pre-intentional but not planning or fully intentional action,²⁰ as it presents its explanandum in isolation, instead of putting it into perspective. Yet, as shown by the preceding discussion of deliberation and choice, perspectival considerations, such as timeliness and worthiness in comparison to alternative pursuits are prerequisite for fully intentional agency. In fact, the practical syllogism does not play any role in Aristotle's account of action proper (*praxis*) and is directly applied to human agency (as opposed to broader voluntary agency as in MA 7 above) only in the context of *akrasia*.

²⁰On this distinction, see Bratman (2007, 3–18). This distinction builds on the earlier contrast between having a goal and having a plan, but is not fully coextensive with it. However, possible divergences will not be given further consideration as they fall beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

2 Ordinary weakness of will

Having clarified the sense in which *akrasia* involves a failure of intentional agency, I shall contrast it with another failure of intentional agency, ordinary weakness of will. The objective will be twofold: firstly, to bring into relief the account developed here against a credible competitor and, secondly, to suggest a plausible way of linking their respective explananda, *akrasia* and ordinary weakness of will. To do so, let us begin by considering the account of the latter phenomenon put forth by Richard Holton.

Holton defines what I proposed to call ordinary weakness of will as follows: “unreasonable revision of a contrary inclination defeating intention (a resolution) in response to the presence of those very inclinations” (2009, 78). This view is defended as an alternative to ‘the traditional account that identifies weakness of will and *akrasia*’ deemed to be ‘not simply inadequate, but straight out wrong’ (1999, 243, 258). According to Holton, this fundamental error stems from the fact that, following Plato and Aristotle, many philosophers have taken peripheral cases of weakness of will to be paradigmatic and, as a result, misconceived the phenomenon at issue. More precisely, the charge is that the traditional account has focused on instances of acting against one’s better judgment, which are neither representative nor difficult to account for (Holton 2003). In so doing, it has failed to appreciate the centrality of irresoluteness which comes to the fore as soon as we isolate cases of (ordinary) weakness of will without *akrasia*. The following thought experiment presents such a case:

Christabel, an unmarried Victorian lady, has decided to embark on an affair that she knows will be disastrous. It will ruin her reputation, and quite probably leave her pregnant. Moreover, she considers it morally wrong. So she thinks it not the best option on either moral or prudential grounds. Nevertheless, she has resolved to go ahead with it. At the very last moment, however, she pulls out: not because of a rational reconsideration of the pros and cons, but because she simply loses her nerve. (Holton 1999, 255)

According to Holton, the interest of this thought experiment lies in the possibility to distinguish between, on the one hand, the tradi-

tional form of *akrasia*, i.e. acting against one's better judgment without ordinary weakness of will and, on the other, ordinary weakness of will, i.e. failing to act on one's resolution without traditional weakness of will. With respect to Christabel, the locus of *akrasia* is to be found in her initial intention to embark on an affair, for this intention clearly goes against her better judgment. So, in Holton's terms, if she were to go ahead with her (disastrous) resolution, she would have displayed traditional *akrasia* but no ordinary weakness of will. In contrast, if Christabel avoids disaster by virtue of simply losing her nerve, she renders herself guilty of ordinary weakness of will but not of *akrasia*.

Pace Holton, this thought experiment seems to support a different conclusion.²¹ Firstly, it enables us to challenge the contrast between traditional *akrasia* and ordinary weakness of will that Holton draws. Secondly, it helps identify a problematic shift of blame allocation in Holton's account of ordinary weakness of will, which, once it is redressed, effectively points toward a secondary failure of intentional agency dependent upon *akrasia*, the primary failure of intentional agency.

To begin to unpack the first critical point, let us address the issue how much of a difference there is between describing the phenomenon at issue in terms of a failed intention rather than a conflicted better judgment. Drawing on the allocation of *akrasia* in Christabel's case, it becomes clear that Holton takes the better judgment against which she intends to act to be motivationally inert. This understanding is also consistent with Holton's earlier remarks a propos the advantages of his proposal over the traditional view, suggesting that there is nothing special about gaps between an agent's evaluation and motivation to act and, therefore, thinking about weakness of will in terms of inner conflict is a distraction (1999, 253–255). In other words, assumed here is a form of externalism about evaluative, including moral judgments. Supposing that this kind of externalism is correct, Holton is right to point out that acting against one's better judgment presents no philosophical challenge, for evaluative judgments are motivationally inert in principle. Consequently, the task at hand turns out to be explaining instances where motivation to act

²¹Cf. Mele (2010) for an alternative critique which also pays particular attention to Christabel's case.

seems to steadily follow an agent's evaluative judgments. This is consistent with a later paper by Holton (2003) arguing that it is strength of will rather than weakness of will philosophers should focus their attention on.

