Kant against Akrasia

This paper reconstructs Kant's argument against the existence of akrasia. The terms akrasia, weakness of will, and incontinence are loosely used.[1] I will take them to be equivalent. I take akrasia to refer, roughly, to cases in which an agent "acts– freely, deliberately, and for a reason– in a way contrary to his best judgment" (Bratman 1979, 153), or where an agent "acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgment" (Davidson 2001, 21). I therefore understand akrasia to be necessarily irrational. Despite its familiarity in our everyday lives, Socrates thought you could not make sense of such an idea. Attitudes have changed. Wiggins (1978, 251) and Setiya (2016, 253) declare skepticism about akrasia a non-starter. Most accounts of akrasia do not bother to address skepticism about it.[2]

If the consensus is right, Kant is in trouble. A fundamental Kantian commitment is the following link between reason and freedom: an action is free just in case it issues from an autonomous will. And a will is autonomous just in case the principles of its acting are determined by pure practical reason, rather than some heteronomous source. Kant accordingly identifies practical reason with the will (MM 6:226, G 4:412).[3] As Daniel Guevara (2009) has most forcefully pointed

[1] Richard Holton (2009, 70-96) distinguishes weakness of will from akrasia, in a manner that tracks some of Kant's distinctions (see footnote 14), but his distinction has not gained universal acceptance so I will treat these terms as equivalent.

[2] Important exceptions are Watson (1977), with whom I engage below, and Levy (2011), who argues that akrasia is not a natural kind. The latter is orthogonal to Kant's approach so I will not address it further in this paper.

[3] Kant's works are cited according to Academy pagination, except the first Critique, which is cited according to the A/B citation style. The following abbreviations are used for Kant's works:
A *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*
Anthropology Friedländer *Lectures on Anthropology Friedländer*
Collins *Lectures on Ethics Collins*
CJ *Critique of Judgment*
CPR *Critique of Pure Reason*
CPrR *Critique of Practical Reason*
G *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*
MM *The Metaphysics of Morals*
Mrongovius *Lectures on Ethics Mrongovius*
P What real progress has metaphysics made in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff?
R *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*
Ref *Reflexionen*
TPP *Toward a Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project*
TPPP Treaty on Perpetual Peace in Philosophy.

out, akrasia, free behavior that is not rational, is impossible on this view. Akrasia is supposed to be a breakdown in the connection between reasoning, which issues judgments about what ought to be done, and willing, which issues free actions. Kant's identification of practical reason and the will forecloses exactly this.

Are there any quick fixes which might allow Kant to keep akrasia? Some have claimed that Kant's distinction between the will [*Wille*] and choice [*Willkür*] can create a gap between judgment and action that would allow for it. On this approach, while the will might be identified with practical reason, choice is not part of our cognitive faculty but rather part of the distinct faculty of desire.[4] This is a mistaken reading. Kant states that "The will [*Wille*] is the faculty of desire considered not so much in relation to action (as choice [*Willkür*] is) but rather in relation to the ground determining choice [*Willkür*] to action" (MM 6:213). Both terms describe the rational faculty of desire, but from the perspective of its determining grounds and its actions, respectively.[5] The representing of a law by practical reason can *itself* determine the will to action.

Another option is a constitutivist solution, explaining akrasia as a special kind of aberration of the proper functioning of our capacities.[6] Such a strategy has been deployed to respond to related criticisms. One line of thought complains that if an act is only free if it accords with morality, then culpable wrongdoing is impossible. Commentators have responded that Kant's position is more subtle.[7] Kant's notion of freedom operates at two levels: "while the capacity (*facultas*) to overcome all opposing sensible impulses can and must be simply presupposed in man on account of his freedom […] this capacity as strength (*robur*) is something he must acquire" (MM 6:397). Immoral action is

[4] Wuerth (2014, 245-50) makes the best case for this kind of reading.
[5] See Pendlebury and Fix (forthcoming) for a discussion and defense of this reading.
[6] See Kohl (2023, 149-150) for an approach to Kant in line with this. See also Fix (2022) for a contemporary constitutivist approach along these lines. Kant consistently rejects the possibility of this kind of 'lawless' freedom because of his reciprocity claim. See e.g., R 6:35.
[7] See Korsgaard (1996, 159-187), Engstrom (2002), Sussman (2005).

imputable because humans have a capacity for free action, but agents can also strengthen this capacity. Thus wrongdoing can be both culpable and a diminishment or imperfection of a capacity to act freely. Such an approach will not work here. It fails to introduce a gap between reasoning and willing that akrasia requires. Kant understands freedom and practical reason's autonomy as reciprocal concepts: they should be substitutable *salva veritate*.[8] Any such impediment to the ability of pure reason to determine the will must result in a loss of freedom, and so any resulting action will be just that much less free. But akratic action is supposedly free and yet irrational.

