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## 12 Aristotle's Analysis of Akratic Action

### I. INTRODUCTION

The question whether akratic action is possible, for Aristotle, is first and foremost the question whether it is possible for people to understand that they should not perform some specific action (e.g., to have the drink that they are being offered) and nevertheless to act against that understanding.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's analysis of akratic action in *NE* vii 3 is one of the most-discussed passages in Aristotle's corpus. Its interpretation has been, and continues to be, highly controversial. The present chapter offers a reconstruction of Aristotle's train of thought in that chapter. Some parts of that reconstruction may be familiar; other parts may not. We shall focus on the central passage that deals with the manner in which the akratic person, while she acts akratically, understands that she should not do what she is doing. Before turning to that passage, we should consider two passages in the chapter that precedes Aristotle's analysis of akratic action, in which he articulates the difficulty that his analysis is meant to resolve. They may offer some clues as to how Aristotle conceives of akratic action.

The first passage (*NE* vii 2.1145b22–31) is one in which Aristotle briefly discusses Socrates' position about *akrasia*. According to Aristotle, Socrates thought that nobody acts contrary to what is best, while holding the appropriate correct supposition. Rather, acting contrary to what is best is always a matter of acting because of ignorance, where this must mean not only lack of understanding but also lack, at the time of action, of the correct supposition concerning what is best. Aristotle points out, reasonably enough, that Socrates' conception manifestly conflicts with what appears and is widely held to be the case. Nonetheless, Aristotle is notably prepared to take seriously the possibility that the affection in question, by which he means the defeat of understanding or correct supposition at the hands of some passion,

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the present chapter, "to understand" and "understanding" will be used to translate the Greek words *ἐπίστασθαι* and *ἐπιστήμη*. This decision will be explained in Section II.

comes about because of ignorance. "One should investigate," he says, "about the affection, if it does come about because of ignorance, what manner of ignorance that turns out to be" (1145b28–29).

Before the akratic experiences an episode of akrasia, Aristotle notes, she plainly thinks that she should not do the bad thing in question (1145b30–31), thus holding the correct supposition. A tentative and, at this point, still hypothetical picture that emerges at this early stage in Aristotle's discussion is a diachronic one in which the akratic, prior to the episode of akratic action, thinks that she should not perform the act in question, whereas at the time of the akratic action she experiences a certain form of ignorance, which in a way explains why her knowledge or correct supposition is mastered by some passion or other. On the interpretation I offer in the present chapter, that is precisely the kind of diachronic picture that Aristotle himself wants to present.

In another passage worth calling attention to (*NE* vii 2.1145b31–1146a7), Aristotle envisages akratic action as arising from a motivational conflict in which a powerful appetite pulls the person one way (1146a2–3) while something else – belief, *phronēsis*, or whatever – pulls him the other way. Aristotle speaks of belief and *phronēsis* pulling the other way (*antiteinein*: 1146a1, a4), resisting the appetitive impulse until that resistance is abandoned or overcome and the person acts on appetite.

This is the language of motivational conflict, recalling the picture of enkaptic and akratic conflict presented in *NE* i 13.1102b14–18 (cf. 1102b21), and of course the psychological conflicts by appeal to which the Socrates of Plato's *Republic* seeks to establish the theory of the tripartite soul.<sup>2</sup> That Aristotle here envisages akratic action as arising from motivational conflict in which appetite prevails is an important point of detail. According to some interpretations of Aristotle's analysis of akratic action in *NE* vii 3, that analysis leaves no room for motivational conflict, in that it takes the akratic to remain unaware of the fact that the object he is impelled to pursue is also one he has decided, or wishes, to stay away from.<sup>3</sup> That Aristotle thinks of akratic action as arising from motivational conflict not only in *NE* i 13, but also in articulating difficulties about akrasia in the chapter that immediately precedes the analysis in *NE* vii 3, is a consideration in favor of interpretations that leave room for motivational conflict.

<sup>2</sup> The verb ἀντιτείνειν ("pull the other way") is used for psychological conflict at *Republic* x 604a2 and a10.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Ross 1995, 229–230; Cooper 1975, 49–50.

## II. THE CENTRAL PASSAGE: NE VII 3.1146B31–1147B19

Aristotle offers three distinctions concerning how people can correctly be said to understand something. These distinctions yield a number of ways in which one might interpret the Socratic claim that it is impossible to act against one's own understanding of what one should or should not do.

## I. NE 1146b31–35

According to the first distinction, presented at 1146b31–35, understanding something may be a matter of having understanding without employing it, or it may be a matter of both having and employing the understanding in question. On the basis of this distinction, Aristotle says that it seems, or is held, to be a terrifying thing to act as one should not, while one is contemplating – that is, employing one's understanding – that one should not do the thing at issue. However, acting against understanding when one is not contemplating the matter in question, Aristotle adds, does not seem to be a terrifying thing. It is not immediately clear what the distinction between merely having and employing understanding is meant to come to. Many have thought that Aristotle means to distinguish between knowing something but not currently attending to it, on the one hand, and attending to it, on the other: for instance, one knows one's social security number, but only on occasion does one call it to mind.<sup>4</sup>

I shall argue for an alternative interpretation of what the distinction is meant to come to.<sup>5</sup> The Greek verb *epistasthai* denotes having expertise or expert knowledge concerning something or other, and Aristotle follows the Socrates character of Plato's *Meno* in conceiving of such expertise in terms of grasping something in a way that rests on having identified, and being able to provide, the cause or proper explanation of the matter in question. "To understand" is a reasonably close English equivalent of the Greek verb *epistasthai*, at any rate as that verb is used in the writings of Plato and Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> It is also along those lines that understanding (*epistēmē*) as a state is explicated in Aristotle's discussion

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Ross 1995, 228; Hardie 1968, 274. Irwin 1999 translates θεωρεῖν at 1146b33–34 as "attend."

