

A Puzzle About Akrasia

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RESUMEN

Los intentos de articular las condiciones necesarias y suficientes de la acción acrática revelan una curiosa dificultad técnica que sugiere una solución novedosa al problema de la acracia: los agentes acrátricos racionalizan su intención acrática en contra de su mejor juicio explotando una brecha persistente en la identificación de sus propias creencias. En este trabajo expongo y defiendo los motivos de este análisis de la acracia y discuto algunas de las preguntas intrigantes que se plantean sobre la naturaleza de la autoatribución de creencias.

ABSTRACT

Attempts to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions on akratic agency reveal a curious technical difficulty which suggests a novel solution to the problem of akrasia: The akrates rationalizes her akratic intention against her better judgment by exploiting a persistent gap in the identification of her own beliefs. Here I motivate and defend this analysis of akrasia and discuss some of the intriguing questions it raises about the nature of belief self-attribution.

I. INTRODUCTION

Consider a peculiar transgression. Chester the cat begs to go outside, as usual. Even so, Chester is an indoor cat, a fact Omar has repeatedly made clear to his roommate Robyn. Robyn values her friendship with Omar and would never intentionally jeopardize it. She also understands how much Chester means to Omar: She knows he would rescue her from a fire only after first saving Chester. Omar has said as much, yet Robyn, having had a dear pet herself, harbors no resentment. Appreciating his great fondness for Chester, Robyn wholeheartedly agrees with Omar that it is best for Chester to be kept indoors. Nevertheless, Robyn intentionally let Chester out one afternoon while she gardened in the backyard. Luckily nothing came of it — Chester did not run away, get stuck in a tree, get hit by a car, or catch so much as a flea. He stalked the yard, ate grass, and enjoyed the sun; Omar was none the wiser. Letting Chester out is regardless a *peculiar* transgression because Robyn *herself* thinks it best for Chester to stay indoors. Apparently, Robyn did what she honestly believed she shouldn't. Her transgression is as much against her own wishes as against Omar's, which makes it odd indeed.

Intentionally performing an action the agent judges worse than an available and incompatible alternative suggests self-deception and perhaps irrationality. If actions are evidence of dispositions and dispositions reliably indicate beliefs, then the agent apparently holds the contradictory belief that P and not P: "I shall refrain from acting yet I shall so act." (A furious Omar might well have accused Robyn of just such irrationality had he found out.) This is the problem of weakness of will or *akrasia*:

What in Anglo-Saxon philosophical circles is called the problem of weakness of will concerns what worried Socrates: the problem of how an agent can choose to take what they believe to be the worse course, overcome by passion. The English expression would not, or at least not primarily, bring this sort of case to mind, but rather such examples as dilatoriness, procrastination, lack of moral courage and failure to push plans through. The Greek word '*akrasia*', on the other hand, means 'lack of control', and that certainly suggests the Socratic sort of example [Gosling (1990), p. 97].

The phrase 'lack of control' should be taken literally. *Akrasia* is problematic because the weak of will or incontinent somehow fail to act as they themselves think they should — it is as if they are not the authors of their own actions, which makes the intentionality with which they act all the more puzzling.

The tension between best judgment and intentional action the *akrates* presents, a tension wholly lacking in those who enjoy abundant *kratos* or power of self-control (*enkrateia*) [cf Mele (1987), p. 4], is so great Socrates concluded it was simply absurd. Apparent cases are impossible, since "no one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course when he might choose the better." [*Protagoras* 358c]. Yet Aristotle famously dismisses Socrates' conclusion, since it "contradicts the plain phenomena" [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b27]. Indeed, the description of Robyn's transgression is sufficiently mundane as to make *akrasia* appear to be a possible, perhaps even ordinary, phenomenon.

Let us assume Aristotle is correct: Conceptual difficulties notwithstanding, *akrasia* is a puzzling yet common feature of human agency. Solving the puzzle requires explaining how the *akrates*' intentional action can deviate so remarkably from her best judgment. How, that is, does it happen that the *akrates* lacks self-control for actions she herself presumably controls? Is the *akrates* fundamentally irrational? Self-deceived? Temporarily insane?

