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Akrasia as a Character Trait: an obstacle for moral development

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Introduction

In the literature on character education, some authors – such as Howard Curzer, Kristján Kristjánsson and Wouter Sanderse – identify *akrasia*¹ as one of the stages in their (neo-) Aristotelian models of character development. Their prime concern is to describe how a person's character can develop from the lowest moral level (vice/the many) via other stages – most notably, *akrasia* and self-control² – to full virtue. They do not deny that a person can get stuck at a stage that falls short of the moral ideal. Curzer, for example, writes that 'although some people at each stage of moral development eventually progress to the next stage, and some deviate from the moral development path, most people at each stage simply fail to move up' (2002, 155; cf. Kristjánsson 2007, 20). Nevertheless, their work evokes the image of *akrasia* as a stage in transition, because the focus lies on means for improvement. Moreover, they discuss *akrasia* with a hopeful tone: 'although the label 'lack of self-control' may not sound very promising, they *people who are at the level of *akrasia*] have made a giant leap on the path to moral virtue' (Sanderse 2012, 108; cf. Curzer 2002, 161, n.38 and Kristjánsson 2007, 21).

In this paper, I rather consider *akrasia* as a stable character trait. I ask the question: how can we conceptually understand that *akrasia* often does *not* develop into self-control or, alternatively, degrade into vice? A person with an *akratic* character – an *akratēs* – is displeased with the way he acts. It is typical of this type of person that he has a judgment about what it is best to do in a particular situation,³ but that he – in trait-relevant situations – fails to act in line with this better judgment due to a competing motivation. There are two ways in which the *akratēs* can try to resolve the conflict between better judgment and action: alter his standards for action or alter his behavior. (Character educationists would obviously recommend the latter.) I explore several reasons why the *akratēs* is unlikely to change either of these.

I start with a discussion of three features that give rise to the belief that *akrasia* is a stage in transition. Then, I try to make sense of the moral stagnation of the *akratēs*. First of all, I discuss that although habits play a large role in this, they do not provide an entirely satisfactory answer. Secondly, I introduce an analogy that Aristotle draws between *akrasia* and epilepsy. I argue that this analogy reveals that people can endure inner conflict and regret because these are not permanently present. Lastly, I turn to Amélie Rorty who explains that *akratic* habits are particularly tough to break because *akrasia* has social and political sources.

Reasons to expect the *akratēs* to change, for better or worse

¹ Commonly translated as 'weakness of the will', 'incontinence' or 'lack of self-control'.

² Curzer and Kristjánsson include other intermediate stages as well, respectively the stage of the generous-minded and the stages of softness and resistance. I stick with the four stages that their models, together with that of Sanderse, have in common. The (neo-) Aristotelian models of character development sketched by Myles Burnyeat (1980), Nancy Sherman (1989) and Bernadette Tobin (1989) do not (explicitly) identify *akrasia* as a developmental stage and are therefore less relevant for my purposes.

³ To connect to the contemporary literature on *akrasia*, I relax Aristotle's demand that a person on the level of *akrasia* has objectively true knowledge of what is the right thing to do. What matters most on my account is that someone is himself strongly convinced of his better judgment. *Akrasia* still differs from the class of the generous-minded that Curzer distinguishes (2002, 156), because the convictions of people in the former class are firm and not vague. Jan Garrett rightly points out that people with unstable convictions (the many) can also struggle to abide by their better judgment (1993, 188). I would say that for such people the path to self-control and virtue not only requires them to align their behavior with their better judgment, but also to develop firmer and clearer standards for action.

There are reasons to believe that akrasia is likely to develop towards self-control or decline towards vice. This has to do with the fact that a person who is on the level of akrasia a) is characterized by internal conflict, b) regrets the way in which he typically acts and c) is bound to know in what kind of contexts he is prone to violate his better judgment.

