

Akrasia: Irremediable but not Unapproachable

Victor L. Worsfold
University of Texas at Dallas

From the well-known mass of scholarly interpretation of Aristotle's *akrasia* — too numerous to review and assess here — Terence Irwin's interpretation, offered in a footnote to a section on degrees of rational self-control in his exegesis of Aristotle's first principles, seems to capture best the sense of moral weakness enunciated by David Carr. "The incontinent (morally weak)," writes Irwin, "tends to lapse from acceptance of the virtuous person's outlook to acceptance of the intemperate person's."¹ The morally weak do understand the good life of happiness but can, on occasion, give into the temptation of their stronger impulses, not because they find the intemperate's conception of happiness to which such impulses lead more appealing than the life of virtue, but because, on Aristotle's view, they do not find good reason to rely on this latter conception of happiness. For Irwin, then, "When he (the morally weak person) abandons his policy of acting on his conception of happiness, he acts incontinently."² On this view, incontinence is primarily a matter of motivation or, more precisely, a lack of appropriate motivation, as Carr points out, for there is a gap between the morally weak person's reason and her or his action. Thus Carr sums up his conception of incontinence as "shortcomings which are liable to follow from insufficient concern for what is good on the one hand and insufficient resistance to what is bad on the other." What can account for this moral failure?

Carr, in addressing this form of moral malfunction, attributes it to a failure of nerve brought on by a lack of good judgment and self-discipline. To address these deficiencies, Carr would require an increase in the development of moral wisdom (*phronesis*) to combat the temptation that results in incontinence. And this development may require grounding in "varieties of pre-theoretical human moral experience inherent in the myths, art and literature of diverse human cultures." The moral educator, it would seem, is, in Carr's view, an interdisciplinarian not to be content with implementing a particular approach to moral education — values clarification or the Kohlberg model — but rather, to find ways to ward off possible moral lapses by an increase in moral intelligence rooted in the study of the arts. I must say, I have my doubts.

Setting aside the temptation to match competing conceptions of moral education with differing conceptions of *akrasia*, I want to propose another kind of solution to the very real educational problems Carr presents. Having chosen a conception of incontinence which is broad enough to include the range of possible akratic behavior which may vary in degree from the merely impetuous to the utterly brazen, I want to provide moral educators with more definite direction than Carr, drawing on the work of some contemporary theorists of moral education. But before presenting my view, based on a critique of Carr's thinking, I believe I must issue a warning to those who would tackle the problem of moral weakness. *Akrasia* is ineliminable! Maybe this is why so few writers about moral education have tackled it, as Carr points out.

That which we cannot cure, they may think, we do not tackle. We must simply face the fact that weakness of the will is a member of that “huge class of contradictions, hesitations, vacillations, incoherences, and absurdities of every kind which,” as Richard Robinson says, “composes a large part of our practical life.”³ We may aspire to moral dominion over ourselves — and I shall try to provide a construction of moral education that points in this direction — but our being human and not saintly, corporeal and not angelic, naturally flawed and not naturally perfect damns us to the ever-present possibility of that unbridgeable gap between our ability to deliberate and discover — or calculate and conclude — what we ought to do and what we actually do. So, how might moral educators approach this ultimately irremediable *akrasia*?

