

## Are the Weakness of Will and Akrasia Two Distinct Phenomena?

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### Abstract

According to traditional philosophical literature, Akrasia is defined as acting against one's best judgment. Philosophers have considered Akrasia as synonymous with the weakness of will. However, Holton considers these two phenomena to be distinct and argues that weakness of will is better understood as over-readily giving up on one's resolutions. This study seeks to show that these two phenomena – unlike Holton's claim – are not distinct, but the accounts of Akrasia and weakness of will take two approaches to explain the reasons behind quitting actions: (1) in terms of its relationship to the agent; and (2) in terms of its relationship to the action. The researcher attempts to show that Holton's interpretation of the weakness of will refers to the second perspective whereas Aristotle approaches it from two perspectives. However, on duly analyzing the elements put forward by Holton, we can see them to be consistent with those of Aristotle.

**Keywords:** Akrasia, Weakness of will, Intention, Belief, Agent, Action, Aristotle, Holton.

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## Introduction

Recently, the weakness of will has been approached from different perspectives. Some philosophers consider it as synonymous with Akrasia (e.g. Davidson, 1970, 1980; Mele, 1987, 2010; Wiggins, 1978). And some others believe that they are conceptually distinct. The traditional literature identifies the weak-willed individual as akratic, when he acts against his own best judgment or better one, intentionally. According to Aristotle, such a person is incontinent and fails to comply with his own judgment due to akratic characteristics (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Bk.7).

In contrast, some philosophers believe that the weakness of will is related to the resolution being defeated rather than the failure to comply with a better judgment (such as Holton, 1999; 2003; 2009: ch. 4). Holton sees the weak-willed person as one who over-readily revises his own resolution. He believes that his account can shed light on the reasons behind the failure to act better than a philosophical account of Akrasia (Holton, 1999:p.241).

This study aims to illustrate that these two phenomena, unlike the view held by Holton, are not different phenomena and that the account of Akrasia and that of weakness of will which has been put forward so far, are actually viewing the failure to act from two different perspectives, namely in terms of its relation to the agent and its relation to the action. As two examples, this study investigates Aristotle's and Holton's interpretation of Akrasia and weakness of will.

Later on, it will be clear that the analysis concerning the weakness of will offered by Holton only involves action while Aristotle sees it sometimes from the agent's perspective and another time from the perspective of the action. This study approaches Aristotle's interpretation from both perspectives, and Holton's interpretation as it being action-related, with the latter complying with the second interpretation of Aristotle.

This paper comprises of four sections: section one analyzes the characteristics of the akratic agent. Then it clarifies how Aristotle appropriately describes the effect of bad desires on giving up the action. Section two describes the akratic action by drawing on three elements required for action, namely belief, desire and intention. It will be made clear in which stage the akratic agent is stopped: belief or intention? Section three explains Holton's attitude to the weakness of will. It seeks to figure out why he relates the weakness of will to the violation of intention, drawing on the main elements of his theory<sup>1</sup>. Finally, section four, entitled "Akrasia or weakness of will?" seeks to find out whether one of these two accounts can be chosen as a better one. Spotting the similarities and differences between two interpretations, this section attempts to drive home the view that Aristotle's interpretation of Akrasia is more in keeping with Holton's interpretation of weakness of will.

## **1. Akratic agent, Belief**

Philosophers ask why an akratic agent acts wrongly intentionally and freely, while he is aware of the wrongness of his action. Socrates considers it impossible and holds only ignorance responsible for the wrongdoing (Socrates, Protagoras: 358d). Viewing virtue and knowledge as the same prevents Socrates from the concession that the wise agent acts wrongly intentionally and consciously (352aff). Some modern philosophers find this phenomenon impossible as well, drawing on different analyses (Hare 1963:ch.5, Watson 1977)<sup>2</sup>. Aristotle calls such a person 'incontinent' whose trait of character prevents him from doing the right action. Aristotle interprets this trait of character<sup>3</sup> as Akrasia (Nicomachean Ethics: 1145b; 1152a) which is manifested as an intentional action against better judgment. In his view, emotions or bad appetites coerce the agent into acting

wrongly. 'The incontinent man, knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion' (Ibid: 1145b).

