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[N.B.: In order to devote more space to my argument, I have omitted all footnote material, though I retain the note numbers in the text. Persons interested may obtain the notes from me in Chicago, or upon request via (216) 397-4786, or, <pmooney@jcvaxa.jcu.edu>. Apologies for any frustration.]

§1. Introduction.

My answer to the question asked in the paper's title is: akratic action--acting contrary to what one believes or knows is the best course of action open to one, or “weakness of will”—is not rational at all, according to Aristotle (here restricting myself to his discussion of akrasia in the Nicomachean Ethics, VII.1-3). In saying that it is ‘not rational at all,’ I have in mind that there is no “intellectual,” or “cognitive,” faculty at work which so much as helps to bring about the akratic act—there is, in other words, no way in which the akrates “figures out” how to perform the akratic act.

For those readers who believe that Aristotle’s account of akrasia involves two warring “practical syllogisms” (a view to be discussed shortly), my claim should come as a bit of a surprise, because what I will call the “two-syllogisms” interpretation of Aristotle is incompatible with it. According to the two-syllogisms view, Aristotelian akratic action is at least somewhat rational. Thus, for example, I disagree with the great Burnet, who maintains that it is “Aristotle’s great contribution to moral psychology” that there is an intellectual element involved in vice and weakness.1 On my view, Aristotle does not believe that there is an intellectual element involved in weakness.

Other readers will find a certain aspect of the argument for my view a little surprising. Since Aristotle partly intended for his account of akrasia to refute Socrates’ rejection of akrasia (as I shall argue in Section 2), since the two-syllogisms account would surely not have refuted Socrates or the Socratic (as I shall argue in Sections 3 and 4), and if we allow the amount of interpretive charity appropriate for one as great as Aristotle—so that we allow that Aristotle would see that such an account (if indeed such an account had occurred to him to give) would not refute Socrates or the Socratic—then we have good reason to suppose that Aristotle did not give a two syllogisms account of akrasia. This argument will surprise because it suggests that Aristotle, unlike most of us moderns, takes Socrates’ rejection of akrasia seriously enough to use it as a philosophical foil in discussing his own views. In fact, as I will point out below, Aristotle uses Socrates’ position as something of a “test” for the soundness of certain “common beliefs” about akrasia that he wishes to defend. Aristotle’s attitude towards Socrates’ rejection of akrasia is thus not as enthusiastically negative as modern ones tend to be, and this insight provides for us an important interpretive constraint upon our reading of his own positive account of akrasia, viz., that it should turn out to be philosophically apposite to the Socratic, and not necessarily to the non-Socratic. (Are we to suppose that there were no Socratics about akrasia, or, at least, Socratic-leaners, in Aristotle’s student audience?) So, in order to see how a crucial portion of Aristotle’s account of akrasia is supposed to work, we will need to take some Socratic presumptions with us to the text. This, indeed, is an unusual approach to take in examining issues regarding akrasia in general, as well as an unusual approach in examining Aristotle’s discussion in particular.

In fact, the vast portion of my paper will be devoted to setting out this Aristotelian-Socratic exchange on akrasia that I believe lies just below the surface of Aristotle’s
discussion in the *Ethics*, and that has gone mostly unnoticed and unexploited in the previous scholarship on Aristotle's account of *akrasia*. (Considerations of space will have me single-mindedly arguing for that point, to the exclusion of including a discussion of what I believe is Aristotle's real account of *akrasia*.) A posthumous dialogue—so to speak—between Socrates and Aristotle on this topic is rich in resources, I think: If my reason is a good one for finding dubious what I have called a "two-syllogisms" interpretation of Aristotelian *akrasia*, then some strengths of the Socratic psychology of action are revealed that otherwise remain mostly hidden. Some of these strengths are unlocked upon a more careful reading of one of Socrates' near contemporaries—someone, notably, who has found plenty more favor among modern philosophers than has Socrates.³

Since so much of what I have to say about Aristotle's account of *akrasia* depends upon my view that he uses Socrates' rejection of *akrasia* as a test for the correctness of common beliefs about *akrasia* that he wishes to defend, I begin by arguing for this claim.

§2: How Aristotle Constructs His Own Discussion of Akrasia Around the Task of Giving an (Un-Socratic) Answer to Socrates and the Socratic.

There can be little question, I think, that Aristotle's account of *akrasia* is, in considerable part, constructed as a response to Socrates' infamous denial of the possibility of *akrasia*. This can be seen, to begin with, by considering the method of approach that Aristotle announces he will follow in examining *akrasia* (1145b3-7), and, secondly, by considering how his approach imposes upon him the task of having to philosophically confront Socrates' rejection of *akrasia*.

Here is Aristotle's announced method of approach (I shall rely heavily upon the Irwin translation of the *Ethics*, with my very few departures discussed in the notes):

*As in the other cases we must set out the appearances (τὰ φαινόμενα), and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs (τὰ ένδοξα) about these ways of being affected—ideally, all the common beliefs, but if not all, then most of them, and the most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs are left, it will be an adequate proof.*⁴

We must not simply accept the common beliefs about *akrasia*, I take Aristotle's overall point to be, without first subjecting those beliefs to some critical examination. So he will first say what the common beliefs (τα phainomena or τα endoxa)⁵ are about *akrasia* before considering some difficulties, or objections, that they encounter; and then, if possible, he will try to show that all of the common beliefs about it are nevertheless true in spite of the difficulties. Should the common beliefs hold up under such scrutiny, this will be a sufficient argument on their behalf.

Per his method of approach, Aristotle then proceeds to list some common beliefs (1145b8-21). On account of space considerations, I here list only those that I believe are most relevant for my discussion. These are that,

*The enkrates (the one who is "strong of will") is the same as the one who abides by his rational calculation, and the akrates is the same as the one who (steps outside of)⁶ it,*

and that,

*The akrates knows that his actions are base, but does them because of his feelings, while the enkrates knows that his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them.*

If Aristotle is to defend these beliefs (amongst others) against objections, then he may need to show how it is possible for a person to "step outside of" his or her rational
calculation (presumably, a calculation about what’s best for the person to do right now—if not, then this cannot be a common belief about akrasia) and yet, because of his or her feelings, act contrary to what has been calculated.

But is knowledge a state against which one may act? A negative answer to this question seems to lie in the offering, and we thus have the first difficulty raised against the common beliefs. If knowledge is strong, after all, then the common beliefs about akrasia—at least those which maintain that knowledge is weak in such circumstances—must be incorrect.

Now Aristotle introduces the difficulty saying (1145b21-22): “We might be puzzled about the sort of correct supposition someone has when he acts akratically,” and, as will be seen, subsequently cites reasons against there being any such sort of correct supposition. But it is chiefly Aristotle’s concern with Socrates’ rejection of akrasia that leads to this difficulty, or aporia. Here is what Aristotle then immediately says about Socrates and his denial of akrasia (1145b22-27):

First of all some say (the akrares) cannot have knowledge [at the time he acts]. For it would be terrible, Socrates thought, for knowledge to be in someone, but mastered by something else, and dragged around like a slave. For Socrates fought against the account [of akrasia] in general, in the belief that there is no akrasia; for no one, he thought, supposes while he acts that his action conflicts with what is best; our action conflicts with what is best only because we are ignorant [of the conflict].

If Socrates is right, then, surely, the person cannot, per the first common belief that I have listed, step outside of his or her rational calculation about what’s best, nor can he or she act on feeling rather than on knowledge, per the second common belief.