This paper argues that Kant offers substantive reasons to reject the existence of akrasia. Kant thinks that akrasia is a concept characteristic of rationalist approaches to practical philosophy, including the Stoics, the Leibniz-Wolffians, and, I will argue, those today who follow Donald Davidson's approach. Kant's argument is two-pronged. First, his critique of rationalism yields a plausible diagnosis for why philosophers end up positing akrasia. Such approaches have a monistic theory of rational motivation, and the result is a distorted account of the way the will can go wrong. Unlike his rationalist rivals, Kant can distinguish failures both in execution, namely prudential and moral weakness, and in legislation, namely intentional transgressions. Only if one conflates prudential and moral practical reason does one end up requiring a concept like akrasia, which gerrymanders together these distinct failures of practical reason. Second, Kant has the resources for an alternative account of the kinds of cases often described as akratic that better tracks our intuitions about moral phenomena.

Section one distinguishes Kant's own concept of weakness from akrasia. Section two reconstructs why Kant thinks rationalists tend to conflate weakness and intentional transgressions, creating the concept of akrasia. Section three sets out Kant's reasons for preferring his own taxonomy. Section four argues that Davidsonian approaches to akrasia share the same assumptions

[8] CPrR 5:29.

as the rationalists Kant targeted. Section five looks at the distinct failure of prudential weakness, which also gets labelled akrasia. Finally, section six shows that Kant can supply a convincing account of the experience of akrasia, where an agent believes they are freely choosing against their best judgment.

I. Intentional and Unintentional Transgressions

Kant's major rationalist influences accept the existence of akrasia, often including the following quotation from Ovid in their discussion: "I see and approve of better things, but I follow the worse [*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*]" (Ovid, *Met.* 7.20–21).[9] While these accounts all distinguish reason and the will, thus making space for akrasia, they differ in how tightly they connect judgment and motivation. Wolff (1738, §514) and Mendelssohn (1931, 150) develop accounts of the 'apparent' good, stemming from the greater immediacy of certain intuitive forms of representation, which leads the akratic to act against their best judgment.[10] Leibniz (1981, II 21 §35), Baumgarten (2013, §669), and Meier (1747, §57) offer slightly less internalist pictures, introducing a kind of sensitivity to a practical judgment distinct from an agent's epistemic assent to it: representations must be sufficiently lively or vivid to actually move us to action.[11]

But Kant's own concept of weakness in the Critical period must be distinguished from akrasia. In a precritical fragment, dated by Adickes to sometime before 1772, Kant describes akrasia: "consciously willing what is disapproved of by reason is the weak will [*schwache Wille*]" (Ref 3867

[9] Baumgarten and Spalding (1741, §39), Meier (1747, §29), and Mendelssohn (1931, 150). I leave aside empiricist approaches, such as Locke's, which are not Kant's central target. For discussion see Vailati (1990).
[10] See Schwaiger (2018) and Albrecht (2000) for analyses of Wolff's and Mendelssohn's positions, respectively.
[11] Baumgarten (2013, §655) also has an account of "apparent pleasures" that may mislead an agent still thereby acting under the guise of the good, but he seems to want to analyze akrasia differently from this kind of practical failure. For Kant, pleasure picks out a feeling, the existence of which is not distinct from its phenomenal character, so there cannot be an apparent pleasure. For analysis of Baumgarten and Meier, see Schwaiger (2018). See Vailati (1990) for discussion of Leibniz's position.

17:317). In the Critical period, by contrast, Kant is careful to distinguish two forms of moral failure: "an *unintentional* transgression which can still be imputed to the agent is called a mere *fault (culpa).* An *intentional* transgression (i.e., one accompanied by consciousness of its being a transgression) is called a *crime (dolus)*" (MM 6:224). We can understand these as failures in execution (carrying through one's ends) and legislation (setting good ends for oneself) respectively. The proper account of Kant's concept of weakness in his critical works is controversial.[12] But we can start by noting that Kant categorizes weakness as a case of "unintentional guilt *(culpa)*" (R 6:38). So, according to the above distinction between intentional and unintentional transgression, the precritical definition no longer applies: weakness does not involve "consciously willing" the action for the Critical Kant. This change is confirmed by a shift in terminology. Rather than referring to a weak *will*, which would imply intentional behavior, weakness after the Critical turn is solely described as being of "the human heart [*menschlichen Herzens*]" or of "human nature" [*menschlichen Natur*] (e.g., R 6:29, CPR A808/B836, and TPP 8:379).

How is weakness a kind of unintentional guilt? We might take weakness still to involve an intention, just not an intention *to transgress* the law. But Kant means something stronger than this. In a case of weakness, Kant says, "I incorporate the good (the law) into the maxim of my power of choice; but this good[… is] the weaker (in comparison with inclination) whenever the maxim is to be followed" (R 6:29). Full-blown intentional actions, for Kant, are self-conscious: we necessarily understand what we are doing when we do them.[13] So in cases of intentional transgressions, we necessarily understand we are doing something immoral when we do them. In contrast, weakness means that what we intended to do comes apart from what happens. Not because we do not know

[12] The literature on Kant's concept of weakness is extensive. [REDACTED] Closest to my approach are Tizzard (2021) and Viljanen (2020). For radically different approaches, which see weakness as either an intentional failure or a failure in how a maxim is itself formulated see Vujošević (2018), Morrisson (2005) and Johnson (1998).
[13] CPrR 5:66.

what we are doing, but because the execution of the intention is botched: we fail to carry through a sincerely held maxim. It is in this sense that weakness is unintentional or not "accompanied by consciousness of its being a transgression" (MM 6:224). So weakness, in the Critical period, does not involve *choosing* to do something that reason disapproves of, but a different way of failing to exercise the free power of choice. Weakness cannot be understood as intentionally acting against what an agent judged best to do. So it is not akrasia.

