THE WILL AS PRACTICAL REASON AND
THE PROBLEM OF AKRASIA

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There is a philosophical tradition, still strong, of identifying the will and practical reason, or of requiring a close and intelligible motivational connection between them.\(^1\) Weakness of will, or akrasia,\(^2\) has been widely discussed because of the difficulties it evidently presents for such a view. Certain cases of akrasia seem so aggressively contrary to reason that it is hard to see how they could have any motivational connection to it at all. Yet they also seem to be

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\(^1\) At *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* § 446, Kant explicitly identifies the will with practical reason. This is one source of the tradition. See Christine Korsgaard, “Self-constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant,” *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 1–29. As Korsgaard’s piece indicates, the rationalist tendency is reflected in ancient views of the will too. About a generation ago it was controversial to think that the ancients had a concept of the will, and talk of the “will” was itself suspect. My use of “will” (and likewise “reason”) is pretty innocent, as should emerge. And, although issues around an Aristotelian conception of the will remain in fact complicated, many authorities read Aristotle as having a notion of the will (and a fairly rationalistic one). See Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), and Terence Irwin, “Who Discovered the Will?,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 453–73. Compare Gary Watson, “The Work of the Will,” in *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, ed. Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172–200, especially Appendix 7.1. See also William Francis Ross Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), which is especially good in response to certain famous objections to talk of the will.

\(^2\) I use the terms interchangeably to refer to knowing and voluntary choice or action against better judgment. This follows a common recent usage. Aristotle’s main use of “akrasia” is narrower in this regard than contemporary use. See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 5. See also David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984), 16–25, which argues that “weakness of will” is probably not the best translation of “akrasia.” Richard Holton, “Intention and Weakness of Will,” *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999): 241–62 argues plausibly that the use of these terms in philosophy typically diverges from what we ordinarily mean by weakness of will. My arguments depend on the existence of certain cases of knowing and voluntary actions against better judgment, whatever we should call them.
voluntary and properly informed human choices and actions, and thus absolutely central instances or expressions of human will.

We all know how the common examples go: You have an occasional urge for a certain vice. You have thought about it a lot and know that indulging it would mean risking or sacrificing something of obviously greater value than any satisfaction the indulgence would bring. You have resisted the urge many times before, so you do not seem to be compelled by it. But you have given in before too, always with regret or remorse. You do it anyway, against your better judgment.

It seems to me, as I believe it will to many of my readers, easy to fill in the specific, real-life details of acts that match this sketch. There seem to be many indulgences like this, against which we have, for example, strict doctor's orders, and so on. Indeed, this type of example is hackneyed by now. Nevertheless, if there are akratic acts like these, and if they are as they appear, they could not possibly be understood as expressions of practical reason. They could not have reason as a motivational source, for they are known by the agent to be contrary to correct due deliberation. Yet, inasmuch as the acts are also intentional, they have all the marks of an utterly central instance of agency or will; for, again, if things are as they appear, the acts are uncompelled.

That is the heart of the argument from (let us call it) aggressive akrasia, against the view that there must be a close and intelligible motivational connection between will and reason, let alone an identification between them.

Before I go on to develop the argument and discuss its significance for contemporary views of will and practical reason, let me note that there have always been important critiques of this rationalist tendency in theories of the will. Humean views of the will have developed important criticisms of the tendency, of course, but the criticisms I present do not depend upon the broader, systematic philosophical commitments of Humean or other non-rationalist theories of the will. Except for the conclusion, the theoretical commitments of my main argument are relatively uncontroversial, I believe. The argument assumes (i) that whatever is both voluntary and properly informed is a central instance of will, (ii) that what is voluntary is uncompelled and intentional, (iii) that “all things
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considered," judgment is sometimes truly better or best, and thus, is rational judgment, and (iv) that any particular reason for action or choice is something that counts, or at least seems to count, in favor of doing the action or making the choice. This last assumption reflects the idea that practical reason is a normative capacity, and that it is expressed in reasons for action that are therefore normative, or at least seemingly so.

There is not much to resist in these minimal assumptions about will and practical reason. Moreover, judging by the literature on weakness of will or akrasia, the main objections are in fact directed elsewhere. They are directed against the very possibility of fully knowing and fully voluntary choice or action against better judgment. While many philosophers accept that akrasia is voluntary in some respects but not others, or knowing in some respects but not others, the tradition is one of skepticism about what I am calling aggressive cases of akrasia, skepticism about unqualifiedly knowing and voluntary cases. This sort of skepticism seems to go back at least to Aristotle, and it is still a common idea. It is implicit in the widely held view that there must be a motivational connection to reason—brokered at least by what seems to be or claims to be rational or reasonable (what I will call "seeming reason")—even in akrasia. This is a source of skepticism about any would-be aggressive akrasia: for, if the akratic act at least seemed to the agent to have a reason backing it, then we must qualify the claim that the act was done with full knowledge of its irrationality.

One more remark by way of introduction: there may be other examples of human choice and action that challenge the rationalist

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3 A few philosophers reject the assumption that reasons must be norms (even seeming norms). I discuss such views briefly in the last section, below.

4 On a natural and common reading of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. David Pears, like many other commentators, argues that the rationalistic tendency in Aristotle's account of human agency makes it difficult for him to admit aggressive akrasia (or "last ditch akrasia," as Pears calls it); see Pears, Motivated Irrationality. Compare with Broadie, Ethics With Aristotle, chap. 5, for a forceful and closely argued reading of the relevant texts that may allow Aristotle to admit aggressive akrasia.

5 Pears (see his Motivated Irrationality) is a notable exception. I go my own way in the arguments that follow, but I owe a lot to Pears's indispensable contribution to this issue and to the general line I take.