At b24 Aristotle evidently quotes from the Protagoras, noting Socrates’ denial there that knowledge can be dragged around by pleasure like a slave. But why does Socrates deny this? Aristotle answers this question in the following way (beginning at b26): because Socrates also thinks that the person believes that the action he is performing, as he performs it, is the best action to perform. In other words, Socrates’ view, according to Aristotle, is that, since no one acts against what he or she believes is best for him or her at the time of acting, and since knowledge is a species of belief, neither can one act against what one knows is best for him or her at the time of acting. Knowledge is strong because belief is strong. This account of Socrates’ view implies that, in discussing akrasia, we must be quite indifferent about what the sort of correct supposition is that is acted against; for purposes of getting clear about akrasia, according to Aristotle, knowledge is no better than true belief (1145b35-46a4; 46b25-31). So as Aristotle evidently sees things, the main issue of akrasia—at least as far as dealing with Socrates’ rejection of akrasia is concerned—is whether or not one can act against a strong conviction that one has about what’s best for one—never mind what sort of conviction this might happen to be. At the very least, we might imagine Aristotle saying to himself, Socrates’ argument about the strength of knowledge captures this point, for (as Aristotle represents that view) it is based upon the notion that belief is strong.

It follows that if Socrates is right about knowledge, he’s just as right about true belief. It may be added that Socrates is then also just as right about phronesis, that intellectual virtue which Aristotle identifies with the ethically virtuous person since it, too, involves having correct beliefs about what is best to do in one’s present circumstance (1140b4-5, 11-16). Knowledge, strongly held true belief and phronesis are the three sorts of correct
supposition that Aristotle considers as candidates for being the sort that is acted against during akrasia; all three of them are found wanting; the first two are found wanting because of Socrates' rejection of akrasia; and the third may be added as wanting in this regard because of the way in which Aristotle explains Socrates' argument against akrasia.

It seems, then, that Aristotle must have supposed that one good test for the viability of the common beliefs is whether or not they manage to stand up against Socrates' view about the strength of knowledge (as Aristotle understands that view). Remember: The common beliefs are to be defended against various puzzles about them, and Socrates' rejection of akrasia is evidently the source of the first puzzle. So even if Aristotle thinks Socrates is wrong about akrasia, he evidently does not think that Socrates is obviously wrong about it. (Why bother, after all, with defending the common beliefs against a difficulty inspired by a view that is obviously wrong?) From Aristotle's point of view, Socrates' view is something of a kingpin: at least some of the common beliefs stand or fall depending upon it, and Aristotle must have thought it one of his tasks in VII.2-3 of the Ethics to defend at least some of the common beliefs against Socrates' denial of akrasia. If acting contrary to a strong conviction about what's best is going to be at all possible, Socrates will need to be wrong about the strength of knowledge.

I shall now assume that sufficient ground has been given for saying that one of Aristotle's main aims in the Ethics, VII.2-3, is to answer Socrates' rejection of akrasia with some anti-Socratic account of akrasia. The importance of this line of reasoning, if it is correct, is that we will have thus established a very important interpretive constraint upon Aristotle's own account of akrasia, namely, that,

Aristotle's own account of akrasia will need to somehow show, against the Socratic position, how akrasia can occur in spite of the presence of knowledge (or some strongly held conviction) in the akrates.

I emphasize 'against the Socratic position' in order to underscore the following point. If Aristotle's subsequent positive account of akrasia does not somehow resolve the Socratic aporia, then Aristotle will not (or, at least, will not necessarily) succeed in his announced aim. It stands to reason, then, that the Socratic position on the matter should be consulted to see if, indeed, Aristotle has succeeded. Aristotle does not, after all, mention Socrates' denial of akrasia merely in order to catalogue what has been said on the issue by those who have considered it before him—a common enough practice for Aristotle. Instead, as we have seen, he presents it as a difficulty that must somehow be overcome in order to defend the common beliefs. This means that Aristotle regarded Socrates' position as a serious and plausible one—enough so, anyway, to merit a good deal of his attention in his own discussion. Hence, unlike many modern thinkers, Aristotle does not simply declare Socrates wrong and move on to consider other, "more challenging," aporiai.

It seems to me, therefore, that if we subsequently find Aristotle's own account unconvincing from a Socratic point of view, then by the "principle" of interpretive charity we owe it to Aristotle to strongly reconsider our interpretation of him!

How, then, are we to interpret Aristotle in light of these considerations? To begin with, we may not approach Aristotle's own account of akrasia armed with our modern assurance that Socrates is obviously wrong about akrasia, and hope to understand the account. If our own anti-Socratic confidence is not matched by Aristotle, how can we be so sure that we will know how to approach Aristotle's own account of akrasia—that we will know "what to look for," so to speak? We will do far better by Aristotle, I think, if we interpret him in a way that allows him the best chance of satisfying his announced aim of
defending the common beliefs against objections, and we can do this only if we first give
due consideration to what sort of account of *akrasia* would pose the greatest challenge to
the Socratic. As will be seen, I believe that such an account must be dismissive of a “two-
syllogisms” interpretation of Aristotle.

The best way to introduce the relevant passages on Aristotelian *akrasia*, why I
believe that Aristotelian akratic action is not rational at all (and so why it in fact poses a
greater philosophical challenge to Socrates than does a two-syllogisms interpretation)
and how my view differs from that of many other scholars, is by briefly considering two
well-known passages from Euripides’ *Medea* (1041-1066, and 1078-1080). I turn now to
this task.

§3: Is Medea Akratic or Merely Indecisive? Why We Should be Skeptical About a Rather
Common Construal of Aristotle’s Account of Akrasia.

In considering the *Medea* passages, I shall assume without argument—though not
without warrant—that Medea is egoistically motivated (i.e., she wants to do whatever is
best for herself in her present circumstance), and that, for her, goodness is a matter of
pleasure and the absence of pain (where pleasure and pain are broadly construed to
include psychological well-being, or happiness, and ill-being, or misery).

Abandoned by her husband, Jason, Medea decides to exact revenge by murdering
her own children by him. But when the time comes for her to act (the first passage), she
reconsiders her plan. For she sees that by killing the children she will suffer twice as
much pain as will Jason (1047). This is too high a price for revenge, and makes it
anything but sweet. But by not killing them, she will be laughed at (1050). After all, she
betrayed her own family to be with Jason (in fact she killed her own brother), only to
now be betrayed by him in turn—a reversal of fortune that would surely be difficult to
live with. But no one will be laughing at her if she gets away with making Jason pay
dearly for his betrayal: his children must be killed. On the other hand, if she spares the
children and simply brings them to Athens with her (as King Aegeus has promised her
refuge), they will be a source of cheer to her (1058). What will bring her cheer once the
children are gone? Perhaps it is best to spare them, instead. But then (or so I interpret
this particular part of the passage) she realizes that the children have already helped her-
unwittingly—to carry out her plot to murder Jason’s new bride, and that they will be
killed by her enemies before they can get away (1060-1). It is best that she kill the
children: They shall die either way, and this way at least their murders may serve to exact
revenge.\(^13\)

There is so far little question that Medea’s state of mind is one of indecisiveness.
She is, after all, unsure about which of her alternatives will yield the best result for
herself. Can she live more happily (or less miserably) having killed her own children and
making Jason suffer, or by sparing the children and letting Jason get away with his
betraying her? She tries to resolve the matter by turning the alternatives over in her
mind to get a glimpse of the various pluses and minuses that accompany each, but,
changing her mind four times, it is evidently a difficult call for her to make.

When Medea finally comes to commit the deed, however, Euripides presents her as
being in an “akratic” condition (the second passage). Here is what Euripides has Medea
say (1078-1080):

*I know (μανθάνω) indeed what evil (κακόν) I intend to do,*
*But stronger than all my afterthoughts (θουλεύματα) is my*
*fury (θυμός),*
Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils (κακόν).