Today, literature sometimes interprets such a phenomenon as the weakness of will. The weak-willed person or an akratic one intentionally chooses the action which he knows or believes to be the worst course of action when he could choose the better course (Wiggs, 1978 p.239). Putting it another way, an agent's will is weak if he acts intentionally and freely contrary to his better judgment (Davidson 1970; 1980:p.21; 2001:p.26).

In doing X, an agent acts incontinently if and only if (a) the agent does X intentionally, (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action Y open to him, and (c) the agent judges that all things considered, it would be better to do Y than to do X (Davidson, 1970; 1980: p. 22; 2001:p.27).

Other philosophers also refer to the same three elements as conditions required for an action to be akratic. Aristotle views an akratic act as one done by the agent who is aware of it being wrong. The bad desire or pleasures lead him to commit the wrong action, setting no obstacles in the way of his free will. Thus, Aristotle views an akratic act as one done consciously and voluntarily (Nicomachean Ethics, 1152a).

Aristotle seeks to explain this phenomenon psychologically and philosophically by drawing on the moral and psychological characteristics of the continent, incontinent, self-indulgent and temperate. According to Aristotle's moral theory, the moral agent is one who is credited with moral virtues and rational virtues which contribute to the individual's good judgment as well as to morally right actions. As a virtue, practical wisdom plays an essential role in the cognition of action. The control of rational power over the power of passionpower, or in other words, the consistency between the rational power and the passion power has the following result: as long as reason judges X to be right, the emotional power

obeys reason, leading the agent to the right action. Given the superiority of his rational power over his emotional power, such a person has self-constraint, acting in accordance with his knowledge. Seeing the agent as a human being, Aristotle believes that reason should have a dominant role (1178a, 1166a, 1168b). Aristotle calls such a person temperate. Both continent and incontinent persons know what to do; both are also tempted to act wrongly. While the continent resists the temptation, conquers it and performs the right act, the incontinent gives in to the temptation and finally performs the wrong act. Unlike the three groups mentioned above, the self-indulgent dominated by vices, cannot recognize the right action at all.

Although the incontinent is not a bad one, from Aristotle's point of view, such a person cannot conquer the temptations due to lack of self-control, giving in to passions. This results in wrongdoing (1150a).

If a person knows that X is right, how can the desire for pleasure prevent one from doing the right action? It follows that bad desires must influence either the individual's judgment or his power. Both are accepted by Aristotle. In the view of Aristotle, true knowledge is the one that has turned into a part of a person (1147a), giving its owner such a power of will that he does not even think of wrongdoing or at least can exercise self-constraint. But the incontinent lacks such knowledge due to the influence of desires. Even if the knowledge is existent, it is undermined and discredited by the desires and irrational emotions, reducing its motivational drive. This kind of knowledge is too weak to motivate the agent to do the action. Aristotle likens an akratic agent to a mad, sleeping and drunk man who blurts out something of which he has no knowledge (1147a; 1147b). Aristotle describes such a person as one suffering from moral weakness. Such a person is blameworthy because of softness which has

caused the person to choose the wrong rather than right action. Softness and moral weakness stem from the agent's irrational desires which undermine the will of the akratic person. This leads to the agent's failure to act appropriately.

In this context, as one part of the akratic individual has control over the other part, i.e. emotions over reason, the rational judgment has faded under the influence of desire, with the pleasure turning the individual into a soft one who cannot do right act<sup>4</sup>. However, this inability is not that strong as to coerce him into wrongdoing because "he has still the power to exercise self-control, should he be willing" (Mele, 1986: P,675, Wall, 2009:p.71).

The moral weakness is the main reason behind one's orientation to act against his own better judgment. As a moral philosopher, Aristotle seeks to shed light on the origin of moral weakness and the agent's failure to do the right action. Analyzing the psychological characteristics of the incontinent, he concludes that the main aim is to reinforce the morality and the will of the agent by uprooting the weakness. This account of Akrasia is called the agent-related account.

## **2. Akratic Action, intention**

Doing an action requires that the agent: 1- knows what to do 2- desires to do it, and 3- intends to do it. Failure in any one of these stages will result in the abortion of the action. Philosophers have different views on the conditions needed to accomplish an action. Some claim belief is the sole requirement, others name belief and desire, yet others focus on a combination of belief, desire, and intention. If one takes belief, desire, and intention as three elements required for the accomplishment of an action, it follows that on judging X as right, the agent can do the action provided he is, 1-willing to do it, and 2- intends to do the action. The action is accomplished provided there is no obstacle and nothing

violates it and the agent has the power to do it.

