Socrates and Aristotle on Akrasia

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Socrates and Aristotle on Akrasia by Zhuoyang Wang, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

In ancient philosophy, *akrasia*, often translated as “weakness of will,” usually means the phenomenon that one acts contrary to his knowledge or belief about what is the best option open to him. Many ancient Greek philosophers have discussed the possibility of this phenomenon, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The discussion of this phenomenon in the *Protagoras* is usually called the Socratic account of akrasia while the discussion of it in the *Republic* IV is usually called the Platonic account of akrasia. The Aristotelian account of akrasia is usually found in *EN* VII. In this paper, I’m going to interpret both the Socratic account and the Aristotelian account of akrasia and talk about the advantages and disadvantages of their account.
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Introduction

In ancient philosophy, *akrasia*, often translated as “weakness of will,” usually means the phenomenon that one acts contrary to his knowledge or belief about what is the best option open to him. Many ancient Greek philosophers have discussed the possibility of this phenomenon, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The discussion of this phenomenon in the *Protagoras* is usually called the Socratic account of akrasia while the discussion of it in the *Republic* IV is usually called the Platonic account of akrasia. The Aristotelian account of akrasia is usually found in *EN* VII.

In this paper, I’m going to interpret both the Socratic account and the Aristotelian account of akrasia. I will start by introducing three different kinds of akrasia: synchronic belief-akrasia, diachronic belief-akrasia, and knowledge-akrasia. I will argue that Socrates denies the possibility of synchronic belief-akrasia and knowledge-akrasia but may admit the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia. Unlike most people, I will divide the Socrate argument in the *Protagoras* into two separate arguments:

(I) Given a fixed good, no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better.

(II) No one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad.

The reason I give two arguments here is that the first argument is about how to achieve a fixed good, which involves *the art of measurement* and *the power of appearance*, while the second
argument is about the knowledge or belief of the good, which is independent of \textit{the art of measurement} and \textit{the power of appearance}. Then, Socrates argues the phenomenon that most people call “being overcome by pleasure” is, in fact, \textit{ignorance}. He concludes that overcoming ignorance or controlling oneself is possessing the relevant knowledge.

In addition, I will interpret the Aristotelian account of akrasia. I will use the word \textit{incontinence} instead of akrasia when introducing Aristotle’s view. Aristotle admits the possibility of all kinds of incontinence, but he thinks that incontinence applies only within the range of excessive human bodily pleasures. Aristotle argues that some bodily pleasures are necessary, so the incontinent person is base because he pursues the excessive bodily pleasures, but not because he pursues the necessary bodily pleasures. Moreover, Aristotle also talks about the psychological process in an agent’s mind when the agent fails to use his knowledge. Aristotle thinks that there are types of premises: \textit{the universal premise} and \textit{the particular premise}. When the agent fails to use his knowledge, these two types of premises are not working well in the agent’s mind. Scholars have many different interpretations about how exactly these two premises work badly. Among their interpretations, I think McDowell’s interpretation is the most compelling one because his interpretation satisfies the two constraints for incontinence:

(I) There must be an inner struggle in the agent’s psychology.

(II) The product of the agent’s rational calculation must contradict the product of the agent’s perceptual knowledge.

After talking about both the Socratic arguments and the Aristotelian arguments, I will talk about the similarities and differences between their accounts. Although their accounts have many
similarities, there are still three significant differences, which are sufficient to give them different conclusions. The first difference is that Aristotle thinks that each of the parts of the soul is capable of initiating motion while Socrates thinks that knowledge will make the appearances lose their power. The second difference is that Aristotle thinks belief is no different than knowledge regarding akrasia, but Socrates denies knowledge-akrasia while permitting diachronic belief-akrasia. The third difference is that Socrates thinks one will always try to pursue a good as much as possible while Aristotle thinks one will only pursue the right amount of that good.

Finally, I will talk about the advantages and disadvantages of their account. The Socratic account seems unable to give a compelling interpretation for the fact that future good is sometimes smaller. The Aristotelian account seems unable to give a compelling interpretation for the fact the beliefs of rational people cannot be stronger than their knowledge. As for their solutions to akrasia, the problem of Aristotle’s solution is that it is hard for an incontinent man to develop good habits. The problem of Socrate’s solution is that some knowledge is hard to learn.
1. The Socratic arguments in the *Protagoras*

1.1 Different kinds of akrasia

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates explicitly says that: “no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better” (358c). It seems that Socrates denies the possibility of akrasia. Gabriela Carone, however, argues that “Socrates does not deny that people may act contrary to what they judge best most of the time, but only that they may act contrary to what they judge best at a particular time” (Carone 113). She thinks it is certainly possible for one to change his mind immediately afterward, or have thought differently immediately before, which can be regarded as akratic in some sense. To explain this view more specifically, Carone introduces Terry Penner’s taxonomy of akrasia. According to Penner, there are at least three different ways in which akrasia can be understood:

(I) synchronic belief-akrasia: acting contrary to what one believes to be the best option open to him *at the moment of action*.

(II) diachronic belief-akrasia: acting contrary to what one believes to be the best option open to him *throughout most of the general context of the action*.

(III) knowledge-akrasia: acting contrary to what one *knows* to be the best option open to him.

Carone agrees with Penner that Socrates would grant the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia but deny the possibility of synchronic belief-akrasia and knowledge-akrasia. And the denial
of the possibility of synchronic belief-akrasia and knowledge-akrasia is what Socrates actually means by his motto “no one does wrong willing” (Carone 114). Although Penner thinks that knowledge-akrasia can also be divided into diachronic knowledge-akrasia and synchronic knowledge-akrasia, Carone argues that it’s unnecessary to give such a distinction because knowledge, unlike belief, has the feature of staying stable throughout the temporal context of the action, including the moment when you choose to perform the action and the one when you assess whether you did rightly (Carone 115). This disagreement, however, makes no changes to their conclusion that Socrates denies knowledge-akrasia of any kind.

1.2 The main argument in the Protagoras

Now, let us look at the original argument in the Protagoras to examine if Carone and Penner’s conclusion is true. Most of the Protagoras are not about akrasia, so it is important to locate the relevant passage first. Brickhouse & Smith think that the topic of akrasia in the Protagoras starts in 352b and ends in 358d, and I’m inclined to say the same thing (Brickhouse & Smith 65). The topic of akrasia begins on 352b when Socrates asks Protagoras whether he agrees with the majority that knowledge is not a powerful thing and ends on 358d before the start of the inquiry of dread and fear. It is worth noting that the word “believe” or “belief” doesn’t appear in this passage until 358c.

Socrates spends most of the time (from 352b to 358a) trying to persuade most people and to teach them the nature of the experience which they call being overcome by pleasure (353a). Most people don’t realize the nature of the experience which they call being overcome by pleasure, and therefore act badly when they are reacting to this experience. The serious consequence is that, as
Socrates says, they will all do badly in both private and public life (357e). To avoid this, it is important to understand the nature of this experience and know the actual cause of it.

