

EMBODIED AKRASIA: JAMES ON MOTIVATION AND WEAKNESS OF WILL

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This paper presents an account of *akrasia*, drawn from the work of William James, that sees *akrasia* as neither a rational failing (as with most philosophical accounts) nor a moral failing (as with early Christian accounts), but rather a necessary by-product of our status as biological beings. By examining James's related accounts of motivation and action, I argue that akratic actions occur when an agent attempts to act against her settled habits, but fails to do so. This makes *akrasia* a product of the agent's practical failure to adequately structure her environment to bring about her desired action. Akratic action performs the vital function of revealing to the agent the exact point at which her cognitive effort was insufficient for bringing about her intended action. It also reveals that future improvement is within her control. As such, akratic action is the very foundation of James's meliorism.



The relationship between thought and action is central to our understanding of what it means to be human. We often pride ourselves on our seemingly distinctive ability to act for reasons, as opposed to primarily out of instinct or to satisfy biological needs. Despite this ability, we often fail to act in accordance with what we take to be our reasons for acting—sometimes mere moments after deciding to act in a certain way. Such actions are referred to as *akratic* and are an important part of our conception of the relationship between thought and action. A complete understanding of action requires not only an account of how reasons motivate action, but also how and why that motivation breaks down.

In this paper, I will present an account of akratic action drawn from the work of William James that is grounded in our neurology and evolutionary history. By making akratic action a consequence of our embodiment, this account avoids making judgments about an akratic actor's rationality, as is the case with most contemporary philosophical accounts, or about the actor's character, as is the case with the account found in early Christian writings. Instead, James's work reorients the debate away from focusing on individual reason/intention-action pairings to the practical life of an agent over time. This affords a crucial place for akratic action in the practical life of agents in a melioristic understanding of human development.

This paper will proceed in the following manner. First, I shall provide a brief overview of the problem of akrasia in the philosophical and early Christian traditions. Second, I shall examine James's account of motivation and articulate the standard case for reasons/intentions motivating action. Third, I will use this standard case to draw out the defective case. I will then consider how James's account fits within the tradition and what consequences this has for our understanding of James's work, especially with respect to his meliorism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AKRASIA

Suppose that you are presented with a choice: you can either take your children to the park, or you can stay home. After a brief consideration, you decide that the best option would be for you to take your children to the park. It is a nice day, they would get exercise, and you would get out of the house. But instead, you do not go to the park. For another example, consider that you have decided that you should refrain from eating cake—you are trying to lose some weight and are trying to cut back on sugar. But then, the next time you are offered cake, you take seconds. In both cases, you are acting in a way contrary to the reasoned position that you have held—this is referred to as *akrasia*, and the actions performed that are contrary to your better judgment are *akratic* actions.

The first substantive treatment of *akrasia* is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, *akrasia* signifies cases in which one's passions overtake one's reason, either after deliberation (*propeteia* or impetuosity) or in the absence of deliberation (*astheneia* or weakness).¹ As is generally the case with Aristotle's ethics, *akrasia* was a property of the agent rather than the action. The *akratic* agent is one who reliably succumbs to his or her passions instead of reason; conversely, the *enkratic* agent is one who experiences the same passions, but does not let them affect reasoning processes.²

Contemporary accounts of *akrasia* focus more on reasoning processes than character formation; as such, *akrasia* is a property of the action and not the agent. One of the most prominent figures on this topic is Donald Davidson, who argues that *akrasia* reflects a breakdown in an agent's practical rationality.³ If *S* has judged ϕ to be the best course of action (or intended to ϕ at *t*), and then does not ϕ at *t*, then *S* is acting irrationally. This builds on the common sense notion that one's evaluative judgments ought to have special status with respect to causing action; namely, evaluative judgments ought to have motivational force that goes beyond merely the ability to give reasons for an action and actually bring about that action. For Davidson, *akratic* action is necessarily irrational, for it is performed in the absence of a sufficient reason for that act.⁴

While many have detracted from Davidson with respect to the cause or structure of akratic action, most agree with his diagnosis that it is essentially irrational behavior.⁵ Indeed, this is the through line of the philosophical tradition—actions must be in accord with reason and not succumb to passions (Aristotle) or irrationality (Davidson).⁶

An account of akrasia can also be found in the early Christian writings of Paul and Augustine. This account shares a great deal with Aristotle's account but differs in some interesting and provocative ways. As it is rarely given attention in contemporary philosophy outside of certain circles, I will give a brief description of that account.

As it is with Aristotle, akratic action is rooted in a conflict between different parts of the self. For the early Christian writers, this is the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?⁷

In a similar vein, Augustine writes,

I was aligned with both [the spirit and the flesh], but more with the desires I approved in myself than those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will rather than acting

freely. . . . And who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with a sinner?⁸

As with Paul, Augustine laments that he is torn in conflicting directions and is unable to follow through with his desires, which he views with shame.⁹ Other passages reinforce the nature of akratic action for these writers.

