

Taking Pleasure in the Wrong Things: Aristotle's
account of the failures in *akrasia* and vice in the
Nicomachean Ethics

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Declaration

I, Jelena Milosavljevic, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to understand what the failures in *akrasia* and in vice are, on Aristotle's view, as he describes them in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I begin by examining the textual issues within the *NE*, which have been the subject of a long and complex debate, and consider some interpretations of *akrasia* and vice in the current literature. Having shown that the interpretations in view fail to give us an adequate account of these characters, I suggest that we have reason to investigate this issue further. Since both *akrasia* and vice involve errors with respect to pleasure, I propose to consider what errors with respect to pleasure look like for Aristotle, and what it means to take pleasure in the right, or wrong, thing. I go on to argue that Aristotle evaluates pursuits of pleasure as right or wrong depending on quantitative features of a pursuit – such as the amount pursued, at what time, and in which context – rather than based on the source of a pleasure, or which object elicits it. My main claim is that pursuits of pleasure are good insofar as they are in accordance with the prescriptions of reason, independently of the specific pleasure that an agent enjoys. Therefore, I argue that we should conceive of the mean quantitatively. Furthermore, I show that this allows us to explain the failures in *akrasia* and vice, and resolve apparent contradictions in the text. I argue that the akratic agent fails by misidentifying the quantitative features of his akratic action as good, and by failing to cultivate reason within his soul. Meanwhile, I suggest that the vicious person's failure lies in his misidentification of the merely pleasant as the ultimate good, and his lack of commitment to reason as a guiding force in life.

Impact Statement

This thesis presents a new interpretation of the failures in *akrasia* and vice as Aristotle describes them in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is important and beneficial for academic purposes since it increases our understanding of bad characters and actions in Aristotle's philosophy. It is also significant for purposes outside of academia, where we commonly refer to Aristotle as an intellectual authority on many things, including human psychology. Furthermore, the thesis questions some traditional assumptions about the value of pleasure in Aristotle's philosophy and shows that the topic discussed is far from settled in the literature.

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CHAPTER I:

AKRASIA AND VICE IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

I.1 Introduction

Within Aristotle's ethics, there are two types of human characters who act badly; those who are akratic, and those who are vicious. The main aim of my thesis is to understand what the failures of these morally bad characters involve, on Aristotle's view, as he describes them in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*).

An extensive debate in the literature precedes the best contemporary accounts of how and why the akratic agent and the vicious person act badly. The central thought of my thesis is that we can resolve this longstanding debate about what each character's failure consists in by considering how Aristotle evaluates pleasure – the domain with respect to which both characters err (1104b9-13, 1148a17) – and what makes any specific pleasure the right or wrong thing to enjoy. Investigating first what it means to take pleasure in the wrong thing, and what a mistake with respect to pleasure truly looks like for Aristotle, will allow us to examine the failures which people in the grip of *akrasia* and vice commit.

Although the akratic agent and the vicious person are clearly distinct characters for Aristotle, my thesis considers both their failures in tandem. The principal reason for doing so is that our efforts to understand Aristotle's view of *akrasia* and vice involve many of the same interpretative challenges. Aristotle frequently describes the failures of both characters in ways that are apparently conflicting, and seemingly inconsistent across different books of the *NE*. The akratic person is sometimes said to act badly because of ignorance (1147b17), and other times as a result of experiencing a motivational conflict between his knowledge and appetite (1102b18). Similarly, the vicious person is often characterised as a principled and unrepentant agent who is ignorant about the nature of the good (1110b25-35) but is elsewhere said to be a regretful and unprincipled pursuer of appetite (1166b20-25). Moreover, both characters act voluntarily (1110b10-15) and err with respect to pleasure in some sense; while *akrasia* befalls those who abandon their rational calculation and decision because of their weakness for pleasure (1151a20-24), vice comes about as a result of mistaking the merely pleasant for the

ultimate good (1110b30-31). Given that both characters have a similarly bad relationship to pleasure and err because of ignorance, to some yet undetermined extent, an examination of *akrasia* and vice alongside each other will be useful for understanding the failure of each state more clearly.

I proceed with my investigation as follows. In chapter I, I examine the seemingly inconsistent textual evidence for the failures in *akrasia* and vice, and identify the main issues with interpreting Aristotle's view of these bad character states in the *NE*. I begin by considering *akrasia* in §I.2, before moving on to vice in §I.4. In order to give an overview of the accounts in the literature and show how current interpretations attempt to resolve the apparent conflict in the text, I examine two prominent accounts of *akrasia* in §I.3 and of vice in §I.5, respectively. In doing so, I show that the views under examination face substantial issues, either because they cannot account for all the textual evidence in the *NE*, or because they significantly underexplain important features of Aristotle's account.

In chapter II, I consider what a failure with respect to pleasure looks like for Aristotle more generally, and what this can be taken to indicate about the kinds of failures that agents experience in *akrasia* and vice. The main argument of this chapter, and my thesis overall, is that a pursuit of pleasure is made good or bad by its quantitative features rather than by the specific source of pleasure, or object, that an agent enjoys. Therefore, I suggest that bad agents go wrong with respect to these quantitative features in their pursuit of pleasures, and that they do so as a result of being deceived about the quantitative extent to which they should pursue any specific pleasure at the moment of action. Based on this theory, I begin to suggest how the akratic and vicious person fail in the presence of pleasure, and consider an objection to my suggestion.

In chapter III, I apply the theory from chapter II and show how my suggestion can reconcile the apparent conflicts within the descriptions of *akrasia* and vice in the *NE*. Ultimately, I suggest that the fundamental failure of both characters consists in their lack of commitment to reason, which in turn causes their more immediate failure of misidentifying the good action for the one prescribed by appetite.

In §I.2, I now turn to examine the interpretative issues in Aristotle's account of *akrasia* and its failure in more detail, before moving on to consider two prominent accounts of *akrasia* in §I.3.

I.2 *Akrasia*

Few questions have dominated the scholarship in Aristotle's ethics as persistently as the problem of *akrasia*. Weakness of will has, on its own, attracted much attention at least since Socrates' stark claim in Plato's *Protagoras* that 'no one errs willingly' (358c7). Part of what is so interesting about *akrasia* is that it is at the same time both a familiar occurrence, and a serious problem for any philosopher claiming pride of place for knowledge and reason as sources of human action.

In this section my aim is to consider the seemingly conflicting view of *akrasia* which Aristotle presents in the *NE*. I begin by examining the textual evidence which suggests that the akratic agent acts badly due to his ignorance of what the correct action is, and then consider the contrary textual evidence suggesting that he commits bad actions knowingly, due to his wrong preferential desire for them. Based on this, I identify two features of Aristotle's view of *akrasia* which remain unclear and demand further attention. The first is a question about the akratic person's motivation – why he comes to be motivated towards doing wrong actions – and the second is a question about his knowledge – how he can both know and be ignorant of what the correct action is during *akrasia*. Furthermore, I briefly indicate how the philosophical literature has attempted to resolve these puzzles, before moving on to examine two prominent interpretations of *akrasia* in §I.3.

Towards the beginning of book VII, Aristotle is quick to reject Socrates' denial of *akrasia* as a view which 'contradicts things that appear manifestly' (1145b28), clearly wanting to explore *akrasia* as an existing phenomenon. Nonetheless, he introduces and motivates the entire inquiry in book VII by asking about the akratic agent's knowledge. Indeed, the central puzzle of book VII is said to be 'what sort of correct supposition someone has when he acts incontinently' (1145b22).¹ From the beginning of his inquiry, therefore, Aristotle's focus lies on mapping the knowledge that the akratic agent has, or lacks, in the moment of weakness. In fact, up until VII.4 the puzzles presented are generally tied to the agent's knowledge, and the relevant question is not yet *why* the akratic comes to be motivated to act as he does, against his decision

¹ Citations of the *NE* are from Irwin (2019).

(1148a10), but ‘*how* it is possible to know and still to act incontinently’ (1147b19, my emphasis).²

For modern readers, this is not a natural starting point in an inquiry about *akrasia*. Although the view that we act upon what we believe best remains common in contemporary philosophy, the thought that desire might on its own drive us to pursue the worse action is a generally accepted alternative in the times succeeding Hobbes and Hume.³ For Aristotle and his intended audience, however, the starting point is closer to Socrates’ view in the *Protagoras*. Aristotle rightly characterises Socrates’ denial of *akrasia* there as based on a strong opposition to the thought that knowledge can be ‘dragged around like a slave’ in pursuit of desiderative appetites (1145b25). For Socrates in the *Protagoras*, the existence of *akrasia* would suggest both that knowledge has a weaker hold on the agent than appetite does, and that the objects of desire can be distinct from what the agent takes to be best – neither of which Socrates is willing to sustain. Therefore, he denies the existence of *akrasia* by claiming that the agent’s action contrary to reason is caused not by a weakness of will, but by the agent’s ignorance of the right action. This, then, forms the historical background for Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia*. Consequently, as Sarah Broadie suggests, for Aristotle’s context the paradox of *akrasia* is not that the akratic agent seems to have contradicting desires, as in contemporary discussions of weakness of will, but rather that he has contradictory states of knowledge and ignorance in his mind.⁴ It is important to note, therefore, that Aristotle’s focus on knowledge and ignorance in a discussion about *akrasia* is not on its own telling of his position on the subject-matter – it is a starting point that would make sense for the ancients, and so it does for Aristotle’s purposes.

This explanation goes some way in clarifying why Aristotle begins his inquiry about *akrasia* by focusing on the akratic agent’s knowledge. Nonetheless, the account he puts forward is neither clear nor obviously consistent. As mentioned above, Aristotle rejects Socrates’ denial of *akrasia* right at the outset, and it is clear that the purpose of book VII is to give an account which treats *akrasia* as a real occurrence. Yet at the end of VII.3, Aristotle claims that ‘the result Socrates was looking for would seem to come about as well’ – the knowledge in the mind of the akratic agent during *akrasia*, he argues, ‘is not the sort that seems to be fully knowledge’

² As my thesis is concerned only with weak, rather than impetuous, *akrasia*, I only consider the range of akratic characters who decide on how to act.

³ For modern defences of the guise of the good thesis, see Anscombe 1963, Tenenbaum 2007 and Raz 2010. For a historical account of the thesis, and the influence of Hobbes and Hume, see Pink 2021.

⁴ Broadie 1991, 280.

(1147b17). There is no further elaboration on what he takes Socrates' view to have gotten right, and where his own account differs; we are, therefore, left with the rather serious task of figuring out how Aristotle thinks 'it is possible to know and still to act incontinently' (1147b19).

This is the primary puzzle concerning *akrasia* which Aristotle sets out to resolve in VII.3, and to that end his first move in VII.3 is to qualify the ways in which knowledge and ignorance can coexist in our minds. He claims that we can ascribe knowledge to people in two ways: 'both to someone who has it without using it and to someone who is using it' (1146b33). That someone can be ignorant and act against his knowledge when he is not attending to is not strange, he says, but that someone would act against his knowledge if he both has it and attends to it is 'extraordinary' (*δεινόν*) (1146b35).⁵ Aristotle soon clarifies how 'having' and 'using' knowledge is distinct:

'...since there are two types of premisses, someone's action may well conflict with his knowledge if he has both types of premisses, but uses only the universal premiss and not the particular premiss. For it is particulars that are achievable in action. There are also different types of universal, one type referring to the agent himself, and the other referring to the object.' (1147a1-4).

This passage introduces us to the elements of syllogistic explanation which Aristotle will employ in his account of *akrasia* going forward. He emphasises that the akratic agent must experience some kind of ignorance – either because he does not attend to the particular premiss, which is concerned with how particulars appear and should be acted upon, or because he fails to correctly identify himself or the object of his pursuit with the universal premiss figuring in his mind. His failure is, therefore, that he 'either does not have or does not activate the knowledge that this particular thing is of this sort' (1147a6). I suggest that these qualifications in terms of 'having' and 'using' knowledge also serve an additional purpose: that of surveying the possible accounts of *akrasia*, out of which one must be correct. In fact, the middle passage of book VII.3 (1146b32-1147b), where Aristotle details the ways in which knowledge and ignorance can come together, should be understood as a presentation of alternative explanations of *akrasia*, through which Aristotle sets the limits for the conceptual space in which we will

⁵ Irwin (2019) translates this as 'extraordinary', but other possible translations of *δεινόν*, which highlight Aristotle's astonishment at the thought of someone acting against his knowledge while exercising it include 'terrible', 'marvellously strong' and 'strange' (LSJ, 9th ed. 1940).

find the accurate account of this phenomenon. By claiming that any options other than these are ‘δεινόν’, Aristotle is suggesting to his audience that the correct view of *akrasia* will be found within the listed options of the ways in which we can both know and be ignorant at the same time. The significance of these passages should, therefore, not be understated; whichever view of *akrasia* we attribute to Aristotle, it must have its beginnings in the aforementioned lines of VII.3.

It is notable, then, that all the options enumerated in this passage denote ignorance as the explanation for how an agent can know and still fail to act in accordance with this knowledge. Here, Aristotle notably compares *akrasia* to the condition of those who are ‘asleep or mad or drunk’, claiming that akratic agents ‘have knowledge in a way similar to these people’ since these are states involving ‘strong feelings’ which disturb both the body and the mind, and temporarily affect agents’ knowledge (1147a13-18). It is unclear whether this comparison is meant to suggest that agents in the grip of *akrasia* are ignorant in the same way as those who are asleep or drunk, or whether the comparison simply means to express that the akratic person is in a cognitively compromised state. It is, however, clear the akratic agent’s condition is caused by *some* kind of ignorance, and that he has an imperfect relationship to the knowledge which he possesses. Evidently, then, on Aristotle’s view of *akrasia* the condition comes about because of ignorance, to some yet unclear extent, and Socrates’ account stands as an at least partially correct explanation of the phenomenon.

Given the emphasis on ignorance in the passages discussed above, it is no wonder that Aristotle’s view has been interpreted as roughly agreeing with that of Socrates in the *Protagoras*. The main thought of these, so called ‘intellectualist’ interpretations of *akrasia*, is that the akratic person’s mistake is ultimately an intellectual failure; Pierre Destrée (2007) attributes a ‘cognitive failure’ to Aristotle’s akratic agent, while David Bostock (2000) takes the agent’s knowledge to be ‘prevented from coming into consciousness’ during *akrasia*.⁶ Even Jessica Moss (2012), whose overall account is not intellectualist, says of the akratic agent that he acts with his ‘rational faculty impaired’.⁷

⁶ Destrée 2007, 141; Bostock 2000, 130.

⁷ Moss 2012, 119.

Although this intellectualist interpretation of Aristotle's view has dominated the literature on *akrasia*, it is neither straightforward nor uncontroversial. Contrary to what we would expect given the emphasis on ignorance and knowledge in book VII, elsewhere in the *NE* Aristotle stresses that human action is motivated not only by reason but also by the 'non-rational', or desiderative, part of the soul, which can either oppose reason or listen to it (1102b25-28). Already in book I, we are told that this non-rational part 'is by nature something apart from reason, clashing and struggling with reason' (1102b18). Desire and practical reason are, through decision, the sources of action within the human psyche (1139a31-33); this suggests that we can fail to do the right action if either of these two components – practical reason or correct preferential desire – are absent. Given that the akratic agent makes the right decision (1152a17) and, therefore, has the right knowledge to inform practical reason about what to do, his failure to perform the right action must mean that he fails with respect to preferential desire. The motivational power that these two components have can pull the agent in different directions, and ultimately, towards different actions. Therefore, the desiderative part of the soul can either listen to reason 'as to a father', or lead the agent astray by motivating him towards an action contrary to the prescriptions of reason.

These passages, scattered throughout the *NE* in books I, II, VI and elsewhere, offer a picture on which the akratic agent's failure is not merely intellectual. Rather, they suggest that the akratic agent acts contrary to what he knows is best because of a motivational struggle between that which reason tells him to do, and that which desire drives him towards. Not only does Aristotle clearly speak of a motivational struggle between these two principles of action at 1102b18, but there he also says that 'incontinent people have impulses in contrary directions' (1102b21). Similarly, he claims that the akratic agent 'thinks it is wrong to pursue this pleasant thing, yet still pursues it', abandoning his decision to do what is better (1146b24). This is explained best by a view on which the desiderative component of the decision pair needed for action is lacking, and where the akratic agent fails to do what is right because he lacks the right preferential desire. It is out of these considerations that the 'desire-based' view of *akrasia* arises, which takes *akrasia* to be caused by the agent's wrong preferential desire for what he knows to be worse, rather than by ignorance or mistaken belief about what is best, as Socrates would have it.⁸ On this suggestion and according to the passages cited above, *akrasia* should be understood as a failure of desire, rather than a failure of knowledge.

⁸ This is argued for by Dahl (1984), Charles (1984), and with certain qualifications, Henry (2002).

The contrast between these descriptions of *akrasia* is problematic not only because it fails to give us a clear view of Aristotle's account of *akrasia*, but primarily because these two ways of characterising the akratic agent seem, at best, distinct, and at worst, inconsistent with each other. If the akratic agent experiences a motivational conflict between his desire and reason, where he struggles to act on his decision because of his faulty appetitive desire, then he must be aware that what he believes to be best is in conflict with what he now desires to do; therefore, he cannot be ignorant of the fact that his action is contrary to his reason and knowledge. Conversely, if an agent in the grip of *akrasia* is ignorant about the best course of action, so that he mistakenly believes, in a moment of weakness, that the worse action is the best one, then his wrong action is caused by ignorance, rather than a motivational conflict between his reason and appetite. Either the akratic agent's failure is one of knowledge, so that there is some temporary cognitive blunder which prevents him from understanding that his action is wrong, or else it is a failure of desire, where the agent fails to desire what he ought to, and instead desires what he should not. Mirroring the two dominant accounts of weakness of will outside Aristotelian scholarship, these two opposing theories take the weak person's failure to be either an intellectual mistake, or else a type of desiderative failure.

