

Self-confidence and practical reason in Aristotle

In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle enquires the moral character of incontinence (*akrasia*) and associates it with a defect in the agent's knowledge of what is best to do (1147a10-18). In a recent article, David Charles associates rightly this epistemic defect with lack of confidence (*pistis*). He explains confidence as consisting in the appropriateness of desire with the correct decision, and the corresponding lack of it as consisting in the discrepancy between desire for what is best to do and an alternative desire for bodily pleasure (Charles, 2011). Charles' interpretation faces two major problems, though.

- 1) It relies on a non-obvious reading of Aristotle's text.
- 2) It cannot take into account the case of *enkrateia* (continence).

In this talk, I take up Charles' suggestion by enlarging confidence to the whole set of practical rational characters: the virtuous man (*phronimos*), the continent (*enkratês*) and the incontinent (*akratês*). I first argue that, according to Aristotle, rational confidence is an essential feature of any kind of reasoning (scientific, dialectical, rhetorical, or practical). Second, I want to show that *phronêsis*, *akrasia* and *enkrateia*, as various kinds of practical thinking, are distinguished by a proper degree of rational confidence. That these three kinds of character are related to confidence is clear from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI.9 1142a19; VII.3 1145b36-1146a1; VII.10 1151b4 ff.) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (1224a38-b2).

In a rhetorical context, rational confidence in one's belief relies on the argument from which the belief is inferred. It is opposed to non-rational confidence, which depends on the benevolence of the orator or the emotional character of the hearer (*Rhet* 1356a1 ff.). The strength of a rhetorical argument depends on two features: the strength of the inferential relation and the nature of the premisses. The inference must hold "necessarily or for the most part" (*hôs epi to polu*, *Rhet.* 1356b17) and the premisses must be reputable opinions (*endoxa*) (*Rhet.* 1356b33-1357a4; *Top.* 1.11).

In the case of practical reason, a decision to act is the outcome of a deliberation process. Aristotle built up the logical tool which we now call practical syllogism to formalize this process (Broadie, 1991: 229). Practical syllogism provides decision with a justificatory argument and, according to the analogy with rhetorical arguments, gives the agent confidence in the inferred decision. Therefore, decision can be more or less confidently attended at, depending on the number, the appropriateness and the explanatory strength of one's reasons to act. This position develops a suggestion made by Wiggins (1980: 234).

More precisely, the strength of the justification depends on three parameters:

- 1) The amount of reasons to act, i.e. how many arguments the agent can reconstruct from his decision and the present circumstances.
- 2) The moral principles considered: Although the *phronimos*, the *enkratês* and the *akratês* all share the same general end (for they all conclude the same practical conclusion as the best thing to do), they do not necessarily consider the same principles and they do not consider them in the same way. Moral principles hold "for the most part" (*hôs epi to polu*). The agent needs to know when the principle applies and when it does not, or when it requires a specification to hold.
- 3) The nature of the considered circumstances: Aristotle insists that the virtuous agent is able to spot the relevant circumstances of the present situation.

From this framework, one can interpret Aristotle's description of *phronêsis*, *akrasia* and *enkrateia*. *Phronêsis* is the state of practical reason in which confidence in one's practical conclusion is the most complete. The *phronimos* picks out the appropriate principles and is sensitive to the appropriate circumstances. From them he is able to build up reasons to support his practical conclusion. He therefore achieves strong confidence in his decision.

The cases of the *akratês* and the *enkratês* are different. They are not intemperate agents, for they have a correct grasp of the end and come to the right practical conclusion (they know what is the best thing to do). However, as they are not virtuous agent, they are prone to alternative desires which are not compatible with the end they are wishing for. The akratic agent differs from the *enkratês* in that, in spite of his practical knowledge, he acts contrarily to what he knows to be the best line of conduct. He goes for a less virtuous course of action, whereas the *enkratês* holds firm to his decision, withstanding his contrary desires.

Given this, how come that the *akratês* can act contrary to what he knows is best? To invoke the presence of alternative non-rational desire is not enough, for in that case, how come that the *enkratês* resists temptation, while the *akratês* fails to do so? The notion of confidence in one's decision yields an answer.

The *akratês* considers many ends which are not compatible one with another. The justification he builds up in favor of the best end is not strong enough to overwhelm the impulse towards non-virtuous courses of action. According to the above mentioned confidence framework:

- 3) The *akratês* is not sensitive only to relevant features of the situation. His character is prone to desires towards features which are not compatible with the best end.
- 2) He is less acquainted with the moral principles he considers, when they hold and when they do not. Therefore he is less at ease in connecting relevant features of the situation to these principles.
- 1) The consequence of this is the relative weakness of his reasons to act according to the best end.

The *enkratês* differs nevertheless from the *akratês* because he can achieve a higher degree of confidence.

- 3) As the *akratês*, he is sensitive to alternative desires.
- 2) He is as well less acquainted to moral principles than the *phronimos*.
- 1) Nevertheless, his reasons to act according to the best end are stronger than those of the *akratês*'. However it is not possible to specify the cause of this higher degree of confidence. It could be either a better character, which makes him less sensitive to non-rational desires. Or it could be a better acquaintance with moral principles and their conditions of application. Or it could be both.

Bibliography

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