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The Lures of Akrasia[1]

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Abstract
There is more to akrasia than meets the eye: it can occur in speech and perception, cognitively and emotionally as well as between decision and action. But because it is over-determined and because it occurs in opaque intentional contexts, its attribution remains highly fallible. The lures of akrasia are the same as those that are exercised in ordinary psychological and cognitive inferential contexts.

When Ahmed first accepted the sage young Leila as a private pupil to study the Koran, he did not foresee the dangers they would run, dangers to Koranic rules that they took to form their actions. Since Ahmed studied abroad, his worldly experience should have led him to foresee that despite his care and Leila's modest decorum, their close study together was likely to put their strictly Koranic lives in peril. In him, such a failure of imaginative foresight may well have been akratic, the akratic beginning of a series of other akratic actions. After a time, he and Leila began to perceive one another – flashing eyes, the curve of the head bent over the sacred text – in ways that ill accorded with their commitments to the commandments. Their akrasia was then in their perceiving, their ways of focusing and attending to one another. After the surprise of their passion, they began to form intentions that violated their judgments. Their lapses were not simply lapses between intention and action. Their elaborate assignations required nested conditional qualifications: 'If your uncle is at the Mosque, we'll meet here; but if he is at home, I shall see you at the oasis by the well.' Their akrasia was then in the formation of their intentions. Yet sometimes, having formed prudent resolutions, they nevertheless impulsively decided to meet. Their akrasia then fell between resolution and decision, a decision that still sometimes required further planning to execute. Yet sometimes, their akrasia came between decision and action: having met, and decided against passion, they sometimes acted contrary to their

[1] My preference for retaining the Greek term *akrasia* is not an arcane taste for the esoteric: it arises from my conviction that the standard English translations – weakness of will, incontinence, backsliding, moral weakness – are, as we shall see, profoundly misleading.

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decisions. There is more to their story: but for the time, we have ample material for philosophical investigation.[2]

1. Who is Capable of Being Akratic?

Let us suppose that in all these cases, Ahmed and Leila – let me call them MAL – acted as voluntarily and intentionally as anyone does. Let us suppose that they acted akratically, if anyone does. What has gone wrong and where? What did they have to be like, to be subject to being akratic? A thoroughly Whitmansque character who announces 'I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself!' is incapable of akrasia. Ironically, only someone who holds herself to act from – or at least in accordance with – her aims and commitments, someone who is capable of carrying out her intentions and decisions, can suffer akrasia. A will o' the wisp, a wanton who acts whimsically and who underwrites whatever she does, cannot be charged with failing to act on her decisive judgment. Nor does coerced or involuntary behavior qualify as akratic, unless it was collusive.

As we shall see, it is difficult to identify single cases of akrasia. Motivational over-determination being what it is, it is always possible that some rationalizing belief or motive supports and justifies what might initially seem akratic. An action may be foolish or wrong in an agent's eyes, but it is only akratic if it constitutes a violation of her commitments. Complex agents have commitments aplenty; they are variously ranked in different contexts; and many of them are at odds with one another. It is often difficult – even for the agent herself – to determine whether she has voluntarily violated a contextually relevant prioritized commitment. This is not merely an epistemological problem: there may sometimes be no straightforward fact of the matter. Charges of akrasia typically need to be substantiated by a pattern of characteristically deflected intentions in agents' deliberations and judgments about what – all things considered – is best for them to do.

2. Varieties of Akrasia

Ahmed and Leila's story identifies a number of distinct places where they suffered an akratic break. We can distinguish:

[2] Their story echoes that of Paolo and Francesa's lament as Dante tells it in the *Inferno*. Canto V.