Unlike with Aristotle, it is not a matter of mastery over your passions or body; indeed, such a mastery is impossible. It is rather the case, especially for Paul, about what has mastery over you. You can judge ϕ to be a preferable action to ψ , but fail to ϕ (and indeed, end up ψ -ing) due to your status as a fallen creature. For this account, akrasia is not a matter of keeping your passions subordinate to reason, nor is it a matter of having the appropriate causal relationship between your evaluative judgments and your subsequent actions. Akratic action is an intractable element of the Christian experience; it is a consequence of the Fall and the corrupting effect it had on human nature. So long as one is attempting to act contrary to the corrupted longings of human nature, one will struggle. Paul and Augustine frame this in terms of their “innermost spirit,” or what they consider to truly reflect who they want to be. They identify with their desires to lead a godly life, but their corporal bodies bar them from doing so. This reinforces the importance of the fact that mastery is impossible. In the early Christian narrative, akrasia is only overcome through death.

There are thus two main lines of thought when considering akrasia and akratic action. Philosophers have long thought that akrasia was a rational failing, in which either one’s passions overtook one’s rational processes, or where one’s evaluative judgments failed to have sufficient motivational force on one’s subsequent actions. In contrast, Paul and Augustine see akrasia as a moral failing that is the result of the Fall, whereby one’s flesh seeks to thwart the Christian’s desire to act in a God-pleasing manner. Despite its long history as a subject of philosophical interest, James himself had little to say about the subject of akrasia.

This is especially surprising given how it was also a topic in his home discipline of psychology. Yet throughout James's corpus, references to akrasia or weakness of will are virtually non-existent. In what follows, I will piece together an account of akratic action based on James's work. I will argue that such a view sits between the philosophical and early Christian accounts of akrasia, although it is ultimately closer to the latter than the former. This view accepts the general picture of the struggle offered by early Christians but replaces the metaphysical idea of "sinful flesh" with a physiological understanding of settled habits. I now turn to an account of James's theory of motivation to set the foundation for this argument.

MOTIVATION AND ACTION

A psychologist's theory of motivation is central to how she conceives of human behavior. Such a theory must perform two tasks: first, it must provide an account of the different kinds of behavior, especially between voluntary and involuntary; and, second, it must explain how these different kinds of behavior differ from and relate to each other.

Whether James considers behavior to be voluntary or involuntary depends on the presence or absence, respectively, of an idea of how to react to a given environmental stimulus.¹⁰ Involuntary behavior includes behavior such as reflexes, twitches, and evolved instincts.¹¹ In each case, the behavior simply happens, without the organism having conscious input into its performance or where the behavior might lead.¹² Consider the case of a twitch. If the twitch happens because you have had far too much espresso in a short period of time, there is no conscious intention to move in such a way prior to the muscle's contraction. You can even twitch after the inevitable crash that leaves you unconscious on the couch. However, you are capable of twitching intentionally—perhaps to give the illusion of having had too much espresso, for comedic effect. In this case, your psychological state is significantly different with respect to the twitch, for you have an idea of what you would like to accomplish through that action. Classifying

involuntary behavior in this way drives James's claim that instinctive actions happen only once, since you will necessarily have some bit of information about what the instinctive behavior would do after you have done it even once.

Voluntary behavior is further subdivided into ideo-motor action and wilful action. In ideo-motor action, the idea of the action is the sufficient cause for that action, wherein "movement follows unhesitatingly and immediately the notion of it in the mind."¹³ In such cases, we are "aware of nothing between the conception [of the movement] and the execution [of the movement]."¹⁴ For example, if someone wishes to open a door, that person reaches for the doorknob, grasps, turns, and pushes. Yet each step along the way is not considered in a conscious manner—at least not in the day-to-day lives of most people. The idea of opening the door is sufficient to bring that action about. In such cases, "incoming sensations instigate [movements] so immediately that it is often difficult to decide whether to call them reflex rather than voluntary acts."¹⁵ Despite this difficulty, James insists that cases of ideo-motor action are voluntary because of the presence of an idea.

Wilful behavior differs from ideo-motor behavior, for in cases of wilful behavior, there are multiple competing and equally attractive ideas of how to proceed that inhibit each other's successful discharge into bodily movement. We feel that even though we have sufficient information to make a decision one way or another, there is no "imperative principle of choice between them," and we are left at a loss of what to do.¹⁶ The two concepts may be equally as strong and equally as attractive to you, but there is a real sense of loss associated with the option you do not choose and a real sense of gain of what you do. In these cases, "both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose."¹⁷ These are the cases in which "we feel . . . as if we ourselves by our own wilful act inclined the beam" to act in one way over another.¹⁸ The distinctive feature of these situations is the feeling of effort that

arises due to the ideational conflict between possible courses of action.