Socrates starts persuading most people by showing that there is a contradiction in their view. Most people maintain that they are unwilling to do what is the best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it, because they are overcome by pleasure, pain, love, or fear (352b-e). For example, they are often overcome by pleasant things like food, drink, or sex. They do those things all the while knowing they are ruinous (353c). Then, Socrates tries to figure out what they mean by saying that pleasant things are ruinous. He argues that if pleasant things are bad, then it seems that they can only be bad because of the terrible consequences that happen later, but not because they bring about immediate pleasure (353d). It would be unreasonable for us to think that sex is ruinous because of the pleasure it produces, but not because of the disease or pain that happens later. It follows that most people believe that pleasant things are ruinous because these things are bad on account of nothing other than the fact that they result in pain and deprive us of other pleasures (354a). Meanwhile, some painful things also seem to be good, like athletics training or treatments by doctors. Of course, they are good not for the reason that they bring about intense pain and suffering, but for the reason that they ultimately bring about health and good condition of bodies (354b). Since pleasant things are bad because of the pain they result in and some painful things are good because of the pleasure they result in, it follows that most people regard pleasure as good and regard pain as bad (354c). If this is true, then their claim that someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by pleasure, is equivalent to the claim that someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not
necessary to do it, having been overcome by the *good* (355d). If one is overcome by the good, then he must be doing what is good, but this contradicts the premise that he is doing what is bad. Hence, Socrates concludes that the prevailing view that people are unwilling to do the best thing they know because they are overcome by pleasure or pain is unconvincing.

The next step for Socrates is to explain the true nature of such an experience. From the previous stage, we saw that most people pursue pleasure as good and avoid pain as bad. Consequently, they will try to maximize the pleasure they gain and minimize the pain they suffer, but they can be wrong about how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Socrates argues that there are two ways people usually use to maximize pleasure and minimize pain: *the power of appearance* and *the art of measurement* (356d). The power of appearance is what appears to be more pleasant and less painful while the art of measurement is the knowledge of what is truly more pleasant and truly less painful. The power of appearance usually tells us that immediate pleasure is greater than pleasure at a later time, so maximizing pleasure regarding the power of appearance is pursuing immediate pleasure. Socrates argues that the immediate pleasure and the pleasure at a later time are not different in any other way than by pleasure and pain, so the power of appearance cannot tell you what is truly more pleasant and truly less painful (356b). This is why the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small(356d). The other way to maximize pleasure and minimize pain is the art of measurement. When weighing pleasant things against pleasant, the greater and the more must always be taken. When weighing painful things against painful, the fewer and the smaller must be taken. When weighing pleasant
things against painful, they should perform that action if the painful is exceeded by the pleasant; while they should refrain from doing that action if the pleasant is exceeded by the painful (356b-c). Socrates argues that the art of measurement, in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth, and would save our lives (356d).

Then, Socrates concludes the experience which most people call being overcome by pleasure happens when they act from the power of appearance, and what they are doing is making mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasure and pain, in other words, with regard to good and bad (357d). To reliably avoid making mistakes is nothing other than to possess the art of measurement, that is the knowledge of measuring pleasure and pain in this case. Therefore, if people make mistakes, it must be because of the lack of knowledge, that is ignorance. This is what “being overcome by pleasure” actually is (357d-e). If one wants to overcome ignorance, the only thing he needs to do is to learn knowledge. In this case, it is to learn the knowledge of pleasure and pain. Most people don’t realize that ignorance is what “being overcome by pleasure” is, but think it is something else. This is why most people usually fail to solve this problem. It is just like they are taking the wrong medicine for their disease because they are wrong about what their disease really is, which is the worst thing because taking the wrong medicine is even much more harmful than not taking any medicine at all. This is why Socrates says that they will all do badly in both private and public life (357e).

1.3 The power of knowledge
There is still one important question left. Socrates believes that nothing is stronger than knowledge, and the art of measurement will make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth and giving us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth (356e; 357c). He also makes a similar claim at the beginning of the conversation:

Knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to save a person (352c).

Socrates doesn’t talk much about how exactly knowledge makes appearances lose their power, but this is crucial to our topic of akrasia. It cannot be the reason that knowledge makes you realize that the present pleasure is smaller and less good because it only shows that knowledge makes the power of appearance lose its power coincidentally but not without qualification. If the power of appearance tells me that the present pleasure is smaller, then the reason above cannot explain why knowledge can make appearances lose their power because both the power of appearance and the art of measurement tell me the same thing. Further, it is possible that the power of appearance is always a power for actions. Even if it is weaker than the power of knowledge, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the power of appearance will disappear when one possesses knowledge.

Brickhouse & Smith think that the power of appearance, meaning the power of something that merely appears to be good to convince an agent that it really is good, is tied to the psychological agency of the appetites and passions. They argue that appetites and passions can be either strong or weak and that a strong appetite or passion is more likely to cause an unknowing agent to believe that the pleasure at which it aims is in fact good (Brickhouse & Smith 71).
Someone with a strong nonrational desire (appetite) is subject to being overcome by the power of appearance, so the possession of the art of measurement must be incompatible with a strong nonrational desire. Brickhouse & Smith introduce the conversation on self-control between Socrates and Callicles in the *Gorgias* to show that knowledge and a strong appetite or passion cannot exist together in the same soul. For knowledge will be sufficient to make a man self-controlled, a man who possesses knowledge must have a disciplined soul (Brickhouse & Smith 85; *Gorgias* 507a-e). As for weak nonrational desires, Brickhouse & Smith argue that they will always surrender to knowledgeable judgment because a self-controlled person “stands fast and endures where he should” since his appetites are not so powerful as to prevent him from reasoning effectively about what is best (Brickhouse & Smith 84&87).

Although Brickhouse & Smith’s interpretation of the relationship between the art of measurement and the power of appearance seems to be convincing, there is an important matter that hasn’t been clarified yet, which is whether the art of measurement is the same as the knowledge of the good. To answer this question, it is important to distinguish two kinds of knowledge of “the good”. One is the knowledge of *what constitutes the good or what the good is*. The other is the knowledge of *what brings about or is instrumental to a fixed good*. The art of measurement seems to be the second kind of knowledge only because Socrates also regards the art of measurement as arithmetic (357a). The knowledge of the good, however, cannot merely contain what is instrumental to a fixed good because it would be weird to say that a man who possesses the knowledge of the good still doesn’t know what the good is. Therefore, the knowledge of the good must be distinct from the art of measurement. Similarly, there can also be two kinds of appearances.
One is what appears to be the real good. The other is what appears to be instrumental to a fixed good. The power of appearance that Socrates talks about seems to be the second kind because when he introduces the power of appearance, the good is already fixed by pleasure. Therefore, the power of appearance must be distinct from the apparent good.

