

Why Does Davidson Transform Aristotle?

Julie Journeau
(Université de Lille 3)

Can we find any explanation of a bad action performed though we have a knowledge of what should have been done? Can I justify eating too many candies while knowing that it will make me sick? Such an action is the acratia one. In this paper, I wish to compare Davidson's and Aristotle's answers. This comparison is guided by the fact Davidson presents his solution of acratia's problem as connected with Aristotle's one. Therefore, I will attempt to shed some light on the links between the two authors and I will try to withdraw which is Davidsonian Aristotle. Secondly, Aristotle and Davidson have the same philosophical aim : find an explanation for the acratia case. The Aristotelian solution has been used by the analytic philosophy, and the analytic tradition claims to follow, for the acratia case, the Aristotelian solution. For instance, G.E.M. Anscombe proposes an analysis of the Aristotelian practical syllogism in order to understand the notion of practical knowledge¹. We will focus our paper on the Davidsonian use of Aristotle. Indeed, it seems to me necessary to confront both solutions of the problem, but also the way they tackle the acratia case. Such a confrontation can enlighten the method used by our authors, and the kind of modern reception of Aristotle. Davidson tries to think with Aristotle, and we'd like to see how does Davidson think with Aristotle. By a comparison of texts, I will try to emphasize that Davidson's Aristotle is an Aristotle modified especially about the problem of the practical syllogism. Indeed, Davidson uses some Aristotelian conceptual tools, such as the practical syllogism or as the distinction between two meanings of the verb *epistasthai*, but his explanation of the acratia case is different from Aristotle's. I will focus on this difference. In this purpose, I will proceed in two points. First I will set the two perspectives, attempting to situate how Aristotle inherits the Acratia problem from Plato and sketching several specificities of Davidsonian solution. Secondly, I will analyze two Davidsonian objections : one about acratia's definition and the other about

¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, §33 : « The notion of "practical knowledge" can only be understood if we first understand "practical reasoning". "Practical reasoning", or "practical syllogism", which means the same thing, was one of Aristotle's best discoveries ».

practical syllogism. I will focus my analysis on the second essay from Davidson's *Actions and Events* and on *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.

I. The problem of akrasia.

As a sort of prolog, I have to make some terminological precisions. The expression « weakness of will » is the translation of the greek word « *akrasia* », and the word « self-control » of « *enkrateia* ». In Aristotelian context, *enkrateia* and *akrasia* don't belong to vices and virtues.

« But we shall have to make some mention of this disposition later, and we have discussed badness earlier ; it is lack of self-control, and softness or weakness for comfort, that must be our subjects now, along with self-control and endurance ; for we should no regard either of these two things as having to do with the same disposition as excellence and badness, or as being a different kind »².

The relationships of *enkrateia* and *akrasia* with virtues and vices are difficult to understand. Indeed, they are not the same sort of disposition, so, they are not an *hexis*, that is to say, a disposition which has a kind of permanence. But, there is not such an important difference between the *enkrateia* and *akrasia* and virtues and vices because they are of the same kind : ο?θ' ?ς ?τερον γένος (1147b2). This point explains Aristotle needs another method to solve the acratia case. This difference can be understood by the fact that *akrasia* and *enkrateia* are about the character but are not properly about moral. To fix this difference, Aristotle uses the example of Neoptolemus in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

« What is more, if self-control makes one tend to stick to any and every judgement, it is bad, e.g., if it makes one stick even to the one that is false, and if lack of self-control tends to make one depart from any and every judgement, lack of self-control will have a good form, as e.g. in the case of Sophocles' Neoptolemus, in Philoctetes; for he is to be praised for not sticking to what Odysseus persuaded to him to do, because of his distress at deceiving someone »³.

² Arist. *EN*, 1145a33-b2, translation by Sarah Broadie : « ?λλ? περ? μ?ν τ?ς διαθέσεως τ?ς τοιαύτης ?στερον ποιητέον τιν? μνείαν, περ? δ? κακίας ε?ρηται πρότερον· περ? δ? ?κρασίας κα? μαλακίας κα? τρυφ?ς λεκτέον, κα? περ? ?γκρατείας κα? καρτερίας· ο?τε γ?ρ ?ς περ? τ?ν α?τ?ν ?ξεων τ? ?ρετ? κα? τ? μοχθηρί? ?κατέραν α?τ?ν ?ποληπτέον, ο?θ' ?ς ?τερον γένος ».

³ Arist., *EN*, 1146a16-21 : « ?τι ε? πάσ? δόξ? ?μμενετικ?ν ποιε? ? ?γκράτεια, φαύλη, ο?ον ε? κα? τ? ψευδε?· κα? ε? πάσης δόξης ? ?κρασία ?κστατικόν, ?σαι τις σπουδαία ?κρασία,

