

# On *Akrasia* and Empathy

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Since the ancient Greeks, philosophers have faced the phenomenon of actions in which the actor appears to act against the actor's own judgment and deliberation. Many have taken to explaining this phenomenon by claiming the existence of *akrasia*, that is, weakness of the will. Many claim that it seems obvious that one sometimes acts contrary to one's judgment due to a weakness of one's will. To be clear, *akrasia* is not simply an instance of someone doing something without thinking and later realizing that they should have done something else. We do not need the concept of *akrasia* to explain those actions. Furthermore, *akrasia* is not when someone thinks about a situation and decides, for example, it would be better to eat ice cream rather than stick to their diet and then eats the ice cream. We might argue that this person ought to not eat ice cream, but it is nevertheless the case that this person acts in accordance with his deliberation, that this person's deliberation produces a result that he turns into an action. *Akrasia* is when someone deliberates correctly, that is, when someone's deliberation yields the valid, cogent result from the premises, and then takes an action that is different from the conclusion she reached in her mind. *Akrasia* is when someone decides it is best to stick to their diet, but still eats ice cream.

Despite what might seem obvious about *akrasia*, the more closely one attends to the issue, the more difficult it becomes to understand how a person is supposed to do something she knows is bad or wrong for her to do, how one is supposed to act akratically. Indeed, it looks like Aristotle might have appraised the notion of *akrasia* similarly<sup>1</sup> (and following Aristotle is usually not a bad place to start). Attending closely to this issue is important, then, as it seems only a nuanced account can adequately account for what otherwise seems like a simple, commonsensical phenomenon. To approach this issue, I analyze the account of *akrasia* in Plato's

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle starts at 1145b3 by saying that *akrasia* seems obvious, yet the concluding remarks about *akrasia* at 1147b1-19 paint *akrasia* as anything but an obvious, commonsense phenomenon.

*Protagoras* and Aristotle's account of *akrasia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In analyzing what Plato and Aristotle say about *akrasia*, I point out a fundamental position that Plato and Aristotle both share that is not a feature of their accounts of *akrasia* per se, but rather is a position that significantly shapes the way that they think about *akrasia*. This point that they share is their thinking that the soul is a unity. I argue that one cannot successfully account for *akrasia* if one thinks of the soul in this way. I suggest a way of thinking about the soul that does not follow the Platonic and Aristotelian notion that the soul's ideal condition is to be unified, but rather that the soul's ideal condition might not be unified. I propose that one finds with Derrida resources for understanding the soul's ideal not-unified condition as analogous to an aporia, and I argue that understanding the soul as not unified allows us to account for *akrasia*. That is, if we understand the soul as having an aporetic character, as not fully agreeing with itself and as having different activities or parts that do not coalesce into a unity, then we can account for *akrasia*.

### **Plato's *Protagoras* and the Akratic's Self-defeating Hedonism**

Understanding what Plato says about *akrasia* necessitates seeing why a discussion of *akrasia* even occurs in the *Protagoras*. Thus, a quick synopsis of the dialogue is in order. The dialogue begins with Socrates talking to a friend to whom Socrates recounts the events of Socrates's day. Socrates claims to have just spoken with the wisest man alive "if you think the wisest man alive is Protagoras" (309d1-2). This claim by no means indicates that Socrates thinks Protagoras is the wisest man alive, but Socrates does admit that talking to Protagoras distracted Socrates from the otherwise alluring Alcibiades, so there is at minimum something enchanting (which is not necessarily a compliment) about listening to Protagoras speak. Socrates tells his friend that Hippocrates came to Socrates in a frenzy because, having just learned that Protagoras is in town, Hippocrates wants to meet Protagoras and become a student of his. Hippocrates

ashamedly admits he wants to be taught by a sophist. Socrates questions Hippocrates, and Hippocrates reveals himself not to know what a sophist is or does. In warning Hippocrates against the dangers of being taught by the wrong person, Socrates says the two of them should go to Protagoras and learn what Protagoras claims to teach and how he claims to teach it before Hippocrates agrees to be a student of Protagoras.

When Socrates and Hippocrates meet Protagoras, who is at the house of the wealthy Callias and is surrounded by other esteemed men of the day, Socrates poses to Protagoras the aforementioned questions. Protagoras claims to teach the art of citizenship and, ultimately, claims to teach virtue, a claim about which Socrates is skeptical. If Protagoras can truly teach virtue, he must know what virtue is, so Socrates asks him the seemingly innocuous question of whether virtue is one thing with justice, temperance, piety, wisdom, and courage as its parts or if these five are merely names for the same thing. Protagoras initially claims that they are parts of virtue and are all unlike each other, like the parts of a face. Socrates wants to investigate this claim and he does so by asking Protagoras questions about the position Protagoras has just propped. These questions, in addition to a discussion about virtue, lead to a good deal of bickering between Socrates and Protagoras, most of which seems to be instigated by Protagoras, as well as a seeming diversion from their initial conversation that involves analyzing a poem. Ultimately, the questioning ends with Socrates claiming that virtue is simply wisdom whereas Protagoras attempts to fight him on this conclusion. In the end, the two do not come to an agreement about the nature of virtue, but rather their conversation ends with Socrates pointing out how ridiculous the two of them must look given that at the beginning of the conversation Socrates argued that virtue could not be taught and Protagoras argued virtue could be taught, but now, at the end of the conversation, each holds the opposite view of his original position and

agrees with some of the initial claims the other man made. Socrates, in ultimately claiming virtue is knowledge, must think virtue is teachable, which is the opposite of his original claim, whereas Protagoras, in ultimately claiming virtue is not simply wisdom, must think virtue is not teachable, or, at least, not wholly teachable, which is the opposite of his original claim.<sup>2</sup>

The debate regarding *akrasia* appears at two points in the text: the first is near the end of Socrates's analysis of the poem and the second<sup>3</sup> is in the discussion about whether courage is like the other parts of virtue.<sup>4</sup> The first entrance of *akrasia*, from my reading, is not discussed much by those who write about *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*<sup>5</sup> and this omission is not without reason: the first entrance of *akrasia* seems to have little to do with the proof for the impossibility of *akrasia* that occurs later in the dialogue. Indeed, although I have not found anyone who gives an argument for omitting any discussion of the first entrance of *akrasia*, I maintain that, for the purposes of understanding what the dialogue teaches about *akrasia*, we do not need to consider the first entrance of *akrasia*.<sup>6</sup> What remains is to understand the second entrance of *akrasia*.

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<sup>2</sup> There is certainly much more to be said about all the portions of the dialogue I addressed, particularly this reversal at the end, and about the portions that I did not address, but this much is about enough to keep in mind how the discussion of *akrasia* fits into the dialogue. I will, though, in discussing *akrasia*, highlight one other portion of the dialogue that I did not mention in this synopsis.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the mention of *akrasia* that occurs during the analysis of the poem as the "first entrance" of *akrasia* and to the argument regarding *akrasia* in the discussion of courage as the "second entrance".

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras are working with the latter's claim that virtue is made up of five parts, which does not necessarily mean that Socrates agrees with this account of virtue.

<sup>5</sup> For more discussions on this topic, see, among others: Callard (2016); Callard (2017); Morris (2006); Rorty (1970); Santas (1966); Vlastos (1969).

<sup>6</sup> The reasoning behind the omission of a careful discussion of the first entrance of *akrasia* is not necessary for this paper or even this section. I, nevertheless, give this reasoning in this footnote. Socrates claims that he is "pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad" (345e2-4) as a justification for his interpretation of a section of the poem at hand. When Simonides, the one who wrote the poem at hand, writes that "All who do no wrong willingly I praise and love" (345d4-5) Socrates claims that we ought to understand the "willingly" as together with the "I praise and love" rather than with the "All who do no wrong". Moreover, Socrates claims that it must be the case, then, that those wise men, which seems to include Simonides, "know very well that anyone who does anything wrong or bad does so involuntarily [ἄκοντες]" (345e4-5). That is, Socrates claims Simonides meant that he willingly loves those who do no wrong rather than that he loves those who do not willingly do wrongs because, Socrates argues, the wise men already agree that no one willingly does what is wrong. This claim does not garner a reaction from the listeners, likely, or at least partially, because Socrates makes this claim while in the midst of a rather long speech; nevertheless, Socrates receives no

In dealing with the second entrance of *akrasia*, we need to begin by addressing two matters that are related to each other: we need to see more precisely how this second entrance occurs in the dialogue and we also need to come to more complete definition of *akrasia*. When Socrates attempts to prove that courage is wisdom, that being courageous is nothing other than having a proper kind of wisdom, he gives an argument that claims to deny the possibility of *akrasia*; Protagoras seemingly accepts the conclusion that *akrasia* does not exist, or, at least, he cannot formulate a sound objection or counter-argument. So, how does Socrates conceive of

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pushback on this claim. It is curious, though, that we are introduced to a topic, seemingly incidentally, that will prove to be instrumental in Socrates's analysis of virtue, which is the main discussion for Socrates and Protagoras.

From an immanent perspective, that is, from the perspective of Socrates's analysis of the poem, the claim does not strike one as out of bounds. If there were not a discussion of *akrasia* later in the dialogue, it would not seem odd that Socrates brings up *akrasia* in the analysis of the poem. (The content of his claim, that *akrasia* is not possible, might still strike readers as surprising, though.) Socrates and Protagoras begin discussing this poem because Socrates acquiesced to Protagoras's complaints about Socrates's style of debate and Socrates allowed Protagoras to ask him as many questions as the former saw fit. When given this chance, Protagoras decided to ask Socrates about this poem despite the fact that the two had just been talking about virtue. The poem has to do with being and becoming a good man, so bringing up this poem is not entirely out of bounds, but it is a far cry from where the conversation on virtue had been moments earlier. Protagoras seems to change the subject as a result of his embarrassment from being tangled in Socrates's web of questioning (333e). Protagoras claims to spot a contradiction in Simonides's poem and Socrates's introduction of *akrasia* is part of Socrates's attempt to defend Simonides, to argue that this purported contradiction is really no contradiction. As Frede notes, many aspects of Socrates's interpretation of the poem seem to be blatant misinterpretations, including the interpretation of the section I outlined above. The misinterpretations seem so blatant, in fact, that Frede argues they are deliberate. If Frede is right (I agree that Socrates misinterprets the poem and I am inclined to think the misinterpretations are deliberate), then this introduction of *akrasia*, while still functioning as part of Socrates's (mis)interpretation of the poem and, thus, still functioning consistently in the world of the dialogue, might also serve a second purpose. When one also takes into account Socrates's later claim that "Discussing poetry strikes me as no different from the second-rate drinking parties of the agora crowd" (347c4-6), it might be that Plato was making a comment about Protagoras, or perhaps about sophists in general, by having him bring up poetry, rather than directly continuing on with the discussion of virtue, when he has the chance to ask Socrates questions.