Given the conflicting textual evidence, the interpretation of *akrasia* is troubling on two fronts. Firstly, since the akratic agent has enough knowledge about the good to make the right decision, more needs to be said about why he is motivated to act in morally bad ways. This first concern is, therefore, primarily a question about the akratic agent's motivation for doing what he has previously decided is worse. Secondly, it is unclear what the akratic agent is ignorant about during the moment of *akrasia*. As we have seen, in VII.3 Aristotle describes the akratic agent's knowledge using a syllogism. There, he outlines universal beliefs, such as 'dry things benefit human beings', as well as those concerning particulars which are controlled by perception, such as 'this is a dry thing', and finally, the conclusion of the two. What the akratic person lacks, he says, is 'the last term' or 'last premise', which 'does not seem to be universal, or expressive of knowledge in the same way as the universal term' but is rather 'a belief about something perceptible' (1147b10-15). This second troubling question concerning *akrasia* is, therefore, precisely what this 'last premise' is, and wherein the akratic agent's ignorance lies. It could reference either the particular premise, so that the akratic person is ignorant of some feature of his present situation, or the conclusion of the entire syllogism. An important aspect

of our account of *akrasia*, therefore, is that it must explain which piece of syllogistic knowledge, as Aristotle sees it, the agent in the grip of *akrasia* lacks.

These two questions naturally arise out of book VII, and follow the two strands of thought Aristotle considers in the chapter – on the one hand, he is concerned with explaining the akratic agent’s motivation, and on the other he seeks to chart the pattern of this character’s knowledge in the moment of weakness. While the first question is concerned with the ‘why’ of akratic action, namely, the reasons for the agent’s underlying motivation towards bad action, the second question asks the ‘how’ – investigating the possibility of action which opposes one’s knowledge of what is best in the first place. Any satisfactory account of *akrasia* must, therefore, be in the position to answer both of these questions.

I.3 Two accounts of akrasia

As suggested above, there are several ways in which philosophers have attempted to explain the conflicting descriptions of *akrasia* as involving either ignorance, or a conflict of motivation. In this section, I will consider two prominent accounts of *akrasia*: first that of David Charles (2007) and next that of Jessica Moss (2012). The two accounts are sophisticated and extensive attempts at reconciling the seemingly contrary descriptions of *akrasia*, treating both sets of evidence described above as equally important; going through them here will, therefore, ensure that we understand the state of the current literature. However, in evaluating their views I suggest that neither can satisfactorily explain both the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of akratic action as outlined above, without either unduly diminishing Aristotle’s intellectualism, or overestimating the extent to which he relies on ignorance in his explanation of *akrasia* specifically.

I.3.1 Akrasia as a failure of rational sensitivity

Having been a chief proponent of the desire-based view of *akrasia* in his 1984 monograph on Aristotle’s philosophy of action, David Charles aims to distance himself from both this previous view, and the intellectualist position, by introducing what he calls a ‘third way’ of understanding *akrasia* in Charles 2007. On his view, the issue has been misconstrued by the two dominant interpretations – the akratic agent’s failure, he claims, lies neither in his intellect

nor simply in an independent desire for doing the wrong action. Rather, the failure in *akrasia* can be traced back to a third, desiderative, state, which is ‘distinct from, but analogous with, cognition’, without being reducible to the second element of a cognition and desire pair, as it is on the desire-based view.⁹ Charles understands this desire as a way of perceiving things which is ‘directly connected with attraction’ and ‘different in kind from ordinary perception’, essentially involving the agent taking pleasure in the object perceived.¹⁰ Importantly, it is unlike a ‘Humean’ desire, as Charles calls it, which is simply a disposition towards obtaining something independently of truth and falsity; rather, he says that it is a kind of ‘hot’ cognition where the agent’s perception is coloured by their emotional response to the object now in their presence.¹¹

Charles sees his own account as arising out of a thought expressed in *De Anima*; namely, that perceiving something as pleasant or painful involves seeing it as good or bad, and either avoiding or pursuing it (431a8-16). From this claim it follows that perceiving something as pleasant involves its pursuit, and it is this thought which he argues can be applied to *akrasia* in the *NE*.¹² On Charles’ view, then, intellectual desire does not come from an emotionally unaffected – ‘cool’ – assertion of an object’s goodness; rather, an agent’s perception of an object as good or pleasant must involve the agent taking pleasure in and being drawn towards the object.¹³ Rather than being either a merely intellectual state, or else a non-cognitive appetite, Charles understands this third state as a perceptual kind of ‘rational sensitivity’ about what one ought to find pleasant and desire, given one’s own values and commitments.¹⁴

In the case of *akrasia*, then, Charles claims that an agent fails to be attracted to the best action, and that practical reason cannot motivate the agent to act in accordance with what it prescribes, since there is no desiderative state under which the right action is perceived as pleasant, and therefore, as good.¹⁵ Consequently, the akratic agent fails cognitively by not perceiving the goodness of an object as attractive, and the right action as the best thing to do, while also failing to have the right preferential desire. Since the akratic person’s failure is essentially one of perception – of this ‘hot’ cognition whose function it is to represent the right action as attractive

⁹ Charles 2007, 201.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 205–206.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 203–204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

to the agent – he will fail to see the good thing as pleasant and will, therefore, fail to grasp the conclusion of the practical syllogism.¹⁶ While the virtuous person takes pleasure in what is truly good, and therefore perceives the good action as pleasurable and attractive, the akratic will not perceive the good-making feature as pleasurable because his rational sensitivity towards the values he himself claims to hold dear is failing. As Charles puts it: ‘[the akratic’s] failure is a failure in the distinctive form of rational sensitivity to value which leads to action’.¹⁷ For the success of a practical syllogism, Charles claims that the agent needs not only knowledge of what is true, but also an attraction to doing the right action which comes from recognising it as pleasant and good. Since he lacks attraction to doing the right thing, the akratic person will fail to perceive the action as good, fail to be motivated towards pursuing it, and finally, fail to grasp the proper conclusion of the practical syllogism.¹⁸

It is a very plausible feature of Charles’ account that identifying or recognising something as good involves a certain attraction to it; this thought echoes the kind of moral internalism which is often attributed to Aristotle. In fact, already in II.3 Aristotle says that pleasure is implied by every object of choice, and that while humans ought to do what is fine and expedient, as opposed to merely pleasant, pleasure is nonetheless that which is commonly shared with all other beings, including animals (1104b35-1105a2). It is also a very attractive feature of Charles’ account that he understands the akratic person’s failure as being partly about his lack of commitment towards acting upon the values he purportedly cares for and thinks are important – this suggests the plausible thought, which I defend in chapter III, that the akratic person does not have the right relationship to his reason and knowledge.

The issue with Charles account, however, is that he ultimately bases all failures in *akrasia* on the failure of preferential desire, which makes his account very similar to the desire-based view discussed in §I.2. To grasp that something is good, on Charles’ account, ‘essentially involves being attracted towards it’ and ‘being moved by its good making features’.¹⁹ This does not mean that lacking the right preferential desire will lead to a failure in understanding the object or action as good. Rather, Charles claims that the akratic person’s ‘failure to grasp the good conclusion consists in her not being properly attracted to doing what she concludes should be

¹⁶ Charles 2007, 206.

¹⁷ Ibid., 206-207.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 204.

done'.²⁰ This reduces what is meant to be a cognitive failure to a purely desiderative one; the akratic fails to 'fully know' simply because he fails to have the correct preferential desire, and the ignorance attributed to the akratic all throughout the early chapters of book VII is reduced to his lack of attraction to the right action.

Part of why Charles holds this specific view of what it means to 'fully know' is because he understands practical knowledge to 'involve not merely arriving at the good conclusion *but also being drawn to act on it*', so that arriving at a conclusion and acting on it are different events on his view.²¹ He claims that the akratic person's failure consists in his lack of attraction 'to doing what [he] *concludes* should be done', where the act of conclusion refers not to the agent's previous decision made while he was yet unaffected by *akrasia*, but to the conclusion which he has reached while in the grip of it, the effect of which has left him unmoved towards acting upon this conclusion.²² This is not only contrary to Aristotle's famous claim in VII.3 that the conclusion of practical knowledge is action – 'it is necessary' he says, 'in the case of beliefs about production, to act at once <on what has been concluded>' (1147a27-29) – but it also suggests that an agent can arrive at the right conclusion and nonetheless remain unmotivated to act upon it in the absence of right preferential desire. This entails that there is a way in which the akratic has put together the universal and practical premises and, thus, knows by 'cold' cognition that he ought to do a certain action, while his intellectual desire fails to be attracted to the action, and therefore leaves the agent unmotivated towards doing it. This picture is problematic for Charles' account for one main reason: it fails to be distinct from the ordinary, desire-based, view of the way in which *akrasia* occurs, which leaves his account vulnerable to all the shortcomings of a desire-based view. The 'hot' and 'cold' types of cognition have the same functions and results as knowledge and desire do on the desire-based picture and, furthermore, the way in which Charles' stipulated intellectual desire fails to be informed by the intellect suggests that it arises independently of considerations about truth and falsity – just as Humean desires do. If the agent can arrive at the right conclusion and nonetheless fail to find it attractive, or identify its right-making features, it must be a capacity whose origin is distinct from concerns about goodness, which would make it reducible to the ordinary desiderative state at play in desire-based views of *akrasia*.

²⁰ Charles 2007, 207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

²² *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

Indicative of the similarity between Charles' account and desire-based views is also his claim that practical knowledge of the good conclusion 'can be undermined by factors which do not make the weak *akrates* doubt its truth' and his subsequent explanation that 'the distinctive mode of acceptance required for a practical conclusion is, in its nature, vulnerable to the operation of factors such as countervailing desires'.²³ The factors that can undermine an agent's practical knowledge of the conclusion are, on his picture, solely desiderative; they are desires which oppose the action prescribed by reason, and diminish the extent to which this action appears pleasant to the agent. The akratic agent, then, comes to act badly because he has independent desires that go against what is best, and because he lacks the correct preferential desire – just as on the desire-based view.

As Charles' view stands, it tells us something about *why* the akratic acts as he does, contrary to his decision – it turns out that he does not have the right relationship to the knowledge he possesses, since he is not committed to acting upon the good-making features he takes himself to value. However, the account fails to distinguish itself from the desire-based view, which leaves it unable to explain the ignorance which Aristotle clearly attributes to the akratic agent. This undermines Aristotle's intellectualism about *akrasia* to an implausible extent. Furthermore, Charles' claim that this third, desiderative, aspect involved in *akrasia* is distinct from ordinary desire is difficult to justify, given that its function remains precisely the same.

Syllogistically speaking, the akratic is said neither to lack the minor practical premiss nor the practical conclusion on Charles' view, lacking instead a desiderative state, which should arise out of the practical premiss and motivate him to act on the conclusion, finally giving him practical knowledge. As I have suggested above, this falls short of a satisfactory answer because it contradicts Aristotle's views on action and practical conclusion being one and the same event. Ultimately, Charles' account struggles to indicate wherein the akratic agent's ignorance lies, and it is a shortcoming of the account that it cannot do so without taking ignorance to be, in essence, a failure of preferential desire.

1.3.2 *Akrasia as an illusion by phantasia*

The account of *akrasia* which Jessica Moss (2012) puts forward is in many ways built on the same intuitions about evaluative cognition as the account of David Charles. Her account begins

²³ Charles 2007, 207.

by establishing what she takes to be a central thought in Aristotle's moral psychology; namely, that all motivation is based on the object of a pursuit being perceived as good by the agent.²⁴ She rightly claims that Aristotle holds the object of desire to be either the good, or the apparent good – as she argues, this is precisely what Aristotle means in III.4 when he says that 'without qualification and in reality, <the> object of wish is the good, but for each person it is the apparent good' (1113a23-24). This is also why we should think, Moss argues, that for Aristotle the object of both human and animal desire is always for things *qua* good.²⁵ If this is the case, however, we need to be able to explain how the good is recognised not only by the – distinctly human – faculty of practical reason, but how we come to be aware of things as good outside of the limits of rationality. This is a particularly pertinent question for *akrasia*, since it is an occurrence during which we desire, and act upon, precisely that which reason tells us is worse.

In order to explain this, Moss develops a view on which *all* desires, including appetitive ones, are based on some kind of evaluative cognition. She explains that '[r]ational desires are based on rational evaluative cognition – intellect', while 'non-rational desires are based on non-rational evaluative cognition – perception or *phantasia*'.²⁶ This perceptual faculty of imagination or appearance, *phantasia*, is a key concept employed in Moss' interpretation, which allows her to explain how even appetitive desires are for that which appears good. As a notion that is frequently mentioned in Aristotle, particularly in *De Anima*, *phantasia* is not out of place in a discussion about perception and desire; in fact, while Aristotle makes clear that *phantasia* is not the same as perception (428a8-12) he says that 'animals do many things in accordance with them [i.e. appearances, or *phantasiai*], some because they lack reason, e.g. beasts, and others because their reason is sometimes shrouded by passion, or sickness, or sleep, e.g. humans.' (429a5-6).²⁷ This is also the picture of *phantasia* which Moss argues for; she claims that next to the rational evaluative capacity of intellect and reason human beings possess this non-rational value cognition which evaluates objects and activities, and motivates us towards their pursuit.²⁸

This motivation is also explained, Moss says, by the fact that the *phantasia* – and here she is referring to the appearance or imagination itself, not the faculty in question – is in itself painful

²⁴ Moss 2012, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁷ Citations from the *De Anima* are from Shields (2016).

²⁸ Moss 2012, 22.

or pleasurable, depending on the action or object it represents.²⁹ This means that *phantasia* can motivate us by making the expectation or anticipation of something pleasurable or painful in itself, since it can reproduce the bodily effects of pleasant or painful perception.³⁰ This is an important conclusion for Moss' view because it proves that *phantasia* can, on its own, motivate us to act; by representing an object and reproducing the effects of pleasurable perception, it causes us to desire the object as a goal.³¹

Based on the thought that *phantasia* can arouse desire for certain objects or activities within us, Moss argues that *phantasia* is a faculty which indicates to us which objects and activities are good – and that it does so by recognising and representing them to us as pleasurable.³² She does this by making a radical but convincing claim: that pleasure itself is a mode of value-cognition.³³ This is a rather strong interpretation of Aristotle's frequent claim that the pleasant appears good (1095b19, 1104b35-1105a2, 1113a22-23) but it is also a thought which manages to maintain Aristotle's strong internalism about moral motivation, and makes sense of the idea that we are motivated to act on things because they appear good to us, even if we can be mistaken about their goodness. In fact, whenever Aristotle talks about the life of pleasure or gratification, he seems to claim this; 'the many... would seem to conceive the good and happiness as pleasure' and 'choose what is pleasant, therefore, because they assume it is good' (1095b19, 1113b1). That pleasure is one way in which goodness and value can be revealed to us is, therefore, a very plausible thought to venture.

On Moss' view, then, the pleasant is desired by human beings because it appears good through *phantasia*.³⁴ Given that *phantasia* can lead to perceptual illusion, either by misrepresenting an object as something it is not, or bringing about the perception and emotional effect of an object without its presence, Moss thinks that it is likely to be responsible for *akrasia*. She thus proposes an account on which she thinks we can reconcile the intellectualist and desire-based views of *akrasia*.³⁵ She does this by suggesting that the agent experiences a motivational conflict of desires, each based on a different evaluative cognition; while rational desire for the correct action is caused by the intellect's representation of this action as good, appetitive desire

²⁹ Moss 2012, 60.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 62.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵ Ibid., 103.

for the contrary action is caused by *phantasia*'s representation of the merely pleasant action as good.³⁶ Even appetitive desire, on this view, arises out of the desire for things *qua* good, but it takes pleasure to be the signifier for these, since pleasure is one way in which we cognize the good. Consequently, these two types of evaluative cognition give rise to conflicting desires, and represent conflicting actions as good.³⁷

It is clear why this is a case of conflicting motivations and desires – as the desire-based view holds – but it is, Moss argues, also a case of intellectual fault, because the appearance of an object or action as good by *phantasia* is comparable to a perceptual illusion, which disturbs the proper function of an akratic agent's cognition.³⁸ The false appearance of something as good makes a great impression on the akratic agent since he is the kind of person that is easily swayed by feelings (1145b12-13, 1151a20-21) and *phantasia* brings up feelings of pleasure in its representation of the wrong object as good. This is *why* the akratic agent is motivated to act on the wrong action – it both appears to him to be that which is good and it affects him emotionally to the extent that he sees the representation by *phantasia* as the right thing to be pursued. This illusion by *phantasia* is also the key to understanding *how* the akratic comes to act in ignorance of what is best despite making the correct decision; since it is an affective illusion, it impacts the akratic agent's feelings and bodily condition, and therefore it renders his access to the knowledge that he would otherwise act on beyond reach.³⁹ Moss argues that the bodily effects (*pathos*) brought on by *phantasia* affect the akratic agent's ability to put together the conclusion of the good syllogism, which is that the akratic should not pursue this thing now in front of him.⁴⁰ Therefore, part of the akratic agent's intellect is 'covered over' because of an intense bodily condition – as is the case for those who are 'asleep or mad or drunk'.⁴¹

Much of Moss' account is both innovative and plausible; the thought that desire is for things *qua* good and that pleasure functions as a primitive value cognition is well-grounded in the text, and a natural interpretation of Aristotle's views about desire and the good. Her overall view of *akrasia*, however, has significant shortcomings. Firstly, she takes ignorance during sleep, drunkenness, and other cognitively compromised states to be analogous with ignorance

³⁶ Moss 2012, 104-105.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 126 *ff.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

during *akrasia*. While Aristotle does compare these conditions at 1147a10-19, claiming that akratic agents ‘have knowledge in a way similar to these people’, this comparison need not suggest that ignorance in *akrasia* and in other cognitively compromised states is the same, but only that, as he says, ‘both have knowledge in a way and do not have it’ (1147a13). Contrary to Moss’ view, it is plausible that Aristotle compares *akrasia* to these other states in order to exemplify that there are different states, similarly ‘affected by strong feelings’, in which agents experience both knowledge and ignorance concurrently.