6 And perhaps instances of non-human animal agency. I restrict my discussion to the human.
tendency in philosophies of human agency. For example, there are certain habitual or automatic choices or actions, or those done on a whim, or many other examples that need not involve anything so cognitive as rationality at their source. However, the rationalist tradition can be, and has been, flexible in this regard; it can accept whims (for example, driving on a whim to Vegas), or actions that are automatic, or spontaneous (for example, many of the actions involved in driving itself), as being at least indirect expressions of what constitutes a practically rational life for human beings. We cannot imagine a practicable or reasonable life without them. Thus, even if indirect, an intelligible motivational connection is ready to hand in this field of action too.

However, whatever we might think about these other cases, I argue that certain familiar cases of akrasia make for an especially pointed and significant counterexample, because in fact these cases of akrasia commonly involve explicit thought about reasons and norms, and even the careful weighing of them, and deliberating on them, and so on. Except for the fact that they seem, in the end, to be so perversely contrary to reason, we might have taken these akratic acts to be paradigmatic expressions of will, since so many standard marks of self-conscious and free human agency are present in them. This is, I believe, what has always made it seem important to try to reinterpret putatively knowing and voluntary akrasia: for example, to interpret it as involving, in one way or another, a kind of involuntariness, or lack or blurring of knowledge, or the like. Nonetheless all such reinterpretations seem to me to fly in the face of appearances, even when they claim to take the appearances seriously.

I

An attractive thought that seems to run through all these reinterpretations is something like this. Surely any akratic indulgence is rational as a means to pleasure, or satisfaction, or some such end. Therefore, in this way even an aggressively akratic act is rational, at least in a certain light. That is, it seems that there will always be some end or other that rationalizes any akratic act, so long as the act is at least intentional. I will be critical of this thought in much of what follows. There are two other assumptions that, if we are not to be
distracted from my main argument, ought to be made explicit right away.

First, I of course accept that we may perform akratic acts with all due attention to the best instrumental reasoning. This includes aggressively akratic acts, even though, in my view, their aggressiveness implies that they themselves are not done for a reason (not even for a seeming reason), in the intended sense. It is neither here nor there that the act is accomplished efficiently and effectively, or with due attention to any other instrumentally rational norm. Reason may be just a means to an irrational end, a slave of the decision to give in to akratic desire.

Second, I accept that it is possible for reason to set the ends of our actions, contrary to what might be held on a view like Hume's, according to which—to put it in its most extreme form—reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions. To deny that reason can set the ends of our actions is to make an unnecessarily strong assumption against the sort of rationalist views of the will I am questioning.

What I do oppose goes like this: Even the aggressively akratic agent must have thought of the akratic indulgence as pleasant, or satisfying, or some such. In light of that thought, his action can be rationalized even if, all things considered, it is not rational. The akratic action may be outweighed by the balance of reasons; nevertheless, the agent takes the pleasure (or the like) as a reason for performing the action. Of course, in order to thus take the pleasure as a reason for action, the agent must be restricting himself to a certain point of view. He makes the akratic action at least seem rational by considering it in a certain restricted light. This sort of rationalization seems perfectly intelligible as a motivation to action. Indeed, it is all too familiar. Thus, it might seem that even the most aggressive akrasia can have an intelligible motivational connection to reason. Grant'd, the akratic agent's own (correct) best judgment is that his action is irrational. Still, his action can at least be made to seem rational, if viewed in a certain restricted light (for example, in light of what seems good under temptation). Therefore, at least seeming reason always provides the desired connection between reason and any akratic act.

Now, I oppose this line of thought even though I accept that acting on a mere seeming reason can count as an expression of practical reason. We are only human and, for example, even actions based on
our better or best judgment are sometimes incorrect and might, therefore, not really be better or best for us. This can be true even when our judgment is warranted. I am really thirsty and quite naturally think that what you have just offered me is water. I am wrong, and (as in the famous example) the turpentine nearly kills me. But this can, nonetheless, be understood as an instance of practical reason, and thus as motivated by reason. Sometimes we get things wrong, through no fault of our own. This is true of our judgments about what is better or best in general or, as in this case, about what specifically instantiates the better or best.

The point is a familiar one, and it lends some support to those who wish to reinterpret the aggressiveness out of akrasia, as it were. For any akrasia might likewise seem to be motivationally connected to reason, when we take, for example, the point of view of the agent under temptation. Of course, the claim is not that the akratic agent is warranted or doing the best he can to be rational, but rather that in a certain light his action appears rational. The vice looks pretty good to him, and seems rational, (or at least not irrational), inasmuch as he ignores or suppresses his thoughts about the bad consequences. It would in fact be perfectly rational in many circumstances other than those he is in. So a motivational connection to reason is not entirely lost. Again, the connection is not based on an honest mistake, or on any warranted or excusable error; nonetheless, there is a point of view according to which a motivational connection to the rational is evident, even in aggressive cases. So goes the line sympathetic to what I am opposing.

Although many putative counterexamples to the view of will as practical reason might be handled in this way, an aggressively akratic act cannot be. Although the act may seem rational when shielded from better judgment, our assumption is that the act is not so shielded. Rather, it is done with full awareness of the truly rational verdict. It is both voluntary and properly informed, and willed, therefore, if anything is. Yet it cannot be understood as motivated by reason. It is not motivated by the rational conclusion of better judgment, obviously. Nor is it motivated by seeming reason, the “at least in a certain light” rational. The most we could say is that the “at least in a certain light” rational considerations could be taken to be reasons by the agent, if
only they were not known to him to be against the truly rational verdict of his better judgment.

It is one thing for an agent to take R (the pleasure or whatever) as a reason for doing A (eating chocolate or some such), when R is really not a reason for doing A, or alternatively to take R as a strong or sufficient reason for doing A, when in fact R is neither a strong nor a sufficient reason for doing A. But it pushes the account of akrasia to, at best, the limits of intelligibility, if the account implies that the agent takes R as a reason for doing A, when doing A is known full well to be contrary to reason. So, again, it is irrelevant that some akratic acts may be rational in a certain restricted light, shielded from better judgment; for if there are aggressively akratic acts they are in fact done with full awareness of the truly rational verdict, assuming that better judgment delivers the truly rational verdict, as surely it often does in cases like the ones we are considering.