What is behind the deliberateness of Socrates's misinterpretation (if it is to be a misinterpretation, and a deliberate one at that) might be an attempt to steer the conversation back to virtue. When Protagoras introduces the poem, Socrates has shown that the other four parts of virtue are simply wisdom but has yet to show that courage is simply wisdom; that is, Socrates has unified temperance, justice, piety, and wisdom, but has yet to bring in courage. It seems fair to think that Socrates, despite Protagoras's bickering and subsequent diversion, still is concerned with uncovering the nature of virtue and, thus, still is thinking about whether courage is simply wisdom, that is, if virtue (since courage is the only remaining part of virtue, on Protagoras's account) is simply wisdom. It might be the case that Socrates realized, when analyzing the poem, that *akrasia* would figure into the discussion of whether courage is simply wisdom. If all this regarding the poem is so, then it might be that Socrates intentionally misinterprets the poem in the way that he misinterprets it so as to lead the discussion back to something that is pertinent to the real matter at hand: virtue. All these hypotheses regarding the poem, of course, need more justification to be considered proven; nevertheless, these hypotheses give us one way of understanding the existence of what seems like a coincidence—that Socrates mentions *akrasia* during the diversion of the poem and then makes the same claim regarding *akrasia* in a crucial moment in the analysis of virtue—which surely cannot be a coincidence. That is, the first entrance of *akrasia* seems to explain more about the poem's status in the dialogue than it does about *akrasia*.

*akrasia*? In the first entrance, Socrates says that no one willingly or voluntarily does what is bad or wrong (345d-e). Does Socrates still maintain this same conception in its second, more proper<sup>7</sup> entrance? If so, what does this conception mean?

The initial frame of the dialogue and the structure of what occurs within this frame provide clues for understanding the second entrance of *akrasia*. As I said before, Socrates tells a friend of his conversation with Protagoras, whom many consider to be extremely wise (309d1-2). Thus, we ought to be aware of, among other things, how wise or unwise Protagoras reveals himself to be throughout the course of the dialogue. Also, Socrates intends to question Protagoras to determine the latter's ability to teach virtue. Given that Socrates professes the importance of taking informed teachers and of allowing oneself to be taught only by knowledgeable people (312c1-5), we also ought to be aware of Protagoras's ability to teach virtue, which necessitates his having extensive knowledge of virtue. As we already saw, it is precisely when dealing with the heart of these issues, when examining whether Protagoras is as wise as people claims he is, when examining if Protagoras knows what virtue is, that *akrasia* properly enters. Thus, we have a justification for thinking about Socrates's argument regarding *akrasia* (that is, the second entrance of *akrasia*) as inexorably linked with the conversation surrounding virtue and Protagoras's ability to know it and teach it.

Indeed, this conclusion might help us understand an otherwise puzzling aspect of this section of the dialogue: Socrates's seeming hedonism.<sup>8</sup> I argue that hedonism is an essential aspect of Socrates's argument<sup>9</sup> regarding *akrasia*, but that Socrates gives an argument regarding *akrasia* that necessitates hedonism does not mean Socrates is himself a hedonist. Indeed, this

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<sup>7</sup> The second entrance of *akrasia* is the more proper entrance because it comes up organically in the conversation of virtue.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Callard (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Morris (2006) does not think that hedonism is necessary for Socrates's argument.

assertion is less an argument that I make than it is something that Socrates himself almost blatantly states as he is closing his argument against *akrasia*.

But even now it is still possible to withdraw, if you are able to say that the good is anything other than pleasure or that the bad is anything other than pain, or is it enough for you to live life pleasantly without pain? If it is enough, and you are not able to say anything else than that the good and the bad are that which result in pleasure and pain, listen to this. For I say to you that if this is so, your position will become absurd [...]<sup>10</sup>

Socrates himself admits that if “you,” meaning the many, can define the good in any other way than as being pleasure, then you will be able to escape the force of Socrates’s argument. Socrates asserts, though, that the many will not define the good in any other way and Protagoras, who functions as the mouthpiece for the many here, does not object to Socrates’s assertion. Socrates plainly states, in as many words, that if one is a hedonist, if one thinks that what is good is pleasure and that what is bad is pain, then “your position,” that *akrasia* exists, “will become absurd.” Before we can see how hedonism renders *akrasia* absurd and before we can see how this conclusion works into the discussions about virtue and, ultimately, Protagoras’s possession of wisdom and knowledge about virtue, we must note how we arrived at the claim I just quoted.

At the second entrance of *akrasia* Socrates wants to be able to prove (or at least have Protagoras accept, or at least have Protagoras be unable to deny) that courage is wisdom and, as courage is the last remaining part of virtue (on Protagoras’s view of virtue) that has yet to be proven as simply being wisdom, that virtue is wisdom. If Socrates can prove that *akrasia* does not exist, that is, if he can prove that no one willingly goes toward what she knows is bad or worse, then Socrates has the foothold that he needs to show what he wants to show about Protagoras and virtue. With this claim secure, that *akrasia* does not exist, Socrates can then say

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<sup>10</sup> 355a1-8.



that the commonsense view of courage—that the courageous person goes toward what is to be feared and the cowardly person only approaches those things that inspire confidence (359c9-10)—cannot be true because, of course, what is feared is bad. That is, the courageous person cannot be the one who willingly goes to what she fears because she knows what she fears to be bad. Rather, Socrates ultimately claims that, without an objection from Protagoras,<sup>11</sup> the courageous person must be the one who has knowledge of the proper objects of fear whereas the cowardly person must lack this knowledge, must be in ignorance of the proper object of fear. On the one hand, the courageous person fears what ought to be feared and does not fear what ought not to be feared, which is simply proper knowledge; on the other hand, the coward fears things that ought not to be feared, which is lacking knowledge, having ignorance. Although a good deal of what I just laid out comes after Socrates reaches his conclusion about *akrasia*, I argue it is fair to consider all of this as bringing us to the argument about *akrasia* because Socrates has all of this in mind, I argue, when he leads us to *akrasia*. That is, although the conclusion about courage comes at later lines of the dialogue than does the discussion of *akrasia*, this conclusion precedes this discussion in Socrates's thinking and planning.<sup>12</sup>

What we have left to understand is why hedonism renders *akrasia* impossible. Socrates argues that the many think that

most people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it. And when I have asked them the reason for this, they say that those who act that way do so because they are overcome by pleasure [...]<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Protagoras is unhappy about the conclusion Socrates reaches because it proves Protagoras wrong and in that sense Protagoras has an objection against the argument, but he cannot formulate an objection to the argument itself that prevents Socrates from disproving Protagoras's position.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Socrates seems to say as much at 354b1-5.

<sup>13</sup> 352d4-e1.

Here we have what turns out to be Socrates's definition of *akrasia* at its second entrance: being overcome by pleasure. At the first entrance of *akrasia*, Socrates maintained only that it is not possible to willingly make a mistake nor willingly do what is bad or wrong. At that point, Socrates did not give any way in which *akrasia* is supposed to be able to happen, did not give any mechanism of *akrasia*. That first conception is quite vague, leaving much to be explained. In the second entrance, we have an explicit meaning of bad, namely, painful; moreover, in the second entrance we also have a way in which *akrasia* is supposed to happen: by being overcome by pleasure. With both this definition of *akrasia* and its mechanism in hand, Socrates proceeds to show how this conception of *akrasia* is incompatible with the hedonism that the many have already admitted that they maintain. It is not the case that Socrates sets out to prove that (1) if you are a hedonist, then you must believe in *akrasia*; nor does he set out to prove that (2) if you believe in *akrasia*, then you must be a hedonist; rather, he sets out to show that this second entrance of *akrasia* and hedonism are incompatible, that is, that the many cannot rightly claim to hold both positions.

Socrates argues that when someone calls something like sex or drinking "bad," this person does not call these things bad "because they bring about immediate pleasure, but rather because of what happens later, disease and things like that" (353d8-10). Moreover, things such as proper diet and intense physical training are not called "good" because they bring about immediate pain, but rather because they ultimately lead to a healthy life, which is more pleasurable. From here, Socrates then shows that, based on the many's own hedonism, their account of *akrasia* is unintelligible. Hedonism equates the good with pleasure and the bad with pain, so Socrates renders explicit what this view really entails for *akrasia*.<sup>14</sup> *Akrasia* is supposed to be the phenomenon in which a person does what is bad while knowing it is bad. The reason,

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<sup>14</sup> This portion of Socrates's argument comes at 355b5-c7.

supposedly, for this akratic action is that he was overcome by pleasure. But, as we have just noted, for the hedonist, that is, for the many, pleasure is nothing other than the good. Thus, *akrasia* purports that the akratic person does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, because he is overcome by the good. Alternatively, since the bad is nothing other than pain, *akrasia* purports that the akratic person does what is painful, knowing that it is painful, because he is overcome by pleasure. Both of these formulations, though, as Socrates notes, are ridiculous; it does not make sense to say that the good causes one to do what one knows is bad nor that pleasure moves one to do what one knows is painful.

Socrates notes that one might object that immediate pleasures and pains are *qualitatively* different than distant pleasure and pains, so Socrates has equivocated the two, one might claim, when he treats them as the same. Socrates counters by arguing that when one looks at two things of the same size, one that is far away and one that is close by, the former seems smaller than the latter even though the two are actually the same size. And, furthermore, if one cannot place the two next to each other to allow the eye to determine their sizes, one realizes that they are the same size if one can measure each of them and then compare the measurements. Just as our eyes deceive us when viewing things from a distance, so too does our ability to judge pains and pleasures deceive us when these pains and pleasures are distant. It is the art of measurement, just as with seeing the size of things, that allows us to determine which pleasures and pains are greater or smaller. There is no qualitative difference between the distant pleasure and the immediate pleasure just as there is no qualitative difference between a far statue and a near statue. They appear to have different sizes, but only the art of measurement will reveal to us which is truly larger. Choosing, then, between pleasures or choosing between pains—that is, for the hedonist, taking actions because all actions are simply choosing between pleasures and pains

for the hedonist—is a matter of measuring. The one who takes the bad action, the action that ultimately leads to more pain than the actor needed to endure or to less pleasure than the actor could have experienced, did so because he erred in measurement. He failed to properly measure the size of the distant pains or pleasures and compare them to the immediate pains or pleasures; he took the appearance of the distant pains or pleasures as their true nature, that is, he took them to be smaller than they actually are, because their distance deceived him.

We can now see how all this work by Socrates ties together. He has demonstrated that one cannot maintain that the good is pleasure and the bad is pain (hedonism) while also maintaining that people take bad or wrong actions because they are overcome by pleasure. On the one hand, if you are hedonist then you cannot be overcome by pleasure (you cannot believe in *akrasia*) because you already assent to pleasure being the good, being your criterion for taking actions; that is, you cannot be overcome by something you already assent to being determined by. On the other hand, if you believe in *akrasia* then you cannot be a hedonist because to be overcome by pleasure means you maintain (or at least think you maintain) something other than pleasure as being of a higher value than pleasure, something which pleasure overpowers in this akratic action; having a value that is higher than pleasure, though, is precisely *not* hedonism. The many, then, want to know the true nature of this phenomenon that they thought was *akrasia*. Socrates has shown that it is nothing other than an ignorance, a failing of one's ability to use the art of measurement to take the good or right action.