Secondly, this ‘covering over’ of an agent’s intellect during *akrasia* does a lot of work in Moss’ account, while remaining a relatively unclear notion. The akratic agent is certainly swayed easily by emotions and non-rational appetites, but it is highly unclear how appetite can so easily push his intellect out of the equation, when only moments ago he was able to make a correct decision about what to do. Her view leaves unexplained how the agent can shift so drastically between a state of motivational conflict and knowledge, to a state of blind ignorance, which ultimately allows appetitive desire to win out. This is also why her account struggles to explain how the enkratic acts on the prescriptions of reason despite his feelings, given that he also suffers from ‘base appetites’ and experiences similar conflicts of motivation (1151b9, 1152a1).

Her emphasis on the impression that a representation by *phantasia* can have is also problematic, for the reason that it renders intellect, in comparison, a relatively weak force within the human psyche. On Moss’ account akratic action must necessarily involve gross intellectual failure, and although it includes a prior motivational conflict, it is nonetheless the agent’s intellectual failure which carries the explanatory burden here. Given that this intellectual failure is induced by non-rational forces, namely by *phantasia* and appetite, her account has the consequence that knowledge is, in a way, ‘dragged about’ by the effects of appetite, which is certainly not a conclusion Aristotle wants to affirm. Similarly, her claim that the akratic agent lacks the conclusion of the ‘good’ practical syllogism – and that this is what ‘the last term’ refers to – implies that the agent experiences such gross intellectual failure that he has both the universal and particular premiss, but fails to put these together, which is both difficult to explain, and a peculiarity which, if it were to be the case, we would expect Aristotle to mention in book VII. Consequently, her explanation of *how* the akratic agent is both knowing and ignorant is, at best, underexplained and, at worst, inconsistent with Aristotle’s view on the power of knowledge.

On the one hand, therefore, Moss' emphasis on the impact of non-rational faculties on reason and action seems unduly to diminish Aristotle's intellectualism, rendering intellect a weak force on his view. On the other hand, she relies too heavily on the ignorance and 'covering over' of the akratic agent's intellect during *akrasia*, underexplaining how the agent comes to be ignorant and act against the knowledge he, in some sense, still possesses.

I.4 Vice

Having gone through the primary text and secondary literature concerning the akratic character, who acts badly not on his conviction but against it, we should now turn to the vicious person, who acts badly out of conviction that his action is best. The literature on vice does not reach back quite as many years as the discussion of *akrasia* does; this is partly because vice has not been seen as a particularly difficult feature of Aristotle's ethics in comparison to *akrasia*, and partly because Aristotle discusses vice only with respect to defining the limits of virtue. In many ways, however, the literature on vice suffers with the same issues as the literature on *akrasia*. It is not clear whether the vicious person fails because he is ignorant about the good or whether he simply has appetites for what he knows is wrong; Aristotle describes him in both ways at different points in the *NE*. My aim in the following section is to go through this textual evidence, showing the tension between passages which suggest that the vicious agent acts on principle, mistakenly identifying the good with the pleasant, and the passage at IX.4, which suggests that the vicious person is unprincipled and knowingly acts on his depraved appetites.

Vice is, above all, the state opposite to virtue. It encompasses all the ways in which we can go wrong and, for Aristotle, this includes a significant and diverse range of actions. He famously claims that 'there are many ways to be in error...but there is only one way to be correct' (1106b29-31). This is because, as he says, 'badness is proper to the indeterminate', namely to anything which is not done in good and correct measure (1106b29-30). This is also why he defines vice not on its own, but primarily in relation to virtue, so that it signifies every state that misses the mark of the mean – whether it be excess, deficiency, or the unqualifiedly bad (1106b25, 1107a10-18). Therefore, the vicious person errs in all sorts of ways, but similarly to the akratic, primarily with respect to pleasure and pain (1104b30-1105a2).

In contrast to the akratic, however, Aristotle tells us early in the *NE* that the vicious person acts on his decision. While the akratic agent errs because he abandons his decision in favour of following appetitive desire, the vicious person makes the wrong decision, and errs because he acts in accordance with it (1112a10). Furthermore, the specifically intemperate man (*akolastos*), who is vicious with respect to bodily pleasures and pains, ‘acts in pursuit of pleasant things because this is what he is persuaded and decides to do’ (1146a31-32). That the vicious person acts on his decision is significant, since this precludes him from being the kind of hopeless and confused agent that acts badly more out of mindlessness than out of conviction. Aristotle clearly tells us that he ‘acts on decision when he is led on, since he thinks it is right in every case to pursue the pleasant thing at hand’ (1146b23-24). This suggests that the vicious person acts as he does because he is convinced that the things he pursues are best. This understanding of vice is also in line with Aristotle’s claim that ‘each state <of character> has its own distinctive <view of> fine and pleasant things’ (1113a31). Although the vicious person is wrong about the good and ends up choosing that which is merely pleasant, he does so on the conviction that his decision and action is actually in line with the good (1113b1-2). If we go along with the view being presented to us in these passages, it leaves us with an account on which the vicious person acts as he does because he makes a calculated and thought-out decision about living a life of pleasure, since he mistakes the good for the pleasant. He is a principled agent whose character has led him to misidentify the good with something it is not, but for this ‘he is bound to have no regrets’ (1150a22), since he truly takes himself to be pursuing the things he ought to pursue, and living life as it ought to be lived.

This description of the vicious person seems uncharacteristic for Aristotle; vice is meant to be the worst state of all, through which all moral failures and errors of reason are expressed. Short of calling him evil, Aristotle certainly takes him to be a morally and psychologically corrupted character, who suffers base desires and cannot choose to free himself of his vicious character once he has acquired it (1114a20-21). Moreover, the vicious person is frequently described as ignorant; Aristotle says that every vicious person ‘is ignorant of the actions he must do or avoid’ and experiences ‘ignorance in the decision’ although not the kind of ignorance which would excuse his wrong and blameworthy behaviour. His actions are voluntary because they are caused by ‘ignorance...of the universal’, rather than any particular feature of his situation (1111a25-1111a35). This ‘ignorance of the universal’ can signify only an ignorance of the good, which agrees with the claim at III.4 that the vicious person acts according to what he mistakenly thinks is the good. This complicates Aristotle’s account of vice; while acting badly

is certainly blameworthy, it is not immediately clear why the vicious person, who thinks himself to be acting well but happens to make a mistake about the nature of the good, should be the embodiment of all bad and terrible actions and deserves to have the trait which distinguishes him as a human being – his reason – expelled from his soul, as Aristotle claims of the intemperate man (1119b1-10).

Adding to this complexity is the description at IX.4, where Aristotle characterises the vicious person as being ‘at odds with himself’ since he has a rational desire for one thing and an appetite for another – as those in the grip of *akrasia* do (1166b7). The vicious ‘who have done many terrible actions hate and flee from life because of their vice, and destroy themselves’, since their ‘soul is in conflict’ and each part of it ‘pulls in a different direction, as though they were tearing [the vicious person] apart’ (1166b14-22, my modification). This characterisation is to be expected given that vice is the worst possible occurrence in the moral life of a human being. That Aristotle should have held an image of the vicious as a happy and satisfied character, who suffers nothing bad on account of straying from both reason and truth, would go against the central tenets of Aristotle’s philosophy, and his forceful claim that the virtuous life *is* both the most pleasant, and the best, life (1178a8-10).⁴² This explains why the description we encounter here is of the vicious person as conflicted and miserable, wishing that the things he pursues ‘had not become pleasant to him’, for he is, Aristotle’s says, ‘full of regret’ (1166b24-25). However, this picture of the vicious person as unprincipled is in stark contrast to the image of the vicious as essentially principled and mistaken about the good, living without regret because he is convinced that he acts as he should. The vicious person of IX.4 is entirely different in that regard, since he in some sense knows that his behaviour is bad – he remembers his wrongdoing in the past and anticipates more of it in the future (1166b16), believing that he should not act as he does. Contrary to the principled vicious person we encountered earlier, the vicious person of IX.4 is convinced that he should not do what appetite tells him to but cannot stop himself from doing it because of his intense and unruly appetites.

What should we make of the vicious person, given that Aristotle sometimes describes him as a principled character who is persuaded that pleasure is the ultimate good, and elsewhere as someone who is torn in two by his conflicting desires, wishing that he was not this unprincipled

⁴² The life of theoretical contemplation is the properly ‘best and pleasantest’ life for human beings (but in the realm of character states and action, this corresponds to the life of the virtuous person).

‘mass of conflicts’?⁴³ As mentioned, the interpretative issues surrounding vice are in many ways similar to that of *akrasia*, since Aristotle offers seemingly conflicting descriptions of the vicious person as either principled and essentially ignorant of his mistake, or else an unprincipled, conflicted and regretful character. Similarly to *akrasia*, an adequate account of moral viciousness must answer two questions: firstly, it must explain how the vicious agent is both principled and ignorant, while also being an utterly conflicted character. This is a question which we can answer by considering the kind of habituation the vicious agent goes through, as well as how the vicious person’s life goes. Secondly, an adequate account of vice must explain why Aristotle takes the vicious person to be such a terrible character, and why he deserves to experience the worst possible punishment; namely, the breakdown of his reason and humanity into beastliness.

I.5 Two accounts of vice

In the following section, I consider two prominent accounts of vice – that of Rachel Barney (2020) and that of Karen Margrethe Nielsen (2017) – both of whom put forward a particular account of the vicious person in an attempt to clarify the otherwise complicated textual evidence. My main aim will be to show that neither of the accounts can answer both questions posed above as adequately as we would like, but that both suggest a rich view of vice which we need to consider in order to pinpoint where they go wrong.

I.5.1 Vice as rationalisation

While above I have suggested that the descriptions of the vicious person are seemingly contradictory but nonetheless expressions of one and the same character, this is not an entirely uncontroversial view. In fact, Barney argues that the portrayal of vice in IX.4 is ‘simply impossible to square with what Aristotle says about the bad person elsewhere’.⁴⁴ Therefore, she suggests that we should not treat the passages in IX.4 as being about the vicious character in general, but rather as being about either the more general category of non-virtuous or base (*phauloi*) characters or about the subset of non-virtuous people who have committed wicked and criminal acts (*mochthêroi*).⁴⁵ Her suggestion is based on the fact that Aristotle often refers

⁴³ The phrase is taken from Julia Annas’ description of Plato’s vicious person in Annas 1993, 554.

⁴⁴ Barney 2020, 276.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

to the vicious as *'kakoi'*, but never mentions the *'kakoi'* or any form of the word *'kakos'* in the passage at IX.4, using only *'phauloi'* and *'mochthêroi'* to refer to what many have simply taken to mean the vicious from elsewhere in the *NE*.⁴⁶ Barney interprets this as a conscious choice on Aristotle's part and takes him to use cognates of *'kakos'* as a technical term referring to the bad person as such, who he does not speak of in IX.4. Therefore, she takes as central to the vicious person's profile *as such* that he is unrepentant.⁴⁷

Barney is right that the absence of the word *kakos* in any form in the passage at IX.4 is notable. However, I want to suggest that it should not be taken as decisive reason, or even a strong indication, for thinking that Aristotle discusses a character who is different from the *kakoi* of book I, II and III in the passage at IX.4. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, Barney herself notes that Aristotle often uses these terms interchangeably, such as when he points out that the excessive pursuit of choiceworthy things should not be called either vice (*mochtêria*) or *akrasia* (1148b2-5). This casts doubt on the thought that Aristotle is using these words as technical terms for specific types of bad people. Secondly, Barney takes as evidence for her suggestion that the *phauloi* refer to the wider category of base people at IX.4 Aristotle's mention of akratic agents as a category of people who 'are at odds with themselves' (διαφέρονται γὰρ ἑαυτοῖς, καὶ ἐτέρων μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν ἄλλα δὲ βούλονται, οἷον οἱ ἀκρατεῖς) (1166b7). However, it is not obvious that this description is meant to refer to akratic agents as an example of the *phauloi* who are at odds with themselves; it is plausible that akratics are mentioned simply as a similar category to the *phauloi*, who are, in this instance, treated as a category of vicious people distinct from akratics, to whom the description 'at odds with themselves' refers. On this reading, the οἷος is not meant to be read 'such as' but 'just as', signifying a clarifying comparison between the *phauloi* who are at odds with themselves, just as akratic agents are, even if the *phauloi* – the vicious people – remain the specific subject of the description 'at odds with themselves'. Finally, I think that there are good reasons for, at the very least, investigating the possibility of a unitary account of vice. One of these is that such views exist in the literature already, with many being plausible and successful in presenting a consistent and unitary view of vice, taking account of IX.4 in their interpretations.⁴⁸ There is also something to be said for attempting to elucidate precisely what kind of character Aristotle is talking about here, using it to enrich the relatively thin conception of vice presented elsewhere in the *NE*. Therefore, Barney's lack of

⁴⁶ Barney 2020, 276.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁴⁸ Notably Irwin (2001), Brickhouse (2003), as well as Nielsen (2017) whose account I consider below.

engagement with the description at IX.4 weakens her account by not addressing many of the issues that figure in the wider literature on vice, and by not providing suggestions for how to resolve the seemingly opposed descriptions of vice within the *NE*.

Although Barney does not question the consistency of vice across different books in the *NE*, her account considers two other issues related to Aristotle's conception of the vicious person; namely, how he comes to desire the bad, and why he is a truly terrible character. To that end, she begins by arguing that bad habituation, which produces vice, is symmetrical to good habituation, whose result is virtue.⁴⁹ She further suggests that habituation in general is a 'brute' process which comes about by mechanistic rote repetition of actions, creating specific moral dispositions within the agent.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Barney suggests that the pleasure gained from acting in accordance with habit comes not from the agent having learnt to perceive certain things as virtuous (or vicious) and therefore taking pleasure in them, but rather from having done an action repeatedly until it is so familiar that simply performing it brings the agent pleasure, while doing something which requires an effort that he has not been habituated to put in, is painful. This process is only enhanced by the way in which we most often learn how to behave – through the imitation of others. This reinforces the pleasures of a habituated action even further, Barney says, since human beings delight in the imitation of others, as Aristotle claims in the *Poetics* (1448b5–9). Therefore, the vicious person should not be understood as someone starting out with a particularly corrupted psyche or exceptionally intense and unruly appetites, but rather as someone who 'defers to her appetites in a routinized way regardless of their strength, because anything else feels difficult, unnatural, and exhausting', says Barney.⁵¹

This goes some way in explaining how the vicious person acquires his character state, and also emphasises the vice of the self-satisfied vicious person who, despite his terrible actions, always feels pleasure from acting in the way that he is used to.⁵² This allows Barney to say that the vicious person need not be principled as such, so that his convictions about following pleasure must come from intellectual reflections about the good, but that he could just as well be an unreflective agent who simply takes up pleasure at any opportunity because he has been habituated to follow it, and gains pleasure from acting as he always has in the past.⁵³ Part of

⁴⁹ Barney 2020, 279.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 281 *ff.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

the novelty of Barney's account is that she wants to allow for a diverse range of vicious agents, some of whom are convinced that the bad thing they now pursue is good, others who know it to be bad but see some advantage for themselves, and yet others who simply pursue that which they have always done, and which has always brought them the most immediately available gratification.

On Barney's view, then, the vicious person's conviction for his way of life is a mechanism of *rationalisation* through which he motivates his blameworthy actions at the level of practical reason.⁵⁴ This is a significant feature of Aristotle's view, Barney says, since it explains how the vicious person is neither a misguided enkratic, who acts badly simply because he has a wrong idea of the good, nor a type of akratic who acts on his appetites against reason.⁵⁵ So, while he pursues the pleasures of desiderative appetites at all times, the vicious person does so under the endorsement of his reason, which Aristotle says has been corrupted in his soul so as to prevent the correct end from appearing to him (1140b17-18). In the vicious person's soul, then, reason has its place only as a 'puppet regime', because it simply serves the ends of non-rational desire by rationalising his actions and pursuits.⁵⁶ This is also why the vicious person's ignorance does not excuse him from blameworthiness; he is not a character who errs because he makes an intellectual mistake about the good, but rather his ignorance comes from the erroneous and false rationalisation that he engages in, in order to justify his desires and bad behaviours. The vicious person acts badly not because he has 'the wrong theory', but rather adopts this wrong view of the good in order to rationalise his pursuit of what has always been pleasant to him because of his bad, and brute, habituation.⁵⁷

Barney's view is a rich account of the vicious person's psychological condition and character state. While she does not engage with the conflicted and miserable agent of IX.4, which prevents her from giving an answer to one of the important questions about vice outlined in §I.4, she can readily answer others. However, her account is primarily based on two thoughts, neither of which I think we should accept without doubt. The first is her account of habituation as brute – as an essentially rote repetitive process, through which actions become pleasant to us and on the basis of which things are pursued. While this picture might be easier to accept

⁵⁴ Barney 2020, 300 *ff.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

for vice, on Barney's view it is also the case for virtue that the mere repetition of the right actions – and imitation of others – can lead to a virtuous disposition.⁵⁸ This leaves both virtue and vice as states which have, to some extent, been created through mere thoughtlessness. This is not an implausible picture of vice in general, but it is, I think, an unattractive one. If we accept that character states are formed by rote repetition rather than by something like reflection or heightened perceptual awareness for the right actions, we end up removing from Aristotle's picture of habituation part of what is so enthralling and interesting about it; namely, that action itself can reveal to us certain features of the moral world as such. As other interpreters have argued, even imitation, which seems a more probable case of learning by rote repetition, is not clearly such; it is possible that Aristotle has a view on which the learner is imitating the virtuous person by adopting his perspective, and reflecting on it, rather than by just mechanistically imitating the actions performed.⁵⁹ This does not mean that Aristotle excludes unreflective agents from his view, but merely that we should not build our entire account of vice and vicious motivation on the basis of habituation as brute, since there are good reasons to think that habituation is not a merely brute process.