The point that I wish to make about these two passages is that, when taken together, they reveal a philosophical complication which is deserving of more attention than it typically receives. The complication I have in mind is not so easily seen when it occurs in the context of a philosophical work of the complexity and richness of Aristotle's *Ethics*. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to see in the *Medea*, and it is largely for this reason that I include the *Medea* passages in my discussion (besides their providing a wonderfully convenient way in which to help explain the Socratic view to which I take Aristotle to be responding). I elucidate the complication from the *Medea* in the following paragraphs before showing how it shows up in the *Ethics*.

If Medea's changes of mind in the earlier passage (a mere dozen lines prior to the later passage) are really only reconsiderations (or even recalculations) of the advantages and disadvantages to come from the alternatives of killing the children and not killing the children, then we have ready to hand a perfectly good explanation for why she ultimately kills them, namely, that she miscalculates, or misjudges, or wrongly estimates (or commits some other sort of intellectual error), that this action is better for her overall than is the action of not killing them. She chooses the wrong alternative, after all, and the first passage leads us to believe that what will determine her choice is simply what results from a comparison of the relative advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. From the point of view of the first passage, and not anticipating the second, how else can she have failed to choose correctly but for her simply not knowing which alternative is the best one (though indeed she takes that course of action which, in the end, seems best to her)? According to the “akratic” explanation offered in the second passage, on the other hand, Medea is indeed not ignorant of what is best, for she knows which alternative this is, namely, not killing the children. Moreover, we are told in this passage, it is her fury (thumos) which gets her to act in spite of her knowing which of the two alternatives yields a better outcome. According to this explanation, there is no thoroughness or precision of calculation concerning the relative advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives, that will have been sufficient to prevent her from killing the children.

Most readers will recognize that the explanation of Medea's action inspired by the first passage recalls Socrates' denial that *akrasia* ever occurs. According to Socrates, knowledge cannot be overcome by passion or pleasure (*Protagoras*, 352b-357b), so if one knows which of one's available alternatives is the best course of action to take, then one must act accordingly, unless otherwise prevented from so acting. All wrong action (that is, any action which yields less good or greater harm to the person than does some available alternative that was open to the person at the time of acting) is to be explained by the person's ignorance, or false belief; of what action from among the alternatives was in fact best for him or her in that circumstance. I shall henceforward refer to this sort of explanation of wrong action as the “Socratic explanation.” According to this explanation of her action, Medea kills the children because she (wrongly) believes that this action is better for herself overall than the alternative; and wanting to do whatever's best for herself given her circumstance, she acts according to this (false) belief.

I come now to the complication that have I mentioned. The person who demands some measure of philosophical acumen from his or her fiction should expect, having now read the first passage, that the explanation for why Medea kills the children is that she simply misjudges that the alternative of not killing the children is less beneficial for herself overall. (So we might imagine a Socratically inspired Euripides having Medea
come to the terrible realization--after having acted--that she indeed misjudged the relative merits of her action. This certainly seems tragic enough.) But one should then find the appearance of the second, akrasia, passage a little puzzling because it is now superfluous: We simply do not need to appeal to akrasia in order to explain her action. In fact, the akratic explanation is plainly inconsistent with the Socratic one: if the state of her mind as she kills the children is one of ignorance or false belief about what’s best, she simply cannot be acting akratically. How, then, are we to come to grips with Medea’s action? Is she merely indecisive (unsure about what’s best for her to do in her circumstance), or akratic (knows what’s best, has that option open to her to perform, but does not do it)?

My purpose in setting out these considerations--far from being an attempt to examine Euripides’ own account of human action (as though his chief concern in the Medea was to present such an account)--is to focus attention upon the juxtaposition of the Socratic and akratic accounts of human action that his literary example provides.

What I shall now maintain is that, provided that we accept a rather common construal of the text, we meet with the same sort of awkward juxtaposition in a rather unexpected place, namely, in Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia in the Nicomachean Ethics (VII.3, 1147a31-35)! This is an unexpected place to find the juxtaposition, if I am right to say that it is there, quite aside from the consideration that this is now Aristotle we are talking about and not Euripides. (Although Euripides is very probably not interested in providing a coherent account of some wrong actions in the Medea, Aristotle surely is in VII.3 of the Ethics; and whatever his philosophical merits may have been, if any, Euripides was no Aristotle.) The real surprise is that, because Aristotle is partly concerned, as we have seen, to answer Socrates' rejection of akrasia with a positive account of akrasia, he should have been particularly wary to avoid a juxtaposition of explanations similar to that found in the Medea! For then, much like Euripides, Aristotle will have superfluously juxtaposed an akratic account of wrong action with an explanation of wrong action that is perfectly Socratic--Socratic, that is, in the sense that the wrong action may be explained quite satisfactorily as being solely the result of a (mis-) calculation about what’s best for the person in the present circumstance. If I am right about this, then the Socratic may him or her self reply to Aristotle’s apparent account of akrasia by simply redescribing Aristotelian so-called-akratic action in terms of false belief or ignorance. That is, just as Socrates might have said to his contemporary Euripides:

“Well, Medea may believe that she is behaving akratically (at 1078-80), but as her indecisiveness in the first passage shows, she has really only--tragically--miscalculated. This is all the explanation that is really needed for her action, and your including this first passage in your play only shows that you yourself are tempted by my own view that all of our actions are preceded by a consideration of their relative merits and demerits--by a consideration of how good or bad they will turn out to be for us--and that all of our actions are brought about solely by such rational consideration. Your addition of the akrasia passage is then really only ad hoc and unnecessary,”

the Socratic might likewise respond to Aristotle’s account of akrasia:

Aristotle is unable to refute Socrates’ denial of akrasia so long as his own positive account of akrasia has the akrates rationally calculating about the merits and demerits of his or her wrong action. For then, we may justifiably press Aristotle for an explanation of how, or why, the wrong action must result from akrasia rather than ignorance. In fact, the Socratic may well press Aristotle for an explanation of what, precisely, the difference
between ignorance and akrasia is really supposed to be. (Is this one more instance in which "being overcome by pleasure" turns out to be nothing other than ignorance? [Prtg. 357c-d.]

As I shall argue below, the only sure way for Aristotle to effectively respond to Socrates’ denial of akrasia is by somehow or other blocking any redescription of the wrong-doer’s action in Socratically rational terms. What I will call a “Euripidean juxtaposition” of explanations, though, does not allow him to do this. If I am right, then not only does Aristotle fail to refute Socrates’ seemingly outrageous denial of akrasia (a shocking enough result, I should think, from the point of view of many contemporary philosophical views about wrong action according to which Socrates is obviously wrong), but one is also then tempted to say that Aristotle “should have known better” how not to argue against his own near-contemporary. Neither consequence speaks well of Aristotle’s philosophical efforts in VII.1-3 of the Ethics.

This, as I say, is what happens if what I have said is a common construal of Aristotle is correct. But what I shall argue for in the remainder of this paper is that this common construal is incorrect, and that, from Aristotle’s point of view, he has blocked any chance for a Socratic rational redescription of the wrong-doer’s action. The reason I think that, from his point of view, Aristotle has blocked the redescription of the wrong-doer’s action, is because Aristotelian akratic action is not rational at all. It is not the result of any sort of intellectual calculation about what to do, nor about how to do it. This is the main thesis that I plan to elucidate and to defend.

But how, precisely, does the alleged Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations show up in the VII.3 passage (1147a31-35, reproduced below) in the first place? And even if it does, how, precisely, does its presence allow Socrates to “redescribe” what Aristotle wants to be akratic action as being an action done merely from ignorance or false belief? I shall begin to answer the first question in the remainder of the present section, reserving for the sequel my answer to the second question and the conclusion of my answer to the first.