In this paper I motivate and defend a solution to the problem of *akrasia* that emerges from abortive attempts at a straightforward analysis of one account of the phenomenon. The solution posits a mechanism of self-deception in human psychology which, I argue, is commonly exploited in cases of *akrasia* and illuminates important and, in the *akrates*' case, convenient limitations on first-person access to beliefs and desires. I proceed as follows. First, I examine some of the explanations that have been offered for the *akrates*' lack

of control and discuss how akrasia itself has become something of a shifting target for philosophical analysis. Second, I describe a technical difficulty in formulating one account of akrasia. Though not insurmountable, the technical problem exposes a curious feature of ordinary descriptions of akratic action which suggests a solution to particularly challenging cases of akrasia. In the penultimate section I explain and defend this solution; in the concluding section I examine the implications, some of them unsettling, for agency and first-person authority.

II. VARIETIES OF AKRASIA

Finding reasons for the akrates' lack of self-control is not especially difficult. In the crudest sense of 'lack of self-control', it might be that in letting Chester out Robyn has been subjected to a cat's well-known devices of mind-control. To count as akrasia, however, Chester's mind-control would have to be more subtle than directly *controlling* Robyn's arm, since it would not then have been *Robyn's* action, intentional or otherwise. Even if it were counted as a kind of limiting case of akrasia, lacking self-control by being remotely controlled poses no explanatory challenge. Chester's mind-control would have to be exerted in such a way that it was Robyn's action to let him out, perhaps by forming in her a decisively strong intention to let him out. In such a case Robyn lacks self-control and letting Chester out is now her action, but it is not the case that it was *her* intention to let him out. It was Chester's intention. This again is akrasia only in the barest and most uninteresting sense.

To be sure, it can be argued that lacking self-control by being directly controlled or by having an intention installed should not be counted as genuine cases of akrasia at all since akrasia requires that the agent herself intentionally act contrary to her better judgment. Whatever we mean by "akrasia", the reasoning goes, it surely poses a greater explanatory challenge than *those* kinds of cases. The trouble with this reasoning is that it tends to put us on something of a conceptual treadmill: As increasingly challenging cases of akrasia are posed, and increasingly sophisticated explanations for them are provided, cases so explained are subsequently rejected as genuine cases of akrasia. Explaining akrasia, then, becomes the self-defeating enterprise of explaining it away. In the interests of taking a more ecumenical approach to akrasia, I propose to treat all cases in which the agent lacks self-control as cases of akrasia. Further, I take it that there may be many different reasons for the akrates' lack of self-control, and different reasons make for different kinds of akrasia. Some kinds of akrasia are more challenging than others, but they are also of greater philosophical interest insofar as they better illuminate the cognitive roots of autonomous agency.

For example, it could be that Chester's mind-control is more subtle than directly controlling Robyn's arm or directly forming an intention in her. Since intentions are formed on the basis of relevant beliefs and desires, it

might be that Chester manipulates the strength of Robyn's desires in such a way that she forms and acts on the intention to let him out, contrary to her own best judgment. Naturally, Chester does not require any special powers of mind-control to pull this off: Looking outrageously cute and miserably pathetic suffices. Robyn's better judgment is thereby overwhelmed by pity for Chester, a common cat ploy.

It must be granted that Robyn has competing desires. She wants to do as Omar wishes and for Omar's very reason that no harm should come to Chester, yet this desire competes with her desire to take pity on Chester and let him out. Indeed, it is difficult to think of an interesting case of akrasia which does not implicate competing desires. *Prima facie* the existence of competing desires ought to have *some* role in explaining akrasia.

According to some accounts, runaway akratic desires are all there is to it. Hare [1963] takes the akrates' better judgment to be simply overwhelmed by desire, much like the nicotine addict who desperately wants to quit smoking but finds himself compelled by his addiction to light up.

In other accounts, the akratic desire does not overwhelm by brute force but by more indirectly subverting practical reasoning so as to make akrasia possible. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the practical syllogism which reflects the akrates' better judgment and would otherwise have produced right action has been temporarily submerged from conscious knowledge by the effects of desire:

[...] for within the case of having knowledge but not using it we see a difference of state, admitting of the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk. But now this is just the condition of men under the influence of passions; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness. It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to these [*Nicomachean Ethics*,1147a10-18].

Conflicting desires create competing bases for the agent's practical reasoning. Strongly conflicting desires may temporarily occlude some of the agent's reasoning from conscious reflection. To say that Robyn is overwhelmed by pity for Chester is, on Aristotle's account, just to say that her pity for Chester has overwhelmed her reasons for not taking pity on him by blocking them from her awareness. She briefly forgets her better reasons under the onslaught of akratic desire.