Let me start, however, with a remark on the category of vice. Jan Garrett argues that Aristotle often does not contrast virtue with vice, but rather with the concept of 'the Many' (*hoi polloi*).⁴ The class of the many includes vice but also other conditions that are radically flawed but not wholly bad (1993, 171).⁵ For this reason, Curzer, Kristjánsson and Sanderse name the first developmental stage 'the many', and not 'vice' as one might expect. The distinctive features that the character educationists attribute to the category of vice/the many are a lack of commitment to virtue, having unstable convictions and not being able to correctly identify virtuous actions. I rely most strongly on the first two features, which are formal, rather than on the third, which is related to content. However, I stick with 'vice' to label the category below akrasia. When I talk of vice, I particularly think of people who tend to base their better judgment directly on their desires or on whatever suits them best.

The first reason to think that akrasia is a stage in transition is that its main characteristic is an internal conflict; a conflict between a judgment about how it is best to act and a motivation to act otherwise. The class of self-control is also characterized by this kind of internal conflict. The crucial difference is that with self-control the better judgment determines action, whereas with akrasia the competing motivation wins out. In contrast with the self-controlled person, the *akratēs* therefore dislikes the consequences that the inner conflict has for the way in which he is inclined to act. For this reason, it is hard to imagine how the internal conflict of the *akratēs* can be permanent.⁶ It is natural to seek to resolve any incongruity, but especially one that troubles a person repeatedly and of which he has a clear idea what the outcome should be. Ideally, the *akratēs* solves his inner conflict in favour of the option he deems best. However, he might not manage to change his behavior. In that case, he might take the other option to rid himself of his inner conflict: to give up on the standards for action that he struggles to live up to. Hence, the *akratēs* need not permanently put up with his characteristic internal conflict, since there are two ways in which he can resolve the tension.

Secondly, akratic actions are typically accompanied by regret and this brings high hopes for improvement. On Curzer's Aristotelian model of character development it is the painful feeling of regret⁷ – a rough translation of the Greek '*aidōs*' – that drives a person to move upwards from akrasia to self-control: 'Regret's role must be to motivate the performance of virtuous acts which eventually become habitual' (1998). This is not necessarily Curzer's view, for his main aim is to accurately describe Aristotle's account. However, Kristjánsson and Sanderse also adopt this idea as part of their neo-Aristotelian models of character development (2007, 35-36 and 2012, 109). In

⁴ Garrett stresses that this is not necessarily a statistical category but that for Aristotle 'the Many is a majority defined by moral-psychological characteristics' (1993, 175).

⁵ Vice forms a subclass of the many that is characterized by an inability to be moved by a fear of punishment in order to change one's behavior (Garrett 1993, 179 and Curzer 1998).

⁶ A similar question can be asked with respect to self-control (see Carol Gould 1994). However, I would say that it is more likely that the inner conflict at the level of self-control can be permanent, since a self-controlled person is not displeased with the way in which he is inclined to act.

⁷ Contrary to Burnyeat, Curzer argues that according to Aristotle the path to virtue is painful. Perhaps it is not Aristotle's view, but we should not rule out the option that positive feelings can stimulate moral development as well, such as the pleasure of receiving a compliment or being proud of getting it right. Kristjánsson suggests that 'Aristotle probably saw a place for both pleasure and pain in the habituation process' (2007, 36). I focus on regret here because there is a direct link with akrasia.

comparison to self-control, what is lacking at the level of *akrasia* is a habit to act in the right way. In order to acquire a new behavioral habit a person needs to perform the right actions. Curzer states that regret functions as a ‘catalyst’ in this process. Regret is a negative reinforcement of bad behavior. It also has the prospective function to warn against actions that it would be wrong to perform (2002, 159-160).⁸ The painful sting of regret might in itself be reason enough to avoid acting in a similar way in the future, but it also helps a person to recognize when he acted wrongly in the past or when he is on the brink of doing so. Regret can thus steer someone in the right direction.

If the *akratēs* does not manage to improve upon his behavior, however, there is also reason to believe that the painful feeling of regret leads him to slip down from *akrasia* to vice. Luc Bovens’ (1999) description of an ‘ardent’ – as opposed to a ‘serene’ – strategy of dealing with *akrasia* exemplifies this. Bovens is unique in that he most strongly recommends a person who struggles with *akrasia* to change his better judgment, or – as he describes it – ‘to raise the utility of what would otherwise count as *akratic* acts’ (1999, 234).⁹ Bovens finds the attempt to change one’s behavior hard and not much fun: ‘...to me it feels like reason whipping the living daylights out of passion’ (1999, 232). Instead, he holds that we should follow the ardent strategy to ‘embrace lightness’ (1999, 235). The way in which I understand Bovens is that people who follow the ardent strategy wish to be free of pain, such as the effort of making strenuous attempts at self-control, but also the feeling of regret. In order to avoid a painful feeling like regret, someone who suffers from *akrasia* can come to adjust his standards for action and justify the way in which he happens to be inclined to act.