How, then, does the alleged Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations show up in the Ethics passage? My answer here will require that I first introduce what has become something of a technical term in Aristotelian scholarship, namely, the “practical syllogism”—not Aristotle’s own term. Considerations of space will not permit a more full discussion of this controversial subject than what I provide below.

According to the construal of Aristotle that I am contrasting with my own position, we are to suppose that the Aristotelian akrates possesses two practical syllogisms at the time that he or she behaves akratically, each of the syllogisms recommending to the akrates two distinct courses of action, namely, to avoid the bad action and to pursue the bad action. The practical syllogism seems to be Aristotle’s way—at least sometimes—of representing a person’s thinking about what to do in a particular circumstance and then acting—more specifically, of a person’s going from a somewhat general belief (or “universal” belief, or premise) about what to do, to doing a quite particular action. The person does this by way of “combining” (1147a26-7) this universal belief with a particular belief (DA, III.11.434a17-19, EN, VII.3.1147ae, 4, 25; 1147b13, 15). For example: If John Dough has the universal belief that Everything sweet must be tasted (1147a29-31), practical syllogistic gets him to actually taste the particular (sweet) fresh pastry which sits before him by his combining the universal belief that Everything sweet must be tasted with the particular belief that This [the particular pastry] is sweet. Unless otherwise prevented (EN, 1147a31; cf., DMA, 7.701a15-16) the combination of the two beliefs results in a conclusion which is itself an action (DMA, 701a13, 20, 23; hence, a practical syllogism, as opposed to a “syllogism of reason,” DMA, 701a7-13; EN, 1147a25-28).
Now how does the person go from the universal belief to performing the action? The answer that is suggested by the sweetness example (see also the examples mentioned in note 17), it seems to me, is that the person comes to “substitute,” as it were, the particular object mentioned in the particular belief (a particular pastry, say) for the sort of object that is mentioned in the universal belief, so that what the person thinks about the sort of object (of sweets, that they must be tasted), he or she now also comes to think about the quite particular object (of this [fresh pastry], that it must be tasted), and this substitution results in the action (e.g., the action of tasting the fresh pastry). In sum, the person has the belief that, 1. **Everything sweet must be tasted**, and the belief that, 2. **This [pastry] is sweet.** By substituting the term ‘this’ (the particular pastry) in (2) for the term ‘everything sweet’ in (1), the person comes to eat the fresh pastry sitting before him or her, since, after all, he now also believes that, **This must be tasted.**

Now my elucidating the practical syllogism in terms of such a rational “substitution” is justified by Aristotle’s own mention of the “combination” of universal and particular beliefs (1147a26-7) which he maintains causes (at least some) action. Action occurs, he says, when “όταν δέ μία γένηται έξ αύτων,” or, ‘when one [belief] comes from these [universal and particular beliefs].’ I fail to see what sense Aristotle’s remark could have in the present context (comparing, as he does, the practical syllogism with the “theoretical” syllogism, where substitution must take place) if not his making some point about what I have called “substitution” in the above illustration.

Moreover, it seems to me, such a combination of beliefs will also demand of Dough (just as it does of Medea) that he “calculate,” in some sense, about the merits and demerits of the particular alternatives before him—in other words, that he intellectually discriminate between pastry, pastry box, pastry tissue, etc. This may strike some readers as remarkably counterintuitive, for it may seem that we know the identity of such things “automatically,” as it were. For the time being, my answer here is simply to underscore that the aim of what I have called “substitution” is to produce an action that satisfies an only somewhat general desire, for the aim of the present syllogism is to produce an action that is sweet-pursuing. But without discriminating between his various alternatives—without checking for, hypothesizing about or guessing at (and the like) the proposed object’s suitability for being acted upon given the parameters specified in the universal belief—how can this aim be met? To say that **This is sweet** is, for purposes of the syllogism, to “rank” **this** ahead of other things for its relevance to the universal belief (1112a17-19) and to do that will require some discriminatory ability. Eating the box in which the pastries sit, after all, will hardly do to satisfy the appetite for sweet; making for a sweet demands a “surgically” precise mechanism of object selection. My overall point here is that rational substitution requires rational discrimination.

So whenever Dough satisfies a desire by; in part, the use of practical syllogistic, his rational faculty must determine how to act to satisfy the desire. He must combine beliefs about objects and actions that are of differing degrees of specificity, and for that purpose, some objects and actions will do, others will not, and some will do better than others.

Importantly, I think, Aristotle’s remark about combination immediately precedes his “Everything sweet must be tasted” example, which itself immediately precedes the passage which I claim contains the alleged Euripidean juxtaposition of Socratic and akritic explanations. Quite evidently, then, whatever else may be true about it, “practical syllogistic” will play some role in Aristotle’s account of akrasia, and so, no less, will the notion of combination. Furthermore, since the sort of substitution—or combination—and discrimination that I have been discussing is a rational principle (or principles), and
provided that my account of Aristotelian practical syllogistic has not been in error, then I conclude that Aristotle's explanation of akrasia at 1147a31-35 must include the akrates' use of this rational principle.

For the time being, then, so much for the practical syllogism. Here, now, is what Aristotle says at EN, 1147a31-35, the passage which I claim includes an Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations, if interpreted as mentioning two practical syllogisms:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a31-2} & \text{ Suppose, then, that someone has (a) the universal belief, and it hinders him from tasting; he has (b) the second belief, that everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet, and this belief (b) is active; and he also has appetite (epithumia). Hence, the belief (c) tells him to avoid this, but appetite leads him on, since it is capable of moving each of the [bodily] parts.}
\end{align*}
\]

Now there is a certain vagueness in this passage which might easily lead one to believe that there are mentioned not one, but two, practical syllogisms, each recommending a quite distinct, and contrary, action. In lines 31-2, Aristotle clearly refers to there being a universal belief which recommends against tasting; and in lines 32-3, there seems to be mention of another universal belief—that Everything sweet is pleasant—a belief which, from the point of view of appetite, can only be a recommendation to taste something sweet. Once it is assumed that there is but one universal belief per practical syllogism, and once it is seen that the two universal statements have contrary aims, then what seems to emerge from the passage is that there are indeed two practical syllogisms being mentioned. The first says something like this (the phrase in brackets indicates the action that is taken, or is to be taken):

**The Good Syllogism**

*Nothing sweet is to be tasted.*

*This is sweet.*

[Avoid this.]

**The Syllogism of Appetite**

*Everything sweet is pleasant (and so is to be tasted).*

*This is sweet.*

[Taste this.]

We then have the remark at lines 34-5 that it is appetite (ἐπιθυμία) which moves the akrates to act wrongly. Thus we have some very strong textual evidence that appetite gets the person to act upon some particular object via its own practical syllogism, the Syllogism of Appetite, and that it does so contrary to the recommendation of the Good Syllogism.

