



Knowing Good, Doing Bad: Understanding Environmental Ethics from an Aristotelian Perspective.

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Abstract

Aristotle developed the notion of *akrasia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Akrasia* describes situations where people know that their actions will be unethical; nevertheless, they continue to do those actions. This paper discusses how *akrasia* is a helpful means of understanding human behaviour in the wake of the environmental crisis. People know that their behaviours are environmentally damaging; nonetheless, they continue to engage in those behaviours. This makes these environmentally damaging behaviours more akin to weaknesses of will than epistemic failures. Understanding human behaviours towards the environment as *akratic* is useful because Aristotle's solutions to *akratic* behaviour can become tools to combating environmental destruction.

About the Author

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Introduction

Aristotle develops the concept of *akrasia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Kraut, 2018). *Akrasia* describes a situation where a person is fully aware that their actions will be unethical, yet they with those actions regardless (Stoyles, 2007). There have been a verity of conceptualisations of *Akrasia*; however, the *akratic* person is most often summarised as having a weakness of will or yielding to temptation (Demos, 1961). This paper argues that *akrasia* is a useful way of understanding human behaviour in the face of the current environmental crisis¹.

Environmental ethics makes moral enquires into how human behaviours impact non-human entities with the aim of producing the best moral outcomes for these non-human entities. The field has gained significant attention in recent years (see Attfield, 2018). It is becoming clearer that anthropocentric activities are having a vast and lasting negative impact on the natural world (Attfield, 2018). Both academics and the public are becoming increasingly concerned with how natural resources are used, which has brought various aspects of the relationship between humans and the natural world into question. Attfield identifies that most people in developed nations are aware of the environmental emergency, yet very little is being done to curb or prevent it. Individuals, governments, and organisations are doing little to

adjust their behaviours to be more in line with the interests of the environment (Blok, 2015).

Notably, Blok tells us that there is a “huge gap between our ethical judgements about the ecological crisis on the one hand and our ethical behaviour according to these judgements on the other” (2015: 965). I argue that this disparity between how humans perceive environmentally friendly behaviour and how they act towards the environment can be deemed *akratic*. This paper investigates this argument. Firstly, *akrasia* is cashed out to present a comprehensive understanding of what it entails. Thereafter, I argue that human beings, in most western societies, know enough about the environmental emergency to understand that some of their actions towards the environment are morally impermissible. This means that when people perform morally impermissible actions towards the environment, they do so *akratically*, in that they are aware that those actions are morally wrong.

What is *Akrasia*?

The ability humans have to *choose* between different options presented to them is at the very heart of *akrasia* (Demos, 1961). I present three criteria that require evaluation when determining whether something is an example of *akratic* behaviour. Firstly, the choice must be normative. Secondly, the choice must not be based on

¹ Various terms have been used in the literature to describe the rapid environmental degradation facing the world. I use “crisis” here given that the consequences of this environmental degradation

could be the inability for humans to inhabit the earth. At times, I replace “crisis” with “emergency” to capture the fast pace at which this life-threatening degradation is occurring.

mistaken beliefs about any of the available options. Thirdly, the chooser must be mentally sound, which includes not suffering from mental disability, or be intoxicated, or be deprived of sleep. It is these criteria that make akratic decisions unique from other immoral decisions people make. Many could argue that they make immoral decisions because of some kinds of epistemic or cognitive deficiency. Akrasia is not concerned with these kinds of decisions. A person who makes an akratic decision may even experience some moral conflict for a period of time before making their decision but in spite of this they continue to choose the immoral option.

Environmental Ethics

In recent years, ethicists and social scientists have become increasingly concerned with the impact of anthropogenic activities on the natural environment (Attfield, 2018). It is generally accepted in scientific and public communities that human-related activities are driving an environmental emergency (Damian Carrington, 2019). The term “emergency” is purposeful here. If human behaviours do not change it will become increasingly difficult to sustain human life on earth, especially at the standards of living many western societies enjoy. In response to this emergency, more ethical focus is being placed on how current human lifestyles and decisions are affecting different ecosystems and non-human species that inhabit them (Benson, 2001). Furthermore, environmental ethics investigates

concepts like responsibility and value in relation to the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

How We Harm the Environment

Blok (2015) argues that the excessive pursuit of pleasure that is present in many modern, western societies shows a clear correlation between akrasia and the environmental crisis (Blok, 2015). There is a wealth of information available around how certain diets, purchasing habits, lifestyle habits, and modes of transport negatively impact the environment. Blok (2015) believes that with all this available knowledge, if people continue to engage in environmentally harmful behaviours, it must be due to weakness of will rather than epistemic shortcomings. For example, if a person knows that buying an electric car is better for the environment than buying a sportscar, yet they still buy a sportscar to impress their friends, their decision can be understood as akratic. Attfield (2018) agrees that humans often exhibit weakness of will in their excessive use of natural resources in pursuit of their desires.