There is a third reason to think of *akrasia* as a stage in transition. It is plausible that the *akratēs* has the self-knowledge that he has an *akratic* character. As Aristotle says, unlike vice *akrasia* does not go undetected by its possessor (*Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) 1150b37). The feeling of regret also testifies of the *akratēs*’ self-knowledge. The fact that someone feels badly about the way he acted reveals that he knows he acted wrongly (even if only after the action). Importantly, the *akratēs* typically acts against his better judgment repeatedly. Some of the better judgments that he violates might be unique to a particular situation, but others will represent a more general standard for action. For example, someone might hold that it is best to stick with a healthy diet but hardly ever resists the temptation of eating a cookie when he can lay a hand on one. It is plausible that someone with a tendency to violate a certain standard for action connects the dots and recognizes the pattern in his behavior.¹⁰ The *akratēs* can note, after a while, which standards for action he is likely to violate and which objects and opportunities trigger *akratic* actions. This self-knowledge could help an *akratēs* to take the necessary precautions to develop a self-controlled character.¹¹

But, again, in the absence of progress, the self-knowledge that one is prone to *akrasia* risks leading a person to take a step down the moral ladder. It is painful to endure the thought that you disapprove of your own character. Curzer remarks that: ‘the incontinent sometimes pretend to be members of the many because they prefer to be perceived as people who are not trying to be

⁸ *Aidōs* has a third function according to Curzer. It ‘prompts the learner to discover which acts are virtuous’ (2002, 160). This function mainly plays a role in his developmental model in the transition from the level of the generous-minded to the level of *akrasia*. In this context, Curzer translates *aidōs* as shame rather than regret.

⁹ For example, people who apply the ardent strategy ‘come to construct an identity that places a disvalue on prudence and a value on spontaneity’ (1999, 234) and they ‘let passion surreptitiously form a pact with reason’ (1999, 235).

¹⁰ This is not always the case, however. As Amélie Rorty remarks: ‘Someone who systematically ignores the obvious or resists corrective evidence may suffer epistemic *akrasia* as well as self-deception’ (1997, 650).

¹¹ For example, someone who suffers from *akrasia* with regard to smoking could throw away all the cigarettes in the house or promise himself a reward for not smoking for a certain period of time.

moral rather than people who are failing to be moral. They would rather be successes at vice than failures at virtue' (2002, 158).¹² I would like to add that this pretence after some time can turn into reality. A person can become convinced that he really does approve of his actions. Furthermore, the self-knowledge that he has a tendency to act in a certain way can lead the akratēs to come to see his behavior as evidence of what he really judges is best. When a person repeatedly violates the same standard for action he is likely to wonder at some point whether he sincerely endorses this standard. Now, sometimes revisiting a better judgment helps a person to discover what he truly evaluates as best. The inner conflict of akrasia can occasionally lead to new and better insights (see Xavier Vanmechelen 2000, 307; Martin Seel 2001, 618 and Annemarie Kalis 2009, 176).¹³ However, when someone changes his convictions exactly *because* he tends to act in a certain manner, the result is not a rational change of mind but a transition to vice. Hence, the self-knowledge of the akratēs can lead to a change of judgment, because this knowledge can be too painful to endure or because someone can viciously become convinced that the pattern of his behavior is evidence of his true conviction.

All of the above mentioned features of akrasia can be expected to induce the akratēs to alter his behavior, but can also lead him to change his standards for action in the case that improvement remains absent. There are therefore ample reasons to expect that akrasia will either develop into self-control or degrade into vice.