Aristotelian akrasia, then, seems to occur in something like the following way. The akrates knows what's best for him or her to do at the time of acting, having determined this (presumably among other considerations) through combining a universal belief with a particular belief, a belief about a quite particular object (or about an action, or the person's self). Presumably, too, the person has a desire to act upon what is known to be best (βούλησις, or 'wish'). The akrates therefore knows to avoid this thing (the fresh pastry), but he or she also has appetite (epithumia), and this desire gets him or her to make for the sweet thing in spite of what is known to be best. (Presumably, appetite does this when it is in some sense stronger than is the desire to do what is known to be best. Moreover, appetite alights upon the sweet thing (the particular pastry) via its own practical syllogism, a mechanism which enables appetite to pick out the sweet thing as something that it would be pleasant to eat.
I do not say that all who think that Aristotle's account involves two practical syllogisms will agree with me as to each of the details of the picture that I have sketched here. I say only that it is somewhat common to find interpretations of Aristotle which have him explaining akrasia in part by reference to two practical syllogisms.23

But now if, as I have argued above, the practical syllogism is a rational mechanism of action selection, involving, as it does, substitution of terms in an effort to combine two beliefs into one for the purpose of action, as well as a discrimination between alternative courses of action for determining what object and action is suitable for such a combination, then, I maintain, we have a situation much like Medea's from the first passage. For then the akrates must be rationally calculative about the particular fresh pastry in such a way that strongly suggests that his or her two-syllogistic state of soul is in fact a state of indecision. On the one hand, Dough realizes (as is evidenced by the Good Syllogism), that the pastry is unhealthy for him (or carries some other disadvantage)—a reason against eating; on the other hand, he also realizes (as is evidenced by the Syllogism of Appetite) that it is pleasant tasting—a reason for eating. Each of these conclusions is reached via the same rational faculty, and so we have no good reason so far to suppose that his eventual consumption of the pastry may be attributed to akrasia, for—again, so far—we only have reason to attribute it to his indecisiveness regarding the pastry. "Is the experience of the pleasant taste worth the sacrifice to my health," Dough might ask himself, "Or is the retention of health worth passing on the pastry?" Isn't this state one of trying to determine what action will be best for Dough overall? But it will be recalled that, at least according to the two-syllogisms construal of Aristotle, the presence of each of these syllogisms in the akrates' soul is supposed to play a central role in his explanation of akratic action! If so, then it seems to me that we have a Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations in the Ethics.

As I have cautioned earlier, the above discussion is only the beginning of my answer to the question, "How, precisely, does the Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations show up in the Ethics?" Without doubt, many readers will be somewhat dissatisfied with what I have said on this score so far. Among other things, it may be thought, there is a big difference between the sort of "indecision" experienced by Dough and that experienced by Medea. To begin with, Medea's calculations (if that's what they are) involve a far more sophisticated deliberation than does Dough's rational determination (if that's what it is) that this is a pastry, and his fairly uncomplicated combination of universal and particular beliefs. In fact, my presentation of the practical syllogism—even if my admitted lack of thoroughness about it is allowed to pass—seems rather suspect on at least this one crucial point, viz., on the matter of whether or not the person actually intellectually discriminates between various objects in order to select the one that the person believes is compatible with the universal belief. It may seem far too implausible to suppose that Dough actually has to think to himself that this is the pastry (and not that, the pastry box), before eating it. To the contrary, it seems that no sort of rational discrimination is needed for such matters. Even if Dough needs to use some sort of reasoning to decide that he wanted pastries, as well as for figuring out how to go to the store to get them (and the like), when it comes down to actually picking up the pastry for eating, such an action is much more "automatic" and non-intellectual.

Besides, as the two-syllogisms account will have it, Dough's distinct conclusions regarding the pastry are apparently "managed" by two distinct desires, one a desire for the good (assuming here that the Good Syllogism's universal premise is influenced, say, by a concern for health because health is a good thing for the one who is healthy), and the
other a desire for what's merely bodily pleasant (regardless of whether or not the bodily pleasant is good). While it may have seemed that Medea's contrary concerns had some prospect of being reconciled with one another (so that she can, in principle, make a rational decision about which alternative is the best for her overall), perhaps Dough's contrary concerns are not reconcilable with one another--perhaps, that is, the two goods under consideration--the "real" good, and the bodily pleasant--are incommensurable goods, and so there is no prospect of their being reconciled with one another in any rational way.

Each of these ways in which Dough's and Medea's indecisiveness differ, it might be objected, renders my attempted comparison between them a doomed project. And come what may for the imagined Socratic response to Euripides, the analogy need not apply to Aristotle's use of two syllogisms to explain *akrasia*.

I plan to answer these concerns, as well as some related ones, in the following section, where my primary task will be to answer the other main question mentioned earlier, viz., 'How, precisely, does the presence of an (alleged) Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations in the *Ethics* allow Socrates to redescribe what Aristotle wants to be akratic action as being an action done merely from ignorance or false belief?'.


I have said that by attributing to Aristotle the view that the *akrates* possesses two contrary practical syllogisms, we are attributing to him an account of *akrasia* which fails to close off the Socratic redescription of "*akrasia*" as being merely a state of ignorance. The reason that this is so is because, if the two-syllogisms construal really is part of Aristotle's account of *akrasia* then, as I see it, the Socratic may respond as follows.

(1) The means by which the person carries out an Aristotelian practical syllogism is the very same means by which the person carries out Socratic rational calculation about what's best to do in the present circumstance, namely, by intellectually deciding what particular action will best satisfy the desire that the person has (i.e., by "substitution" and discriminating between alternatives).²⁴

So, (2) The Aristotelian *akrates*, who acts according to a "syllogism of appetite," must intellectually decide what particular action will best satisfy the appetite (to go ahead and eat this [pointing] sweet thing, it being the sort of thing that satisfies the desire for something sweet to taste). That is, the person must nevertheless intellectually "screen" the proposed (wrong) action in terms of its relative advantage to the person's appetite.

The Socratic may then make the following breathtaking, if suspicious-looking, move:

(3) Therefore, if, in addition to the good syllogism, there is also the syllogism of appetite, then, when the Aristotelian *akrates* acts he or she is acting from a (false) belief about what is best overall for him or her in the present circumstance!

So--provided that (3) is allowed--the Socratic may also insist that, therefore,

(4) The explanation for the Aristotelian "*akrates'" wrong action is a false belief (ignorance) the person has about the goodness to be gotten by eating sweets.

If (4), then Aristotle has not refuted Socrates because the action may be redescribed in intellectualist terms. Thus we have it that, from the Socratic point of view, the Aristotelian "*akrates'" action seems to be the result of a rational thought process, and that, as Socrates would have it, therefore his or her action is to be explained by reference
to a miscalculation, or misjudgement or other sort of intellectual error regarding the proposed action's overall goodness; and we see why the Socratic might say that Aristotle simply does not need to appeal to an irrational desire (epithumia) in order to explain the wrong action any more than fury (thumos) is needed to explain Medea's wrong action.

But as my discussion above suggests, (3) seems to be a questionable move. In fact, (3) may seem to be a very sloppy piece of thinking on the part of the Socratic, for it simply does not follow from the fact that the person is reasoning about how to best satisfy his or her desire for something that is bodily pleasant that he or she is therefore reasoning about how to best satisfy his or her desire for whatever's best for him or her in the present circumstance. For what it is that one desires in the one case (what's best) is not (except fortuitously) the same thing as what it is that one desires in the other case (what's merely bodily pleasant). Quite simply, it may be pleasant to eat sweets, but, generally speaking, sweets are not good for a person. Hence, to reason about how to satisfy the one desire is not (except fortuitously) to reason about how to satisfy the other desire. The Socratic may not maintain that, because the akrates' action is the result of some rational thought process, therefore the wrong action is to be explained by reference to some intellectual miscalculation. So the Socratic will be quite wrong to maintain (in [4]) that the person is acting upon a false belief about what's best overall for him or her to do, for that person may be a genuine akrates. The Aristotelian akrates, in that case, has a true belief about what's best for him or her right now (but does not act upon that belief), but instead acts upon a belief about what's merely bodily pleasant--and, in fact, this belief might also be a true belief.