The point is especially clear, if we grant that in some cases all the would-be reasons for doing the aggressively akratic act A are silenced, so that the agent recognizes that nothing counts, not even a little bit, in favor of doing A, and everything counts against it. If someone recognizes that all the would be reasons for doing A are silenced and yet knowingly and freely does A anyway, then there is nothing that motivates her to do so that can be identified as a reason for doing so, not even a seeming reason. Nothing counts in favor of the act the agent performs, not even the fact that the act she performs satisfies one of her desires. I will return to the issue of silencing in a moment.

The counterexample from aggressive akrasia seems fairly decisive even if we do not grant silencing, that is, if we grant that there is always something that the akratic agent can take as a reason for performing the akratic act, for example, pleasure or satisfaction of desire. If we believe that there is always something like this that counts (perhaps only a little and quite insufficiently) in favor of doing the akratic action, then even bad reasons are never entirely silenced. OK. Assume then that even bad reasons for acting always have some rationality in them, however insufficient. No matter, for these bad reasons are fully recognized to be bad, that is, fully recognized to be irrational to act on, given that they are instances of aggressive akrasia.

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Yet, the claim against a view like the one I am arguing for is that the akratic nevertheless acts on them as a reason by focusing on, or otherwise responding to, whatever rationality those bad reasons do have, however insufficient it may be. It is hard to see how this is intelligible.

A comparison to theoretical reasoning helps bring this out. There is a good example for comparison in the film about John Nash (the great Princeton mathematician): A Beautiful Mind. In the film, there are various people, including a little girl, who appear to Nash regularly and totally life-like, filling his mind with all kinds of terrible things to believe and do. The girl is, in her own child-like way, especially persuasive. Nash has to struggle not take her claims as reasons for believing and doing the things she says. For all he can tell, she is standing right in front of him, talking to him, in her strangely persuasive, innocent little voice. Still there is a turning point in one scene where, in a lucid and stable moment, he says: “She never ages. She can’t be real because she never ages.” It is simple and obvious, like those “aha!” moments that mathematicians are used to, where the proof just comes together and one wonders why one did not think of it before. She never ages, so she must be an illusion. It is not a proof, but it is the voice of considered rational judgment.

Now this dramatic hallucination does not necessarily stop appearing the way it does just because reason has reached a clear and stable verdict against it. The same is true of mundane perceptual illusions, such as the illusory bend in a stick in water. We might even grant that, in general, the way things appear in perception always counts at least a little in favor of taking them as being the way they appear. So, even if best and correct rational judgment overwhelmingly counts against it, the illusion or hallucination (or false perception of some other kind) always has at least a little something going for it reason-wise, so to speak. So even though it is decidedly irrational to believe that the stick in the water is really bent, or that the little girl is real, there is nevertheless a residue of reason, as it were, that is never eliminated from the hallucination or illusion; the way the false perception presents things counts a little in favor of judging that things really are the way it presents them. The rational appeal is weak, insufficient, and so on, but never silenced.
Still, what would we make of someone who knew and accepted all the reasons for thinking that the illusory bend in the stick (just to stay with the mundane case) was indeed an illusion and yet nevertheless formed his beliefs and judgments on the basis of the residual rationality of the illusion? We would have to imagine that he took something as a reason for believing that \( P (=\)the stick is bent\) which he was fully convinced was a bad reason for believing that \( P \), and then nevertheless believed that \( P \) for that (bad) reason. That is hard to make intelligible. Now consider the practical version of the same: our agent, fully recognizing that the illusion is an illusion, still takes how things appear in the illusion as a reason for acting. For example he still takes the illusory bend in his walking stick as a reason for going to buy a new one, and then, acting on that very reason, goes and buys a new stick, leaving the one he knows is perfectly OK lying in the water. How is that intelligible? How does it help make it intelligible if we grant—as we are—that the illusion was not entirely silenced, that is, that the appearance of the bend counts for something, counts a little in favor of driving to the store and getting a new stick for example? Of course, my point is that the whole crazy episode is on a par with the aggressively akratic agent being moved somehow by the following sort of thought: “Well, I realize that the satisfaction of my desire is a very bad reason for acting here and now, but even a bad reason is a reason. The satisfaction of my desire counts for something, counts a little in favor of doing what I fully recognize to be quite irrational to do here and now.” Bear in mind that, on the view I am disputing, this would have to be an intelligible description of an expression of the agent’s practical reason.

It is important to bear this last point in mind because I have heard it objected that we do the sort of thing just described all the time: for example, we are convinced completely that flying is much safer than driving, and yet out of an irrational fear of flying we avoid flying at great cost, while never hesitating to drive. In order for this familiar sort of behavior to be analogous to the irrationality of acting on the apparent bend in the stick as a reason (when we are sure it is not bent), we would have to imagine, say, taking the appearance of danger (from being so high in the air when flying) as a reason for thinking that driving is safer than flying, when we are sure it is not. More precisely, the analogous thing would be to choose to drive rather than fly, in
response to *that* appearance as a reason of relative safety, even though
we are fully convinced that that is a bad reason to drive rather than fly.

We would never incline towards this barely intelligible (if it is
intelligible) account of such an irrational preference to drive, at least
not if we were trying to explain the sort of the thing that happens "all
the time." We would think instead that the irrational behavior is a
response to a compelling fear which itself does not respond to reason
or immediate voluntary control; the agent acts from this fear rather
than for any reason as a reason. Alternatively, we would think that if
there is anything that could be easily imagined to have been acted on
*as a reason* for driving rather than flying, then it must lie in the
rationality of the thought of quieting the fear of flying by just giving
into it. This, along with other things, explains behavior around
common fear of flying or the like, and not the taking of a known
illusion of relative safety as a reason of relative safety.