Understanding the moral stagnation of the akratēs

Despite the reasons to believe that akrasia is a stage in transition, we know from experience that it is actually often rather a state that stays fixed. Many people have an akratic character, at least with regard to certain domains. Think of people who never cease to struggle with being overweight, who do not manage to stick with long-term projects or who always have difficulty meeting deadlines. Luc Bovens illustrates this in his philosophical article on akrasia when he confesses: 'I have struggled with weakness of the will all my life. (...) You do not want to hear my diatribe: my love life, my health, my career ... all ruined by weakness of the will' (1999, 230). Moreover, Aristotle himself – on whose work the character educationists build – primarily presents akrasia as a character trait (*hexis*).¹⁴ On his account, this means that it is a moral category (NE1105b25-26), but also that it is a stable and long-lasting disposition (NE1129a13-16). How can we conceptually understand that akrasia is a stable and long-lasting character trait?

The answer seems all too obvious: an akratēs does not easily change his character because his akratic habits are just too well entrenched. On the one hand, there is the habit of being motivated to act in a certain way. This keeps in place the judgment-contrary behavior. On the other hand, there is the habit of forming certain kinds of better judgments.¹⁵ This prevents the akratēs from

¹² Curzer also observes that 'The many often pretend to be incontinent because incontinence is more respectable than choosing to act wrongly' (2002, 158). This goes to show that people tend to try and cover up their faults.

¹³ Sabine Döring holds that this is what happens in the example of Huckleberry Finn that has become famous in the literature on akrasia. She maintains that: 'in the end, Huck comes out of it [the conflict between his better judgment that it is best to turn in the runaway slave Jim on the one hand and his feelings of sympathy for Jim on the other hand+ with new and better reasons, by which he may then guide his actions' (2010, 297). Döring denies that Huck exemplifies what Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder have coined 'inverse akrasia' (1999, 161), but she does think that in Huck's case akrasia has led to the discovery of a better reason for action. I agree with Döring that akrasia is never rational, but that sometimes akratic conflict can be productive.

¹⁴ This is actually often ignored or even denied in the contemporary literature on akrasia. However, to correctly interpret Aristotle's account of akrasia it is important to notice that he regards it primarily as a character trait and not, as is common in contemporary literature, as a type of single and isolated action. I argue for this elsewhere (unpublished), but see also Jörn Müller (2009) and John Cooper (2009).

¹⁵ Perhaps some people would be reluctant to call this a habit, since it concerns an epistemic state. I am not saying that the akratēs identifies with his standards for action thoughtlessly. Although a person's better judgment may

heading into the direction of vice. From the perspective of the *akratēs*, it is the first type of habit that needs to be changed. He is already convinced that he should act otherwise than he does. The problem is motivational. However, as Aristotle observed, habits are like a second nature and are hard to change (NE1147a23 and NE115230-33). Think of habits as pathways in a forest. If a certain route is often taken, a path becomes marked out. Once a path is created, it is the easiest way through the forest. Likewise, when a person has acquired a habit to be motivated to act in a certain way, he has performed a certain type of behavior so often that it is most easy to do so again. To create new motivational pathways takes much time and repetition. Some character educationists are mainly concerned with the character development of children, whose constitution is not yet entirely settled (Kristjánsson 2007, 22 and Sanderse 2012). In the case of the young, the mechanisms that I described in the previous section might be relatively successful. However, the constitution of adults who are prone to violate their better judgment is more stable. Having an *akratic* character trait is tragic. By the time a person acquires a firm conviction on the basis of which he disapproves of his inclination to act in a certain way, the behavioral habit has already taken shape.

