

## *The two faces of akratics anonymous*

LUC BOVENS

I have struggled with weakness of the will all of my life. So many opportunities passed me by simply because I was unable to keep my eyes on the prize. The lure of the tiniest joy is sufficient to make me avert my eyes from aspirations that I am genuinely committed to. You do not want to hear my diatribe: my love life, my health, my career ... all ruined by weakness of the will.

As we speak, I hold a modest position in a philosophy department. What brought me to this life that has at least some semblance of decency? I think back to all the interviews for real jobs that I failed to show up for, because I could not tear myself away from some lousy game of pool. I think back to the shame of being evicted from my attic room, because I wasted my entire unemployment cheque on expensive lattés in an upscale coffee shop. And so, to keep warm in the cold Colorado winters, I spent my days in the university library, playing hide and seek from the security personnel. With time on my hands, I started studying my condition. To my surprise, I learned that my condition had a beautiful Greek name – *akrasia*. Herds of philosophers, psychologists and economists had made respectable careers out of studying bums like me. Having lost all of my latté-drinking friends, I was eager to join in in this newly found game. *Akrasia* and statistics handbooks do not mix well, which steered me away from psychology and economics. So the choice was clear. Knowing human frailty from first-hand experience, I had a few thoughts of my own which I sent to the philosophy journals. The rest is history. Granted, my new latté-sipping friends are a bit more nerdy than my previous ones. But I do have a licence to call this ‘work’. Really, it is not a bad life.

And my condition? When it comes to therapy, philosophy has been somewhat of a disappointment. Centuries of tomes and treatises on the nature of weakness of the will, yet very little in the way of therapy! Does weakness of the will exist, and if so, how is weakness of the will possible? Oh, we have heard it all before, but how about this little query for a change: if my life is a total mess and weakness of the will seems to be the obvious culprit, then what is there to be done about it?

Maybe I shouldn’t be so unkind. After all, it was due to some snippets of philosophical writings that I learned about binding myself to resist enticement. The recipe is simple. Suppose that you want to achieve some long-term gain, say, to quit smoking, finish a novel, or what have you. On

the road there are a million distractions interfering with your good intentions. So what can you do when you suffer from akrasia? To speak with the learned: you raise the disutility of the potential distractions. I beg your pardon? The philosopher is quick to clarify: you promise your friends to pay them \$1000 when you light up one more time or don't have your book in the mail to the publisher before solstice. But I am an akratic bum, my friends would just laugh at me when they hear the words 'money' and 'promising' coming from my mouth! I quickly learned that my cash flow is irrelevant. There are equally effective low-budget versions of this recipe. Simply tell all your friends that you are quitting smoking: there is plenty of disutility in the shame of lighting up that first cigarette. Get an apartment in deep suburbia to finish your novel: there is plenty of disutility in the hour-long ride to the bar where you wasted so many hours before.

Does it work? No doubt. But, I must say, it can be painful. Take my elder brother: it is disgusting how strong-willed he is. We quit smoking on the same day. But no, he did not tell anyone, he did not need to tell anyone. We both resolved to spend less time in the bar, but he did not need to give up his uptown apartment. There is no doubt that he has the better deal. Even if we are able to stick to our resolutions, I am still paying more. I live in fear of derision, were I to light up again. My brother does not. I am stuck in deep suburbia. My brother is not. And I don't even want to think about backsliding: for me the penalties will be relentless, while he will just get away scot-free.

And the pain is not the worst of it. What gets to me the most in this kind of life is the utter boredom of it all. It kills any sense of passion that I once had about life. Of course, some passions I can live without. It's sure nice to feel my passion for smoking or for the bar scene wane. But passions, like grapes, come in bunches: you pick out a few here and there, and what's left looks like hell. Pick out the smoking and the bar scene and my respective passions for sensual joys and for socializing in general are just not what they used to be anymore. They have been tampered with, lost their spontaneous character. Take a sensual joy like drinking lattés or a social engagement like a dinner party. These are quite innocent pleasures in my life and I don't have a guilty conscience about them. But since I started combating akrasia, I always sense the gatekeeper breathing down my neck, also for pleasures that have not come under his axe. I don't just drink lattés anymore; I drink lattés that unlike smoking are really alright for me to enjoy. I don't just go to dinner parties anymore; I go to dinner parties and am allowed to smile through it all, no guilt required, unlike during nights on the town. Well, you can have your lattés and your dinner parties, I don't give a rip about them anymore. Maybe there are some who revel under the

yoke of self-control: philosophers certainly tend to speak highly of this way of life. Speaking strictly for myself, I turn numb when encircled by the walls of denial.