Now, we will look at the passage in the Gorgias to see if Socrates is talking about the art of measurement there. I agree that, in the Gorgias, Socrates admits that ethical virtue requires harmony between one’s knowledge of what is best and one’s nonrational desires, but Socrates doesn’t necessarily say that ethical virtue requires harmony between the art of measurement and one’s nonrational desires. It is not convincing to directly assume that the possession of the art of measurement is incompatible with strong nonrational desire. What Socrates means here is that the knowledge of what constitutes the good is incompatible with strong nonrational desire because the knowledge of the real good makes the apparent good no longer attractive. Here is evidence of why Socrates is not talking about the art of measurement. In the Gorgias, when Socrates is having a conversation with Callicles about what a self-controlled man looks like, he says:

So, it’s necessarily very much the case, Callicles, that the self-controlled man, because he’s just and brave and pious, as we’ve recounted, is a completely good man, that the good man does well and admirably whatever he does, and that the man who does well is blessed and happy. (507c)

If a self-controlled man is a completely good man, Socrates must be not talking about the art of measurement here because the knowledge that a completely good man possesses must be the knowledge of the good. Merely knowing how to achieve a fixed good is not sufficient to be a
completely good man because one can be wrong about what the good is. Therefore, Socrates is not saying that the art of measurement is incompatible with strong nonrational desire but saying that the knowledge of the good is incompatible with strong nonrational desire.

Let us go back to our topic on akrasia in the *Protagoras* to see how knowledge makes appearances lose their power. Previously, we observed that it is not because knowledge corrects the mistakes the power of appearance makes because knowledge should always make the appearances lose their power. According to our previous distinctions about different knowledge and appearances, it is more appropriate to say that the knowledge of what is instrumental to a fixed good makes what appears to be instrumental to that fixed good lose its power. The reason is that acting from knowledge will guarantee that we achieve the fixed good while acting from appearance does not guarantee anything. If one wants the good, there is no reason for him to not choose the most secure way to achieve the good, which is acting from knowledge, when he possesses knowledge. It is worth noting that it is possible to achieve the fixed good through the power of appearance, which means that the power of appearance can be an option for achieving the good. If one possesses knowledge, the power of appearance does not merely disappear but only becomes no longer powerful. For example, suppose I want to go to Canada, which is thousands of miles away. I have two ways to go there. One is on foot; the other is by plane. If the only goal is to arrive in Canada as soon as possible, I will inevitably choose to go there by plane because every rational person knows that taking a plane is much faster. Therefore, the option that going there by plane makes the option that going there on foot lose its power, so going there on foot is no longer powerful for my goal. However, it doesn’t necessarily mean that going there on foot is not an
option. It is always an option because it is possible to arrive in Canada by foot. The power of this option doesn’t merely disappear, but only looks tiny compared to our better option, so we will treat it as not powerful at all. This is what Socrates means by saying that the art of measurement makes the appearances lose their power.

1.4 The two arguments in the Protagoras

Socrates’ main argument shows the nature of “being overcome by pleasure”, which is ignorance, and overcoming this ignorance is possessing the art of measurement. If one possesses the art of measurement, it is impossible for him to act from the power of appearance because the art of measurement will make the appearances lose their power. Therefore, Socrates concludes:

Then if the pleasant is the good, no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better. To give in to oneself is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom (358c).

It is very important to see that there is an “if” at the beginning of this sentence. The word “if” shows that Socrates presupposes that pleasure is the fixed good when giving the argument. Since pleasure is fixed good, the only thing left is to find out what is instrumental to pleasure. If one knows the best and most efficient way to achieve pleasure, it is impossible for him to not act on that knowledge. If he doesn’t choose the best way to achieve pleasure when he knows it, it must be the case that pleasure is not the good for him. If the good is not fixed by pleasure, it is not surprising that the person will do something other than the best thing to achieve pleasure. Socrates also realizes that most people usually act from the power of appearance because they do not possess
the art of measurement. Socrates argues that even in this case, it is still impossible for most people to not act on what appears to be instrumental to pleasure, which is their belief about the best and most efficient way to achieve pleasure, if pleasure is the good for them. Since pleasure is the fixed good, their intention is always to maximize pleasure. If they don’t possess the art of measurement, the only thing left is the power of appearance. Although the power of appearance may not always tell them what is truly instrumental to pleasure, following the power of appearance is the best thing they can do if they ever want to pursue some possible pleasure. If one doesn’t follow the power of appearance when he does not possess knowledge, it means that pleasure is not the good for him because it is impossible that someone who believes pleasure to be the good does nothing pleasant or at least appears to be pleasant. This is Socrates’ main argument in the Protagoras, which is about the art of measurement and the power of appearance.

I believe Socrates also has another argument in the Protagoras, which is not about the art of measurement and the power of appearance:

Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good (358d).

This argument is saying something different than the main argument. Obviously, there is no “if” in this argument, so Socrates does not presuppose a fixed good in this argument. If there is no fixed good, then the art of measurement and the power of appearance don’t apply to this argument because both of them require a fixed good. I think this argument is actually about the knowledge or belief about what the good is or what constitutes the good, but not about what is instrumental to
that good. Socrates is trying to say that if one possesses the knowledge of what the good is, he will pursue that thing as the good and try to maximize that good. It doesn’t make sense at all to say that one knows what the good is but pursues something else as the good. If he pursues something else as the good instead of the real good, he must not know what the good is. Similarly, if one believes something to be the good, it is guaranteed that he will pursue that thing as the good. If he pursues something else as the good, he must believe that the thing he is pursuing is the good. It is possible for people to not realize what they truly believe to be the good. For example, suppose I say that I believe virtue is the good, but I only do pleasant things instead of virtuous things. Then, in this case, what I truly believe is that pleasure is the good but not virtue and I am wrong about what I believe. Therefore, the belief Socrates talks about is not merely people’s belief about their belief, but the objective fact of what they believe. This is what the second argument means.

1.5 The possibility of different kinds of akrasia for Socrates

The interpretation of both arguments in the Protagoras seems to be compatible with Carone’s denial of knowledge-akrasia since knowledge will make the appearances lose their power. They are also compatible with the denial of synchronic belief-akrasia. Belief can only direct one’s actions when one does not possess knowledge. Since it is the appearance that gives us beliefs and one thing can only have one appearance at one time, the appearance cannot produce two contrary beliefs at the same time. Therefore, synchronic belief-akrasia is also impossible.

As for diachronic belief-akrasia, we should consider its possibility for the two arguments individually. For the first argument, the good is fixed, which does not allow any change in the belief about what the good is. Then, it is the appearance that changes and therefore changes our
beliefs about what is instrumental to that fixed good. Socrates agrees that the power of appearance often changes our minds (356d). He also thinks that people may regret their actions by following the power of appearance, which also endorses the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia. As for the second argument, it is also possible for one to change his belief about what the good is. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates thinks that everyone wishes to do well, and we do well by possessing good things (278e). It is commonplace that people wish to possess different good things at different times of their lives. Therefore, diachronic belief-akrasia is possible for both of the arguments in the *Protagoras*.