Thus, Socrates has what he needs in order to show that courage is nothing other than wisdom: no one willing does what she knows<sup>15</sup> is bad or wrong, but rather a person does what is bad or wrong out of ignorance. Courage, then, is not choosing to go to what one finds fearful,

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<sup>15</sup> Neither Socrates nor any of his interlocutors discuss the meaning of “knowing” here, so I will postpone talking about the importance this term has until we see what Aristotle says about *akrasia* because Aristotle's account of *akrasia* focuses on knowing.

what is bad, but rather courage is having proper knowledge of what is to be feared and what is not to be feared. Now that courage can be shown to be nothing other than wisdom, virtue itself (since all five of its parts, according to Protagoras's view of virtue, have been proved to be wisdom) can be shown to be nothing other than wisdom. With this proof, Socrates has demonstrated that Protagoras<sup>16</sup> does not know what virtue is because Socrates's questioning has led Protagoras to contradict his original position on virtue. Thus, Protagoras cannot teach others what virtue is. It is the desire to examine Protagoras's knowledge of and ability to teach virtue that led Socrates to investigate *akrasia* and to show that hedonism and *akrasia* are incompatible.

When thinking about what the dialogue tells us about *akrasia*, we must keep in mind what assumptions or positions ground the argument regarding *akrasia*. Perhaps the most important position that grounds the discussion of *akrasia* in the dialogue is the shared understanding between Socrates and his interlocutors that the soul is ideally unified. That is, when the soul exists properly, it is unified. Indeed, this position is one that Plato himself held. Plato gives an account of the three parts of the soul in the *Republic* in which he discusses the soul having a reasoned part, a spirited part, and an appetitive part. Even though the soul has these three parts, the soul is still one unified thing and the just human is the one whose parts exist in harmony and follow the hierarchy they ought to follow. Of course, this account of the soul occurs in a different dialogue than the one we have been looking at in this paper and, therefore, it might not be warranted to bring up what Plato says about the soul in the *Republic* when thinking about *akrasia*.<sup>17</sup> If we are justified here in considering what Plato says about the soul in the *Republic*, then the point stands, namely, that Plato and the debaters in the *Protagoras* understand

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, with the reverse that Socrates notes at the end of the dialogue (361b6-c3), Socrates has also revealed that he himself does not know what virtue is either.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the relationship between the *Republic* and the *Protagoras*, see Morris (2006).

the soul as a unity. If we are not justified in considering what Plato says in the *Republic*, the point stands even more poignantly.

In the *Protagoras*, there is no detailed discussion about the nature of the soul. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Socrates and Protagoras are working off a model that assumes the soul is one unified thing. Indeed, the account of the soul in the *Republic* indicates that there can be conflict between different parts of the soul whereas there is no discussion of any potential conflict between parts of the soul in the *Protagoras*, and less still any mention of the soul having parts. That is, the *Protagoras* seems to work off a model of the soul that not only understands the soul as a unified thing, but also understands the soul as in every way one, that is, without different parts or aspects or activities. This claim is merely an inference because the soul is not discussed in any serious way in this dialogue; I draw this inference from the fact that no one in the dialogue ever brings up the possibility of something like distinct parts or activities in the soul. That no one in the dialogue mentions anything like conflict between different parts or activities of the soul seems to be a telling omission because a discussion of *akrasia* is the perfect opportunity to discuss such possibilities. That is, an account of *akrasia* seems to give one a perfect opportunity to discuss different parts, activities, divisions, etc. in the soul when accounting for the seeming internal conflict that appears essential to *akrasia*, yet no one in the dialogue takes advantage of this opportunity. At the very least, it is clear that when thinking of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*, Socrates and Protagoras think of the soul as a unified thing, and they might even think of the soul as utterly one, without any divisions or distinctions.

With this conception of the soul,<sup>18</sup> we see that understanding *akrasia* becomes understanding how one unity can have conflict in it. If the soul is entirely one, as might be the

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, there is much more to be said about the soul than whether it is unified or not, but, for our thinking about *akrasia*, this is the principle way in which the soul is important.

understanding in the *Protagoras*, then understanding *akrasia* means understanding how a oneness can experience internal conflict; if the soul is unified and has distinct parts, as is the case in the *Republic*,<sup>19</sup> then understanding *akrasia* means understanding the nature of the conflict between the parts of this unity. Indeed, understanding *akrasia*, then, involves understanding how the passions are able to overcome their position in the hierarchy of the parts of the soul and overpower reason, which sits at the top of the hierarchy. As we continue to think about *akrasia*, it is imperative that we keep in mind the conception of the soul (or, more broadly, of the human being) that underlies any particular discussion of *akrasia* because any given understanding of the soul yields certain requirements in terms of explaining *akrasia*. Now, I turn to what Aristotle says about *akrasia*.

#### **Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the Voluntariness of *Akrasia*:**

Just as with Plato, with Aristotle it will be useful to identify some of the main points in the sections presently at hand (Book III and Book VII) so as to keep straight the points Aristotle makes about *akrasia*.<sup>20</sup> Doing so will involve explaining the key concepts, mostly laid out in Book III, that figure into the discussion of *akrasia*. It makes sense to start where Aristotle starts, with the set of concepts that seems most encompassing when discussing actions: voluntariness and involuntariness.

In typical Aristotelean fashion, it turns out that there are these two types of action—voluntary and involuntary—as well as a middle ground between these two.<sup>21</sup> An action is only “forced *without qualification* whenever its cause is external *and* the agent contributes nothing”

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<sup>19</sup> Although it is not clear how the *Protagoras* understands the constitution of the soul, it is clear that the dialogue takes the soul to be unified.

<sup>20</sup> Irwin translates *akrasia* as “incontinence” and I will use the terms “*akrasia*” and “incontinence” interchangeably when discussing Aristotle.

<sup>21</sup> We will come to see that there might be some interpretive ambiguities when thinking about this middle ground.

(1110b4-5).<sup>22</sup> This “and” here is important because it is not enough that the cause of the action lie outside the “agent”<sup>23</sup> for the action to be involuntary. It must also be the case that the “agent” (victim) in no way aids in the carrying out of this action. If person A pushes person B toward person C and B leaps toward C while B is falling from being pushed, then B was not forced to bump into C, regardless of whether B would have bumped into C without the addition of the leap. This example, an odd one though it is, is a case of a cause of an action coming from outside the agent (who, in such a case, is indeed an agent) while the agent also contributes something to the action; thus, the action is voluntary. Something would also fail to meet the criterion of an involuntary action if the cause comes from within the agent, but the agent does not contribute anything to the action, such as digesting. Of course, it is the regulative processes of the agent that cause one to digest, but this fact does not mean that the agent *contributes* to the action, for Aristotle seems to mean contribute in a purposive sense. Indeed, if Aristotle did not mean “contribute” in a purposive sense, then anyone who is the victim of forced action would contribute in one way or another, simply by being where they are at the time the forced action takes place or simply by being alive. Yet, if a victim of a forced action contributed something to the action, then, Aristotle says, it would not be unqualifiedly forced; thus, “contribute” must mean something purposive, or at least the term must have some focused meaning.

Furthermore, we see that any action that is “caused by ignorance is nonvoluntary, but what is involuntary also involves pain and regret” (1110b19-20). A person cannot be said to be acting voluntarily if she does not know what she is doing, if she is ignorant; one cannot be making use of one’s own volition if one does not know what one is doing. If she comes to regret what she did, then she acted unwillingly, Aristotle says, because she would not have taken this

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<sup>22</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Aristotle says, the person who is normally called the “agent” of a forced action (the person who is pushed into a crowd) is actually more like a victim than an agent.



action if she had not acted out of ignorance. If she has no reaction toward this action she took, then she is nonwilling. It might seem, then, that the person who is glad to have taken the action she took out of ignorance would be said to have acted willingly; Aristotle, though, does not mention this person. All these actions are instances of the person who acts *from* ignorance as opposed to the person who acts *in* ignorance. The drunken person, Aristotle says, acts *in* ignorance because this person certainly has an ignorance about him when acting, yet the actions he takes are not caused by ignorance but rather drunkenness. It is the drunkenness that causes the actions, actions that are done *in* ignorance as the drunkenness also causes him to be ignorant while drunk.

Aristotle clarifies not only between two ways of acting ignorantly, but also two types of ignorance. It is the case that “ignorance of what is beneficial” does not “make action involuntary” because “the cause of involuntary action is not [this]<sup>24</sup> ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; it is not [in other words] ignorance of the universal, since that is a cause for blame” (1110b31-1111a1). Lacking knowledge about what is good and bad, the universal, is not an ignorance that causes actions to be involuntary, but rather it is an ignorance that is endemic of a vicious character. When one acts out of ignorance of the universal, one acts voluntarily with vice. What makes an action involuntary (when it is the sort of involuntary action that is involuntary because of ignorance) “is ignorance of the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with, since these allow both pity and pardon” (1110a1-3). That is, a person acts involuntarily if he is ignorant of the particulars involved in the action. A person acts viciously if he eats the hemlock plant because he thinks hemlock plants are healthy; a person acts involuntarily if he eats the hemlock plant because he thought it was an elderberry. Not only must a person act out of the specific sort of ignorance in order for his action to be considered

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<sup>24</sup> Bracketed attachments to quotes are those of the translator unless otherwise noted.

involuntary, but he must also feel pain or regret for his action.<sup>25</sup> That is, pain or regret is a necessary but not sufficient cause of an involuntary act. Thus, the “voluntary action seems to be what has its principle in the agent himself, knowing the particulars that constitute the action” (1111a19-24) and, seemingly, such an action may or may not involve pain or regret.

Decisions are a subset of voluntary actions. Decisions are actions that are voluntary and that involve deliberation. No involuntary act involves deliberation, but not all voluntary acts involve deliberation. We deliberate about things that can “be achieved through our agency” (1112a30), which is to say we deliberate about matters that are within our control. Furthermore, we deliberate about means to ends, not ends themselves. We can come to the ends we have in mind by wishing; for example, we wish to be healthy. We can also come to the ends we have in mind through our character; for example, we can aim at generous ends because of a virtuous character. That is, we deliberate about the means to achieve ends, the ways in which we can achieve the goals of being healthy and generous, but we do not deliberate about the ends or goals that we pursue. Moreover, we deliberate about means to ends when the means are unclear.

We do not deliberate about the means we use in carrying out everyday tasks in which the best course of action is clear. Extraordinary conditions aside, people do not deliberate about the means used to dressing oneself in the morning; one simply gets dressed, one simply does it. Instead, deliberation is best suited to actions in which the best course of action is unclear or in which some actions that might be taken have multiple potential outcomes. A doctor, Aristotle says, has the end of curing. The doctor deliberates about what actions might be taken to cure his patient. If there is only one option, the doctor chooses that option and enacts it. If there are multiple options to curing the patient, the doctor continues deliberation in order to determine

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, even if the action is involuntary because it was forced, not because it was done from ignorance (from ignorance and being forced are the only two types of involuntary action), it still must involve pain or regret.

which of the possible options would be the most cost-efficient, the least painful for the patient, the most likely to succeed, etc. The doctor then chooses the action that is best and enacts it.

Indeed, that about which we deliberate is the “same as what we decide to do, except that by the time we decide to do it, it is definite; for what we decide to do is what we have judged [to be right] as a result of deliberation” (1113a3-6). Of course, as Aristotle is aware, the akratic person is the one who supposedly does the precise opposite of what Aristotle claims here. We can see, then, that for our purposes it is necessary to have made clear what Aristotle thinks about deliberation so that we can understand the way he deals with the *akrasia*.