My answer to this objection is as follows. The objection's force, I think, derives from the assumption that,

(5) The person doesn't need to be desiring the good in order to use his or her rational faculty to act upon the desire that he or she has since he or she could be knowingly desiring some other thing.

This assumption is what allows the objector to grant what I have said about Aristotelian practical syllogistic (that it involves substitution and discrimination), but think very little of the concession: granting that even appetite needs to do some amount of reasoning in order to figure out what particular thing to act upon is not damaging to a two-syllogisms interpretation of Aristotle, because the reasoning that goes on here is simply reasoning about how to satisfy what appetite wants, and that is not (except fortuitously) reasoning about what's best.

My strategy for answering the objection to (3) will be to disarm the force of the assumption (5). And I will do this by arguing that, since Socrates does not himself make the assumption (5), and since, as I have already argued, Aristotle's account of akrasia in the Ethics is designed, in considerable part, to answer Socrates' rejection of akrasia, Aristotle himself cannot accept (5) as an assumption, but must make some sort of argument on its behalf . . . if, indeed, he wishes to rely upon (5) at all. However, since I expect that Aristotle would find arguing for (5), against the Socratic, an extremely difficult task (and perhaps even contrary to some of his own views about rational desire for the good), he himself would not argue for (5). To see why this is so, it will be necessary to consider some aspects of the Socratic psychology of action in some detail.

While Socrates' view is typically regarded with easy-going skepticism, and while it may be tempting for some to say of Medea, "How could she not know that it's wrong to kill the children?" his view nevertheless suggests a rather elegant way of relating thought, desire and action with one another that cannot be matched by the akratic explanation. According to this suggestion, all human action is rational action in the sense of its being
the direct result of an intellectual calculation about what’s best for the person to do in his or her present circumstance—that is, all human action is the result of a rational desire. In what follows I elaborate on this point.

A Socratic explanation of action draws together thought and desire by maintaining the following:

(6) All action results from the comparative strength of the desire to perform that action over the strength of the desire to perform an alternative action.23

(7) The strength of a desire is directly related to the degree of good (pleasure) or bad (pain) that the person expects to come from the action: the greater is the degree of good, or the lesser is the degree of bad, expected to come from the action, the stronger is the desire to perform that action.24

(8) The expectation of goodness upon which a person acts is formed solely by his or her intellectual calculations about the relative pleasures and pains to come from the action, i.e., all expectation of goodness is rational expectation.25

So we get that,

(9) The person always acts on that alternative which he or she rationally expects will bring the most good.

Propositions (6-9) all lie behind the Socratic position that all action proceeds from a rational desire, or a desire for what’s best for the person in the present circumstance.26 If the person’s conception of a proposed action changes in light of new information or fresh considerations (e.g., Medea now believes that getting revenge against Jason leads to her own misery, or she now believes that she will be even more miserable if she fails to kill the children, or she now believes that the children may be a source of cheer to her, and so on), then the strength of his or her desire to perform that action changes, and he or she will instead take an alternative course of action (provided that the desire to perform that alternative is now the strongest); and, conversely, if the person’s desire to perform a particular action changes, then his or her conception of the goodness of the action in comparison with the alternatives must have changed.

If this account of the relation between desire, thought and action is correct, then not only do we have a tidy explanation of why Medea vacillates back and forth between alternatives (fresh considerations present themselves to her as she contemplates her action, resulting in her changes of mind about which alternative is best), but we also get a Socratic (if not Socrates’) reason for denying the possibility of akrasia:

(10) All wrong action—that is, all actions which yield less good (or more bad) for the person than some available alternative action—must be solely the result of some sort of miscalculation, of which alternative is really the best one for the person.27

Without a doubt, Socrates will have been attracted to the first passage from the Medea because of the account of Medea’s immanent wrong action that it suggests, but then find himself somewhat befuddled by the second, akratic passage. But if akrasia explains Medea’s action, then her thought about her situation and the strength of the desire upon which she acts have, as it were, come unstuck—if ever they were connected. Her desire to kill the children must then vary independently (or, at least, somewhat independently) of her beliefs about whether or not she will be able to live happily (or less miserably) after having killed them—an astonishing psychological state of affairs from the Socratic point of view. If some human actions are akratic, then the relationship between thought, desire
and action must inevitably be a far more complicated affair than the Socratic explanation makes it out to be.

However, with these Socratic presumptions (6-9) in place, let's see what happens when it is allowed that Dough's rational faculty is quite capable of determining for him that this is to be tasted, and not that, if his epithumia is to be satisfied. In other words, let's allow that the epithumia mentioned in line 33 of 1147a have its own practical syllogism. The case that I wish to make on behalf of the Socratic here can be made clear if we imagine the Socratic cross-examining the akrates about why he acted as he did, and the akrates responding according to the information contained in his syllogism of appetite. Here, again, is the Syllogism of Appetite:

Everything sweet is pleasant (and so should be tasted).
This is sweet.
[Taste this.]

If the Socratic now asks Dough, “Why did you taste the fresh pastry?” Dough's answer is, “Because it is sweet.” While this response on Dough's part is informative, the Socratic who is still presuming that (6-9), and hence (10), are true need not yet be compelled into believing that he is speaking with a genuine akrates. The very nature of the Socratic view of desire and action has it that the person pursues sweetness (say) because he or she thinks it the best of his or her present alternatives. So if the Socratic is to be convinced that he is dealing with a genuine akrates, he or she will continue to press the issue. We might imagine, then, the exchange continuing along the following lines: Socrates asks, “I still don't quite follow you, Dough. What difference does its sweetness make as to whether or not it should be tasted?” Dough responds: “Well, everything sweet is pleasant, and pleasant things should be tasted.” This exchange between them now exhausts the information recorded in the Syllogism of Appetite. But, as before, the Socratic still need not be compelled by Dough's response. All that Dough has done is to change the description of the object of his desire from the sweet to the pleasant, so Socrates still has no reason to suppose that Dough is pursuing the pleasant for any other reason than that it is thought to be the best of his present open alternatives. Suppose, then, that Socrates continues his questioning along the same lines as before. Socrates: “I'm starting to get a better picture, Dough, as to why you tasted the fresh pastry. But I'm still a little foggy about your explanation. Why should pleasant things be tasted?” How, now, is Dough to answer? Some scholars have said that, as a simple matter of fact, the akrates is simply unable to justify him or her self any further. Typically, this view is presented as one about how Aristotle's conception of the appetitive practical syllogism simply works. Once the universal premise is reached, the akrates is simply not able to justify his or her action any further.33 I find such a position on the matter unconvincing. To begin with, it begs the crucial question: Why can't the person answer any further?—what non-intellectual factor prevents the akrates from answering? In fact, when it is borne in mind that the account of akrasia in question is aimed mostly at Socrates, such a response amounts to little more than a refusal to do philosophy with Socrates since it seems only to declare the question unanswerable by the akrates; and since it is reasonably clear that Aristotle wishes to engage the Socratic philosophically, this seems to be an unflattering interpretation of Aristotle's account of akrasia. Moreover, the Socratic will be eager to point out, the would-be akrates was perfectly able in his or her answering of questions up to this point, so there is nothing wrong with his or her rational faculty. That is, Dough gives evidence of having substituted this particular pastry for sweets; and, presumably, sweets has been substituted for the pleasant tasting. So Dough has also done some sort of
discriminating between alternatives to arrive at the beliefs that Sweets are pleasant tasting and that This is sweet. Are we to simply suppose, then, that Dough’s rational abilities suddenly atrophy once the universal belief is reached? No, the Socratic need not be compelled here—at least not without further argumentation. In fact, if Aristotle thought this maneuver a sufficient means with which to deal with Socrates, then I can’t see that he has much reason to treat Socrates’ rejection of akrasia as the source of the first aporia for the common beliefs. Why use Socrates’ view as something of a test for the viability of the common beliefs if, in the end, it is sufficient to merely declare that the rational faculty upon which the Socratic view depends is ineffective at some apparently arbitrary point in the akrates’ reasoning process? (Similarly, it should now be seen, the Socratic will not be immediately put off by the view that some goods are simply incommensurable with one another without much more argument on behalf of the incommensurabilist. How, Socrates might ask, are we to be sure that the state of mind the person is in is best described as being pulled in two different directions by incommensurable goods, rather than as mere ignorance [uncertainty, etc.] about how the goods are to be rationally compared with one another?)