To Aristotle, in which stage does an akratic agent face the problem? The desire can prevent the accomplishment of an action in two ways: 1- by influencing the agent's knowledge, it causes him to ignore the accomplishment of the right action and to devalue the action. Consequently, knowledge loses its motivational function, with desire as the only remaining stimulus, driving the individual to the wrong action 2- by the influence desire can exercise on the agent's will thereby not allowing him to intend the action or to violate the intention after having intended it. Which one is correct in Aristotle's viewpoint?

Aristotle categorizes the incontinent into two groups:

1- Those who do not abide by the conclusion of their deliberation. 2- Those who cannot make a decision because of sensitivity and overexcitement (1152a). The first group has opted for the action and intends to do it yet they cannot. The second group has not opted for the right action. That is, he cannot intend to do the action. In both cases, the actions are not accomplished. However, the type and the degree of the effect of desire on will vary by the group. The second group gives in to the temptation with no deliberation, committing the wrong action. The first group deliberates first and then gives in due to the influence of emotions. In Aristotle's view, the second incontinence is an instance of impetuosity and the first one is a case of weakness (1150b). Both groups are under the control of emotion.

This interpretation offered by Aristotle is somewhat different from the interpretation of an akratic man as one who is unable to intend to act rightly (see Mele, 1987;2010; Davidson,2001:p.30; 1980: p.39). This is because in the accounts mentioned above, the effect of desire for pleasure on intention manifests in two ways: the lack of intention and the intention violation, both of which, according to Aristotle, are

held responsible for the failure to do the action. Although the person violates his better judgment, he had not chosen the wrong action from the very beginning (1148a; 1151a). “He who pursues the excesses of things pleasant - not by choice but contrary to his choice and his judgment- is called incontinent” (1148a). This interpretation of *Akrasia* is called action-oriented interpretation. Out of two representations of incontinent offered by Aristotle, the first one is more in keeping with the traits characterizing an akratic man. The issue in question is the weakness of the will. To Aristotle, it is important that the moral agent not give in to the temptation easily. For the same reason, one who commits wrongdoing not driven by a strong desire to do so is more inferior and hence, more blamable than one who acts wrongly under the influence of strong desires to do so (1150a). The former easily betrays his intentions and act contrary to his decision. The moral weakness or softness causes the man to lose his resistance against pleasures or even anger and fear, ending up doing the wrong action. However, the wrong action requires one either to be dominated by desire and thus unable to make a decision or to violate a previously made decision. In both cases, the man fails to accomplish the action.

Note that Aristotle believes that the weakness of will is relevant only when the doer gives up the action because of bad pleasures (sometimes anger). Thus, giving up the action because of changing circumstances, good pleasure, the agent’s inability or coercion is not considered as a case of the weakness of will. Moreover, it is appropriate and even necessary that the doer changes his first belief and acts against it on reasonably knowing that his first judgment was wrong (1146a).

### **3. The weakness of will and intention violation**

Relating weakness of will with intention violation rather

than judgment violation, Holton makes a distinction between Akrasia and weakness of will (Intention and weakness of will, 1999). He says:

The central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgment but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions (1999: p. 241).

He believes his account can offer a better explanation for why one fails to act, compared with that of Akrasia. Thus he replaces Akrasia with it (Ibid: p.250). In his view, the weakness of will occurs when “agents are too ready to reconsider their intention” (Ibid: p.241) and the weak-willed man is one who “over readily revises an intention” (Ibid: p.250). He takes such an approach because unlike many philosophers he does not consider desire and belief as motivational factors or at least as the sole motivational factors. On the contrary, he believes that resolution plays the most important role and that revision of resolution or violation prevents one from accomplishing the action.