We must first distinguish between incontinence/continence and intemperance/temperance. Temperance is a virtue of the nonrational part of the soul and it is more properly concerned with pleasures than it is with pain.<sup>26</sup> Temperance/intemperance is related to pain in the way an intemperate person might feel pain at the privation of a pleasure, but temperance is properly only the relation to pleasures and whatever pain is associated with the temperate or intemperate person’s relation to pleasure is derivative. Temperance deals with pleasures of the body, not pleasures of the soul. Specifically, there is only temperance in touch and taste, Aristotle says, and he only includes taste as a kind of pleasure that occasions temperance because of its close relation to touch; most precisely, there is only temperance and intemperance with regard to touch. There is not temperance and intemperance with relation to other pleasures of the body (sights, e.g.) because although a person can enjoy these pleasures too much or too little, no one, Aristotle says, enjoys them with the almost obsessive excess that is endemic of intemperance. There cannot be temperance in these pleasures because there is not intemperance in these pleasures.

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<sup>26</sup> Bravery is the virtue of the nonrational part that is properly concerned with pain as it is the mean regarding what is to be feared, and things that are to be feared are, in one way or another, painful.

All of this holds for continence and incontinence as well. We must see, then, what differentiates temperance/intemperance from continence/incontinence. Temperance is concerned with the amount to which one enjoys a pleasure whereas continence is concerned with one's ability to control one's desire for pleasure. For example, the temperate person is the one who enjoys sex the proper amount and appropriately acts on this proper desire whereas the continent person enjoys sex more than is proper yet is still able to not over-indulge in action by restraining one's excessive desire. On the one hand, the temperate person has no desire to seek more pleasure than is right and, thus, partakes in pleasure in the appropriate amount; on the other hand, the continent person has a desire to seek more pleasure than is right but is able to control himself and, thus, partakes in pleasure in the appropriate amount. On the flip side, "incontinence is against one's decision, but vice [and intemperance is a vice]<sup>27</sup> accords with decision" (1151a6-7). The intemperate person does not regret his overindulgence because he acted according to his decision whereas the incontinent person does regret what he did because he acted against his decision. While the temperate person takes the same action as the continent person, and while the intemperate person takes the same action as the incontinent person, the latter in each case acts despite herself whereas the former in each case does not; the continent acts despite her desire for more pleasure and the incontinent (the one who is more properly said to act despite herself) acts against what deliberation tells her is best for her to do.

The incontinent person is the one who, properly speaking, acts despite herself more than the continent person because a person, according to Aristotle, is supposed to follow reason. That is, while both desire and reason are constitutive of the human, reason ought to rule over the human. In the continent person reason "overpowers" desire and this person acts in accordance with reason rather than desire when reason and desire conflict. In a sense, this situation involves

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<sup>27</sup> This insertion is mine.

a person acting despite herself because she does not act in accordance with what one aspect of her (desire) tells her to do; in a more accurate sense this action does not involve overpowering, for Aristotle, but rather is an instance of the proper relation between reason and desire. It is for these reasons that the incontinent person, then, is the one who more properly acts despite herself. That is, two aspects of her (reason and desire) conflict and she acts in accordance with desire, which ought to submit to reason. The continent person acts despite herself because she follows reason in favor of desire, but, because this is what she ought to do, it is not an instance of acting despite herself in the fullest sense. The incontinent person acts despite herself in the fullest sense because she follows desire in favor of reason, which is the opposite of what she ought to do.

We can now start to address what Aristotle says about *akrasia*. Aristotle begins Book VII, which is dedicated to *akrasia* and matters pertaining to *akrasia*, by wanting to “make a new start” such that we examine “three conditions of character to be avoided—vice, incontinence, and bestiality” (1145a15-16). It will not be necessary for us to examine what Aristotle says about the third member of this group, but it is key to note that incontinence and vice are distinct; that is, as I noted before, incontinence is not a vice and continence is not a virtue.<sup>28</sup> We also need to take note of the definition of *akrasia* that Aristotle gives (a definition that he sticks with throughout the analysis of *akrasia*): “The incontinent person knows that his actions are base, but does them because of feelings” (1145b13-14). We are reminded in this definition that incontinence is a “condition of character,” that is, it is a way of being, a habit, rather than an isolated action. Although Aristotle goes on to talk about incontinence itself, this definition demonstrates that any discussion of incontinence is to be understood as a discussion of what an incontinent person is, does, or undergoes; that is, incontinence cannot happen without an incontinent person to do the incontinent action. Moreover, the incontinent person is also the one

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<sup>28</sup> The importance of this point will become clear shortly.

who does “the worst actions willingly,” (1146a6) where “worst actions” should be understood in a qualified sense; not “the worst actions” as in genocide, but the least choiceworthy action in a context, such as drinking too much at a work dinner. The incontinent person is one who comes to the *correct* conclusion in deliberation, yet acts contrary to it. A person is not incontinent if he thinks it is best to drink as much as one can, but fails to make use of that position when acting by drinking the appropriate amount. The incontinent person is overcome by passion or desire such that he acts contrary to reason or his thoughts and beliefs, and is not someone who is overcome by reason, as it were, as one can describe the continent person.

Aristotle then goes on to distinguish between two ways of knowing: a person can know something while using this knowledge or without using this knowledge. It seems absurd, Aristotle says, to think that the incontinent person has knowledge and also uses this knowledge while acting, so it must be that the incontinent person has knowledge without using it (1146b35-1147a1). Thus, we are already moved toward Socrates’s position, that *akrsia* is not possible, depending on how we conceive of knowledge; that is, when thinking of the incontinent person, we can only think of her as having knowledge in a particular way. The incontinent person is like the drunk person in that the incontinent person has knowledge but lacks access to it. The drunk person is overcome by the effects of alcohol and cannot make rational decisions that she would otherwise make because she is overcome by this sensation. Similarly, the incontinent person, when in the presence of some pleasure, cannot make use of the knowledge that she uses to make the correct decision when not in the presence of the pleasure, but she still has this knowledge when she is in the presence of this pleasure. When Aristotle says that “if the appetites are large and intense, they actually expel rational calculation” (1119b10-11) he does not mean that the pleasure is so strong that it removes the knowledge from the incontinent person, but rather that

she is temporarily (while in the presence of the pleasure) unable to make use of her knowledge. The pleasure disables the mechanism, which is otherwise active, that causes a decision (in the case of the incontinent person, a correct decision) to lead to an action, but this pleasure does not remove the knowledge that leads to the correct decision. Just like with the drunk person, the thing that causes the person to be overcome (the effects of the alcohol in the case of the drunk person and the pleasurable thing in the case of the incontinent person) eventually fades away and the person returns to a state in which she can take actions that accord with the decisions she reaches. Nevertheless, incontinence is a condition of character in the sense that it endures. One only acts incontinently when the troublesome pleasure is present, but the incontinent person is always susceptible in that there is not a time when the pleasure will appear and the incontinent person will not be overcome by it. Just (except for perhaps the most utterly cowardly person) as someone who is cowardly is not perpetually scared but rather is perpetually one step away from being scared, so too is the incontinent person simply perpetually one step away from being overcome by pleasure.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between two types of premises of which a person can have knowledge: the universal premises and the particular premises. It must be the case that the incontinent person errs with regard to a particular premise, not a universal premise, Aristotle says. That incontinence must be an error related to particular premises seems to be true by definition, for the incontinent person is one who, by definition, knows what is right for him to do. That is, the incontinent person knows not to eat the sweet food that is unhealthy and that the incontinent person allegedly has this knowledge is what makes his case challenging; if he did not have this knowledge, it would be easy to explain how he can end up taking an action that he should not take. That is, the incontinent person goes wrong with relation to the minor premise,

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<sup>29</sup> Incontinence is not a vice like cowardice, but it does share the enduring, habitual nature that a vice has.

not the major premise. Aristotle understands, it seems, the minor premise, in the example of eating sweet food, to be the combination of two beliefs: (1) everything that is sweet is pleasant and (2) this thing in front of the incontinent person is sweet.<sup>30</sup> Desire overcomes the minor premise, which seems to be the belief produced by the combination of the beliefs that sweet things are pleasant and that this is sweet. The desire overcomes this combinatory belief such that the incontinent person only has this minor premise in the way that a drunk person says he knows something or in the way that a person correctly recites a mathematical proof that she has just heard but has yet to understand. That is, the incontinent person seems to have a depleted or deactivated knowledge, which is not fully knowledge, when overcome by the desire.

We might think of this understanding of incontinence as loosely analogous to a person who has money in a bank account. This person has (is the owner of) the money that she has in her bank account. When this person goes to the store and forgets her wallet (let's assume she has no other form of money with her) she does not have her debit card with her, which gives her access to the money in her bank account. When this woman tries to purchase something at the store, she still *has* the money that is in her bank account, that is, forgetting her wallet did not cause her to lose all the money in her bank account; she still owns the money in her bank account.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, she is not able to make use of this money when acting, when trying to buy something at the store. Similarly, the incontinent person still has the knowledge that sweet things are pleasant and this is sweet but does not have access to this knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Here, it does

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<sup>30</sup> Although Aristotle does not state outright the major premise he has in mind with his example, the way that Aristotle lays out the two beliefs of the minor premise indicates that he has in mind a major premise that "one should taste nothing pleasant". As Irwin notes, this is probably not meant to be a terribly realistic example.

<sup>31</sup> We will assume she has not had her debit card stolen while she left her wallet wherever she left it.

<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, the analogy is not perfect. For one, the cause of this woman's being unable to access what she has (money) is due to the lack of something (her debit card) whereas the cause of the incontinent person's inability to access what he has (knowledge) is due to the presence of something (a pleasure). Yet, *akrasia* literally means lack of power, so a lack certainly plays a role in *akrasia*. Furthermore, this lack of power must be met by a pleasure that awakens this lack, so *akrasia* involves both a lack and a presence whereas the example I give seems to just involve a



not seem to me that Aristotle is drawing any sort of distinction between potential knowledge and actual knowledge, but rather between a lack of access to what is actual and an access to it.

Indeed, *akrasia* is precisely the not carrying out of a correct decision, which seems to imply that the conclusion of the deliberation, the decision, is actual in some way. All of this, then, is what leads Aristotle to say that, in a way, Socrates is right because the kind of knowledge that is dragged around during incontinence is not “fully [knowledge, but rather]<sup>33</sup> only perceptual knowledge” (1147a17) is dragged around during incontinence.

We can briefly summarize what Aristotle says about *akrasia* as follows. The akratic person is the one who habitually acts in accordance with immediate pleasure, which is contrary to the correct decision that he reaches when deliberating. The discrepancy between the action and the conclusion of the deliberation is due to a desire overpowering the minor premise of this person’s deliberation. This person has the correct conception of what action should be taken, but he fails to take this action and, furthermore, regrets taking the action he takes after the effects of the desire have left.