The example of Neoptolemus underlines this difference because it enlightens the possibility of an excellent *akrasia* : « ἴσται τις σπουδαία ἄκρασία ». Neoptolemus is an example used by Aristotle to explain the specificity of the acratia. Neoptolemus is Achilles' son⁴. At the end of Trojan war, the Achaeans have to get Heracles' bow, which implies to go and get his owner : Philoctetus. But, Philoctetus is wounded, and because of his wound's odor, he has been abandoned in Lesbos Island by the Achaeans. Ulysses asks to Neoptolemus to lie to Philoctetus in order to persuade him to turn back among Achean army. But, when Neoptolemus arrives in front of Philoctetus, he cannot respect his engagement with Ulysses. It is this incapacity of Philoctetus to be constant in his engagement which is qualified of excellent weakness of will by Aristotle. Indeed, because of his friendship with Philoctetus, Neoptolemus cannot lie any more to Philoctetus. Therefore, weakness of will seems to be a disposition relative to something, e.g. relative to an engagement. To rephrase, we can identify it in relation to another thing and to another person, e.g. Neoptolemus is acratia considering the circumstances and the persons. In the same way, the excellence of his weakness of will is connected to the persons : in respect to Ulysses and to the Achaeans, Neoptolemus is not excellent because, by telling truth to Philoctetus, Neoptolemus takes the chance to cause the defeat of the Achaeans, but, in respect to Philoctetus, Neoptolemus is excellent because he is sincere with Philoctetus. In a certain sense, he is a Kantian moral subject. Consequently, weakness of will or *akrasia* is a good or bad disposition *pros ti*, but the virtue is a good disposition in every circumstances, so it is good *haplôs*. The second point were we can distinguish weakness of will from the sphere of virtues and vices is through their fields of application. On one hand, we have some vices and virtues which are about pleasures and pains, and on the other hand, we have some disposition as weakness of will, which are about everything and not only about pleasure and pain. Nevertheless this Aristotelian definition of weakness of will, which *quid juris* is not only about moral application, Davidson claims his conception being more general.

« Let me explain how my conception of incontinence is more general than some others »⁵.

οἷον ἡ Σοφοκλέους Νεοπτόλεμος ἢ τὸ Φιλοκτήτη· ἢ παίνεται γὰρ οἱ κρυμμένων οὐκ ἐπίσθη ἢ πῶς τὸ ἐδυσσέως διὰ τὸ λυπεῖσθαι ψευδόμενος ».

⁴ For the story of Philoctetus, cf. Homer, *Iliad*, B.710 ff.

⁵ Davidson, « How Weakness of the Will is Possible ? » in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 21.

One of our aims is to try to understand why Davidson regards Aristotle's conception as not general enough. I think it means that Davidson considers that this problem is not only for the moral sphere but also for any other action. This point seems to be one of the differences between Aristotle and Davidson. But we can imagine that Aristotelian option is also valid out of the moral sphere. Therefore, Aristotle and Davidson settle the problem in a different way. To Aristotle, the problem is not settled by a connection between will or desire, but by a matter of knowledge (*epistêmê*). The Aristotelian question could be spelled out as follows : why act badly, knowing the good ? According to Aristotle, the problem of an incontinent action is grounded in the difference between the agent's belief and his acting. The agent knows that *x* is a bad, but he does *x*. The question with the example of Neoptolemus is to know whether Neoptolemus knows that « not lie to Philoctetus » is bad, which is hard to say. Indeed, Neoptolemus seems to think only of his friendship with Philoctetus, but on the other hand, he seems to wonder whether his decision to tell the truth is good : the recurrence of the question "what shall I do"⁶ which underlines Neoptolemus' hesitation.

« But one might raise the problem: in what sense does a person have a correct grasp when he behaves uncontrolledly? Well, some deny that it is possible to do so if one has *knowledge*: it would be an astonishing thing if, when knowledge is in us – this was Socrates' thought – something else overpowers it and drags it about like a slave. For Socrates used completely to resist the idea, on the grounds that there was no such thing as behaving uncontrolledly; no one, he would say, acts contrary to what is best while grasping that he is doing so, but only because of ignorance »⁷.

The aim of Aristotle is to explain, and might be to solve a contradiction in the acratist agent. Indeed, such an agent acts against his judgment, as if something were stronger than his true judgement. With this text, we can understand why the Aristotelian answer doesn't involve free will. It is not only an historical matter; it is also due to the fact that Aristotle searches to explain the internal contradiction of the incontinent agent. This question is

⁶ Neoptolemus asks this question five times : S., *Ph.*, 757, 895, 908, 969, 974.

⁷ Arist., *EN.*, VII.3.1145b21-27 : « ἡπορήσειε δ' ἂν τις πῶς ἡπολαμβάνων ῥῆθ' ἡκρατεύεται τις. ἡπιστάμενον μὲν οὖν οὐ φασι τινες οὐδὲν τε εἶναι· δεινὸν γὰρ ἡπιστήμης ἡνούσης, ἡς ἡετο Σωκράτης, ἡλλο τι κρατεῖν καὶ περιέλκειν αἴτιον ἡσπερ ἡνδράποδον. Σωκράτης μὲν γὰρ ἡλως ἡμάχετο πρὸς τὸν λόγον ἡς οὐκ οἰσῆς ἡκρασίας· οἰθένα γὰρ ἡπολαμβάνοντα πρᾶττειν παρ' τὸ βέλτιστον, ἡλλ' δι' ἡγνοίαν ».

already discussed in Aristotle and is connected with *Protagoras'* thesis⁸. Plato and Aristotle set the problem in the same way. Nevertheless, an important difference between Plato's and Aristotle's acratia remains. Firstly, the Socratic virtue is not a disposition. Secondly, it might be have no status difference between temperance and others virtues in Plato. But, in both cases, the point is to explain an act which is performed against our knowledge of good. Socrates has explained one man cannot be courageous without knowing what is to affront and what is to fear. Socrates infers the following paradox : if the courageous man is always audacious, audacious is barely courageous because he doesn't have the proper knowledge. Consequently, it's the possession of the knowledge which discriminates the audacious man from the courageous one. And, the virtue of courage belongs only to him.

« Daring and courage are not the same thing, which is how it comes about that the courageous are daring, whereas the daring are not all courageous. And that is because daring can come from people's expertise, but also from rage or madness – just like power – while courage comes from nature and the proper development of the soul »⁹.