Whether Robyn's akratic desire overwhelms her, as Hare argues, or obscures her better judgment, as Aristotle has it, the subversive strength of the akratic desire is key to explaining the akrates' failure to exercise self-control. Yet Austin explains that the akrates may well be calm, cool, and collected.

I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself

to two segments and do, 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 [Austin (1979), p. 198].

Watson [1977] argues that there is a distinction to be drawn between motivationally compelled action, such as what one would expect of the addict, and akratic action if only because we hold the weak of will responsible for their actions in a way we do not hold the addict responsible. *Pace* the aforementioned conceptual treadmill, Hare and Aristotle may have explained some cases where there is want of self-control, but they haven't accounted for any of the philosophically interesting cases where the akrates intentionally and *freely* acts contrary to her best judgment.

To be sure, it seems odd to say that Robyn was *overwhelmed* by pity for Chester. She may have been *moved* by pity, but she was, like Austin, quite in control. The akratic desire neither directly compelled Robyn nor indirectly obscured her better judgment from attention. Robyn intentionally let Chester out, contrary to her own better judgment, and she did so freely. Robyn took pity on Chester; she was not made helpless by her pity.

Suppose that agents are (minimally) characterized as having beliefs, desires, and the capacity to form intentions. If so, then it is one very short step from Aristotle's account of submerged stretches of practical reasoning with 'their' beliefs, desires, and resulting intentions to proposing that the akrates suffers from what might be called multiple-agent disorder. The akrates is almost literally of two minds. Davidson explains akrasia in just this way.

[...] the way could be cleared for explanation if we were to suppose two semi-autonomous departments of the mind, one that finds a certain course of action to be, all things considered, best, and another that prompts another course of action. On each side, the side of sober judgement and the side of incontinent intent and action, there is a supporting structure of reasons, of interlocking beliefs, expectations, assumptions, attitudes, and desires. [Davidson (1982), p. 181]

Hence the akrates' judgments, both akratic and best, are made relative to specific and isolated reasons which serve to justify them. Being of 'two minds', the akrates acts for *some* reasons, but not for all the available reasons. Robyn's transgression is to act on some of her reasons without having considered all of the available reasons.

Why, though, couldn't have Robyn acted on all available reasons? Surely she was aware, even as she was letting Chester out, that she was acting contrary to her own better judgment. Davidson's explanation of free and intentional akratic action is confined to instances of akrasia that issue from relative or conditional reasons, which begs the question of whether it is possible for an agent to freely, intentionally, and consciously act contrary to all-out or unconditional better judgment. The agent, that is, cannot be accused of

being of two minds in cases of “last-ditch” akrasia [Pears (1982)] or “strict” akrasia [Mele (1987)].

The range of possible reasons Robyn might give Omar to explain her letting Chester out is lean if her action can be characterized as a case of strict akrasia: She intentionally let him out; she freely let him out; and she do so all the while perfectly aware that she was acting in a way that directly contradicted her own all-out judgment on the matter. In the case of strict akrasia the agent has the desire to exercise self-control, the ability to exercise self-control, and the knowledge to exercise self-control; yet she intentionally and freely fails to exercise self-control. There is more than a whiff of philosophical paradox here.

Earlier I suggested that we set aside the question of what counts as genuine akrasia by accepting all cases of lack of self-control as cases of akrasia which are distinguishable by the ways in which self-control is lacking. On this approach the important question is what makes some cases of akrasia more philosophically problematic than others. In the next section I clarify the problem akrasia presents by revisiting Davidson’s account. To his credit, Davidson was quite good in grasping that part of the problem of akrasia is explaining why it is such a problem.

III. THE PROBLEM OF AKRASIA

Davidson’s insight was to cast the problem of akrasia as a *logical* problem. “If your assumptions lead to a contradiction, no doubt you have made a mistake, but since you can know you have made a mistake without knowing what the mistake is, your problem may be real.” [Davidson (1980), p. 23] Specifically, Davidson thinks the following three principles are self-evident but not cotenable.

- P1. If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally.
- P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do x than to do y, then he wants to do x more than he wants to do y.
- P3. There are incontinent (akratic) actions [Davidson (1980), p. 23].