It is sufficient for my argument that Kant's weakness is distinguished from akrasia. And to defend properly a positive account of Kant's notion of weakness would require a separate paper. But I will sketch briefly how weakness fits into his account of agency. Kant thinks cases of weakness occur when an agent has lost "mastery of oneself" (MM 6:407), due to emotional distortions like fear or anger, which he calls "affects" (MM 6:407), which prevent rational choice from properly operating. For example, I act weakly if anger clouds my judgment and I punch someone due to their provocations, despite having intended to calmly deliberate with them. Avoiding cases of weakness does not require that the agent choose otherwise. Rather, these are cases where "reason says, through the concept of virtue, that one should *get hold of* oneself" (MM 6:408): we need to expend effort in sustaining our capacity for rational choice. The issue of weakness therefore concerns something closer to what contemporary theorists call willpower, rather than any intentional choice against moral reason.[14]

II. Rationalist Approaches to Evil Result in the Concept of Akrasia

[14] See Holton (2007) and Sripada (2014). The comparison is not perfect: unlike these accounts, Kant does not think of weakness as involving developing a new intention. And this is why he understands weak actions as diminished kinds of actions, in which reason has less presence.

Rationalists posit akrasia, Kant suggests, because their conceptual resources permit no other description of intentional transgressions. Kant notes in the *Religion* that much of the philosophical tradition looks to weakness to explain moral evil:

> It is a very common presupposition of moral philosophy that the presence in the human being of moral evil can very easily be explained, namely by the power of the incentives of sensibility, on the one hand, and the impotence of the incentive of reason (respect for the law) on the other, i.e. by *weakness* (R 6:59n).

We have seen that while Kant allows for weakness, it can apply only to unintentional failures, in which a maxim is not carried out due to the strength of an inclination. This is because "inclinations only make more difficult the *execution* of the good maxims opposing them" (R 6:57), whereas intentional transgressions stem from "perverted maxims" (R 6:58n), which must involve some free act of end-setting.

Kant uses the Stoics as the archetypal exponents of this misconception of evil. The Stoics understand morality as a struggle against inclinations.[15] Losing this struggle is a result of "carelessness" (R 6:57) on the part of agents. This approach, Kant suggests, seems suspect:

> When the Stoic thought of the human moral battle simply as a human being's struggle with his inclinations, so far as these (innocent in themselves) must be overcome as obstacles in the compliance to his duty, he could locate the cause of the transgression only in the *omission* to combat them, since he did not assume any special positive principle (evil in itself); since this omission is, however, itself contrary to duty (a transgression) and not just a natural

[15] Throughout this paper I will speak of the Stoic position as Kant understood it. Kant's target in his discussion of the Stoics is also probably the broader Stoic reception of his time, exemplified by Wolff. See Wolff (1752, §83-90). For discussion see Schierbaum (2024) and Buchenau (2024). Recent contributions on Kant's relation to the Stoics are collected in Merritt (2025).

> error[…] its cause [must be sought] in that which determines the power of choice as free power of choice (R 6:59; underline mine).

The Stoic understands evil as an intentional omission to combat inclinations. This account of weakness is close to Kant's own pre-Critical definition of a weak will, and to what contemporary theorists use akrasia to describe: while knowing what they ought to do, an agent decides not to, giving in to some other desire. And it therefore has the characteristic combination (or, for Kant, confusion) of a model based on conflicting forces (note terms such as 'struggle' and 'battle') and a model in which agents have a kind of complete executive authority over their actions (note terms such as 'omission' and 'carelessness').

Kant thinks the Stoics are forced to describe evil as an intentional omission of combat because their rationalist approach does not allow for the concept of a positive principle of evil. He explains the latter as follows: "If the good = a, the opposite contradicting it is the not-good. Now, this not-good is the consequence either of the mere lack of a ground of the good, = 0, or of a positive ground antagonistic to the good, = - a; in this latter case, the not-good can also be called positive evil" (R 6:23n). So the diagnosis concerns the rationalists' general use of a *privative* theory of evil, understanding it only as a kind of lack. Seeing Kant's point requires understanding why the Stoics cannot conceive of a positive principle of evil, and why that lack forces them to treat akrasia as the central form of practical failure.