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i. MAL's principles, their general beliefs about appropriate human aims, about what is commanded by Divinity, or required by morality, or conducive to human well-being.
ii. MAL's commitment to actualize or realize those aims, to instantiate them in their actions, to attempt to be guided by them.
iii. MAL's interpretations of their situation:

(a) their perceptual categories: the focus and patterns of salience and attention
(b) their linguistic and conceptual categories: their menu of primary and default descriptions
(c) their emotional responses

iv. MAL's forming an intention to act:

…… forming *a resolution* to act, 'Despite all to be said against it, we must
continue to meet'
…… forming a *conditional intention* to act, 'If it's not raining, let's meet at the oasis; if it is raining, let's meet at the porch of the Mosque.'
…… *deciding* to act according to their resolution, 'Let's meet at the Mosque after today's mid-day prayers.'

v. MAL *acting* according to their decision.

When they fail to commit themselves to their general aim and principles, MAL suffer from *akrasia of direction or aim*. When they fail to see their situation in the light of their commitments, they suffer from *interpretive akrasia*. Flaws of inference in drawing the appropriate intention or decision from their commitments are forms of *akrasia of irrationality*; failures to act from decisions are *akrasia of character*.

Now, more details about places where the akratic break can take place:

2.1. Akrasia of aim

The akratic break can appear between MAL's general Koranic principles and their actual commitment to be guided by them. Although they identify themselves as Believers, they often knowingly *fail* to commit themselves to them, allowing themselves to succumb to

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'modernism', lassitude, cynicism, weariness, or depression.[3] What medievals called *accidie* or *melancholia*, is – at least for some sorts of agents – voluntary: it is a predictable result of simpler decisions and actions. Like other akratic conditions, *accidie* or *melancholia* can carry other akratic actions in their wake. Having failed to commit themselves to their Koranic commands, MAL formed further akratic intentions and decisions.

A more radical form of akrasia of aim involves *refusing* to follow one's primary principled aims, deliberately choosing to act against them. Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor defies Christ's divine message; Goethe's Mephistopheles and Gide's Lafcadio can for a time, or at least in principle, decline to serve the what they take to be The Good. ('Non serviam.' 'Let evil be my good.' 'I will be the imp of the perverse.')

For MAL the Koran has the status of gravity: it is a principle of necessity beyond reason, neither rational nor irrational as a given in itself. Although they regard its laws as open to interpretation, they believe that its doctrines and commands should guide their lives. Having studied at Canberra and MIT, MAL have nevertheless also come to accept a secular morality that sometimes appears to violate Koranic injunctions. They are torn: although they accept the secular views they learned abroad, they nevertheless consider their commitment to the Koran and its injunctions to have over-riding priority over what they now consider 'rational considerations'. Akratically, MAL decide to violate their Koranic commitments; akratically they take the secular course and emigrate to Australia. They regretfully regard themselves as having taken the rational... but akratic course.

2.2. Akrasia of interpretation

The akratic break can take place between MAL's general commitments and their interpretation of a situation in which they find themselves. Such a failure of interpretation can be expressed in deviant perceptions, or in speech, in cognition, or emotion.

……*Akratic perception:* MAL might akratically attend to one another's sexually arousing features, instead on concentrating on one another's scholarly insights. Against Koran injunctions, they might perceive their Sudanese or Yemeni guest-workers as sub-human; or

[3] See Michael Stocker, 'Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology', *Journal of Philosophy* **76** (1979): 738–53.

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see elderly faces as ugly and deformed, or the motions of disabled people as comic. Wherever attention and focus are voluntary, there is room for akrasia.

……*Akratic speech:* MAL might akratically violate Koran injunctions in addressing their elders with undue and disrespectful familiarity, or Ahmed might describe Leila's physical charms in talking with his friends; or they might describe Mecca and the Holy Kaaba as a dump. Expressions of praise and blame, apologies and excuses are subject to akrasia: they can violate principles of truthfulness or sincerity. Because akratic speech can often be politically significant, political reformers stress the possibility of revising the vocabulary of the old regime. Banning references to 'niggers', 'broads', and 'old geezers' can sometimes be a way of reforming akratic action whose origins lie in interpretive akrasia.