In many cases, he refers to the inadequacy of desire and belief as conditions for the accomplishment of the action (Ibid.: pp. 241-243; 2006:p.4; 2003: p.2). This is not to say that he views belief and desire as of no value but that they are not sufficient for accomplishing the action. As a matter of fact, will-power serves as a complement to the three elements (2003: p.5; 8). As a factor different from the other three (Ibid: p.1, 2, 9), will-power acts like an arm, helping the agent overcome all the irrational factors in the way of the accomplishment of an action (p.9). According to Holton’s account, irrational desires are to be blamed for the violation of the intention. With the inclinations in the individual, “an agent whose will-power is strong can stick by his resolution even in the face of strong contrary desires; an agent whose will-power is weak readily abandons his resolution” (2003:p.2). Thus in

Holton's view, resolution is not something independent of intention, but it is considered as an intention which is stable and incessant, helping one to perform the action<sup>5</sup>(2003:p.3). An agent's intention will lead to the action, provided he resists reconsideration and does not violate it (1999:p.241). Should the agent reconsider his intention (though he should not have) and violates his resolution, he is a weak-willed man, failing to do the action.

This is why Holton considers the strength of will as a condition required for the accomplishment of action, allowing one to abide by his resolution by resisting the inclinations (2003). According to him, weakness of will requires that one's revision of resolution is inappropriate by the standards of a good intender, i.e. he should not have made such a revision (1999: p.259). Given the fact that a good intender is one whose decisions, as well as the revisions he makes in his decisions, are reasonable, it is unreasonable to revise the intention in this case. Weakness of will occurs when the agent revises the intention when he should not <sup>6</sup>(1999:p.247; 2003: p.3).

Touching on the difference between weakness of will and Akrasia, Holton (2012) maintains that weakness of will is related to revision of intention while Akrasia is related to lack of intention, that is, having no self-control, an akratic man can not intend a right action while a weak-willed agent has intended to do the action but he fails to do so due to the influence of contrary desires, causing him to violate his previous intention. Some proponents of Akrasia emphasize that an akratic man is characterized by having no intention. For example, Davidson claims that a weak-willed man cannot have an intention compatible with his better judgment. (1985: pp.205-6)

From Holton's point of view, intention can defeat the contrary inclinations (1999:p.250). The resolution defeats the

desires which are to corrupt the intention. “Resolutions are contrary inclinations defeating intentions: intentions formed by the agent with the very role of defeating any contrary inclinations that might emerge” (2003:p.9). The analysis and the resulting recommendations offered by Holton in various articles (e.g. in 2003; 2006) are aimed at shedding light on what is meant by the weakness of will and how can the agent get rid of this misery. It should be mentioned that the weak-willed person changes his intention under the influence of various psychological moods such as meticulousness, temptation, sorrow, and disappointment. While it is not rational for him to have such inclinations and as these inclinations are not reasonable, so changing the intention is irrational. However, changing his intentions due to reasons such as changing circumstances or waking to the fact that his previous intention was wrong, the person cannot be described as a weak-willed one. It is as if a person has made up his mind to go on a picnic tomorrow but changes his intention upon knowing that it is to rain tomorrow. In this case, the agent’s new decision is reasonable, stemming from the rainy weather rather than unreasonable desires (1999: p.247, see also 2004). Thus, it is the reason behind the agent’s decision to change his intention that determines whether this change is reasonable or not. Being reasonable, the change of intention is not considered the weakness of will. A weak-willed person becomes a strong-will one by abiding by his previous intention, becoming determined by not changing it. Having no reason to reconsider his intention, he is said to have a resolution.

Holton relates the weakness of will to resolution in the papers prior to 2012. However, in response to a critique written by Mele on his theory (2010), he made changes to his account of the weakness of will refuting Mele’s view. In his paper, Mele seeks to show that the common account concerning weakness of will, unlike Holton’s assertion, is compatible with both Holton’s account of weakness of will

and his own view (2010:p.397). Mele seeks to reinforce his own view by drawing on empirical evidence. Using some empirical methods, Holton (2012) shows that Mele's explanation is not correct, concluding neither his own account nor that of Mele is correct (Holton, 2012: p.342). Holton is not intent on completely refuting his own view of will weakness, asserting that "the ordinary notion of weakness of will is more like a prototype or cluster concept" (Ibid.) in which different factors play a role and that these factors need to be taken into account. Akrasia, resolution-violation and the moral valence of the action are the main features none of which by itself can attribute the weakness of will (Ibid.). The following section sheds light on the degree to which these elements can contribute to the affinity of the traditional and non-traditional accounts of the weakness of will.