In conclusion, Socrates denies the possibility of both knowledge-akrasia and synchronous belief-akrasia but permits the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia.
2. The Aristotelian argument in the *EN VII*

I will use the word *incontinence* instead of akrasia when introducing Aristotle’s view. Unlike the Socratic account, the Aristotelian account of incontinence seems to admit the possibility of all kinds of akrasia, though some scholars disagree (Brickhouse & Smith, 229). In this section, I will first explain the Aristotelian definition of incontinence, namely the range of incontinence, because Aristotle thinks incontinence without qualification does not apply to all kinds of incontinent actions. After that, I will talk about the Aristotelian account of the psychological process in an agent’s mind when the agent fails to use his knowledge. Then, I will discuss different interpretations of what “last *protasis*” means in the *EN VII*. Among these interpretations, I will argue that McDowell’s interpretation is the most compelling one because his interpretation satisfies both of the two constraints for syllogism. One constraint is that there must be an inner struggle in the agent’s psychology; the other constraint is that the product of the agent’s rational calculation must contradict the product of the agent’s perceptual knowledge.

2.1 The range of incontinence

Aristotle defines the range of continence and incontinence at the very beginning of Book VII: Continence and resistance seem to be good and praiseworthy conditions, while incontinence and softness seem to be bad and blameworthy conditions. The continent person seems to be the same as one who abides by his rational calculation; and the incontinent person seems to be the same as one who abandons it. The incontinent person knows that his actions are base,
but does them because of his feelings, while the continent person knows that his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them (*EN VII.1, 1145b5-15*).

We can conclude from this passage that there are three conditions for an incontinent action. First, an incontinent action is blameworthy. Second, an incontinent action involves rational calculation, but the person abandons it. Third, an incontinent action involves base appetites. According to Aristotle, all of these conditions are essential. Missing one of them will be insufficient for an action to be incontinent. Now, let us look into these conditions in detail to see why Aristotle thinks they are necessary for incontinent actions.

### 2.1.1 The range of incontinence: being blameworthy

To explain the necessity of being blameworthy, Aristotle introduces some possible sources for incontinence:

First of all, both continence and resistance and incontinence and softness are evidently about pleasures and pains. Some sources of pleasure are necessary; others are choiceworthy in their own right, but can be taken to excess. The necessary ones are the bodily conditions… Other sources of pleasure are not necessary, but are choiceworthy in themselves, such as victory, honor, wealth, and similar good and pleasant things (*EN VII.4, 1147b20-30*). Based on the different sources of pleasure, Aristotle defines two different forms of incontinence:

When people go to excess, against the correct reason in them, in the pursuit of *non-necessary but choiceworthy* pleasure, we do not call them simply incontinent, but add the qualification that they are incontinent *about* wealth, gain, honor, or spirit (*EN VII.4, 1147b30-35*); when people go to excess, against the correct reason in them, in the pursuit of *bodily pleasant* things...
and in the avoidance of *bodily painful* things, like hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and all the objects of touch and taste, we call them *simply incontinent, or incontinent without qualification*. We will not say that people are incontinent about food or water but say that they are incontinent about bodily pleasures (*EN* VII.4, 1148a5-15).

Incontinence occurs in the pursuit of non-necessary but choiceworthy pleasure is called *incontinence with qualification*, while incontinence occurs in the pursuit of bodily pleasure is called *simple incontinence* or *incontinence without qualification*. Aristotle argues that the incontinence of an incontinent man should be blamed not only as an error but as a vice (*EN* VII.4, 1148a1-5). Since incontinence with qualification is not blamed as a vice, it is not the kind of incontinence that an incontinent man has (*EN* VII.4, 1148a1-5). As Aristotle says, it is just like people will call someone a bad doctor or bad actor, but no one will call him simply bad since each of these conditions is not vice, but only similar to it by analogy (*EN* VII.4, 1148b5-10). It is certainly possible for a virtuous man to be a bad doctor or a bad actor (in terms of lacking relevant skills) because virtue, which is the quality of the soul, is irrelevant to the quality of skills.

To have a better understanding of this, let us take incontinence *about* studying for example. Suppose I love studying and I study for 20 hours every day. My reason tells me that I should not study for such a long time because it is bad for my health. The pleasure I get from studying is so intense that it makes me ignore my reason, so I keep studying for 20 hours every day. It seems that I’m acting incontinently in this example because I didn’t follow my reason. However, Aristotle thinks that although this example is very similar to an example of (simple) incontinence, there is nothing incontinent in this example because incontinence is not merely to be avoided, but also
blameworthy (*EN VII.4, 1148b5-10*). Although excess about studying is what I should avoid, it won’t make me become a blameworthy man because what I’m doing, that is studying, is choiceworthy in itself though the way I’m doing should be avoided. In other words, pursuing the pleasure of studying is pursuing a good. Pursuing a good is nothing blameworthy. The only problem is that the way of pursuing this good should be improved or modified. Therefore, although we can say that I’m incontinent *about* studying, it won’t make me become an incontinent man since what I am doing is not blameworthy.

If we agree with Aristotle, then the kind of incontinence that an incontinent man has must be *simple incontinence* or *incontinence without qualification*, meaning that it occurs in the pursuit of bodily pleasure. Aristotle emphasizes that (simple) incontinence is *not* about all kinds of bodily pleasures since there are various types of bodily pleasures, like human bodily pleasures, bestial bodily pleasures, and diseased bodily pleasures, but *only* concerned with human bodily pleasures (*EN VII.6, 1149b25-35*). He defines human bodily pleasures as something naturally pleasant and common to everyone, namely something *pleasant without qualification* (*EN VII.5, 1148b15-20* & *EN VII.6, 1149b5-10*). In contrast, non-human bodily pleasures, like bestial and diseased bodily pleasures, are not something naturally pleasant and common to everyone, which means they are something *pleasant with qualification*. Here are Aristotle’s examples of being pleasant with qualification. Suppose there are a few people who find it pleasant to eat humans. Since most people won’t find it pleasant at all, eating humans is not naturally pleasant to everyone, so the pleasure of eating humans is not a kind of human bodily pleasure, but rather a kind of bestial bodily pleasure. Another example is about people who feel pleasant when plucking hairs and chewing nails. These
pleasures come from diseased conditions and bad habits. Most people don’t have these diseased conditions and bad habits, so they will not feel pleasant by plucking hairs and chewing nails. Since plucking hairs and chewing nails are not something naturally pleasant to everyone, they are not human bodily pleasures, but rather some diseased bodily pleasures.