Kant's criticisms of rationalism are most substantively directed towards the Leibniz-Wolffian school of his own time, and my argument will hinge on extending these complaints to his description of the Stoic case. Wolff's universal practical philosophy involves a kind of motivational monism, in which all motivation stems from a more or less clear and distinct cognition of the good, ranging from pleasure, as an indistinct cognition of the good, all the way to explicit judgments

concerning the good or perfection (Wolff 1738, §511).[16] Kant accuses this approach of failing to distinguish between moral motives "represented completely a priori by reason alone" and "empirical motives" (G 4:391 cf. Mrongovius 29:598). Kant has in mind the distinction between morality and happiness. The morally good is derived rationally a priori from the form of lawfulness inherent in practical reason, and the agreeable, derived empirically from feeling. When the totality of the latter is rationally synthesized, it yields the representation of happiness.[17] On the Wolffian rationalist model, this lack of distinction between different kinds of motives involves treating "motives only in terms of the greater or smaller amount of them, without paying attention to the difference of their sources (since all of them are regarded as of the same kind)" (G 4:391). For Kant, the collapse of distinct forms of motivation into a single kind makes nonsense of the concept <obligation>. Much of his project in the *Groundwork* and the second Critique involves separating out the *sui generis* nature of the categorical imperative such that the motivational force of 'you must be truthful' and of 'you must try the caviar' can be distinguished in kind and not just by degree.

This rationalist conflation stems from a philosophical position which assumes that conceptual resources can exhaustively fulfill the demands of metaphysical explanation. On such an approach the ground of a negation can only be a lack, never an opposing reality: "by mere concepts reality= a can be contrasted, not to reality= b, but only to privation= 0" (P 20:282 cf. CPR A268-74/B324-30). This stems from the fact that concepts on their own stand only under the principle of analytic judgment: non-contradiction.[18] This principle certifies exactly one excluder for a mark R: its contradictory, not-R. No *positive* mark M can exclude R unless M includes not-R within it. So, for

[16] See also Wolff (1752, §87-90). See Eggers (2019) for Wolff's rationalist position as described here and Goldenbaum (2024) for the specific relevance of the notion of perfection. Compare Kant's criticisms of this kind of position at CPrR 5:40-1 and CPrR 5:22-5.
[17] See CPrR 5:58-9 and G 4:418-9. The good and the agreeable can be brought together insofar as the latter is *conditionally* good, given a good will. But the determination of the original relationship between these two objects of pursuit is nevertheless a choice (see R 6:36).
[18] CPR A150-4/B189-92.

example, because pleasure is understood as a positive reality, pain must be understood as a lack of pleasure. The thought of independent realities opposing each other, what Kant calls *real* opposition, cannot be made sense of.[19]

This metaphysics is what underwrites the rationalist's motivational monism described above. Applied to the will, it means denying that two distinct positive sources of motivation may come into conflict: the end of happiness does not contain as a mark the negation of virtue; thus there is no way the two can oppose each other. All motivational sources are in principle compatible with each other. Positive grounds of motivation are in this sense homogeneous: in a given scenario, a best course of action can be specified according to a single measure of perfection, and if the actual action departs from this course it can be described only as a privation of this perfection.[20] Hence this approach treats "all evil as ground = 0, i.e., mere limitation" (P 20:282).[21] In accordance with the principle of non-contradiction, virtue can be opposed only to the *analytic* negation of virtue, or non-virtue: "vice [becomes] merely[…] the want of virtuous motives" (P 20:282). So the rationalists cannot account for a positive principle of evil, and the result is that all evil must be explained by a lack of moral motivation.[22]

Applying this broader critique of rationalism to its Stoic iteration, Kant claims Stoic motivational monism tries to understand the will entirely through moral concepts (CPrR 5:60; cf. TPPP 8:415n).[23] He therefore understands the Stoics to take *virtue* to specify exhaustively the

[19] For discussion see Longuenesse (2000, 136-138).
[20] See Wolff (1752, §12) and Baumgarten and Kant (2020, §36). For discussion see Stratmann (2026). Kant identifies this as the rationalist position at G 4:442-4, CPrR 5:40-1 and R 6:4n.
[21] See also R 6:23n and CPR A273/B329.
[22] See Baumgarten (2013, §135-140) and Ref 3557 17:54, for Kant's discussion of Baumgarten's claim. See Hogan (2013, 286-7) for helpful discussion.
[23] Kant understands the Stoics' rationalism to function a little differently from that of the German rationalists here. He takes them to reject the legitimacy of inclinations, stemming from pleasure and displeasure, to motivate the will at all. Rather than pleasure as a confused representation of the good, it is defined negatively, as a hindrance of the absolute

positive content of the good. Now, this is challenged by happiness, which at least appears to be a distinct source of value from virtue. Kant understands the Stoics to respond to this challenge by claiming that happiness is conceptually contained in virtue, such that from the achievement of virtue, happiness analytically follows (CPrR 5:126-7).

The containment of happiness in virtue makes intentional transgression incoherent. Every positive ground for action is already included in the representation of virtue. Therefore, having deliberated about an action, there are no positive grounds which could ever speak in favor of *choosing* anything but the moral act, which is necessarily also the happiness-maximizing act. Thus they understand evil privatively, as the will carelessly being overcome by inclination. Yet there are also cases in which we evidently intentionally pursue immoral ends without suffering any kind of affective distortion on our capacity for choice. To extend this privative notion to cover all cases of evil, the Stoics have to adapt their model of weakness to allow for intentional behavior. And such a choice is necessarily irrational, given a philosophical system which identifies all positive grounds for choice with morality. The result is a category of intentional weakness or akrasia, in which an agent irrationally decides not to struggle against inclinations.