The second idea on which Barney builds much of her account is the thought that the vicious person's ignorance is to be found, essentially, in his employment of corrupted reason for the purposes of rationalising his behaviour. While this explains well why the vicious person is a terrible character – he only seemingly follows reason, but in fact he puts it to use towards achieving non-rational goals and appetites – it does so at the expense of accounting for the vicious person's ignorance. For Barney, the vicious person behaves badly not because he holds the wrong belief about the good, but rather he holds a mistaken belief about the good because this is how he rationalises his wrong behaviour. This reading is a very particular interpretation of Aristotle's claim that the vicious person's actions are done in ignorance of the universal, and come by because the vicious person makes a wrong decision. Barney's explanation also makes the vicious person's conviction seem unduly thin, which goes against a very natural reading of Aristotle's text on which the vicious person really is persuaded by the principles of pleasure-seeking which he follows.

⁵⁸ Barney 2020, 281.

⁵⁹ This is the picture of habituation suggested by Hampson (2019).

Barney's interpretation makes the two most prominent features of the vicious person as he is described in the *NE* – his ignorance, and his conviction for the life he lives – relatively thin concepts. Her account is motivated partly by her consideration for the fact that vice as a category encompasses a diverse range of characters who err in very different ways, and whose state is difficult to explain by one and the same account. However, her interpretation leaves very little space for any other kind of vicious person than the one who has gone through his early life being entirely unreflective and unconcerned with moral matters, and who uses his reason to tell himself a false story about the causes of his bad actions.

1.5.2 Vice as progressively more depraved

In contrast to Barney, Nielsen's view of vice is motivated to a large extent by the need to account for the description of vice in IX.4. Nielsen argues that we need to situate the various descriptions of vice – on the one hand in book II and III, and on the other in VII and IX.4 – within the context in which they appear, and read them as relating to the discussion which surrounds them.⁶⁰ As such, she argues that the description in IX.4 refers to the specifically intemperate man, who is vicious with respect to bodily pleasures and pains.⁶¹ Part of the reason for her emphasis on this is that she wants to account for vices of deficiency, which she thinks are often left out, and not only consider vices of excess such as intemperance, which she takes are in focus in VII and IX.4 but should not be understood as encompassing Aristotle's conception of vice in general.⁶²

Nonetheless, Nielsen's view is that the description of intemperance at IX.4 is consistent with what Aristotle says of vice elsewhere, even if it is not meant to be a description of all vicious people. She takes it that the references to vice in book VII are also aimed at describing the specifically intemperate man, in order to distinguish him from the main topic of book VII, namely, the akratic agent.⁶³ Nielsen therefore argues that discussions of vice in and beyond book VII – including IX.4 – should be treated as being, first and foremost, about the intemperate man.⁶⁴ This means that the descriptions of the vicious person in IX.4 should be understood as conflicting with Aristotle's account of the intemperate man of book VII, rather

⁶⁰ Nielsen 2017, 4–6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

than being in conflict with Aristotle's account of vice in general. This is an important consideration for her, since it shows that inconsistencies arising out of this passage will not be problematic for vice as an entire category, but merely for one vicious character; this immediately ensures that whatever our conclusions about IX.4 are, they cannot be that Aristotle's account of vice in general is inconsistent.

So, Nielsen's analysis turns to intemperance specifically and, as a particular subcategory of vice, she claims that it remains consistent throughout the *NE*. This is because she takes the passage at IX.4 to be describing the *development* of the intemperate person – the way his life actually goes – rather than simply the psychological state of an intemperate character, as in book VII.⁶⁵ The failure of the generally vicious person, she says, is that he is ignorant about the ends he should pursue – ‘the universal’ at 1110b35 – rather than any particular feature of his situation, as is the case with the akratic. Nielsen argues that this can be used interchangeably with Aristotle's claim that ‘ignorance in the decision’ causes vice, since it is the vicious person's end which makes him act badly, while his deliberation works well, being ‘not about ends, but about means to ends’ (1112b11).⁶⁶ This vindicates the description of the vicious – and therefore also the intemperate man – as essentially principled, acting upon his decision while being ignorant of the correct ends. This captures well the ignorance which Aristotle clearly wants to attribute to the vicious person, without making him into an unreflective agent, since he makes a decision about how to act, and ‘decision involves reason and thought’, even when its outcome is wrong (1112a16).

Given that the vicious person's ends are misguided, and that he is ignorant of what he truly ought to pursue, it makes sense that his life will go badly. In the case of the intemperate person, the error is a particularly devastating one, since he decides to pursue in principle that which is prescribed neither by reason nor knowledge but the non-rational parts of his soul – namely, pleasure. It should therefore not be surprising, Nielsen says, that the intemperate person's life goes badly, and that he comes to be disappointed even when he achieves the ends of his pursuit; his ends are considered bad for a reason, and he will come to experience pain and regret from their terrible consequences, irrespective of the fact that he decides on them and acts out of

⁶⁵ Nielsen 2017, 8-9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

conviction.⁶⁷ This is, in principle, true for any vicious person, since they all err with respect to the right end, and will therefore come to bear the consequences of this within their lifetime.

For the intemperate person, however, things are particularly bad. Since he is persuaded that he ought to follow his appetitive desire without restriction or measure, his desire for pleasure will eventually grow more intense, be less easily satisfied, and become progressively more unrestrained.⁶⁸ This is why the intemperate person of IX.4 becomes someone with conflicting desires, whose soul is torn apart by opposing forces; while his rational desire sees the pleasant as the good and fine, he soon realises that the shameful appetites in which he indulges compulsively are the opposite of that, and therefore regrets that he has them.⁶⁹ He will also fail to maximise pleasure, which is his goal, because he will find himself with desires so unrestrained that he cannot but indulge in them, even if by his own standards he ought to delay immediate pleasure for greater gratification at a later point. He therefore acts against his own view of the good, and eventually realises that his appetites, and the life during which he indulges in them, are everything but good and fine; this is why he is not his own friend, as Aristotle's discussion of him in IX.4 is meant to show. At the point of realising this, however, the intemperate person cannot change his character and let go of his terrible desires – he has encouraged the non-rational parts of his soul, neglecting his reason, and this is ultimately how his appetites come to 'expel rational calculation' (1119b10).⁷⁰

Nielsen accounts for the difference in description between book VII and IX.4 by suggesting that it exemplifies the progression of the intemperate person's life, as well as his increasingly depraved state. Both of these suggestions are, I think, very plausible and true to the text. It is clearly the case that Aristotle cannot allow for the vicious person's life to go well, and that he will suffer bad consequences on account of his bad actions – whether or not he is convinced of their goodness. To say anything else would be not to take Aristotle's moral realism seriously. It is, moreover, very likely that Aristotle thinks of the intemperate man in the way Nielsen presents him – Aristotle says of intemperate person's desire that it is 'insatiable and seeks indiscriminate satisfaction' and that his 'active exercise of appetite increases the appetite he already had from birth' (1119b8-10). The view on which untempered desires grow

⁶⁷ Nielsen 2017, 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

progressively more unrestrained is correctly attributed to Aristotle here, and Nielsen is therefore able to account for the much-discussed inconsistency between the portrayals of vice in IX.4 and elsewhere, with an account that is both simple, and very plausible given the text.

There are a few things which we should consider, though, before claiming Nielsen's view to be the ultimate authority on vice. The first is that her account depicts the vicious person in general, as well as the intemperate man specifically, as a 'misguided enkratic', to borrow the term from Barney.⁷¹ This is not to say that her account would be inconsistent with a view on which the vicious person's failure lies in more than his misidentification of the good, but only to point out that her account lacks an explanation for why the vicious person comes to desire what he does, not only as a genuine intellectual mistake about the good, but because of some feature of his psychology on which he already desires the pleasant rather than the good. A view of vice which can account for Aristotle's claims about the vicious person's culpability – and why he comes to deserve the worst punishment a human being can receive – must be able to tell a story about the vicious person's motivations for acting as he does, while making it clear that it is not by mere chance that an agent becomes vicious rather than enkratic. As Nielsen's account stands, it does not make this distinction clear enough.

This is also why Nielsen's account cannot, as of yet, explain why the vicious person deserves to have their humanity taken away from them. Although she indicates that within the vicious person's soul it is appetitive desire, rather than reason, which reigns, it is not clear how this is the vicious person's fault nor why Aristotle takes him to be the worst character of all. There is a balance to be had between the ignorance we attribute to the vicious agent, and the mistake we need to say he must have made during the development of his character. While Barney emphasises the latter, Nielsen's focus lies on the former; my aim here is just to sustain the thought that we must find a way in which to integrate the two, since Aristotle clearly means the vicious person's condition to comprise both of these features.

⁷¹ Barney 2020, 275. It is notable that this is also how Barney describes Nielsen's view of the vicious person, and objects to her account on precisely this point.

CHAPTER II:

THE DECEPTIVE NATURE OF PLEASURE

II.1 Desiderata for an account of *akrasia* and vice

The previous chapter explored the seemingly conflicting textual evidence about what the failures of *akrasia* and vice consist in, on Aristotle's view. Having gone through several accounts in the current literature which attempt to reconcile these, I argued that each interpretation struggles either with accounting for all the textual evidence in the *NE*, or underexplains very important aspects of Aristotle's view. While the debate about the failure of these characters is clearly alive and well, I concluded that we are, nonetheless, far from having a firm grasp on Aristotle's view of *akrasia* and vice.

In order to make my own suggestions about the failures of these characters, it is important to consider what my previous analysis of the literature says about the kinds of desiderata which an accurate account of *akrasia* and vice ought to meet. In this section I will therefore outline the features which an accurate account of *akrasia* and vice should include, and from this set out a plan for discussion in the upcoming sections §§II.2-II.6 of this chapter.

The main point of emphasis in my previous discussion of the literature was that, for both *akrasia* and vice, an accurate account of Aristotle's view must be able to explain the seemingly differing descriptions of these two character states across the *NE*. As such, *akrasia* specifically cannot be understood as arising primarily out of a wrong preferential desire, nor can the akratic agent's ignorance be reduced to a mere failure of preferential desire. This does not take account of Aristotle's thought that the akratic person's ignorance is a state in which the agent lacks some piece of knowledge, and would undermine his claims that *akrasia* is a state of both 'knowing and not knowing' in VII.3. Similarly, in the case of vice we cannot simply understand the vicious person's failure as one which pertains to his lack of reflection on his actions or the rationalisation of his bad behaviour, but must account for the conviction with which the vicious person acts on Aristotle's view, and the 'ignorance in the decision' which is attributed to him.

At the same time, however, it would be incorrect to reduce the mistake in *akrasia* and vice to a purely intellectual failure. While Aristotle clearly thinks that ignorance is a significant feature of these character states, relying too heavily on gross intellectual failure in our explanation of them undermines important features of Aristotle's philosophy overall. If the failure in *akrasia* is primarily intellectual, so that the presence of appetite immobilises the agent's intellect from functioning properly during the moment of *akrasia*, this would imply that knowledge and intellect can be 'dragged about' by appetite, which is both inconsistent with Aristotle's claims in VII and implausible given his overall intellectualism. Similarly, an account of vice which takes the vicious person's failure to consist in an intellectual mistake only will be unable to explain why Aristotle thinks the vicious person is the worst character of all, and why his life goes so badly despite his convictions that he is acting as he ought to. Therefore, an adequate interpretation must be able to explain the ignorance involved in these states, which Aristotle makes so much of in his descriptions of them, while at the same time telling a plausible story about the nature of the akratic agent's and the vicious person's desire, and how it leads these characters astray.

Despite the highlighted shortcomings, there are two important features about the failures in *akrasia* and vice that the interpretations previously considered get right. The first is that both the akratic agent and the vicious person err with respect to their reason in some sense. While Barney (2020) suggests that this occurs through the vicious person's corrupted rationalisations of his bad actions, Charles (2007) emphasises that the akratic agent lacks an attraction – and therefore, a certain rational sensitivity – to the things he claims himself to value and pursue.⁷² That the vicious person lacks a commitment to reason is clear; he acts for the purposes of maximising the satisfaction of his desiderative appetites. Additionally, Charles' explanation highlights that the akratic agent also fails in a similar way in his commitment to reason, since he is, on all accounts, able to act contrary to the things he himself claims to value most and which reason prescribes as good. If reason had a better hold on him, as it does in the enkratic person's case, he might very well be able to resist the strong feelings of attraction which arise within him in the presence of pleasant things. However, he is someone who 'is overcome by what most people can resist, and is incapable of withstanding' his feelings (1150b13). An adequate account of *akrasia* and of vice must, therefore, include an explanation about these

⁷² Charles 2007, 206.

characters' lack of commitment to reason, and to action in accordance with what reason prescribes – whether they themselves are aware of this failure, or not.

The second accurate feature suggested by the accounts surveyed is that there is some evaluative mechanism by which that which is pleasant appears to the akratic agent and the vicious person as good. As Moss (2012) and Charles both argue, this evaluative cognition is distinct from reason, and in Moss' original view, it is the non-rational faculty of *phantasia* – imagination or appearance – which causes illusions in characters about the nature of the good and actions in accordance with it. As I have suggested in §1.3, this is a very plausible and textually suitable answer to the question of *why* base characters are motivated to act on what is worse. The suggestion that a non-rational evaluative cognition, such as *phantasia*, presents pleasant things as good is therefore a valuable insight worth including in our accounts of *akrasia* and vice.

In order to avoid underexplaining important features of Aristotle's view, as I have suggested the accounts of Nielsen (2017) and Moss do, we need to consider the failures in *akrasia* and vice beyond the efficient and purely mechanistic causes of bad desires or cognitive mishaps. To say that the akratic agent fails because his knowledge is momentarily covered over by the appearances of *phantasia* and the urges of appetite, or that the vicious person fails by misidentifying the merely pleasant for the good, falls short of being an accurate explanation of these states primarily because it falls short of being a complete account of what occurs during them. These kinds of accounts do not engage with the more urgent question of how pleasure can induce this effect in the akratic and the vicious person, nor why their conditions are such grave moral errors for Aristotle that he feels obliged to spend the entirety of book VII describing what goes wrong during them. Moss' account of *akrasia*, for example, leaves us with a view on which the akratic agent is like a feeble and mindless child, unable to keep their thoughts on anything but the anticipation of pleasure. This clearly is not a correct description of the person who is thoughtful enough to make a correct decision about what to do; therefore, her account cannot explain how the akratic can at one point assert X to be right, and then do not-X moments later, without having deficient reasoning skills or being unaware of his situation. Similarly, Nielsen's view of vice leaves us with an account on which vice could turn out to be a genuine intellectual error – a description which is clearly in tension with Aristotle's claim that vice is the worst character state of all, precisely because it involves a principled pursuit of wrong things.

To arrive at a more complete and accurate account of the failures which occur in *akrasia* and vice, without relying on gross intellectual mistakes or underestimating the ignorance involved, it is necessary to do two things. Firstly, we must consider what a failure with respect to pleasure looks like, on Aristotle's view, in order to understand what makes actions done under the influence of *akrasia* and vice bad and wrong. Secondly, we must examine how pleasure can so convincingly deceive the akratic agent and vicious person into believing – either momentarily or for a longer period of time – that their pursuits are good, when they are precisely the opposite of that. Therefore, we must consider on the one hand how good and right pursuits of pleasures are distinguished from bad and wrong pursuits of pleasure on Aristotle's view and, on the other hand, what psychological processes prevent the akratic agent and vicious person from making this distinction accurately. Therefore, my aim in chapter II is to understand why certain pleasures are thought of as bad, and others as good, by Aristotle, through considering what it is that determines the moral value of a pleasure in the first place.

I propose to do this as follows. In §II.2, I suggest that agents go wrong in their enjoyment of pleasure because they pursue it excessively, rather than because they pursue specific objects or sources of pleasure, such as necessary pleasures of food, drink and sex. Based on this, I argue that Aristotle evaluates pleasures as good or bad not with respect to the objects which elicit them, but with respect to the quantitative features of an agent's pursuit of them – namely, whether the agent pursues them in the amount and manner that reason prescribes. I further argue for this view in §II.3 by discussing the mean, since it is Aristotle's marker of goodness, and when a pursuit of pleasure can be said to have hit the mean. In doing so, I consider the accounts of J.O. Urmson (1973) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1980, 2006), suggesting that neither conception of the mean accounts for the way in which Aristotle understands mistakes with respect to pleasure. Having gone through the textual evidence and considerations about the literature on the mean, in §II.4 I expand on my view of how pleasures are evaluated, arguing that the good-making feature of specific pleasures is that they are pursued, with respect to quantitative features of the pursuit, in accordance what reason prescribes. Moreover, I make a start at suggesting how this theory can better explain the failures of *akrasia* and vice as failures of both knowledge and desire. Finally, in §II.5 I consider and respond to a possible objection, regarding actions and pursuits that are bad *simpliciter*, before fully applying my suggestion to the akratic agent's and vicious person's failures in chapter III.

II.2 Pleasure and excess

My focus in this chapter lies squarely on mistakes with respect to pleasure. The reason for this is that Aristotle clearly takes error with respect to pleasure, above all, to be the origin of wrongful action:

‘For virtue of character is about pleasures and pains. For pleasure causes us to do base actions, and pain causes us to abstain from fine ones... and pleasures and pains make people base, from pursuing and avoiding the wrong ones, at the wrong time, in the wrong ways...’ (1104b9, 20-22)

More specifically, concerning the akratic and the vicious person, Aristotle says:

‘For the principles of things achievable in action are the end for the sake of which <we act>, but if someone is corrupted because of pleasure or pain, no appropriate principle can appear to him’ (1140b17-18).