These are the distinctions between human bodily pleasures and non-human bodily pleasures. Then, Aristotle argues that if one overcomes his non-human bodily pleasures or is overcome by them, we will not say he is simply continent or incontinent because each of these states is outside the limits of vice, but like bestiality (EN VII.5, 1149a1-5). Here is why Aristotle thinks each of these is outside the limits of vice:

One sort of vice is human, and this is called simple vice; another sort is called vice with an added condition, and is said to be bestial or diseased vice, but not simple vice (EN VII.5, 1149a15-20).

Aristotle divides vice into two kinds: human vice and non-human vice. As a human, we should only focus on human vice and only human vice is blameworthy (for us). This is why non-human vice is outside the limits of human vice. Aristotle doesn’t deny that there is a sort of bestial incontinence and a sort of diseased incontinence, but (simple) incontinence is about human vice only, which corresponds to human intemperance (EN VII.5, 1149a15-20). Therefore, continence and incontinence will only occur in the pursuit of human bodily pleasures.

To be clear, what we get from this section is that transference of incontinence is not (simple) incontinence. Being blameworthy is one important indicator to know whether a kind of incontinence is simple incontinence or not. Moreover, only human vice can be blameworthy.
Neither human non-vice nor non-human vice is blameworthy, so incontinence doesn’t apply to them. At the end of VII.5, Aristotle concludes that incontinence and continence apply only within the range of intemperance and temperance, that is about (human) bodily pleasure and appetites (\textit{EN VII.5, 1149a20-25}).

2.1.2 The range of incontinence: abandoning rational calculation

The second condition is that a man who acts incontinently abandons his rational calculation. In this section, I will not talk about the psychological process in the incontinent agent’s mind but will only explain Aristotle’s definition of rational calculation. One important question here is what is “rational calculation”. Is it a sort of belief? Is it a sort of knowledge? Or is rational calculation merely something capable of yielding beliefs/knowledge?

To answer these questions, one important thing we need to know is that for Aristotle whether one acts contrary to his knowledge or belief does not matter.

For some who have belief are in no doubt, but think they have exact knowledge. If, then, it is the weakness of their convictions that makes people with belief, not people with knowledge, act in conflict with their supposition, it follows that knowledge <for these purposes> will be no different from belief; for, as Heracleitus makes clear, some people’s convictions about what they believe are no weaker than other people’s convictions about what they know. (\textit{EN VII.3, 1146b25-35}).

Aristotle thinks that belief is no different than knowledge for the topic of incontinence because both people who know and people who believe will take whatever they know or believe to be true. If one acts contrary to what he takes to be true, then he is acting incontinently. If one doesn’t take
a supposition to be true, then he doesn’t believe that supposition. For example, suppose I think eating genetically modified foods seems to be bad for health but I’m not sure about it. Then, even if I eat some genetically modified foods, it won’t make me become an incontinent man because my reason is very not sure if I should eat genetically modified foods. In fact, the thing in my mind seems to be that it is permissible for me to just eat a little of them because there is no sufficient evidence to show that they are truly unhealthy. If so, then it is hard to say that I truly have the belief that I should not eat genetically modified foods. If I do believe that I should not eat genetically modified foods, having this belief will be no different than possessing the knowledge that I should not eat genetically modified foods.

Some scholars, like Carone, seem to disagree with Aristotle because knowledge carries certain advantages that belief does not (Carone 111). Acting according to one’s better judgment (belief) does not guarantee that one will not make mistakes since one may have wrong beliefs about what is good; acting according to one’s knowledge, however, guarantees that one will not make mistakes since what one knows must be true (Carone 112). I think this is not an objection to Aristotle’s taxonomy because he explicitly says that incontinence and continence without qualification apply only within the range of true beliefs.

If incontinence makes someone prone to abandon every belief, there will be an excellent type of incontinence (EN VII.2, 1146a15-20).

For incontinence makes someone act contrary to what he supposes <is right>; but since he supposes that good things are bad and that it is wrong to do them, he will do the good actions, not the bad (EN VII.2, 1146a30-35).
Now on the question whether the incontinent person’s action conflicts with true belief, not with knowledge: whether it is knowledge or belief does not matter for this argument (EN VII.3, 1146b25-30).

Hence in one way the continent person abides by just any belief and the incontinent person abandons it; but speaking without qualification, the continent person abides by the true belief and the incontinent person abandons it (EN VII.9, 1151b1-5).

We can see that Aristotle does realize the problem of having false beliefs. If an incontinent abandons both true and false beliefs, there will be an excellent type of incontinence. For example, if I believe that being virtuous is what I should avoid and I act contrary to my belief, then I will do what is virtuous and this seems to be good, but not bad. In this sense, incontinence will become something excellent. However, it seems that no one will think incontinence is something excellent. If so, we must deny that incontinence involves false beliefs. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that incontinence and continence (without qualification) apply only within the range of true beliefs.

Now we know that, for Aristotle, incontinence and continence (without qualification) apply within the range of true belief and knowledge, but we haven’t talked about whether rational calculation is the belief itself or something yields the belief. Aristotle seems to deny that rational calculation is the same as belief.

The result, then, is that in a way reason and belief make him act incontinently. The belief is contrary to correct reason, but only coincidentally, not in its own right. For the appetite, not the belief, is contrary (EN VII.3, 1147b1-5).
I will assume the word *reason* is the same as rational calculation. Here, Aristotle doesn’t say *either* reason *or* belief makes one act incontinently but says that reason *and* belief in a way make him act incontinently, so reason (rational calculation) and belief should be different. Aristotle also says that it is possible for belief to be contrary to correct reason, which also shows that he thinks reason is not the same as belief because nothing can be contrary to itself. Even if reason involves both good reason and bad reason, it doesn’t matter because showing that belief can be contrary to one part of reason is sufficient to show that reason and belief are not the same thing.

If reason is not the same as belief, what kind of role does it play in actions? Although Aristotle doesn’t talk much about it in the *EN*, we can find some clues in the *De An.* III 10.

As it is, thought is never found producing movement without desire (for wish is a form of desire; and when movement is produced according to calculation it is also according to wish), but desire can originate movement contrary to calculation, for appetite is a form of desire…That is why, though in any case it is the object of *desire* which originates movement, this object may be either the real or the apparent good…That then such a power in the soul as has been described, i.e. that called *desire*, originates movement is clear (*De An.* III 10, 433a21-433b4).

Aristotle thinks both appetite and wish are forms of desire and it is desire which originates movement. Then, both appetite and wish can originate movement for both are forms of desire. This is compatible with the claim that each of the soul is capable of initiating motion (*EN* VII.3, 1147a30-35). Aristotle also thinks that when movement is produced according to reason, it is also according to wish, but he doesn’t say much about the relationship between reason and wish here.
To have a better understanding of this relationship, we can look at C.D.C. Reeve’s interpretation of wish.