This feeling of effort is central to understanding James's account of action; thus, we must understand its role and function in his psychophysics of action to understand how it motivates behavior. The feeling of effort is a by-product of our neurology and the effect that habituation has on the development of our brains over time. For James, objects of experience stimulate our sensory nerve-roots, which cause nervous energy to travel from those nerve-roots into our brains. Having made their way into the brain, they seek a way out, and in so doing, either "deepen old paths [through the brain] or to make new ones."¹⁹ Whether there is a pathway in the brain will depend on whether the agent has experienced that object of experience or similar objects of experience before and how often. Each pathway corresponds to a series of bodily movements that result in a successful response to the object of experience. The more that an object is experienced, the deeper the pathway gets. As these pathways are used and reused, they become deeper and deeper, making it more and more likely that the behavior which results from this discharge will happen.²⁰ Once a neural pathway is developed, the agent has acquired a habit.

While habit formation occurs primarily in the brain, its ultimate function is to facilitate more effective interaction between the organism and its environment.²¹ This function is accomplished in two ways. First, a habituated action will have a strong degree of motivational force behind that action, merely by virtue of being habituated, regardless of the wishes of the agent at the time.²² Second, a habituated action suppresses actions contrary to that habit.²³ By both motivating the repetition of the habituated action and suppressing contrary action, the agent does not have to expend much cognitive effort to perform that action.²⁴ In general, this makes a habit "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent."²⁵ It is easy and pleasant to stay within one's habits, and revolution is hard and unpleasant.

From this characterization, we can see how a habitual action relates to the feeling of effort that one experiences in volitional action. If we act in accordance with our habits, we do not experience the sensation of effort that we experience when we have competing courses of action. Indeed, we experience effort in two scenarios. First, we may experience the feeling of effort if we try to act against a habituated response. Since habits are a strong motivator and are difficult to resist, any attempt to act against that habit will be strenuous. Second, we may experience the feeling of effort if we encounter an object of experience for which we have no habituated response. In this case, it is not that we are acting in the absence of any kind of response, for that would make it fall more into the category of instinct for James. It is considered to be an instinct because we would have no insight into how effective our response would be. Rather, we have “general forms of discharge” that present possible responses based on the similarity of the object of experience to other objects of experience.²⁶ These general forms of discharge are themselves habits, albeit habits that are imperfectly suited to the object of experience in question.²⁷ Successfully resolving the situation makes it more likely that we activate the same neural pathway responsible for the resolution.

Habituated actions are ideational because they originated as effortful behavior in which there was a clash of ideated possible responses to environmental stimuli. Through practice, the time between stimulus and response is greatly reduced, as is the amount of effort required to overcome competing courses of action. It is this anesthetizing effect of habit that places them in the center of considerations of akrasia. I now turn to a full explanation of what actions are akratic in James’s scheme.

EMBODIED AKRASIA

Akratic actions are universally considered to be defective in some way. The challenge is to determine the character of this defect and the conditions under which it makes actions akratic. To that end, we must now consider which types of behaviors are capable of being akratic in the first place.

All involuntary actions such as reflexes, instincts, or twitches can be automatically excluded because involuntary behavior is not preceded by an idea of how to act or based on any input from the agent. It is rather a direct line from environmental stimulus to response, with no intermediary awareness or insight into why one is responding in that way. Think again of the espresso-induced twitch—this is a result of the biochemical workings of your brain and is not the product of a conscious decision to act in that way. Since you do not intend to twitch or judge twitching to be the best course of action, one cannot act akratically by failing to twitch.

James would exclude ideo-motor actions—well-formed habits—from consideration as well. This is due to the neurological basis of habits and their phenomenological character. In ideo-motor action, an environmental stimulus prompts an idea of how to respond, and the mind acts unhesitatingly on that idea. There is no decision, judgment, or any other sort of *fiat* to act, but rather no resistance put up against the natural discharge of that idea into action. Since there is no judgment, intention, or awareness that contributes to the performance of that action, failing to perform that action does not indicate a breakdown of the causal force between reasons and action, but rather a failure of the action itself. For example, consider a professional baseball player's well-developed habit of reacting to a line drive hit towards him. His reaction is to dive and catch the ball. He does not weigh the options available to him; there is usually insufficient time for such processing. Failing to catch the ball does not mean that he acted akratically; it just means that he failed to catch the ball.

So far, most of this is in agreement with contemporary accounts of akrasia. Where James starts to part ways is with his treatment of wilful behavior. James's account of habit and how it relates to volitional action problematizes traditional thinking about akrasia. Any case of volitional behavior is going to involve multiple competing possible courses of action, all of which have a relatively significant degree of motivational force. Consider the two possible cases of volitional behavior. If you experience the feeling of effort when acting contrary to your settled habits, the

very reason why this is unpleasant and effortful is because your settled habits are strong motivators, and it is difficult to resist acting in this way, especially if this is one of the first times you have acted against that habit. If you experience the feeling of effort because you have no settled habit to respond to a particular object of experience, it is not as though you are acting absent any idea of what to do; rather, you have general patterns of behavior that are motivating you in competing directions towards action. Indeed, if you had no idea about what to do, then by James's account, the response would not be voluntary. There is still a conflict (this is what generates the feeling of effort), and there are still competing sets of habits at work, but the selection is between the sets of these habits. Choosing one set over another will categorize that object of experience as being of the same kind as the objects to which those habits typically respond and result in the formation of a new neural connection. Again, there are competing courses of action, each of which has motivational force.