‘The person who is prone to be overcome by pleasures is incontinent... [the intemperate] pursues excesses of pleasant things because they are excesses and because he decides on it... One of those who do not <act on what they> decide is led on because of pleasure. The other is led on because he is avoiding the pain that comes from appetite.’ (1149b14-26).

Furthermore, Aristotle holds that pleasure causes deception within base characters, where they ‘choose what is pleasant... because they assume it is good’ (1113a35-1113b3). Consequently, it is clear that an attraction to pleasure, and an avoidance of pain, plays a fundamental role in motivating the akratic agent’s and the vicious person’s bad and blameworthy behaviour. In investigating the failures in *akrasia* and vice, therefore, our focus should lie on pleasure and its ability to deceive morally bad characters about the nature of their actions.

For a domain so intimately related to morally deficient states, however, pleasure concerns itself with a very wide range of objects. The virtuous person takes pleasure in acting virtuously, but as all other characters, also enjoys the necessary pleasures of food, drink and sex when appropriate (1154a17-18). Beyond these bodily enjoyments, ‘some appetites and pleasures’,

says Aristotle, ‘are for the fine and excellent kinds of things, such as wealth, profit, victory and honour’ (1148a24-25). We take pleasure in many different objects, some of which are necessary because of our animal nature, such as food, and some of which are naturally choiceworthy despite not being necessary for survival, such as honour. Pleasure, then, can be found in many things of varied nature, and has its role to play in the lives of base characters, where it causes deception, as well as in the lives of virtuous people, whose life is the most pleasant of all.

Aristotle rarely specifies which objects we should take pleasure in and which we should avoid; as mentioned, he speaks of that which is naturally choiceworthy as being pleasant, and likewise of necessary pleasures as being enjoyable. However, we should not take this to mean that he equates those pleasures which are necessary with those that are naturally choiceworthy. In fact, he says that only the latter can be called pleasant without qualification (*ἀπλῶς*), while the former are *qualifiedly* good, namely, depending on who pursues them, for what end, and in which situation (1153a29-30). Nonetheless, he rarely speaks of particular sources of pleasure as good or bad. Instead, throughout book VII, he emphasises that the akratic and vicious person both err because they pursue things ‘in a particular way, namely to excess’ (1148a28). Indeed, even those who pursue fine and excellent things can do so to excess, as Aristotle says of Niobe’s pride for her children, and Satyrus love for his father (1148a35-1148b1). While ‘each of these things is naturally choiceworthy for itself’ and therefore excess in fine pleasures cannot properly be called vice, nor can weakness for them be called *akrasia* more than in name (1147b35-1148a2), Aristotle still points out that ‘excess about them is bad and to be avoided’ (*φᾶῤλαι δὲ καὶ φευκταὶ αὐτῶν εἰσὶν αἱ ὑπερβολαὶ*) (1148b4).

Aristotle’s view of fine pleasures, as opposed to bodily pleasures which lead to *akrasia* and intemperance, is therefore more complex than it seems to be at first glance. While he ensures that we do not misunderstand these two types of pleasures as being on equal footing, he also claims that we cannot straightforwardly say of necessary pleasures that they are bad and to be avoided. Rather, Aristotle’s claims about pleasure here suggest that agents fail by going to *excess* in their pursuit of pleasures, independently of which objects or actions they take pleasure *in*; the object of their pleasure matters less than the way in which they pursue it, since all that is pursued ‘to a degree that goes against reason’ is bad (1148a30). This does not mean that we need not distinguish between errors with respect to pleasures of the spirit, such as honour, and

appetite-driven bodily pleasures, such as food, but only that an excess is unwanted and leads to bad consequences in both cases, even if not equally so for both.

A further reason to emphasise the thought that it is excess of pursuit, rather than the specific object of the pursuit, which makes a pleasure good or bad, is that Aristotle seems to assert precisely this in his discussion of bodily pleasures:

‘The base person is base because he pursues the excess, but not because he pursues the necessary pleasures; for all enjoy delicacies and wines and sexual relations in some way, though not all in the right way.’ (1154a16-18)

Rather than claiming bodily pleasures to be bad overall, here Aristotle clearly wants to retain the thought that pleasures of the body will be part of all characters’ lives, including that of the virtuous person, and that the chief mistake of base characters is not that they pursue these pleasures in general, but that they do so to an excessive extent. While erring with respect to pleasures of spirit is not as bad as erring with respect to bodily pleasures – for reasons which I will consider in §II.4 – it is clear that an excessive pursuit of *any* source of pleasure is bad on Aristotle’s view.

What would explain Aristotle’s emphasis on excess throughout book VII is, I suggest, a picture on which pleasures are evaluated similarly to everything else in Aristotle’s ethics – namely, with respect to the extent that they are in agreement with reason. On this reading, a pleasure is good or bad depending on whether it is pursued in accordance with reason, or in a way that deviates from what reason prescribes. In book II, we are told that virtuous action consists in a mean, which is itself ‘defined by reference to reason’ (1107a1). Therefore, the good-making feature of all things, including pleasures, is whether they are pursued in accordance with reason, just as actions are virtuous if they are in the mean. In other words, acting in the way that reason prescribes is always good, and acting against the demands of reason is always bad, no matter what our action is concerned with and which object we aim to obtain. Conceiving of things in this way makes it clear that a pleasure is not evaluated as good or bad by Aristotle with respect to its object or source, that is, whatever the pleasure is about or concerns itself with (food, honour, moneymaking). Rather, any specific pursuit of pleasure is evaluated with respect to the quantitative features of that pursuit, namely, how the agent has gone about pursuing any

specific source of pleasure, and whether he does so in accordance with the prescriptions of reason.

I take it that the object of pleasure, which the agent enjoys, should therefore not be understood as that which determines the value of a pursuit, action, or pleasure. If Aristotle had envisaged 'real' pleasures as found only in some goods and objects, he would not have described the base person's fault as so closely related to pursuits of excess without mentioning at least a general class of pleasures which should be categorically avoided. Moreover, if he were to take the object which an agent enjoys as the grounds for evaluating whether their enjoyment of a pleasure is good or bad, he would face the same difficulty as we have seen Moss' account does: he would struggle to explain how the quantitative features of a pursuit make all the difference between something being the right or the wrong thing to take pleasure in. Additionally, he would have to explain how the agent's intellect, working perfectly well until it encounters a pleasant particular, could be so undermined, or 'dragged about', by appetitive desire as to entirely mask what is truly bad and should be avoided as something pleasant and good. Given his reluctance to say this about the akratic agent's intellect, and the emphasis of so many passages on excess as the main issue with *akrasia* and intemperance, we should, at the very least, engage with the thought that the good-making feature of a pleasure does not lie solely in the object which elicits it, but rather in the quantitative features of its pursuit.

Before explicating my view fully, it is worth clarifying two things at this stage. Firstly, I should emphasise that while the focus on pleasure has temporarily caused me to shift from speaking about the vicious person, to speaking about the specifically intemperate man, the suggestions I put forward are not limited to the vice of intemperance and should be treated as applying to all vices. This is because I take Aristotle to understand pleasure and pain as two sides of the same coin, so that vices of deficiency are equally mistaken with respect to pleasure as vices of excess are. Moreover, vicious people in general err with respect to pleasure in some sense, even if they do not err with respect to bodily pleasures in particular, as the intemperate man does, since they mistakenly identify pleasure as being the good, and act in accordance with this conviction.

Secondly, my suggestion already involves a specific conception of the mean, which is not uncontroversial, and relates back to a discussion about the nature of the mean as either a quantitative, or qualitative, measure. My aim in §II.3 is, therefore, to consider this debate more thoroughly, and suggest a way in which we can consistently understand the value of pleasure

as situated not in its source, but the quantitative features of its pursuit, without having to accept a picture on which the mean lies on a linear scale between two opposed vices at the extremes.

II.3 The mean

So far, I have suggested that quantitative excess in an agent's pursuit of pleasure is that which makes action bad and base. This involves a quantitative conception of the mean, which Aristotle takes to be the measure and reference point of right action (1106a25-28). A view of this kind is attributed most notably to J.O. Urmson (1973), who argues that the mean is a quantitative midpoint between two extremes of literal excess and deficiency.⁷³ On his view, wrong actions or feelings happen 'too often or too rarely; about too many or too few things; toward too many or too few people; for too many or too few reasons'.⁷⁴ This, I think, is an implausible interpretation of the mean, and of how 'excess' works as a quantitative description for Aristotle. Therefore, I will consider the view famously opposing Urmson's conception of the mean, namely that of Rosalind Hursthouse (1980, 2006). She argues that '[t]o many of the virtues there correspond vices which consist simply in being disposed to feelings about wrong *objects*... The objects are not 'too many' or 'too few', but just plain wrong; the vices are not excesses or deficiencies but just ways of going wrong'.⁷⁵ Therefore, she conceives of the mean as qualitative, where failures to hit the mean are failures to act on the right object – such as being angry at the wrong person, or taking pleasure in the wrong things. To clarify which conception of the mean my view involves and why it is plausible, this section will discuss Hursthouse's arguments against a quantitative account of the mean, showing that my suggestion in §II.2 can withstand her objections, without having to agree with Urmson's account.

To begin, it is clear that a symmetrical account of 'two opposed' vices on either extreme of the mean, as Urmson illustrates it, is not Aristotle's view. On the contrary, Aristotle notes that for many actions and feelings, there is a dissymmetry in the way that people err, so that 'one extreme is closer and more similar to the intermediate condition' (1109a6-8). He says of rashness that since it is 'closer and more similar to bravery, and cowardice less similar, we oppose cowardice more than rashness...for what is further from the intermediate condition

⁷³ Urmson 1973, 225-226.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷⁵ Hursthouse 1980, 71, my emphasis.

seems to be more contrary to it' (1109a9-12). Furthermore, with respect to fear and confidence, Aristotle evidently holds that we can err in ways which are not exclusively about either excess or deficiency, as Urmson would have it. In fact, each vice comes with certain intricate and idiosyncratic dispositions; the rash person is not only too confident about fearful things, but also 'impetuous' and tends to 'wish for dangers before they arrive, but shrink from them when they come'(1116a7-10). His error lies not merely in excessive confidence, but also that in situations of real danger, he does 'not stand firm against anything frightening' (1115b33). It is also notable that with respect to bravery, there are three, rather than two, ways of going wrong: cowardice, rashness, and excessive fearlessness – a condition which Aristotle says has no name, but nonetheless counts as a vice (1116a24-28). Similarly, there is only one vice with respect to justice, namely, injustice (1130a15-16). It is, therefore, neither the case that vices are two in number, nor that the mean lies in a literal midpoint between vices at the extremes. To envisage the mean as such fails to take account of the complexity of individual virtues, and even vices; part of what it means to be courageous, for example, is not merely to be brave with respect to the right situations, but also to be afraid when this is appropriate, and to judge when each response is correct.

There are, therefore, good reasons to think that Aristotle's conception of the mean is captured more faithfully when understood as a specific target, which gets it just right, rather than a midpoint on a scale. Hursthouse's view expresses Aristotle's thought better by conceiving of the mean as a measure which gets it exactly right.⁷⁶ By conceiving of the mean in this way, her account can explain vice with respect to anger, which is not limited to situations in which someone is too angry or not angry enough; as Hursthouse points out, this vice is primarily about someone who is bad-tempered because he gets angry at the wrong things, or fails to be angry about the right ones.⁷⁷ If we follow Urmson's view, as Hursthouse rightly argues, we will not be able to account for cases like her 'fearless phobic' who fails to fear the right things, such as death or great pain, but fears all the wrong things, such as mice or the dark.⁷⁸ Therefore, Hursthouse gets something important right about Aristotle's doctrine of the mean – namely, that virtue is not attained by consistently, say, fearing or taking pleasure in the right number of things, independently of what these things are. It would, indeed, be absurd if Aristotle's argument was that virtue comes from fearing or taking pleasure in the same number of objects

⁷⁶ Hursthouse 1980, 61-62.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

and as frequently as the virtuous man does, even if what we fear or take pleasure in is completely different.

There are, thus, good reasons to reject Urmson's view, as Hursthouse argues. Her own view fundamentally consists in two claims. The first is that wrong actions or feelings are just wrong, whichever way they deviate from the mean. This is exemplified by her suggestion that the mean is illustrated best by imagining it as the centre of a circular target that we are meant to hit, rather than a linear scale where a virtue lies at the midpoint between vices.⁷⁹ Therefore, an action or feeling is not made right by being in the mean – as she says, '[t]his is to get the order of explanation the wrong way round' – but it is in the mean, the bullseye we ought to hit, *because* it is the right thing to do or feel.⁸⁰ The second claim constituting her view is that an action or feeling is right because it is about the right object, and that it is the object, defined under a qualitative description, in which we find the good-making feature of an action or feeling.⁸¹ I want to affirm the first claim, while resisting the second – my suggestion for how pleasure comes to deceive the akratic and vicious person depends on the good-making feature being situated within the quantitative extent to which the pursuit of an object agrees with reason, and not in the object itself, as Hursthouse suggests. Crucially, I argue that Aristotle situates value within reason, rather than within specific objects, so that anything which conforms to reason will be good, while anything that deviates from it will be bad.

Without rejecting her diagnosis of the quantitative view presented by Urmson, I want to put pressure on the way in which Hursthouse conceives of the mean as qualitative. The most straightforward point to press on is to question in which way objects, by themselves, make an action good or bad. Hursthouse argues that right and wrong objects – and people – 'are identified as such by the way they are described', namely, 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' food, actions 'contrary to what is fine' or 'in accordance with the fine'.⁸² This suggestion tells us little about what determines the healthiness of each kind of food, and for whom it is a correct thing to eat. The objects which we can properly describe as 'right' or 'to be pursued' certainly hit the mark of the mean, but granted that a certain thing is healthy, it remains unclear what makes it so –

⁷⁹ Hursthouse 2006, 108.

⁸⁰ Hursthouse 1980, 69.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67 *ff.*; Hursthouse 2006, 106 *ff.*

⁸² Hursthouse 2006, 106.

whether the specific type of food itself, or the fact that this specific type of food is healthy for a certain agent given a particular context.

Therefore, Hursthouse's view does not clear up the ambiguity surrounding the question whether a good feature – health, for example – is attached to the object, such as a specific type of food, or whether the label 'right thing to pursue' or 'healthy' is applied to objects given the context of an agent's action. If she were pressed on this question, Hursthouse could give one of two answers. Firstly, she could claim that there are certain things which it is always good to take pleasure in, and others which it is always right to fear. This seems to be what she argues for in Hursthouse 1980, given her frequent mentions of 'right objects' of pursuit.⁸³ However, this does not seem correct in light of our discussion about pleasure in §II.2. Not only have we been told that bodily pleasures are enjoyed by all characters, 'though not all in the right way', but also that an excess in choiceworthy pleasures, of 'fine and excellent kinds of things, such as wealth, profit, victory and honour', is also bad and to be avoided (1148a25). This can hardly be consistent with Hursthouse's suggestion that vicious action comes from not engaging with the right objects, since even in the case of fine pleasures 'people are blamed not for feeling an appetite and love for them, but for doing so in a particular way, namely to excess' (1148a27-29). Although pleasures of victory and honour come from engaging with precisely the right kinds of objects, it is clear that we can make mistakes about them also, if we do not pursue them in the right way and to the right quantitative extent.⁸⁴ Therefore, Hursthouse's purely qualitative analysis fails to account for the significance which Aristotle gives quantitatively excessive pursuits of pleasure, and the way in which his discussion of the akratic and intemperate man specifically focuses on excessively pursuing and desiring pleasant particulars. The akratic and intemperate man cannot merely be missing the mark with respect to objects, as Hursthouse suggests, because what they pursue to excess are the kinds of pleasures that the virtuous man can, and does, enjoy as well. Situating value squarely within the objects themselves prevents us from understanding the many ways in which we can err, since most pleasures – including bodily ones – can be pursued in both good and bad ways, so that the way in which they are pursued can make all the difference between a right action, and a base one.

The second thing Hursthouse could say is that the pursuit of objects under unspecified conditions is neither right nor wrong, but that in situations whose conditions are specified, there

⁸³ Some examples of this can be found in Hursthouse 1980 (67-68, 70-71).

⁸⁴ In §II.4, I argue that these 'fine and excellent kinds' of objects are also ultimately evaluated as such because of their relationship to reason.

are right and wrong ways to go about things. If her point is that these conditions are qualitative, then we are back to where we started – it is difficult to understand how the qualitative description of a specific pursuit as simply ‘right’ tells us anything about what makes this pursuit correct and good. If, on the other hand, her thought is that the conditions are in any way quantitative – such as having one sweet thing a day, or eating no sweets when one is ill – then her view is at the very least encompassed by mine, and at worst collapses into my suggestion entirely. Hursthouse claims, specifically about pleasure, that ‘[t]he wrong objects enjoyed by the self-indulgent are “the pleasures of the table, wine and sex” (VII.14.1154a18) that fall under the descriptions “unhealthy,” “unaffordable,” or “contrary to what is fine”; the right objects fall under the contrary descriptions’.⁸⁵ If she means to say that the objects mentioned here – bodily pleasures such as food, drink and sex – are the wrong objects to take pleasure in given that they can be described as unhealthy, harmful, or vicious in some sense, then her claim is not that the objects themselves possess certain values so as to be either right or wrong, but rather that to pursue things when they can be described as ‘wrong’, given the situation and the agent in question, fails to hit the mean. This suggests that her view situates value not within the object itself, but within the object as it is understood *in light of the agent’s pursuit*. This is notable for two reasons; firstly, it is inconsistent with her focus elsewhere on the right and wrong objects of pursuit and, secondly, it is strikingly similar to my, avowedly quantitative, conception of the mean. The reason for this is that if we want to say anything else about the agent’s pursuit – other than that it can be described as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ – we must resort to describing quantitative features of the pursuit, such as how much or in which context the agent has pursued a certain thing.