<sup>5</sup> The present interpretation is similar to, but should be distinguished from, Charles 2009, according to which what Aristotle means by employing understanding is contemplating a truth "as part of a relevant body of knowledge." The notion I am introducing is more specific than this.

<sup>6</sup> As Burnyeat 1981, 102, says, "Explanation and understanding go together in a way that explanation and knowledge do not."

of the topic in *NE* vi 3. That discussion, which itself refers to the explication of understanding that is given in *Posterior Analytics* i 2, defines understanding as a demonstrative state, a state that is suited to providing demonstrations of certain truths by reference to appropriate starting points or principles. Those demonstrations identify the proper explanations why the proposition in question is true.

Now, one thing to note about this is that in *NE* vi 3 understanding is defined as a state (*hexis*) of a certain kind, rather than as an activity: as something that one *has* rather than as something that one *does*. Merely being in that state, without putting it to use, is to understand in the sense of having understanding without employing it. The discussion in *NE* vi 3 suggests what employing that state might come to: understanding something is a state suited to demonstrating it, and plainly one way in which one might put such a state to use is by demonstrating the truth of the proposition that one understands, whether by stating the demonstration in speech or by thinking it through. For Aristotle, doing so will crucially involve calling to mind the propositions that constitute the demonstration and employing them as premises of an argument for the truth of the proposition that is being demonstrated.

In our passage from *NE* vii 3, Aristotle switches from speaking of employing understanding to speaking of contemplating (*theōrein*). He uses this word, and the cognate noun *theōria*, in several other places so as to denote the activity that comes about when understanding (*epistēmē*) is put to use.<sup>7</sup> Given that the state of understanding something, for Aristotle, is a matter of knowing something on the basis of knowing its cause or explanation, it is natural to think that the activity that comes about when understanding is put to use is an activity of grasping something to be true by grasping its cause or explanation. For example, being in the state of understanding that triangles have interior angles equal to two right angles consists in knowing that fact based on knowing its explanation, and the activity that corresponds to that state is occurrently grasping that triangles have angles equal to two right angles by occurrently employing appropriate propositions as premises of an argument for the truth of that proposition about triangles.

Given the strict notion of understanding that Aristotle means to explicate in *NE* vi 3, and also in the *Posterior Analytics*, understanding concerns only propositions that are true by necessity. And the relevant propositions about individuals and particular objects or actions, such as the proposition that I should not have any more to drink, are not true by necessity. So it may seem clear that the notion of understanding that Aristotle explicates in *NE* vi 3 is unsuited to understanding propositions

<sup>7</sup> E.g., *De Anima* ii 1.412a22–23; ii 5.417b28–29.

such as the ones that are at issue in the analysis of akratic action. However, in *NE* vi 3 Aristotle notes that the notion he is explicating is a strict one, and he implicitly recognizes a looser notion, or looser notions, based on similarities with understanding conceived of strictly (1139b18–19). Now in *NE* vii 3 Aristotle distinguishes between what seems to be understanding conceived of strictly, and perceptual understanding, which concerns propositions that feature a particular term, such as the proposition that this chocolate bar should not be eaten (1147b13–17). Such perceptual understanding, it seems reasonable to suppose, is a case of understanding conceived of loosely, based on similarities with understanding conceived of strictly.

In what way might perceptual understanding resemble understanding conceived of strictly? Given the close connection in Aristotle's usage between understanding something and knowing its cause or explanation, one point of similarity should be that perceptual understanding crucially involves knowing the reason or explanation why the proposition in question is true. Given that the propositions that are subject to perceptual understanding will include many that are not true by necessity, the premises on whose grasp perceptual understanding rests need not be true by necessity, either.

Moreover, particular terms such as "this chocolate bar" must feature in some of those premises, given that they must yield conclusions in which such particular terms feature. Nonetheless, Aristotle thinks that there really are reasons and proper explanations why a given agent in a specific situation should or should not perform some action, and so it seems reasonable for him to operate with a relaxed notion of understanding, with the result that one can in a way understand that, say, one should not have this drink that one is being offered. This will be a matter of grasping a truth in a distinctive way, namely, by grasping the reason why the proposition in question is true.

The upshot of these comments on Aristotle's conception of understanding is an alternative interpretation of the contrast between merely having understanding and employing understanding, which Aristotle also refers to as contemplating the matter in question. On this interpretation, employing understanding so as to contemplate something is not only a matter of attending to it. It is also, and crucially, a matter of grasping its reason. More precisely, it is a matter of grasping the truth of a proposition on the basis of grasping the reason why the proposition is true. This conception is much more specific than the standard conception of what is involved in contemplating a given proposition, for instance, the proposition that one should not act in some particular way. As we will see, that greater specificity has considerable advantages for understanding what goes on in the Central Passage overall.