We can identify¹⁰ Aristotle acratia's case and one of the man who is living according to his own pleasure, knowing that kind of life is not the more excellent one. In order to explain this attitude, Socrates presents an analysis of the science, and especially of science's exercise. When Aristotle solves the acratia's problem by an explanation of the double meaning of *epistasthai*, he proposes an analysis of knowledge in a practical context. In doing so, he continues a Platonic enterprise. Socrates makes a similar interrogation to Protagoras when he asks to him his opinion about knowledge:

⁸ The adjective « *andrapodos* » show the textual connection between this text of *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Protagoras*, because it also used in *Protagoras* about the same subject, namely, the problem of the force of a knowledge.

⁹ Pl., *Prt.*, 351a3-b3.

¹⁰ It has to be noted that the acratia case doesn't exist in Plato as clearly as in Aristotle. Indeed, as Nicholas Denyer explains, « that name and its cognates do not occur in *Protagoras* ; and when people who knew Socrates do repersent him as using that name and its cognates, they represent him as assuming that someone might be κράτωρ » (*R.* 579c) or κρατής (*Xen. Mem.* 1.5.2-3), and that there is such a thing as ἀκρατία (*Grg.* 525a), κρατεία (*R.* 461b) or κρασία (*Xen. Mem.* 4.5.4-11). Nicholas Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 183.

« "Now, Protagoras, be good enough to lay bare another part of your mind for me. What is your position on knowledge? Is that another area where you share the commonly held view? Or have you a different view? What most people think about knowledge, roughly speaking, is that it is not something strong, not something which directs or rules. They don't regard it as anything of that kind at all. They think that while a person may well have knowledge within him, he is ruled not by knowledge, but by something else – now anger, now pleasure, now pain, sometimes sexual appetite, often fear. They regard knowledge simply as a kind of slave, dragged this way and that by all the other things »¹¹.

This sum up of the traditional position about knowledge means that, when we are acting against our knowledge, we are governed by a passion. This thesis implies a conception of knowledge as something without the necessary strength to order an action. Aristotle relies on Platonic heritage¹². Consequently, Aristotle continues the examination of the possibility to act against a true judgment of what is good, but he does not give the same answer as Socrates to this question. According to Socrates, when an action looks as if it were contrary to judgment, it's not because the judgement is true and defeated by a stronger passion, but rather because the agent acts in the ignorance of what is good. The agent thinks to act properly. He doesn't intend to carry out bad action. To conclude, Plato uses the distinction between an action performed knowing what is good and an action performed ignoring what is good. Instead of this distinction, Aristotle uses the distinction between act and potency. This Aristotelian change of position is guided by Aristotle's judgement about Platonic explanation : Socratic explanation is not coherent with facts:

« Now to say this is to say something at odds with what patently appears to be the case »¹³.

Davidson settles the problem in the same way as Aristotle. He defines the weakness of will as behaviour of the one, who, although knowing what is the best, does not perform it. Causes of this contradiction may be various – weakness of will, lack of will, something we don't want anymore, something that appears to be better. Davidson uses the principle that a person who acts

¹¹ Pl., *Prt*, 352b1-c2.

¹² Arist., *EN*, VII.2.1145b23-25 (already quoted).

¹³ Arist., *EN*, VII.2.1145b27-29.

intentionally acts according to what she knows being the best thing to do. But, the acratia man knows what is the best thing to do, but seems to intentionally ignore it and does something which he knows not to be the best course of action. Moreover, when we compare Aristotelian and Davidsonian definitions, we can notice a similarity of definitions which is interesting, especially because Davidson presents a series of objections to the Aristotelian solution. So why is Davidson unsatisfied by Aristotle's solution, in despite of this similarity in the definitions ? According to Davidson, causes of contradiction are various: weakness of will, lack of will, something we don't want anymore, something who appears to be better. Davidson uses the principle, which is not used by Aristotle, that a person who acts intentionally acts according to what she knows to be the best thing to do. But, the incontinent knows what is the best thing to do, and seems intentionally prefers something which he knows not being the best. Therefore, acratia's action reveals a contradiction of the agent : I know that x is good, I know that y is bad, but I do y. *De facto*, such actions do exist. Davidson gives several examples which are real or literary : brush your teeth although I just get in bed, the adulterous sin of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta or Medea's crime who acts under an impulsion, knowing that she should not kill her children. Those examples show that Davidson doesn't care about objects of *acrasia*, but rather about the behaviour itself:

« 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. Knowledge also has a unneeded, and hence unwanted, flavour of the cognitive; my subject concerns evaluative judgements, whether they are analysed cognitively, prescriptively, or otherwise »¹⁴.

II. Two perspectives about the acratia problem

An interesting difference between Aristotle and Davidson's solutions is that Davidson doesn't use the Aristotelian distinction between using a knowledge (i.e. to have a knowledge in actuality) and having a knowledge without using it (i.e. to have a knowledge in potentiality). But, this distinction could be a good aid to solve the problem, even as Davidson settles it. This Aristotelian distinction between two kinds of knowledge is guided by a weakness of Platonician position. According to Aristotle,

¹⁴ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 21.

Socratic explanation is not coherent with facts. From Davidson's perspective, the point to understand about the acratia is why he doesn't act well, although he knows what to do. To explain this point, Davidson uses three principles which he borrows from Stuart Hampshire.

« Given this interpretation, Hampshire's principle could perhaps be put :

P1. If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and believes himself free to do either x or y , then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally.

The second principle connects judgements of what it is better to do with motivation or wanting:

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 actions »¹⁵.

Davidson uses those three principles to explain Aristotelian position. He doesn't identify Aristotelian position with Hampshire's, but those principles are an instrument to show the difficulties of Aristotelian position. According to Davidson, Aristotle explains the acratia actions by a weakness of the will. So, if we explained the action of acratia men in an Aristotelian way, we would say that he knew it, but he could not resist an external factor : an emotion, a desire, a feeling. Davidson states:

« A related, but different, view is Aristotle's, that passion, lust, or pleasure distort judgement and so prevent an agent from forming a full-fledged judgement that his action is wrong. Though there is plenty of room for doubt as to precisely what Aristotle's view was, it is safe to say that he tried to solve our problem by distinguishing two senses in which a man may be said to know (or believe) that one thing is better than another; one sense makes P2 true, while the other sense is needed in the definition of incontinence »¹⁶.