Where

- D. In doing x an agent acts (akratically) iff
 - i. the agent does x intentionally
 - ii. the agent believes there is an alternative action y open to him

- iii. the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x [Davidson (1980), p. 22].

Although Davidson (1980) tries to convince us that (P1), (P2), and (P3) — or at least principles sufficiently like them for purposes of generating a contradiction — are self-evident, he does not bother to show that the principles imply a contradiction. This is presumably left as an exercise for the scrupulous reader.

Let us be scrupulous readers. Given (D), (P3) is equivalent to

- P4. There is an agent A and an action y such that A does y intentionally, A believes there is an alternative action x open to him, and A judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do x than to do y.

From (P1) and (P2) it follows that

- P5. If an agent A judges that it would be better to do x than to do y, and A believes him or herself free to do either x or y, then A will intentionally do x if A does either x or y intentionally.

By (P4) and (P5), A does x intentionally if A does either x or y intentionally. But, by (P4), A does y intentionally. Assuming that x and y are exclusive alternatives, it follows that A could not have done y intentionally by (P5). Hence (P1), (P2), and (P3) are not cotenable: If (P1) and (P2) are true, (P3) must be false; or if (P3) is true, either (P1) or (P2) is false. But taken individually, (P1), (P2) and (P3) are, apparently, true.

Davidson's solution is to draw attention to the "all things considered" clause in (P4). The inference to a contradiction is blocked because the akrates' judgment as specified in (P4) has a condition not found in (P5)'s "it would be better to do x than to do y". To clarify the logical form of (P1), (P2), and (P3), Davidson introduces a special operator, the 'pf' or 'prima facie' operator. (D.iii), that is, should be revised to read 'pf<it would be better to do x than y, all things considered>', which does not by itself allow for the inference required by P2 of 'it would be better to do x than y'. Thus the inference to a contradiction is blocked because the reasoning that concludes in action requires the unconditional, *sans phrase*, judgment that doing x would be better than doing y.

Davidson's solution may be fine as far as it goes, but it excludes the possibility of strict akrasia in which the akrates makes an unconditional, *sans phrase* judgment while nevertheless acting on her akratic desire. In such cases the akrates' judgment cannot justify the introduction of a special logical operator to block the contradiction. Thus contradiction should once again threaten if the phrase 'all things considered' is dropped from (P4). Does it?

Consider a series of definitions:

$W_\alpha(x)$: = the degree to which α wants to do x .

$V(x)$: = the value of doing x .

$B_\alpha[\Phi]$: = α believes that Φ .

$D\alpha x$: = α does x .

$D'\alpha x$: = α does x intentionally.

Thus we may restate (P1) as

$$P1-1. \forall\alpha\forall x\forall y((W_\alpha(x) > W_\alpha(y) \wedge B_\alpha[\diamond(D\alpha x \vee D\alpha y)]) \rightarrow ((D'\alpha x \vee D'\alpha y) \rightarrow D'\alpha x))$$

and (P2) as

$$P2-1. \forall\alpha\forall x\forall y(B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)] \rightarrow W_\alpha(x) > W_\alpha(y))$$

From (P1-1) and (P2-1), it follows that

$$P5-1. \forall\alpha\forall x\forall y((B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)] \wedge B_\alpha[\diamond(D\alpha x \vee D\alpha y)]) \rightarrow ((D'\alpha x \vee D'\alpha y) \rightarrow D'\alpha x))$$

It remains to formulate (P4). Recall that (P4) does nothing more than draw out the claim that there are akratic actions as defined by (D). The obvious formulation of (P4) would be

$$P4-1. \exists\alpha\exists y((D'\alpha y \wedge B_\alpha[\exists x(x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x)]) \wedge B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)])$$

But this cannot be right: where large in (P4-1), 'x' is not bound by any quantifier. Since the large occurrence of 'x' is free, (P4-1) is an *open* sentence. The problem is serious. An open sentence is not a sentence that merely fails to be true: An open sentence cannot be either true or false. Under standard Tarskian semantics, open sentences may be *satisfied* or not by (sequences) of objects, but truth and falsity are not properties of open sentences. It follows that (P4-1) is meaningless from the standpoint of derivation. No contradiction threatens since no inference can be drawn. Our first attempt at restating the problem of akrasia has failed.

