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WEAKNESS OF WILL: THE PLURALITY OF MEDIEVAL EXPLANATIONS

ARISTOTLE'S *AKRASIA* AND ITS INTERPRETERS

Sometimes the history of philosophy can provide us with a laboratory situation in which new ideas are introduced into old contexts in such a way that we can clearly see the reactions they provoke and the changes they cause. This was the case when Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated into Latin in the middle of the thirteenth century. Within a very short time a new Aristotelianism introduced a number of new questions related to philosophical psychology. The old context of Augustinian Christianity offered only a limited amount of conceptual tools for the understanding of these new questions. A paradigm shift was, therefore, necessary in many areas related to the philosophy of mind. In spite of some conflicts the contemporary historian is for the most part surprised to find how flexible the medieval scholars were in changing their conceptual frameworks to suit the new philosophy. In the following I will highlight these developments through one exemplary case study, that is, the medieval reception of Aristotle's 'weakness of will'.

Aristotle discusses *akrasia*, 'weakness of will', or 'incontinence', in the seventh book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*). The weak-willed person wants to do good, but he nevertheless acts against his own better judgment. The existence of *akrasia* is a philosophical problem, since Socrates held that nobody acts against his own knowledge. (*EN*, 1145b). On the other hand, however, weakness of will seems to be common among human beings. But if we admit the existence of this phenomenon, how is it compatible with the Socratic axiom that knowledge and better judgment can never be overcome by an inferior power? Aristotle solves this problem by saying that the akratic person ignores something at the very moment of his incontinent action. Even

if he claims to know that he is doing wrong, he does not use his knowledge in a clear and distinct way. (*EN*, 1146b-1147b).

Many twentieth-century philosophers claim that Aristotle's problem is still relevant and have presented various new solutions. But, despite this recognition of his relevance, historians of philosophy have disagreed in their interpretations of Aristotle. At least two basic readings of *EN* VII have been proposed. The traditional way (model 1) to explain weakness of will is to say that the incontinent person does not make full use of the minor premise of the practical syllogism which normally determines his action. He knows the general facts expressed in the major premise, but he does not apply them to the particular circumstances; and he does so because the minor premise, informing about the particular facts, is not properly grasped. He, therefore, fails to draw the right conclusion, which should otherwise, through the mediating choice (*prohairesis*), become the effective cause of his action. According to this view, the conclusion of the practical syllogism and the action itself are more or less identical.¹

An alternative reading of Aristotle (model 2) holds that the akratic person at least in some cases reaches and fully realizes the correct conclusion, but that something interferes with acting on the basis of the conclusion. In this case we have to distinguish between conclusion, choice and action. A supporter of model 2 can interpret Aristotle's view that the akratic person acts voluntarily but contrary to his own good choice (*EN*, 1151a5-7; 1152a15-17) as meaning that the interference takes place between the good choice and the deviant action.² An adherent of model 1, however, argues that the right conclusion is never even properly grasped.

Although Aristotle's *akrasia* has been widely studied, philosophers have until recently neglected the medieval commentaries on *EN* VII. One reason why the medieval discussion has been neglected is the prejudice that weakness of will is uninteresting for philosophy in a Christian period. According to this prejudice, the Judeo-Christian and Augustinian notion of will makes *akrasia* self-evident, because the will is not bound to obey what reason commands. In keeping with this prejudice, William Charlton, for example, holds that "Western European Philosophy has little to show on the subject of weakness of will before the present century".³

Every student of medieval commentaries on *EN* knows that this is not true. Bonnie Kent, for example, concludes that the Franciscan literature alone on *akrasia* "can only be described as voluminous".⁴ But although the Augustinian notion of will does not preclude an interest in *akrasia*, the

above-mentioned prejudice contains a grain of truth in the sense that one should acknowledge the existence of an 'Augustinian' model of interpretation in the medieval discussion on *EN* VII. According to this model — let us label it model 3 —, all bad actions are performed out of bad choice. This contradicts Aristotle, who holds in *EN*, 1151-1152, that the *akratic* person does act voluntarily but not by choice, whereas the *wicked* person does act by choice. Models 1 and 2 allow for this distinction, but model 3 does not. One cannot distinguish within model 3 between wicked and akratic action in the way Aristotle does. All intentional actions in this model, however good or bad, are due to a conscious 'choice'. Thus, there is neither a psychological nor a moral difference between the sin of the 'wicked' man and the sin of the 'akratic' man. This is plausible within Augustinian psychology, although one must add that after the introduction of a new voluntarism and a new modal theory by John Duns Scotus and William Ockham the models 1, 2 and 3 to a great deal lose their relevance.⁵

Here we cannot enter into Augustine's discussion on the psychology of morally deviant actions. We can note, however, that Augustine in spite of his non-Aristotelian notion of will recognizes that human agents sometimes seem to act contrary to their own priorities. Augustine uses the expression *invitus facere*, "to do something unwillingly/reluctantly", to describe such a situation. But his analyses of these situations always stress the moral responsibility of the agent, and he, therefore, concludes that even the person who "wills unwillingly" has deliberately chosen or "consented to" the action in question.⁶ In this sense his acting against his own better judgment is interpreted within the framework of model 3.

In the following analyses I will employ models 1, 2 and 3 to give a kind of typology of some medieval interpretations of Aristotle's *akrasia*. I will begin with Robert Grosseteste's translation of *EN* VII and the anonymous Greek commentary attached to it. After this I will comment on Albert the Great's understanding of *akrasia* and then conclude my presentation with some remarks concerning the late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century commentaries, especially John Buridan.⁷

ROBERT GROSSETESTE AND THE GREEK COMMENTATOR

Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* becomes known in Western Philosophy through Robert Grosseteste's Latin translation of *EN* in 1246-1247. This

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