

What is the best way to describe the failure that the akratic person has (character, knowledge, will, ...) and why?

The akratic person (*akrates*), as characterised by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is best understood as having a failure of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which results in them not taking the right action despite correctly grasping moral principles. Although this account of akrasia is in some respects similar to one on which the akratic agent instead has a defect of knowledge, locating *phronesis* as the point of failure better accommodates Aristotle's distinctions between different types of *akrasia*, and also fits more naturally with how we usually think of knowledge, as a purely intellectual quality. In this essay, I first briefly introduce the *akrates* and their defining flaw, contrasting them with virtuous, self-controlled (or continent), and vicious agents. Then, I outline Aristotle's taxonomy of *akrasia*, explaining why this undermines the case for describing the *akrates*'s defect in terms of willpower or ignorance alone. Finally, I argue that *akrasia* is best understood as a failure of *phronesis*, and draw out what this implies about the character of the *akrates*, given Aristotle's views on the connection between prudence and ethical excellence.

We say that an agent is akratic when they act against their better judgement or knowledge of what is right, taking some action ϕ despite being aware that a more choiceworthy action ψ exists and is open to them. At the start of Book VII, Aristotle introduces *akrasia* as a condition which is to be avoided, but is not so bad as vice (VII.1, 1145a15-20). This is noteworthy for two reasons: first, it establishes that *akrasia* is a settled state of character and not merely a passing affliction that an individual might occasionally suffer. Second, by setting up *akrasia* in the context of five other states of character (virtue, vice, brutishness, divine virtue, and self-control), Aristotle allows us to see more clearly the boundaries of *akrasia*. Unlike a vicious person with a distorted conception of the good, the *akrates* starts from the right principle (*arche*) but takes actions contrary to that, and will later feel regret for doing so. The difference from the vicious person is primarily internal (in the sense that both perform bad actions, but have different orientations towards them), whereas the *akrates* differs outwardly from the self-controlled and virtuous agents, both of whom do take the correct actions. Although the self-controlled

Commented [u1]: Do you think it is despite grasping moral principles or despite grasping what it is they are supposed to do in this particular situation? In the case of the *phronimos*, we would arguably say that both of these are present. But which aspect does the akratic person here fall short? At this early point in your essay, you might sidestep bringing up this issue by simply saying "despite knowing what they ought to do" or something like this. But it might be worth answering this question in the course of your essay.

Commented [u2]: Is this anticipating a particular objection?

Commented [u3]: I'm not sure about this. It seems to me that instances of practical knowledge, which usually are not described as 'intellectual', seem perfectly natural as well.

Commented [u4]: Technically, since you are using the Greek word here in the plural, it should be 'akrateis.'

Commented [u5]: This formulation makes it sound a little bit as if *phronesis* was a capacity or faculty that could potentially fail, but remember that *phronesis* is not a part of the soul but rather a particular form of excellence of one of these parts. So at this point, without looking at your further argument, the most natural way to understand this is possibly 'failure to have *phronesis*'?

Commented [u6]: Good, this seems like a crisp and helpful definition. It might be worth relying on some primary text here to show where you get this from.

Commented [u7]: This is an interesting point that would deserve further argument and explanation. Many scholars think Aristotle is read more naturally as saying that *akrasia* is in fact not a hexis or stable disposition like vice and virtue but more similar to an affliction or pathological condition. While it can become habitual, it does not determine one's entire character the way that virtue and vice do.

Commented [u8]: This is a very interesting idea in its own right—what do you make of the role that regret plays here? What does it show about the *akrates*?

agent shares in having shameful appetites with the *akrates*, the former is able to overcome these non-rational desires and follow the action in accordance with reason, while the latter succumbs (VII.1, 1145b12-14). Superficially, at least, this might lead us to think that the akratic person has a failure of willpower: they know what it is they ought to do, but lack the strength to follow through on their judgement.