……*Cognitive akrasia*: MAL might akratically engage in a line of inquiry or investigation that they foresee is likely to threaten the sanctity and authority of the Koran. They might, for instance, develop medical procedures that conflict with their Koranic commitments. They might allow analogies to selective historical precedents to have more weight in their decision-making than they think Koranically warranted. Often akrasia works as a strategy toward self-deception: MAL can become their own home-grown self-deceiving sophists, using explanatory strategies that violate their methodological commitments. Wherever there is a causal line to voluntary action in cognitive activity – as there is in the direction and re-direction of attention of attention, for instance – there is room for akrasia.[4] Cognitive akrasia is not limited to individuals in private life: a scientific community or a governmental and bureaucratic elite can akratically allow political or ideological considerations over-ride their commitments to the primacy of truth-oriented scientific policies and methods.

……*Emotional akrasia:* MAL's emotions – their mutual sexual attraction, their tendencies to jealousy and envy – can violate their Koranic commitments. Although their emotions are typically not themselves under direct voluntary control, psychologically astute people like MAL can redirect or check the focus of their attention. MAL's emotional akrasia generally has its roots in some form of interpretive akrasia. Their akratic sexual attraction may have emerged from their lingering attention to one another's beauty; their akratic

[4] See Amelie Rorty, 'Akratic Belief', *American Philosophic Quarterly* (1983): 175–183.

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envy may have been prompted by spending time gossiping about their neighbor's wealth and power.

2.3. Akrasia of irrationality

Akrasia of irrationality occurs as a break between an evaluative commitment and forming a particular intention or decision. Leila says, 'More than anything, I want to become a good physician, with the best medical training possible. I've received a generous fellowship from the King Saud University College of Medicine in Riyadh …So I think I shall stay and study the Koran with Ahmed.' As it stands, without the addition of further premises, it's not clear whether Leila's decision is akratic. The extent of akrasia of irrationality is often masked by self-deception: given over-determination of intentional attitudes, Leila might self-deceptively rationalize her decision by thinking that if she waits a year, Ahmed might join her to study in the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies at King Saud University. Or she might have heard – on good authority – that a significant number of the leading faculty of the KSU College of Medicine have joined *Médicins Sans Frontières* to volunteer their services in Syria. Identifying cases of cognitive akrasia is subject to the standard difficulties of attributing intentional attitudes in opaque contexts. Apparently deviant or irrational akratic intentions invite speculative rationalizing explanations. An enhanced enlargement of the principle of charity can supply rationalizing explanations for apparently deviant or irrational intentions. The attribution of akrasia has the burden of proof: the default assumption is that Leila has a justificatory explanation of her apparent lapse.

Like actions, intentions and decisions are often over-determined: they typically have multiple aetiologies and multiple 'identifications'. A decision may be akratically irrational under one description but not under another. Leila's decision to stay to study the Koran with Ahmed may violate her intention to become a physician but not that of becoming a Koranic scholar. Or she may be akratic in heading for the KSU College of Medicine rather than in continuing her Koranic studies. Because it is open to multiple interpretations, her decision may be identified both by the action type that it standardly prompts and also by its connection to her general aims and commitments. The typical description of her decision to continue her studies with Ahmed provides its initial thin identification; its internal connection to her conceptual and motivational structure provides a thicker, fuller contextual identification of her decision. When those

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two modes of identifying her intentions differ, her apparent irrationality may be akratic under one description but not under another. Without a background understanding of Leila's psychology and its cultural background, attributions of akrasia – or of irrationality, for that matter – are speculative. Given over-determination of decision-making, Leila may be misled about the operative and effective grounds of her decision. In principle her thought processes are transparent to self-reflection, but they are nevertheless often actually quite opaque to her.