#### **4. Weakness of will or Akrasia?**

It was made clear in the previous section why Holton describes weakness of will as a phenomenon distinct from Akrasia, preferring his own account of will weakness to that of Akrasia, hence its replacement. This section is aimed at discussing that these two phenomena, unlike Holton's view, are not distinct. In other words, if Aristotle and Holton interpret weakness of will as a philosopher of action, their account is the same, identifying weakness of will as violation of resolution. The following section seeks to make it clear that many of the elements that Aristotle drew on to interpret the weakness of will are also shared by Holton's interpretation of the same concept, namely weakness of will. As a result, it will be clear that what makes these two philosophers take different views is that Aristotle tries to analyze this issue from the viewpoint of a moral philosopher while Holton analyzes it more from the view of a psychologist.

In the previous section, it was said that Holton, unlike the

advocates of Akrasia, believes the change of intention to be the main reason behind the avoidance of action. This is because Holton takes objection to those claiming that intention is comprised of desire and belief, as well as those believing desire and belief are the only factors required for the accomplishment of the action.

There are different accounts of the contribution of belief, desire, and intention to action. They are as follows: 1- that belief is the only necessary and sufficient condition for the accomplishment of the action<sup>7</sup>. 2- Belief and desire are necessary and sufficient conditions for the accomplishment of the action. 3- Both are necessary conditions yet not sufficient. There are also different accounts of how these three elements are related. For example, intention is composed of desire and belief (Davidson, 1970; 1983; 2001: p.13) or that the relationship between belief and intention is normative (Anscombe, 1963:p.56-7; Holton, 2008: p.56). Should intention be considered as composed of desire and belief, it follows that intention will not be translated into action if either of the elements is lacking. In this case, having intention is contingent on two elements: namely desire and belief. If the relationship between belief and intention is normative, it means that on believing in the rightness of X, the agent should intend it and put it into action.

In either case, the accomplishment of the action is contingent on a requirement, namely the agent is not willing to act against his own intention. Being so, the agent's desire to do the action is compatible with his judgment according to which he can act. The akratic agent's desire to do wrongly leads to the avoidance of action provided that the same desire destroys either the agent's primary judgment or his intention. Apparently, Aristotle's interpretation of desire has a double effect, influencing both knowledge and intention. This is made possible either by destroying the intention or averting the

formation of intention.

On the other hand, if the judgment is a requirement for the choice or intention and one intends to do the action following the judgment, the action is accomplished provided that there is a resolution to do so. The intention becomes determined provided all conditions required to do the action are met. The least is that one ensures the doer to be willing and able to do so.

As previously mentioned, the weakness of will is relevant provided that the obstacles are unreasonable (including pleasures or psychological factors such as hesitation and temptation). However, if his reasons are rational, one cannot be said to have weakness of will. This is as if one has decided to do the action which is beyond his ability (assuming that he was not aware of this failure) or that the new circumstances have rendered the primary judgment unreasonable. In this context, the person's intention to do the action might not become serious or he may have to violate his intention due to his inability. In all cases, although the intention has been violated, the agent cannot be said to have weakness of will.

Given the above-mentioned discussion, it is clear to what degree Holton's account and that of Aristotle are compatible. Both share the view that belief and intention are the requirements for the accomplishment of action. According to Aristotle, as Holton believes, knowledge is a necessary requirement, yet not a sufficient one for the accomplishment of action, putting emphasis on intention without which, he claims, the agent fails to do an action (Aristotle, *On the Soul*:433a ). Holton finds his own interpretation distinct from that put forward by the proponents of *Akrasia* as being against belief. On the other hand, he considers *Akrasia* as being compatible with a lack of intention. Yet in his words; weakness of will is the same as intention violation (1999; 2003; 2012). Holton's approach to the contribution of belief,

desire and intention to action allows him to make a sole connection between weakness of will and intention violation. "One requires having desire and belief so as to be able to choose the action. Yet they don't determine the choice and action" (2006, p.4; 15).

