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An Argument for Akrasia

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In *Protagoras*, Socrates makes an argument against the idea that *akrasia* is possible—that is, he argues that it is impossible for an agent to deliberately choose an action that the agent does not believe will be to its benefit. For the purposes of this paper, Socrates' argument against *akrasia* in *Protagoras* will be: (1) An agent has a choice to do or not do action *X*, (2) the agent believes that doing action *X* is more beneficial than not doing it, (3) so the agent will always do action *X*. In this paper, I will argue that *akrasia* is possible, contradicting Socrates' view and several other arguments that favor his position. To do so, I will present a counterexample which shows that *akrasia* is possible, even on a metalevel, and then several possible objections.

The Counterexample Required

Saying that *akrasia* is impossible is a bold claim as it only takes one conceivable, possible instance of *akrasia* to be a sufficient counterexample; I will illustrate one such instance by positing the following premises. First, only reason is reliable to decide what actions are most beneficial. While the souls of the rest of the animal kingdom, and arguably some humans, seem to be devoid of reason and thus only have the unreasoned elements of the soul to obey, rational human beings have access as agents to reason, and it seems evident from examining the human condition that actions that most conform to reason are the clearest and most beneficial actions to take. Even if the capacity of the agent to reason is lesser than others, it is far more reliable to assess the benefits of an action, or even to acquire knowledge of the benefits of an action as Socrates proposes, than to rely on the unreasonable part or parts of the soul.¹ Second, it follows that if reason rules, then what is most beneficial will be chosen. Third, it also follows that if reason does not rule, then what is most beneficial may or may not be chosen. This is evident when examining animal natures of all kinds, including humans. It is most beneficial to hydrate the body when one is dehydrated, and an appetite of thirst arises in the soul to compel an action of drinking water. However, if an agent, seduced by appetites to drink from a river that causes dysentery, drinks from the river to quell its thirst, the most beneficial option to abstain from drinking is abandoned in favor of the less beneficial option, leading to far worse dehydration than before. Clearly, when reason is not ruling, either because it is absent or silenced, the agent's choices will be terribly unclear in choosing what is most beneficial. Fourth, the crux of the argument is that an agent can choose whether or not reason will rule it. As a conscious agent with access to reason, it seems evident that conscious choices are possible—that is, it seems evident that a rational agent has the ability to freely make its choices by virtue of its agency. If an agent has the ability to make choices, then it follows that the agent has the ability to decide whether or not its reason will rule

¹ Plato, *Protagoras* 356c-357c

its ultimate actions. If the agent does not have this ability, then it seems that no agency exists in the agent at all and that all people, who are mistakenly ascribed agency, are really just automatons obeying whatever part of the soul happens to be controlling their actions, which seems absurd. Even if this were not absurd, then it seems that Socrates' argument cannot apply to people as agents, since these people would not have agency after all, and thus his argument would be irrelevant to us. Fifth, it follows from the second and fourth premises that if the agent chooses to have reason rule, then it is indeed impossible for it to commit *akrasia*. An error in reason is hardly a conscious act against reason and thus the clearest depiction of right action. The counterexample emerges, however, in the sixth premise: if the agent chooses not to have reason rule, then it is conceivable and possible that it can commit *akrasia*.

The agent, in choosing to let something other than reason rule it, can fulfill the requirements of *akrasia* in that it will believe an action to be most to their benefit but will do an action that is less beneficial. The reasoning part of the soul, regardless of what position of authority the agent places it in its soul at any given moment, is the only part of the soul capable of determining the most beneficial action; it will form beliefs about the benefits of any action and it will inevitably form the most reliable beliefs. The reasoning agent, if it chooses at any moment to displace reason from its ruling position, still has reason in the soul with the correct beliefs about the benefits of any particular action. The agent committing *akrasia*, however, through whatever cause, places the unreasoning or nonrational parts of the soul in the ruling place, in which, as with the dysentery example, it can do the action which is least beneficial, while reason, from its now demoted position in the soul, continues to hold the belief that not drinking from the river is the most beneficial action.