The looming possibility of akrasia provides a natural occasion for Leila's attempt to reach reflective equilibrium. In the face of an apparent conflict between her commitments and a decision, Leila can engage in a critical reflective reassessment of her aims, principles or commitments.[5] However subtle, however sincere it may be, that process – the process of changing one's mind and revising revising one's preferences – is as open to akrasia as is any other quasi-voluntary action. Given over-determination of intentional attitudes in opaque contexts, any such revision may (or may not) itself be akratic. There may be a determinate fact of the matter about whether any of Leila's reconsiderations was akratic or 'purely' rational, but the truth value of a specific attribution of akrasia is standardly indeterminable. Akrasia involves a deviant inferential chain: it marks a break between an action and its standard causes or grounds. Because the attribution of priorities among commitments is not only opaque, but subject to subtle revision, are subject to continuous revision, there may be less akrasia than meets the eye.

2.4. Akrasia of character

Akrasia of character occurs between a decision and its presumed action outcome. Leila had decided – all things considered – to postpone going to medical school and stay to study with Ahmed. But just before the beginning of term, she read a biography of Clara Barton and happened to see a film set in metropolitan Riyadh. She began to have dreams of herself heroically saving Ahmed's life during a cholera epidemic. Suddenly, somewhat to her own surprise, she began filling out forms for courses and dorm room assignments for the woman's division of KSU Medical College. She had tearful sessions with Ahmed, packed her bags and books and off she went to Riyadh.

[5] I am grateful to Robert Frederick for raising this point.

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The varieties of akrasia do not form a chronological sequence. Neither Ahmed nor Leila first form general evaluations, then commit themselves to them, and then apply general principles to particular cases, form an intention, then a resolution and then decision, and finally proceed to act. Their understanding of their commitments become more specific, more precise as they make choices; their intentions become clearer as they learn more about the alternatives available to them. Their actions can constitute or instantiate their ends rather than being independent means to realizing them. Similarly their actions can instantiate or specify their ends rather than serve as independent means towards realizing them. What MAL decide and do can specify or articulate the significance – the meaning – of their commitments.[6] If they are themselves charismatic authorities, their choices and intentions can become part of the ongoing hermeneutic tradition of Koranic interpretation. Retrospectively, a confident attribution of their akrasia might have to be withdrawn.

3. The Scope of Akrasia

The wide range of possible locations for akrasia suggests that – ironically enough – there is often more as well as less akrasia than meets the eye. Philosophic analyses of akrasia tend to locate it as a break between an intention or decision and its performance in action. They have treated it as a species of irrationality or character flaw, leaving the question of why akrasia is so popular and pervasive to psychologists.[7] Having marked the variety of locations where the akratic break can occur, we can resist attempts to narrow its scope.

……Akrasia need not involve violating a commitment or forgoing a long range benefit in favor of a present pleasure. Although Leila had acquired austere puritanical habits as a child, she repudiated her asceticism and became quite a *bon vivant* during her junior year

[6] See David Wiggins, 'Weakness of Will, Deliberation and Practical Reason', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **76** (1973–4): 29–51 and his 'Weakness of Will, Commensurability and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **79** (1978–79): 251–277

[7] See Donald Davidson, 'How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 21–42.; Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009); Alfred Mele, *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (eds) *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

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abroad. Now, studying the Koran with Ahmed, she might akratically forgo a present pleasure – buying a basket of fresh strawberries, or taking a pointless saunter by the river – in favor of a stern distant alternative she has come to consider foolish.

……Akrasia can involve failure to act: there is akrasia of omission. Absorbed in her conflict about whether to go to medical school or to stay and study with Ahmed, Leila might – against all her principles and affections – akratically neglect the friends who need her help and counsel.

……The akratic alternative need not be desired. Leila might not particularly relish the idea of going to KSU medical school: she can clearly see years of self-denying, frustrating grueling work ahead of her. She might even foresee that she would be unlikely to succeed in becoming the kind of physician she would like to imagine. And yet she might, against her better judgment, start her medical training as a gritty form of self-punishment that she does not condone.

……Akrasia need not involve choosing the second best alternative: the akratic alternative often has low ranking among the range of considered preferences.[8] When Leila's uncle prevented her meeting Ahmed, her sorrow and frustration sometimes led Leila to bizarre uncharacteristic akratic behavior: against her better judgment, she grossly insulted her uncle, although antagonizing her uncle was the last thing she wanted to do.