The action is accomplished provided the intentions are not violated. This requires the person to have a resolution, made possible through a strong will which obviates the desires which have the power to defeat the intentions. By saying that the strength of will is a power different from the other three elements, acting as an arm, Holton does not mean a power along with the rational and emotional powers, rather he means ability, allowing the person to do his action. The moral agent described by Aristotle should also have the same ability. Every agent willing to do the action should avoid all the negative factors by exercising self-control.

As previously mentioned, Aristotle suggests two types of incontinent, 1- the person who does not abide by his intention 2- the person who promptly gives in to emotions; the former intends to do the action but he cannot abide by his choice, the latter is so undermined that does not entertain the right action in his mind. As I said in section two, Aristotle called the first person weak-willed. Then violation of intention is not characteristic of Holton's account. That is, his account of weakness of will as a philosopher of action is similar to Holton's account. In addition, if intention is a requirement for the judgment, acting against it gives rise to the violation of intention rather than a lack of intention. Take the following example:

Knowing the health dangers smoking will bring about, Joe is keen to give up smoking. Yet he cannot make up his mind to do so because of the difficulties related to quitting smoking. He only smokes on new eve's day. In this case, he has only contradicted his own beliefs without violating his intention.

(Mele 1982; 2010). Mele uses the same example as a case in favor of his own interpretation and against that of Holton, asserting that though Joe has violated his own belief (giving up smoking), his weakness of will does not stem from the violation of intention. This is because he has not intended anything, hence there is no violation. In fact, his weakness of will emanates from his lack of intention (Mele, 2010: p.402). However, he could have decided to quit, and if he had, he would have quit (Mele, 1987; 2010: p.400-402). In his paper (2012), Holton does not accept Mele's account. Instead, he apparently seeks to confirm that Joe's primary decision to give up smoking is a decision in its own right which would be violated if Joe smokes again (Holton 2012: pp.345-6). This example can be drawn on to reinforce a conclusion earlier mentioned, namely, passing judgment can amount to intending an action. Thus, having judged the action, one does not need to intend to do it once again. Drawing on this account, one can say that in the framework of Aristotle's interpretation, the incontinent's making a judgment amounts to intending an action. But being overcome by his desires, the agent violates his intention.

The other case shared by Aristotle's interpretation and that of Holton is concerned with the contribution moral valence makes to the weakness of will or *Akrasia*. That is, the action should have some characteristics, should quitting it be interpreted as weakness of will. In particular, the action should be morally right and the agent should have recognized the rightness of the action. Aristotle considers the violation with such a belief as a requirement for *Akrasia*. The same point Holton makes in his recent paper in which he refers to the contribution moral valence of action makes to the weakness of will (2012,p.354-6). This presupposes that violation of intention is not the sole indicator of the weakness of will and that the strength of will does not necessarily mean that the agent must do an action he has already intended. What matters

is that the action should be morally right. As a result, the agent experiences the weakness of will even when he commits a wrong act.

As another evidence of the above-mentioned point, the association Holton makes between weakness of will with the irrationality of reconsideration can be interpreted in two ways:

1- The agent should be practically committed to his own recognition, something made clear by Aristotle as well. The rightness of action entails that one does it<sup>8</sup>. In other words, if a person knows that action X is good, practical rationality requires it to be done<sup>9</sup>. Otherwise, as Mele has mentioned, this would be at least subjectively irrational (1995: p. 71; 1987:p.5).

2- In order for the reconsideration to be wrong, one should be assured of the rightness of the action he is going to do, hence there is no reason for reconsideration and changing of intention. As Mathews points out, reconsideration which results in irresolution occurs when, "one starts looking at the situation again from a different angle, considering counter reasons and aims and principles which militate against the original decision or resolve" (1966:p.408). The wrongness of reconsideration is relevant when one is suspicious of the rightness of the reasons, principles, and goals which he has drawn on to decide which action to do. The same view is shared by Aristotle who claims, as Holton believes, that on perceiving his judgment to be wrong, the agent should reexamine all the aspects and take a new decision.