The overconsumption of natural resources has a direct negative impact on the natural environment, with some arguing that it could lead to the overexploitation and collapse of different environmental systems (Lisa Kernegger and Stefan Giljum, 2009). A report conducted by Friends of the Earth Europe found that this collapse in environmental systems could threaten

the survival of human beings on the planet² (Lisa Kernegger and Stefan Giljum 2009). This information is freely available and often discussed in modern, western societies. If people take the time to inform themselves of these issues, it will become clear that their everyday behaviours are environmentally damaging. This means that ignorance is not an excuse³. I argue that this is enough to deem the continued environmentally damaging behaviour of humans to be an example of akrasia.

Where to From Here?

If we understand the reluctance of people to alter their environmentally harmful behaviours as examples of akrasia, it may be possible to use Aristotle's methods for combating akrasia to combat the environmental crisis. Current means of combating the environmental crisis are proving ineffective. This may perhaps be due to most approaches focusing on epistemic intervention, following the Platonic tradition that, "to know the Good is to do the Good" (Rorty, 1970). The levels of environmental destruction present today that continue in spite of its public salience is testament to this idea failing, at least in circumstances pertaining to environmental preservation. The rest of this section will discuss Aristotle's methods for combating akrasia and investigate whether they can be used to address environmentally harmful

behaviour in individuals.

According to Aristotle, habit is an acute cause of akrasia (Rorty, 1970). Humans learn their behaviours from the people around them, most notably their parents, siblings, and people in their community. These people influence an individual's knowledge, language, beliefs, values, and so on. This means that if we learn environmentally unfriendly habits from our immediate circumstances, we are likely to continue exhibiting these without questioning them. For example, if a person is raised in a consumerist family, then they are likely to engage in consumerist behaviours themselves, including into their adult years. However, Aristotle is confident that humans can improve and break free from any unhealthy habits they learnt from teachers, parents, and their communities (Rorty 1970).

Aristotle argues that morality is a practical aspect of life that is learnt and honed through practice and repetition, like an "actor repeats this lines" (Rorty, 1970). This means that people can elevate themselves from their inherited, akratic behaviours. For example, imagine a person who has developed a habit of purchasing an excessive amount of clothing. If this person practices stopping themselves from purchasing new clothes when it is not necessary, they will become better at

² This further defends using the term environmental *crisis*.

³ Of course, people may fall victim to misinformation. However, this article assumes that people have the responsibility to ensure that the information informing their actions is reliable.

it until they no longer have their environmentally harmful habit. Aristotle acknowledges that, as is the case with learning any new skill, this will be difficult in the beginning, but will continue to get easier over time through practice and repetition (Rorty, 1970). Therefore, being mindful of our environmentally harmful behaviours, and continuously trying to stop them or replace them with positive behaviours, will be beneficial to solving the environmental emergency.

Value is another key driver of akratic decision making. Elizabeth Willott and David Schmidtz (2002) believe that environmental ethics has as much to do with humans deciding what is worth saving, as it does with what needs saving. They argue that human beings are ethically inclined to behave morally towards things on which they place a higher value. According to this view, the more humans are taught to value the environment, the more willing they will be to preserve it.

A prominent theory for the valuation of the natural world was put forward by Christopher D. Stone in his article *Should Trees Have Standing?* Stone (1972) argues that humans will not be motivated to change their behaviours towards the environment until natural objects, such as forests, trees, oceans, and rivers are given rights. According to Stone, things with rights see things without rights as less valuable. This idea is seen throughout history. Women, children, and people of different races have all been without rights in the past, which lead to them being valued only as the property of others

(Stone, 1973). This valuation as property means that these people were used as a means to an end. Since gaining rights of their own, women, children, and people of different races are valued far more in society and have far more opportunities and resources available to them, and the general societal view has shifted away from seeing these people as property. Stone believes that extending rights to the natural environment will have a similar impact in increasing its value to modern societies. This stands to influence people to treat the natural environment with more respect and consideration.