In the following, I shall not give further consideration to externalism about evaluative judgments as implied by Holton's rejection of the traditional view of *akrasia*. In so doing, I do not mean to suggest that it does not point to an alternative worth exploring. My reservations instead are as follows. Firstly, this kind of externalism cannot be taken for granted but needs to be argued for, however, Holton does not offer an explicit argument to this effect. Secondly, should an argument in favour of externalism about evaluative judgments prove successful, it would at the same time provide a reductionist account of *akrasia* along the lines I contemplated above, that is, not that *akrasia* is impossible as internalist sceptics maintain (Hare 1963; Watson 1977) but that it is all too common, provided the contingent links between evaluation and motivation. Thirdly, and most importantly, the issue addressed by the traditional view of *akrasia* is not about going against motivationally inert judgments. On this view, *akrasia* poses a challenge in need of philosophical explanation because holding a judgment that a particular course of action, A, is the best thing to do at a particular moment in time, t, is conceptually sufficient for intending to perform A at t (see, for instance, Mele 2002). Internalism about evaluative judgments offers an intuitive way of expressing this connection. However, if, following Holton, we dismiss this kind of internalism and take it that an agent's judgment in favour of A does not suffice for him to form an intention to do A at t, but requires an additional component, the *akratic* challenge would reappear under the guise of acting against one's intention to perform A. Following this line of thought, it turns out that ordinary weakness of will is not a different phenomenon from that addressed by the traditional view of *akrasia*, but merely a re-description of the same phenomenon meant to satisfy an externalist intuition about the nature of evaluative judgments.

This brings us to the second critical point I wish to make about ordinary weakness of will, the problematic shift of blame allocation to which it leads *qua* externalist re-description of traditional *akrasia*. Since the point of this re-description is to move away from the idea that the explanandum is some sort of gap between evaluation and

motivation, it becomes difficult to make sense of what the blame or, as Holton prefers to call it, the stigma (1999, 253–254; 2009, 82) that attaches to ordinary weakness of will could even amount to. The difficulty is particularly salient in cases, such as the thought experiment about Christabel. To recap, the example is intended to work out as follows. Christabel has formed an *akratic* resolution but then fails to act upon it because of the very inclination, in this case, fear which this resolution was meant to offset. As a result, Christabel ends up culpable of ordinary weakness of will, that is, a failure to act upon her *akratic* contrary inclination defeating intention in response to pressure from this very inclination, but not of *akrasia*, since the resulting omission is in accord with her better judgment. But how are we to understand the point of Christabel's culpability?

As indicated earlier, Holton argues that ordinary weakness of will is blameworthy by virtue of being an unreasonable revision of a prior resolution. The blame conferring feature here is unreasonableness and, in order to fulfil its task, it has to imply an internalist picture of reasons for action. This however stands uneasily with the intended move away from the traditional picture of *akrasia* so that we begin to lose sight of what might be at stake in presumed cases of ordinary weakness of will if they are to be dissociated from *akrasia*.

To bring out this point, let us look again at Christabel's case. In order to be able, following Holton, to find her at fault for not acting upon her *akratic* resolution, we need to assume that reasons for action are generally dependent upon an agent's set plan. As long as the plan does not get revised as Holton puts it by means of 'rational reconsideration of pros and cons' (1999, 255), it is unreasonable for the agent not to carry it out, even if this plan is in and of itself unreasonable. On this model, Christabel acts unreasonably because she does not manage to carry out her unreasonable plan, that is, she loses her nerve, and gets blamed for that.

A possible way to dissipate the ensuing air of a paradox would be to apply the distinction between internal and external reasons for action and to flesh out two separate kinds of unreasonableness at work in the description above. Thus, the plan Christabel set out is externally unreasonable. The term is meant to reflect the presence of reasons that speak against the plan in question, irrespective of Christabel's endorsement of it. Another way to capture the underlying intuition is to say that it would be better if this plan did not succeed, even

though Christabel might be upset. In contrast, her failure to carry out this plan is internally unreasonable. If she had not set her mind to it, there would have been nothing to reproach her for and no failure to speak of.

However, drawing on the discussion of inverse *akrasia* in the preceding section, there is good reason to doubt that a distinction between internal and external unreasonableness can help resolve the paradox of Christabel's culpability. To recap, instances of inverse *akrasia* involve praiseworthy actions which however are performed against an agent's better judgment at the time of action. The concept of inverse *akrasia* therefore implies a gap between practical irrationality or the *akratic* aspect of an action on the one hand, and its blame- or praiseworthiness, on the other. The former takes as a reference point the agent's better judgment, whilst the latter reflects the moral quality of the action. Consequently, instances of inverse *akrasia* are praiseworthy although practically irrational.