## 2. NE 1146b35–1147a10

Aristotle's second distinction concerning how people can be said to understand something, presented at 1146b35–1147a10, is based on a distinction between two modes of propositions, universal and particular. "Nothing prevents a person from acting against understanding when they have both and are employing the universal, but not the particular one" (1147a1–3). Having distinguished between universal and particular propositions, Aristotle adds a further distinction, which concerns the constituents of universal propositions. One constituent concerns the person, the other one concerns a given object. His example is the universal proposition that dry food is good for every human. This concerns a certain kind of object, dry food, and it concerns the person in question, given that it concerns every human being. Aristotle envisages a case in which someone knows that dry food is good for every human, and hence for him, and also that such-and-such food (say, cereal) is dry, but either lacks or fails to employ the proposition that this is cereal.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle concludes abruptly that the difference between "these two manners" is enormously large, so that knowing in this way seems to be nothing strange, but knowing in another way seems astonishing (1147a8–10). The two manners in question must be two manners of knowing, which presumably are meant to amount to two manners of understanding.<sup>9</sup> What Aristotle takes to be astonishing would then seem to be acting against understanding when one understands the thing in question in one of the two ways of understanding that he means to introduce, whereas there is nothing strange, he thinks, in acting against understanding when one understands whatever it may be in the other way. One way of understanding that this triangle has internal angles equal to two right angles, Aristotle holds elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> is by understanding that triangles have angles equal to two right angles, without knowing of this triangle. This is a matter of understanding universally that this

<sup>8</sup> 1147a7: ἀλλ' εἰ τόδε τοιόνδε, ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἢ οὐκ ἐνεργεῖ ("but if this is a thing of this kind, the person either does not have or does not employ"). It may well be significant that Aristotle is saying that this proposition is not employed, rather than that it is not contemplated. He may mean to leave room for the idea of employing a proposition (say, as a premise in an argument) without thereby contemplating it. Contemplating is the activity that corresponds to the state of understanding, and the object of understanding at issue in the situation that Aristotle has in mind is not the proposition that this particular thing is cereal, but the proposition that this particular thing is good for me. That this is cereal is part of the reason why this is good for me.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word translated as "to know" is εἰδέναι. According to a proposal by Burnyeat 1981, 104 (which rests on results presented in Lyons 1963), one use of εἰδέναι is as a synonymous replacement for ἐπίστασθαι.

<sup>10</sup> *Posterior Analytics* i 1.71a24–29; cf. *Prior Analytics* ii 21.67a14–21.



triangle has angles equal to two right angles. Aristotle contrasts this with unqualified understanding that this triangle has angles equal to two right angles, which comes about when someone recognizes that this figure is a triangle and applies to it his understanding that triangles have angles equal to two right angles. The distinction between two ways of knowing that is in play in our passage seems to be that same distinction.<sup>11</sup> Someone who understands that cereal is good for people in a way understands that this portion of cereal is good for people, even if she does not know of this portion of cereal. This is to be distinguished from cases in which someone knows that this is cereal, applies to it her understanding that cereal is good for people, and so understands in a different way that this portion of cereal is good for people. Those latter cases are cases of unqualified understanding that this portion of cereal is good for people.

So Aristotle's main point in our passage seems to be that there is nothing perplexing about cases of acting against understanding in which a person understands only universally, but does not understand without qualification, that they should pursue or avoid some particular object – say, this portion of cereal. For example, a person may understand that he should now eat cereal, and he may put that understanding to use in grasping the fact on the basis of grasping the appropriate explanation. Now it might be that he just does not know that the stuff in that container in the refrigerator is cereal, or it might be that he does know that but fails now to think of it, so that he also fails to employ this knowledge so as to grasp both the fact that he should now eat this and the reason why that fact obtains. If he did so employ the proposition that this is cereal, then he would count as unqualifiedly understanding, in the sense of contemplating, that he should now eat this. He would be grasping the fact in a distinctive way, by grasping the reason why it obtains. For anyone to grasp in this way that he should now eat this portion of cereal and nonetheless to act against that understanding, Aristotle is saying, would be bizarre.

In effect, in providing this second distinction between ways of understanding something, Aristotle is calling attention to a way in which one can act against one's own understanding even when that understanding is in a way active. He is calling attention to unproblematic cases in which someone acts against understanding when he understands universally, though not without qualification, that he should pursue or avoid some particular thing. Jones is at a party and understands that he should not have any more alcohol, given that he will be driving home. He grasps that

<sup>11</sup> Morison 2011 offers a detailed explanation and philosophical defense of Aristotle's distinction, and also a fuller account of its application in our passage than can be provided here.

fact and the reason why it obtains. Moreover, he employs that understanding in selecting a bottle of what he takes to be nonalcoholic beer, rather than some other beer. He is wrong about the beer he selects: that beer contains about 5 percent alcohol. He either simply does not know this or knows it but fails to put this knowledge to use, perhaps because he is distracted by the conversation he is having. As he is drinking the beer, he is acting against understanding. He understands that he should not have any more alcohol. So in a way he understands that he should not have the alcoholic drink he has selected. Moreover, he is employing that understanding. Partly on the basis of that understanding, he selects the beer that he does select, in preference to some other beer. Nevertheless, this is an unproblematic case of acting against understanding. It is unproblematic because Jones is at the time of action simply unaware of the key fact that he is having an alcoholic drink.

### 3. NE 1147a10–18

In the third distinction, presented at 1147a10–18, Aristotle introduces a special way of having understanding that he takes to be different from the ways that have been spoken of. Within having but not employing understanding, he adds, there is a distinctive state, "so as both in a way to have and not to have [i.e., understanding], like people who are asleep, experience fits of insanity, or are drunk." People who are in certain emotional states, he says, are in this kind of condition: anger, sexual desire, and some other such states change also the condition of the body, as well as (he thinks) the condition of their understanding. "It is clear, then," he concludes, "that we should say akratics are in the same state as these people" (1147a17–18). So with this distinction, between a special way of having but not employing understanding and other cases of having but not employing understanding, Aristotle has finally focused in on the cognitive condition in which he takes the akratic to act against understanding when she acts akratically.