Aristotle's view is « related » to Hampshire's second principle which is about the internal contradiction of the agent. Davidson regards Aristotle's theory as also working about this internal contradiction of the agent. So, Davidson uses Aristotelian theory of *akrasia* connected with Hampshire's

¹⁵ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p.23.

¹⁶ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p.28.

principles in order to demonstrate that those two theories don't give a good account of an incontinent action. Davidson reads Aristotelian theory as connected to Hampshire's second principle. This use of Aristotle and Hampshire is interesting because Davidson doesn't try to provide a refutation but rather to think with Aristotle and Hampshire. Therefore, he proposes a solution to make more efficient Aristotelian and Hampshire's principles. The point I am trying to make is that I'm not certain we need to amend Aristotelian theory as Davidson does to make it more efficient as Davidson does.

Aristotle uses two theoretical instruments with the aim to solve the problem of *acrasia*: the distinction between knowing in actuality and knowing in potentiality. The second instrument is strictly connected with the first one: it's the so called « practical syllogism ». The distinction between the two ways of knowledge is introduced in *EN* 1146b31ff. in order to solve different problems which had been previously enumerated:

« But since there are two ways¹⁷ in which we say someone knows – for both the person who has knowledge but is not using it and the one using it are said to know – there will be a difference between doing what one shouldn't when knowing one shouldn't but not having regard to the knowledge, and doing it when actually having regard to it; for this is what is thought astonishing, not if one does what one shouldn't when *not* having regard to the knowledge »¹⁸.

By this double sense, Aristotle might mean one has science in potentiality, namely without using it, and, the other has science in actuality, namely, he has and uses it. But, in this passage, we have to consider that the distinction doesn't appear so explicitly because the words *energeia* and *dunamis* don't occur. We can read it in the fact that Aristotle insists on the difference between having science and using it, and having science without using it: to use science refers to the field of actuality. It seems that an other passage of the *Prior Analytics* can help us to shed light on this double sense of the verb *epistasthai* : *Prior Analytics* II21. In this passage, Aristotle distinguishes three senses of *epistasthai*.

« For 'to know' can be used with three meanings: as knowing by means of universal knowledge, knowing by means of the peculiar knowledge of something, or as knowing by means by means of

¹⁷ We can read in those two senses of the word « to know » a commentary of the image of dovecote in Plato *Theaetetus*.

¹⁸ Arist., *EN*, VII.3.1146b31-35.

exercising knowledge; and consequently 'to be in error' also has the same number of meanings »¹⁹.

In both passages, it has to be noted that Aristotle has the same aim: he distinguishes several meanings of 'to know' in order to explain the failures of the acratist man to act virtuously. In both passages, we have the same verb, *epistasthai*. But in *Posterior Analytics*²⁰, the science is described as *ametapeistos*, e.g. as something about which we cannot change the conviction. This description conducts to wonder how the *acratist* can know (e.g. *epistasthai*) and act against his knowledge. Practical syllogism seems to be the instrument which explains this contradiction. Indeed, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle attempts to explain moral failure : acratist fails to act properly although having the correct knowledge. In *Prior Analytics*, he attempts to explain theoretical failure: we fail to attain the truth although having a part of the knowledge. In both cases, the conclusion isn't discovered: the fact it is either an action or a proposition is not the point. That's why the explanation of *Prior Analytics* is more developed. The acratist represents an example of moral failure. The example of theoretical failure is the mule. I think that Daisy is in foal, I know mules are infertile, but I seem to be unable to recognize Daisy as a mule. I don't know it's a mule, and observing external signs, I figure it as in foal. But, Daisy is a mule, so she cannot be in foal:

« And nothing prevents someone who knows both that A belongs to the whole of B, and that this, in turn, belongs to C, from thinking that A does not belong to C (for example, knowing that every female mule is infertile and that is a female mule but thinking that this is pregnant) : for he does not know that A belongs to C, if he does not simultaneously reflect on the term related to each one. Consequently, it is also clear that if he knows one but does not know the other, he will be in error. And this is just what the relation is of universal to particular knowledge »²¹.

¹⁹ Arist., *APr.* II.21.67b3-5 : « τ? γ?ρ ?πίστασθαι λέγεται τριχ?ς, ? ?ς τ? καθόλου ? ?ς τ? ο?κεί? ? ?ς τ? ?νεργε?ν, ?στε κα? τ? ?πατ?σθαι τοσαυταχ?ς ».

²⁰ Arist., *Apost.*, I.2.71b3-4 : « ε?περ δε? τ?ν ?πιστάμενον ?πλ?ς ?μετάπειστον ε?ναι » : « if anyone understands *simpliciter* must be unpersuadable » (english translation by J. Barnes, in *R.O.T.*).

²¹ Arist., *APr.* II.21.67a33-39 : « ο?δ?ν δ? κωλύει ε?δότα κα? ?τι τ? Α ?λ? τ? Β ?πάρχει κα? πάλιν το?το τ? Γ, ο?ηθ?ναι μ? ?πάρχειν τ? Α τ? Γ, ο?ον ?τι π?σα ?μίονος ?τοκος κα? α?τη ?μίονος ο?εσθαι κύειν ταύτην· ο? γ?ρ ?πίσταται ?τι τ? Α τ? Γ, μ? συνθεωρ?ν τ? καθ' ?κάτερον. ?στε δ?λον ?τι κα? ε? τ? μ?ν ο?δε τ? δ? μ? ο?δεν, ?πατηθήσεται· ?περ ?χουσιν α? καθόλου πρ?ς τ?ς κατ? μέρος ?πιστήμας ».