However, this view is challenged by the more nuanced taxonomy of *akrasia* which Aristotle goes on to present later in Book VII. In particular, he distinguishes between weakness, where one's deliberation fails to inform the action taken, and impetuosity, where one fails to deliberate at all (VII.7, 1150b19-22). With weakness, the idea that a lack of resolve in the will is to blame seems justified – the individual uses some amount of reason to form a judgement about what to do, but does not stand by it. On the other hand, it is hard to argue that the impetuously akratic agent fails to take the right action due to a lack of willpower, given that their reasoning did not get off the ground and there was therefore never any deliberation whose conclusions they abandoned for want of willpower. It must be something other than the will, then, that the akratic person lacks.

Perhaps the deficiency is instead in knowledge – motivated by intuitions similar to those that Plato ascribes to Socrates in his dialogue *Protagoras*, we might think that nobody could possibly take an action they truly believed to be suboptimal, and that ignorance of some sort is the cause of apparent *akrasia* (357d).^{*} Aristotle's position is that ignorance plays an important explanatory role, through several potential channels: an *akrates* may fail to acquaint themselves with the particulars of the situation, or possess relevant such knowledge without actively bringing it to bear on their deliberation, for instance (VII.4, 1147b10-14). Yet here again, Aristotle's taxonomy of *akrasia* again undermines the case in favour – it is rather unnatural to say that an impetuous agent, who fails to deliberate at all, is ignorant. "Hasty" or "foolish" might be better descriptors, but those are adjectives describing someone's character, not their intellectual state. Moreover, even in the case of the weak agent, describing *akrasia*

^{*} Socrates's position, as Aristotle remarks, was that *akrasia* did not exist at all (VII.2, 1145b24-27). The dispute between the two philosophers is largely semantic, though (Price 2006, p236) – certainly there are real-life examples which fit the commonsense concept of *akrasia*, and as I am about to discuss, Socrates and Aristotle arrived at similar conclusions about the sorts of ignorance which give rise to (quasi-)akrasia.

Commented [u9]: In terms of the dialectic of your essay putting this preliminary view or approach on the table is a nice way for you to proceed. However, I feel one could tease out the intuition that this is a matter of willpower a little better. At this point, you have only pointed out that the *akrates* is *unable* to overcome non-rational and contrary desires, but it is not clear yet why, within the framework of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a reader would draw the conclusion that the reason why the *akrates* is that way is because of a failure of the will.

Commented [u10]: Good, this idea of affirming one's judgement in some way seems to be a clearer explanation gets us to the matter of willpower.

Commented [u11]: Good, the point is articulated well and fits in well with the dialectic of the argument.

Commented [u12]: Looking at it in isolation, I understand why this claim will not seem intuitively plausible. However, if we admit Aristotle's second way in which a person might be ignorant, namely having adequate knowledge but not putting it to good use, perhaps there is a way to see this in an impetuous person.

in terms of knowledge somewhat stretches **ordinary parlance** in claiming that a failure to adequately *attend* to knowledge is a form of ignorance, as Charles (2010, p208) suggests.

Commented [u13]: Again, we might wonder how Charles's appeal to 'ordinary parlance' fits with the kind of argument that one wants to make here.

A more elegant and convincing way of understanding the *akrates*'s failure is as a shortcoming in practical wisdom (*phronesis*). On Aristotle's account, an akratic agent either does not deliberate, or they does not reach the correct decision despite deliberating (Price 2006, p245). In each case (impetuosity and weakness respectively), the agent ends up taking a wrong, imprudent action. Drawing on Aristotle's division of the soul developed in the previous book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can attribute this error to **a shortcoming in the rationally calculating part of the soul** (VI.1, 1138b7-9), whose function is to deliberate on practical matters. The connection to *phronesis*, the corresponding virtue of this part of the soul, also helps us see why the fundamental failure of the *akrates* is not one of character. Aristotle explains that *phronesis* requires virtue of character as well as excellence in practical reasoning (VI.2, 1139a32-35), **with the former being something that both the self-controlled agent and the *akrates* lack (as evidenced by their having base appetites)**. Although the self-controlled agent does not possess *excellence* in practical reasoning, it is their superior ability to deliberate which allows them to take the correct action in spite of their inappropriate desires, and therefore **practical wisdom is the defining feature of the *akrates***.