James draws our attention to the fact that choosing one course of action over another does not neutralize the motivational force of previous contenders or otherwise add enough motivational force on its own to overwhelm the motivational force of those contenders.²⁸ If it did, then we would never experience the feeling of effort, since all our behavior would be either habit-driven or purely reflexive. James also recognizes that not all our motivations are reasons; in fact, it is impossible for us to act in a rational way, isolated from all other arational motivators, such as emotions, desires, and feelings. The strongest motivator for our future behavior is not our rationality, but rather how we have successfully responded to the environment previously—our habits gleaned from experience. However, we must recognize that our evaluative judgments (or intentions) about the best course of action ought to have some weight in our subsequent behavior.

I believe that the best way to balance these two *desiderata* is to follow James in giving an agent's tendencies, dispositions, and settled environmental responses a central role in his account of akrasia. I argue that for James, akrasia is the situation in which an

agent has attempted to act against his or her settled habits, but has failed in that attempt; the resulting action, which would always involve the agent falling back onto a habitual behavior, would be akratic.

There are two important clarifications that must be made before we progress. First, it must be the case that the agent experienced the feeling of effort at some point in the attempt. Suppose that *S*'s habitual response to *p* is to ϕ , and that *S* has decided that she will not ϕ the next time she encounters *p*. If *S* encounters *p*, does not experience the feeling of effort, and subsequently ϕ s, this would qualify as a case of ideo-motor action, which is not capable of being akratic. *S* may have forgotten about her resolution to refrain from ϕ -ing; she may have not noticed that she had encountered *p*; or, maybe she immediately caved in the face of potential effort and resorted to ϕ -ing. Without the feeling of effort, there is no awareness of what you are doing; without awareness, an action cannot be akratic.

While this makes the most sense with respect to acting against a settled habit, it makes less sense with respect to cases in which there is no settled habit. The second clarification deals with such cases. Suppose that *S* has no settled habit with respect to *p*, decides that ψ -ing is preferable to ϕ -ing, and then subsequently ϕ s. In this case, *S* must have underestimated the extent to which ϕ was an established habit with respect to *p*-like objects of experience. The feeling of effort matters here, too. If *S* did not experience the feeling of effort when she failed to ψ , then ϕ was a settled habit that she was unaware was a settled habit; if she did, then she was attempting to act against a settled habit and underestimated just how settled ϕ was. A quirk of this account is that even if *S* had decided to ϕ , and then subsequently ψ s, then *S* had underestimated the motivational force of ψ . With these clarifications out of the way, we can now consider how this account fits with previous accounts of akrasia.

An interesting feature of this account is that it is closest to the early Christian accounts previously described more than other accounts, but naturalized (to an extent). James accepts the general

framework common to both the philosophical and religious accounts in that one's cognitive processes are attempting to resist the motivational force generated by the body (vis-à-vis one's neurology). Unlike Aristotle, but like the early Christian writers, James closes the door on the possibility of mastery over the body. So long as you are alive, you will struggle against certain tendencies of action and thought, and sometimes you will fail. James eschews characterizing the struggle as being between one's flesh and one's spirit; indeed, one's body is just as responsible for enkratic actions as it is for akratic actions. Instead, one's settled habits play the role of the antagonist, pulling the agent in directions that she would rather not be pulled.²⁹ Despite making this change, habit's function in the framework remains the same, and the fight between habituation and cognition is as intractable as the fight between flesh and spirit.

One major point on which James deviates from the Saints is that James does not attach any negative connotations to akratic action with respect to one's moral status. As noted, both Paul and Augustine lament their inability to conquer their bodies' impulses and consider themselves less godly due to this shortcoming. Indeed, sin is required for akrasia to be possible in the first place. James, in contrast, makes no such judgment. In fact, James's clearest description of these actions—which, coincidentally, involves a discussion of Paul and Augustine—makes no mention of akratic action being immoral simply for being akratic, but instead presents both figures as an example of those with “divided wills”—people who have conflicting selves that motivate contradictory behavior.³⁰ James only reserves contempt for one case, the serially akratic, that will be discussed later in this paper.

The account of akrasia given in previous paragraphs also has consequences for contemporary treatments of akrasia. Given James's treatment of action, philosophers are wrong to consider akrasia a problem of rationality—although he might grant that it looks like one, *prima facie*. While we may wish that our actions are always guided by right reason, many—if not most—of our actions are motivated by things other than reasons. It is easy to

claim that *S* ought to ϕ , because *S* judges ϕ to be the best course of action. However, to claim that *S* is irrational if *S* does not ϕ over-rationalizes the conditions under which decisions are typically made. Further, how we respond to reasons are often dictated by arational features of our psychology in subtle and often uncontrollable ways. When we may fail to act on our better judgments or intentions simply because we are feeling angsty, it is hard for James to claim that such a failure is one of rationality.