Now, if acquiescing in the irrational fear of flying is more rational,
or at least understandably apparently more rational, than fighting it is,
then the analogy with aggressive akrasia is lost. It is also lost on the
account that makes the fear of flying out to be irresistible and thus
unresponsive to free rational agency. Nothing I argue implies that an
irrational fear or desire cannot compel us against reason; for all we
know about its irrationality, perhaps it can. This possibility ought to
be clear at least from the case of tragic mental illnesses, such as the
illness suffered by Nash, where it is possible that in spite of all he
knows, he might not be able to control the impulse to act on what the
hallucinated girl says when she presents herself next time. What I
dispute is that all cases of intentional action against reason must
somehow be compelled by irrational forces or, for all their
irrationality, be responses to reason, for example, responses at least to
seeming reason.

Then, even if we do not rely on the possibility of silencing, we still
have a fairly decisive argument against a motivational connection to
seeming reason in case of aggressive akrasia. For episodes such as the
buying of a new stick to replace the one known to be perfectly OK
push the idea of such a connection to the corners of barely intelligible
logical space, at best.

The argument seems to me to be completely decisive, if we do
grant that akrasia can involve silencing. Often cited is Gary Watson's
awful case\(^8\) of the parent who has the urge to drown the screaming child in order to stop the screaming. Now, if you believe that, tragic and horrifying as it is, it is also nevertheless true, that parents can and sometimes do voluntarily act on such an urge, knowing that the urge is entirely silenced as a reason for action, then I don't think you have any more room to maneuver in trying to defend the view that even the aggressively akratic act can be motivated by reason, that is, by seeming reason.

This is a dramatic and improbable sort of case. So it is worth noting that many rather pedestrian cases of akrasia plausibly involve silencing too. After a while we recognize that there is just nothing to be said in favor of having that cigarette, or drink, or other little indulgence; it is not even pleasant on the whole any more. Yet we indulge anyway, freely and knowingly, for all we or anyone else can tell.\(^9\)

I do not wish to deny that the aggressively akratic agent in some sense does A \textit{because} of R, in the scheme sketched above. For example, he can smoke a cigarette because it momentarily satisfies his craving. But what he cannot in the circumstances do is take that (the satisfaction of the craving) as a reason for doing what he does, not in the intended sense of reason. That is, he cannot be taking the momentary satisfaction of his craving as something that makes his act rational, not even seemingly so, not given that he is mindful of what he knows. Given what he knows, he cannot do this any more than he can take the known illusory bend in his walking stick as something that makes his leaving it in the water (in order to go buy a new one) seem rational, not even granting that the illusory bend, like the satisfaction of desire, always counts for something, however insufficiently, on the score card of reason.


\(^9\) See my discussion below (p. 550) of the run of the mill case put by Sarah Buss. See also the cases Thomas M. Scanlon discusses in his \textit{What We Owe to Each Other} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 51. His discussion illuminates the contextual sensitivity and structure of silencing.

Thanks to Judith Baker for this last reference. Baker discusses similar cases in her "Rationality without Reasons," in \textit{Mind} 117 (2008): 763-82, where she argues for a position that is in certain ways friendly to the one I oppose here, and yet in some ways also friendly to the one I defend. Her paper deserves its own extended consideration elsewhere.
Then, if there is aggressive akrasia, there are properly informed (deliberated upon and so on), voluntary choices and actions that, for all we can tell, have no intelligible connection to reason, not even one brokered by seeming reason.

I turn now to skepticism about aggressive akrasia.

II

Let us be clear about what we must be skeptical of by first considering how things look at the level of appearances, the level at which almost everyone admits it is plausible that there are all too many fully knowing and voluntary actions against better judgment.

Typical akratic actions are at the very least intentional. They have a conscious purpose, an end in view—for example, tasting something delicious, or having a cigarette, or getting drunk (to stay with the hackneyed cases). Moreover, means are intelligently, sometimes ingeniously, applied to achieve the end. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to blame, censure, or regret the acts which accomplish these ends. Of course, people often do censure, blame, or regret such acts. Often, there are also no apparent mitigating circumstances of ignorance or compulsion, or the like, to buffer the regret or guilt. It seems, then, that such cases are done voluntarily and knowingly, even though they cannot be said to have been done for a reason, in the intended sense of reason. As noted before, we should not be distracted by all the, as it were, attendant rationality closely associated with the aggressively akratic act (for example, I get in the car, I drive to the store, I buy the cigarettes—all instrumentally rational given my akratic purpose). The point is that it appears that the akratic action itself cannot have been done for a reason. The rational application of means to ends in bringing about an end one knows to be irrational does not make rational the bringing about of the known to be irrational end. How could it? Likewise, it does not make the known to be irrational end something that was accomplished for a reason, or even seeming reason.

It also appears that in many typical cases we see the irrelevance of the thought that good feeling (or good taste, or satisfaction of desire, and so on) is a perfectly good practical reason in other contexts, or the error in the related thought that the akratic act involves, after all, a
good feeling or good taste (and so on) and, has, therefore (!), at least that much going for it in the present context. Indeed, we may know that the good feeling or good taste is a sufficient reason not to perform the relevant act—imagine we are committed to a regimen of self-denial in order to repair our eroded and pleasure-indulging will or in preparation for an austere, monkish life, or some such.

Then, skepticism about aggressive akrasia involves (i) skepticism about the voluntariness of akrasia—more specifically, skepticism that the act is not compelled—or (ii) skepticism about the knowingness of akrasia, or both (i) and (ii). All we need consider are the well-known general themes in the vast literature.

Socrates seems to maintain a complete and extreme form of skepticism. As commonly interpreted, he maintains that all wrongdoing is due to ignorance or compulsion. This follows from his claim that we could not knowingly and voluntarily do what we thought was bad or relatively inferior. Then, it seems, no one is culpable for her bad or inferior choices. Here we bite the bullet.