The desiring part of the soul (orektikon), whose virtues the virtues of character are, is not fully rational, because it cannot give reasons or construct explanatory arguments as the rational part can. Nonetheless, because it can ‘listen to reason and obey it’ as a child can its father, it ‘shares in reason in a way’. What enables it so to listen is rational wish (boulēsis) — a desire specifically for the human good or happiness, and hence responsive to the rational part’s prescriptions regarding it (Reeve 202).

Reeve thinks wish is a desire for the human good, and wish is responsive to reason. It is wish that makes one listen to reason, so if one listened to reason, it must be the case that he listened to wish. If appetite is active and originates movement, it means one failed to use wish to make him listen to reason, so one failed to produce the movement by reason. This is what happens when desire originates a movement that is contrary to reason. As for appetite, I will talk more about it in the next section.

2.1.3 The range of incontinence: base appetites

In the 2.1.1 section, we concluded that incontinence applies only within the range of intemperance and temperance, that is about bodily pleasure and appetites, but Aristotle thinks simply being appetites is not sufficient for incontinence. We still need one additional condition, which is the appetites involved in incontinence are base appetites. Then, in this section, we will figure out what base appetites are and why Aristotle thinks base appetites are necessary for incontinence.
If we remember, both simple incontinence and incontinence with qualification involve excess. If so, then *base* appetites should be something about excess, and this is exactly what Aristotle thinks.

People are blamed not for feeling these appetites and pleasures, but for doing so in a particular way, namely to excess (*EN VII.4, 1148a25-30*).

The base person is base because he pursues the excess, but not because he pursues the necessary pleasures (*EN VII.14, 1154a15-20*).

Aristotle thinks that base appetites are *excessive* bodily pleasures, and simple incontinence occurs when one pursues *excessive* bodily pleasure, but not when one pursues necessary bodily pleasure. Then, the next question is why it is about excessive bodily pleasures, but not about necessary bodily pleasure. What is the distinction between excessive bodily pleasures and necessary bodily pleasure?

Aristotle argues that if all bodily pleasures are bad and blameworthy, then the opposite of bodily pleasures, that is pains, seems to be something good and praiseworthy (*EN VII.14, 1154a10-15*). Since no one thinks that all pains are good, then it must be the case that some bodily pleasures are good, and these are the necessary bodily pleasures. Then, Aristotle emphasizes that these necessary bodily pleasures are only good up to a point.

Some bodily pleasures and appetites are also necessary, but they are only necessary to a certain extent (*EN VII.7, 1150a15-20*).

For all enjoy delicacies and wines and sexual relations in some way, though not all in the right way (*EN VII.14, 1154a10-15*).
When the pleasures are harmless, people will not be reproached for pursuing them; but when the pleasures are harmful, what they are doing will be base (EN VII.14, 1154b5-10).

Aristotle believes that necessary bodily pleasures are necessary to a certain extent. The necessary bodily pleasures will no longer be necessary if they become harmful. For example, drinking one cup of wine is pleasant and not harmful to the body. Therefore, drinking one cup of wine is pursuing necessary bodily pleasure. On the other hand, drinking ten bottles of wine is pleasant but is harmful to the body. Therefore, drinking ten bottles of wine is not pursuing necessary bodily pleasure. Certainly, most people will agree that drinking ten bottles of wine is incontinent and also agree that it is intemperate if the man’s rational calculation is in accordance with this action. However, if one’s rational calculation tells him to not drink wine at all, but he still drinks one cup of wine, will Aristotle think this man is acting incontinently? I think the answer is no. Since incontinence applies only within the range of excessive bodily pleasures, this man is not acting incontinently because drinking one cup of wine, as we said, is not pursuing excessive bodily pleasure.

This conclusion seems to be more plausible if we look at Aristotle’s statement on the relationship between incontinence and the capacity of most people.

Incontinence and continence are about what exceeds the state of most people; the continent person abides by reason more than most people are capable of doing, the incontinent person less (EN VII.10, 1152a25-30).

Aristotle argues that a man is incontinent if he fails to do what most people are capable of doing in terms of self-control. If most people are not capable of controlling themselves in some situations,
then nothing incontinent will happen in those cases. For example, suppose I’m lying in bed with my eyes closed and I tell myself that I should not fall asleep. My bed is so comfortable that I fall asleep. Aristotle will say that it won’t make me an incontinent man because most people would fall asleep in this situation. Since most people are not capable of being continent in this situation, my action will be neutral, meaning that it is neither continent nor incontinent. If, however, I am able to stay awake until the end, which is beyond what most people are not capable of doing, then I will become a very continent man.

This argument can possibly help us understand why Aristotle thinks drinking one cup of wine does not make a man incontinent while drinking ten bottles of wine makes a man incontinent when his rational calculation tells him to not drink at all. It seems that most people, in this situation, will drink one cup of wine because it is tasty, but most people will not drink ten bottles of wine at a time. In other words, most people are not capable of refusing one cup of wine while they are capable of refusing ten bottles of wine. If this is true, then failing to refuse one cup of wine will not make a man incontinent because it is beyond what most people are capable of doing.

Therefore, base appetites are excessive bodily pleasures and bodily pleasures are excessive when they produce harm. Then, we are clear about the range of incontinence: incontinence applies only within the range of excessive bodily pleasures.

2.2 Incontinent actions without psychological process

Now we know the range of incontinence. The next important thing is to look at the process of an incontinent action. We need to know what happens in one’s mind when he acts incontinently. In fact, Aristotle argues that there are several cases where no psychological process is involved.
First, there is no psychological process for a mad, drunk, asleep man to behave because they will just act without thinking, so Aristotle says these people both have knowledge in a way and do not have it (*EN VII.3, 1147a10-15*).

Moreover, strong feelings, like spirited reactions and sexual appetites, can also disturb thinking. It is hard for a person to do any rational calculation during sexual intercourse, so there is no psychological process involved in this situation.

Furthermore, people also say the words that come from knowledge, but merely saying the truth doesn’t necessarily mean that they understand it. For example, if we tell a 3-year-old kid that eating too much candy is bad for his health, then the kid is able to repeat the words. If we ask him if he should eat a lot of candy, he is able to tell us that he should not do it because it is bad for his health. However, most kids will still eat a lot of candy because they don’t fully understand why it is true. As Aristotle says, they are saying the words in the way that actors do (*EN VII.3, 1147a20-25*). Therefore, there is no psychological process involved in this situation, either.