Now, there are two answers to Socrates’ last question ("Why should pleasant things be tasted?") that Dough must not give to Socrates, namely,

(DK) “I don’t know why, or whether, pleasant things should be tasted,”

and,

(PG) “Because what’s pleasant is what’s good (best for me in the present circumstance).”

Dough must not say (DK) because this may give Socrates just what he wants: a confession of ignorance or uncertainty about the proposed action.

He must not say (PG) because this will only show that Dough wrongly thinks that the pleasant is the good, and once more exhibits his ignorance about what’s best for himself. In other words, (PG) simply transforms what was a syllogism of appetite into a “good” syllogism—a syllogism which represents the person trying to get what is best for him or her self. Then, the Socratic may well maintain that Aristotle’s passage on akrasia really is like Euripides’ first passage in the Medea: Dough sees two alternatives open before him, each with its share of goods (pleasures) and bads (pains), and determining which of the two courses of action is the most pleasurable may be somewhat difficult (resulting, perhaps, in a feeling of “inward struggle”); but, in any event, Dough is, like Medea, merely indecisive and not akatic.

Perhaps some readers will object that my way of handling the inadequacy of (PG) is a little facile for, after all, Aristotle may simply maintain that Dough’s thinking (PG) is a matter of habit because the person has, over time, come to (wrongly) identify the (bodily) pleasant with the good. If so, then of course Dough’s saying (PG) is not the result of ignorance so much as it is an acquired intellectual disability: His reasoning about matters of the bodily pleasant has become somewhat “corrupted”. But this suggestion will not do here. For the habit described—that of believing that the (bodily) pleasant is the good—is the state Aristotle calls akolasia ("intemperance"), and this state, he maintains, is quite distinct from akrasia. The akolastos decides to act on the bodily pleasant because the good is thought to be the bodily pleasant... but the akrates does not have this belief (1148a17-18; see also 1148a8-9)! In other words, the akolastos (habitually) wrongly concludes that the bodily pleasant is the good, but the akrates draws no such conclusion; the akrates decides (prohairesis) what’s best, but does not act upon it.

I conclude, then, that, as against the Socratic, Aristotle will have created a great
deal of philosophical trouble for himself to explain \textit{akrasia} by, in part, making reference to a second practical syllogism, this one in the charge of appetite. Similarly, then, I conclude also that Aristotle will have had a difficult time in using the assumption (5) to argue against Socrates (namely, that the person doesn't need to be desiring the good in order to use his or her rational faculty to act upon the desire that he or she has). (In fact, I suppose that Aristotle will have agreed with Socrates that,

\begin{quote}
(5*) All practical reasoning is reasoning about satisfying a desire for the good.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

I am now in a position to answer an objection that I raised earlier concerning Socrates' alleged fallacious identification of,

\begin{quote}
(P) reasoning about how to get what's (merely bodily) pleasant for oneself,
\end{quote}

with,

\begin{quote}
(B) reasoning about how to get what's best for oneself,
\end{quote}

or, the apparently fallacious (3): “If, in addition to the good syllogism, there is also the syllogism of appetite, then, when the Aristotelian \textit{akrates} acts he or she is acting from a (false) belief about what is \textit{best overall} for him or her in the present circumstance.”

Now surely, Socrates does not believe that what's best for oneself just \textit{is} whatever's (merely bodily) pleasant for oneself, so my argument here will \textit{not} proceed by way of defending Socrates in that way. Instead, I will begin by pointing out that, in the context of the argument in which (3) was originally stated, the Socratic him or her self says \textit{nothing} about there being any desire for what's merely bodily pleasant for the person--\textit{that} point being part of the \textit{objection} against the Socratic's argument. The \textit{Socratic} point, made against the two-syllogisms approach, is only that,

\begin{quote}
(R) In reasoning about how to satisfy whatever desire it is that the person has, the person must reason about how to get what's best for him or her self.
\end{quote}

Then, of course, if we suppose, \textit{with the two-syllogisms account of \textit{akrasia}}, that,

\begin{quote}
(DP) Sometimes we desire to do only what's bodily pleasant for us, regardless of whether or not getting what's merely bodily pleasant is also good for us,
\end{quote}

then, together with (R), we get the apparently implicit identification of (B) with (P). For then, whenever we reason about how to satisfy one of the desires mentioned in (DP), we must, by (R), be reasoning about how to get what's best for ourselves. The point that I am making, however, is that while Socrates endorses (R), he does \textit{not}, as is pretty widely agreed, endorse (DP).\textsuperscript{36} Of course, a discussion of all of the whys and wherefores of Socrates' endorsement of (R) and rejection of (DP) falls well outside the scope of this paper. But, these matters taken as granted, we are in a position to see rather plainly why the Socratic will not allow there to be a syllogism of appetite without careful and rigorous argumentation on Aristotle's part. Once it is granted that the syllogism of appetite involves--in fact, requires--the rational substitution of a particular \textit{this} for the sort of thing mentioned in the universal premise, the Socratic (who endorses [R] and is waiting for an argument against it) may well press the "\textit{akrates}" Dough for an answer to the question about why the thing's \textit{pleasantness} is a reason for tasting. The person's powers of rational substitution function perfectly well in the remainder of the practical syllogism (Dough's explaining that the pastry's sweetness is a reason for eating the pastry, and that a sweet taste's being pleasant is a reason for pursuing the sweet), so why should they falter \textit{now}? Is it because the \textit{sort} of reasoning involved in justifying the universal premise is of a relevantly \textit{different} sort than what I have been referring to as the "substitution of a particular thing for a somewhat general thing"? I fail to see how. From the \textit{Socratic} point
of view, after all (and that is the point of view that matters here), persons always want what's really best for themselves, so the belief that something pleasant should be tasted must be the result of supposing (at least in the person's present circumstance) that the pleasant-tasting is the good. But what this reasoning involves is simply a rational substitution of the term, the pleasant-tasting, for the term, whatever's best (in the present circumstance)! But this is precisely what occurs, I have maintained, in Aristotelian practical syllogistic. In each case, the person must discriminate between his or her available options, decide which of them best fits the bill, and then perform the substitution of terms. This seems to be quite enough to make practical syllogistic a case of "Socratic" substitution. I expect that Socrates would have said here:

"It seems that this fresh pastry is really only thought-good by Dough; but this does not mean that he therefore doesn't really desire only the real good. Dough's problem is clearly a misestimation of the goodness to come from the action of eating the pastry, together with a misestimation of the good to come from the action of not eating the pastry. He is, like Medea in the first passage, only indecisive about what's really best for himself. A two-syllogisms approach to giving a positive account of akrasia is wholly unsatisfactory as a refutation of my rejection of akrasia."

To sum up this portion of my discussion: from the point of view of the philosophical exchange between Aristotle and Socrates on akrasia, there is nothing suspect, really, about the Socratic's premise (3) in the argument against the two-syllogisms approach. So long as Dough is reasoning about how best to satisfy a desire (remember: Dough opts for the pastry, and not the box in which it sits), he is reasoning about how to do what's best for himself—never mind what he says (cf. Medea's declaration of akrasia in the second passage)!