Instances of inverse *akrasia* resemble Christabel's failure to act on her *akratic* resolution in that they also involve a 'failure' of a plan, which, like Christabel's, is not worth realizing. In terms of the distinction I introduced earlier, we could say that both ordinary weakness of will without *akrasia* and inverse *akrasia* amount to internally unreasonable failures of externally unreasonable plans. This common ground between the two phenomena makes it difficult to explain why we should end up with different outcomes with respect to moral appraisal, for as indicated earlier there is reason to believe that inverse *akrasia* is praiseworthy, whereas, according to Holton, ordinary weakness of will is blameworthy.

A possible rejoinder could be to argue that it is a mistake to consider instances of inverse *akrasia* as praiseworthy. I will not pursue this line of reasoning here because even if the rejoinder is successful, this will not suffice to make sense of Christabel's culpability. In essence, although unworthy of praise, instances of inverse *akrasia* would still be blameless. This is an intuitive way to make room for the feature of inverse *akrasia* that underpins the claim about its praiseworthiness. This feature has to do with the fact that inverse *akratic* actions although performed against the agent's better judgment are still performed for a reason. This reason may not be fully appreciated or even articulated by the agent, yet, it clearly figures within his motivational set. To use Bernard Williams's helpful expression, there is a 'sound

deliberative route', following which the agent could counterfactually acknowledge the reason upon which he acts as his better judgment (Williams 1981). If this is correct, the reason at issue is not an external one. Consequently, the ensuing inverse *akratic* action is not only an externally reasonable one, but also an internally reasonable one. We may be reluctant to praise inverse *akratic* agents since, although they do the right thing, they do not do so wholeheartedly. However, we cannot deny the fact that they do the right thing intentionally.

This is bad news for Christabel's culpability, for in her case the plan she 'fails' to carry out is clearly not only externally but also internally unreasonable, for it is, as Holton points out, an *akratic* resolution. The upshot is that the overriding reasons against going ahead with the affair are not merely counterfactually accessible to Christabel but have effective purchase on her. This is indeed the point of her trying to form an *akratic* resolution – being able to resist these compelling reasons. In light of this, Christabel's 'merely losing her nerve' looks like a very good response to the reasons at issue, for she is correct to be afraid of going ahead with the affair and, unlike inverse *akratic* agents, she is equally aware of being correct. Since there is no defensible sense, in which we could say that what Christabel ended up doing was unreasonable, ordinary weakness of will without *akrasia* turns out to be blameless.

The preceding analysis has two related implications. The first is that Holton's account of ordinary weakness of will implicitly relies on a kind of internalism about reasons for action that is also at the heart of the traditional view of *akrasia*. As a result, it becomes impossible to note any significant difference between the two views. The second is that, by reverting to the internalist premises it sought to avoid, Holton's account of ordinary weakness of will is bound to tell conflicting stories about the relationship between motivation and evaluation, internal and external reasons for action.

Does this mean that we should abandon the notion of ordinary weakness of will and, if so, would this not be equally damaging to the account of *akrasia* I set out in the previous section, for like Holton's it also points to a failure of intentional agency rather than conflicted better judgment like the traditional view? In the remainder of this paper, I shall aim to address both issues. More precisely, I shall argue that there is a distinct phenomenon that Holton's account has the merit to point to and that this phenomenon is best understood as a secondary

failure of intentional agency. By clarifying the significance of this failure, we are in a position to both anticipate concerns about the account of *akrasia* on offer here and bring into relief the way, in which it integrates internal as well as external constraints on reasons for action.

3 Ordinary weakness of will as a failure of *akrasia* defeating pre-commitment

The conception of *akrasia* as a primary failure of intentional agency I developed earlier provides support for a (moderately) revised account of ordinary weakness of will. In particular, it helps straighten up the story about blame allocation for ordinary weakness of will and, as a result, makes it possible to safely distinguish the latter from the phenomenon the traditional view of *akrasia* is after. To recap, the alternative I proposed articulates *akrasia* in the following way. *Akrasia* is a primary failure of intentional agency in the sense that it involves a motivational conflict which is only due to the *akratic* agent's evaluative immaturity and not to some conflict of values. The blameworthiness of *akrasia* reflects the pre-intentional status of *akratic* wrongdoing. More specifically, it brings into focus the fact that *akratic* pursuits are obviously ineligible on reflection and, in this sense, *akratic* agents fail to put two and two together. As we saw earlier, this feature of *akrasia* is key to explaining why the problem of inverse *akrasia* does not arise for the account on offer. In terms of the distinction between internal and external unreasonableness, *akratic* actions can be said to not only exhibit both, but in a way, to precede the very possibility to distinguish between these kinds of unreasonableness. This is because the failure involved in *akrasia* is that to engage in fully intentional agency instead of taking one's cue from what is immediately present like a mere purposive agent. In this sense, *akrasia* is a primary failure of intentional agency.