The Evident Psychology

Before going into objections, I will briefly overview the psychology that I think is most apparent in the human soul as a rational agent. It seems evident that the human soul is made of distinct parts since it seems there are components of the soul that do not always agree. When one is, for example, tempted by an appetite which is known, or believed, to be not beneficial, there is a conscious awareness of this appetite and a conflict between the goals of that appetite and the goals of the part of the soul warning against it. The presence of conflict is enough to display that there is a division of interests within the agent, distinct parts of the soul. If the soul is simple, having no parts, there would be no conflict as something simple cannot move against itself. It also seems evident that the part warning against appetite is actively using reason and rational thought to dissuade the agent from indulging that appetite, and this is clearly the rational or reasonable part of the soul. How many components of the soul there are is not relevant to my argument, only that there is a distinct reasoning part of the soul opposed to a nonrational part or parts, though

the argument that Plato posits for three parts of the reasonable, the spirited, and the appetitive is compelling and enough to satisfy that there is a distinct reasoning part of the soul that has different motivations and reliability than the other part or parts.² What is key to my psychological claim, however, is that the reasoning part of the soul is the only part that can generate beliefs and that the agent, if one is an agent at all, has the ability and authority to decide what will rule or at least guide its actions.

There is an objection to this point about the reason alone holding the beliefs of a soul while the unreasoning parts of the soul do not that seems to be raised in the paper “Socrates on the Emotions.” The claim is made that Socrates’ objection to *akrasia* rests on the psychological claim that beliefs formed by the nonrational parts of the soul at some point override the beliefs formed by the rational part so that “the belief held by the agent at the time of acting is the product of a non-rational belief-forming process at the moment of action”; the soul is acting according to what it believes to be best.³ Brickhouse and Smith offer a scenario where a crowd of people, enraptured by a tragedy and feeling the emotions tailored to its delivery do not rationally accept that they are experiencing loss, yet their nonrational emotional beliefs override that rational disbelief allowing for emotions to swell up as if they were experiencing the tragedy themselves. The problem with this psychology is that it is not clear whether one is *believing* a story when one is engaging the presented material of a play or monologue or any other performance. Usually, the accepted parlance is that the audience ‘suspends their disbelief’ when consuming a story for entertainment or emotional satisfaction. There is something to this expression that should not be overlooked. The audience, in suspending their rational *disbelief* of the scenario presented before them, allows their emotions, or any nonrational element of their soul, to be satisfied when engaging in entertainment. They may be using the rational parts of their soul in a diminished state to create beliefs at the behest of their souls’ nonrational parts, rationalizing what is irrational, during the performance so that they may make sense of the situation being presented to them. So long as the story or performance is not so ludicrous as to awaken the rational part of the soul, causing the audience to put their rational disbelief guard up so to speak, the audience will accept what is happening. What cannot be said to be happening is that the nonrational parts of the soul are creating beliefs of their own to counter beliefs the rational part of the soul is making. Since it is not clear that nonrational parts of the soul can generate beliefs to overcome rational beliefs, this argument that one overcome with emotion does what he believes is most beneficial, thus making a point against *akrasia*, is objectionable.

² Plato, *Republic* 4.435c-442c

³ Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, “Socrates on the Emotions,” *Plato Journal* 15 (2015): 13-15

Perhaps one could grant that human psychology allows for beliefs to form in nonrational parts of the soul and that I am just obfuscating the objection by stating that rational parts of the soul create beliefs for nonrational parts, but a firm counterexample should dispel any such notion. It was made evident earlier that humans, as rational agents, have rational and nonrational parts of their soul. Animals are creatures with souls as well, but it cannot be said that they are rational souls. It can be said then that the animal's soul is made of only nonrational parts, or perhaps is simple and nonrational. If animal souls can only be made of nonrational parts, and nonrational parts of the soul can generate beliefs, then it must be that animals can form beliefs. However, the capacity of animals to form beliefs does not seem evident in their behavior. In fact, given that animals act based on genetic programming and response to environmental stimuli, they may very well be described as organic automatons composed of appetites and behaviors to fulfill those appetites. Automatons do not form beliefs in any meaningful sense, as they are purely responding to programming when certain external conditions are met. Since it seems clear that animals cannot form beliefs, even though they have souls composed of nonrational parts, it can be concluded that nonrational parts of souls do not create beliefs of their own. This leaves the belief making solely up to the rational part of the soul, which means that if an agent follows an appetite against the beliefs generated by the rational part of the soul, it has committed *akrasia*.