Following Aristotle, almost everyone else has adopted a more moderate position (a more limited skepticism) by exploiting, for example, analogies with certain states of diminished cognitive capacity. Aristotle compares akrasia to certain states, such as being drunk, that involve diminished cognitive ability, but that do not entirely vitiate conditions for agency and responsibility. So, for example, what knowledge we have while drunk (or drowsy, or in a trance, or asleep, or the like) does not have the same cognitive or practical significance as when we are lucid. This puts it mildly, of course. Anyway, diminished cognitive states—such as drunkenness—

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10 Protagoras, 357.
11 Brandon Zimmerman has pointed out to me that Socrates himself may not have drawn this inference. See, for instance, Gorgias 477a–480d.
12 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 7.9.1147a10.

Caveat: Qualifying the knowledge claim (the claim that the akrates knows he is going against better judgment) seems to be Aristotle's strategy in the Nicomachean Ethics. David Pears (in Motivated Irrationality) points out that Aristotle seems to take the other strategy in the Eudemian Ethics, where he seems to qualify or mitigate the voluntariness of akrasia by suggesting it may be compelled.

There is still controversy about Aristotle's precise view (see Broadie, Ethics With Aristotle, chap. 5, for example) but there is also a fairly wide consensus that Aristotle's solution is to qualify the knowledge claim.
provide familiar examples of how we can have knowledge, (in certain respects), even while it is difficult or impossible for us to make proper application of that knowledge. Likewise, the allure of certain bad choices makes salient what should not be, muted what should, and so forth (“I know, from last time, that I’ll probably regret it, but it looks so good and I haven't had one in a long time,” and so on).

Of course, the devil is in the details, but the analogy is useful. Still, whatever the details, this sort of skeptical strategy is after all skeptical of any case of akrasia that involves unqualified knowingness. Therefore, the skeptical solution it offers does not admit aggressive cases of akrasia. Nevertheless, it is a solution that tries to honor the phenomena to some extent. Its strength lies in its moderate stance. It takes something of what seems right from both sides of the issue.

Likewise, there are moderately skeptical solutions that deny the full voluntariness of akrasia, rather than deny the full knowingness. They challenge the idea that akrasia is uncompelled, as Gary Watson does in his effective and widely acknowledged piece. Watson's is of course just one of the many solutions along these lines, offered in recent times, but it is a good example of one that denies the full voluntariness of akrasia rather than the full knowingness. What makes it a particularly good example of this sort of solution is that it depends on two points generally accepted. First, a compelling desire is that which cannot be resisted by the normal capacity of self-control; second, the desires that prompt acts of akrasia can be.

Watson argues for a middle way: the weak willed have not maintained or cultivated the normal capacity of self-control and thus find themselves unable to resist akratic desires at the time of action. The akratic act is therefore nonvoluntary at the time of action (like a compelled act), but blameworthy nevertheless (like a voluntary act) inasmuch as the agent could have cultivated the normal capacity of self-control and thus would have been able to resist at the time of action. So the akratic act lies in between the compelled and the voluntary and retains features of both. Like the compelled, it is irresistible at the time of action, but, like the voluntary, it is blameworthy because it could have been resisted.

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13 Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of Will.”
Who can deny, for some cases of akrasia, the plausibility of this type of solution, or of the first type (that is, solutions that mitigate the knowingness)?

Consider the type just discussed. It is plausible to maintain, for some akrasia, that the akratic could not, at the time of action, have done otherwise than what he did? It is likewise plausible to distinguish, as Watson does, the different senses of “could not have done otherwise”: (i) one that applies to desires that no one or hardly anyone can resist, period, and (ii) another that applies to desires that anyone with normal human capacities of self-control can resist. Then, as I say, it seems plausible that, in certain cases, the weak willed cannot resist at the time of action, even though they could have developed or maintained the normal human capacities of resistance or self-control. Erosion of the will, through neglect or bad habit, surely does account for some cases of akrasia: cases easily distinguished from complete psychological compulsion, where there is nothing even a healthy human will could do to resist, or be reasonably expected to do (even if there are also extraordinarily strong human wills that resist beyond anything we could reasonably expect them to resist).

Likewise, for some akrasia, it seems quite plausible that the comparison to states of diminished cognitive capacity will provide an account of how akrasia is possible. There are versions of either strategy that may plausibly handle even some putative aggressive cases of akrasia.

III

Now let me cut to what seems to me to be the chase.

Is it even remotely plausible that either one of these moderately skeptical strategies will adequately cover all cases of voluntary and knowing action against better judgment? Consider some of the obstacles each strategy faces. Consider first the attack on the voluntariness of akrasia. The phenomenology of typical cases presents obstacles here. Think of “run of the mill” lapses in a diet or any other typical weakness of will that (by contrast with examples involving strong addiction, such as addiction to narcotics) involve no extraordinarily strong feeling: no feeling of compulsion, no monkey on
the back. Indeed, insofar as feelings go, it often seems quite clear that one could have stuck to what one judged best and done otherwise at the time of action than the akratic action one did do.

Common patterns of weak-willed behavior support this sense about the voluntariness of akrasia. You have a weakness for chocolate: sometimes you give in, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you give in even after an encouraging pattern of self-control. Yet, at other times you resist even after a discouraging pattern of indulgences. Both patterns are common to akratic behavior, that is, to one and the same weakness an akratic agent has had. Moreover, they are not entirely foreign even to extraordinarily strong addictions. And, of course, sometimes hardcore addicts quit cold turkey and for good. All of this sets a firm presumption against the view that every case of putative knowing akrasia must involve compulsion or irresistibility at the time of action.

Now, we are often ignorant of the causes of our behavior. For all we know, there might be, contrary to appearances, hidden forces compelling us all the same, in every would-be case of aggressive akrasia. Still, any such story (of hidden compulsions) is a long and complicated story, if there is one to tell. We must wonder why someone would insist on trying to tell it, against all appearances. (It is worth noting that determinism does not obviously imply the impossibility of the supposed voluntariness of aggressive akrasia. For it is not obvious that causal determinism is incompatible with voluntariness, or will, in general.)

I hope the obstacles to the strategy that questions the will's freedom have been made clear by these considerations.

The strategy that questions full knowledge is just as evidently limited. In many cases, the akratic agent just is, for all we can tell, as cool and clearheaded as she is on other occasions (including those occasions when she does the right thing by resisting akratic desire).