This is also the case for vices other than intemperance; if an agent fears the squeaking of mice and the dark, he is best described not as fearing the wrong objects – for someone can correctly be afraid of either, given the right situation – but rather as being excessively fearful given his situation. Therefore, the agent who has a phobia of mice is not cowardly because mice are always the wrong source of fear, but because he is afraid of them at all times, when, truthfully, there are few situations in which reason prescribes them as the right thing to fear. This also fits well with Aristotle’s description of the akratic person, who ‘is overcome by what most people can resist’ and abides by reason less ‘than most people are capable of doing’, since, as he points out, ‘incontinence and continence are about what exceeds the state of most people’ (1152a25).

⁸⁵ Hursthouse 2006, 106.

Consequently, there are good reasons to reject Hursthouse's view of the mean as purely qualitative. This does not entail that we must reject her helpful illustration of the mean as a target in the centre of a circle, or that we must affirm Urmson's view. In fact, I want to suggest that we can understand excess within the domain of pleasure as having a quantitative dimension, which is expressed by the extent to which a pursuit of pleasure accords with the prescriptions of reason, without deferring to a view on which an action or feeling is made right by being the quantitative midpoint between two vices at the extremes. We do not have to say, as per Urmson, that taking pleasure in that which we ought to simply means taking pleasure in the right number of things. We are still engaging in a quantitative analysis if we take right action to consist in pursuing something to the extent that reason prescribes, in the appropriate manner, and so on. This makes it clear why Hursthouse's unscrupulous but healthy person still errs; while he eats the right amount of food to remain healthy, the manner in which he pursues food and the extent to which he will go in order to obtain it are not in line with reason. Although this is a good objection to Urmson's view, it does not present a problem for my quantitative view as I have described it in §II.2. It is either the case that the unscrupulous person's desire for food is excessive, so that he will not mind going to inappropriate lengths in order to obtain it, or otherwise that he is deficient in caring for his honour, or the rations of others, to a degree which goes against the prescriptions of reason. Understanding excess or deficiency in a way that takes them out of the context in which they exist, namely in human lives, will necessarily make them seem overly mathematical and arbitrary; situating them within the ethics of our lives, where pursuing objects to an extent against reason is possible, makes it clear that the quantitative dimension of the way in which we go about things is not divisible from the moral quality that objects come to have. We can, therefore, resist the suggestion that actions and feelings must be about the right objects, while maintaining that their right-making feature is one which gets things exactly right, as the bullseye in the centre of a target does.

II.4 What makes a pleasure good?

What makes a pleasure good, then, is its agreement with reason, and the agent's pursuit of it in a manner that accords with reason. Excess, on the other hand, makes the pleasure bad if it is found in either the way something is pursued, or in the amount that is pursued. Broadie helpfully points out that even in the case of agents who are habituated well and drawn to pleasures of culture rather than typical bodily pleasures, having a 'prereflective' inclination

towards them, as she calls it, allows them to be taken to excess and detriment even if they are fine and excellent pleasures.⁸⁶ That this is made possible by the inclination being ‘prereflective’ highlights precisely that actions must accord with reason in order to be good, even if the objects they concern themselves with are such as to already promote goodness in some sense. Broadie gives the examples of pleasures of conversation, debate and friendship, all of which Aristotle considers to be fine pleasures. Lacking the correct measure or extent to which we should pursue them, however, allows these naturally choiceworthy objects to be sources of excess that should be avoided (1148b4). This suggests that it is, in fact, the manner and degree to which we pursue and desire them which matters for correct action, rather than whether the object in question is naturally choiceworthy. If we are to act well, concerning pleasure or anything else, we must have reason as our reference point for good action. The value of the action and pleasure, then, comes not from the object that is pursued, but *how* the object is pursued, and crucially, whether the pursuit is one that agrees with reason. This situates value, as Aristotle understands it, in reason, and as I will argue in a moment, in things which further our capacity to reason. While his moral realism ensures that there is always an objectively good way in which we ought to act, both in specific situations and in the general pursuit of goods in life, these values ultimately hang on being guided by reason, and living life as reason prescribes.

Pleasures are, therefore, good or bad only in view of the extent to which they agree with reason or deviate from it; this is their good-making feature. If this is the case, then why does Aristotle speak of naturally choiceworthy and necessary pleasures at all? If we should take my suggestion on board, we must make sense of this distinction, along with the fact that he clearly says of the person who is akratic about choiceworthy things that they are ‘not simply incontinent’, but ‘called incontinent because of a <mere> similarity’ (1147b32-1148a1). Moreover, Aristotle makes clear that while the actions of the ‘unqualified’ akratic are blameworthy as vice, ‘none of these conditions [concerning naturally choiceworthy pleasures] is blamed as a vice’ (1148a4, my modification). Since the distinction appears at numerous times in the discussion of *akrasia*, it is important to take account of – Aristotle clearly differentiates between excessive actions concerning pleasures that are fine and choiceworthy, as opposed to the excessive pursuit of necessary pleasures.

⁸⁶ Broadie 1991, 317.

In fact, Aristotle devotes VII.14 to answering precisely this question, and he does so by considering the faults of bodily pleasures as opposed to the naturally choiceworthy ones. We have already seen that excess is the wrong-making feature in base actions, and here we are told that ‘the bodily goods allow excess’ (1154a17). Immediately before this, Aristotle says that excess makes the base person such because he pursues the excess, ‘but not because he pursues the necessary pleasures’ (1154a16-17). The rest of the section goes through reasons for pursuing the excess in bodily pleasures, among others because ‘excesses of pain make people seek a cure in the pursuit of excessive pleasure’ and ‘because they are intense, [they are pursued] by people who are incapable of enjoying other pleasures’ (1154a29, 1154b2, my modification). It is clear, therefore, that bodily pleasures encourage excess in a way that other pleasures do not, and are the easiest pleasures to enjoy. Experiencing the pleasure of honour indicates having done something honourable; bodily pleasures, on the other hand, necessitate no effort towards finding out what the good thing to do is. They are simple, and enjoyed by those who cannot enjoy other things, since bodily pleasures are easily available and require little in terms of moral education or preparation. In other words, they do not promote reason, and even when they are pursued in the way that reason prescribes, they do little for our character other than offer temporary, effortless, enjoyment.

Broadie takes this to be the reason that Aristotle, despite his rejection of what she calls ‘neutralism’ – the thought that rational activity, the highest good, is neither pleasant nor painful – often seemingly has a neutralist’s negative attitude towards necessary pleasures. They are ‘neither noble nor ennobling... and we need not go out of our way for them’, but they allow for excess to the extent that ‘a person engrossed in them is often even physically incapable of determining the right moment to disengage’.⁸⁷ Their fault is that they are unconcerned with reason and intelligence, and sometimes counter them completely; if my suggestion stands, this is to be taken as a serious charge against them. Indeed, if I am right about value being so centrally situated within reason rather than within the pursuits of specific objects or sources of pleasure, we would expect anything which might undermine reason and intellect to be approached with great caution. It is, therefore, not surprising that Aristotle would want to distinguish these pleasures from those which firstly, promote reason in some sense, and secondly, already within them require a certain commitment to being guided by reason in action. Bodily pleasures, as we have said, invite excess in a way that other pleasures do not,

⁸⁷ Broadie 1991, 326.

and engaging with them extensively implies that we are not cultivating reason. Thus, we can maintain the distinction between choiceworthy pleasures and necessary pleasures, while consistently holding that a pursuit in agreement with reason is what makes pleasure good, rather than the kind of object or source that a pleasure comes from.

It turns out, therefore, that the extent to which we pursue something determines the value of our action, and whether it is a good or bad pleasure to engage in. What distinguishes the good from the bad is a matter of extent, and commitment to reason, rather than the object or source of pleasure. More specifically, the value of the object itself is determined by its relation to reason, and thus the same is true for the pleasure which is derived from it. My suggestion is that Aristotle endorses a version of the thought that a change in the quantitative feature of the object or activity desired – the extent to which something is in line with reason – is really a change in quality – whether our pursuit is good or bad. Understanding value like this, rather than something inherent to specific objects, makes the deception experienced by primarily the akratic, but also the vicious person, much more straightforward. We no longer have to explain how the akratic could possibly think it is good to pursue X, when moments ago he decided it is good to pursue not-X, since the difference between these is, essentially, one of quantity, which is easily confused when the agent is under the influence of strong feelings. While reason, through what we have illustrated as the akratic's 'good syllogism', prescribes one piece of cake as the correct amount to pursue, his appetite urges him – through 'the bad syllogism' – to eat a second piece. Given that the difference in content between the conclusions of the two syllogisms is one of quantity, it is very possible that someone who has a deficient relationship to his reason will confuse the difference between these two, and which quantity it is correct to pursue. We can retain the thought that he is ignorant of a certain feature of his situation – namely, which amount of cake is good and should be eaten – without needing to say that he has made a gross intellectual mistake, since the content of each prescribed proposition is similar. In the vicious person's case, his lack of commitment to reason causes him to mistake the quantity prescribed by appetite, which is merely pleasant, for the quantity prescribed by reason, which is good. Although the quantitative difference between the prescriptions of reason and of appetite is small, the actual normative difference between them remains as radical and important as ever; the first choice is correct, and in agreement with reason, while the other one is in excess, and deviates from what reason demands. This is why correct action is such a precise and difficult endeavour, and requires the agent to listen attentively to the reason within his soul.

On my suggestion, a pursuit is in accordance with reason not only given the amount (of, say, cake) that someone desires, but also the extent to which they desire it – namely, whether they desire it to an extent which is contrary to reason, even if the amount they desire is not. This is because their desire reflects the way in which they will go about their pursuit: if someone listens well to their reason and tempers their appetite, they will be prepared to give up something, such as a few pounds, for the enjoyment of a piece of cake. The person whose desire deviates from what reason demands, on the other hand, might be prepared to give up far too much money for the piece of cake in front of them; what makes their action good, then, is whether the extent of their pursuit, and their desire, is in accordance with reason.

II.5 Thoroughly wicked vice

There is, what seems at first glance to be, a strong textual consideration against the view I have just proposed. Aristotle says the following in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) book II, amid a discussion about virtue and vice:

‘One must be aware that some of the affections we have been talking about cannot be placed under the heading of ‘manner’, if ‘manner’ is taken to be a matter of degree. For example, one is not an adulterer by seducing married women more than one ought; there is no such thing. Rather, the very act is a case of wickedness – the name of the affection implies it has the quality of a vice. Assault is a similar example. That is why people contest a charge, saying that they did have intercourse but it was not adultery because they were unaware or were coerced; or that they struck a blow but it wasn’t assault.’ (1221b19-25).⁸⁸

He makes a similar point in *NE* II.6 as follows:

‘Not every action or feeling admits of the mean. For the names of some automatically include baseness – for instance, spite, shamelessness, envy <among feelings>, and adultery, theft, murder, among actions. For all of these and similar things are called by

⁸⁸ Citations of the *EE* are from Inwood and Woolf (2012).

these names because they themselves, not their excesses or deficiencies, are base.’
(1107a10-14).

Aristotle makes it clear that while some actions or pleasures are bad because they are constituted by an excess or deficiency, others are simply vicious by nature, and can never be pursued in the right manner or to the right degree. My view crucially depends on bad actions being so *because* they are pursued to a degree against reason, and not because they are such as to depend on the object itself for their value; the passages above seem to suggest the contrary.

It is worth spelling out in detail why Aristotle brings up these incorrigibly vicious activities – which I will refer to as ‘thoroughly wicked vice’ from here on – and whether my view can accommodate them. Firstly, the fact that he describes precisely the view I have proposed and emphasises that it is not the case in ‘some’ of the affections discussed, goes some way in suggesting that the view *does* describe correctly what Aristotle takes to be the case in several of the bad and base actions mentioned. Secondly, this kind of thoroughly wicked vice is evidently not pursued by every base character – spite, theft and murder are hardly results of *akrasia*. These instances, then, of thoroughly wicked vice, cannot be pursued to a correct extent; they do not admit of a degree in accordance with reason at all. This need not go against the view I have suggested – in fact, it follows from my view that actions and pleasures which can never be prescribed by correct reason are also not within the domain of things which can be pursued in a correct way. By their very nature, these actions do not admit of the criterion of goodness – namely, of reason. This is precisely what makes them so terrible, and prevents them from ever being pursued in a way that would qualify them as good.

Part of why the suggestion presented here comes upon difficulties, and is often glossed over in the literature, is that it requires great precision: on the one hand, we have seen that Aristotle takes the extent of our pursuit and desire to be a relevant feature in the valuation of actions and pleasures, more so than what their sources or objects are. On the other hand, he wants to avoid saying that a bad action is less blameworthy because it only slightly deviates from reason. Any deviation from acting in accordance with reason is bad, as understanding the mean as a target illustrates, but depending on whether the action, pleasure or desire could have been pursued in agreement with reason at all, different moral evaluations and responses will be appropriate. Certain actions, such as murder or adultery, are inappropriate responses to any context, and

therefore always vicious; they are deemed by reason to be bad *simpliciter*, and can never be pursued in the right amount.

If we are said to have done something which is bad *simpliciter*, then, we cannot defend ourselves by claiming that we went about it in the right manner, or did it to the right extent – as Aristotle rightly asserts, ‘there is no such thing’ (*EE* 1221b21). If we wish to defend ourselves from the claim that we have committed something unqualifiedly bad, we must deny that our action was such, by arguing one of two things: that the action was, in fact, in line with what reason prescribed, such as arguing in the case of assault that it was a form of physical aggression which was a justifiable response to the other person’s provocation, or else, that it was somehow qualifiedly bad – perhaps we did commit adultery, but were ignorant of it.

By highlighting that there are some actions and feelings which cannot be pursued appropriately in any quantity, Aristotle is not denying that pleasures and actions are, in general, evaluated on a quantitative basis. The purpose of his claim is simply to state that there are things reason never prescribes as the right thing to pursue. In other words, there are behaviours which any upstanding citizen must stay clear of, and every lawmaker must prohibit, since they are not such as to be only qualifiedly bad, but bad *simpliciter*. Having previously suggested that the bad-making feature of actions and feelings is excess, Aristotle is now clarifying that we cannot rely solely on this analysis in order to determine whether something is good or bad; there are things which are wrong and base, and can never be pursued in accordance with reason. Therefore, we must be informed and guided by reason both in the quantity we pursue, and in choosing to pursue only things which can accord with reason in the first place.

Returning now to the domain of pleasure, which our discussion focuses on, we can see that a pleasure is not made good by its source or object, but by the extent to which it agrees with what reason prescribes, both in reference to what the agent pursues and the extent of his pursuit itself. This view is not contrary to Aristotle’s claim that some things cannot be pursued in the right way – rather, it is a natural consequence of taking value to be situated within reason, since those things which cannot be in accordance with reason cannot be pursued in any quantity as to make them good. The value of a pleasure, therefore, depends on the extent to which it agrees with reason, rather than the value of the object which elicits it. Having set out the suggestion of this chapter in some detail, I now turn to applying it in our problem cases of *akrasia* and vice.

CHAPTER III:

APPLYING THE THEORY

III.1 Failures in *akrasia* and vice

The previous chapter laid out a theory of how Aristotle evaluates pleasures as good or bad within his ethics. Given that he takes feelings and actions to be good or bad depending on whether they hit the mark of the mean, or miss it (1106b25-1107a2), the last chapter discussed Aristotle's conception of the mean, in order to properly understand how actions and feelings miss the mark of the mean, and what it means to act badly with respect to pleasure.

Up until this point in the thesis, I have argued for two main claims; firstly, that there is a need in the literature for a further explanation of what the akratic agent's and the vicious person's failures consist in, and secondly, that we should conceive of failures to hit the mean as failures with respect to quantitative features of a pursuit, whose correct measure is prescribed by reason. My suggestion is that understanding right action as defined by the quantitative features of an action – the amount of pleasure pursued, at what time and in which context – allows us to grasp how the akratic agent and the vicious person are intellectually capable agents, who nonetheless commit grave mistakes with respect to pleasure, and should be blamed for doing so.

Having gone through my suggestion for how Aristotle evaluates pleasures as good or bad and the conception of the mean which my view presupposes, the following section aims to put these together and apply the theory, as it were, to the main subjects of our discussion – the akratic agent and the vicious person – and explain what the failures of these characters consist in. In §III.2, I outline the akratic agent's mistake as being both his failure to distinguish, in the moment of *akrasia*, the content of what reason prescribes from the content of what appetite urges him towards, and a failure to foster within himself the ability to listen to reason and act in accordance with its prescriptions. In §III.3, I discuss the vicious person's failure and argue that it consists in his misidentification of the pleasant as the good, as well as his lack of commitment to reason, shown through his principled pursuit of ends set by appetite. Throughout §§III.2-III.3, I aim to show how my suggestion resolves the issues which I have argued that other interpretations encounter, as well as the apparent conflict in the textual

evidence. Finally, in §III.4, I indicate some consequences of my view for the way in which we understand pleasure and reason within Aristotle's philosophy in general.