Stone's view can be summarised to the idea that the environment should have intrinsic value in society, not only instrumental value. This means that the environment should be valued in of itself, not only in its ability to satisfy the needs and wants of people. For example, a tree should be valued because it is a tree, not because it can be used to build a table or make medicine. Willott and Schmidtz (2000) believe that there is evidence for people valuing the natural environment for both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. Nevertheless, people continue to disregard the interests of the environment in their decision making, even if they do value it. This is because the instrumental value people associate with the environment often overshadows the intrinsic value people associate with it. This is most frequent when people are harming the environment to fulfil a want that is in excess of what a person needs (Kernegger and Giljum, 2009). Richard Sylvan

attempts to make sense of this disjunction between the instrumental and intrinsic value people associate with the environment in his *Last Man* thought experiment.

The *Last Man* thought experiment goes as follows: “You are the last human being. You shall soon die. When you are gone, the only life remaining will be plants, microbes, and invertebrates. For some reason, the following thought runs through your head: Before I die, it sure would be nice to destroy the last remaining redwood. Just for fun” (Willott and Schmitz, 2000). Sylvan then asks whether it would be wrong for you to cut the last redwood down. If the answer is yes, then the tree seems to be valued intrinsically. If no, then the tree seems to be of value instrumentally. Valuing the environment intrinsically stands to benefit the environment as it will be seen as more than a mere means to an end. This is the crux of the argument presented by Stone (1973). If someone values the environment intrinsically, and then continues to behave in ways that are harmful towards it, they can be described as akratic, and should be taught to act otherwise. Therefore, teaching people to value the environment intrinsically would be a major step towards curbing the environmental emergency.

What’s Really Wrong with Akrasia?

To be environmentally ethical takes time and effort. People have a limited time to be alive and experience pleasure, which is understood by some as being the main driving force for hedonistic

behaviour that is environmentally damaging (Macaro, 2005). Why should people not make the most of the pleasure available to them? I will investigate this point from an Aristotelian perspective.

According to Aristotle, pursuing pleasure as a central life goal is to live a life “fit only for cattle” (Macaro, 2005). He believed that people should strive for a life of happiness, which can only come from making reason a central goal and using that reason to balance pleasures and pains (Macaro 2005). For example, a person should use reason to determine how much food they require, and not eat so much that they are gluttonous and not so little that they starve. An akratic would not be able to achieve this idea of a good life, because it is inherently unreasonable to know what is wrong, and yet continue to do wrong. This is why one should take steps to minimise their akratic behaviours.

Aristotle’s theory of the good life is at odds with modern conceptions of the good life. The contemporary conception of the good life is entirely unreasonable and unsustainable (Milbrath, 1993). A drive for excess wealth and pleasure is at the heart of the modern good life, but in order to achieve it, we need to destroy the resources that enable excess wealth and pleasure in the first place. The pursuit of momentary human pleasures cannot be endlessly supported by the natural resources available on Earth, which will lead to devastating consequences for standards of living in

the future. As Aristotle suggests, a balance must be struck to ensure that human life is able to prosper into the future. This means that the contemporary conception of the good life as “growth in material consumption” needs to end and be replaced with a more reasonable, balanced, sustainable goal.

Conclusion

Akrasia is a failure in moral reasoning and not an error of knowledge. It has to do with when a person chooses the morally wrong option, when there were morally right options available. I have argued that this is a helpful way of understanding how people behave in the wake of the environmental emergency. People have abundant knowledge that their behaviours are environmentally damaging, and there are better options available, yet they keep enacting damaging behaviours. It seems encouraging that if we view human behaviours as akratic, we are able to use Aristotle’s suggestions for overcoming akrasia to stop people from engaging in environmentally harmful behaviours. These suggestions include practicing ethical behaviour to undo old habits, learning to value the environment appropriately, and striving to be more reasonable. Due to our habits and behaviours being directly influenced by those around us, establishing an environmentally ethical society will produce more environmentally ethical people. It is not enough to rely on facts to influence people’s environmentally damaging behaviours. Aristotle displays how people need to mindfully train their will if any significant progress is to be made in addressing the environmental emergency.

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