Whilst the explanation of the *akratēs*' moral stagnation in terms of habits rings true, it is nevertheless not entirely satisfactory. The question remains how the habits that are expressive of the character trait can stay well entrenched given the above-mentioned reasons to believe that *akrasia* is likely to change.¹⁶ After all, habits can be broken. It is easiest to keep to the beaten track, but it is not impossible to go off the trail. As Alfred Mele points out, factors other than character can influence action, such as a person's attentional condition (1987, 84-93). It is always possible to withdraw oneself from the grip of character. Moreover, it is characteristic of the *akratēs* that he acts against his better judgment, but this does not mean that he completely lacks self-control. In fact, the *akratēs* may abide by his better judgment more often than not (cf. Kristjánsson 2007, 21 and Sanderse 2012, 108). *Akrasia* is domain-specific.¹⁷ A person could make use of this fact to compensate for his *akrasia* in one domain (say, food) with the control he possesses in another domain (say, keeping promises) (cf. Chrisoula Andreou 2010). Furthermore, also *within* the 'akratic domain' self-control is not entirely lacking. For example, someone who suffers from *akrasia* with regard to alcoholic drinks manages to decline having another drink on more than one occasion, for otherwise he would be dead drunk most of the time. (If he were an alcoholic his problems would be of a different degree.) Hence, to develop a self-controlled character, the *akratēs* does not have to start from scratch. Habits surely play an important role in accounting for the stability of *akrasia*, but they do not tell the whole story. Again, how can we make sense of the fact that internal conflict, regret and self-knowledge often fail to urge the *akratēs* onwards?

Let us start with the question how *akrasia* can be permanent given the characteristic internal conflict with its bad consequences for action. Aristotle provides the clue to an answer here. He says that *akrasia* is like epilepsy in that it is 'a non-continuous way of being as one shouldn't be'

remain implicit before acting *akratically*, the *akratēs* confirms his standards for action every time he disapproves of acting to the contrary. I merely want to point out that a person's tendency to form certain kinds of better judgments can be as stable as the inclination to act otherwise.

¹⁶ I do not take results from empirical research into consideration here. However, some psychological research has come up with helpful suggestions for attempts at self-control. To give two examples: Peter Gollwitzer (1999) has found that the formation of implementation intentions – specifying the where, when and how of implementing an intended goal – helps a person to complete tasks; Walter Mischel and Bert Moore (1973) have revealed that focusing on the informative rather than the arousing properties of an object – say on abstract qualities instead of on tastiness – helps a person to delay gratification. These kinds of self-control techniques do not change a person's character straightaway of course, but they might help a person to take the all-important first step to kick the habit.

¹⁷ If *akrasia* would display a unity such as that of full virtue, the *akratēs* would get nothing done that he sets out to do and it is doubtful whether he would then be sufficiently rational to even be considered a person.

(NE1150b35). This analogy is worth developing further. An epileptic is ill all the time, but the symptoms of the illness only show now and then. The symptoms only occur when there is a trigger, such as lack of sleep or stress. Likewise, then, akrasia is a stable condition of which the characteristic features are only temporarily and occasionally present. The symptom – an inner conflict that results in a failure to abide by one’s better judgment – only shows when it is triggered by an object of desire or aversion.¹⁸ The analogy of akrasia with epilepsy has two important implications. First of all, when akrasia is a stable state it does not follow that the characteristic internal conflict is itself permanent.¹⁹ An *akratēs* does not experience conflict all the time. Conflict comes with the motivation to act contrary to one’s better judgment, and this motivation only arises in trait-relevant situations. Secondly, the underlying condition of akrasia that ensures that the symptoms are reliably triggered is not directly perceivable. When there is no trigger, the *akratēs* therefore looks very much like a self-controlled person and perhaps even like a virtuous person. In between akratic actions, what is on show are the *akratēs*’ standards for action alone and not the inclination to act to the contrary. Hence, the analogy with epilepsy reveals that the internal conflict that the *akratēs* experiences is only temporary and occasional and that his akratic character is not constantly on display.

The analogy that Aristotle draws between akrasia and epilepsy helps us to see how internal conflict can fail to establish any change in the *akratēs*. True, a person could make use of the time between trait-relevant situations to take precautions that prevent repetition of akratic behavior. However, the crux is that at such moments the symptomatic features of akrasia are not there; that is, there is at that time no inner conflict that asks to be resolved. One might, after acting akratically, intend to do better next time, but soon enough do not feel an immediate urge to do something about it. After all, right now nothing much seems to be the matter. Hence, the *akratēs* might fail to improve because at the time that it is most convenient for him to try to prevent future akratic actions he is not constantly reminded by an internal conflict of his tendency for judgment-violation. Similarly, this keeps the *akratēs* from decline. There is no pressure to reconsider one’s standard for action when judgment-contrary motivation is not there. In this context, the *akratēs* has no trouble hanging on to (or perhaps restoring) his conviction about how it is best to act. Hence, one way to understand that akrasia remains stable is that the uncomfortable internal conflict that is essential to this state is not constantly present.