This cognitive condition is not simply a matter of having but failing to employ understanding that one should not do the thing in question. It is supposed to be a different way of having understanding from the ones that have already been spoken of, and of course having understanding without employing it was spoken of in the first distinction Aristotle offered. The cognitive condition in which people act akratically should also be different from understanding something by having and employing a suitable universal proposition without employing, or having, some relevant particular proposition. That, too, is a way of having understanding that has already been spoken of. Rather, both the examples Aristotle uses and the fact that he says that this condition is a matter of having

understanding in a way, and also of not having understanding, indicate that he has in mind a condition of having understanding that is temporarily compromised by the psychological or physiological condition that one is in.

Elsewhere Aristotle says that a sleeping geometer is further removed from being in fulfillment than a waking one.<sup>12</sup> A geometer who is awake can right away achieve fulfillment as a geometer by activating her understanding of geometry. By contrast, a sleeping geometer is temporarily prevented from putting her understanding to use by the condition in which she currently is. In waking up, she gets a step closer to the fulfillment of what she is. She is now in a state of full preparedness for exercise.

Aristotle characterizes the cognitive condition in which akratics act akratically as a matter of having understanding in a way, but also of failing to have understanding. So far as ordinary cases of having but not employing understanding are concerned, he never says that these are cases of not having understanding. And why would he? After all, he conceives of having understanding as being perfectly consistent with not currently employing it. Why then is he saying this about the particular cognitive condition in which akratics act akratically?

Elsewhere he makes clear that he takes it to be characteristic of having understanding that the person in question is able to exercise it at will, unless she is prevented by something external – external to the person, that is, as when, say, a brick hits her on the head (*De Anima* ii 5.417a27–28). We can therefore make sense of the idea that the akratic while acting akratically in a way lacks understanding by supposing that she exemplifies a special case of having but failing to employ that understanding. What is characteristic of that special case is that the person in question is temporarily prevented from employing her understanding, given the psychological or physiological condition she is in.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that emerges is that it is only in an expanded or relaxed sense of having understanding that the akratic, while acting akratically, counts as having understanding. Being in that condition, Aristotle quite obviously thinks, also counts as a way of temporarily not having understanding. This is an important point, since it enables us to make sense of the evident fact that he takes the akratic to revert from ignorance to understanding at some time after the akratic action (1147b6–9). He plainly thinks that there is a sense in which akratics, when and while they act akratically and against their own understanding, act in ignorance

<sup>12</sup> *Generation of Animals* ii 1.735a9–12. Cf. *Physics* vii 3.247b13–16: “When someone, from being drunk, asleep, or sick is changed into the opposite condition, we don’t say that they have again come to be a person who has understanding, even though before they were unable to make use of their understanding.”

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Ross 1995, 229; Kenny 1966, 174; and Pickavé and Whiting 2008, 343.

of the fact that they should not act in the way that they do. And we can make sense of this: it is because although there is a sense in which they have understanding, they are not, while acting against that understanding, in a position to employ it.

4. *A Supplementary Comment: NE 1147a18–24*

Aristotle has now identified the specific cognitive condition in which he thinks akratics act against their own understanding when they act akratically. This answers the question in what way the akratic knows that he should not do the thing in question when he acts akratically (1146b8–9). Before approaching the explanation of akratic action in a different way, namely in the manner of the natural philosopher, Aristotle wraps up the present part of the discussion by adding a supplementary comment. This comment concerns the fact that when people act akratically, they may well say things that seem to express their own understanding that they should not act in the way that they do. Someone may act akratically in, say, having a much bigger meal than she should, and while hugely enjoying every bit of it say that she really should not be eating this much, given that her doctor told her that she risks having a heart attack unless she loses twenty pounds. So, one might object to Aristotle that when people act akratically, they often show every sign of understanding that they should not do the thing in question and, in fact, of making use of that understanding so as to state both the fact and the reason why.

Aristotle's response is that saying the things that come from understanding is no reliable indication that the person in question is currently employing the relevant piece of understanding. In fact, the example of learners who do not yet have understanding but who can already recite the explanations proves that people can say things that come from understanding (that is to say, they can state suitable facts and the explanations why those facts obtain) without yet even having that understanding. In saying the things that come from understanding, people may simply be relying on memory, without at the time making use of their understanding so as to grasp the inferential and explanatory connections between the facts and explanations that are at issue. In fact, they might not have mastered those connections, and so they might not even *have* the understanding from which the things they say come.

5. *The Natural Philosopher's Explanation: NE 1147a24–b9*

The next section, which begins at 1147a24, seems best understood as an explanation of akratic action that employs principles or terminology specific to the philosophy of nature. The preceding discussion was

conducted at a more general level, relying for the most part on terms that are familiar from discussions meant to apply to all branches of knowledge alike, such as the *Analytics*.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle gives no indication that he means to modify or correct the preceding account of the specific cognitive state in which people act akratically. We should try to interpret the natural philosopher's explanation so that it supplements the account that has already been given, in a way that employs principles or terminology belonging specifically to the philosophy of nature. In fact, this can be done.