Aristotle's and Holton's interpretations deal with the key role of irrational desires. By posing the question "why the agent does not act while being aware of it", though Aristotle expresses his own concern that knowledge may not be translated into action, he considers the agent's rationality as a condition for the accomplishment of this relationship. That's why he is baffled by the irrational desires of such a person. He

believes the behaviors of a virtuous man to be the criterion against which rationality can be measured. Having a strong morality, such a person lacks the irrational emotions and desires<sup>10</sup>. He also enjoys internal tranquility, self-control, and strong will. As a result, he enacts whatever he has knowledge of. In contrast, a person suffering from moral weakness has irrational desires and emotions. Though such a person is not bad, he is not good either<sup>11</sup>. Holton's approach to the role of irrational desires is not as strict as that of Aristotle. In a paper, Holton asserts that the rationality he has in his mind is not shared by the "truly rational creatures" (Rational Resolve, 2004). He continues: 'Rationality for creatures like us has to fit with the capacities and concerns that we have. It is here that rational resolve finds its place' (2004: p.530). Given the above, should Holton speak about the moral agent; he cannot accept the criterion given by Aristotle to determine whether or not an action is rational. However, Holton's position is not that different from Aristotle when it comes to the effect of irrational desires on violation of intention and quitting of action. That is, Holton claims that man is usually overwhelmed by emotions and desires and that irrationality of these desires can cause him get into trouble. The point is that Holton does not consider irrational desires to be bad as long as they don't get in the way of action. But in the view of Aristotle, irrational desires of any sort are bad, leading to the devaluation of agent's moral status (even if they don't prevent one from doing right action). This is the case for continent person.

Aristotle's position and that of Holton concerning the type of desires differ in the following as well: Holton considers desires not to be confined to pleasures and anger, elaborating on other psychological factors playing a role in the weakness of will. Although Aristotle does not comment on the role of the same factors in quitting of action, he considers them to be important due to their effect on the intention violation. On the other hand, given the badness of negative emotions, Aristotle

makes a difference between pleasures and anger, saying that pleasures are absolutely bad but anger is not as disgusting as pleasure (1149a). Holton does not make such a difference, believing that any psychological factor such as stress, hesitation, depression or fear which violate the intention and weaken the will should be considered as irrational desires. According to Holton, a person enjoying a resolution or a strong will can overcome the irrational desires. This difference of positions can be likely explained as follows: putting emphasis on the agent being moral, Aristotle claims only wrong desires which are directly associated with the incontinent play a role in knowledge or intention, while in a broader view, Holton includes fear and temptation as destructive factors as well. This is because the effect of fear on weakness of will is the same as the effect desire for wrongdoing has on weakness of will. However, hesitation and fears don't necessarily result from the agent being bad while desire for wrongdoing indicates the person is bad.

As mentioned earlier, Akrasia is a character trait rather than an action. It seems that we are more likely to perceive the similarity between Akrasia and weakness of will, should we interpret the latter as an internal state which makes the agent violate his intention. As Akrasia is a character trait which prevents one from acting in accordance with his knowledge also the weak-willed person does not violate his intention only sometimes due to an irrational reason, but the weakness of will causes one to violate his intention easily and promptly (1999). Such a person is psychologically driven to give up his action. Holton refers to mental disorders such as temptation, hesitation and the like which may undermine the agent's will, preventing him from doing the right action (1999, 2003, 2004, 2007). The recurrence of these states causes one to fail to act in accordance with his intentions. This indicates that the weakness of will is an internal state even if it is not to be considered a character trait. That is, it is a factor preventing

one from abiding by his intention. Here, the weakness does not mean the violation of intention. Suffering from the weakness of will, one cannot abide by his intentions. This is in keeping with the Aristotle's remark that *Akrasia* is an internal state or trait, leading the agent to violate his own belief.

## **Conclusion**

This study was aimed to show that the distinction Holton has made between *Akrasia* and weakness of will is not accurate, and that the two concepts are more related than previously thought. That is, we can identify an akratic man as one who cannot obey his intention; therefore he quits the right action. Holton, like some of advocates of *Akrasia* (e.g. Davidson, 1980) believes an akratic man is one who cannot intend to do the action, while a weak-willed person is one who intends to do it but violates his resolution. This paper illustrated that, in Aristotle's account of *Akrasia* as well, an akratic man is one who intends to obey his judgment but he is not successful due to the influence of bad emotions. As a result, such knowledge cannot motivate the person to do the right action. This kind of perspective is called agent-related perspective. Yet, in an action-related perspective, the akratic person cannot continue his intention as he is influenced bad desires. To show this, the first and second sections examined the characteristics of the akratic agent and akratic action in Aristotle's account, coming to the conclusion that Aristotle, when he approaches this matter as a philosopher of action his account of *Akrasia* is similar to Holton's. That is, the akratic man or weak-willed person intends to do the right action but he cannot.

