

Buddhist Notions of *Akrasia* ***Ryan Harbert***

The philosophical notion of *akrasia*, incontinence, or weakness of will, has, in the West, been around at least since the time of Socrates. The Greek word "*akrasia*" was apparently first used by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the East, in Buddhism, the word "*akrasia*" of course didn't exist, but the same notion does seem to have been a part of Buddhist tradition. In this paper I will attempt to articulate various formulations of what Buddhist *akrasia* might look like, and I will relate them to the Platonic and Aristotelian articulations already found in the West.

I want to begin by briefly outlining the notions of *akrasia* that we get from Plato's Socrates (or early Plato), later Plato, and Aristotle. These seem to be the most studied understandings of *akrasia* in the West.¹ Laying them out now will also provide categories for later comparison and analysis of Buddhist notions of *akrasia*.

Before we begin, I want to clarify, with respect to the topic, what exactly I am addressing. I am not merely arguing that a notion of *akrasia* exists within Buddhism. My main goal is to attempt to understand and explain what some writers within Buddhism have said that might be interpreted as a Buddhist formulation of *akrasia*. In doing this, I believe that I will have effectively shown that a notion of *akrasia* does in fact exist within Buddhism. Also, in this paper I will use the terms "*akrasia*," "incontinence" and "weakness of will" interchangeably. And I use the term "weakness of will" knowing that the ancient Greeks and Buddhists seemingly did not have a notion of the will as we do.

Part I – The Platonic and Aristotelian Notions

The major notions and analyses of *akrasia* that have been understood by commentators in the West have been articulated by Plato and Aristotle. Plato understood it in apparently two different ways--one articulated in the *Protagoras* and one in the *Republic*. Plato's early account of *akrasia* also shows up in the *Meno*, but the

¹ Donald Davidson also has a well known and much written about modern recasting of the problem. His account should be considered in a fuller treatment of this topic.

Protagoras, however, will suffice for this discussion. Aristotle spent his effort working through the issue in the in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Plato, Aristotle and, as we will see, some Buddhist writers, all essentially saw weakness of will as a phenomenon to be explained. They all seemingly agree that there are apparently times when a person will know the good or right, but will choose the evil or bad. There are various ways to formulate this apparent incoherence, but for the purpose of this paper, they all essentially boil down to the above.

Plato, in the *Protagoras*, represents his teacher, Socrates, as wanting to deny the conventionally held account (i.e., the account believed by most people) of how one acts against one's own better judgment (i.e., acting *akratically*). In his discussion with Protagoras, Socrates represents the conventional account by explaining that knowledge of the right action is overpowered by something else:

...when knowledge is present in a human being, they think that it is not the knowledge that rules him but something else — now spirited anger, now pleasure, now pain, sometimes erotic love, many times fear. They simply think about knowledge as they do a slave, that it is dragged around by all else... (Plato 1998, 352b-c)

Socrates ultimately argues that it is not that knowledge is being “dragged around” as a slave, but that knowledge is lacking. Socrates, in his account, seems to equate pleasure with the good and pain with the bad (or evil). Those who go awry simply don't have the knowledge to measure goods and bads properly. After some discussion on measuring properly in order to make a decision about the right action, Socrates says “...those who err in choosing pleasures and pains...do so through a lack of knowledge; and not only of knowledge but of that knowledge which...is the art of measuring” (Plato 1998, 357d).

Plato, later in his career, seems to have moved to a position where right-doing was not solely the result of knowledge (or wrongdoing the result of ignorance). At various places in the *Laws*, generally considered one of Plato's later dialogues, Plato, unlike Socrates in the earlier *Protagoras*, indicates that knowledge can, in fact, be dragged around by the passions (Plato 2007, 698b; 863e-864a). And thus, Plato suggests that, contrary to what Socrates was teaching earlier, it is possible for a person to knowingly choose the bad. What accounts for such a change in Plato's conception of weakness of will is, apparently, Plato's later reflections on the nature and makeup of the human soul. In the *Republic* 436a-b Plato gives us his well-known three divisions of the soul: the calculating part, or reason, the spirited part, and the passionate part. All three of these are said to have their own ends and essentially be at odds with one another

over the rule of the whole soul (or person). Of course, they are only at odds in the disordered soul; they work well together in the well-ordered soul. With this account of the soul, *akratic* behaving occurs when the passionate or spirited parts somehow overpower the calculating part. And so, we find that mere knowledge of the right, existing in the reasoning part, is not enough to guarantee that it obtains.