Aristotle begins with a comparison between theoretical thought and practical thought. In so doing, he relies on the earlier distinction between universal and particular propositions, except that beliefs now take the place of propositions. Aristotle also adds that it is perception that controls the cognition of particulars. These and other references to psychological capacities, acts, and states apply terminology that belongs to the study of ensouled beings, and therefore, for Aristotle, to the philosophy of nature. Whenever one belief arises from a suitable pair of universal and particular beliefs, Aristotle says, then in theoretical cases "it is necessary for the soul to assert what is concluded, and in practical cases right away to do it" (1147a26–28). He adds an example: "if one should taste anything that is sweet, but this, being one of the particulars, is sweet, it is necessary for a person who is able to, and is not prevented, to do this at once" (1147a29–31).

Two details in this passage call for comment. First, it is not immediately clear what Aristotle has in mind in speaking of one belief arising from a suitable pair of other beliefs. He might have in mind belief in the conclusion that is entailed by the universal and particular beliefs in question; for instance, the belief that one should taste this particular thing. That is unlikely, though, because Aristotle says that whenever one belief arises in this way, it is, in theoretical cases, necessary for the soul to assert what is concluded. By this comment, he seems to mean that the formation of the single belief, in theoretical cases, necessarily leads to acceptance of the conclusion, in parallel to the way it necessarily leads, in practical cases, to enactment of the conclusion. But if by the single belief in question Aristotle just means belief in the conclusion, then the formation of that single belief already includes acceptance of the conclusion. So it seems better to think that the single belief in question is a composite belief that combines a universal and a suitable particular belief.<sup>15</sup> The idea then is that whenever people form such combined

<sup>14</sup> Burnyeat 2001, 19–24, clarifies what Aristotle means by discussing some matter *phusikōs* ("in the manner of the natural philosopher"), namely, to discuss it in a way that relies on principles appropriate to (some subject matter in) natural philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> This suggestion is due to Michael Frede. *Contra* Charles 2009, 53.

beliefs in which suitable universal and particular propositions are accepted and thought of together, then in theoretical cases one necessarily accepts the conclusion, while in practical cases one necessarily enacts the conclusion, provided that one is able to and is not prevented.

Second, what kinds of possible preventers does Aristotle have in mind in saying that in practical cases, once someone forms the appropriate single belief, it is necessary for him to do the thing in question, provided that he is able to and is not prevented? Those possible preventers, one might think, include nonrational desires (Charles 2009, 54–55). This, however, seems wrong. If desires were included among possible preventers, Aristotle would be envisaging cases in which someone has and employs both the relevant universal proposition and a suitable particular proposition, and so would count not only as understanding but also as contemplating the fact that he should not do the particular thing at issue. Aristotle would then be committed to thinking that in such cases the person in question may act against his own fully active understanding, being prevented from acting on that understanding by a nonrational desire, for instance an appetite.

But note that Aristotle said earlier (at 1147a8–10) that it would be astonishing for someone to act against understanding when she understands the thing in question by having and employing both the relevant universal proposition and a suitable particular proposition. So, if possible preventers included desires, Aristotle would now leave open as a possibility something that a short while ago he said would be astonishing, without explaining or even acknowledging as dramatic a change as this.<sup>16</sup> So it seems best to understand Aristotle as having in mind only factors outside the person's psychological makeup as possible preventers of action on fully active understanding. The idea, then, is that once someone forms a unified practical belief by putting together a suitable pair of universal and particular beliefs, she is bound to act on the conclusion, provided that she is able to do so – that is to say, provided that she is not externally prevented from doing so.

We now come to the central sentences of Aristotle's analysis: "Whenever then the universal belief is in the person preventing him from tasting, and on the other hand the belief that everything sweet is pleasant, and that this is sweet (and this one is active), and an appetite happens to be present, then belief says to avoid this, but the appetite drives the person on. For it can move each of the parts. As a result, it so happens that people act akratically in a way under the influence of reason and belief, although belief is not in itself opposed to correct reason, but only incidentally; for the appetite, not the belief, is opposed to correct reason" (1147a31–b3).

<sup>16</sup> This argument is due to Jozef Müller.

Aristotle is describing a conflict between correct reason and an appetite. He says that it is the appetite that is opposed to correct reason, whereas belief is opposed to correct reason only incidentally, not in itself. The belief under whose influence the person acts akratically is the belief that this is pleasant. This belief, Aristotle thinks, is not in itself opposed to correct reason, presumably because it does not as such conflict with correct reason. Correct reason does not deny that this is pleasant. Reason insists only that it should be avoided. The belief is opposed to correct reason incidentally, in that it triggers and supports an appetite to pursue the thing in question. And that appetite is opposed, and opposed in itself, to correct reason.

For the appetite to be opposed, and opposed in itself, rather than incidentally, to correct reason, the occurrent expression or deliverance of reason that is at issue should be an impulse that is exactly opposed to the appetitive impulse that drives the person to the particular sweet thing. This in fact seems to be what Aristotle has in mind: the person holds a universal belief that prevents him from tasting, and as the appetite drives him to some particular sweet and therefore pleasant thing, belief says to avoid this thing.<sup>17</sup> By this, Aristotle means that the person has formed the belief that he should now avoid this particular thing, on the basis of believing that he should now avoid having any food, and that this particular thing is food. The universal belief that he should now avoid food is a decision not to eat now.

Given Aristotle's moral psychology, whenever a person realizes that a decision she has made applies to her present circumstances, she is impelled to act on the decision. In fact, as our passage makes clear, Aristotle takes it that when someone combines the universal content of a decision with a suitable perceptual belief so as to form a single but composite belief, she will necessarily enact the conclusion of that belief, provided that she is able to – that is to say, provided that she is not externally prevented from doing so. So, as long as the person in question is employing both members of a suitable pair of universal and particular beliefs – say, the universal belief that she should not have any food now, and the particular belief that this is food – she will find herself with a single, composite belief with which she will comply, provided that she is not externally prevented from doing so. In our passage, Aristotle also envisages a belief that this particular thing is sweet, and therefore pleasant, and, based on that belief, an appetite to eat this particular sweet thing. So at this stage the person experiences precisely the kind of motivational conflict that Aristotle takes to be characteristic of akratics.