This paper tried to show that the internal states and the characteristics of the agent cannot be considered separately from his actions. However, this is possible from two perspectives: 1- Viewing the agent from a psychologist's or

moral philosopher's perspective, explaining what has driven the agent to do so. 2- To view him from the viewpoint of a philosopher of action, explaining in what stage the right action is aborted. This comes down to the element which is considered the most important. In my own opinion, all these elements are of equal importance and that they vary with respect to its proximity to the action. Beliefs are as important as intentions. The approach taken by Holton to the analysis of weakness of will is more of the psychological type, while Aristotle approaches the issue as a moral philosopher. Being so, they are led to take different views to the agent and the factors influencing the action or quitting of action. Holton focuses on the persons suffering from mental and psychic disorders while Aristotle deals more with those suffering moral weakness.

Should we choose one of the two interpretations, namely Akrasia and weakness of will, it seems that Akrasia can potentially be interpreted in a way that accounts for both aspects intended by philosophers. To me, these two interpretations can complement each other provided that we take account of the points Holton considers to be characteristics of his own interpretation.

### **Endnote**

1. Here, I don't seek to thoroughly analyze Holton's account but rather the aim is to identify the mainstream thoughts of Holton concerning the subject of my paper.

2. Both philosophers find Akrasia impossible in that they believe the akratic man is not actually free and that akratic action is not done willingly. However, Hare puts emphasis on the logical relationship between judgment and action (1963:p.79), referring to the evaluative judgment that one always does what he thinks he should do (provided he has the capability to do it physically and psychologically) (1952:p.169).

As a result, one should enact his own judgment in such a context. However, as these conditions are lacking in the case of Akrasia, it follows that Akrasia is impossible (1963: pp.78-9). Watson puts emphasis on 'resistance', believing that the weakness of will is similar to psychological compulsion. This is because the akratic agent cannot resist desire. As a result, he is not free to do other actions; hence, Akrasia is impossible (1977).

For a critique on Watson' view, see Ferenc Huoranszki (2011), 'Weakness and Compulsion: The Essential Difference'.

3. Philosophers are divided on whether Akrasia is a character trait or an action. For example, Mele considers it a character trait (1987:p.3) while Holton believes it to be an action (1999:p.241). In this paper, Akrasia is introduced as a character trait.

4. I am not to speak about the relationship between levels of knowledge and action. This is only to say that the akratic man is not sure that the first belief is right and the second wrong. He can be described as a person who is psychologically ignorant. His softness concerning the first action and the intensity of desire concerning the second action has resulted in the weakness of will for the first action and in a strong will for the second action.

5. According to Bratman, intentions have two characteristics: 1- controlling 2- stable. As intentions directly draw the agent to the action, they can control (1987:p.16). As they are immune to change and revision, they are stable (Ibid: p.16; 65). Drawing on Bratman, Holton names the immune intentions as resolution (1999:p.241).

6. In his paper entitled 'Rational Resolution' (2004), Holton gives a detailed account of rational and irrational decisions, explaining when reconsideration is rational and when it is irrational.

7. For a critique on this view see Byron J. Stoyles (2007), ‘Aristotle, Akrasia, and the Place of Desire in Moral Reasoning’. Stoyles argues that the akratic person's failure is not of the cognitive type but due to the counter desires.

8. Hare claims that Akrasia and moral weakness are the same (1963: ch.5). This is rejected by Mele (1987: p.5).

9. On the irrationality of Akrasia action, see Davidson, 1980: p.41

10. Inspired by Aristotle, McDowell (1979) believes: the virtuous agent is alien to temptations of any sort and hence has no reason to do the wrong action. In contrast, Yuval Eylon (2009) believes the virtuous agent should have other desires and have reasons for his non-virtuous action. I believe such an agent does not have the desire for wrongdoing. This is not to say he is completely free of temptation but the virtue has made them immune and safe.

11. According to Aristotle “half-wicked”

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