……It need not be impulsive: it can involve long range and carefully considered planning. Ahmed and Leila might plot to spend time alone without surveillance, ingeniously trying to get her uncle out of the way by persuading him to undertake the Hajj next Fall.

……Akrasia is not limited to singular occurrences: there are akratic habits as well as akratic events. When – despite his better judgment – Ahmed characteristically withdraws from all society when he is distressed, he might well be acting from a deeply entrenched habit rather than from the attractions of solitude.

……The attractions of the akratic alternative are often not obvious: they need not be expressed by, nor manifest in the akratic action. The akratic alternative sometimes has the generic attraction of presenting a stressed or conflicted person with an outburst of random activity. The attractions lie not so much in *what* is done, as of doing something, anything. Frustration or anger is often expressed in

[8] See Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise And Rotten Compromises* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) and his *Betrayal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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indiscriminate pointless insult or violence.[9] Akrasia provides a temporary solution – a third way – for unresolvable ambivalence.

……Akrasia need not involve pathological motivation. Far from being pathological, the various strategies and habits that pull toward akrasia are standard routine psychological functions and routines. Default principles of salience – focusing on what seems presently desirable, for instance, or conforming to social patterns of speech and behavior – operate even in the most carefully responsible and strongly empowering practical reasoning. Because such patterns and strategies do not require any particular motive to be brought into play, because they are habits of thought and behavior that can operate independently of motivational structures, they can akratically override preferred alternatives.

……The akratic alternative need not be seen or judged as wrong, immoral or harmful. Ahmed's cousin Ali, a member of ISIS who has committed himself to a violent jihad, may at the last moment akratically decide not to carry out a suicide bombing he has planned.

……In acting akratically, MAL are aware of what they're doing when they arrange to meet secretively, but they need not be actively consciously aware that they are violating their Koranic commitments in doing so. Not need their akrasia always be regretted. Although its motivational rationale is weaker than those of their preferred alternative, it may nevertheless represent a value that they cannot and would not regret.

4. Demystifying Akrasia

Let's suppose that MAL are standard issue sensible people, capable of deliberation and following their judgment about what is best for them to do, all things considered. They are critically reflective about their desires and priorities; they are capable of correcting their judgments and checking their actions; they don't have hang-ups or obsessions; they are not self-destructive. They know what they're doing if anyone does. What prompts MAL to act against their better judgment, to abandon their commitments? Under what conditions might such perfectly ordinary, reasonable people voluntarily act irrationally or out of character? What – above its surface attractions – does the akratic alternative promise them? Akrasia is, after all, in general distressing and undesirable even when it is self-

[9] See Amelie Rorty, 'The Political Sources of the Emotions: Greed and Anger', *Philosophical Studies* (1998), 143–159.

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deceptively rationalized or when it brings unexpected benefits. For MAL, the discomforts of their akrasia go beyond those involved in the risks they are taking or in their shame at violating serious commitments. At least some of the regret and anxiety of their akrasia comes from being mystified by their actions, rather than from the actual outcome of the akratic course, which might be serendipitously enjoyable or beneficial. Akrasia is often unsettling because it produces a sense of vertigo about the structure and stability of rational agency. That is one of the reasons why self-deceptive rationalizations often accompany akrasia, as attempts to steady the sense of confident self-command.

As we told it, MAL's story is a story of their continuing akrasia: preferring to remain faithful to their Koranic principles, they nevertheless repeatedly violated its commands. So why did MAL, sensible as they are, become akratic? Akrasia has many attractions besides the satisfactions it presents on the surface. Let's call the alternative that expresses or exemplifies MAL's basic aims, commitments, Koranic interpretations, decisions the *preferred alternative*. What explains the power of the akratic alternative and the relative weakness of the preferred judgment?