The question is thus what kind of failure James would consider akrasia to be if not one of rationality or character. The clue can be found in the one time that James does discuss akrasia directly. In *Principles*, James eschews the then-standard terminology of weak wills in favor of discussing what he calls the *obstructed will*. The will—understood as a relation between an agent’s cognitive processes and its ideas, rather than as a discrete element of our psychology that can innervate bodily movements or decide courses of action by *fiat*—is obstructed when its natural tendency to discharge into action is impeded either through a lack of motivation to act (what James calls *impulsion*) or having an excess of inhibitors.³¹ Sometimes this is the result of a lack of focus due to fatigue, conflicting ideas, or even absentmindedness. In other cases, obstruction becomes pathological, where “the vision [attention] may be wholly unaffected, and the intellect clear, and yet the act either fails to follow in some other way. ‘*Video Meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*’ is the classic expression.”³² The “classic expression” is simply Paul’s lament: “I see the better way and approve it, but I follow the worse way.” In this, we see that James has taken the concept of akrasia out of the moral and/or rational spheres and made it a *psychophysical* matter, where the agent fails to act in accordance with her better judgment because her nervous system does not have a structure conducive to bringing about the actions that follow from her judgments.³³ This is supported by James’s idea that akrasia is a form of lethargy, when motivators to act “fail to *get to* the will, fail to draw blood, seem, in so far forth, distant and unreal.”³⁴ In these cases, it is always when an agent fails to overcome a physical predisposition; as per

James's example, the alcoholic never talks of overcoming his sobriety.³⁵

From this, I argue that akratic actions are those when the agent fails to adequately set himself up for success at resisting his habitual action, making akrasia a practical failure. Consider this in terms of James's recommendations in *Principles* for those who wish to alter their habits. In a striking phrase, James says that the overriding goal in such an endeavor is to "*make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.*"³⁶ Our nervous systems can be our enemy because they lock us into certain patterns of behavior that, depending on our age and upbringing, may be impossible to break. James explains that a "low-born" person can never fully learn how to buy the right clothes or speak without a "well-to-do" accent, if his ascension to a higher social class happens after the age of twenty.³⁷ After twenty, our brain has lost much of its plasticity and therefore cannot be reshaped as effectively as it can be before that time. It is, however, possible to keep oneself reasonably flexible through practice and incremental improvement, and through such exercise maintain some degree of adaptability. Central to this thought is the importance of manipulating one's environment to maximize the chance of success for the desired habit to take root and to act on the new habit as frequently and decisively as one can.³⁸ For those who have no pressing need to alter their habits, James has the following advice:

*Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws night, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test.*³⁹

James states that those who do practice resisting their comfortable habits in this way will "stand like a tower when everything rocks

around him, and when his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.”⁴⁰

We can see how the failure involved in akratic action is essentially practical: Akratic actions happen because the agent has not trained herself properly and/or has not manipulated her environment to the extent required to bring about successful resistance of her habituated actions. Consider the following example. Suppose you are binge-watching your favorite show on Netflix, but have a stack of papers to grade. You judge that the best course of action is to grade those papers and intend to do so at the end of the current episode. The current episode ends, and you feel the inner conflict—get up and grade or stay at rest and watch another episode. If you take the latter option, then you are acting akratically.

We must keep two things in mind with respect to this example. First, if the action of getting up to grade feels effortful, it is because there are competing ideas of how to respond to your current circumstances that activate contradictory physiological movements. In this case, you are motivated to both grade papers and to continue watching Netflix; contradictory physiological movements would include getting off your couch (to go get your essays) or remaining at rest. Second, performing your intended action is only possible if your motivation to grade is stronger than your motivation to watch Netflix. We should not underestimate the motivational force enjoyed by the act of watching Netflix in this scenario, even just by virtue of being your current behavior.

Given these points, we can see how James would reject the idea that the central failing of akrasia is rational. Note that neither the act of grading nor the judgment that grading is the best course of action are intrinsically rational actions; they are only rational insofar as they are appropriate responses relative to prior commitments. Judging that grading papers is the best course of action relative to the project of exemplifying a virtuous instructor demonstrates that the agent is rational. It is an appropriate response to the agent’s environment and circumstances. For that judgment to immediately bring about an action, it must have sufficient

motivational force to overcome all competing alternatives. Whether a judgment to ϕ will have enough motivational force to cause ϕ is a consequence of the agent's neurological structure. If the neural pathway responsible for ϕ -ing is not as deep as the neural pathway responsible for some other action ψ , and if ϕ and ψ are possible responses to the agent's current circumstances, then the agent will not ϕ . In circumstances where ψ is not a possible response—say, if the choice were between grading and watching curling, the latter of which has no motivational force for the agent whatsoever—then the agent would have no trouble ϕ -ing. This is not a matter of rationality, but of the presence and relative strength of habits—a practical matter.