Drawing on this account, it becomes apparent that ordinary weakness of will can be explained as a secondary failure of intentional agency, that is, a failure to tackle the problem posed by *akrasia*. In this respect, the contrary inclination defeating intention or resolution, as Holton puts it, which gets overturned in instances of ordinary weakness of will, can be usefully compared to unsuccessful pre-commitment (Elster 1984; 2000). Interestingly, Holton considers the

possibility of such a connection, but then dismisses it, because he believes that third party involvement, as in the original story of Ulysses and the Sirens, is central to pre-commitment but inessential to the phenomenon he aims to clarify (Holton, 1999, 245–246). However, if we take third party involvement to be one way of improving the prospects of certain pre-commitments rather than a distinctive feature of the underlying intention,²² the similarities between resolution and pre-commitment become apparent. Firstly, they are both future-oriented. By this I mean that they take the following logical form: at a moment in time, t_1 an agent forms the intention to perform an action when a subsequent moment in time, t_2 takes place.²³ Secondly, both are meant to ensure that, when t_2 arrives, the agent sticks to the plan he formed at t_1 . These two features are closely connected so that there is no need for extra reason, other than the lapse of time between t_1 and t_2 for an agent to be concerned about his sticking to the plan. In this sense, pre-commitment can be seen as a paradigm, yet inconspicuous case of intentional agency.

In contrast, in order for pre-commitment to come to the fore, an extra reason is required. Examples include forms of self-binding, to which Elster (1984) first drew attention, as well as contrary inclination defeating intentions as defined by Holton (1999). The common ground the two kinds of planning share is that at t_1 the agent anticipates, as a part of the planning, various kinds of difficulties that are likely to jeopardise his undertaking at t_2 . In the case of contrary inclination defeating intentions, these difficulties have to do with motives that the agent would like to be rid of. In light of the preceding critical discussion of ordinary weakness of will, it is persuasive to attribute the drawbacks re blame allocation and distinctiveness vis-à-vis the traditional view of *akrasia* to under-describing the phenomenon at issue. The alternative view presented here fills in the missing part of the story. In particular, it depicts the circumstance of ordinary weakness of will as involving one's realisation of being in the way of *akrasia*, cou-

²²The subsequent discussion of pre-commitment draws on Radoilska (2012).

²³Alternatively, the logical form could be presented as involving counterfactuals, that is, in a situation s_1 an agent forms the intention to perform an action should another situation, s_2 arise. Nothing of significance for the present argument hangs on whether we choose the one or the other way of presenting pre-commitment/resolution.

pled with ambition to extricate oneself by means of pre-commitment. In other words, there is a primary failure of intentional agency that a person sets to resolve by means of fully intentional agency. However, since *akrasia* covers both a specific behaviour and an underlying character disposition (the first feature of the conceptual schema I outlined in Section 1), the circumstance of ordinary weakness of will is more likely than not to give rise to actual cases of ordinary weakness of will, that is, secondary failures of intentional agency. This is because of the immediate salience of *akratic* distractions, which can be experienced as irresistible in the grips of *akrasia*, independently of the agent's prior resolution to resist such distractions. Following this line of thought, it becomes apparent that the seeds of failure involved in ordinary weakness of will are already sown by the initial failure it aims to resolve, that is, *akrasia*.

By grounding the revised account of ordinary weakness of will in a conception of *akrasia* as a primary failure of intentional agency, we are able to address the drawbacks of the original account as well as maintain the compelling intuition at the heart of Holton's proposal, according to which "the central cases of weakness of will are best characterised not as cases in which people act against their better judgment, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions" (1999, 241). Moreover, we are in a position to appreciate the sense, in which weakness of will understood as secondary failure of intentional agency can be seen as more 'ordinary' than *akrasia* from a phenomenological or experiential viewpoint, although the latter is conceptually fundamental, for it is the secondary failure to tackle the primary, pre-intentional one that brings the scope of the underlying problem into focus. In this respect, it is plausible to consider that more often than not the experience of *akrasia* goes hand in hand with that of ordinary weakness of will.

Where does this leave us with respect to the traditional view of *akrasia*? Drawing on the discussion of inverse *akrasia* and the distinction between internal and external unreasonableness I introduced earlier, there are three options open to us. The first is to argue that acting against one's better judgment presents a different kind of (secondary) failure of intentional agency. The second option is to distinguish between intentional and rational agency and to locate the failure of acting against one's better judgment with respect to the latter but not the former category of agency. And finally, we may be inclined to recon-

sider the traditional view as an umbrella concept covering a cluster of separate phenomena, in which evaluation and motivation – somewhat paradoxically – come apart. Whatever route we take, it remains the case that neither ordinary weakness of will, nor *akrasia* which it builds upon could be fully accounted for in terms of acting against one's better judgment.

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