<sup>17</sup> The most natural way of construing τοῦτο is as picking up τούτι, which is the closest neuter subject in what precedes.

The appetitive impulse will prevail and get the person to act on it. Now we know that, setting aside external prevention, Aristotle takes it to be impossible for a person to act against his own understanding, if he both has and employs the relevant universal proposition (say, "I should not now have any food") and has and employs a suitable particular proposition (say, "this is food"). How then can the person whose thoughts Aristotle is describing in our passage act against his own understanding, as he must do if they are to act akratically? The answer should be obvious. Aristotle has already told us in what cognitive condition akratics act against their own understanding when they act akratically. As we have seen, he takes their cognitive condition to be one in which their understanding that they should not act in the relevant way has been temporarily incapacitated. Aristotle has also told us that emotional states such as certain appetites and anger put people in this kind of condition. So his idea must be that appetite eventually prevails over correct reason by putting the person in the kind of cognitive condition that was described earlier as the condition of understanding or quasi-understanding in which akratics act akratically.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that it is no part of Aristotle's conception of that cognitive condition that people who are in it are completely deprived of their cognitive powers. They may be fully aware of the particulars they are facing (*contra* Rowe 1971, appendix). They may know perfectly well that this is a chocolate bar. They are definitely in a position to engage in voluntary action, given Aristotle's conception of the voluntary. As is well known, Aristotle operates with a rather relaxed notion of what kind of cognition is required for voluntary action. He takes even infants and nonhuman animals to be able to act voluntarily. Provided that a dog is aware that it is your hand that it is biting, rather than a sausage that you are holding in your hand, the dog, Aristotle thinks, is acting voluntarily in biting your hand. When Aristotle describes the cognitive condition in which people act akratically as ignorance, as he does in a passage to which we will turn presently, he is relying on a specific notion of ignorance that he has introduced quite carefully.

What he has in mind is a form of ignorance that consists specifically in temporarily not having understanding. As we saw, he conceives of having understanding as a matter of having some acquired piece of understanding ready for use. People who experience an episode of *akrasia* do not,

<sup>18</sup> Thus Aristotle envisages two distinct stages of episodes of uncontrol: a stage of motivational conflict between appetite and active understanding, and a stage of action on appetite, during which understanding is temporarily incapacitated. An interpretation along these lines was suggested by Rowe 1971, appendix. Müller 2008 has more recently drawn attention to the possibility of reading the passage in this way.



strictly speaking, have understanding. They are temporarily unable to engage in the activity of understanding ("to contemplate") that they should not do this particular act. In other words, they are temporarily unable to grasp that fact in a certain distinctive way, namely, by grasping the reason why it obtains. So in this specific sense they are at that time ignorant of the fact that they should not do the act in question.

Nonetheless, in an extended or relaxed sense, they do have that understanding. After all, once they calm down, they will again be able to make use of their understanding and contemplate the relevant facts at will. They will not have to regain that understanding by learning the relevant facts and explanations all over again. Given the removal of the relevant physiological obstacles, they will once again be able to employ the understanding that in a way they had all along.

Aristotle declines to tell us how it is that the akratic person's ignorance subsides and how she again comes to have understanding (1147b6–9). That account, he says, is not specific to the phenomenon of *akrasia*, as it applies likewise to the transitions from drunkenness to sobriety and from sleep to waking. Moreover, it is, he adds, the task of physiologists to provide such an account. Aristotle's idea seems to be that certain emotional states, drunkenness, and sleep bring with them agitated physiological conditions that render the person temporarily unable to employ whatever understanding she may have. This remark implicitly answers the question why Aristotle has nothing to say, for present purposes, about how it is that the cognitive condition in which people act akratically comes about: how this form of temporary ignorance arises is not a question specific to the phenomenon of *akrasia*, but applies likewise to drunkenness and sleep; and in any case it belongs to the physiologist, not to the philosopher, let alone the practical philosopher, to discover the material processes that lead to the temporary incapacitation of understanding.

#### 6. *Two Supplementary Comments: NE 1147b9–17*

"Given that the last proposition is a belief about what is perceptible and controls action, this the person either does not have while she is in the emotional state, or she has it in the way in which, as was said, having isn't understanding but only saying, as the drunk person has the verses of Empedocles." Most commentators have thought that in speaking of the last *protasis* (1147b9), Aristotle has in mind the minor premise of the good practical syllogism described in the preceding passage (at 1147a31–34). This is because of the widespread, but mistaken, opinion that, in Aristotle's usage, the word *protasis* just means "premise." However, it is in fact clear that the word, which occurs frequently in the *Analytics*,

means "proposition" (Charles 2009, appendix 1). Given that this is what the word means, there are three reasons for thinking that in speaking of the last proposition in our passage, Aristotle has in mind the conclusion of the bit of practical thought with which he credited the akratic just before his appetite drove him to act against that conclusion.

First, that proposition – namely, that this should be avoided<sup>19</sup> – is in fact the last proposition that Aristotle mentioned. Second, that proposition is an object of understanding (*epistasthai*) in a way that the minor premise of the akratic person's good practical syllogism is not. The minor premise, for example, that this is food, is not grasped on the basis of grasping suitable reasons or explanations. It is grasped just by looking at what one is up against (*NE* iii 3.1112b33–1113a2). By contrast, the conclusion of the good practical syllogism is grasped on the basis of a suitable reason or explanation. It is grasped precisely on the basis of grasping the two premises of the good practical syllogism. By employing those two propositions as premises of an argument, one grasps the reason why the proposition that is the conclusion is true.