As a second attempt, consider

$$P4-2. \exists\alpha\exists y(D'\alpha y \wedge \exists x(B_\alpha[x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x] \wedge B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)]))$$

Read informally, (P4-2) says that there is an agent α and an action y such that α does y intentionally and there is an action x such that both α believes x is

an alternative to y which α could do and α believes that doing x would be better than doing y .

Notice that P4-2 is much stronger than Davidson's original characterization of akrasia. (D) merely requires that the agent *believe* that there is an alternative action; it does not demand there actually be such an action. Davidson is explicit on this point:

It is often made a condition of an incontinent (akratic) action that it be performed despite the agent's knowledge that another course of action is better. I count such actions incontinent, but the puzzle I shall discuss depends only on the attitude or belief of the agent, so it would restrict the field to no purpose to insist on knowledge [Davidson (1980), p. 21].

Surely Davidson is correct. We can easily imagine examples of akrasia in which the supposed better alternative does not, in fact, exist. Unbeknownst to Robyn, say, the door-latch is broken and Chester will get out regardless of what she does. (P4-2) denies that her action is akratic simply for want of an operating latch, since (P4-2) requires that the alternative exist, not just that the akrates believe it exists. Hence the second attempt, (P4-2), fails. Widening the scope of the existential quantifier in (P4-1) so as to cover the free 'x' and close the sentence results in an account of akrasia that fails to catch a great many apparent instances of akratic action.

Let us make one last attempt:

$$\text{P4-3. } \exists\alpha\exists y(D'\alpha y \wedge B_\alpha[\exists x((x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x) \wedge B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)])])$$

(P4-3) successfully avoids the problem (P4-2) had of claiming that the alternative action the akrates contemplates actually exists. It is odd that (P4-3) involves second-order beliefs, since that is nowhere reflected in Davidson's exposition. Nevertheless, second-order beliefs do not appear to pose a special problem of their own.

If (P4-3) is correct, we should be able to derive a contradiction from it and (P5-1). How so? We can identify two steps in the argument. We require both

$$\text{P6. } \forall\alpha\forall y(B_\alpha[\exists x((x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x) \wedge B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)])] \rightarrow B_\alpha[V(\mathbf{X}) > V(y)])$$

and

$$\text{P7. } \forall\alpha\forall y(B_\alpha[\exists x((x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x) \wedge B_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)])] \rightarrow B_\alpha[\diamond(D\alpha\mathbf{X} \vee D\alpha y)])$$

Yet neither (P6) nor (P7) can be correct, since 'x' occurs free in them (where large). We are back to exactly the problem with which we began, which suggests that there may be a deeper issue at stake.

In particular, we have a scope dilemma. If the existential quantifier binding an alternative action occurs outside the belief context, then we fail to account for the apparent problem of akrasia. Yet if the existential quantifier occurs inside the belief context, then we cannot derive a contradiction from (P1), (P2) and (P3). To see this, note that it is no good to try to accommodate the problem with (P6) by rewriting it as,

$$\text{P6-1. } \forall\alpha\forall y(\text{B}_\alpha[\exists x((x \neq y \wedge \diamond D\alpha x) \wedge \text{B}_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)]) \rightarrow \\ \text{B}_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)])])$$

because we are then unable to detach ‘ $\text{B}_\alpha[V(x) > V(y)]$ ’. The scope of the belief context blocks any useful inference.

To be sure, three failed attempts at rigorously stating Davidson’s formulation of the problem of akrasia (*sans phrase*) is merely suggestive, not conclusive. No doubt there are clever ways to reformulate Davidson’s account so as to get around the scope problem. Nevertheless, the failure of Davidson’s formulation, *sans phrase*, is puzzling. His account seems perfectly intelligible and grammatically ordinary until one attempts to resolve it into standard symbolic form. Something is amiss. In the next section I offer a diagnosis of the problem and argue that the diagnosis also serves to explain especially challenging cases of akrasia. I then close by exploring some of the implications of akrasia so explained.

IV. BELIEF HOPPING

Consider (D) again. According to (D.ii), it must be the case that the akratic agent believe that there is an alternative action x open to him or her. By (D.iii), it must be the case that the akratic agent believe that doing the alternative x would be better than doing the action the agent in fact does intentionally. Davidson’s definition of akrasia involves *belief hopping*. That is, Davidson’s definition of akrasia, *sans phrase*, makes a claim about actions in one belief context and hops into another belief context to make further claims about *the very same actions*. Formally and fundamentally, this is what blocked our attempts to establish the proper scope of the existential quantifier governing ‘ x ’.