First, the moral educator should realize the significance of *akrasia* as a problem of motivation — or as the lack of appropriate motivation lately noted. As Roger Straughan has argued in his book challengingly titled *Can we teach children to be good?* “The most straightforward interpretation...of this weakness (of the will) is that we sometimes simply do not want to do what we believe we ought to do.”⁴ Curiously, Carr does not discuss this text of Straughan, so he misses the importance of construing *akrasia* as freely chosen. Even if we think of an akratic act as the result of a second-order desire — the desire not to desire something which our deliberation points to — weakness of the will may still be construed as an act of free agency, for as Alfred R. Mele argues, “an agent’s acting on a desire which he takes here to be good and sufficient reason not to act on is not a sufficient condition of the desire’s being irresistible.”⁵ There has merely been a failure on the agent’s part to employ the necessary mode of resistance at the time of the second-order desire’s tempting, resulting in behavior inconsistent with the moral agent’s usual pattern of following her or his moral promptings, translating the conclusions of such reasoning into moral action. Because *akrasia* is freely chosen, then, moral educators can make an inroad into moral weakness by getting their students to come to care for consistent moral behavior habitually, indeed coming to care for such behavior enough that the students want to act upon it. Again, Straughan reminds us, “no teaching can guarantee such a result,”⁶ but realizing that students can choose to do something about their weakness of the will, moral educators should not give up. But how is the moral educator to foster caring for the habit of consistent moral behavior?

Let us consider Carr’s distinction between the virtuous and the continent, in which he characterizes the first as conflict-free when they confront the promptings of natural inclination against those of right reason, and the latter as able to ward off temptation by exercising self-control in aid of right reason. We can enlist, *contra* Carr, the help of habit rather than myth, with its inevitable religious connotation, or art and literature with their attendant problems of interpretation or perhaps re-interpretation, as Nietzsche would have said, in light of the present situation to which they are thought to be relevant. Rather than eschewing habit because it is always, for Carr, to be juxtaposed to, and so viewed as less than, reason in its action-guiding force, moral educators might constitute habit as Betty Sichel does. On Sichel’s construction, habit, or rather, habits come to be a part of the self that allows for moral engagement in the world, engagement implying not simply behavior, but “that the

agent by being immersed within a moral situation and a moral universe acquires strength and understanding from that situation and universe.”⁸ As such, habits may be sufficient to avoid the temptation that leads to incontinence. How such habits are to be inculcated is, of course, crucial to addressing Carr’s problem, and I find the feminist thinking of Nel Noddings very suggestive in this regard.

In a recent summary of her views about what she calls “the centrality of moral education in the ethic of care,”⁹ Noddings argues that the care perspective on moral education has four dimensions: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, all of which might serve to reinforce the kind of habits most likely to function as antidotes to moral weakness. Moral educators, or carers, must exemplify such behavior in their own dealings with students so that the students learn what it is to come to care about reaching a morally appropriate conclusion to their conflicts habitually. Dialogue is crucial to caring, for through it we learn about the lives of those whom our caring — or lack of caring — effects, including most importantly, I would have thought, our own. Practice in caring by students is important for moral educators to structure so that the students can regularly reflect about their attempts at care — both the successful and the unsuccessful. Confirmation of our students comes when moral educators work to identify the student’s “better self and encourage its development...by recognizing something admirable...in each person we encounter,”¹⁰ thereby encouraging the students always to do likewise in their own lives. Moral education, construed as promoting the ethic of care, may well inculcate habits of engagement with the world which, while hardly Aristotelian in nature, may lead to students being less willing to engage in moral weakness than they otherwise might. To the extent that they do so, their world will be a better place for them.

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1. Terence Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 612.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Richard Robinson, “Aristotle on Akrasia” in *Articles on Aristotle: 2. Ethics and Politics*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield and Richard Sorabji (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 89.
 4. Roger Straughan, *Can We teach Children to be Good?* (London: George Allan and Unwin, 1982), 91.
 5. Alfred R. Mele, “Is Akrotic Action Free?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XLVI, no. 4 (June 1986): 673-79.
 6. Straughan, *Can We Teach Children to be Good?* 95.
 7. c.f. Ian Mills, “Moral Decision-Making, Religious Reinforcement and Some Educational Implications,” *Journal of Moral Education* 6, no. 3 (May 1977): 163-69.
 8. Betty Sichel, *Moral Education: Character Community and Ideals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 104.
 9. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Westview Press, 1995), 190. For a fuller account of Noddings’s view, see Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 8.
 10. Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, 192.