A similar explanation goes for why regret is often not enough to get the *akratēs* to alter his ways. A person experiences regret over his akratic action. It can sting very much at the time of action, but the painful feeling might not linger for very long after the internal conflict is no longer present. It is not that the *akratēs* no longer disapproves of his action. Quite the contrary. It is just that he is not reminded of it by means of a constant feeling of regret. If it is indeed the case that regret fades away after the action, this would also clarify that the *akratēs* can withstand to change his standard for action in order to avoid pain. There are moments of relief in between separate akratic actions. This also gives the *akratēs* the time to reinforce his convictions and confirm to himself that his standards for action have not wavered. Furthermore, the *akratēs* might find the idea of the alternative to pangs of regret even more painful. He could realize that it is irrational to change his better judgment based not on what he takes to be good reasons for action but on what he happens to be most motivated to pursue at the time. Therefore, as with the internal conflict,

¹⁸ For reasons of moral evaluation, Aristotle limits the realm of unqualified akrasia to objects of bodily appetite. I allow for a broader range of objects. Furthermore, like Sanderse (2012, 105-106), I put aside here the boundary that Aristotle draws between akrasia, which relates to pleasure, and softness, which relates to pain.

¹⁹ John Cooper is therefore mistaken when he ascribes to Aristotle the view that the disharmony of akrasia is itself ‘well-settled’ (2009, 13).

regret is likely to be only temporary and occasionally present. A second way to understand that akrasia stays fixed is that regret does not stick around long enough to establish change.

Thus far, I have argued that internal conflict and regret often have no transforming effect on akrasia because they are relatively short-lived. Does the same line of thought apply to the self-knowledge of the akratēs? As I previously argued, it is plausible to believe that the akratēs is acquainted with the particulars of his akratic character. There is a link between this self-knowledge and regret, because regret sure enough helps the akratēs to explicate the knowledge and make it salient. So, perhaps a person fails to benefit from his self-knowledge because regret is not there in between trait-relevant situations to remind him of it. However, I am not sure whether this is the case. The self-knowledge of the akratēs differs from the features of inner conflict and regret because it is not a symptom of the stable and underlying condition of akrasia. Rather, it is an awareness of having this condition. And this awareness need not diminish when the characteristic symptoms of akrasia are no longer making an appearance. The sheer realization that one is prone to eat more chocolate than one considers healthy, for example, could prompt a person to refrain from including it on the grocery list. Aristotle's analogy of akrasia with epilepsy therefore is less successful in accounting for why the aspect of self-knowledge does not alter the state of akrasia.

Amélie Rorty offers an explanation in another direction to help understand how akrasia can remain a stable and long-lasting character trait. She points to social and political sources in order to argue that akratic habits are particularly hard to break.²⁰ The core of her view is that 'Social institutions and economic systems encourage and foster the very actions that they also condemn' (1997, 652). She gives the example of Daemona, a stockbroker who trades in short-term securities. Daemona values helping the infirm and elderly as a volunteer, but against her convictions at the same time she tricks her fellow volunteers into making risky investments to her own personal gain. Rorty traces her akrasia back to 'the tension between Methodist ideals of social service and the attractions of an expensive, lively style of life' (1997, 654), the latter of which is encouraged by 'mass media, television dramas, songs, and advertisements' (1997, 653). Rorty's argument entails that social institutions and other elements of public life maintain each of the different sides of the inner conflict that is characteristic of akrasia.²¹ For behavior to qualify as akrasia, it is important that a person has internalized the values that he violates. But if this criterion is met, the picture that Rorty sketches can make sense of many of the most common examples of akrasia. Think of examples concerning alcoholic drinks. Health institutions recommend that it is not good to drink more than one glass of alcohol and advertise that one should drink with measure. This reinforces a person's standard for action that it is best not to drink too much and strengthens a specific judgment such as that it is best to have no more than one drink at the party tonight. At the same time, there is peer pressure because drinking is considered a social activity and it might be considered impolite to decline if someone offers you a drink. On top of this there are commercial images that promote alcohol consumption, such as that of James Bond who makes drinking a beer look classy and refreshing. This supports the judgment-contrary motivation side of the akratic conflict. With these factors in play, it is hard for the akratēs to adapt his behavioral patterns, for the attractiveness of the akratic option is confirmed repeatedly in public life. Societal structures also prevent the akratēs from changing his standards for action all too easily, for they remind him of his convictions with regularity. A way to understand, then, that the self-knowledge of one's akratic character does not guarantee that one manages to take precautions to prevent further