Belief hopping is notoriously problematic, as examples taken from an observer’s attempt at attributing beliefs to an agent demonstrate. His utterances may lead us to conclude that Bob sincerely believes that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* but does not believe that Samuel Clemens wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. Or consider Kripke’s [1979] famous example. Imagine that Pierre, a native speaker of French, grows up in France and, prompted by rumor, comes to assent to “Londres est jolie.” Pierre later moves to a seedy side of London without knowing that this is the “Londres” of French fame. Having no acquaintances who speak French, he must learn English by interac-

tion with English speakers. As time progresses, Pierre comes to vigorously assent to “London is not pretty.” It appears that Pierre is contradicting himself.

Kripke’s Pierre illustrates the trouble an observer has attributing beliefs to an agent: The observer cannot assume that the agent identifies the content of one belief with the content of another belief even when the content is clearly identifiable. The observer’s attribution of beliefs is woefully underdetermined by the evidence he has for them.

I submit that a similar phenomenon is at the root of the apparent contradiction implicit in the akrates’ behavior. Under the duress of conflicting desire, the akrates rationalizes her akratic action by, in effect, not identifying it as such. Robyn’s akratic action of letting Chester out can be rationalized against her judgment that it is better for Chester to stay indoors than be let out because she did not let him out *unsupervised*. She rationalizes her action by viewing it not as letting him out *full-stop*, which she has clearly judged against, but as letting him out under supervision. Thus she blocks the identification of the contents of her beliefs which would otherwise implicate her rationality.

Yet if there is a kind of strict akrasia that hinges on the agent’s own misidentification of the content her own beliefs, as I have argued there is, then such instances of akrasia also serve as evidence that first-person authority about belief is not absolute. In pursuing the akratic alternative, the agent is more like an observer attributing beliefs to herself in an attempt to rationalize her own actions than the veridical, if sincere, believer she is usually taken to be. So construed, akrasia appears to challenge the common view we have of ourselves as enjoying infallible access to our own beliefs. Those who find absolute first-person authority intuitively compelling will no doubt find this account of akrasia to the same extent intuitively repellent. I close by arguing that the erosion of first-person authority implied by akrasia so understood is neither as excessive nor as surprising as it first appears.

V. FALLIBLE FIRST-PERSON ACCESS

Imagine a line drawn between ‘Descartes’ and ‘Ryle’. ‘Descartes’ represents having perfect access to one’s own beliefs. Thus from “Reply to Objections II” we have it that “[t]hought is a word that covers everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it.” [Descartes (1955)] ‘Thought’ is thereby *defined* in such a way that to have a thought is to be aware of having the thought.

‘Ryle’, on the other hand, represents having no more privileged access to one’s own beliefs than to anyone else’s. As Ryle puts it,

[...] no metaphysical looking-glass exists compelling us to be for ever completely disclosed and explained to ourselves, though from the everyday conduct

of our sociable and unsociable lives we learn to be reasonably conversant with ourselves [Ryle (1949), pp. 180-181].

Descartes and Ryle endorse positions between which lie a broad range of intermediate positions wherein an agent has privileged access, but not perfect access all the time, to his or her own beliefs. Construing the problem of akrasia in terms of the misidentification of the contents of belief, together with the relative rarity of cases of akrasia which cannot otherwise be explained in one of the various ways I canvassed earlier, suggests a position on the line between 'Descartes' and 'Ryle' which is somewhat closer to 'Descartes' than 'Ryle'. That is, an agent may misidentify her own beliefs, but not nearly so readily as Ryle's position would presumably permit. Though not perfect observers and self-attributors of belief as Descartes would have it, agents are normally in a much better position to correctly attribute beliefs to themselves than Ryle would have it. Davidson would not, apparently, disagree.

Though there is first person authority with respect to beliefs and other propositional attitudes, error is possible; this follows from the fact that the attitudes are dispositions that manifest themselves in various ways, and over a span of time. Error is possible; so is doubt. So we do not always have have indubitable or certain knowledge of our own attitudes. Nor are our claims about our own attitudes incorrigible. It is possible for the evidence available to others to overthrow self-judgements [Davidson (2001), p. 4].

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