2.3 Incontinent actions with psychological process

As for the situation where some psychological process is involved, Aristotle argues that there are two types of premises/beliefs that happen in one’s mind:

For one belief is universal; the other is about particulars and therefore controls them. And in the case where these two beliefs result in one belief, it is necessary, in one case, for the soul to affirm what has been concluded, but, in the case of beliefs about production, to act at once on what has been concluded (*EN VII.3, 1147a25-30*).
Aristotle thinks that the two types of premises or beliefs that happen in one’s mind are the universal premise and the particular premise. The universal premise is a universal principle about one kind of thing while the particular premise shows that a particular thing belongs to that kind of thing. For example, I know that everything that is unhealthy should be avoided, and smoking is unhealthy. According to Aristotle, both of these are universal premises since there are different types of universal premises (EN VII.3, 1147a1-5). The particular premise is something about the particular, which should be something like smoking one single cigarette is a type of smoking. Then, I can reasonably conclude that he should not smoke this cigarette, and therefore act on this conclusion.

The problem is that sometimes a man only uses the universal premise but not the particular premise even if he has both types of premises, and sometimes he just doesn’t have the particular premise at all (EN VII.3, 1147a1-10). Jessica Moss gives us a very good example to interpret what Aristotle is saying here.

Someone might know, for example, that all dry food is good for people, and that he is a person and that some type of food is dry, but if he “either does not have or is not exercising” the knowledge that some particular morsel of food is of this type, there will be nothing strange in his failing to eat it (Moss 121).

Moss thinks that the man fails to eat something dry because he simply does not know that it is dry or is not “exercising” that knowledge (Moss 121). If he does not know it, failing to eat the particular dry food is nothing special. However, it will raise a new problem. As Moss points out, if the man does not know whether the food is dry or not, then he must undergo no inner struggle (Moss 122). If so, then how can we say a man is acting incontinently if there is no inner struggle? One possible
answer may be that Aristotle is not giving an example of incontinence. Instead, as Anthony Kenny says, Aristotle is simply explaining one sense in which a man can knowingly do things he should not (Kenny 173). If we review the previous cases about a drunk man, strong feelings, and saying words in the way that actors do, we can also tell that there is no inner struggle in these cases. If so, then it is very likely that Aristotle is merely talking about the cases of having without using.

2.4 Different interpretations of the last protasis

To figure out what Aristotle really tries to say here, it is very helpful to look at what he says about the “last protasis”.

Since the last premise (protasis) is a belief about something perceptible, and controls actions, this is what the incontinent person does not have when he is being affected. Or <rather> the way he has it is not knowledge of it, but, as we saw, saying the words, as the drunk says the words of Empedocles. And since the last term does not seem to be universal, or expressive of knowledge in the same way as the universal term, the result Socrates was looking for would seem to come about as well (EN VII.3, 1147b10-20).

There is a big debate about how to interpret the “last protasis”. One common interpretation is to take “last protasis” to refer to “the particular premise”. As Moss argues, the agent never notices that the cake falls into the category of things forbidden by the universal premise, and thus never reaches the conclusion “Avoid this” (Moss 128). For example, the universal premise says “Avoid all sweet things”. The particular premise says “This piece of cake is sweet”. Then, the conclusion is “Avoid this cake”. If the particular premise is missing, the agent cannot reach the conclusion that “Avoid this cake”, and this is why the agent fails to follow the universal premise. Although
this interpretation seems compelling, there is still a problem with it. As we talked about before, it seems that man does not undergo any inner struggle if we think the particular premise is missing. If so, then it seems unreasonable to say that he is acting incontinently.

Another interpretation takes “last protasis” to refer to the “last proposition”. “Last proposition” means the conclusion of the syllogism, which means the agent is unable to get the final conclusion. The reason is that his strong appetite prevents his reasoning from the two premises to a conclusion even if he actively knows both premises (Brickhouse & Smith 226). The problem with this interpretation is that Aristotle explicitly says that the last protasis is a belief about something perceptible (En VII.3, 1147b10-15). Since a conclusion is not something perceptible, it is very likely that Aristotle does not mean the last proposition when saying “last protasis”.

Brickhouse & Smith do realize the problems with the previous two interpretations, so they give a third interpretation. Although they also take “last protasis” to refer to “the particular premise”, they think that there are two syllogisms in the agent’s mind and “last protasis” can be the particular premise for either syllogism (Brickhouse & Smith 226). Brickhouse & Smith thinks there are two universal premises in the agent’s mind:

(U1) All unhealthy food is to be avoided.

(U2) All sweet things are pleasant.

If the agent follows his reason, his reason will provide a particular premise that (P1) “This candy bar is unhealthy food”. Then, combining (U1) and (P1), he is able to conclude that (C1) “This candy bar is to be avoided”. If, however, the agent follows his appetite, his perceptual knowledge will provide a particular premise that (P2) “This candy bar is a sweet thing”. Then, combining (U2)
and (P2), he will conclude that (C2) “This candy bar is pleasant”. It is obvious that if we combine (U1) and (P2), we can never reach (C1) because (P1) is missing. This interpretation is also compatible with the possibility of an inner struggle. The inner struggle for the agent, in this case, is the struggle between getting the particular premise from reason and getting the particular premise from appetite. Although Brickhouse & Smith give a very compelling interpretation, there is still one objection that remains. It seems possible for the agent to obtain both (P1) and (P2) at the same time because the candy bar can be both unhealthy and pleasant. As Moss argues, the product of the agent’s rational calculation should contradict the product of the perceptual knowledge, meaning that (P1) should contradict (P2) (Moss 129).

To solve this problem, it is helpful to look at McDowell’s proposition. He suggests that the universal premise should be “Avoid excessive numbers of sweets” or “Avoid unwholesome food”, instead of merely being “Avoid sweets” (McDowell 29). Then, if the agent follows his reason, his reason will provide a particular premise that (P1) “This is too much”. If he follows his appetite, then his perceptual knowledge will provide a particular premise that (P2) “This is not too much”. Since (P1) contradicts (P2), our problem gets solved. Now the agent can either follow his reason or follow his appetite but cannot follow both at the same time.
3. Similarities and differences between Socrates and Aristotle

3.1 Similarities

We can see a lot of similarities between the Socratic account of akrasia and the Aristotelian account of akrasia. It is not something simply like Aristotle disagrees with the Socratic account of akrasia. As Moss says, Aristotle’s akratic agent is closer to Socrates’ than many have thought (Moss 132). Even Aristotle himself admits this.

The result Socrates was looking for would seem to come about as well. For the knowledge is not the sort that seems to be primary knowledge, not is this dragged about because he is affected, but only perceptual knowledge is present (EN VII.3, 1147b10-20). Aristotle thinks that the knowledge that an incontinent man possesses is merely perceptual knowledge, but not primary knowledge. By McDowell’s interpretation of the syllogism, the universal premise is “Avoid excessive numbers of sweets”. If one follows his appetite, his perceptual knowledge will provide a particular premise that “This is not too much”, and then he will get a perceptual conclusion that “No need to avoid this sweet”. Then, he eats this sweet. However, the conclusion that “This sweet should be avoided” has never appeared in the agent’s mind, and this conclusion seems to be the primary knowledge of this sweet. It seems that Aristotle agrees when the agent eats this sweet, he doesn’t possess the primary knowledge of this sweet.