In this case, I cannot obtain the right conclusion of my reasoning : If Daisy has such an abdomen, it could be because of a pregnancy for it's a female mule. In this kind of error, there's a problem about knowledge of particular, namely Daisy in our case. If we can establish a parallel between the both passages, an important point is to note some lexical differences. On the practical side (*Nicomachean Ethics*), the distinction is between using or not using a knowledge : *khraomai* (1146b32) and *ekhein* (1146b33-4). The only verb which refers to the action is *prattein* (1146b34). On the theoretical side (*Prior Analytics*), the point is the middle term by which we can know something. Moreover, this passage uses the verb *energein*. Consequently, it explicitly distinguishes between knowing in actuality and knowing in potentiality.

Aristotle analyzes the two following examples : the one of someone who has knowledge of what has to be done, but doesn't perform it, and the other one of someone who has knowledge, who uses it but who doesn't perform what has to be done. It is the second case which is the case of acrasia, and which is explained by Aristotle. The first case seems to be obvious : for a given reason, one isn't able to use the science (passion, madness, drunkenness). Someone who declaims Empedocles' lines being drunk is an example of the first case:

« That they say the things that flow from knowledge indicates nothing, since those in the affectives states mentioned, too, can recite demonstrative proofs and Empedoclean verses, and if those who have learned something for the first time can string the words together, they don't yet *know* what they have learned – because they have to assimilate it, and that requires time »²².

The second instrument used by Aristotle in order to solve the problem of acrasia is the practical syllogism. There are several difficulties about this expression, because Aristotle doesn't use it. The nearest expression is in *Nicomacheans Ethics* VI 12.1144a31-32: « *hoi gar sullogismoi tôn praktôn arkhên ekhontes* »²³. It doesn't mean exactly « practical syllogism » but a reasoning about the objects of action (*praktôn*). Yet, Davidson seems to consider practical syllogism as an analysis of practical reasoning. But, it is not certain that we can regard practical syllogism as a kind of formalization of practical reasoning. This interpretation of the « practical syllogism »

²² Arist., *EN*, VII.3.1147a19-22.

²³ Arist., *EN*, VI.12.1144a31-32 : « ο? γ?ρ συλλογισμο? τ?ν πρακτ?ν ?ρχ?ν ?χοντές ε?σιν » : « for chains of practical reasoning have a starting point » (translation by Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe).

comes from the fact that tradition has considered practical syllogism as an analogous to the theoretical one. But, Aristotle doesn't establish this parallel²⁴. He doesn't constitute a formal syllogism strictly parallel to the theoretical one, even if there are some similarities between practical and theoretical fields.²⁵ Moreover, one has to consider that Aristotle also uses practical syllogism in order to explain all kind of actions, including animals' ones. Those interpretative difficulties can be regrouped under three headings. To solve those difficulties could have a consequence on the type of possible knowledge in ethic. The first concerns practical syllogism status. Is it an account of the action²⁶, a kind of ethical demonstration²⁷, a product of deliberation²⁸, an explicative modelization? The second difficulty is about the relation between practical and theoretical field. As the expression « practical syllogism » doesn't occur in Aristotelian corpus, it's a problem to consider it as strictly parallel to the theoretical syllogism. We are more concerned by the third difficulty. Indeed, this difficulty regards the modifications of practical syllogism in the aim to explain the practical failure of the reason.

Davidson refers accurately to *De Motu Animalium* and to Aristotle's description of the mechanism of intentional actions. In the second part of the second essay, he uses an Aristotelian syllogism in order to explain his own example:

« In the simplest case, we imagine that the agent has a desire, for example, to know the time. He realizes that by looking at his watch he will satisfy his desire; so he looks at his watch; we know the intention with which he did it. Following Aristotle, the desire may be conceived as a principle of action, and its natural propositional expression would here be something like 'It would be good for me

²⁴ In his edition of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Grants had already noted that « It is uncertain how far this doctrine, even in its beginnings, is to be attributed to Aristotle himself » (pp.212-213).

²⁵ As M. Nussbaum (*Aristotle de Motu Animalium*, Princeton University Press, pp.180-181) remarks it, there are several texts (*Metaph.* VII ; *EE* II.11.1228b28ff., *EN* 1151a16-17) in which Aristotle shows that there's an *arkhê*, namely a starting point as well in theoretical sciences as in ethics. But, those texts don't allow to conclude to two forms of reasonings strictly parallel each others.

²⁶ We might regard Anscombe's analysis of practical syllogism as adopting this option because Anscombe denies that practical syllogism is a demonstration : practical syllogism isn't about something true, but about actions, cf. Anscombe, *Intention*, Cambridge / London, Harvard University Press, §33, pp. 59-60.

²⁷ This option is that of M. Nussbaum (M. Nussbaum, *Aristotle de Motu*, Princeton University Press, pp. 165-220).

²⁸ S. Broadie seems to choose a similar option. Indeed, according to Sarah Broadie, the practical syllogism is a justification or an account of a choice, cf. S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 225-231.

to know the time', or, even more stiffly, 'Any act of mine that results in my knowing the time is desirable'. Such a principle Aristotle compares to the major premise in a syllogism. The propositional expression of the agent's belief would in this case be, 'Looking at my watch will result in my knowing the time': this corresponds to the minor premise. Subsuming the case under the rule, the agent performs the desirable action: he looks at his watch »²⁹.

According to Davidson, this attempt at explaining is not a good account of acrasia:

« As long as we keep the general outline of Aristotle's theory before us, I think we cannot fail to realize that he can offer no satisfactory analysis of incontinent action »³⁰.