Now that we see what Aristotle says about *akrasia*, we need to bring to mind again what Aristotle says about actions done without knowledge of particulars because there seems to be a problem here. That incontinence is not a vice means that incontinence cannot be ignorance about a universal premise. We also saw that, by definition, incontinence must involve proper knowledge of the universal premise and this knowledge is not touched during the incontinent action, this knowledge is not what is affected by the pleasure that overpowers the incontinent person. Since there are only two kinds of premises and since the knowledge the incontinent person has is affected when this person is overpowered, it must be that the particular premise is

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lack. Of course, she cannot “lack” her debit card unless she has one, unless a debit card is “present” in the sense of her owning it, but this is not the kind of presence at play in *akrasia*.

<sup>33</sup> This insertion is mine.

impacted. Ignorance of the universal is “cause for blame” (1111a1). Aristotle juxtaposes this ignorance with ignorance of the particular, about which he says that “an agent acts involuntarily if he is ignorant of one of these particulars” (1111a2-3). When Aristotle is talking about the way the premises function *qua* premises, it is important not to equivocate between, on the one hand, the universal premises and particular premises of which Aristotle speaks in Book VII and, on the other hand, the universals and particulars of which he speaks in Book III (from which I just quoted), which are not premises. Aristotle does speak of premises in Book VII, but he also seems to speak about universals and particulars in the way he is speaking in the quote above, so thinking about the discussions in the two Books will not be an equivocation if we do it correctly.

Aristotle gives the example (1147a5-10) of the person who may not eat some food because, despite the fact that this person knows that dry foods benefit people and that he is a person and that the group of things “X” are all dry foods, this person does not know that this thing in front of him is a member of X. Furthermore, we already saw that in describing incontinence Aristotle says that the minor premise is made up of two beliefs: that sweet things are pleasant and that this in front of me is sweet.<sup>34</sup> It is this premise, the combination of these two beliefs, that is overpowered by the desire and, thus, it is with this premise that we find the site for incontinence. The latter of these two beliefs seems to correspond straightforwardly with the way Aristotle talks about particulars in the quote above from Book III and with the way he talks about particulars with the dry food example from Book VII. It is not as immediately clear that the former of the beliefs is a particular in the same way. It is not particular in the sense that it is relative to a particular set of circumstances in the way the latter belief is relative. When Aristotle refers to particulars in the sense of the latter belief, he is referring to “who is doing [an action]; what he is doing; about what or to what he is doing it; sometimes also what he is doing it

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<sup>34</sup> I will be referring to these two beliefs as the “former belief” and the “latter belief” for the next few paragraphs.

with; [...] for what result [...]; in what way” (1111a4-6).<sup>35</sup> The person, Aristotle says, who is ignorant of these things when acting, acts involuntarily. The latter belief of the minor premise is clearly of this sort. Depending on how one thinks about the act of eating, this latter belief could fall into a few of the different ways in which Aristotle means particular; the precise way in which this latter belief falls into the kinds of particulars does not matter, for what matters is simply that it falls into one of them.

How we understand this former belief will be the crux of understanding the difficulty at which I am currently pointing. Does this belief fall into one of those kinds of particulars? If one thinks of tasting as an activity and the food that is tasted as “to what he is doing the action” or as “with what he is doing the action” then it seems this former belief can fall into one or more of these kinds of particulars; that is, this belief that “sweet things are pleasant” tells the actor something about the thing he is acting upon or with. One might say, though, that it is not properly the former belief that tells the actor about what he is acting on, but that only when the former belief is combined with the latter belief does the actor learn something about the object of his action. If the first route is the case (that the former belief falls into one of the kinds of particulars) then both the former and the latter beliefs are kinds of particulars. Since the minor premise is made up of these two beliefs, then it seems like the minor premise itself is a kind of particular, unless one wants to claim that the combination of two particular premises does not yield a particular, minor premise. If the second route is the case (that the former belief is not properly a kind of particular) then it is still the case that the combination of the former and latter beliefs yields a particular, minor premise. In either case, the important result is that the minor premise is itself a particular, and not just a particular *premise*, but a particular in the way that Aristotle means in Book III. If we keep in mind two points, we see the significance of this result.

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<sup>35</sup> All insertions in this quote are mine.

One of the points is that Aristotle says (1111a2-3) that actions done out of ignorance of the particulars are done involuntarily. The other point is that incontinent actions are actions done without knowledge of the minor premise. Thus, it seems that incontinent actions are done involuntarily. And if they are done involuntarily, then they are not actually incontinent actions, that is, then *akrasia* does not exist.

There also seems to be another issue with voluntariness. We saw before that actions that involve pain or regret are involuntary if the cause of the action is outside the agent. If it is the case that any action that has a source outside the agent (and the action involves regret) is involuntary, then it seems that every action is involuntary in a way. Every action involves something other than the agent, for every action is relating in or with or to the world.<sup>36</sup> In this vein, let us consider a point I mentioned with the debit card example. *Akrasia* seems, in a way, to have two causes: one that is outside the agent and one that is within or caused by the agent. Furthermore, both of these causes are necessary for an act to be akratic and neither is independently sufficient. The incontinent person is one who has the habitual disposition of being overcome by pleasures and of acting against the correct conclusions he reaches in deliberating; this is the internal cause. The external cause is the pleasure that excites or activates the desire in the incontinent person. On the one hand, the internal cause is not itself sufficient; if the internal cause were sufficient, then the incontinent person would constantly take actions contrary to the correct conclusion he reaches in deliberation, but an incontinent person does not act in this way; rather, he only takes incontinent actions if the pleasing object is present. On the other hand, the external cause is not itself sufficient; if the external cause were sufficient, then anyone who ever meets a pleasing object would act incontinently, but this is not the case; everyone does not act incontinently, but rather only incontinent people, people with the habitual disposition I

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<sup>36</sup> I will come to touch on other aspect of this issue later.

mentioned above, act incontinently. Thus, it seems that the internal cause and the external cause are equally important in bringing about the akratic action. Given that there is an external cause that is as *necessary* as any other cause for the akratic action to occur, it seems that an akratic action is one that has a principle cause that is outside the agent. Aristotle says that akratic actions involve pain or regret, and if an action involves pain or regret and has a principle cause outside the agent, then the action is involuntary. Thus, it again seems that akratic actions are involuntary.

It also seems there might be a problem from another angle, too. Again, decisions are a subset of voluntary actions. Moreover, Aristotle gives the example that “no one willingly throws cargo overboard, without qualification, but anyone with any sense throws it overboard to save himself and the others” (1110a10-12). What, though, are we to make of the throwing (*ἀποβάλλειν*) in light of our being thrown (*geworfen*)? What are we to make of the decisions we make in light of the not-entirely-voluntary condition of our being? Aristotle calls this throwing a mixed action, which seems to be different, perhaps, from a nonvoluntary action. A nonvoluntary action seems to be one that is neither voluntary nor involuntary whereas a mixed action is both voluntary and involuntary. It does not matter here whether we think a mixed action is different from a nonvoluntary action or if we think there are two types of nonvoluntary actions and this throwing is one of those two. What matters is that this throwing is voluntary in a way and involuntary in a way. Actions like this throwing are “more like voluntary actions,” (1110a13) which is to say that these actions are not precisely voluntary. They are more like voluntary than involuntary actions but, properly speaking, are not strictly either.

What action, then, would be properly voluntary for Aristotle? Does not every action involve some sort of needing to throw cargo off the ship, some being thrown? One might claim that Aristotle’s example is meant to be an extreme one. That is, Aristotle’s example is one of life

and death, one that we do not encounter often, and one that has a particularly displeasing involuntary aspect to it. That I am wearing a blue shirt and therefore unable to wear a black shirt that I like, one might say, is a qualitatively different situation than that of the person throwing cargo. I have the opportunity cost of not being able to wear a black shirt so that I can wear a blue shirt and the person on the ship has the cost of throwing cargo overboard so that he can survive. The qualitative difference, someone might say, (1) lies in the cost associated with the action chosen, that the costs in Aristotle's example are so high that they constitute a different kind of phenomenon than what we encounter with most of our actions. Or, someone might say that the qualitative difference (2) lies with the circumstances in which the action occurs because, in choosing a shirt to wear (assuming I am not dressing myself to go somewhere that I do not want to go), I do not take issue with the circumstances in which I take an action whereas the person throwing cargo overboard wishes to avoid the circumstance in which he must take the throwing action.<sup>37</sup> Yet both these accounts seem less than satisfactory.

The first route (1) seems unsatisfactory because it is not clear where the distinction lies. When does an everyday cost associated with an action that still leaves the action purely voluntary become a cost that no longer makes the action purely voluntary but rather mixed?<sup>38</sup> What criterion would we outline that a cost must meet such that it renders an action mixed? Would the criterion be subjective, or at least somehow variable, depending on the situation? In the throwing cargo example, the man who is forced to throw all his possessions overboard is surely more hurt than the enormously wealthy person who throws overboard what constitutes a microscopic amount of her wealth. The man's action might seem mixed, but is the same true of the woman's? Her cost, if we imagine her wealthy enough, seems closer to my not wearing a

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Irwin notes this difficulty about Aristotle's discussion of mixed actions and these are the two avenues for understanding Aristotle that Irwin suggests (202).

<sup>38</sup> Just because the distinction is not clear, though, does not mean the distinction does not exist.

black shirt than the man's losing his life's possessions and, thus, seemingly renders her action purely voluntary. Does the criterion for what makes a cost great enough to make an action mixed depend on the person taking the action or is there a universal, objective criterion? One might say that the objective criterion is that a situation is a matter of life and death. But what about the person who is not afraid of death or the person, more extremely, who is suicidal? If these points are enough to make one claim that the criterion that makes a cost so great that the action becomes involuntary is up to each person, then it seems one would have to say that each person determines (in this sort of case, but not necessarily in every sort of case) what makes an aspect of an action (throwing the cargo overboard, for example) voluntary or involuntary. Such a conclusion does not seem to make sense, though, for what would it mean for a person to be able to determine what is involuntary? An involuntary action is not under our control in terms of our ability to do the action or not do the action, nor is an involuntary action under our control in terms of what makes an involuntary action involuntary, in terms of its nature. Thus, the attempt to posit an objective criterion that makes a cost of an action so great as to render the action mixed seems to fail because there does not seem to be a criterion that captures the essence of how great a cost must be in order to make an action mixed; the attempt to posit a subjective criterion for such a cost seems to lead to an absurdity, namely, that each person determines what is involuntary for him.

The second way (2) also seems less than satisfactory. Certainly, the person throwing cargo overboard would rather not to do so; he would prefer that he could successfully make his voyage with all his possessions. But in what way can I, the person who wears the blue shirt instead of the black shirt, be said to have assented to my situation? To be a human is to be thrown into situation, to be thrown into the world, to be thrown into life itself. While one can

stop oneself from living by killing oneself, no one can ever assent to having been born.