This is very similar to Socrates’ account of the power of appearance and the art of measurement. If we remember, it is the power of appearance that gives us perceptual knowledge,
but only the art of measurement can tell us the truth. It seems that Aristotle and Socrates are just using different words for the same thing. There is more evidence in *de An*. III.10.

Since desires run counter to one another, which happens when a principle of reason and an appetite are contrary and is possible only in beings with a sense of time (for while thought bids us hold back because of what is future, appetite is influenced by what is just at hand: a pleasant object which is just at hand presents itself as both pleasant and good, without condition in either case, because of want of foresight into what is farther away in time) (De *An*. III.10 433b5-433b11).

Aristotle thinks when one desire conflicts with another desire, it is not because one desire is completely in the opposite direction of the other desire, but because one desire is influenced by what is in the future while the other is influenced by what is at hand. This is exactly the same distinction between the power of appearance and the art of measurement in the Socratic account. The power of appearance is influenced by what is at hand while the art of measurement is influenced by what is in the future.

Since the Socratic account of akrasia has so many similarities to the Aristotelian account, it seems possible for Aristotle to actually agree with the Socratic account of akrasia. Brickhouse & Smith argue that “whenever someone does what he ought not, it cannot be the case that his knowledge generated by reason and reflected in the universal premise is ever affected by strong appetite” (Brickhouse & Smith 229). Moreover, they also think that, at the time the agent does what he should not do, the agent cannot actively believe that he ought not to act as he does
Therefore, they conclude that Socrates and Aristotle agree that there is no such thing as synchronic akrasia (Brickhouse & Smith 229).

3.2 Differences

Does Aristotle really agree with Socrates that there is no such thing as synchronic akrasia? I think not. Although their accounts have many similarities, there are still three significant differences, which are sufficient to give them different conclusions.

The first difference is that Aristotle thinks that each of the parts of the soul is capable of initiating motion while Socrates thinks that knowledge will make the appearances lose their power (EN VII.3, 1147a35-40; 356e). Aristotle believes that even if one’s reason tells him what he should do, it is still possible for him to act from appetite but not reason. Appetite can originate movement by itself for it is a form of desire. As for Socrates, knowledge will be sufficient to rule a person, so it is impossible for one to act from appetite if his reasoning part works well. It may be helpful to look at the Platonic account in the Republic IV. Plato thinks that the appetite part and the spirit part of the soul can influence the rational part, but it is always the rational part that yields belief and originates movement (442b-d). If it is always the rational part that yields belief, then it is definitely the case that one can never act contrary to his belief, but this is not the case for Aristotle.

The second difference is that Aristotle thinks belief is no different than knowledge regarding akrasia, but Socrates thinks knowledge will be sufficient to control oneself while belief that comes from appearances often makes us regret our actions. Although sometimes the power of appearance gives us true beliefs, these beliefs are true only coincidentally but not without qualification. This is why Socrates permits the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia but denies knowledge-akrasia.
If knowledge-akrasia is the same as belief-akrasia as Aristotle thinks, then there is no way for Socrates to both deny the possibility of knowledge-akrasia and permit the possibility of diachronic belief-akrasia.

The third difference is that Socrates thinks pleasure can be either good in itself or not good in itself while Aristotle thinks some pleasures are choiceworthy and others are blameworthy. Maybe, from Socrates’ perspective, Aristotle seems to say that pleasure is not something good in itself. This interpretation works if we are talking about the difference between honorable pleasures and dishonorable pleasures. In this case, honor seems to be what is good in itself but not pleasure. However, this is not the case for Aristotle. Aristotle thinks that some bodily pleasures are necessary and good. The bodily pleasures are base only because one pursues the excess. Now, it is hard to say whether bodily pleasures are something good in themselves or not because Aristotle believes that only the right amount of bodily pleasure is good. This difference also makes knowledge-akrasia impossible for Socrates but possible for Aristotle. In Socratic psychology, if one knows what a good is, he will always try his best to pursue that good as much as possible. However, in Aristotelian psychology, if one knows what a good is, he will try to pursue only the right amount of that good. It is hard to have any inner struggle in Socratic psychology because the goal is very straightforward while it is easy to have some inner struggles in Aristotelian psychology because the right amount of a good is very hard to determine.
4. Advantages and disadvantages of Socrates’ and Aristotle’s view

4.1 The disadvantage of the Socratic account of akrasia

Socrates thinks that the immediate pleasure and the pleasure at a later time are not different in any other way than by pleasure and pain (356b). Ideally, if one knows his lifetime, the immediate pleasure seems to be no different than the pleasure at a later time. Practically, however, it is really hard to say that the immediate pleasure is no different than the pleasure at a later time. No one knows what will happen tomorrow. Many soldiers smoke when they know smoking is bad for health because they just don’t care. It is possible that they will die in battle shortly, so every cigarette they smoke can be the last possible one they are able to smoke. Here, the art of measurement no longer works. If pleasure is the good, it is hard to do the measurement. If the soldier will die tomorrow, he should certainly smoke many cigarettes today. If the soldier can survive in the battle, maybe he should not smoke right now. Even the wisest person cannot know whether he will die tomorrow. Then, it seems impossible to do the Socratic measurement here.

4.2 The disadvantage of the Aristotelian account of akrasia

Aristotle thinks that belief is no different than knowledge for the topic of incontinence because both people who know and people who believe will take whatever they know or believe to be true. It is the weakness of conviction that makes people with belief but not people with knowledge act contrary to their supposition. Although some people’s convictions about what they believe are no weaker than other’s convictions about what they know, it seems that the beliefs of rational people will always be weaker than their knowledge. Suppose knowledge is justified true
belief. Then, the distinction between knowledge and true belief is that true belief doesn’t have justification. For rational people, it is always justification that gives strong conviction. Any strong conviction from other sources seems to be irrational. If so, it is impossible for people who use reason well to have beliefs that are no weaker than knowledge.

4.3 The advantages and disadvantages of their solutions

The most important part of topic akrasia is how to solve this problem. Socrates thinks controlling oneself is to possess knowledge. Aristotle doesn’t give his solution in the EN VII, but we can possibly find the answer in the EN II. He thinks that virtue of character results from habit (EN II.1,1103a15-20). Since continence is one virtue of character, controlling oneself must be developing good habits. The problem with Aristotle’s solution is that an incontinent man usually fails to follow his reason. If so, developing good habits will be very hard for him. If an incontinent man can somehow develop good habits, it seems that he is no longer incontinent anymore. As for the Socratic solution, there is no doubt that one will control himself if he possesses knowledge. The problem is that some knowledge is hard to learn, like virtue. Socrates also points out the important question of whether virtue is teachable in the Protagoras.
Work Cited