²⁰ Her undertaking is Aristotelian in nature, for as she observes 'Aristotle locates his ethics within the frame of his politics' (1997, 646).

²¹ This is not to take away the responsibility of a person for his akratic actions. Rorty also emphasizes that despite the social and political origin akratic actions can still be considered voluntary (1997, 645).

akratic action, is Rorty's idea that the contexts in which the akratēs is vulnerable to akrasia are themselves strongly embedded in societal structures.

Conclusion

The way in which some character educationists present akrasia evokes the image of a stage in transition. There is indeed reason to believe that inner conflict, regret and self-knowledge will urge the akratēs towards self-control or, alternatively, towards vice. Nevertheless, akrasia is more often a stable and long-lasting character trait. Akratic habits can account for this to some extent, but how can these habits themselves remain fixed? Inner conflict and regret are distinguishing features of akrasia, but – as Aristotle's analogy of akrasia with epilepsy reveals – they are only temporarily and occasionally present. In the absence of the uncomfortable and painful experience that they cause, an akratēs can easily get away with an intention to do better next time without doing anything right now to prevent future akratic action. The absence of regret might also explain that the akratēs' knowledge of the particulars of his condition is not salient to him at times when he could be taking precautions. However, self-knowledge might not diminish as the symptoms of akrasia fade away, for it is itself not a symptom of the stable condition of akrasia but an awareness of it. Rorty argues that akrasia can have social and political sources. This might explain why self-knowledge of one's akratic character can fail to induce change, for, if Rorty is right, to improve upon one's character not only requires change in personal structures but also in societal ones. All of these factors together help us to understand how akrasia can remain a stable state. The story I sketched is not without wiggle room, but I see no problem in this. It is always possible that some people with an akratic character will eventually move on or deteriorate. However, I have given several reasons to make sense of the fact that the akratēs often does not change his character. It is a pity, of course, that people with an akratic character have such a hard time progressing to self-control. On a positive note, akrasia does not easily turn into vice either. Perhaps this is what the character educationists have in mind when they state that akrasia is a major step forward on the developmental path. However, most of the time, once akratic habits have firmly taken shape, akrasia is primarily an obstacle for further moral development.

What does all of this imply for the cultivation of virtue, or – as a penultimate step – of self-control? Rorty concludes that 'The long-range solution for their [people with an akratic character+ endemic akrasia rests with political and economic reform' (1997, 657).²² This would certainly assist most people with an akratic character, but it is not all too hopeful since one cannot manage this task on one's own. Another option would be to somehow get a painful feeling like regret to linger even after the internal conflict of akrasia has disappeared. A person can try to create a painful feeling that reminds him to take steps in order to progress, albeit with the risk that the pain becomes too much for him and he finds the solution in a change of judgment. Luc Bovens would not prefer to make use of this strategy himself, but he suggests to someone who wants to quit smoking to 'tell all your friends that you are quitting smoking: there is plenty of disutility in the shame of lighting up that first cigarette' (1999, 231). It is not comfortable to create more painful experiences in order to achieve one's end. However, it is not surprising that this is what it takes for the akratēs to make improvements. Kicking a habit that is both deeply entrenched in one's character and supported by elements of public life that are strongly embedded in societal structures is no easy job.

²² Rorty holds that knowledge of the social and political sources of akrasia can in principle also help a person to counteract their effect (1997, 657). I think she has in mind something similar to what I said about the self-knowledge of the akratēs: it can provide a person with the knowledge of which contexts he had better avoid. Rorty warns, however, that knowledge of the sources of akrasia can also lead a person to 'self-deceptively disown their akratic actions' (1997, 657).

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