III. Kant's Alternative Model

In contrast to rationalist approaches, Kant can account for a *real* opposition between our motivations, such that we can have positive ends which conflict with the moral law, in addition to a *logical* one, which can account only for a lack of moral motivation.[24] Such a distinction, I will now

good of the perfect independence of the will (R 6:57; see also CPrR 5:127n). But this approach also fails to recognize two sources of motivation, as is clear from the Stoic's identification of happiness with virtue.

[24] See MM 6:384. Kant describes this as the difference between contraries and contradictories. Contradictories are specified analytically according to the principle of non-contradiction. Contraries require synthetic content.

argue, tracks our ordinary judgments about moral transgression in a manner unavailable to the akratic model.

Rather than being a mere privation of virtue (and, analytically, a privation of happiness for the Stoics), vices stemming from a positive principle of evil involve an agent choosing the agreeable over the good, happiness over virtue. It is in this way that intentional transgression is a real possibility for human agency. Intentional transgressions are not just failures in execution, like weakness. They are failures in legislation, involving an agent setting an end that they conscious violates the moral law (MM 6:224). But intentional transgressions are not instances of akrasia either. Rather than being an irrational action which departs from one's judgment, such transgressions are prudentially rational actions departing from moral judgment. This is possible if an agent has incorporated into their fundamental maxim their desire for happiness prior to the moral law (R 6:36). That is, they have determined their happiness to be of more significance than the morally good.

The rationalist approach offers an exhaustive account of human action through the concepts of perfection and privation. Its cost is the incoherence of its depiction of evil. Kant's theory, by contrast, portrays agents as having an unconditionally free choice concerning the priority of happiness or morality. But such a choice is not further explicable, "for we can explain what happens only by deriving it from a cause in accordance with laws of nature, and in so doing we would not be thinking of choice as free" (MM 6:380). To provide some explanatory ground for the choice between good and evil principles leads to either a regress problem, insofar as one insists on freedom, or to the abolition of freedom if one supplies some final ground outside of free choice (R 6:21n).[25]

[25] There has been debate between so-called intellectualist and voluntarist descriptions of Kant's position. Intellectualists see intentional transgressions as an intentional misuse or distortion of freedom. Voluntarists see intentional transgressions as a free choice. See Pendlebury and Fix (forthcoming) and Timmermann (2022) for the respective

Unless one wants to beg the question in favor of a kind of transcendental freedom which excludes the application of the principle of sufficient reason, one might wonder why we ought to trade the Stoic incoherence of immorality for the Kantian inexplicability of freedom. Kant offers two significant upshots in favor of his position.

First, Kant's charge is that the Stoic-perfectionist picture lacks the resources to make a distinction between merely weak and properly evil agency. Lacking an evil principle that an agent could choose, rationalists must describe *all* rational agency as virtuous, and all evil as a mere lack of sufficient rational agency. The Stoics therefore cannot explain the kind of rationality an agent may exhibit in their pursuit of evil ends: when faced with what appears to be rationally competent villainy, the Stoic must either deny competency or deny villainy.[26] Kant's introduction of a real, rather than merely logical, opposition to the moral law makes sense of evil not as privation but as an active choice which may involve reason. Rationalist moral philosophy therefore lacks a central conceptual resource to make sense of moral violations that we tend to view as the most pernicious kind.

Second, Kant thinks that the lack of resources for such a distinction has practical consequences. Insofar as the Stoic philosophical position is adopted by agents, it can hinder the realization of our moral vocation by distorting the appropriate enemy of virtue. Kant stresses that only with the notion of a positive principle of evil which opposes morality can we appreciate the "total dissimilarity of [these] basic principles" and guard against "the danger associated with the

positions. If the intellectualist position is correct, then intentional transgressions also diminish an agent's freedom in misusing it. While I think the intellectualist approach is right, I take what I say here to be neutral between these approaches.

[26] See MM 6:384. Compare A 7:293, where Kant claims that even though we experience disgust at great crimes, we still admire the strength of the maxim involved. Again, the rationalist position cannot make sense of this kind of complex attitude, as it acknowledges a single kind of rational strength.

illusion of a close relationship between [these] characteristics" (R 6:60n). The danger, Kant points out, can be avoided only if an aptitude in willing evil ends is understood as different in kind from virtue, rather than simply a different application of the same aptitude. Without this distinction, virtues become "splendid frailties" as they are conceived solely as a kind of rational competency, a kind of "discipline of the inclinations in general" (R 6:59 cf. G 4:394) which may be used to realize good or evil purposes alike.[27] Distinguishing virtue from general rational competency allows Kant to hold them to independent standards, such that virtue is understood as the strength of an exclusively *pure* practical reason. It then becomes "improper to ask whether great *crimes* might not require more strength of soul than do great *virtues*" (MM 6:384), for great crimes are corrupted in their principle, not merely their execution.

IV. Extension to Contemporary Accounts

Kant's criticisms of the rationalists can be extended to contemporary advocates of akrasia. Contemporary discussion of akrasia follows from Donald Davidson's groundbreaking approach. Davidson understood philosophy of action to be a completely general account of agency. Morality would then be a particular domain to which this general account can be applied. Failures such as akrasia, on this view, should be analyzed in abstraction from such particular domains: "incontinence is not essentially a problem in moral philosophy, but a problem in the philosophy of action" (Davidson 2001, 30n14).

