

Aristotle and Searle on Desirable Action: Two Contrasting Analysis

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The paper delves into the conditions under which an action can be deemed desirable, focusing on two contrasting models proposed by Aristotle and John Searle. While Aristotle emphasizes reason and virtue as central to the desirability of action, his framework ultimately remains desire-centric. In contrast, Searle advances a model of desire-independent action, arguing that the Aristotelian view renders actions susceptible to incontinence. Building on this debate, we contend that continent actions are desirable not merely because they are desire-independent, but also due to their normative grounding. We further argue that the normativity of action should be conceived as an imperative, rather than being reducible to mere rationality of action.

Keywords: *desirability, akrasia, desire independent, power of will, desirable action, moral psychology*

Introduction

Aristotle considers desire as the wellspring of human action, asserting that desire is responsible for both voluntary and akratic actions. The *akratic* actions are caused by *akrasia* – the *weakness of will* which lacks normative element in order to be virtuous or desirable action. The performance of *desirable* action presupposes rational deliberation. The *desirability* condition of action, for Aristotle, considers use of reason and virtues. John Searle, on the contrary, argues that actions are basically intentional. The intentional actions are *desire-independent* which are grounded on reason. *Desirable action* is action with *desire-independent reason*. Searle clearly rejects the Aristotelian model under the large scheme of classical theory of action. Searle concedes that action originates from desire which characterizes action as *desire-dependent* action. These desire-dependent actions are vulnerable to *akrasia*. However, Searle's challenge is mainly in the line of naturalisation of the *deontic power* of human intentionality that maintains: *all desires to do something are rational desires*. Following this dictum, Searle questions the very possibility of normative action based on desire. In this paper, we intend to study the desirable condition of action focusing on the two different models of *desirable action* proposed by Aristotle and John Searle respectively.

Following this debate on the desirable action from the standpoint of Aristotle and John Searle, we try to hold that continent actions are desirable not only because they are *desire-independent* but also due to their normative grounding. An attempt is also made in this paper to analyze the Searlean criticism of Aristotle's theory of

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action and also show that Aristotle's theorization of action has a contemporary relevance and to the study of philosophical moral psychology. It is in this context that Donald Davidson (2002) and David Charles' (1984) analyses of desire and *akrasia* have been principally considered while responding to Searle's criticism of Aristotle.

To understand the intricacy of *desirable action*, the paper is divided into five sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion, beginning with the first section, which provides a general account of Aristotle's theoretical classification of action, referring to *Nicomachean Ethics*. A discussion on desire and *akrasia* with reference to Aristotle's *De Anima* and other texts is made in the second section. In the third and fourth sections, we try to analyse the notion of desire and *akrasia vis-à-vis* the notion of *reason*. The incontinent or *akratic* action, unlike any other action, originates from desire and propels rational deliberation. As Searle concedes, *akrasia* is 'something common in *human* life.' It could also, therefore, be held that, if not all, some actions do originate from desire, whose intent could be deliberated upon in order to perform a *desire-independent action*, and that we need not necessarily treat reason as an isolated faculty for decision-making. In the final (fifth) section of the paper argues that if one fails to deliberate and does not *contemplate* pursuing *desirable action*, then *incontinent* action may occur as an expression of *intense desire* by elucidating Donald Davidson (2002) and David Charles' (1984) views on desire and *akrasia* which have been principally considered while responding to Searle's criticism of Aristotle. The paper concludes by suggesting that moral failure is an outcome of excessive *self-indulgence* that weakens the normative attitude of a person. There is an urge that the agent needs to be practically wise and *the will* ought to be morally strong in order to perform a desirable action.