Finally, in considering Aristotle's view on *akrasia* we come back to a position close to that of Socrates—that weakness of will is due to a lack of knowledge. Aristotle's articulation of incontinence is more extensive and nuanced than Plato's Socrates. Generally speaking, Aristotle's position is that incontinent people "both have knowledge in a way and do not have it" (Aristotle 1999, 1147a14). That is, knowledge of the good or right exists within the incontinent person, but somehow it is not active when the incontinent act is performed. Aristotle and Socrates both agree that incontinent acting does not really happen—it is only an appearance. And both agree that where there are incontinent acts, there is ignorance, or lack of knowledge.

Part II – The Buddhist Notions

Tom J.F. Tillemans, in his article, "Reason, Irrationality and *Akrasia* (Weakness of the Will) in Buddhism,"² comes to the conclusion that Buddhists do, in fact, hold a notion of *akrasia*. He states that:

...there is a recurrent argumentation in texts like Aryadeva's *Catuhsataka*, in Nagarjuna's *Ratnavali* and in the *Bodhicaryavatara* of Santideva to the effect that Buddhist practitioners know well that most of their actions are worse courses. Aryadeva (2nd-3rd century CE) for example, consecrates his first four chapters to a famous series of four "illusions" (*viparyasa*) that are supposedly present in varying degrees in the troubled minds of Buddhist practitioners: thus Buddhists are convinced that things are impermanent, but also tenaciously and wrongly hold them to be permanent, what is actually painful is held to be pleasant, unclean things are held to be clean, and selfless things are held to have selves. (forthcoming, p. 5)

Tillemans explains that there are many examples of "odd behaviour and incoherence" from Santideva, Dharmapala and the

² Tom Tillemans is the Chair of Buddhist Studies at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. He has graciously allowed me to use this unpublished article for my essay. I am relying heavily on it as a representation of Buddhist thinking about *akrasia* as it seems that there have been very few commentators relating East and West on this subject. I will provide this article upon request.

Buddhist monastic writers (forthcoming, p. 6).³ Tillemans, in his article, then turns toward the topic of how Buddhist writers, themselves accepting that wrong behavior is happening despite what is known to be right, account for such a problem. He provides three different accounts.

The first is to give an *Abhidharma*-based psychological account of how the passions constrain one to move against one's own better judgment. While Tillemans doesn't get into the exact nature of such an account, it appears that it is similar to a Western materialist-psychological account where behavior is explained in a way that precludes freedom of choice for an autonomous agent. He says that such an account would explain that the internal forces moving a person toward evil "might be as irresistible and intrusive as overwhelming external force" (forthcoming, p. 7). He believes that this account is inadequate because, although such an account may explain the extreme cases of "crimes of passion, obsessive-compulsions, or demon possession," such an account does not explain cases where a person does seem to have a choice not to comply with their inner drives. That said, and without further development, he moves on to the second account.

The second way, according to Tillemans, a Buddhist might construct an account of how wrong behavior happens is to follow the thinking in Dharmakīrti's *Pramanavarttika*:

What then is the source of these [moral] faults so that they are abandoned due to the repeated cultivation of its antidote? The genesis of all the [different] kinds of faults is due to the false view that reifies the person (*satkāyadarsana*). This constitutes ignorance (*avidyā*); the attachment to the [I and the mine] is based on that. From that [attachment] come hatred and [all] the rest [of the moral faults]. (forthcoming, p. 8)

As Dharmakīrti continues to explain "if someone sees that there is no I and no mine," (forthcoming, p. 8) such a person will not be attached to anything and will not be given to hatred or moral faults. And, as he explains above, the false view that is "reifying the self" is "precisely that [view] that we term 'ignorance' (*ajñāna*)" (forthcoming, p. 8) This view comes tantalizingly close to the views of Socrates and Aristotle. I will have more to say about this below.

The final account of how a person chooses to act against his own will that Tillemans's articulates is that there are competing networks of belief existing in the mind or psyche of the *akratic* Buddhist. Although he doesn't provide any quotes, he believes that this is the most plausible rendering of Buddhist texts such as *Pramanavarttika*

³ He uses "incoherence" to describe the reasoning behind an *akratic* act.

and others. Buddhist literature, he argues, regularly indicates that we create networks of beliefs or reasonings, such as “this is me,” “this is mine,” “this is essential to my happiness” (forthcoming, p. 11). These reasonings cohere with one another very well and lead to decisions to act in certain ways. This network of beliefs then competes with another network of Buddhist beliefs that states that there is no I and thus no need to defend it. The Buddhist, Tillemans explains, according to these texts, is caught between these two networks.