Agency Has a Say

The question now arises whether I am obfuscating again by comparing animals to humans, as it seems consistent with Socrates' argument to say that the rational parts of the soul, in making beliefs for the nonrational parts, is simply fulfilling a function in which the agent forms beliefs about what is best for one to do so that "everything we do is always motivated by a rational desire."⁴ It is important to note, however, that according to the psychology I laid out, the agent's power of choice plays the key role in determining whether the rational part of the soul is rightfully acting according to reason or simply doing the bidding of the nonrational forces of the soul. In this case where *akrasia* is possible, the nonrational forces bid the rational part of the soul to create beliefs to support their aims, and the agent has the final say in whether to have the rational part of the soul speak freely for itself or slavishly for the nonrational forces. For the agent to make its choice in a case of *akrasia*, the rational part of the soul and the nonrational forces have already made their positions known in what the agent should do in the scenario at hand. It is only at the moment when the agent makes its final choice to obey the nonrational forces that the rational part of the soul creates a belief to support following through on the action that it

⁴ Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socratic Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 79

had just warned against; the ‘nonrational’ belief is created only after the consent is given by the agent to act. The nonrational action is then rationalized in retrospect to the action. To clarify, it does not seem necessary that the action itself is already followed through for the rationalization to take place, but it is necessary that the agent has chosen to obey the nonrational parts of the soul and whatever desires it bids the rational part of the soul to rationalize. Once the rationalization takes place, it seems almost impossible for the agent to backtrack and totally protect itself from acting contrary to reason; the rational part of the soul is now corrupted, and now beliefs in obedience and defiance to reason are competing for primacy. While not completely protected, the agent can still possibly choose the beliefs that the rational part of the soul had created before the dilemma had emerged, but it is much harder for the agent to do so at this point as opposed to the point before it willingly gave nonrational forces permission to use the rational part of the soul to create beliefs sympathetic to their desires. During this whole deliberation period, since reason is the only reliable master for the agent to obey to do what is most beneficial, the agent, in choosing to both rationalize the nonrational and then obey the rationalized beliefs has made it possible to commit *akrasia*. It seems right that even when the agent has chosen to abandon reason, the beliefs the rational part of the soul had formed on its own are still present in the soul, but only willingly silenced by the agent just as an audience does while trying to enjoy a dramatic performance.

If the beliefs from the rational part of the soul are still present but willingly silenced so the agent can obey the nonrational forces of the soul, and its rationalized beliefs, without conflict, then that itself seems like a case of *akrasia*. Indeed, it seems like the mere choice of the agent to rationalize the nonrational forces or to dim the rational part of the soul can be seen as something contrary to reason, and thus not the most beneficial action to take. Before the rationalization, there is a moment where the only beliefs in the person’s soul are from the rational part of the soul. In this moment, the only way for the nonrational parts of the soul to have their desires rationalized is if the agent chooses to place the nonrational part of the soul in charge and have the rational part create beliefs for them. So, in this moment, if the agent chooses to rationalize the nonrational, the agent acts against what it believes to be most beneficial, and thus commits *akrasia* on the metalevel—that is, the agent committed *akrasia* during the deliberation period rather than after deliberating and acting.

The case of the drunk driver comes to mind as a pertinent example, even as a macrocosm of what takes place within a soul at the moment of decision. The actions of the drunk driver during his intoxication are hard to read, as the rational part of his soul is dimmed. It is clear that his actions are rarely going to be beneficial, but it is also clear that his actions do not seem to be his own. One could argue that *akrasia* is not present in his situation; his actions are not done in

deliberate contradiction to his reason as it is dimmed by intoxication. The *akrasia* is clearly present, however, in the run up to his intoxication; he willingly chose to intoxicate himself to a point where his reason could not fight back against nonrational forces. It seems like this example of *akrasia* is even more evident when someone deliberately does this to drown the reason into silence. So, when someone deliberately silences his reason, giving the nonrational forces power over his actions so that the rational part of the soul rationalizes the nonrational desires, that seems to be a case of *akrasia*.