And third, Aristotle is telling us that the last proposition controls action. It is hard to see why he might want to say that the minor premise of the good practical syllogism (i.e., "this is food") controls action. That some particular object is food is by itself neither here nor there so far as action is concerned. On the other hand, it is easy to see how it is that the conclusion of the good practical syllogism is the kind of proposition that controls action. That some particular object should be avoided is a determinate, situation-specific prescription, and as long as such a prescription is an item of occurrent, active understanding ("contemplation"), Aristotle thinks, the person in question will necessarily act on it, unless she is externally prevented from doing so. In fact, this is what he said just a short while ago, pretty much in so many words (at 1147a25–31).<sup>20</sup> So, the idea that such practical conclusions control action is not only by itself readily intelligible. It also has been carefully prepared for in the immediate context of our passage.

What this first supplementary comment comes to, then, is that akratics, while they act akratically, do not have, in the sense that they do not have understanding of, the kind of proposition that, if and as long as it is an item of active understanding or contemplation, controls action. In saying that they do not have that proposition, Aristotle is relying on what he said earlier about the cognitive condition in which akratics act akratically.

He said earlier that this condition is a matter of having understanding in a way.<sup>20</sup> The point crucial for his current purposes is that it is also a

<sup>19</sup> ἡ μὲν οὖν λέγει φεύγειν τοῦτο ("opinion then says to avoid this"), 1147a34.

<sup>20</sup> ὥστε καὶ εἶχειν πῶς, 1147a12–13.

matter of not having understanding.<sup>21</sup> Having understanding without employing it is a matter of having that understanding ready for use, so that one can employ it at will, unless one is externally prevented from doing so. In this strict sense of having understanding, the akratic does not, at the time of akratic action, have understanding that he should not do the particular act in question. In now saying that, while they are in their emotional condition, akratics do not have the proposition that is the conclusion of the good practical syllogism, Aristotle is simply insisting on the strict notion of what is involved in having some piece of understanding.

Alternatively, an akratic, while being in some suitable emotional state, may have the last proposition not by having understanding of it but by being in a position to say it. This idea also has been carefully prepared for: saying the words that come from understanding is no reliable sign that the speaker is employing understanding, or even that he has understanding. One can say these things from memory, without at the time employing, and in fact without even having, understanding of the facts in question.

In a last supplementary comment, Aristotle revisits Socrates' refusal to accept that understanding can be defeated by some other psychological force. "And because the last term does not seem to be universal," Aristotle says, "or suited to understanding in the same way as the universal, what Socrates was looking for seems to come about: for that in spite of whose presence the affection comes about is not what seems to be understanding in the strict sense of the term, but perceptual understanding, nor is it understanding in the strict sense of the term that is dragged about on account of the affection" (1147b13-17).

The last term that features in the piece of practical thought that Aristotle has just described (at 1147a31-34) is the term "this particular thing," denoting some particular object in the person's environment. Aristotle plainly has in mind a syllogism of the form: *A* holds of *B*. *B* holds of *C*. Therefore: *A* holds of *C*. *A* stands for "to be avoided," *B* stands for "food," and *C* stands for "this particular thing." In English: this particular thing is to be avoided because food is to be avoided and this particular thing is food.

So the idea is that the term "this particular thing," which (in Aristotle's schematic depiction) is the last term to enter into the person's practical thinking, is not a universal term, and not suited to understanding in the way universal terms are. If all the three terms featuring in the syllogism were universal, the premises might be such as to impart complete, nondefective understanding of the conclusion that follows

<sup>21</sup> καὶ μὴ ἔχειν, 1147a13.

from them. But as things stand, one of those terms, the last one, is not suited to understanding in the way that the others are.

Furthermore, the nonuniversal term in question features in the conclusion, and must do so, since the conclusion is such as to control action and therefore must be about some particular object of pursuit or avoidance. Because the nonuniversal term needs to feature in the conclusion, it must also feature in one of the premises. So it cannot be eliminated and replaced with some universal term. Given the ineliminable presence in the argument of a nonuniversal term, the proposition that is the conclusion is not open to being understood in a complete, nondefective way. Any understanding that one may have concerning such a proposition will therefore fail to amount to understanding in the strict sense of the term. Since such understanding is tied to particulars that are objects of perception, it makes sense for Aristotle to describe this compromised form of understanding as perceptual understanding.

The upshot is that as long as one limits oneself to the narrow conception of understanding that corresponds to the strict use of the term, it turns out that it is never understanding that is defeated by any other psychological force when someone acts akratically. As Aristotle says, that, in spite of whose presence akrasia comes about, is not what seems to be understanding in the strict sense of the term, but is perceptual understanding.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle's idea is that it is understanding concerning particulars, understanding that one should pursue or avoid this or that particular object, that controls action. Since it is this and no other form of understanding that is such as to control action when things go as they should, it seems reasonable for Aristotle to think that it is this and no other form of understanding that gets defeated when people act akratically.