III.2 Akrasia

As we have said previously, the akratic agent is someone who makes the correct decision about what to do (1146b22-24), having deliberated on the means by which he should achieve his end (1150b21). Before he is in the grip of *akrasia*, the akratic lays down the end which appears good to him, and makes a 'decent decision' about how to act in order to achieve it (1152a17). This means that he can identify the correct – truly fine and good – end in accordance with reason, even if he falls short of the virtuous person for whom what is truly fine and pleasant always appears as such (1113a31). In this way the akratic agent is similar to the enkratic, since both have the same base desires (1152a1) and begin by holding a true belief about what they ought to do. However, where the enkratic person abides by his belief, or knowledge, the akratic agent does not (1151b3-4). This failure to comply with his own decision is not a result of abandoning his conviction about what is right, or being tricked into believing that his pursuit of excessive pleasure is right on the level of rational thinking; this would have the unwanted consequence that his knowledge could be 'dragged about' by appetite, which is precisely what Aristotle denies in claiming that 'the knowledge that is present when someone is affected by incontinence is not the sort that seems to be fully knowledge' (1147b16-17). Therefore, the akratic agent clearly has universal knowledge about the nature of the good in the same way that the enkratic agent does, who acts well precisely because he acts on his reason and knowledge.

That the akratic agent can identify the right action as such in the way that the enkratic and temperate person can, even if he is far behind them in terms of acting upon his conviction, should tell us something about the kind of habituation he undergoes. Although he has not gone through the entire process of virtuous habituation, or even the stage at which he learns to act on the prescriptions of reason against his appetites, he has clearly developed to the degree that he can correctly identify the good by rational means, and make a correct decision about how to act. Nothing in my account depends on whether he has done so by the kind of 'brute' habituation suggested by Barney, or something of a more enriched process, in which he learns to identify virtuous actions by imitating and taking on the virtuous person's perspective, as

Margaret Hampson argues.⁸⁹ It is, however, notable that the akratic person's ability to identify the correct action as such, even when he fails to go through with it and can assert it only in theory, is explained significantly better by the kind of enriched account of habituation that Hampson proposes. The akratic person's habituation enables him to identify, in the abstract, which action he ought to do, while failing to achieve what is perhaps the most important aim of habituation – namely, to instil into the young agent an ability to go through with virtuous actions, and become the kind of character who does so *virtuously*.⁹⁰ It is important to highlight this feature of the akratic agent's psychology because it allows us to say of the akratic agent, firstly, that he has begun enriching his soul to tune into what virtuous action is, although he still acts on feeling over this knowledge, and secondly, that he recognises, on a rational level, the authority of reason over appetite. Whatever it is that causes him to act badly, therefore, it is not a conviction that bad actions are good, nor a use of reason for the purposes of achieving the aims of appetite.

Despite his ability to recognise reason and knowledge as that which should rule his soul, Aristotle famously says of agents in the grip of *akrasia* that they make claims about what they ought to do 'in the way that actors do' (1147a23) because 'those who have just learnt something do not yet know it, though they string the words together; for it must grow into them, and this takes time' (1147a22). Although the akratic agent has knowledge of the universal and is, therefore, able to hear the prescription of reason well enough that he can make a correct decision, the relationship which he has to his knowledge is nevertheless in a volatile stage, similar to that of the person who has just begun the process of habituation. Thus, he is not yet fully committed to acting in accordance with reason, even if he has agreed to the fact that it ought to be the governing authority in his soul.

When Aristotle compares the akratic agent to those who recite verses of Empedocles, then, he is qualifying the kind of relationship that these agents have to their knowledge, including their commitment to what the words entail, rather than simply discussing whether those who recite the words understand them. The actors reciting Empedocles know the words they are saying enough to 'even go through demonstrations' but fall short of understanding all that they are intellectually committing themselves to in reciting them (1147a19-20). Similarly, akratic

⁸⁹ Barney 2020, 281 *ff*; *cf* Hampson 2019, 309-315.

⁹⁰ The difference between these is that the latter requires of the agent not only that he performs the right actions, but that he does so knowingly, from a stable disposition, and for the sake of the fine action itself (1105a29-35).

agents are not committed to acting as reason prescribes, and listening to reason in all instances; they are like agents who have only recently learnt that they should act upon reason and knowledge, so that these have not yet grown into their soul to truly govern the way they act in general. As Aristotle says, the akratic agent is ‘like a city that votes for all the right decrees and has excellent laws, but does not apply them’ (1152a20-21). Therefore, I suggest that the akratic agent is convinced that he should act as reason prescribes, but is not committed to what this entails, namely, that he must temper the excessive appetites in his soul by engaging with them less, in order to foster the ability of his desiderative part to listen to reason and obey its prescriptions (1102b26-29). He has a faulty relationship to his reason because he is not firmly committed to acting in accordance with it, and has allowed appetite to take hold of his soul. This, I suggest, is a consequence of voluntarily having acquired, and having been habituated into, the kind of character state which is so excessively attracted to pleasures that he fails to anchor reason properly within his soul.

Part of the akratic agent’s psychological profile and condition, therefore, is this deficient relationship to the knowledge and reason within him. Another integral part of this character’s psychology, however, is the akratic agent’s excessive appetite for pleasure (1148a5-11). As we have seen, Aristotle tells us that this non-rational desiderative part clashes and struggles against the akratic agent’s reason (1102b18), leading to a motivational conflict within his soul about which action to pursue. This is why Aristotle says of the akratic agent that he has ‘impulses in contrary directions’ (1102b21). As is clear by now, this does not mean that his conviction in the goodness of the action prescribed by reason is shaken, but only that there is a non-rational desire within him which yearns for the satisfaction of appetites which are contrary to correct reason (1147b1-4). The competing forces of reason and appetite, both of which are ‘capable of initiating motion’ within the agent (1147a35), is what Aristotle describes syllogistically, and that which has been understood as constituting the two competing syllogisms present in the akratic agent’s mind. Aristotle describes them as interacting in the moment of *akrasia* as follows:

‘Suppose, then, that someone has the universal <belief> hindering him from tasting; he has the second <belief>, that everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet, and this belief is active; but it turns out that appetite is present in him. The <belief>, then, <that is formed from the previous two beliefs> tells him to avoid this, but appetite leads him on’ (1147a32-35).

Within the akratic agent's soul there are two kinds of forces which are attempting to move him; on the one hand, practical reason which aims at the end set by his wish, informed by the universal knowledge of the good that the agent possesses (1147a32), and on the other, appetitive desire, informed by his universal knowledge about the nature of pleasure ('everything sweet is pleasant') (1147a34). In order for the agent to arrive at a conclusion about how to act, a belief about the particulars now in front of him is needed – this belief complements both the universals informing practical reason and desiderative appetite, respectively, and is controlled by perception (1147a26). The two resulting syllogisms – of which the one controlled by reason is commonly referred to as 'good', while the one controlled by appetite is referred to as 'bad' – both share the same particular premise ('this is sweet') concerned with how the object now in the agent's presence appears to him.

The first step in putting together the account of *akrasia* I wish to propose is to mention that the two competing syllogisms, described above, are each based on different types of evaluative cognition. As I have argued in chapter I, we should take on board Moss' suggestion that *phantasia* presents pleasure as good by non-rational means, and causes the agent to desire the pleasant thing in his presence since the particular literally appears good to him.⁹¹ Her application of *phantasia* to *akrasia* explains well why the bad action appears good to the akratic agent – both perceptually and emotionally, since *phantasia* can cause both perceptual illusions and intense feelings in the agent – and how it does so through the presence of pleasure. While reason correctly judges the pleasant particular as something that the akratic agent should pursue to a specific quantitative extent, including 'none at all', *phantasia* represents the pursuit of this particular as good and, therefore, 'appetite leads him on' to pursue the particular now in front of him, without restraint or regard for doing so in accordance with reason (1147a35). Although *phantasia* represents the pleasant as good to all characters, the enkratic and the temperate person will not be swayed by its appearance because they are committed to acting in accordance with reason, and will listen to its corrections against the false appearances of *phantasia*. Meanwhile, the akratic agent will hear reason but then become so overtaken by the anticipation of pleasure that the non-rational part of his soul will readily accept the pleasant particular as good. Consequently, the akratic agent experiences a motivational conflict between the action

⁹¹ Moss 2012, 106 *ff.*

correctly evaluated as good by the faculty of reason, and the action wrongly represented as good by *phantasia*.⁹²

Before the akratic agent encounters a particular source of pleasure, then, he possesses base appetites but remains convinced that he should listen to his reason and not pursue them. When he comes upon a particular source of pleasure his condition ‘flares up’ and he falls into the grip of *akrasia*. Let us illustrate his failure as it happens, having laid down all the necessary components of the akratic agent’s psychology. Since the akratic agent has acquired a character easily swayed by appetites, ‘similar to those who get drunk quickly from a little wine’ (1151a3-4), the correct realisation that this sweet thing before him is pleasant will already set in motion the excessive appetite which he has for pleasure, and an anticipation of experiencing it. His universal knowledge of sweet things as pleasant will combine with his particular, and perception-based, knowledge of the object in front of him as pleasant (1147a25-29). At this point, his *phantasia* will motivate him towards pursuing this pleasure by representing it as good, since it interprets everything pleasant as being good. Given that he has a character weakness for appetite, having failed to temper his overwhelming emotional response at the thought of bodily pleasures, the appearance of the particular as good by *phantasia* motivates him to act on the prescription of appetite. This is *why* the akratic agent is motivated to act badly, despite having a correct supposition about the nature of the good.

Although the akratic simultaneously forms a ‘good syllogism’ of belief about sweet things not being suitable for consumption, and this thing being sweet, therefore unsuitable for him to pursue now (1147a32), it is ultimately the formation of the ‘bad syllogism’ within the akratic person’s mind which properly instigates *akrasia*. At first, the agent is convinced that he should act in accordance with reason and has a view of how he ought to pursue a specific pleasure, quantitatively speaking. Already in the next instance, however, he becomes aware of the bad syllogism, and acts contrary to his previous conviction about how to pursue the pleasure before him. The shift between these two states is straightforwardly explained on my account, because the akratic agent’s extraordinarily heightened emotional state will make the conclusion of the

⁹² Although Aristotle does not explicitly mention *phantasia* in book VII, or indeed in any part of the *NE* related to *akrasia*, he discusses it extensively elsewhere, notably in *DA* book III. It is plausible to think, therefore, that he thought it too much of a ‘naturalist’s’ concept, which might have been beyond the scope of the target audience of the *NE*. That he is not interested in exploring all the biological and scientific details in the background of the akratic agent’s condition is evident by the fact that he sets the issue of how the akratic regains his knowledge after *akrasia* aside, since the answer is such that ‘we must hear it from the naturalists’ (1147b8).

good syllogism, and of the bad one, appear similar in content. What I have in mind is the following. Before the moment of *akrasia*, the akratic agent is aware that he has already had, say, one piece of cake today. Furthermore, he is convinced that eating another piece of cake would be excessive, given his belief that the healthy measure prescribed by reason is precisely one piece of cake a day. If he is offered another piece of cake today, he knows rationally that he ought to refuse. However, in the moment when the pleasant particular is present before him, his attraction to the anticipated pleasure, and the representation of this second piece of cake as good by *phantasia*, causes a momentary confusion in his mind about the difference between the quantitative features prescribed by reason, and those that appetite urges him towards.

He is not ignorant of what reason commands, since he still possesses the knowledge from a moment ago about the prescription of reason, but rather his failure lies in his lack of ability to distinguish, temporarily, between the content of what reason prescribes and what appetite pushes him towards. He is suddenly unable to explain how they are distinct, since both appear good, and are different only with respect to the quantity that is represented as good, rather than with respect to the object that the action is about. Therefore, he confuses the description of ‘do not eat this sweet thing in front of you’, which is the good conclusion prescribed by reason, given that the agent has already had one piece of cake, with the bad conclusion urged by appetite, namely, ‘eat this one sweet thing in front of you’. This requires no gross intellectual failure, although it clearly involves ignorance on the akratic agent’s part; he fails to grasp the difference between the content of what these opposed forces prescribe, even if he knows that one of the actions is in agreement with reason, and the other one is not. Given that right and wrong pursuits of pleasure differ only with respect to their quantitative features, the quantitative difference between the actions prescribed by reason and by appetite will not be great. Therefore, the akratic agent will misidentify the pleasant particular in front of him as the right and good quantity of pursuit. He becomes unable to distinguish between the actions commanded by reason and appetite, respectively, which constitutes his ignorance in ‘the last term’ (1147b14), while also having the kind of base character which desires pleasure excessively; consequently, he acts on the conclusion of the ‘bad syllogism’ and eats the sweet thing before him.

His failure, therefore, is that he mistakes the conclusion of *phantasia* and appetite for that of reason and knowledge, failing to perceive the difference between the action prescribed by reason and the action appearing good to his appetite. This ability to distinguish between the

two, which I have suggested the agent lacks during *akrasia*, is also the ‘perceptual knowledge’ which Aristotle famously argues that the akratic agent ‘does not have when he is being affected’ and which is ‘dragged about’ under the influence of *akrasia* (1147b10-17). Rather than an intellectual fault of reasoning, the akratic agent’s failure lies in perceiving, and following the perception of, the wrong quantitative feature of a pursuit as correct, since the prescriptions of reason and appetite appear to him to be the same. Nonetheless, his failure is caused by genuine ignorance in the moment of *akrasia* about the right extent and way in which to pursue the pleasant particular before him. Thus, the akratic agent’s pursuit is really an indulgence of his excessive appetite, rather than an act of pursuing things in accordance with reason, although he takes himself to be doing the latter during his experience of *akrasia*.

This is why Aristotle can consistently hold that the akratic ‘acts in knowledge both of what he is doing and of the end he is doing it for’ (1152a16), since he knows that he is pursuing a specific pleasure for the sake of obtaining it, while also claiming that he is ‘not in the condition of someone who knows and is attending’ (1152a14), since the presence of his strong appetites causes him to be ignorant about the specifics of what reason says as opposed to what appetite urges him on to do. Consequently it is right to say, as Socrates does, that only an agent’s ignorance of the good can cause him to act badly, and that he cannot knowingly do what is worse (1147b15; *Prot.* 358b7-c6). The akratic agent mistakes the merely pleasant action for the good one, by mistaking the conclusion of the ‘bad syllogism’ as being the conclusion of the ‘good’ one, and misidentifying the wrong quantity of pursuit as the right one. Ultimately, this is a mistake of identifying something in one’s environment as belonging to a specific category, or the failure of ‘perceptual knowledge’ during *akrasia* (1147b14-17). Meanwhile, the akratic agent’s universal knowledge about the nature of the good, as well as his conviction for acting in accordance with what reason prescribes remain unchanged; this, then, is the answer to *how* the akratic agent can both know and be ignorant at the same time.

An important part of the explanation for how the akratic agent can fail with respect to the particular in front of him is, therefore, the fact that he has an inadequately developed relationship to his reason and knowledge, so that he easily mishears what reason says during *akrasia*, since he has acquired a character excessively swayed by feeling and appetite. This is why akratic agents merely ‘say the words in the ways that actors do’ (1147a23); although they claim to be committed to action in accordance with reason, they are not, and although they take themselves to know what reason says during *akrasia*, they do not. It is notable that this kind of

failure concerning particulars is precisely what Aristotle says is to be expected of children and those who have not had much experience, since ‘some time is needed’ to produce the kind of experience which makes correct beliefs about particulars possible (1142a15). This fits well with the suggestion I have been making so far, namely, that we understand akratic agents’ state of moral development best if we conceive of them as being similar to that of a very young student of virtue, who has just learnt to recognise that he should listen to reason, without yet being able to apply this in cases where his strong and childlike appetites get the best of him, partly because he is ignorant about how to apply his universal knowledge of the good to pleasant particulars. That this is a plausible interpretation of Aristotle’s view is also evident by the fact that he says of young people discussing ethical manners that they ‘only say the words’ (1142a20), which is precisely how he describes the akratic agent’s knowledge during *akrasia* as well (1147a23).

Therefore, my suggestion for how we should understand Aristotle’s view of *akrasia* in the *NE* resolves several issues which I have argued that other accounts encounter. Understanding right action as specified in terms of quantitative features, rather than absolutely determined by specific objects or sources of pleasure, makes the akratic agent’s failure much more straightforward. Importantly, it achieves what Aristotle aims to accomplish in VII; namely, to present an account of *akrasia* which treats it as an existing phenomenon, arising both out of a motivational conflict between reason and appetite, as well as an ignorance about particulars. Moreover, my suggestion emphasises that the akratic agent’s fundamental failure lies in acquiring the kind of character that relates so poorly to reason that he lacks a true commitment to action in accordance with it, irrespective of his theoretical convictions and claims.

While my suggestion is indebted to Moss’ view, particularly with respect to how *phantasia* functions and contributes to the agent’s condition, the account I put forward gives us a more complete explanation of precisely what the akratic agent’s failure consists in. My account does not attribute a gross intellectual failure to the akratic agent in order to explain how the akratic can fail so significantly with respect to his knowledge and reason. Consequently, I can avoid issues that come from relying too heavily on ignorance as an explanation for akratic behaviour, such as rendering knowledge and intellect a weak force within the agent. Moreover, the view I suggest can explain why the akratic agent is motivated to act as he does, and how he can momentarily shift from a state in which he knows that the sweet thing is bad, to moments later pursuing it as good. That the akratic would make a mistake concerning which one of these is

in accordance with reason, given that they differ with respect to quantity only, merely emphasises Aristotle's point that virtue is a difficult state to achieve.

III.3 Vice

The intemperate man differs from the akratic agent primarily because he is convinced by and decides on, at the outset, the action he ends up doing (1147a23, 1151a13, 1152a6). It is plausible to think that the same is true of the vicious person in general, for two reasons. Firstly, Aristotle says that 'every vicious person is ignorant of the actions he must do or avoid' and that people 'make the wrong decisions because of vice' (1111a2, 1112a10). He explains that it is 'ignorance in the decision, which causes vice' and further, that this should properly be understood as an 'ignorance of the universal', for which people can be blamed (1111a32-34). Secondly, the end he aims at is set by what appears to his character as good and pleasant (1113a31), and it is for the sake of achieving this end that he makes his decision (111b27); since he acts badly, in ignorance of which actions to pursue, it must be the case that he makes a bad decision about how to behave, and acts upon it. This makes it evident that the intemperate person's conviction to act as he does is true of the generally vicious person as well.