The same sort of response is applicable to the idea that the central failing of akrasia is moral. The action that an agent takes will always be the one with the stronger motivational force; that is, the action that results from the most efficient pathway of discharge through the brain. In such cases, there is a strong sense in which the agent's action is decided before she struggled with her competing motivations. In our example, the motivation to continue watching Netflix was too strong for you to begin your grading; thus, you were not capable of performing the moral action and cannot be faulted for not doing what you could not do. This chimes well with the tone of James's treatment of the morbidly-obstructed will. James does not condemn those who are in such a condition for being immoral; rather, he recognizes that they have a psychophysiological problem that needs to be addressed.

The failure involved in the grading-or-Netflix case is the failure to put yourself into a situation where you are more likely to grade papers should you decide to do so, both by training yourself to resist the pull of habituated actions (like watching Netflix) and by manipulating the environment to make your chosen action more likely to come about (e.g., by not beginning to watch Netflix when you have grading to do). Although James does not make the connection explicit, his maxims for developing one's ability to resist habituated action clearly resemble physical exercise, such as resistance training. Just as we do not condemn those who do not

exercise in this way as irrational (relative to the project of a healthy life) or immoral (for failing to prepare themselves for situations in which physical strength is required), we would not, under James's view, condemn those who do not do 'effort training' as being irrational or immoral. That said, those who engage in effort training will have relatively more self-awareness about their own tendencies and the necessary steps required to mitigate those tendencies.

In sum, James's account of akrasia does not give akratic action the same degree of negative connotation found in either philosophical or religious accounts. It merely denotes that the agent has not adapted her environment—and herself—sufficiently towards the desired end to allow for to resist her habituated impulse to do otherwise. While this is within the agent's control, and thus is something for which she may be held responsible, it is also something that adds no extra irrationality or wrongness to the action performed that was not already present in the action. If S intends to not- ϕ , but ϕ s, then ϕ is inappropriate relative to some overarching project regardless of whether S intended to not- ϕ , or whether S intended to ϕ . While akratic action may look irrational or immoral *prima facie*, it instead merely shows that the agent has not reached the point where she can resist her habituated behavior in these circumstances.

This makes James's account of akrasia an interesting point between the philosophical and religious accounts. It accepts the general picture found in religious accounts but rejects its assessment as a reflection on one's character. It also goes further in showing how the disparate selves at war within one person are interwoven with each other and provides a physiological basis for that war. From the philosophical tradition, James accepts that the problem has something to do with one's decision-making ability and the relevance of one's project to determining what counts as akratic action. He rejects the view that it is ultimately a matter of rationality. To both, James adds a sharper focus on the arational factors which contribute to decision-making, including the environmental conditions at the time of decision. This results in

embodied akrasia—akratic action that is the result of a full-fledged agent with competing desires and intentions failing to engage with her environment in a way sufficient to resist her ingrained habits.

AKRASIA AND MELIORISM

The account of akrasia given in previous paragraphs fits neatly with James's work in other areas and illuminates some fascinating connections between such works. The most important of these is the connection to James's doctrine of meliorism, the belief that the world can be made better through human effort. In short, akratic action is a key component of meliorism. Akkratic action provides the agent with valuable information that cannot be gleaned from anything else and acting on that information grounds the agent's belief that improvement is possible through increased effort.

If akratic action involves an agent reverting to her settled habits despite making the conscious effort to act against those habits, then there is a fair bit of awareness at play. The agent must be aware of her decision to make such an attempt, aware that the attempt was made, and aware of the attempt's failure. Her persistent awareness yields information about the attempt and subsequent failure; namely, knowledge of the point at which the failure occurred, and the reason for her failure. Recall that a wilful action is brought about only when all the inhibitors for that action are removed.⁴¹ For James, the strongest inhibitors are alternative courses of action that present an equal—or, quite possibly, superior—amount of satisfaction to the course of action that one is attempting to perform. Watching your favorite show, on a nice, comfortable couch, with some snacks, and texting your friends as they watch along may present itself as a more satisfying way to spend your night than slogging through two hundred papers comparing Locke and Hobbes on the state of nature.

Yet even if you akratically watch Netflix instead of grading, that akratic action reveals the most important factors keeping you from grading. Perhaps you dread the subject matter: You can find new figures to study next time. Perhaps you find essays tedious: You can find new ways to assess a student's grade. Perhaps it is

the isolation: You can find a colleague to grade alongside. Perhaps it is that you leave your grading to the evening: You can rearrange your day to grade in the morning. Regardless, trying and failing provides you with information that you can then take and use to increase the likelihood of success the next time you are faced with a similar situation.