My aim is to try to determinate whether the reproach addressed to Aristotle is founded. Indeed, if Davidson is right, it implies that Aristotle's approach isn't useful anymore. If Davidsonian interpretation of practical syllogism is right, practical syllogism is only a way to formalize a practical reasoning, and, according to Davidson, Aristotelian practical syllogism is not a good formalization of a practical reasoning. My aim is to understand whether the practical syllogism is such a formalization. If the practical syllogism is not a formalization, that means two things. The first one is that Davidson's reproach is not relevant because it's not a formalization which Aristotle's wanted to make. The second one is that the practical syllogism might still be an instrument to solve the problem of acrasia. Davidson proposes a faithful rephrasing of Aristotelian description:

« It seems that, given this desire and this belief, the agent is in a position to infer that looking at his watch is desirable, and in fact the making of such an inference is something it would be natural to describe as subsuming the case under the rule. But given the desire and this belief, the conditions are also satisfied that lead to (and hence explain) an intentional action, so Aristotle says that once a person has the desire and believes some action will satisfy it, *straightway he acts* »³¹.

²⁹ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp.31-32.

³⁰ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p.32.

³¹ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 32.

This description shows the parallelism between a practical syllogism and a theoretical one. In both cases, we have a minor and a major which is a kind of rule for the practical syllogism. Another point addressed by Davidson is the fact that the conclusion is an action : « *straightway he acts* ». Since someone knows both of the premises, he acts immediately. Indeed, there is such a connection between the premises of practical syllogism and his conclusion. In *De Motu*, Aristotle uses the adverb *euthus* (εὐθύς) when he settles a conclusion. But, this adverb is not used in theoretical context, to introduce the conclusion of a theoretical syllogism.

« For example, whenever someone thinks that every man should take walks, and that he is a man, at once he takes a walk »³².

I would add that the nature of the conclusion owes us to limit parallelism between practical and theoretical syllogism. This difference seems to be too important to keep looking at the practical syllogism as symmetric to the theoretical one. Indeed, it shows that those syllogisms have two different aims which are irreducible to each other: the one attempts to present knowledge in an adequate order, the other, attempts to describe an action. This fact is significant about the difference between practical and theoretical syllogism : this kind of conclusion, is a characteristic of practical syllogism. It also reveals that we cannot consider practical syllogism as a strict parallel of theoretical syllogism in a practical field. This kind of conclusion raises two problems. First, can we consider practical syllogism as an inference? If we cannot, which kind of argument is it, and is it still an argument? Secondly, does practical syllogism succeed at explaining acrasia?

With respect to the first question, the practical syllogism does not involve an inference as the theoretical one. If it were an inference, the conclusion could be justified by a logical connection. But this conclusion is not justified by a logical connection because this conclusion is an action. An inference implies to obtain a proposition as a conclusion, which is not the case for the practical syllogism. Moreover, if practical syllogism were an inference, which would the criteria be that allows to consider the practical syllogism as a valid argument? Is there any logical law who could justify the passage from a proposition to an action to perform? In other words, there is a qualitative difference between premises and conclusion which makes difficult to think practical syllogism as an inference. This impossibility contradicts Davidson's analysis of practical syllogism as an argument that

³²*DM*, 701a13-14 : « οὐκ ὄντι παντὶ νοήσῃ τι παντὶ βαδιστέον ἄνθρωπῳ, ἀπὸ τῆς δὲ ἄνθρωπος, βαδίζει εὐθέως ».

contains a kind of analysis of a practical argument because the practical syllogism is not constituted by propositions and doesn't represent a formalization of an argument. To conclude this point, the practical syllogism is not a formalization of the argument that I make before acting, but a kind of description of the representations which cause the action.

One of the passages³³ in which the practical syllogism is developed is *De Motu* 7. It is significant that practical syllogism is presented in a biological treatise and not in an ethical one. If it were in an ethical treatise, it would be legitimate to regard the practical syllogism as a formalization of practical reasoning. Indeed, in an ethical treatise, we may have an explanation of how we choose to act, and how to choose properly. This is the case in Aristotelian ethics. But, the explanation of how to act isn't made by an exposition of a good practical reasoning, but by an exposition of a series of dispositions which make me able to choose, e.g. the *phronesis*. Consequently, it seems that Davidson expects from practical syllogism something which it cannot provide : a promise of practical reasoning analysis. Indeed, such an interpretation is opposite to the *De Motu*, because practical syllogism is about actions which do not require reasoning. With respect to this point, the examples of practical syllogisms are obvious³⁴.

1. *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a13-14³⁵ : « Whenever someone thinks that every man should take walks, and that he is a man, at once he takes a walk ».

2. *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a14-15³⁶ : « Or if he thinks that no man should take a walk now, and that he is a man, at once he remains at rest ».

3. *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a16-17³⁷ : « I should make something good; a house is something good. At once he makes a house ».

4. *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a17-19³⁸ : « I need covering; a cloak is a covering. I need a cloak. What I need, I have to make; I need a cloak. I have

³³ Other presentations can be found in *EN*, VI.1142b23, VI.1143a36-b3, VI.1144a29-b1, VII.1147a1, *EE*, 1227b24, *de An.*, 434a17-19. We could add the presentation of deliberation as an analysis in *EN*, 1112b20 ff., but it is not a practical syllogism because Aristotle assimilates deliberation to a geometrical analysis.

³⁴ I take this list from Crubellier M., « Le syllogisme pratique ou comment la pensée meut le corps », in Laks A. & Rashed M. (eds), *Aristote et le mouvement des animaux, dix études sur le De motu animalium*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, pp. 16-17.