Furthermore, in every situation in life we acquiesce to the world or tacitly comply with the world, but we do not choose or fully determine any situation in which we act, let alone the world as a whole. Thus, if an action is only voluntary if the actor has determined the situation in which she acts, then no action is voluntary. One might say, though, that the qualitative difference does not lie in the actor determining the situation in which she acts, but rather that the difference lies in the actor being content with, in some way, the situation in which she acts. The person who throws cargo overboard clearly is unhappy with the situation in which he must act, into which he was thrown, whereas I am content and perhaps even happy with the situation in which I choose between shirts to wear, the situation into which I was thrown. But it seems clear we ought not make this difference the criterion of what makes an action voluntary or involuntary. It cannot be the case that simply because a person dislikes the situation he is in or is discontent with the situation into which he was thrown that this person then acts involuntarily when acting in this situation. If this were the case then any time someone disliked a situation into which she was thrown, she would not have responsibility for her actions because they would be involuntary. Thus, this second route's attempt to claim that an action is only purely voluntary if the actor determines the situation in which he acts fails because there are no such situations; the condition of human life of being thrown precludes such a reality. Also, the second route's attempt to claim that an action is only purely voluntary if the actor is in some way content with the situation into which he was thrown fails; if this were the case then something as basic as a foul mood would excuse a person from ethical obligations because this mood would render his actions involuntary.

Given that these two routes seem less than satisfactory, what are we to think about decisions? As we have already seen, Aristotle clearly positions decisions as a subset of voluntary



actions. Yet, we have just seen a number of reasons for thinking that the actions we take are actually, as Aristotle defines it, mixed actions, that is, a mix of voluntary and involuntary, and not purely voluntary. If this is the case, then what does this mean for decisions? Is the issue as simple as admitting that there are no purely voluntary actions, even though we can still conceive of such an action, and then moving decisions under mixed actions? Would the essence of decisions change if we understand them as a subset of mixed actions? The answers to these questions are not clear. What is clear, though, is this issue complicates the Aristotelian account of *akrasia*, complicates it from a place that is more fundamental, and less directly related to *akrasia*, than the other objections I have raised. *Akrasia* is supposed to be a person acting contrary to the decision he makes, to the conclusion he reaches in deliberating. The objections surrounding voluntary action, though, seem to muddy the water around what status a decision holds. And by muddying the status of decisions, the status of acting against a decision one reaches also becomes muddied, which is to say the phenomenon of *akrasia* becomes muddied.

Not only does the phenomenon of *akrasia* become muddied when thinking through what Aristotle says about voluntary and involuntary actions, but *akrasia* also becomes muddied when we think about the soul. As we saw, Plato conceives of the soul as unified, and Aristotle shares this view. Aristotle, as we have seen, comes to a conclusion regarding *akrasia* that differs from the conclusion regarding *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*, yet, vitally, these positions share the view that the soul is ideally unified.<sup>39</sup> That is, when the soul is healthiest and most beautiful, it is in utter self-agreement, in total harmony with itself, the various activities or parts each fulfilling their proper function. Of course, this is not to say that Plato and Aristotle conceive of the soul in the same way, and it is not even to say that the way in which they think of the unity of the soul is

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<sup>39</sup> For, among other things, interesting claims regarding the metaphysical, epistemological, and political differences between Plato and Aristotle that might play a role in motivating that different understandings of *akrasia*, see Rorty (1970).

identical, but they, nevertheless, share the basic view that the soul is a unity. Furthermore, this is not to say that Plato and Aristotle think of the soul as devoid of different parts or activities; they understand the soul as having, at the very least, different aspects that serve different functions and have different goals while still being unified.

Compared to what we saw in the *Protagoras*, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we have an even clearer view of how the soul is understood. Of course, it would be far too much here to discuss everything Aristotle says about the soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (much less what he says about the soul in all his works). Here we only need to consider a few points about the soul that are relevant to *akrasia*. Aristotle claims that when it comes to continent and incontinent people “we praise their reason, that is to say, the [part] of the soul that has reason, because it exhorts them correctly and toward what is best” and that it is evident that continent and incontinent people “have in them some other [part] that is by nature something apart from reason, clashing and struggling with reason [...]”<sup>40</sup> for incontinent people have impulses in contrary directions” (1102b15-20). From these remarks, we see that Aristotle understands the soul as having at least two activities. Given that both instances of “part” here (and at other places in discussions of the soul in Book III) are insertions from Irwin, it seems that Aristotle might not even understand the soul having parts in the way that Plato does in the *Republic*. Nevertheless, Aristotle takes the soul to have one activity that involves reason and another that involves something that clashes with reason, namely, appetites and desires. Furthermore, these two distinct activities have different objects. The object of appetites and desires is pain and pleasure, which is to say that the activity in the soul involving appetite takes maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain as its goal. The object of the activity of the soul that involves reason (and for our purposes regarding *akrasia* I consider this activity of the soul only insofar as

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<sup>40</sup> Only this last insertion is mine.

it relates to making decisions about actions) involves what is good and bad for the person as a whole.

What is good for the person as whole includes pleasure and pain, which is to say that the reasoning activity in the soul encompasses, in some way, the object of the desiring activity of the soul. Indeed, the reasoning activity stands above the desiring activity as the reasoning activity is to rule over the desiring activity when the soul functions properly. Nevertheless, these two activities are distinct and, as such, they can conflict with one another. Indeed, such conflict is precisely what occurs, Aristotle says, with the incontinent person. The reasoning activity of the soul weighs what action is best for the person—considered in his entirety—to take and the desiring activity of the soul considers what action is best for the person—considered only in his being concerned with pleasure and pain—to take. The incontinent person takes the action that the desiring activity of the soul tells him to take even though this person understands that he ought to take the action prescribed by the reasoning activity.<sup>41</sup> The temperate and continent people, as opposed to the intemperate and incontinent people, are the ones who “listen to reason” (1102b33) in the way that one listens to and obeys one’s father. Indeed, the incontinent person also listens to reason, but he only does so sometimes, when not in the presence of a pleasure that overpowers the reasoning activity.<sup>42</sup> That is, incontinent people and temperate people alike are able to adjudicate between the different proposals of actions from the different activities of the soul. Even though we have different activities in our soul, we are able to take an action because we are able to pick which activity’s proposal we will act on. It is the unity of the soul that allows us to pick between the proposals of the different activities. That is, the distinct activities (or parts

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<sup>41</sup> The reasoning activity and the desiring activity can prescribe the same action, but they will give different reasons for taking this action. The incontinent person finds himself in trouble when the different reasons these two activities have for prescribing an action result in prescribing different actions.

<sup>42</sup> The temperate and continent people listen to reason unqualifiedly whereas the intemperate and incontinent people only listen to reason when they are not faced with pleasures.

because this conclusion also holds for Plato) in the soul do not undermine the unity of the soul and it is precisely the existence of this unity that allows us to come to a decision, according to Aristotle, that is objectively right or correct, and then take an action based on that decision.

There seems to be a fundamental problem with maintaining that *akrasia* exists if one thinks of the soul as unified. If the soul is unified, then is not *akrasia* simply a person at certain times acting in accordance with the action prescribed by the reasoning activity or part of the soul and at other times acting in accordance with the action prescribed by the desiring activity or part of the soul? If we are able to adjudicate between the proposals from different activities or parts of the soul, as a conception of the soul as unified maintains, then is not *akrasia* picking the action that accords with reason when it appears best to pick and picking the action that accords with desire when it appears best to pick? That is, if we understand the soul as unified, we do not seem to be able to make use of *akrasia* to account for the phenomenon in which a person acts contrary to reason and in accord with desire despite the fact that this person claims to know that acting in accordance with reason is best. If we understand the soul as unified, then how can we rely on *akrasia*, how can we rely on positing a person as doing what he knows is worse when he has the ability to correctly adjudicate between possible actions, rather than understanding seemingly-akratic actions as instances of a person thinking its best to act according to desire instead of according to reason?

### **Derrida and the Power of *Akrasia*:**

What if the soul is not unified as Plato and Aristotle maintain it is? What would it mean for the way we have been thinking about *akrasia* if the different activities in or parts of the soul do not coalesce into a unity? What if the soul is constituted by these activities or parts while they

remain irreducibly other to one another? What if various activities or parts of the soul do not fall into a hierarchy wherein one can adjudicate between their various claims?

What if we can understand the soul as non-unified<sup>43</sup> on the model of an aporia? This is not to say that the soul is itself an aporia. Rather, I propose understanding the soul's ideal condition as analogous to an aporia, as having the condition of being at the intersection of incommensurable claims, a condition which ought to be championed rather than lambasted. That is, on this model of the non-unified soul, the different parts or activities of the soul do not exist in a way in which their claims can be adjudicated and chosen between (at least not in the way that Aristotle describes the nature of a decision), and less still do they exist in a hierarchy. Each activity or part of the soul, and its respective proposals for actions, is absolute *qua* itself. On the Platonic and Aristotelian model of the soul, the parts or activities of the soul exist in a hierarchy and the proper and ideal condition of the soul is that these distinct elements fall into order. Reason is at the top of this hierarchy for both Plato and Aristotle, which is to say that however many other parts or activities one might identify in the soul, all of them are subordinate to reason and the objects of and proposals for actions by them are all less choiceworthy than the object of and proposals by the reasoning element of the soul. The ideal condition of the soul for both Plato and Aristotle is being unified and in self-agreement such that the various constitutive elements all follow their ordered positions.

But what if the soul's ideal condition is not to be unified in this way? What if the soul's ideal condition is not to have its constitutive elements fall into a hierarchy wherein some elements rule over others, and some elements propose actions that are understood to be, in some objective sense, more choiceworthy than actions proposed by other elements? What if, instead,

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<sup>43</sup> For the rest of this section I will be working from the view that the soul is not unified. Unless I state otherwise, whenever I refer to the "soul," one should hear "non-unified soul".

the constitutive elements of the soul do not coalesce into a unity, but rather they constitute the soul while being entirely other to one another? What if the various elements of the soul do not fall into a hierarchy, but rather their various proposals for action are incommensurable? And what if this incommensurability is not a fault or imperfection of the soul, but rather a strength or perfection of the soul? What if having to navigate demands that are both absolute and conflicting is the human condition, a condition which should not be overcome and, indeed, cannot be, but rather should be provoked and investigated? What if we understand the soul's ideal condition differently from the way in which Plato and Aristotle understand the soul's ideal condition? What if the soul's ideal condition, rather, were one of ambiguity in terms of the relation between its elements? What if not ambiguity, but rather conflict? What would this different understanding mean for *akrasia*?

We can move toward this different conception of the soul by understanding the soul's condition as analogous to an *aporia*. One way we can get at this analogy is to think about decisions. The way that Derrida conceives of decisions might be the precise inverse of the way Aristotle conceives of decisions, or, at least, these two ways of thinking about decisions are quite different. We have seen that Aristotle says that deliberation occurs when the proper course of action is within our control, yet the best action is not clear. That is, we think about what would be best to do and this reasoning leads us to a conclusion, which is a decision. This decision prescribes the best action to take in a situation. That is, a decision is a well-reasoned answer to the reflexive question "What should I do?" in which the answer is not immediately clear, but it is attainable nevertheless. For Aristotle, there is a correct, or at least "good," decision that we can come to in deliberation. Derrida, conceives of decisions in a different way. Derrida maintains that a decision occurs when one is faced with an *aporia*. That is, we only have responsibility to

make a decision about an action once we recognize the irresolvable poles of an aporia, once we are confronted by two conflicting, and contradictory, obligations. Although one is faced with contradictory obligations, one is not recused from acting, from making a decision, but rather such cases call for action just as much as, if not more than, other situations.<sup>44</sup> In these cases, it is impossible to reason one's way to some objectively correct, or even "good," action; what reason reveals in these situations, and all that it can reveal, all that could possibly be revealed,<sup>45</sup> is that there is no correct or "good" action. There is no way to choose between the possible actions in such a situation, when faced with an aporia, because there is no evaluative comparison to be made between the available actions; each claim must be chosen, one must decide to act in accordance with each claim, but these claims conflict. Such situations are, by definition, irresolvable. It is precisely in these moments, when facing an aporia, that we make a decision. Acting in one way rather than another when there is precisely no reason to choose one action in favor of another is to make a decision.