The akratic course sometimes acquires its attractions by its power to dominate motivating attention. It can have more salience than the preferred course by focusing on some feature of the akratic alternative – its vividness, its intensity, its immediacy, its associations – that blocks appropriate concentration on the preferred, but distant or abstract alternative. It can be immediately present; it can have imagined intensity or excitement; it can promise relief from pain or boredom; it can be determinate and familiar; it can symbolically represent the satisfaction of a frustrated need. Patterns of attentive focusing express constitutionally-based dominant salience (food to a hungry person) as well as those that reflect socio-cultural formation and reinforcement (the Confederate flag to a Southern segregationist). They also result from the vicissitudes of individual psychological history (the sensitivities of combat veterans' post traumatic syndromes). It is not always easy to identify the attention-dominating features of an akratic alternative: their attractions can be symbolically coded, in ways that could only be deciphered by tracing the formation of deeply seated and entrenched psychological habits. Leila's characteristic akratic rudeness when she fears a rival for Ahmed's attentions has its sources in the fiercely competitive playground games at her Day Care Center. When the preferred course is perceived as distant or difficult, a strongly entrenched habitual routine presents a default solution, rather than the satisfaction of any particular

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attraction. The attractions of the akratic alternatives are sometimes those of the familiar, the habitual or easy course. Any easy or strongly habitual action would have done equally well. The akratic but habitual course can present ready-made, presumably relatively reliable action repertoires without being justified on those grounds.

……A range of affective patterns – for instance, those expressed in associational antipathies or in susceptibility to charismatic influence – can pull in the direction of the akratic alternative. Normally a tactful, constructive mentor, Ahmed might be curt and dismissive towards a student to whom he has taken a dislike. Against their better judgment, MAL might be influenced by a powerful Mullah to join ISIS in a demonstration against their old friends and good neighbors.

……Images drawn from literature and popular culture may present compelling scenarios that capture the imitative imagination.[10] Lured by ads in fashion magazines that made their way to her village, Leila might akratically start wearing showy risqué dresses under her chador.

MAL may suffer akrasia because their preferred judgment isn't sufficiently motivating, rather than because the akratic alternative is strongly attractive. They may not have learned how to envisage the preferred good, not have developed the perceptual and imaginative habits that enable them to attend to it, to see it vividly. It can seem less real to them because they do not know how to specify it in detail, because they only conceive it schematically, without being able to imagine how it might connect with their habits. Or they may have envisaged it all too vividly, but as distant from the repertoire of their habits. Their practical reasoning might fail to carry the habits, the simulation or the rehearsal that begins action.

Leila's sense of empowerment may be weak: even though she thinks of herself as a liberated woman, she may have been socialized to be passive or self-effacing and compliant. She may have come to believe that the world is unlikely to afford – or to afford her – anything like the akratic alternative again. The patterns of her perceptual salience may be at odds with her later commitments; the patterns of her attention may not express her preferences. Her preferred judgment may lack conviction because it seems distant, merely academic: she has difficulty imagining herself fulfilling her preferred alternative.

[10] See Jon Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds,* (Chichester/New York/Brisbane/Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), Chapters 5 and 6

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Akrasia has a strongly cultural dimension. Ahmed's and Leila's erotic imagination and desires may have been feverishly developed by their reading Rumi's flowery love poetry. More commonly, the habits of resisting prevailing dominant social scenarios and narratives that constitute violations of principled commitments can remain undeveloped or stultified: MAL's neighbors can have difficulty imagining alternatives to socially entrenched responses. They can, for instance, react to slights or insults that impel them to long standing feuds that they deplore and regret as violations of their Koranic commitments.