### III. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is appropriate to end by saying a bit more than has so far been said in defense of what may be the most unorthodox idea that has been presented in the chapter: that what Aristotle means by *epistasthai* throughout the whole discussion is knowing a fact in a distinctive way, namely, knowing it on the basis of knowing the reason or explanation why that fact obtains. Once that idea is adopted, it becomes clear that the distinction between understanding and contemplating is not the distinction between

<sup>22</sup> This seems the best way of interpreting the difficult words οὐ γὰρ τῆς κυρίως ἐπιστήμης δοκούσης παρούσης γίνεται τὸ πάθος . . . ἀλλὰ τῆς αισθητικῆς at 1147b15–17. Stewart's rather popular conjecture of *περιγίγνεται* instead of *παρούσης γίνεται* (adopted, for instance, by Broadie and Rowe) is unnecessary. The present translation assumes that the participle *παρούσης* has concessive force.

knowing and attending to, but that between dispositional and occurrent cases of grasping the truth of a suitable proposition on the basis of grasping the reason or explanation why the proposition is true.

One reason to accept this interpretation of what Aristotle in our discussion means by *epistasthai* is that it reflects Aristotle's own explication of what the verb and its cognates mean. By way of explicating what understanding (*epistēmē*) is in *NE* vi 3, he says that it is a state suited to demonstrating, and for Aristotle to demonstrate the truth of a given proposition is just to give a rigorous statement of the reason or explanation why the proposition is true. In *Posterior Analytics* i 2, he says that "we think that we understand each thing without qualification . . . when we think we know the explanation on account of which the thing in question is" (71b9–11).<sup>23</sup>

Second, interpreting what Aristotle means by *epistasthai* in this way has the important advantage that it makes it easy to see why he thinks that when people act akratically, they do the base thing in question voluntarily.<sup>24</sup> If Dan is unaware of the fact that the woman he is having sex with is his friend's wife, then having sex with his friend's wife is not, for Aristotle, something that Dan does voluntarily. If the akratic person's temporary inability to employ *epistēmē* were a temporary inability to call to mind what he dispositionally knows (for instance, that Sarah is a married woman, and in fact is Jack's wife), then one might reasonably worry that in his emotional condition he cannot be aware of the particulars of the situation in the way that is required for voluntarily doing the bad thing in question. However, being temporarily unable to grasp facts on the basis of grasping the explanations why those facts obtain leaves one in a position to recognize individuals and particular objects in one's environment, which is what is required for voluntary action.

It also leaves one in a position to grasp normative facts. For example, while Dan is akratically having sex with Jack's wife, Sarah, he may be aware not only of the fact that Sarah is Jack's wife but also of the fact that he should not be having sex with her. But in such cases, Dan's awareness that he should not be doing what he is doing does not rest on his active knowledge of the reason why he should not be doing it. It is not connected to his more general practical commitments in the way that it would be if his actions were guided and controlled by active understanding.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also *Physics* i 1.184a10–16; *Posterior Analytics* ii 19.100b5–14: ἐπιστήμη δ' ἅπασα μετὰ λόγου ἐστὶ ("every form of understanding is with an account"), which is why understanding does not pertain to the indemonstrable principles of a science; likewise *NE* vi 6.1140b31–1141a1.

<sup>24</sup> As he states at *NE* vii 2.1146a6–7, and at *NE* vii 10.1152a15–16.

Third, and last for now, Aristotle is notoriously unclear about just which proposition it is of which the akratic, while in the grip of his emotional condition, is ignorant in the special way of being ignorant that pertains to *akrasia*. Hence the long debate in the secondary literature about whether the akratic, according to Aristotle's analysis, is ignorant of the minor premise of the good syllogism,<sup>25</sup> or only of its conclusion.<sup>26</sup> The present interpretation of what Aristotle means by *epistasthai* explains why it is reasonable for him to leave it implicit to which proposition the ignorance that is characteristic of *akrasia* pertains. The ignorance in question consists in a special way of not having precisely the piece of understanding against which akratics act when they act akratically. This is also the piece of understanding that Aristotle has in mind in speaking of the understanding in spite of whose presence *akrasia* comes about. He describes this understanding as perceptual understanding, because it features a particular term, and perception is responsible for the cognition of particulars.

So, if *epistasthai* in our discussion means what we have taken it to mean, Aristotle gives us all the information we need to work out just which proposition he has in mind in saying that the akratic, while in the grip of the emotional condition, is ignorant of something or other (1147b6), does not have understanding of something or other (b10-11), and acts akratically in spite of the presence in him of perceptual understanding of something or other (b15-17). The proposition in question is not the proposition that is the major premise of the good syllogism, since that proposition does not feature a particular term. Nor is it the minor premise, since it is not an object of understanding at all. It is grasped by perception, not on the basis of grasping an explanation.<sup>27</sup> So the proposition in question must be the conclusion of the good syllogism. The salient piece of understanding that the akratic in a way has but also lacks at the time of akratic action is understanding that he should now stay away from the particular object that he is pursuing.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Ross 1995, 229-30; Cooper 1975, 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Joachim 1951, 226-229; Charles 2009, 61-62.

<sup>27</sup> It is probably no coincidence that in the whole discussion Aristotle never uses the verbs *epistasthai* or *theōrein* with regard to the kind of proposition that constitutes the minor premise of the good syllogism (e.g., "this is sweet"). Relatedly, he freely switches between "employ" (*χρᾶσθαι*) and "contemplate" (*θεωρεῖν*) in speaking of what it is that people understand (i.e., that they should not do something, or that certain things are base: 1146b32-34, 1147a12), but in speaking of employing the kind of proposition that constitutes the minor premise of the good syllogism (at 1146b35-1147a3; at 1147a7; and at 1147a33), he uses only "employ" or "be active" (*ἐνεργεῖν*), but never "contemplate."

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