Another objection that will be made regarding my presentation of the practical syllogism is that it simply does not involve reasoning, or at least, that it does not involve the relevant sort of reasoning needed in order for me to treat it as being the Socratic sort of rational mechanism that I have said it is. Instead, according to this view, the practical syllogism is simply that device which non-rationally connects a person's actual reasoning about what to do with his or her action, via perception (or some other non-rational—that is, non-substitutive—mechanism). The strongest account of this view is, in my estimation, John Cooper's (Reason and Human Good in Aristotle, Hackett, pp. 1-88).

What inspires Cooper's view is Aristotle's claim that all virtuous action is chosen (prohairesis). According to Cooper, this claim of Aristotle's, if taken quite literally, implies that our "moral decisions" are all somewhat robustly thought out. In fact, Cooper objects, if this is what Aristotle is saying, then our "moral decisions are much more excogitated than in general they are" (p.7). But surely, we might insist, our judgments about what we should do are not all that consciously thought out—if they are really thought out at all. Consider the following ("non-moral") example of "extreme excogitation" offered by Cooper (p. 26):

To see what I'm doing I need light; to get light I can turn on the electric bulb; to turn on the electric bulb I need to turn the switch to "on"; this is the switch—whereupon I decide to turn this to "on," and do so at once. Thus deliberation when complete yields an action, decided on as the action of turning this (pointing), or eating this, and so on, an action described in such terms being always calculated as the, or a, way of realizing one's purpose.

As I have maintained about Dough: he must somehow say to himself, "this is the sweet
thing.” But Cooper maintains instead that once it is decided that turning on a light is a way of achieving one's end (or, say, that eating sweets is a way of achieving one's end), the agent need do no further rational discriminating between possible objects of action. The person doesn't need to deliberate about what thing is the light switch (or the pastry), for he or she already knows this--he just reaches out and turns the switch to “on.” So when it comes to actually turning the switch, Cooper argues (p. 27) “It is perception that is called for . . . not further reflection.” It is not surprising, then, Cooper thinks, that Aristotle should characterize the particular premise of a practical syllogism as being “controlled by” perception (VII.3.1147a27, b10). Perhaps action is really only relatively prohairetike.

The main difficulty with Cooper's argument about over-ex cogitation, or so I shall maintain, is that it fails to adequately explain how the person, non-rationally, actually manages to turn the individual switch to 'on,' rather than perform some other action which does not have the effect of satisfying his desire for light. Let us assume that the person has now reached what we have been referring to as the universal premise in a practical syllogism (that, say, In all these sorts of circumstances, it is good to have light)--that point which Cooper thinks is the last thing that is deliberated, and which constitutes the prohairesis. How, precisely, are we to now explain the person's actually reaching for and turning on the light switch? Cooper's answer here is that the person need only perceive the light switch. But surely the person has a number of other perceptions at the same time as he or she perceives the light switch (e.g., perceptions of a faucet knob and a garbage disposal switch). So we may now ask (in perfectly Socratic fashion, I think) how does the person know upon which perception to act if, as Cooper has it, there is no rational means needed to perform the discrimination between perceptions (two perceptions of which, by the way, are frustratingly similar to one another)? How is our person to ensure that his or her dumb, non-rational perception of light switch rather than his or her perception of garbage disposal switch, or even faucet knob, “connects” with the universal belief about its being good to have light? If Dough perceives the pastry box in addition to the fresh pastries, how is it that these non-rational perceptions manage, by themselves, to have only the one and not the other of them connect with the universal belief in order to cause the action which leads to the satisfaction of the desire for sweet? I do not see how this can be,39 but for some discriminatory mechanism which is able to select the one as being the correct, or the better, perception upon which to act. Cooper thinks the question is one of whether or not one might already know what a light switch is or looks like (as though one perceives light switches in isolation from anything else), prior to turning it on. I think this question is mostly beside the point, for the issue involved is one of how the person identifies which of his or her perceptions is the light switch perception--the perception needed in order to satisfy the desire for light.

I suggest, instead, that there must--even in these cases of seemingly “automatic” action--be at work some sort of substitution principle which allows the person to discriminate between his or her various perceptions, so as to be able to pick out which perception (or perceptions) is (or so the person believes) relevant to the universal belief. On my view, when I act upon a light switch perception, I have discriminated between it and my other perceptions. The ideal candidate for such a principle is precisely some sort of Socratically rational principle, for what is needed is some means of determining that action upon this particular object is what the universal premise of the syllogism is calling for. The person does not turn the switch to 'on' simply for the sake of turning the switch to 'on,' after all, but does so in order to achieve a certain end.
Another way to look at my objection to Cooper’s view is invited by his suggestion that complete deliberation may take place well before any practical syllogism links it to action. If he is right, then it seems that the agent may “store up” several standing prohaireseis, each waiting to be acted upon when its appropriate perception takes place. By now, though, it should be clear that the person will require the services of some rational principle in order to successfully discharge any one of his or her standing prohaireseis. If not, how else will the right individual perception get hooked up with its corresponding prohairesis (again, conceived of here in the manner of a universal premise)? If it does not correctly get hooked up, I suggest, the reason is simply because the person has made some sort of error in his or her judgement about what’s best in the present circumstance—about what perception goes with what “prohairesis.” (We may imagine here the prospective home buyer testing the light switches, but rather than turning on the kitchen light instead activates the garbage disposal. If Cooper’s position is correct, I see no reason why this person won’t simply make the same mistake over and over again: In all such situations as these which require a major economic commitment, test the product carefully, including a testing of the circuitry by turning on a light switch, says his “prohairesis”; Here’s a light switch, says non-rational perception; the person [repeatedly] turns on the garbage disposal just so long as it is the garbage disposal switch which is repeatedly perceived.)

When it is recalled, now, that Aristotle’s aim in VII.3 is, in part, to respond to Socrates with a positive account of akrasia, and it is also recalled that a Euripidean juxtaposition of explanations of wrong action allows the Socratic a far too ready reply to him—“But the person is still acting from a rational desire!”—we should be highly dubious of an interpretation of Aristotle that has him explaining akrasia by making use of two practical syllogisms. A more promising reply to Socrates would be one in which akatic action is not rational at all (in the sense of involving substitution). I believe the relevant passages of the Ethics allows for such an alternative interpretation of Aristotle.

§5. Concluding Remarks.

There are at least two very pressing questions I have yet to answer, each of which must be left unattended. First: If Aristotle does not explain akrasia by the use of two practical syllogisms, then how else is the passage at 1147a31-5 (which seems to make such clear mention of two universal premises) to be read? Second: How does Aristotle’s account of akrasia really go? Below I offer only my own quick answers to each question, foregoing here arguments and explanations for either of them.

Aristotle’s account of akrasia, I believe, must rely upon epithumia being much like Plato’s species of irrational desire (Republic, IV, 435b, ff.) of the same name, which is “housed” in its own part of the soul—cut off from any use of a rational faculty to get itself acted upon. So Aristotle (and Plato) must provide a non-rational mechanism which gets the person to act upon the epithumia. As I stated at the outset: For Aristotle, akratic action is not rational at all (in the sense of involving substitution).

As for how to read the main passage discussed here (EN, 1147a31-85), I believe that a more thorough examination of Aristotelian practical syllogistic will show the troubling remark, “Everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet,” to involve mention of only a particular premise—not a particular and (a second) universal. If so, then the textual evidence supporting a two-syllogisms account is considerably weakened.

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