Akrasia can emerge in situations where someone finds himself unable to exercise deeply entrenched or reliably endorsed habits. An exile alienated from his social milieu, someone who suffers strong restrictions on his scope of action can become debilitated, his habits and dispositions blocked. Anomie, alienation, subtle victimization and isolation are seed beds for the kind of akrasia that moves to a random, impulsive expression of frustration that violates principles and preferred commitments. Yet access to unusual and unrestricted power can also induce akrasia. One of the ways in which power corrupts is that it gives a stressed or conflicted person greater occasion for apparently safe akrasia. In such cases, the checks and constraints that might normally add weight to the preferred course can recede, become muted. The powerful but conflicted *akrates* is nevertheless also often canny about the directions of his akrasia: he plays safe in acting against his better judgment, violating his principles by victimizing only those powerless to affect him, compounding his behavioral akrasia with akratic rationalization.[11]

5. From Banal to Monstrous Akrasia

The standard habits and patterns of attention that highlight the akratic alternative or diminish the motivating attraction of the preferred alternative are standard operating procedures. That is precisely their power: they are default psychological operations that do not require any particular motive or commitment or preference in order to be brought into play. The akratic alternative can consist in reverting to lower gear, to relatively automatic psychological functioning, without having an over-riding reason for doing so. Akrasia often simply involves acting voluntarily lapsing into conventional, habitual

[11] See Amelie Rorty, 'How to Become Corrupt', *Yale Review* (1998) 104–112.

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or thoughtless behavior in situations where we take ourselves to have reason to act thoughtfully, deliberately.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of Eichmann's banal *failing to think* links ordinary standard issue akrasia to the underlying core of mind-boggling crimes against humanity.[12] Understanding akrasia – its lures and locations – helps us to understand what happens when an ordinary banal bureaucrat fails to see, fails to describe and connect what he is doing with his professed principles and commitments. As Arendt reports him – and as he often described himself – Eichmann was focused on doing his work, fulfilling his duties. The very psychological and cognitive habits that make akrasia so pervasive and persistent – their ordinary use in practical reasoning and agency – helps to explain why, when and where otherwise a perfectly ordinary *l'homme moyen sensuel* fails to *think* about what he is doing when he is just going about doing his work and leading his life. Arendt's message echoes the Vedantic Hindu scriptures: *Tat Tvam Asi* ('Thou art that.') As Pogo has it: 'We have met the enemy and he is us.'

Distinguishing locations for the akratic break also marks the optimal leverage point for reform. Locate the precise point of akrasia and you have located a place where a self-reforming akrates can best attempt to intervene. Just as conventional social patterns often contribute to akrasia, so too they can in principle support good will attempts to overcome it. Even philosophy and speech act theory can reveal the careless akrates to himself.[13] When popular journalism and charismatic figures weigh against racist and sexist language, it becomes easier to become self-conscious about pejorative references to 'kikes' and 'broads'. Recognizing akratic speech patterns locates the focus where habits can – at least in principle – be changed by recourse to the same psychological routes that developed them on the first place. As the tendency to imitate charismatic figures can

[12] See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Group, 1963). I am grateful to Anthony O'Hear for recommending a different analysis of Eichmann, one that interprets him as fully, non-akratically committed to his role in the Holocaust. See Bettina Stagneth (*Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014)). See also J-P. Sartre, 'Childhood of a Leader', *The Wall* (New York: New Directions, 1948), 84 ff., originally in *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939).

[13] See Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice, Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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prompt akrasia, so too can a self-reforming akrates place himself in a position where he is likely to imitate a counter-vailing figure.

It would of course be absurd to attempt to justify or accept a general policy that validates akrasia on the grounds that its origins, structures and dynamics underlie the psychology of basic cognition and action. Although akrasia is not by any means the worst among the psychological and intellectual vices, it cannot – in the nature of the case – be justified as general policy. If akrasia can sometimes lead to vicious criminality, determined attempts to obliterate the generic capacity for akrasia would amount to frontal lobotomy. Without the kinds of patterns of attention and salience, without the pervasive habits of interpretation and cognition, we would be at a loss. The correction of banal akrasia and its criminal or evil extensions – whether it be the banalities of eating forbidden fruit or the horrors of organizing transport schedules for trains to Auschwitz – can only take place piecemeal, by correcting specific, contextualized patterns of attention, or speech, habits of interpretation and cognition. Whatever methods such techniques of correction might take would have to turn to the very psychological strategies that prompted akrasia in the first place.

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