These are familiar considerations, but they serve to remind us what any claim on the other side must do. They remind us that opposition to the possibility of fully knowing and voluntary akrasia must come from fairly weighty theoretical or a priori considerations, such as the idea that whatever we do intentionally, let alone
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voluntarily and knowingly, must be done in response to a reason or seeming reason.14

For all the plausibility of this and related conceptual claims about intention, choice, or in a word, will; it is no easier to pursue the details of the two skeptical strategies against aggressive akrasia. Even if we were to grant the favored a priori or theoretical connection between intention (and so on) and reason, there would still be the difficulty of explaining, specifically, how compulsion or diminished cognitive ability (or the like) was involved in those akratic actions where, for all we can tell, the akratic agent was uncompelled and perfectly aware of what he was doing. We would just have to accept, on the basis of the supposed conceptual constraints on the nature of the will, that there was some compromise of the voluntariness or knowledge in the action.

That is the point of a famous example of J. L. Austin's. Austin imagines (recounts?),

I am very partial to ice-cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with the persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments and do so, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. We often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse.15

In fact, Austin's example points up the limitations of both skeptical strategies. For it would be hard to give a revisionist account of Austin's behavior—that is, an account in terms of compulsion or diminished cognitive ability (or the like)—without flirting with the radical skepticism about the will associated with hard determinism, or other views radically skeptical of human will or agency. For if acts like Austin's are, after all (and contrary to all appearances), the result of compulsion or diminished cognitive ability, then the putative freedom or voluntariness of any human action is suspect.

14 The great majority of the skeptical arguments that Arthur F. Walker critically surveys (in his "The Problem of Weakness of Will") seem to be influenced by this idea. The same is true for the arguments in more recent literature, as I indicate in the final section. 15 John L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in John L. Austin, Philosophical Papers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 198 note 1.
A famous example of Donald Davidson's skeptical strategies, especially the appeal to diminished cognition. Davidson's gone to bed without brushing his teeth. He believes that he ought to brush before bed and almost always does. From the force of habit, he feels the impulse to get up; but he also knows that if he gets up now, he will break the spell and lose good sleep. Not brushing one night will not matter. Sleep is more important. That's that: he'll stay in bed. Yet, he gets up and brushes his teeth anyway, ruining his sleep. In this example, the choice influenced by sleepiness is the right choice. The sleepiness works in favor of staying in bed and against the akratic desire to brush one's teeth. Davidson gets up and brushes anyway.

Now, like Austin's, this is not the typical sort of case: it is a kind of akrasia with respect to one's own bedtime comfort and does not necessarily involve a violation of anything so lofty as to be described as one's principles—certainly not one's moral principles. These atypical features are helpful; they are precisely what make it difficult to interpret the akrasia as anything less than fully knowing and voluntary. Davidson's cognition may or may not have been reduced by sleepiness, but if anything contributes to reduced cognition in his case it is the sleepiness. So, it is a mark of the willfulness of Davidson's act against better judgment that his better judgment is in this case supported by pleasant feelings associated with the comforts of bed, the promise of good sleep, and sleepiness itself. That is, his akrasia seems particularly willful and perverse: certain typical temptations to akrasia (various sensual pleasures and bodily appetites) side, in this case, with better judgment rather than against it, and yet, Davidson nevertheless acts against it. Therefore, if we wish to call into doubt the apparent willfulness of his akratic act, we cannot plausibly do so by appealing to diminished cognitive ability. We must instead fall back on the other strategy and go in search of the recherché force that compels the act. And, again, we do so at the risk of obliterating a meaningful distinction between compelled (not voluntary) and uncompelled (voluntary).

It might be objected that what just as likely happened to Davidson is that the life-long habit of brushing made him so uncomfortable as to

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16 See Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of Will Possible?" in Donald Davidson, Actions and Events (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 21–42.
“have to” get up and brush, or made it such that it was more rational for him to get up, in the circumstances. However, Davidson is offering the case as one of akasía, and thus as inconsistent with the suggestion that he was compelled to get up and brush, or that it was after all more rational, in terms of his rational goal of good sleep, to get up and brush. Now, we can reinterpret the case as offered by Davidson. Such things as suggested by the reinterpretation do happen. But why do we have to reinterpret it? Is it at all plausible to do so in this and all such cases? “He had to get up and brush?” “He must have judged it more reasonable to get up and brush?” Like all necessary or universal claims in this contested context, these are very strong claims. It is evident that they could not be grounded in what is most plausible in the cases, case by case. They seem to be grounded, rather, in an a priori or theoretical claim that requires the favored reinterpretation of all cases of aggressive akasía. What might that claim be?

IV

It is worth considering one recent argument for just such an a priori claim.

In what must be one of the most thorough and closely argued papers against the possibility of (what I have been calling) aggressive akasía, Sarah Buss maintains that “[i]t is not possible for someone to do something freely; if she thinks that, all-things-considered, it would be better to do something else.” Independently of that claim, she also argues for the even stronger claim that “no one can do something intentionally, if she believes that, all things considered, it would be better to do something else.”\footnote{Page 16 of Sarah Buss, “Weakness of Will,” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 78 (1997): 13–44.}

It would be hard to find a position more at odds with my own, or one that better illustrates a commitment to the identification, or close necessary connection, between will and reason. For in her argument for the second claim—that no one can act intentionally against better judgment—Buss leans crucially on the following:
(A) If someone intends to do something, then doing it is her goal; and to say that doing it is her goal is to say that she can be characterized as having set this goal for herself. The goal of someone who acts intentionally . . . necessarily . . . reflects her own opinion of what she has reason to do.  

(B) To regard X as a goal to be pursued is to attribute a certain value to X; that is, it is to judge that X is a goal worth pursuing.

Then, the intention to do X necessarily implies that the agent who intends to do X values X. Or, equivalently, they are necessarily reflections of what the agent thinks he has reason to do.