³⁵ Arist., *MA*, 7.701a13-14 : « οἷον ἴταν νοήσῃ τί παντὶ βαδιστέον ἄνθρωπῷ, αἴτῃς δ' ἄνθρωπος, βαδίζει εἰθέως ».

³⁶ Arist., *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a14-15 : « ἢν δ' ἴτι οἴδεν βαδιστέον ἢν ἄνθρωπῷ, αἴτῃς δ' ἄνθρωπος, εἴθῃς ῥεμεῖ ».

³⁷ Arist., *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a16-17 : « ποιητέον μοι γαθόν, οἰκία δ' γαθόν· ποιεῖ οἰκίαν εἴθῃς ».

³⁸ Arist., *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a17-19 : « σκεπάσματος δέομαι, ῥμάτιον δ' σκέπασμα· ῥματίου δέομαι. οἴ δέομαι, ποιητέον· ῥματίου δέομαι· ῥμάτιον ποιητέον ».

to make a cloak ».

5. *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a32-33³⁹ : « "I have to drink", says appetite. "Here's drink", says sense-perception or *phantasia*⁴⁰ or thought. At once he drinks ».

6. *E.N.* VI.9.1142a22-24⁴¹ : « either in supposing that all heavy liquids are bad, or that his particular liquid is heavy ».

7. *E.N.* VII.5.1147a29-31⁴² : « thus if everything sweet should be tasted, and *this* (some particular item) is sweet, one will necessarily at the same time also *do this*, provided that one *can* do it, and is not prevented ».

Those examples show that practical syllogism can be about every field of actions, and not only moral ones. Davidson qualifies the practical syllogism as a description or as an account of practical reasoning. But I think that it is rather a presentation of the mechanism of intentional action. Each of those examples proposes an explanation of a mechanism for one particular action : to walk, to eat a sweet or to drink. Aristotle seems to want to show how an intentional action is caused. Davidson understands Aristotelian mechanism in the following way : when we act, we satisfy a desire. This interpretation implies two points. The first is that practical syllogism is an inference:

« Since there is no distinguishing the conditions under which an agent is in a position to infer that an action he is to perform is desirable from the conditions under which he acts, Aristotle apparently identifies drawing the inference and acting : he says 'the conclusion is an action'. But of course this account of intentional action and practical reason contradicts the assumption that there are incontinent actions »⁴³.

There's still a problem namely how to understand Davidson's claim that Aristotle's solution is contradicted by the existence of acratia actions.

³⁹ Arist., *de Motu Animalium*, 7.701a32-33 : « ποτέον μοι, ἢ πιθυμία λέγει· τοδὲ δὲ ποτόν, ἢ ἀσθησις ἐπεὶ ἢ φαντασία ἢ νοῦς· ἐθὺς πίνει ».

⁴⁰ I conserve the mere transliteration of « *φαντασία* », because I don't wish to engage the discussion about the translation of this term. About the function of *phantasia* in intentional action, one can consult M. Nussbaum, *Aristotle de Motu Animalium*, Princeton University Press, pp. 221-269, J.-L. Labarrière, *La condition animale, études sur Aristote et les Stoïciens*, pp. 85-120, P.-M. Morel, *De la matière à l'action : Aristote et le problème du vivant*, Paris, Vrin, pp. 129-136.

⁴¹ Arist., *EN*, VI.9.1142a22-23 : « ἢ γὰρ ἢ τι πάντα τὰ βαρύσταθμα ἴσα φαῖλα, ἢ τι τοδὲ βαρύσταθμον ».

⁴² Arist. *EN*, VII.5.1147a29-31 : « οὖν, εἴ παντὺς γλυκέος γεύεσθαι δεῖ, τουτὶ δὲ γλυκὸς ἢ ἢν τι τὴν καθ' ἡκαστον, ἢνάγκη τὴν δυνάμενον καὶ μὴ κωλύμενον ἢμα τοῦτο καὶ πράττειν ».

⁴³ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 32.

Davidson's analysis could be explained by the fact that the practical syllogism does not allow an internal contradiction in the agent. Indeed, the practical syllogism show a necessary connection between representations and actions. The second point is that, according to Aristotle, desire can be conceived as a principle or a cause of action. This comprehension is correct.

« For all animals both impart movement and are moved for the sake of something, so that this is the limit to all their movement : the thing for-the-sake-of-which. Now we see that movers of the animal are reasoning and *phantasia* and choice and wish and appetite. And all of these can be reduced to thought and desire. »⁴⁴.

Davidson gives the following example : in order to know the time, the agent looks at his clock. In this case, the desire can be conceived as a principle of action. We desire to know the time, so we look at our clock. Davidson identifies this principle with the major premise of a practical syllogism. The minor premise could be rephrased in this way : « To look at my clock will make me know the time ». It's a subsumption which allowed the agent to perform an action. A second objection to Davidson's interpretation of practical syllogism as an inference and as something which contains an analysis of practical argument is put forward by Pierre Aubenque⁴⁵. According to Aubenque, if we regard practical syllogism as a formalization of a practical argument, that means that deliberation is a mere argument, which can be formalized. So, we could find a kind of argument which would allow us to make a good deliberation without any virtue of *phronesis*. But, Aristotle explains several times, especially in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, that prudence, i.e. the virtue which is behind a good deliberation, is connected to experience. Then, we cannot deliberate only by an argument because each deliberation is connected to several contingent circumstances which a mere argument cannot embrace.