These cases of *akrasia* seem even able to withstand the knowledge requirement that Socrates' seems to make. Evans argues that the component of knowledge is key to Socrates' argument against *akrasia*, given that knowledge is not something that can be swayed by any appetite or emotion.⁵ I think that this aspect does not sufficiently address the issue that I raised with the deliberate choice that the agent possesses. If an agent has knowledge of what is most beneficial, even the knowledge that Socrates suggests is possible, the agent can still choose to place nonrational forces in the ruling position of the soul, just as a man can willingly silence his reason to momentarily silence any conflict in his soul. To again use Plato's example of the city-to-man analogy as an illustration, it is possible for the reasoned element of a city, the philosophers, to have true knowledge, but simply having that knowledge does not mean that the reasoned element of the city is thereby placed in command of the city's affairs. Unless the reasoned element of the city is placed in power by the city, the knowledge will not be used to rule the actions of the city. So it is with the agent's soul that unless the reason rules according to the agent's consent, even knowledge will not be sufficient to avoid wrongdoing. The appetites or the spirit or any other nonrational force would be in charge, and the knowledge that the rational part possesses will be ignored. Again, it seems even choosing to put the nonrational forces in charge is a case of metalevel *akrasia*, which still seems possible with knowledge given the agent's aforementioned power of decision.

Some Objections

A possible objection to my metalevel counterexample could be that it is impossible to tell that in any moment of deliberation the rational part of the soul has generated beliefs of its own prior to the nonrational parts bullying the agent to rationalize nonrational desires. This objection can be thwarted by illustrating the persistence of rational beliefs about decisions before, during, and after the action is undertaken. People hold rational beliefs about what they should and should not do whether they are in the respective circumstance the rational belief is about. People concerned

⁵ Matthew Evans, "A Partisan's Guide to Socratic Intellectualism," in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 6-33

with health always believe that eating inordinate amounts of cake is bad for their health, but it is only during a moment of deliberation when the appetites rise that an agent would choose to rationalize their appetites and pit them against the purely rational beliefs. When the moment of deliberation is past, they will again have their rational beliefs about eating cake, this time cleared of all rationalized appetites, along with a feeling of accomplishment or guilt depending on the action they took.

There is an objection that seems common among some scholars that Socrates' rejection of *akrasia* hinges entirely on the premise that hedonism is true. Weiss argues in favor of such a position, going so far as to say, "The alternative to this general approach is...to understand Socrates to be denying, *only given hedonism*, the possibility of acting contrary to one's beliefs. It is only once...people have been transformed into one-dimensional pleasure maximizers that *akrasia* is precluded."⁶ Since knowledge is described as an accurate system of measuring the pleasures and pains that one may experience in life, then having this knowledge would indeed preclude any deviation from the most beneficial good, according to Weiss. This will align with Socrates' argument that ignorance is to blame for errors in judgement, but not a willing choice, since it is always the goal of maximal pleasure that is being pursued in hedonism. I will not, however, go into the details of how Socrates does not reject *akrasia* in the absence of hedonism because it is irrelevant to the argument and counterexample I have presented. Even in hedonism, *akrasia* is still possible. In my counterexample, the deliberation could be about any kind of beneficial standard, hedonist or not, and it will still result in the possibility of *akrasia* in the moment of decision of whether to rationalize the nonrational desires in the soul. If ultimate pleasure is concerned, and one's rational belief is that abstaining from cake will be more pleasurable overall for one's life, then choosing to rationalize the nonrational desire to eat cake will still be a case of *akrasia* on the metalevel as I have already illustrated.

Conclusion

Socrates' argument against the possibility of *akrasia* is compelling and more forceful than one might initially think given its simple and counterintuitive nature, but it is unsound due to the counterexample I have proposed objecting to the inference to (3) from (1) and (2) that Socrates proposes in *Protagoras*. I have presented a sound psychology showing that the soul is composed of a rational part of the soul and at least one nonrational part and that the rational part of the soul is alone capable of generating beliefs. In that, and against objections, I have shown that beliefs generated by the rational part of the soul are solely present in the soul before rationalization of nonrational desires takes place. In rationalizing the

⁶ Roslyn Weiss, *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 62-63

nonrational, which is an action contrary to reason, one commits *akrasia* on the metalevel and then opens oneself up to commit a tangible action that constitutes *akrasia*.

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