Jon Elster (1979: 36–111) devotes a long essay to all the ins and outs of binding oneself to guard against weakness of the will. He takes the phenomenon to be a form of ‘second-best or imperfect rationality (that) takes care both of reason and passion.’ (1979: 111) It’s certainly some way of care taking: to me it feels like reason whipping the living daylights out of passion. Elster seems to be worried too. He concludes his essay with some cautious words of wisdom: ‘What is lost, perhaps, is the sense of adventure.’ (1979: 111) Well, thanks a lot, it’s nice to know that one is not alone. But where do I go from here? Maybe there’s just one remedy for akrasia. While it may cure some, for others its side effects are so nasty that they prefer the disease. But my acquaintance with philosophers has made me suspicious. It seemed just the kind of cure for them to come up with. Did I insult you? Well, I take up the gauntlet. Such will be my quest: to return with a remedy against akrasia that also works for those of us who are sensitive to passion pruning.

Fog rolling in from the mountains – a perfect day to start my quest: I cuddle up in the library with some recent issues of *Mind*. I find another little snippet of therapy for akrasia in a distinctly unphilosophical format. A small advertisement promises a new cure for akrasia, signed by Doctor Roy Sorensen. If you find yourself committing akratic acts from time to time, send a \$1000 check to our venerable Doctor. As soon as you commit one more act, which you know to be irrational, you can write to get your money back. There is now a substantial reward attached to your act, which has thus become, all things considered, the better thing to do. So it is no longer true that you committed an akratic act! No doubt there is some clever version of the liar paradox hidden in Sorensen’s offer, but aside from entertainment for paradox mongers,<sup>1</sup> is there something of therapeutic value here?

‘What a farce!’ I hear you say. I understand your derision. The cure seems to promise that one can eat one’s cake and have it too. But wait, not so fast, for me there is something at stake here. If this cure can deliver what it promises, then we akratics are through with cutting our wings. We will be able to let our passions soar while casting off the stigma of akrasia. Well, am I ready to send in the cash? Of course not. But neither would I

<sup>1</sup> Marion Ledwig noted that there is an interesting parallel between Sorensen’s cure and Gideon’s Paradox, as discussed in Bar-Hillel and Margalit, 1985. The paradox can be readily avoided if we can get Dr. Sorensen to promise to send our money back when we commit one more act which we know to be *otherwise* irrational. He should: If he is a clever enough stockbroker, he will still make a buck.

respond to an advertisement with an invitation to sign a contract that would commit me to send in \$1,000 with my next akratic action. And yet that is precisely what the age-old recipe of binding oneself turns into when cast in academic editorial style. Stories about cash changing hands bring clarity to strategies for self-management, but such strategies tend to work best at dusk. I have seen the recipe work all too well for many of my akratic friends who don't have a dime to spend and have trouble even pronouncing words like 'disutility': they vote for stricter drug laws, oppose pornography on the tube, and some of them even go so far as taking wedding vows! So, returning to Doctor Sorensen's recipe, your derision doesn't bother me a bit. The real question is whether this recipe can be made to work in some sparsely lit alley and without cash changing hands. In other words, is there a bootleg version of this more gentle cure for akrasia? And, am I to discover it, or has it also already been practised for ages?

What Doctor Sorensen is up to is all too clear. Rather than raising the disutility of the akratic act in order to keep temptation in rein, he proposes to raise the utility of the akratic act, so that the act is no longer akratic in kind and temptation can be given free rein. But can this be done when one does not have \$1000 to dispense? I decided to walk the earth with my membership card of the local chapter of Akratics Anonymous and to visit sister organisations around the globe. As is the case in any sufficiently large social group, distinct cultures are bound to emerge. And clearly, there is a serene and an ardent side to my support group. In this age of political correctness, I leave it up to you to determine in what corners the serene are outnumbered by the ardent and vice versa.

The serene side I know all too well: it is stacked with those who let no opportunity slide to raise the disutility of akratic acts. There are various ways of doing so. Some are masters at manipulating their surroundings: they construe their worlds such that it would be costly, time-consuming or just simply unpleasant to take up akratic acts. Others are masters at manipulating their characters: they come to think of themselves as self-disciplined people in total disregard of who they really are. At least some do manage to pull themselves up by their bootstraps: akratic acts become all too costly, since they are threats to their self-image. This is where we Akratics Anonymous differ from Alcoholics Anonymous. We are well aware that, rather than the truth, it is self-deception that can set us free. And then finally there is a hybrid strategy. Some try to manipulate their social surrounding by projecting an image of self-discipline: they stack their social network with friends who value self-discipline and come to expect self-discipline from them. The added cost of akrasia is to abandon their social identities.

But what about the ardent side of Akratics Anonymous? They are such

a different batch that it is hard to believe we are actually trying to cope with the same illness. I tried to disguise the serene demeanour that never really sat well with me anyway in order to gain access to this distinct culture. I was astonished at what I learned. They were brewing Doctor Sorensen's recipe in multiple flavours and consuming it with great zeal! Being a philosopher, I am given to taxonomy, though no taxonomy could do justice to this spectacle. So please forgive my futile attempts.