Part III - Analysis

In contrasting the *Abhidharma*-based view of incontinence with Plato’s and Aristotle’s views, we don’t find much commonality. Given that, as Tillemans explains, the *Abhidharma*-based view is a seemingly materialist account of psychological behavior, it appears to be a completely different kind of account than what Plato and Aristotle give us. The *Abhidharma*-based account needs further development and exploration in order that points of contact with Plato and Aristotle might be determined – it was not, however, within the scope of Tillemans’s paper (not this paper).

In contrasting Plato and Aristotle with the second, Dharmakīrti’s *Pramanavarttika*-based notion of Buddhist *akrasia* above, at first glance it seems that the account is in line with Socrates and Aristotle’s account of ignorance of the good leading to bad behavior. But a difference can be found in that Dharmakīrti and other major Buddhist thinkers saw ignorance not as a lack of knowledge, but as a misunderstanding, or a “false view.”⁴ The difference between “ignorance” and “false view” here is not clear. Operating under a false view leads to the notions that things are “permanent,” that what is actually painful is pleasant, and that “selfless things” are selves. It is not obvious how this might map to Plato’s and Aristotle’s notion of ignorance. Exploring possible interpretations of the “false view” idea, it might be held to fall more in line with the Platonic and Aristotelian idea that a person simply may not know what the good is—such a view precludes incontinent behavior since incontinent people, by definition, know that what they are doing is wrong. But this doesn’t seem to fit Tillemans’s representation that Buddhists seem to knowingly engage in wrong behavior.

Alternatively, the “false view” idea could be more in line with Aristotle’s idea that knowledge could be inactive in the person who is “asleep, mad or drunk.” At the time of acting (excluding the person asleep), such a person has the proper knowledge available to

⁴ Tillemans points out this problem.

them (as Buddhists with a false view do), but for whatever reason, it is just not acted on. This seems a better fit with the “false view” notion. But to come to a comfortable conclusion an account would need to be given of what it exactly means and how exactly knowledge (or the good view) could be inactive.

The final “competing networks” view of Buddhist *akrasia* that Tillemans articulates could seem, at first glance, to comport well with Plato’s later, modified, acceptance of *akrasia*. The Buddhist networks could be seen as roughly equivalent to Plato’s division of the soul. But, here too, there are differences: Plato divides the soul into separate faculties (reason, spirit, and appetite) which either compete or cooperate depending on how well-ordered the soul is. According to the “competing networks” view, there is a false network in which the world and conventional reality is seen as permanent and independent. This network is a false one. It cannot, if we were to follow Plato’s pattern, be well-ordered with the good network (where the world is understood as impermanent), as if it were a faculty of the soul. Rather than faculties, the “networks” seem akin to world views.

In general, Tillemans’s paper is very helpful as a brief introduction to the subject of Buddhist *akrasia*. But I believe for those of us sitting in the western tradition who are familiar with the long-lived Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of weakness of will, it should be expanded in a such a way that the ideas of the various important Buddhist thinkers are more accurately and thoroughly translated into Western categories. An important area that I think he could have touched on is that Plato and Aristotle spend much time dealing with the passions. Tillemans barely mentions the passions in his account. It is my guess that the Buddhist notion of craving might map quite well as the equivalent of the passions, and how a Buddhist would tell the story of how the passions, or craving, is involved in incontinence should be compared to how Plato and Aristotle explain the role of the passions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how a Buddhist account would fit with Platonic and Aristotelian systems of the human psyche – They all seem very different in their own way. In fairness, it should be remembered that such a detailed analysis was beyond Tillemans’s scope, given that his paper was a rather broad survey (as is mine) of the issue of Buddhist *akrasia*.

In conclusion, Tillemans’s paper was quite broad and didn’t provide much fodder for in-depth analysis. For this reason, my analysis of these issues is also broad and preliminary. Nevertheless, in this paper I have attempted to articulate various formulations of Buddhist *akrasia*. I have also attempted to relate them to Platonic and

Aristotelian articulations of *akrasia* already found in the West. My account of the various notions of Buddhist *akrasia* was heavily dependent on Tom Tillemans' article, "Reason, Irrationality and *Akrasia* (Weakness of the Will) in Buddhism." I am very grateful to him for allowing me to use it.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. (1999). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Plato. (1998). *Protagoras*. In *The Dialogues of Plato, vol. 3: Ion, Hippias Minor, Laches, Protagoras*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Plato. (2007). *Laws*. New York: NuVision Publications.
- Tillemans, T. (forthcoming). "Reason, Irrationality and *Akrasia* (Weakness of the Will) in Buddhism." University of Lausanne, Switzerland.