Commented [u14]: Again in terms of being precise about terminology; compare this phrase with the above "a shortcoming in practical wisdom (*phronesis*)"; this goes back to an earlier comment about clearly distinguishing parts of the soul and their corresponding excellencies or virtues.

To conclude, the underlying flaw of the *akrates* is a defect **in their faculty of practical wisdom**. Depending on the nature of this dysfunction, they may exhibit weakness or impetuosity, but in either case will fail to reach the correct decision (and thus action) despite having the requisite knowledge to do so. Although the *akrates* does have a less-than-virtuous character as a corollary of them lacking *phronesis*, this is not their defining failure, and neither is a deficiency in willpower or knowledge in general. An account of *akrasia* grounded in practical wisdom unifies Aristotle's two subtypes, and is supported by his discussion of the role that ignorance plays in the condition.

Commented [u15]: Good, this is an important observation—but we might wonder about whether it is true the stark way that you put it here. Does the *enkrates* lack *phronesis* to the same extent as the *akrates*? Are there different aspects of *phronesis* that the *enkrates* has partly cultivated despite not possessing *phronesis* fully?

Commented [u16R15]: I see that you address this concern in the next sentence; the formulation here, however, perhaps does not quite capture the difference in degree.

Commented [u17]: I suppose this reads 'lack of practical wisdom'?

Commented [u18]: Related to some comments above, it is misleading to call *phronesis* a faculty.

References

- Charles, David. 2010. 'Akrasia. The Rest of the Story?', in Pakaluk & Pearson (eds.), *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, 187-210.
- Price, Anthony. 2006 'Acrasia and Self-Control', in Kraut (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Nicomachean Ethics* (2006), 234-254.

Rohan,

This is again a very well-structured and clearly written essay, in which you aim to give a clear answer to the question and demonstrate very good understanding of the distinctions that Aristotle draws in Book 7 in his discussion of the akratic person.

There are a few points that I think could be improved. First, even when answering non-commentary questions, I think you should take the time briefly to contextualise the theme of the question—simply take it as an opportunity to demonstrate your broad understanding and familiarity with the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This also does not necessarily need to be extensive, just one or two additional sentences regarding the place of the discussion in the work and why it matters for the overall project will be enough. Next, it is appropriate for an essay in the history of philosophy to quote, discuss, and analysis passages of primary text. The reason is that it is precisely the point of this kind of scholarship that often the primary text is not at all unambiguous or clear; it would have been interesting, for instance, to see your above claim about *akrasia* being a stable state of character supported by primary textual evidence. Of course, this is not something expected in the exam. However, when it comes to writing papers in the history of philosophy, you should demonstrate that you are able to unpack and talk your reader through some passages. I am aware that you were short on time this week and that you have done analyses like this to some extent in your previous essay, so don't worry too much about it.

Be careful clearly to distinguish the parts of the soul and its capacities from the excellencies or virtues that are associated with them and make sure that it is clear which of these you have in mind. For instance, when you say “a failure of *phronesis*” in your introduction, the charitable reader can still assume that you accurately think of *phronesis* as the virtue of the calculatory rational part of the soul, but when you call *phronesis* a faculty, this is rather quite unequivocally misleading. I know you are well aware of these differences and very well-versed at this point in Aristotle's terminology; just be careful this shines through in your writing and there are no mistakes like this.

In the case of your argument here, unfortunately, this imprecision does matter to some extent, for I have to wonder what exactly you mean when you say that the flaw of the akrates is “lack of *phronesis*.” So I will probably just ask you to talk me through your argument again with this correction in mind. I look forward to our discussion.

JG