The ardent are most creative in finding ways to raise the utility of what would otherwise count as akratic acts. Their strategies are actually surprisingly similar to what is happening on the serene side. Some are masters at manipulating their environments. They are keenly aware what vices lure them into akrasia and they choose a way of life in which the exercise of these vices meets with rewards. Among them we find roadies who cannot resist the lure of the grunge, stockbrokers who suffer from incurable greed, and, of course, philosophers who cannot control their garrulous natures. If you cannot or wish not to conquer your vices, you might as well organize your life in such a way that they turn into virtues.

Others are masters at manipulating their characters. They come to construct an identity that places a disvalue on prudence and a value on spontaneity. Unlike their serene counterparts who embark on a self-deceptive journey towards self-discipline, the ardent make a conscious display of how they live a life of passion. They proclaim that their agency must be genuine and not calculated: their goal is to act out of love, out of longing, as well as out of anger, spite, envy ... and never with a view to what their choices will bring in the way of future benefits. Their heroes are artists, intellectuals and politicians who are famous for their Bohemian whim and they strive to live their lives with the same emotional honesty and purity. Consequently, their impulsive actions are no longer akratic, since each such action now has the added benefit that it strengthens their self-image. This strategy also involves a good dose of self-deception, no less than the serene strategy of character manipulation. But they resist the light of truth for different reasons: on the serene route, the agent must hide from himself that he is not quite as self-disciplined at the outset as he pretends to be. On the ardent route, the agent must hide from herself that she is so calculating that she constructs a self-image of spontaneity and puts it to use to overcome the akratic nature of her actions.

This strategy of character manipulation naturally spills over into a hybrid strategy of manipulating one's social environment. Not only do the ardent want themselves to know what passionate people they are, but they also want the world to know. By making a conscious display of their Bohemian whim, they come to gather friends who appreciate and positively reinforce their way of life. Agency that would once have been akratic, now

turns out to be straightforwardly rational, since it affords the added benefit of reliable interaction within a selective circle of friends.

This is what I have learned during my quest: what seemed at first to be a laughable piece of sophistry, turned out to be an age-old recipe, with some philosophical spice added to it. There is something curious about pre-Sorensenian philosophical treatments of akrasia though. In so far as philosophers have had any interest in therapy, they have single-mindedly focused on the serene side and have put on blinders for the ardent side of Akratiks Anonymous. Their agenda is clear: better to have reason whip passion into shape, than let passion surreptitiously form a pact with reason. Maybe Ulysses and his men had no other choice. But it is good to be reminded that there are other ways to deal with the proverbial sirens in our lives than by stuffing our ears with wax or having ourselves tied to the mast. And yet, let us not remind ourselves too much, since strategies of self-management are most successful at dusk. When it comes to overcoming akrasia, the examined life is no less dangerous than the hemlock that killed Socrates. It's alright to take a few sips; *Conium Maculatum* taken in the right dosage strengthens the heart. But be careful not to gulp it down, lest akrasia will get the best of you.

You wish to join Akratiks Anonymous? Be my guest, no \$1000 needed, being human is your ticket in. Do I mean to say that we are all akratics? Not really, many of us have found a way of dealing with the threat of akrasia. But just like Alcoholics Anonymous, we also welcome recovering akratics. In the opening pages of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera (1984: 6) remarks that Parmenides' 'lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, the most ambiguous of all.' Maybe akrasia is the key to the mystery: the ardent embrace lightness, the serene embrace weight to avert the threat of akrasia. And, to speak with Aristotle, just like we need to know whether we are more like Milo or more like a beginning gymnast to determine how much we should eat, we should also know who we are to determine how much lightness and how much weight to embrace in our struggle with akrasia. Such is the route that leads to happiness.<sup>2</sup>

*University of Colorado at Boulder*  
Boulder, CO 80309-0232, USA  
*bovens@spot.colorado.edu*

<sup>2</sup> I have benefited from presentations in CREA (Ecole Polytechnique, Paris) and in the Universität Konstanz. I also thank Ronald de Sousa, Graham Oddie, Gottfried Seebaß, Chris Shields, Roy Sorensen and the editor for their comments and suggestions. This work was in part supported by a fellowship of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

*References*

- Bar-Hillel, M. and Margalit, A. 1985. Gideon's Paradox – a paradox of rationality. *Synthese* 63: 139-155.
- Elster, J. 1979. *Ulysses and the Sirens. Studies in Rationality and Irrationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kundera, M. 1984. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Translated from the Czech. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Sorensen, R. 1997. Advertisement: a cure for incontinence! *Mind* 106: 743.