Before moving on to discuss the vicious person's failure, it is worth noting that much of what Aristotle says about the intemperate person specifically can also be applied to the overarching category of vice in general, even if these two are not interchangeable. As Aristotle makes clear, virtues and vices of character are about pleasures and pains, and in which way we are taught to pursue and withstand each of them (1104b9-13); temperance is, similarly, concerned with bodily pleasures (1118a2). This suggests that there is a relevant comparison to be made between the two, and that it is plausible to think that at least some of the descriptions of the intemperate person's relationship to bodily pleasure will hold true for the vicious person's relationship to pleasure in general. This is also supported by the fact that other specific vices, such as cowardice, are also described as being about 'excessive pain' (1116a1). The rash person also seems to take pleasure in the wrong things, like boasting and showing off (1116a30). Therefore, we are not unjustified in considering, at the very least, both what Aristotle says about the vicious person in general, as well as the intemperate person specifically, in our attempt to explain what the vicious person's failure consists in, on the whole.

Having made a start at explaining the relationship between vice and intemperance, as well as how the textual evidence between these is related, we should now consider how my suggestion fares in explaining the vicious person's failure. As mentioned, the distinctive mark of the vicious person is that he acts principally on what he takes to be a correct decision (1151a7). This is because he makes a significant mistake about the nature of the good, and misidentifies it with pleasure (1104b35, 1113b1-3). His first error, therefore, is that he has acquired a vicious character by acting in morally deficient ways, having been careless about the things he pursues (1114a4-5). In this he is similar to the akratic agent, who is blamed for having acquired a character excessively attracted to pleasure (1151a11). Nonetheless, by the time he has been habituated into vice, he is a principled seeker of pleasure who acts in accordance with his decisions and beliefs (1151a12-13). He does this not by following the prescriptions of reason, since reason is not the kind of thing to recommend vicious actions, but by listening to the prescriptions made by the non-rational part of his soul – namely, appetite. Therefore, he is not only a principled seeker of pleasure as such, but a principled seeker of desire-satisfaction. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it suggests that his failure is not a genuine intellectual mistake of the kind that might produce a misguided enkratic, to use Barney's term.⁹³ He cannot be said to merely make a mistake with respect to the nature of the good, when the process by which he comes to do this is based on following non-rational and appetitive forces within his soul. If his mistake was a strictly intellectual one, we would expect him to admit of reason as an authority to be followed but make a mistake regarding its precise prescriptions about pleasure and the good, which is not at all how Aristotle characterises the vicious person. Secondly, this means that the vicious person is committed to acting in accordance with a faculty which, in all things, opposes and struggles with reason, which is bound to lead him to wrong actions and prevent him from living a good life.

Let us pick up on these two consequences, and discuss their implications for our understanding of the vicious person's failure in more detail. I have suggested that his voluntarily acquired character is that of a principled seeker of desire-satisfaction, which means that his mistake about the good, or 'ignorance in the universal' is not caused by a genuine intellectual mistake, such as believing that what reason prescribes as the good end is pleasure-maximisation. Rather, the vicious person's mistaking of pleasure as the good is a consequence of the fact that he listens to, and follows, the urging of the non-rational part of his soul. Again, here Moss' account

⁹³ Barney 2020, 275.

of *phantasia* is helpful in clarifying how this occurs. In pursuing pleasure as good on the recommendation of *phantasia*, the vicious person has decided to act on the prescriptions of a non-rational evaluative mechanism, even before he has been firmly habituated into vice and while he still has the ability to develop a rational mechanism of evaluation (1114a20-22). Therefore, he becomes accustomed to acting on the recommendations of pleasure because he realises its potential to satisfy his appetites, rather than because he makes an intellectual misidentification of pleasant actions as good, or whichever kind of similar scenario we would expect if the vicious person's mistake was a genuine intellectual error about the nature of the good. This does not diminish the ignorance which Aristotle attributes to him, for the vicious person is certainly in error about which actions are good and which are bad. His confusion is also significantly more straightforward to understand in view of my suggestion that for all vices except those which are thoroughly wicked, or *bad simpliciter* as outlined in §II.5, acting badly is a matter of pursuing the wrong quantitative features of a source of pleasure, rather than pursuing specific, absolutely bad, objects. Therefore, the vicious person cannot be said to make a genuine intellectual mistake like a misguided enkratic would, since his failure to correctly identify the good comes out of his own choice to follow non-rational forces over reason in his pursuits.

This leads us onto the other component of the vicious person's failure, namely, his commitment to following the prescriptions of appetite, which are directly opposed to that of reason. Being guided by appetite in his pursuits, while also being a principled character who can both plan and decide on how to act, suggests that the vicious person must use reason in deliberating how to go about achieving the things he aims at. Indeed, the vicious person is said to be able to deliberate correctly about how to get what he wants, even if this does not constitute good deliberation given his vicious ends (1143a20). This means that the vicious person utilises his practical reason as a tool for achieving the ends set by the non-rational part of his soul. He is, therefore, not only acting badly and gaining only evils for himself, since any pursuit against correct reason ends up being harmful, even when it happens to be pleasant, but he is also doing so by corrupting reason and putting it to work on the precise thing it was meant to prevent. This is precisely why Aristotle says of vice that it 'corrupts the principle' (1140b20) and 'produces false views about the principles of action' (1144a35); the vicious state of character prevents the right principles of action, according to which an agent judges how to act well, from appearing as such to him. This has two significant consequences for the way in which we should understand the vicious person's condition. Firstly, it means that the vicious person fails

to grasp the truth about how to act, and the true nature of the good and the pleasant, as opposed to the practically wise person who is right about all of these (1140b10). If we want to say, as Barney does, that the vicious person is someone who ‘always manages to feel satisfied about his behaviour’, we will have to claim that Aristotle thinks it possible to be both satisfied with one’s actions and nonetheless ignorant about the most important moral truths in life, which undermines the importance that Aristotle seems to give intellect in the happy – and most pleasant – life.⁹⁴ Secondly, this indicates that reason, which the vicious person has but utilises as a mere tool for the achievement of base pursuits, must be in a struggle with itself over rationally calculating how to achieve things which it does not deem good. Given that reason works towards the ends of appetite, the vicious person will never have a genuine intellectual conviction about this being good, because intellect and practical reason can never be such as to admit of a falsehood and endorse wrong ends (1139b15-18), even if they can rationally calculate how to get to them. Therefore, the vicious person will act upon a corrupted version of reason, which correctly calculates how to achieve the end, without recognising it as good or correct action in any way other than that it achieves the task set by appetite.

This last thought allows us to explain how the vicious person goes from being a principled pursuer of pleasures, to the distraught agent of IX.4, whose ‘soul is in conflict’ (1167a20). We have said that his reason is corrupted, because it is made to perform actions sanctioned only by appetite, but **not by itself, even though in the vicious person it is untrained to correctly recognise actions and ends as good or bad**. Consequently, it performs its function of guiding the agent towards truth badly, all the while being guided by a growing appetite. The vicious agent’s ‘active exercise of appetite increases the appetite’, which becomes ‘insatiable and seeks indiscriminate satisfaction’ throughout the vicious person’s life (11198-9). Therefore, it is not surprising that vice eventually comes to ‘expel rational calculation’ from his soul (1119b1-10), so that the vicious person becomes ‘full of regret’ (1167a25) in the long term; by acting on the prescriptions of appetite only, the vicious person corrupts his reason to the extent that it can no longer achieve even his own bad end, namely, the maximisation of appetites. As Aristotle says, he is ‘at odds’ with himself, since he comes to have ‘an appetite for one thing’ – that is, the quickly gratifying pleasure now in his presence, ‘and a wish for another, as incontinent people do’, namely, the more satisfying pleasure which he aims at and which is in accordance with his

⁹⁴ Barney 2020, 290. I take the point that Barney’s argument is not that the vicious person is *happy* as a eudaimon is, but her thought is still that the vicious person’s corrupted reason endorses his actions, so that he lives a satisfying life overall, even if he does not experience the highest kind of pleasure and happiness that comes from living virtuously.

decision (1166b7-8). Therefore, Nielsen is correct in claiming that the characterisation at IX.4 should be understood as a development of the vicious person's condition, and a description of how his life actually goes.⁹⁵ As she suggests, the vicious person's appetites have grown so unruly that he is no longer able to abide by his decision to await the more gratifying pleasure, but is compelled to act upon the first pleasure he sees before him, which is why he 'is soon distressed because he was pleased, and wishes these things had not become pleasant to him (1167a23-24).⁹⁶ Therefore, we can consistently hold that the vicious person begins his life as someone who is principally convinced that he should act as he does, but gradually becomes overcome by the pleasure he pursues so enthusiastically, that he can no longer act well, even according to his own vicious standards. His failure is, ultimately, a two-fold one; he voluntarily acquires a vicious character which prevents him from seeing the good as such, so that he mistakenly believes the pleasant to be the good which he should aim at, and entirely lacks a commitment to reason, given that he becomes a principled seeker of desire-satisfaction who acts on, and is committed to following, the prescriptions of appetite only. Given that he crowns appetite and allows it to rule his soul, while utilising reason merely as a way of achieving depraved ends, we should not find it surprising that Aristotle takes him to earn the punishment of losing his reason, and being made to live an utterly miserable life.

Therefore, my suggestion can account both for the vicious person's ignorance and principled pursuit of pleasure, which Aristotle sets out in the first few books of the *NE*, and his eventual development into a conflicted and miserable agent, as Aristotle describes him in IX.4. By arguing that his failure can be traced back to a misidentification between the good and the pleasant, as well as by his lack of commitment to reason, I have suggested a view on which Aristotle can consistently hold the vicious to be both a principled and conflicted agent. This is consistent with Nielsen's suggestion that the characterisation of the vicious at IX.4 should be understood as describing the development of the vicious person's life, rather than being a description of an unchanging psychological state. Moreover, we can now understand how the vicious person errs both with respect to knowledge, since he is ignorant, and with respect to something else, since he is not a misguided enkaptic; his mistake is neither purely nor primarily an intellectual one. The good cannot appear as such to him because he fails to hear reason and is committed to following the prescriptions of non-rational and appetitive forces only. It is also clear why he is such a depraved character that Aristotle thinks he eventually loses his reason

⁹⁵ Nielsen 2017, 8–9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

and humanity; he enslaves reason for the purposes of bad ends, and promotes appetite as the only true authority within his soul. Therefore, he comes to live a bad life both with respect to what is truly good and fine, and with respect to his own bad ends of maximising desire-satisfaction.

III.4 Pleasure and reason

Now that I have argued for what the failures of the akratic agent and the vicious person consist in, it is useful to consider briefly what the consequences of my view are for understanding Aristotle's conception of pleasure, and of reason. My aim in this section is to indicate a significant and, I think, plausible consequence of my view; namely, that even sources of typically vicious pleasures, such as bodily pleasures, can be a significant part of the virtuous person's life, if pursued in accordance with reason. If this is the case, it is only a further indication of the value of reason within human life.

I have already argued that there are reasons to think that the necessary bodily pleasures are not on the same standing as choiceworthy pleasures of honour, wealth, and the like. There are, as suggested in II.4, two reasons for this. The first is that pleasures of the body more easily allow excess and indulgence (1154b15), and as we have seen, it is precisely excess which makes actions and pursuits of pleasure wrong. Therefore, it is easier to be in error about bodily pleasures than about other things. Secondly, while bodily pleasures are 'good up to a point' (1154a13), they involve appetite, and being overcome by them signifies that one is overcome by non-rational forces (1149b4). In contrast, making mistakes with respect to choiceworthy pleasures, such as spirit, means that the agent is 'overcome by reason in a way' (1149b3). Pleasures and sources of pleasures which involve reason will, therefore, be better because they entail that the agent relates to and cultivates their rational nature, as opposed to engaging with the non-rational part of their soul. Although human beings can make mistakes with respect to choiceworthy pleasures as well, the relationship these pleasures have to reason is, ultimately, why they come to have a more privileged status than pleasures of the body.

Even so, Aristotle makes clear that we should not think of bodily pleasures as bad, since 'pains contrary to these pleasures [are] deplorable' and 'what is contrary to an evil is a good' (1154a11). I want to suggest that part of the reason Aristotle discusses bodily pleasures and mistakes with respect to it so extensively in book VII is that he wants to be careful in criticising pleasure in general, and whether the ways in which human beings relate to pleasure in their

lives is good or bad overall. While it is clear that pleasures ‘contrary to reason’ are harmful, and prevent human beings from living virtuously, Aristotle also wants to suggest that failing to take pleasure in things when one should, is wrong – in fact, the only reason he does not discuss the ‘deficient’ vice with respect to temperance more than in a few lines is because this kind of person is ‘not found very much’ (1119a6-10). However, he still counts this condition as a kind of vice, mentioning it along with intemperance in book III, which would be difficult to explain if he thought that bodily pleasures, on the whole, are bad and to be avoided.

Rather, Aristotle’s suggestion seems to be that bodily pleasures are something which human beings are so attracted to that they can easily overtake us, which is why they must be tempered and approached with caution, so as not to harm our ability to listen to and follow reason. This is precisely what the temperate person does, says Aristotle: he does not engage with or feel an appetite for intense bodily pleasures, but has ‘only a moderate appetite, not to the wrong degree or at the wrong time or anything else of that sort’ (1118b15). This paints a picture of the temperate person not as someone who avoids bodily pleasure, but as someone who enjoys all sources of pleasures in just the right way. Given that this person, who is virtuous and practically wise (1144b31-1145a2), acts in accordance with reason and truth in everything, and always sees the best action as such, it must follow that failing to engage in bodily pleasures when one should is a failure with respect to truth in some sense. If the virtuous person, who has achieved virtue in both the rational and non-rational part of their soul, also engages with pleasures to some degree, it must be the case that bodily pleasures which are qualified in some sense – as I have suggested, with respect to quantitative features – are a significant part of the virtuous and happy life according to Aristotle. This is not only an interesting consequence of the account I have suggested, but also an important feature of Aristotle’s philosophy as a whole. It suggests not only that pleasure is far from something which we should avoid, but also that learning to enjoy them in just the right way can be a significant positive feature of the virtuous person’s life, and not merely a necessary consequence of being a human animal.

That even the sources of base pleasures can be pursued in a way that makes their contribution to an agent’s life good, is, I think, an important marker of the way in which Aristotle values reason, and signifies the importance which he places on reason as a determinant of good action. It is only when an agent values reason to the extent that he voluntarily chooses to elect it as the ruler of his soul that he is a truly good, and virtuous, character – but when he has done this, his actions with respect to any domain will be excellent. This, then, is why Aristotle finds such

fault with *akrasia* and vice; both are character states which fail with respect to valuing and acting upon correct reason, which is the one faculty whose excellence any human being should strive towards. If the purpose of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is to drive home to future law-makers and politicians the importance of cultivating reason within both their own souls and the souls of their citizens, then it is clear that he achieved his aim completely.

III.5 Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis has been to explore the failures in *akrasia* and in vice. I began chapter I by considering the textual issues within Aristotle's own descriptions of these bad and base character states in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In §I.2 and §I.4, I showed that the principal difficulty in interpreting Aristotle's view was the seemingly conflicting evidence, which sometimes suggested that the failure of these characters lies in their ignorance, and other times that it lies in their knowing pursuit of that which is merely pleasant. In my attempt to show that this question remains unresolved in the literature as it stands, I considered two interpretations of *akrasia* – that of Charles (2007) and that of Moss (2012), and two interpretations of vice – that of Barney (2020) and of Nielsen (2017). In both cases, I concluded that the views put forward fail to either take account of all the textual evidence, or to include important features of Aristotle's overall philosophy in his view of these bad characters specifically. Therefore, I suggested that there was sufficient reason to look into the failures of these characters further.

Since both the akratic agent and the vicious person err with respect to pleasures, in chapter II I considered what errors with respect to pleasure look like for Aristotle, and how we should understand what the wrong things to take pleasure in are. By showing that necessary pleasures are enjoyed by all characters, and that Aristotle highlights an excessive pursuit of pleasure as the failure in both *akrasia* and intemperance, I suggested a view on which the specific source of pleasure, or the object which elicits it, is not the determining factor in whether a pursuit of pleasure is right or wrong. Rather, I argued that Aristotle evaluates pleasures as good or bad depending on the quantitative features of their pursuit, and whether these are in accordance with reason. Based on this, I argued that we should understand right action, and the mean, as being quantitatively defined, in a way which both moves away from the ideas of J.O. Urmson (1973) and nonetheless responds to qualitative objections by Rosalind Hursthouse (1980, 2006). Therefore, my main claim was that value is situated within reason and quantitative features of a pursuit, rather than within specific objects that are always good to pursue. Furthermore, I argued that Aristotle can distinguish between necessary and choiceworthy

pleasures based on how the latter promote and cultivate reason in some sense, while the former do not.

In chapter III, I applied this theory about how pleasures are evaluated to the problem cases of *akrasia* and vice. I suggested that the akratic agent's failure consists in his misidentification of his qualitatively wrong pursuit of pleasure during *akrasia* as right, where he becomes unable to tell the difference between the conclusions of reason and of appetite, respectively. This, I suggested, is based on a prior failure to commit to acting in accordance with reason, and to temper his appetites for pleasure given his rational admission that reason ought to govern his soul. Furthermore, I suggested that the vicious person's failure lies in his complete lack of commitment to acting on the prescriptions of reason. Due to this, the vicious person fails by following the prescriptions of appetite throughout his life, and by misidentifying pleasure as the ultimate good. Finally, I suggested that this tells us two important things about pleasure and reason within Aristotle's ethics overall. On the one hand, it suggests that even bodily pleasures, which are prone to overwhelming human beings, will be part of all character's lives and need not be avoided on principle. On the other hand, the view I present ultimately emphasises the importance of valuing reason, and of always acting on the prescriptions of reason in our lives.

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