More importantly, akratic action reveals that it is not an external force that is keeping you from following through with your intentions but rather that it is an internal matter. If an action is akratic, then external forces are not responsible for the failure to act in the proper manner. If you decide to grade your papers, realize that you left them at the office, and therefore go back to watching Netflix, that action is not akratic—it was just impossible due to circumstances of which you were not aware. The failure of akratic action is always something within the agent's control; as such, it is something that can be avoided and ultimately eliminated through effort and practice. Akratic actions thus reveal that our efforts can make a difference to outcomes, even if they did not manage to do so in that particular instance. Since this information is only available through akratic action, it makes akratic action a significant component for an optimistic outlook towards human development and progress. Once this optimism is extrapolated to society or the universe, akratic action becomes foundational for James's entire project of meliorism. Akratic action shows that habits do not lead to action fatally, and that it is possible, through extra effort and determination, that an agent could always act otherwise—the very foundation of free will for James. Being able to act otherwise implies that the course of the universe is in some way pliable and undetermined. In short, we know that we can make things better in the world, because we can make things better with ourselves.

Akratic action's cognitive function and its connection to meliorism help explain James's contempt for the serially akratic. James claims that there is "no more contemptable type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion,

but who never does a manly concrete deed.”⁴² This contempt is echoed in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” where James criticizes the “boor” who, through his intolerance for the feelings of unease associated with having unsettled beliefs about philosophical topics, takes the first position presented to him as absolute fact in order to alleviate that unease.⁴³ In both cases, James criticizes those who make a habit out of resolving an undertaking, but then abandoning it at the first sign of resistance.⁴⁴ This makes sense, given the practical nature of *akrasia* and the possibility of avoiding it through preparation: If one repeatedly resolves to not- ϕ , but then ϕ s, then one is engaging in a protracted exercise in self-delusion. Trying and failing is only a problem if you make no attempt to use that information in the future to maximize the possibility of success.⁴⁵

This account of embodied *akrasia* not only invites us to think differently about how failure to act in accordance with our better judgment fits in within our understanding of practical reason, but also how to think of its role within our understanding of human progress and our ability to make the universe better through our collective efforts.

THE PROBLEM OF JAMES’S (OUTDATED) NEUROLOGY

While James’s account of *akrasia* is intriguing, the fact that it is based on his neurology hinders its potential to reorient debates on this topic. To be charitable, James’s neurology is horribly outdated. No contemporary figure would espouse a drainage-channel model of neurology. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to reconcile James’s work with modern cognitive science, I believe that enough of a reconciliation is possible to preserve the core insights upon which James’s account of *akrasia* is based, if one understands James’s work functionally. To that end, I will now briefly turn to the work of Daniel Kahneman, whose two-tiered model of reasoning both resonates with James’s account of the struggle between habituated, easy responses on one hand and reasoned, difficult responses on the other.

The clearest explanation of Kahneman’s two-tiered model of reasoned action is found in his 2011 work *Thinking, Fast and*

Slow. In that book, Kahneman posits that our cognitive abilities fall within one of two broadly-understood systems. System One is characterized by being quick and reflexive (“fast” thinking); System Two is sluggish and reflective.⁴⁶ Being quick and reflexive, responses which originate in System One require very little effort on the part of the individual.⁴⁷ Responses which originate in System Two, however, place greater demands on our cognitive capacities and thus require varying degrees of effort in proportion to the demands of the task.⁴⁸ Since System Two is inherently lazy and seeks to conserve energy whenever possible, we often default to system one responses unless we are strongly invested in the outcome of the decision, or if we have no System One response to which we can default.⁴⁹

While the connection to James’s work is clear, Kahneman’s view rejects one key feature of James’s work: the “explosiveness” of the will. For James, we experience discomfort because the will must act and act now: not having a clear path of discharge results in the buildup of nervous energy. For Kahneman, System Two is not explosive, but lethargic, and discomfort is because burning any energy is unpleasant. Even with this modification, the core picture that James presents is maintained, including the extension to consciousness. According to Kahneman, control and volitional behavior is rooted in System Two.⁵⁰ System Two is also what either endorses or rejects the intuitive responses that are provided by System One. In all cases where System Two is at work, we feel effort as extra energy is being expended; in all cases of extra energy being expended, we have System Two at work. Our conscious life is wholly contained in the use of this energy. Indeed, our mental lives are wholly comprised of the instances where System One is insufficient or leads to disastrous results.⁵¹

Again, it is impossible to fully reconcile James’s outdated neurology here, but it is clear that there is at least one potentially fruitful connection between James’s work and contemporary psychology, and there are likely others.⁵² If we take James’s model figuratively or at least functionally, then the model that he presents is not so far-fetched. This is especially the case given that the

phenomenological effects of System Two reasoning, for Kahneman, echo those of wilful action for James; namely, they are effortful and often unpleasant. Further, they are empirically measurable.⁵³ More work must be done to explore the possibility of reconciling James's work with Kahneman's; I leave this to future scholarship.⁵⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study of akrasia has a long and distinguished history. Although it stems from a common sense insight about how better judgments ought to inform behavior, one's conception of akratic action is a central feature of one's treatment of action as a whole, especially how one conceives of the motivational force between judgments and intentions on the one hand, and actions on the other. James's account of akrasia and akratic action deviates from the traditional accounts found in both philosophy and from early Christian sources. James accepts the Christian view that akrasia is the result of conflicting motives from within, but rejects the framework and language of sin and redemption. James accepts the view of philosophy that akrasia involves some defect in the decision-making process, but rejects that akratic action is indicative of irrationality. Instead, James's embodied view of akrasia holds that akratic action is the result of an agent attempting to act in a way contrary to one's settled habits, but failing. This failure is not the result of a flaw of character or rationality; instead it is largely a misestimation of the effort required to act in such a way. This gives the agent some valuable information for how to avoid akratic action in the future, thus paving the way for gradual self-improvement. This suggests that akratic action is a key component for James's doctrine of meliorism.