Understanding the soul on this model, then, means understanding the soul's constitutive activities or parts as poles of an aporia. If we go with what we have seen from Aristotle regarding the soul, namely that there is a desiring activity and a reasoning activity, the aporia analogy fits well in this regard because an aporia is always between two poles. For example, there is an aporia between, on the one hand, the unconditional law of hospitality, which prescribes that we must accept a foreigner with hospitality under any and all circumstances and without demanding anything from the foreigner, and, on the other hand, the conditional laws of hospitality, which prescribe that we must obey certain laws given by a legislative body as well as

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<sup>44</sup> Such cases are, for example, situations that call for forgiveness because, as Derrida argues, "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable" (*Forgiveness*, 32).

<sup>45</sup> That is to say that reason's inability to find the correct decision or a "good" decision is not a fault or shortcoming of reason, but rather such correct or good decision are by nature impossible when facing an aporia.

the customs and mores of our inherited tradition that pertain to hospitality. As another example, there is also an *aporia* between, on the one hand, the unconditional law of forgiveness, which prescribes that we must forgive when the guilty person does not see himself as guilty or does not seek forgiveness if he sees himself as guilty, and, on the other hand, the conditional laws of forgiveness, which prescribe the transactionary rules we must follow and the ends toward which (namely, reconciliation) we must aim when forgiving someone. In these cases, and all others, the *aporia* is between *two* poles, an unconditional law and the conditional laws.<sup>46</sup> Thus, if we follow Aristotle's model in which we have seen an appetitive activity and a reasoning activity, then we have our two poles. If we wish to follow Plato, or to come up with some other way of understanding the activities or parts of the soul, we would seemingly run into a problem with the analogy because Plato's model gives three parts of the soul. Nevertheless, the spirit of the analogy still holds because we can think of each of the three parts of the soul as "poles," as preventing evaluative comparison. While it might be important for Derrida's understanding of the *aporia* as such that it consists of *two* poles, the force of the analogy we have been using still holds without being confined to two poles.<sup>47</sup>

When facing an *aporia* we are faced with two equally valid claims. For example, "Forgive!" (the unconditional law of forgiveness) and "Forgive those who repent" (one of the conditional laws of forgiveness). As I noted before, the poles of the *aporia* are two *laws*. The

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, an *aporia* is an antinomy in the truest sense as it is between an unconditional *nomos* and the conditional *nomoi*. I will return to another significance of this point shortly.

<sup>47</sup> It is important to point out, if the following was not already clear, that just because the soul is not unified does not mean we are to think that the soul does not "really" exist. Just because the soul is constituted by multiple distinct activities or parts that are utterly other to one another, we should not therefore think each person is not one entity. Just as an *aporia* is the standing-in-contrast-to or standing-in-distinction-from, we might say, of each pole to the other, so too is the soul the standing-in-contrast-to or the standing-in-distinction-from each activity or part of the soul to the other or others. An *aporia* is not the unity between the two poles, but rather an *aporia* is the conflict of two equally valid prescriptions; the soul is not the unity between multiple activities or parts, but rather is the incommensurability of multiple prescriptions from distinct sources.



conflict of an aporia, of an antinomy in the truest sense, “does not oppose a law to nature or an empirical fact,” but rather it “marks the collision between two laws, at the frontier between two regimes of law, both of them non-empirical” (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 77-79). It is not the case that we are commanded by a law to be hospitable and then a number of practical concerns obstruct are path (such as my inability to fit inside my home every person to whom I would otherwise be hospitable). It is the case, rather, that there is an unconditional law that commands we be hospitable and that there are also the conditional laws that command us to follow certain rules or conditions when carrying out hospitality. That is, an aporia is “contradictory *a priori*” (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 65), contradictory in its nature, before we entertain any practical concerns about implanting either the unconditional law or conditional laws.

It is also the case that conditional laws corrupt the unconditional law, but this fact does not mean that the unconditional law is somehow “better” than the conditional laws. Although it might seem at times as though Derrida is arguing for one side of an aporia in favor of another, that is, that he is arguing that one side of the aporia is the truer version of whatever concept is at hand, Derrida is only doing so because of the historical reality in which his discussion occurs. When he seems to prioritize unconditional forgiveness over conditional forgiveness, for example,<sup>48</sup> it is not that Derrida sees the unconditional side of the aporia as right and the conditional side of the aporia as wrong, but rather he argues in the manner that he does because people readily understand the conditional laws of forgiveness while seeming to ignore (willfully or not) the unconditional law of forgiveness. In problematizing the aporia of forgiveness, which is, like any other aporia, no more one side than it is the other, he argues more strongly on the unconditional side because this is the side that our historical reality causes to need stronger

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<sup>48</sup> For a reading of Derrida as truly privileging unconditional forgiveness over conditional forgiveness, see Murphy (2014).

arguing. Hypothetically, when analyzing some other aporia, Derrida could find the need to argue more strongly for the conditional side than the unconditional side; again, though, this would not mean he privileges the conditional side, but rather it would mean he sees the inherited tradition as favoring or more readily recognizing the validity of the unconditional side than the conditional side in the case of whatever this hypothetical aporia might be.

Understanding each pole of the aporia as constitutive of the aporia just as much as the other pole fits with the way in which Aristotle talks about the activities of the souls. Aristotle argues that the “nonrational feelings seem to be no less human than rational calculation; and so actions resulting from spirit or appetite are also proper to a human being” (1111b2-4). Although there are points at which we certainly find Aristotle giving a kind of prioritization to reason over desires, here he says that any such prioritization does not indicate that appetites are any less human than is reasoning. It is not the case that the appetites that bring us to act in certain ways and these actions that are the product of appetite are in some way less true to our nature than actions that are done based on reason. Just as an aporia is no more the conditional than it is the unconditional, the human is no more appetite than it is reason. For Aristotle, though, reason, nevertheless, is the more proper guide for our actions and lives even though the soul is no more reason than appetite. Aristotle, on the one hand, can still maintain that the two activities of the soul have a proper guide because he understands the soul as unified; we, on the other, because we are working with an understanding of the soul as not unified, do not need to maintain that these two activities have a proper guide or that they fall into a hierarchy in which one can be chosen in favor of the other for an objectively correct reason, even though we maintain that these activities constitute the soul. Understanding the soul in this way that I am proposing, though, might seem to create a problem.

If we think of the soul like an aporia, which is “the undecidable crossing of the ways” (Dufourmantelle, *Hospitality*, 26), then does that mean that we must abandon the idea that Plato and Aristotle (and many others) share that it is best for a person to act and live one’s life in accordance with reason? That an aporia is between two laws is part of the problem. If an aporia were between a law and a set of practical circumstances, then we would have an obligation, it seems, to follow the law rather than to acquiesce to practical concerns. Or perhaps one would suggest that we ought to act in accordance with the practical concerns rather than the law. Either way, it would still be the case that the two poles of the aporia would be different enough that we would seemingly have a right to claim adherence to one pole in favor of another. The two poles of an aporia are, in fact, between a law and laws, which means that each side of the pole is absolute in its own right. Of course, one side of the aporia is comprised of the *conditional* laws, so this side of the aporia is not absolute in the sense of unconditional or universally applicable, but this side of the aporia is still absolute in the sense that all laws are absolute, in the sense that the claims of these conditional laws *must* be followed, that these laws enforce an irrevocable obligation onto any person who faces the aporia. That is, both sides of the aporia are absolute because each side demands, with equal validity, that its dictates must be followed.

Moreover, in the case of hospitality (and the following is true for any other aporia), the unconditional law of hospitality commands “that we transgress all the [conditional]<sup>49</sup> laws (in the plural)” due to the unconditional law’s being absolute while “the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consist in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality” (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 77). Each pole of the aporia commands that we follow its law or laws unequivocally. Even the conditional laws enact an unconditional burden in the sense that these laws command that we must *always*, that is, we might say, that we *unconditionally*, follow

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<sup>49</sup> This insertion is mine.

the conditional laws of hospitality.<sup>50</sup> According to the conditional laws of hospitality, there is no situation in which we have a right to act outside the bounds of the conditional laws; that is, the conditional laws claim that we can never rightly follow the unconditional law of hospitality (or the unconditional law of any aporia). Similarly, the unconditional law requires that we always act without regard for the conditional laws. That is, the unconditional law claims that we can never rightly follow the conditional laws of hospitality (or any aporia). This aporia (like all others) is an “insoluble antinomy, a non-dialectizable antinomy” (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 77) between the unconditional law of hospitality and the conditional laws of hospitality. It is precisely (1) the nature of an aporia as an antinomy, as being between law and laws, between two absolutes, that, in part, creates the problem I mentioned above. And it is the fact that (2) there is no dialectic that can resolve the antinomy produced by these two conflicting absolutes that, in part, creates the problem I mentioned. It is only with both (1) and (2) together that we have this problem.

To restate the problem, given that both sides of an aporia are absolute and given that there is no dialectic that can resolve the antinomy created by these conflicting absolutes, no action that we can take can be right or correct because any action will conform with one side of the aporia and, in doing so, it will conflict with the other side of the aporia. This fact about the actions we take when facing an aporia is not a problem *qua* aporia, but rather is essential to the nature of an aporia. This fact, this essential characteristic of an aporia, seems to present a problem, though, when we understand the soul as analogous to an aporia. On this analogous model, the “poles” in the soul are the desiring activity or part and the reasoning activity or part. As analogous to the poles of an aporia, we would have to say that there is no correct pick for us

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<sup>50</sup> For example, we *must* forgive someone only if he repents. This conditional law is absolute in the sense that we are *required* to forgive if someone repents and we are *forbidden* from forgiving if he does not forgive. If one side of an aporia were merely practical concerns, this side would not have the same absolute nature and, thus, would not pose the same problem.

to make; that is, in any situation, there is no correct pick for us to make between the action prescribed by the desiring activity or part and the action prescribed by the reasoning activity or part. If this problem is valid, then we would have to say that a life in which someone always takes the action prescribed by desire is just as good of a life as the life in which someone always take the action prescribed by reason. I think that more properly understanding the analogy between the soul and an aporia will resolve the problem.