Akrasia is a problem for philosophy of action to account for because it appears to violate what Davidson understands as a basic and unrestricted internalist principle concerning rational agency.

[27] Kant accuses Wolff of the same mistake. See CPrR 5:40 and Mrongovius 27:626.

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" (Davidson 2001, 23).

Given that agents will intentionally do what they most want to do, there seems to be no space for actions that depart from what an agent judges best. Davidson's solution turns on locating irrationality in the transition from an agent's all things considered judgment to the unconditional judgment which they in fact act on. Thus an agent acts for some reason when acting akratically, but this reason is distinct from the one recommended by their all things considered judgment.

Davidson's methodological non-moralism may seem far from Kant's rendering of the Stoic position, which takes virtue to be the exhaustive topic of human action. But Kant's argument concerned the tendency of rationalists in general to pursue a *universal* practical philosophy. In such theories, all motives are "regarded as of the same kind" (G 4:391), and the comparison and coordination of our reasons for action can thereby be achieved using a single notion of the good or perfection, moral or otherwise. And this means that Davidson shares the rationalists' fundamental assumption. This is easily seen from Wolff's endorsement of an equivalently unrestricted internalist principle: "for a human being who cognizes something as better, it is impossible for them to prefer the worse, and as such it necessarily happens that they choose the better" (Wolff 1751, §521).

On a Kantian account, Davidson has attempted to model the entirety of practical reason on the structure of prudential reason. Prudential reason involves the calculative specification of what an agent ought to do on the basis of the given end of happiness.[28] All-things-considered judgments can capture the logic of such a specification well. For Kant, however, the use of 'better' in Davidson's P2 disguises that prudential and moral grounds for action cannot be compared in this manner. Just as the Stoics collapse all possible grounds for action into a single representation of virtue,

[28] See CJ 20:201n and MM 6:433n.

Davidson's all-things-considered judgment allows for a single deliberative procedure for all possible reasons for action. Kant's claim is that moral reason should not be assimilated to such an account.

Contra Davidson, Kant does not think of morality as a specific domain of philosophy of action. Rather, it is part of the form of free agency. And he thinks this can better account for the various capacities constitutive of the will, and the various ways these capacities can then go wrong. The formal role of morality that concerns us is an agent's *choosing* whether to prioritize selfish or moral reasons.[29] And this cannot be accounted for by an all-things-considered-judgment because it first determines how an agent will relate to such reasons, rather than calculating with already given reasons.

Kant's diagnosis of why rationalists end up positing something like akrasia applies here as well. An unrestricted P2 makes all practical failure look akratic: lacking the concept of a choice concerning an agent's end, failures in legislation and execution cannot be distinguished. The will goes wrong only in failing to transform reason's calculations into the proper intention. The result is the concept of akrasia.

Kant's complaint concerning rationalist approaches to weakness here will generalize to contemporary accounts of akrasia that (i) offer an account of agency in abstraction from moral and prudential reason, and (ii) subscribe to some version of Davidson's internalist P2. This can be seen by looking at the way such approaches deal with moral phenomena.

Gideon Rosen's account of moral responsibility offers one such case. Rosen understands akrasia in Davidsonian terms, and claims that it is only in instances of akrasia that moral

[29] For related claims that full accounts of agency need something like this, see Chang (2023, 186-191), Buss (1997, 37), who explicitly connects the issue to Kant, and the discussion of the distinction between instrumental and ethical agents in Eckert-Kuang (2026).

responsibility for a transgression is in fact possible, for only in such situations does an agent both recognize some moral obligation and yet freely choose to act otherwise (Rosen 2004, 312). This was, recall, exactly what Kant understood the Stoic's position on immoral action to be. Such an impoverished conception of practical reasoning departs from our ordinary manner of judging transgressions, and has no room for distinct ways in which agents can go wrong.

This can be seen through an example. Frank Jackson (1984, 2), also following Davidson's analysis, uses as a case of akrasia a situation in which someone does not leave their name and address after a car accident for which they were responsible. Jackson specifies that in this scenario there need not be any kind of overwhelming passion or emotion. This agent knows that they ought to take responsibility for the car accident, but acts otherwise. Now, did this agent act freely but irrationally against what they all-things-considered judged they should do? To my mind, Kant offers a more plausible description of such a situation as a case of intentional transgression, rather than akrasia. The agent chooses to act in favor of self-interested grounds, rather than in favor of moral grounds. Their behavior is perfectly prudentially rational in its selfishness. Just as with the Stoics then, the Davidsonian approach results in the loss of a distinction between weakness and vice.