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NOTES

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¹ For Aristotle's full account of *akrasia*, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a24–52a36.

² *Ibid.*, 1151a30–52a8.

³ Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For an overview, see Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," esp. 39–46.

⁶ An alternative definition is found in the work of Richard Holton. Holton argues that there is a clear distinction between *akrasia* and "weakness of will" (Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 70–2, 83–6). Holton reserves the term *akrasia* is for cases in which *S* judges ϕ to be the best course of action, but then resolves to not- ϕ . (85). Weakness of will refers to "unreasonable revision of a contrary inclination defeating intention (a resolution) in response to the pressure of those very inclinations" (78). Roughly speaking, the difference is this: *akrasia* is a flaw in the priority *S* gives her own evaluative judgments, and weakness of will is a flaw in *S*'s ability to follow through with her intention.

As we shall see, James's account sounds very similar to how Holton defines weakness of will (indeed, this is James's preferred terminology as well). However, James would not accept the distinction on Holton's grounds. As defined by Holton, *akrasia* would be a subset of weakness of will; specifically, the most extreme version of it, where the desire to not- ϕ is so weak that it cannot even stave off one's contrary inclination to ϕ long enough for one to form a resolution to not- ϕ . As defined, these two concepts exist on a gradient rather than being separate concepts in their own right. As any further consideration of this distinction would take us well beyond the scope of the present project, and that it would not affect my argument regardless of outcome, I will

note Holton's distinction but exclusively use the term *akrasia* throughout the paper.

⁷ Romans 7: 15, 18, 22–24. (RSV)

⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 153–54.

¹⁰ James, *Principles*, 1132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1004.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1004–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113–14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

²³ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130. *Italics in original.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128–29.

²⁹ I must note that habit plays a central role in Augustine's work as well. Consider the following passage: "The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion" (Augustine, *The Confessions*, 143). Clearly, habit is central to forming a poor character, but for Augustine, this ultimately stems from the corrupted will. James does not see the will as inherently corrupted, but does see it working in roughly the way envisioned by Augustine.

³⁰ See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 143–45.

³¹ James, *Principles*, 1152.

³² *Ibid.*, 1153.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1153.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1155.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 126. Italics in original.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127–28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130. Italics in original.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴³ James, *Will to Believe*, 62–63.

⁴⁴ What sets the serially akratic apart from those with a morbidly obstructed will is that the former judge ϕ to be the best course of action, try to ϕ , but then habitually abandon their intention to ϕ at the first sign of resistance, while the latter judge ϕ to be the best course of action, but then never ϕ . A smoker who understands the harm of his habit but never resolves to quit would be a case of the morbidly obstructed will, while a smoker who vows that every cigarette is his last would be serially akratic.

⁴⁵ While this may seem similar to Aristotle's virtue-based account of akrasia, it differs in several important respects. First, as noted, James does not believe that mastery is ever possible. Instead, what he is advocating here is being prepared for future circumstances; his fire insurance analogy is particularly noteworthy in this respect (James, *Principles*, 130). The agent is not being enkratic because they have an enkratic character, but rather they are being enkratic so that they can respond effectively to future trials. Second, there is a degree of repetition and awareness of one's akratic behavior in James that is emphasized less in Aristotle. Failing to develop the ability to power through the feeling of effort results in someone who knowingly fails to do anything that might be unpleasant. Knowing that you could

improve, and how to improve, but then not doing what you need to do in order to improve, only compounds the akrasia and leads to self-fulfilling prophecies.

⁴⁶ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 20–21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22, 47–48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21–23, 28–29.

⁵² Another candidate for reconciliation with James is work on ego depletion; see Baumeister, “Ego Depletion,” 1252–65.

⁵³ Kahneman, 43.

⁵⁴ A recent attempt to modernize James in this way may be found in Brunson, “Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth,” 29–47. Brunson suggests that we ought to read James’s work, especially “The Sentiment of Rationality,” as an early articulation of processing fluency (Brunson, “Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth,” 32–5). While Brunson’s work has merit and ought to be commended, I believe that he has misinterpreted James’s intention behind “The Sentiment of Rationality,” which I believe ought to be read as an early articulation of the affect heuristic instead. Unfortunately, it is well beyond the scope of the present project to articulate my reasons any further.