Buss maintains these rationalistic connections, as many others do, because she believes it is a priori that, as she says (in what I have labeled (A)), the goal of someone who acts intentionally necessarily reflects his own opinion of what he has reason to do. For Buss, as for so many others, this is another way of saying that the goal of someone who acts intentionally necessarily reflects his own opinion that the goal is valuable (in some respect or in a certain light, at least).  Buss is everywhere clear that these connections are necessary and a priori, and fundamental; they motivate her thesis—thesis (2'), as she labels it—that no one can do something intentionally, if he believes that, all things considered, it would be better to do something else, a thesis Buss takes to be a priori and not derivable from any other thesis. Thus neither her thesis (2') nor the intuitive, a priori considerations that motivate or inform it are provable, or arguable on more basic common ground.

What aid can be offered to those of us who believe the thesis is, on the basis of certain counterexamples from akrasia, plainly false? Well, most of the supposed counterexamples to her thesis (2') fail, she says,

to distinguish between preferences and mere inclinations to go for one thing rather than another . . . the agents in these examples [of akrasia] appear to be acting against their all-things-considered evaluative judgments only insofar as we interpret their preferences as inclinations, or mere desires; and yet they appear to be acting for

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18 Ibid., 17. Her emphasis.
19 Ibid., 20.
20 Ibid., 20.
Then, getting down to the sort of case I have adduced from the beginning, she continues,

Can someone deliberately turn on the TV despite believing that it would be better to go for a jog, all things considered? There can be no difficulty, we think, in explaining such a commonplace occurrence; the person acts as she does because she is strongly inclined to watch TV, strongly disinclined to jog, or both; but since her action is clearly intentional, she must also act as she does because she thinks she has a good enough reason to act this way. Failing to notice that we have here explained one and the same action as both the direct result of a non-rational influence (the agent's inclination) and the direct result of the agent's comparative evaluative judgment, we take ourselves to have discovered a compelling counterexample to thesis (2').

Let me emphasize that the example Buss offers here is of the common sort of akratic act we have sketched from the beginning, a type that is easy to imagine as a case of “for all we can tell” aggressive akrasia. What stands in the way of her accepting it as indeed such a case is the idea that one can act intentionally only by acting on what one takes to be a reason or seeming reason, in the intended sense. If we reject this idea, we can avoid the error Buss attributes to her opponents. We can likewise avoid the earlier implications in (A) and (B) above, and any others that Buss thinks force us into accepting thesis (2'). The same goes for her thesis (2): “[i]t is not possible for someone to do something freely, if she thinks that, all-things-considered, it would be better to do something else.” Every consideration she advances in favor of either thesis (2' or 2) depends crucially upon the assumption that what is intended or freely chosen, and in that sense willed, must be willed for a reason, that is, it must be willed because the agent sees it, at least in a certain light, as good, or right, or the like. This is just what it seems so many akratics obviously refute.

Television can be fun, for sure, and perfectly OK and even edifying, but it is long since time that I take up some form of exercise in the evening rather than spend it watching TV. The doctor is emphatic. I am convinced. It is less than an hour out of my evening. I

22 Ibid., 23.
always feel better when I do it, depressed and lethargic when I don’t. I still feel the pull of the old bad habit, but it doesn’t seem irresistible, because I have, after all, resisted it before. Indeed, when the pull was at its peak I was able to drag myself out on the track. But now, I have slipped back into it for a few days and there is no excuse tonight. There is not even anything all that good on, but I flake out anyway.

It is interesting, and helpful to me, that Buss’s own summary of the considerations favoring thesis (2') reveals a logical gap in her main strategy for convincing us of that thesis. She says,

My argument for thesis (2') has two steps. I will argue, first, that it is impossible to force someone to do something intentionally, if, under the circumstances, she would rather not do it; hence, if someone does something she would rather not do, under the circumstances, then she does not do it intentionally.2

But the conclusion does not follow from the premise. What follows is: if someone does something she would rather not do, then she does not do it both forced and intentionally. This is consistent with her doing it intentionally: for example, intentionally and unforced, as in aggressive akrasia. In effect, I have argued that this gap in Buss’s argument (and a similar one in her arguments for thesis (2)) is never closed.

Now I hope it is clear that this does not all come down to my saying P and my opponent saying not P, and each of us digging in our heels on the basis of some rock bottom intuition. If, as a long tradition holds, it is a conceptual truth that one must in some respect value (or otherwise deem reasonable or rational) what one does intentionally or freely, then it will be impossible to interpret these familiar episodes of akrasia as aggressive, whatever anyone’s firm intuition about the cases. It will be a priori that the akratic agent either revised his judgment, or that his judgment was clouded, or suppressed, or the like, or else that he was somehow compelled. As the considerations of the last section I hope show, even if we believed in these traditional rationalistic claims about reason and will—for example if we accepted thesis (2') or (2)—we would nevertheless find it very hard to explain, in many episodes of akrasia, more precisely how the akratic was compelled or how he was clouded in his judgment, or distracted from it, or revised it, and so on. We would have to believe that the act was

2 Ibid., 16.
not fully knowing or voluntary, simply on the basis of the a priori status of the thesis itself, against all appearances.

So, my argument does not simply pit one intuition against another. It questions, on the basis of a plausible and natural understanding of a variety of well known cases of akrasia, a very strong generalization that the cases must be interpreted in a certain way, even though for all we can tell, when considering the details, they do not fit that interpretation. Now if we know that an a priori principle implies that some apparent phenomenon is impossible, then that it nevertheless seems possible (and that we cannot specifically see how it is impossible) ought not to dissuade us from accepting that it is after all impossible. On the other hand, we ought to be skeptical of the supposed a priori status of a principle, when the experience and reflection of many thoughtful people seems plainly at odds with it, especially too, when upon reflection, it is difficult to see how, specifically, the cases in question fit the principle against all appearances. Not to mention that philosophers and ordinary people alike have had the idea that it is in the very nature of a will to be free to choose what is plainly irrational or otherwise bad, period.