V. Prudential Weakness

The story so far explains away akrasia when a moral issue is at stake, and offers a more fine-grained taxonomy of how an agent may be going wrong: they may be failing in execution or legislation. But it would strain plausibility if Kant means to describe all action that departs from the recommendations of reason as immoral. His break from the rationalists comes precisely from his pulling apart a moral and a prudential use of reason, and their independent motivational sources. Prudential reason has its own form of weakness which adds to explaining away cases that appear akratic. Kant's most substantive example of prudential weakness takes place in the *Groundwork:*

> The precept of happiness is often so constituted that it greatly infringes upon some inclinations, and yet one can form no determinate and sure concept of the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations under the name of happiness. Hence it is not to be wondered at that a single inclination, determinate both as to what it promises and as to the time within which it can be satisfied, can often outweigh a fluctuating idea, and that a man - for example, one suffering from gout - can choose to enjoy what he likes and put up with what he can since, according to his calculations, on this occasion at least he has not sacrificed the enjoyment of the present moment to the perhaps groundless expectation of a happiness that is supposed to lie in health[…] in this case[…] the general inclination to happiness did not determine his will (G 4:399)

The gout-sufferer intentionally chooses against what he judges he ought to do to be maximally happy.[30] Does this mean Kant accepts the existence of prudential akrasia? No, because Kant denies Davidson's P2 even when restricted to prudential scope.

> Prudential P2: If an agent judges that there are no relevant moral considerations and that it would be prudentially better to do x than to do y, then she wants to do x more than she wants to do y.

Obviously, Kant must deny Prudential P2 on grounds different from those on which he rejects its unrestricted form. On a Kantian account, Prudential P2 is excessively internalist, because Kant's approach to prudential reason is broadly Humean. In its prudential deployment "reason only occupies[…] the place of a servant of natural inclination" (R 6:45). Happiness, as the object of prudential reason, involves the rational, evaluative judgment of what will best maximize the satisfaction of all an agent's inclinations. But it must borrow, with the help of the power of the

[30] [REDACTED] Much more could be said about the nature of prudential weakness. My account here is closest to Bader (2023). For a radically different interpretation of prudential weakness, see Timmermann (2022, 114).

imagination, its motivational efficacy from the inclinations that it promises to satisfy.[31] Hence in the gout-sufferer case happiness *itself* is described as an inclination. The inclination to happiness, as the imagined ideal of my inclinations maximally satisfied, must be *causally* stronger than the immediate competing inclinations in a given situation. And it is no surprise that in a given situation this vague judgment of greater happiness can be motivationally overpowered by an immediate pleasure.

Without Prudential P2, Kant does not think there is a relevant sense of freedom in cases of prudential weakness, and it therefore does not count as akrasia. Recall the two definitions of akrasia I began with. Davidson requires only that the agent act intentionally; Bratman requires that they act freely. I take the stronger requirement to specify the phenomenon for Kant. An action is akratic only if an agent with full rational control over the action chooses against what they judge they ought to do. Davidson, like many philosophers, thinks that *any* intentional behavior needs to be understood under a "constitutive ideal of rationality" (Davidson 2001, 223). That is what allows us to make sense of akrasia as an abberant case of irrationality. But this is not Kant's position. Only from a *moral* point of view do I evaluate an agent "under the idea of a reason having complete control over all subjective motives" (G 4:420n). For a rational but not moral being "self-consciousness would indeed make him a thinking automaton, but the consciousness of his own spontaneity, if taken for freedom, would be mere delusion[…] because the proximate determining causes of its motion and a long series of their determining causes are indeed internal but the last and highest is found entirely in an alien hand" (CPrR 5:101 cf. R 6:26n). Prudence deals with the maximal satisfaction of inclinations which are given from without. And because it concerns the causal strength of conflicting inclinations, not a weighing of reasons, prudential weakness does not, strictly speaking, exhibit irrationality either. It is rather a failure of discipline. Prudential discipline is "the executive authority

[31] See Stroud (2003) for a discussion of Humean externalist approaches to akrasia.

of reason's prescription over the actions that proceed from sensibility" (Collins 27:360) such that an agent actually acts from the counsels of prudence. But the motivational force of this authority does not lie in reason itself. Rather, "the understanding plays off one sensible factor against the rest" (Collins 27:361).[32]

While unrestricted P2 was rejected because it extended the calculative form of prudential reason to all of practical reason, prudential P2 is rejected because it applies the rational authority of moral agency to prudential reason. The agent cannot be described as *freely* acting against what they judge they ought to do, even if they are intentionally doing it, because Kant's prudential motivational externalism means that reason is not the final arbiter of the course of action for which it forms the intention. So prudential weakness is not fairly described as akrasia either.

VI. Clear-eyed Akrasia

I have argued that Kant would carve purportedly akratic cases into three distinct kinds: intentional transgressions, moral weakness, and prudential weakness. None of these kinds can be called free action contrary to what one judges one has most reason to do. But can Kant's taxonomy capture the target phenomenon? What is missing so far is an account of the experience of what is termed clear-eyed, or aggressive, or full-fledged akrasia. In these cases, an agent acts akratically while (i) being wholly conscious of the reasons against their action, (ii) experiencing no mitigating distortions on faculties (what Kant terms affects), and with (iii) an awareness of their ability to do otherwise (cf. Guevara 2009). Moral weakness involves mitigating distortions. Prudential weakness does not

[32] Kant's position on prudential weakness is very close to Watson's (1977) account of failures of self-control in his own skeptical account of akrasia. However, from Kant's perspective, Watson fails to account for moral weakness, in which the standard of self-control is not set by the norms of a community, but rather by reason itself.