That we are understanding the soul as analogous to an aporia in which the actions prescribed by the two poles cannot be decided between the in Aristotelian sense of a decision does not mean that acting in accordance with either side of the pole is as likely as the other to lead to a healthy, prosperous, successful, or happy life. Taking actions will always have consequences and these consequences go far beyond the bounds of the actor's control. For that reason, then, taking the actions prescribed by reason might lead a person to "better outcomes" than the outcomes produced by taking the actions prescribed by desire. Even if it is true that acting in accordance with the actions prescribed by one pole is more likely to lead to "better outcomes" than acting in accordance with the actions prescribed by the other pole, it is not the case that we therefore have the ability to adjudicate between the divergent proposals from the different activities or parts of the soul. Insofar as we are as much one activity or part of the soul as the other, and not a unity of them, we must accept each part's goal or aim as equally valid. We saw before that the desiring activity or part and the reasoning activity or part have different goals and we saw that we are only supposed to choose reason's goals over desire's if we think there is a hierarchy that permits of adjudication, a hierarchy that exists due to the supposed unity of the soul. But if we understand ourselves as equally one activity or part as much as another and do not assume that these parts coalesce in a unity, then the reason for choosing reason's goals falls

away. We no longer have the ability to choose, in the Aristotelean sense, between the goals of the different parts.

We can think of an example using the aporia of hospitality to further establish the way in which we have resolved the supposed problem about understanding the soul as analogous to an aporia. Both poles of the aporia of hospitality are absolute in that the claims of each pole demand, with complete validity, being followed; in that sense, it is impossible to deliberate to a conclusion that reveals the proper course of action. Any course of action will be wrong in that it does not follow the demands of one of the poles and it is precisely in light of the knowledge that we cannot dialectize this antinomy with which we are faced that an obligation occurs to make a choice, to decide, to act. In the case of hospitality, we might bring about “better outcomes” if we simply follow the conditional laws of hospitality rather than the unconditional law of hospitality. If one follows the unconditional law of hospitality, then one will accept undocumented immigrants into one’s home despite the fact that there is a conditional law given by the legislative body that forbids undocumented immigrants from residing in this country.<sup>51</sup> By following the unconditional law of hospitality rather than following one of the conditional laws of hospitality, this person who accepts undocumented immigrants into his home puts himself at risk of legal punishment (if not physical “punishment” from neighbors who dislike his action) and imprisonment. Of course, if this man who accepts undocumented immigrants into his home ends up in prison, he will no longer be able to provide hospitality to anyone. Thus, by following the unconditional law of hospitality, he found himself in a situation such that he was no longer able to provide hospitality.

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<sup>51</sup> There are exceptions to this conditional law, but, in general terms, this is the way in which this conditional law functions.

If, instead, he had decided to follow the conditional laws of hospitality, he would not have accepted undocumented immigrants into his home. By not accepting undocumented immigrants into his home, he would not have put himself at risk of legal punishment and he would not have been sent to prison. While not in prison, he could have fought for the rights of undocumented immigrants and perhaps even been involved in convincing legislators to change the law (that is, to change one of the conditional laws, the conditional law that is given by the legislative body, not to change *the* unconditional law of hospitality, which no one can change) to make it less difficult for people to immigrate as they please. By following the conditional laws of hospitality, it would seem, this man has brought about “better outcomes,” that is, he has been more hospitable than he would have been had he followed the unconditional law of hospitality.<sup>52</sup> To think this way, though, is wrong, at least according to the logic of an aporia. An aporia, as I have stressed, is an antinomy, it is an irresolvable paradox between *law* and *laws*, between two absolutes, both of which *must* be followed. One cannot properly face an aporia by seeking refuge in empirical or practical realities such that a person decides to act in accordance with one pole in favor of the other pole because the former brings about “better outcomes.” To react to an aporia in this way is either disingenuous, that is, intentionally misguided, or it is the product of a misunderstanding of the nature of an aporia. Empirical matters are out of bounds in terms of the action one takes when faced with an aporia because an aporia is a more fundamental conflict, a struggle between law and laws, between two absolutes that demand actions in a more obligatory way than empirical matters demand and oblige. Thus, the way in which we rightly face an aporia is by facing it without giving weight to empirical matters because each pole of the aporia is

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<sup>52</sup> It is possible to think of a situation in which following the unconditional law of hospitality produces “better outcomes” than following the conditional laws of hospitality, but the example in which the “better outcomes” come from following the conditional laws sufficiently serves to secure the point.

inherently (without consideration of empirical matters) as weighty, that is, as demanding of our adherence, as possible.

It is in this way, then, that we resolve the seeming problem regarding our analogy between the soul and an aporia. The solution does not deny the fact that acting in accordance with one pole might bring about “better outcomes,” in whatever way we mean “better,” than acting in accordance with another pole. Just as with the case of the man following the conditional laws of hospitality rather than the unconditional law of hospitality who brought about “better outcomes” by doing so, acting in accordance with the action prescribed by the reasoning activity or part of the soul might bring about “better outcomes” than acting in accordance with the desiring activity or part of the soul. We cannot think, though, that because deciding to act in accordance with one pole might bring about “better outcomes” than acting in accordance with the other pole that we have resolved the aporia or that we have found a way of deliberating that allows us to decide, in an Aristotelian sense, which action is best. If one acts in accordance with the pole that brings about “better outcomes,” so be it; but she cannot decide, in the Derridean sense, to act in accordance with this pole because it brings about “better outcomes.” “Better outcomes” cannot lead her to decide, in the Derridean sense because as soon as one has a reason for deciding, one is not deciding but rather one is (as I have been terming it) picking. The only way to decide which pole with which one should accord is do so without reason, for deciding without reason is the only true decision. By understanding the soul as analogous to an aporia, we rightly maintain both that one pole very well might be more likely to lead to “better outcomes” than the other pole and we maintain that, nevertheless, action in the face of an aporia is undecidable, in the Aristotelian sense, and the only thing occasions a decision, in the Derridean sense.



We can now see how this understanding of the soul allows us to understand *akrasia*. Understanding the soul as not unified means that the soul is constituted by multiple activities or parts, each of which is just as much constitutive of the soul as the other activity or part (or, activities or parts, if we think there are more than two). Furthermore, these activities or parts do not coalesce in a unity; the soul is each of these activities or parts without being a unity of them. By not forming a unity, there is no hierarchy into which these activities or parts fall, but rather they remain utterly other to one another and lack any evaluative means of comparison. In remaining other in this way, each activity or part prescribes an action such that the soul is faced with two (or more) actions that are “contradictory and equally justified imperatives” (*Forgiveness*, 54) that demand one’s action. We have said that *akrasia* is being overcome by desire such that one takes an action that one knows to be worse, that conflicts with what reason tells one to do. But the way in which one knows that acting in accordance with desire is “worse” than acting in accordance with reason is by knowing, or at least thinking, that acting in accordance with reason will produce “better outcomes.”

But we have seen that deciding what action to take based on which pole is more likely to bring about “better outcomes” is not truly making a decision. An akratic action, then, is only a “bad” action if we appraise our actions according to their outcomes. That, on the level of the cause of an action, it is no better to act in accordance with the prescription from reason than in accordance with the prescription from desire does not mean that, for example, murdering someone because you have a “desire,” one might say, for vengeance is as valid of a decision as acting according to reason and not murdering someone. The person who commits murder did so because he thought that murdering would bring about “better outcomes,” namely, that committing murder would satisfy his “desire” for vengeance. Because he acted based on what he

thought would bring about “better outcomes,” he did not make a decision. Any decision a person makes will *necessarily* lack a reason for having been made and, therefore, deciding to act in accordance with one “pole” of the soul is as choiceworthy as acting in accordance with the other “pole.” That is, there is precisely no reason for deciding to act in accordance with one rather than the other. Taking an action that accords with desire only appears to have overpowered reason if this actor is under the impression that he ought to act in accordance with reason because doing so will bring about “better outcomes,” if he thinks that the soul is unified and reason is its guide or at the top of the hierarchy of the constituents of the soul. *Akrasia*, then, is when one determines that acting in accordance with reason will bring about “better outcomes,” but one acts in accordance with desire, not because one was “overcome” by desire, but because one *decided* to act in accordance with the desiring activity or part of the soul rather than the reasoning one. And, so, when the akratic person reacts to his akratic action by saying “I do not know why I did that,” we see that he is absolutely right, for there can be no reason why he decided what he decided.

**Conclusion:**

One seems to be within one’s right to ask for more from Plato and Aristotle about *akrasia*. With Plato, we only have reason to abandon belief in *akrasia* if we are hedonists. If the reader of the *Protagoras* is not a hedonist, then the reader does not take away any argument that moves her to abandon belief in *akrasia* or even to seriously reconsider or reshape her position on *akrasia*, nor does she find an argument that further grounds her belief in *akrasia*. On the face of it, it seems like Aristotle marks a progression in terms of a definitive account of *akrasia* because Aristotle makes a claim—that *akrasia* does exist—on terms that anyone can accept. That is, Aristotle’s account seems to move past the issue of lacking a direct, forceful relevance to some readers’ thoughts on *akrasia*. As we saw, though, there seems to be a few problems with

Aristotle's account of *akrasia* given what Aristotle says about voluntary and involuntary actions. If these issues I pointed out are valid objections, then it seems either that Aristotle cannot claim that *akrasia* exists or that Aristotle must make some changes or clarifications to what he says about voluntary and involuntary actions or about *akrasia* (or both) in order to be able to account for *akrasia*.

Even more fundamentally, though, there seems to be an issue with the way that both Plato and Aristotle conceive of *akrasia*. That both Plato and Aristotle both understand the soul as unified seems to prevent them from successfully accounting for *akrasia*. What if, though, the soul is not unified? This is the question we have been thinking through with Derrida. Derrida seems to provide us with the ability to understand the soul as not unified. Plato and Aristotle understand the soul as having constituting parts or activities that fall into a hierarchy in which reason rules and guides the other constituting elements. Reason's guiding status allows us to determine what action we ought to take, in an objective sense. The unity of the soul allows us to weigh the various actions proposed by different constituting elements and, furthermore, since Plato and Aristotle understand the soul as a hierarchical unity, we can objectively know that we always ought to take the action that accords with reason.

But what if the constituting elements of the soul are not unified and what if they do not fall into a hierarchy? What if the reasoning activity or part and the desiring activity or part are irreducibly other? Even Aristotle admits, we saw, that reason and desire are equally human, so if we do not understand these elements of the soul to be in a hierarchy, then how could we decide, in Aristotelian sense, between the two? Indeed, we cannot. If the reasoning and desiring elements of the soul give equally valid prescriptions for actions, given that they are not unified elements of

the soul and given that they do not fall into a hierarchy, then how do we come to take actions?  
What would this understanding of the soul mean for *akrasia*?

We have seen that this departure from the Platonic and Aristotelian understanding of the soul has also led us to a different understanding of decisions. We no longer understand a decision as deliberating about means to ends and then choosing whichever means, according to reason's analysis, will lead to the best action; this is an entirely rational understanding of decisions. The different understanding of decisions that we have come to is precisely not rational; indeed, Derrida says it is madness. We only decide when we face conflicting claims that, with total validity, both demand our action. Given that we must do both but cannot do both, we decide which action to take precisely at the moment that we have no reason for acting in one way rather than another. This different understanding of the soul means we no longer have the ability to decide, in an Aristotelian sense, between prescriptions for actions from different activities or parts of the soul. We, then, can conceive of an instance of *akrasia* by understanding the soul as producing two conflicting and contradictory prescriptions for action when faced with a tactile pleasure, and that each prescription is absolute *qua* the constituting element that prescribed it. A person thinks that acting in accordance with reason will bring about "better outcomes," but he has precisely no reason to act in one way rather than another. In the face of this circumstance, he decides, in the Derridean sense, to act according to desire.

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