V

I think I have cast a wide net with the arguments I have made from certain fairly common cases of akrasia. I think very few non-Humean philosophers of the will escape it.

I cannot document these last two claims here, but consider what Gary Watson recently points out about philosophers who argue for a so-called externalist view of the will. Externalism in this sense is supposed to account for the possibility of acting counter-normatively, as in the sort of akrasia I have been pushing, without falling back on a connection to seeming reason or the like. Watson cites (especially) Jay Wallace and Rogers Albritton (among others). Albritton does

indeed reject the connection between will and reason, without recourse to the idea that the akratic acts on what (from a certain subjective point of view) at least seems to be a reason. Yet Wallace in fact falls back on the idea, in spite of what he might otherwise wish to maintain. Here are the relevant texts in full.

Commenting on a certain difference between theoretical and practical reason, Wallace says,

I have contended that there is no paradox involved in choosing to pursue an end that one acknowledges to be bad, tracing this to the idea that volition differs from belief in not being an essentially normative commitment. Having said that, however, I should also like to reiterate that there are complex and important connections between choice and normative concepts. Thus, in cases in which we choose at variance with our better judgment there must be something that makes the action chosen seem attractive, an eligible candidate for performance from the agent’s point of view, and this will typically be a function of our normative cognitions. We might believe, for instance, that what we are doing is pro tanto good, while judging that it is not really best on the whole. Alternatively, states of emotion or desire can make it seem to us as if our actions are valuable in some dimension, even if we are aware that they are not valuable in fact. Furthermore, citing these kinds of evaluative thoughts and cognitions can help us understand akratic actions retrospectively, making it at least partially intelligible why the worse act was freely chosen, what made it seem attractive to the agent at the time. In this sense, evaluative cognitions can illuminate the reason why akratic agents act as they do.

Earlier, he illustrates the point this way:

One may act on one’s desire to go to the beach, for instance, without really accepting that the pleasures thus made available provide a reason to skip the class one is scheduled to teach.

Here we have, again, the typical sort of case, one which could quite naturally be taken to be a case of aggressive akrasia. But then, in the footnote to the text, Wallace falls back on the usual qualification:

Note that if my remarks here are on the right lines, there will be a different sense in which all choice might be said to be “sub-

\footnote{Wallace, “Normativity, Commitment, and Instrumental Reason,” 13–14. His emphasis.}
\footnote{Ibid., 5.}
\footnote{Wallace says “different sense” because he is contrasting his view to Korsgaard’s view of the subjective normativity of choice.}
jectively normative, insofar as choice or commitment always presupposes at least the apparent value of the ends chosen.

Much the same could be documented of other externalists, or of those who otherwise might seem to grant aggressive akrasia. So, as I say, I believe I have cast a fairly wide net.

David Velleman and Rudiger Bittner might escape it, since they do the rare and radical thing (especially among proponents of the will as practical reason) of rejecting a necessary connection between practical reason and norms or values of any kind. They deny that reasons for action are necessarily norms, even seeming norms, of any kind. I have assumed that reasons in the intended sense must be norms, or at least seeming norms, or something that indicates some value in the action, or seems to (even if only the value of permissibility).

The contributions of Velleman and Bittner deserve more attention than the remainder of this final section allows, but this much is worth noting here about Velleman's view. He cites Milton's Satan, who famously says in an ultimate act of rebellion: "Evil be thou my good." Now some (Velleman cites Anscombe, for example) have thought this to be unintelligible, unless qualified by what Velleman aptly calls the "guise of the good." The idea is that even Satan must see his rebellion as good in some way, some way that (as Anscombe suggests) intelligibly answers the question: Why make evil your good? That is, what's the good in it? The traditional answer being (as, again, Anscombe notes) something along the lines of the glory that lies in refusing to subjugate oneself to anything, including Almighty God.

Thus, even Satan does what he does ultimately under at least the guise of the good: a disappointing devil as devils go. According to Velleman, we can imagine a better one, that is, worse one, if we imagine that Satan makes evil for evil's sake his "good." Why not, given that we have removed the traditional a priori obstacles to imagining that one can act without gilding one's goal with the good or apparent

good? But then this Satan also eliminates anything rational from his ends, insofar as there is anything in the rational that reflects goodness, or value, or rightness, or permissibility, and so on. Velleman nevertheless wishes to say that this Satan acts for a reason; this Satan sees evil as a reason for doing what he does. He responds to evil, under no good guise, as a reason for action.

My objection is this: I do not understand how such a use of "reason" is any different from simply "end," that is, "thing willed." That is, I do not understand how "X was Y's reason" (in Velleman's sense of "reason" here) is not simply equivalent to "X was Y's end." Velleman himself does not treat "good" in the famous line, "Evil be thou my good," as involving anything good or even apparently good. That is the point of his arguing that it is possible for an agent to will things without seeing them as in any way good, and indeed that it is necessary for Satan to so will things (contrary to Anscombe's interpretation). With apologies to Milton, perhaps I could put my objection this way: Reflecting Velleman's suggestion, Satan might just as well have said, "Evil be thou my reason." That would not make evil his reason, or apparent reason—not any more than "good" is made a good, or apparent good, in the original and more memorable line.\footnote{This paper goes back a long way, and I apologize if I have not been able to recall all who assisted me. But I acknowledge gratefully the comments I received from my colleagues (some now former colleagues) on early drafts. In particular, I would like to acknowledge especially John Doris's help in this regard, and also Julie Tannenbaum's (who was in fact helpful at all stages, early and late). For help on more recent versions, I would like to thank Jonathan Ellis and Richard Otte. Judith Baker commented on the penultimate draft, and, among other things, helped me think through, more critically, the so-called silencing cases, and the idea of choosing badness for badness sake. I am afraid that I was too attached to my own view, by then, to appreciate all that I should have from her comments. Finally, a version of this paper was delivered at the American Philosophical Association Meetings, Pacific Division, Spring 2006, and to an informal reading group in the department of philosophy, UCSC, 2006. I profited immensely from discussion of the paper at these meetings.}