involve an agent's full rational authority over the course of action. And to describe clear-eyed cases as intentional transgressions seems excessively moralistic: examples of clear-eyed akrasia range from toothbrushing to eating an extra chocolate bombe. The uncompelled character of clear-eyed akrasia is often taken as the best evidence for akrasia as a *free* action against one's better judgment, so the Kantian will need a response to satisfactorily complete his case.[33]

When we bring together the moral and prudential components of agency discussed above, Kant can account for the experience of clear-eyed akrasia. Consider Bratman's description of the clear-eyed case of Sam, someone drinking when he should not be:

> Sam drinks the wine for a pair of reasons: the pleasure of drinking and the temporary relief of his depression. He does not drink it impulsively or impetuously; he drinks it, rather, deliberately and with a knowledge of his reasons both for and against drinking it. Finally, Sam is not compelled so to act. He could put the glass down and go to sleep and he knows this. Sam's case is, it seems, one of free, deliberate, and purposive– i.e., full-blown– action contrary to the agent's best judgment (Bratman 1979, 156-7).

Suppose that Sam's drinking has merely prudential significance.[34] Kant would understand Sam's drinking to be a result of his undisciplined character such that the motivational efficacy of the inclination to drunkenness is stronger than the motivational efficacy of the inclination to happiness. While Sam's drinking is intentional, on Kant's account Sam has no prudential alternative. He acts according to the inclination with greatest force.

So how can Kant explain Sam's awareness of his freedom? Kant claims that agents' consciousness of their negative freedom stems from their consciousness of their moral obligations: "only [the moral] law[…] makes us conscious of the independence of our power of choice from

[33] For discussion of the significance of these kinds of cases see Mele (2002, 159).
[34] Kant does discuss the potential moral significance of inebriation at MM 6:427, but I leave this aside here.

determination by all other incentives (of our freedom) and thereby also of the accountability of all our actions" (R 6:26n; cf. CPrR 5:4n). But Kant notes that this freedom comes apart from one's prudential rationality:

> The less a human being can be constrained by natural means and the more he can be constrained morally (through the mere representation of duty), so much the more free he is. Suppose, for example, one so firm of purpose and strong of soul that he cannot be dissuaded from a pleasure he intends to have, no matter how others may reason with him about the harm he will do himself by it. If such a one gives up his plan immediately, though reluctantly, at the thought that by carrying it out he would omit one of his duties as an official or neglect a sick father, he proves his freedom in the highest degree by being unable to resist the call of duty (MM 6:382n).

Kant's point in this passage is not to consider someone who is deluded about the best path to happiness. His point is that prudential rationality is not necessary for freedom, so there can be cases in which an agent is prudentially undisciplined but nevertheless free.[35]

For Kant, Bratman's description of Sam's drinking therefore conflates two independent aspects of Sam's position. If Sam's case solely involves prudential concerns, then a motivationally stronger inclination causes him to act intentionally against his inclination to happiness. But it is possible that he remains morally free, in the sense that no inclination has authority over his will where duty is at stake, and none happens to be at stake here. While he is pushed to act in favor of something suboptimal in terms of his happiness, he can still know that if any moral consideration were in play, he *would* disregard all sensible inclination in favor of duty.[36]

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[35] Undisciplined, or prudentially weak, may seem like a strange label for someone described as having a strong soul. But strength of soul, at least in prudential contexts, is distinct from discipline, describing, in the prudential case, the general motivational force of one's desires (Anthropology Friedländer 25:651). Prudential rationality thus proves 'weaker' than some particular desire.

[36] See Bader (2015) for a discussion of the way in which moral considerations can silence prudential ones.

This is why clear-eyed akrasia attaches only to the trivial. Consider instead if Sam's desire to drink would prevent him from acting morally. Say, for example, he must perform a high-risk surgery the following day, and a lack of sleep and a hangover could endanger the patient's life. Here, clear-eyed akrasia ceases to be a plausible description: it seems that he is either not freely deciding to drink or engaging in a choice to endanger someone that must count as an intentional transgression.

So there are cases in which moral freedom and acting against what one judges one prudentially ought to do coexist, so long as there are no moral considerations in play. And this is because prudence has little to do with freedom. When I tell someone they ought not to have another drink for prudential reasons, I am trying to add weight to their general inclination to happiness, by bringing to mind the future suffering their action will incur. When I tell someone they ought not to have a drink for moral reasons, I treat them, again, morally, "under the idea of a reason having complete control over all subjective motives" (G 4:420n).

VII. Conclusion

I have argued that Kant does not need akrasia in his taxonomy of practical failure. Kant's account of practical reason allows for both legislative and executive failures. And this means he can divide the cases usually called akratic into three kinds: intentional transgression, moral weakness, and prudential weakness. None of these are free action against one's better judgment. The motivational monism of rationalist approaches means that they have no room for these distinct kinds of failure, with all departures from the recommendation of reason taking the form of a kind of intentional weakness. Finally, I have suggested that Kant has room for the phenomenology of clear-eyed akrasia, because even when an agent is not able to do otherwise prudentially, they remain morally free.

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