In order to understand the use of Aristotle made by Davidson, we have to examine one last point : does the practical syllogism explain incontinence ? We have to distinguish two points of view : the first one is Davidson's one, the second one is Aristotle's one. According to Davidson, practical syllogism doesn't give a sufficient account of *akrasia*, but, as we attempt to show, Davidsonian interpretation seems to be mistaken about the status of the

⁴⁴ *DM*, 700b15-19 : « πάντα γὰρ τὸ ζῆα καὶ κινεῖ καὶ κινεῖται ἕνεκά τινος, ὅστε τοῦτ' ὅστιν αὐτοῦ πάσης τῆς κινήσεως πέρας, τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα. ῥῶμεν δὲ τὸ κινουῦντα τὸ ζῆον διάνοιαν καὶ φαντασίαν καὶ προαίρεσιν καὶ βούλησιν καὶ πιθυμίαν. ταῦτα δὲ πάντα ἕνάγεται εἰς νοῦν καὶ ῥεξίν ».

⁴⁵ Pierre Aubenque, *La Prudence chez Aristote*, Paris, PUF, pp. 149-150.

practical syllogism. If we regard the practical syllogism in a more Aristotelian way, this instrument seems to be a satisfactory explanation.

According to Davidson, such an analysis of practical syllogism contradicts possibility of acratia actions. There is still an interest in Aristotelian theory of acrasia because this theory succeeds in explaining why we can say of an agent he is acratia, knowing something better to perform. But this theory fails to explain an action which results from a violent desire. In this case, an Aristotelian explanation of this action could be only to attribute the origins of action to a desire. Davidson might reproach to Aristotelian theory to not distinguish between two acts which have a different moral value : incontinent action and virtuous action. Indeed, in both cases, the desire causes those actions : one desire is controlled, the other is not. So, the only interest of Aristotelian theory is to show that the agent's capacities weren't optimal because the agent didn't possess all his reasoning capacity. In other words, Aristotelian theory would allow to focus on a kind of extenuating circumstances. Thus, the agent doesn't assess accurately what he is performing. The difficulty of Aristotelian theory is in the relation between the agent and the object of his action, i.e. the desirable object. The fact the object is desirable isn't important. If the agent wants to act, he has to do it because he is moved. The practical syllogism enlightens a kind of mechanism and, for this reason it doesn't account the fact that I could have chosen and acted in an acratia way.

« As long as we keep the general outline of Aristotle's theory before us, I think we cannot fail to realize that he can offer no satisfactory analysis of incontinent action »⁴⁶.

In Davidsonian interpretation of Aristotle, Aristotelian theory fails to give an account of incontinent actions because it's unable to explain why sometimes an agent does an action which he judges bad. This failure of Aristotelian theory is connected with the fact that Aristotle doesn't study the relation between desire and action.

« No doubt he can explain why, in borderline cases, we are tempted both to say an agent acted intentionally and that he knew better. But if we postulate a strong desire from which he acted, then on the theory, we also attribute to the agent a strong judgment that the action is desirable ; and if we emphasize that the agent's ability to reason to the wrongness of his action was weakened or distorted, to

⁴⁶ Davidson, « How is Weakness of The Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 32.

that extent we show that he did not fully appreciate that what he was doing was undesirable »⁴⁷.

Therefore, Davidson regards Aristotelian theory as being not general enough. It can work for particular cases, but not for every case. The reason is that this theory doesn't show enough agent's motivations. Davidson's point seems to be that Aristotle doesn't explain why a same desire and a same belief can cause two different judgements.

« On such a modified version of Aristotle's theory (if it really a modification) we would still have to explain why in some cases the desire and belief caused an action, while in other cases they merely led to the judgment that a course of action was desirable »⁴⁸.

Davidson reproaches to Aristotle to not give an account of this fact in which seems to be the solution of acrasia's problem. Indeed, acting badly, incontinent people believe to have the desire of the good action. For that reason, a good theory of acrasia has to give an account of this false belief. Indeed, according to Davidson, Aristotle forces us to abstract a « piece of practical reasoning »⁴⁹ and to conclude that the incontinent action was desirable.

« We must therefore be able to abstract from his behaviour and state of mind a piece of practical reasoning the conclusion of which is, or would be if the conclusion were drawn from the premises, that the action actually performed is desirable »⁵⁰.

The practical syllogism is indeed a kind of abstraction because we separate from actions the representations which are causes of the actions. The question is therefore to determinate whether the practical syllogism is a kind of practical reasoning. I do think that the practical syllogism is not a practical reasoning, nor a formalization but rather a kind of didactic instrument to propose an explanation of actions. That the practical syllogism has a pretention to reflect the reality of action isn't sure. This point emphasizes a difference between Aristotle's and Davidson's perspectives :

⁴⁷ Davidson, « How is Weakness of The Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Davidson, « How is Weakness of the Will Possible ? », in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 33.

Aristotle tries to give a description and Davidson attempts to give an account of acraic action. To rephrase, Aristotle tries to explain how this action is possible, although Davidson attempts to explain why this action is possible.

To conclude this comparison, I wish to underline that Davidson's reproach to Aristotle is grounded on an interpretation of the practical syllogism as a kind of formalization of practical reasoning. This premise is not warranted. Moreover, as Davidson remarks it, the Aristotelian solution doesn't take into account to the agent's motivations. The importance given to the agent's motivation is the main difference between Aristotle and Davidson. But, even if Davidson transforms Aristotle, he thinks with Aristotle, because he builds his solution in the Aristotelian one. The absence of agent's motivations in Aristotle's solution is connected with the fact that the concept of free will wasn't elaborated until Alexander Aphrodisias' *de Fato*. But it is also connected with the point of view adopted by Aristotle on the acrasia: Aristotle tries to understand why a desire can be stronger than a true knowledge. Consequently, Aristotle and Davidson cannot agree on the same explanation. This does not mean to read Aristotle about acrasia is useless, but simply that we have to read it and to adapt it, as Davidson attempts to do, because his own explanation of acrasia is constructed from that of Aristotle.

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