I

In the book III of *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, Aristotle classifies action into two kinds: *hekousion* and *akousion*, which have been variously translated as voluntary, and involuntary (Ross 1999), willingly and unwillingly (Hauges 2001), and intentional and non-intentional (Charles 1984). In this paper, we would like to retain the sense of *voluntary* and *involuntary*. According to Aristotle, the *voluntary* action is not just simply opposed to *involuntary* action, rather it is also different from *non-voluntary* action. We can represent Aristotle's classification of theory of action in two groups: *voluntary* and *not-voluntary*. An action is considered voluntary if the action is performed *knowingly* by the agent. That is to say, the agent knows what s/he is doing. The voluntary actions, according to Aristotle, are *hekousions*. But if the same action is performed *in* ignorance or the agent is *forced* to perform the action, then the action will be characterized as an *involuntary action*. In the words of Aristotle, "if a wind carried someone away, we could say that what happened was forced and, in consequence, it was not voluntary" (Aristotle *NE*, 1110a35-5). The agent being carried out by wind is something caused by the external force of the wind; it was not desired by the agent. Similarly, if the agent is suffering from the sleep-walk syndrome, his/her movement in sleep is caused by the syndrome which

is not known to him/her; rather the agent is *ignorant* of the fact that s/he is moving. In the case of movement caused by the *force* of the wind, the agent though *knows* that s/he is moving; still, their movement has no *self-control*. The movement is due to the greater *force* of the wind over the mass of the agent's body as well as against their desire. In these cases, ignorance and force are treated *external* to the agent and hence are characterized as an involuntary action—*akousion*.

Apart from voluntary and involuntary actions, Aristotle also talks about *non-voluntary* action. The notion of non-voluntary action pertains to both voluntary as well as involuntary action. The cause of action is not *always* external or may not be external to the agent. Rather the cause of action is internal. For example, if the agent *knows* that smoking is injurious to health, but continues to smoke because of their addiction. In this case, the agent's addiction shows *intense desire* for smoking acts as an *internal cause* or *force* that compels the agent to smoke. The agent knows that the *consequence* of the action will be harmful or would have adverse effect on their health, still, s/he is *helpless* and their *will* succumbs to the *intense desire* of smoking. This is a *non-voluntary action* that exhibits *weakness of will*.

Aristotle further maintains that action done *in ignorance* is different from action done *by ignorance*. When an agent does not know, what s/he is doing and what the consequence will be if the action is undertaken, then it will be an action done *in ignorance*. In this context, the agent ignores the particulars which the action is concerned with. For instance, when a thirsty person drinks something assuming that 'it is water' to quench his/her thirst, but in actuality, the liquid that s/he happened to drink was not water but 'it was wine.' In this situation, s/he actually did *not desire* to drink wine. S/he only desired to quench his/her thirst. Here, the agent's action is done *in ignorance*. This kind of action is considered *involuntary* because the agent did not *desire* to drink wine. Rather the agent's desire was to drink water and quench his/her thirst.

However, in Aristotle, ignorance is the cause of vice (Aristotle *NE*, 1110b 25) as it happened in the case of the agent who unknowingly drank wine and also the agent who performed action with the *weakness of will*. The agent's action belongs to these categories and involves ignorance. An action done *in ignorance* is shown as/inexample of 'drinking wine unknowingly', whereas action done *by ignorance* is discussed in connection with the example of 'addictive smoking. 'Thus, the action done *in ignorance* and *by ignorance* is respectively of two types namely: involuntary and non-voluntary action; these two kinds of action belong to the category of not voluntary action.

Based on these classifications we can figure out two satisfactory conditions of Aristotle's theory of action:(1) An action is considered voluntary when its cause originates within the agent—that is, the agent is the sole source of the action. (2) For an action to be truly voluntary, the agent must also possess knowledge of the particular circumstances involved in the action and be aware of what the action entails. This notion of voluntariness of action is called *praxis*. If one of these conditions is not satisfied then the action will be considered *not voluntary*. The explanation of not voluntary action exhibits an *episode of production* which is described in various ways citing the examples, 'force of the wind', 'walking in sleep syndrome', 'drinking wine as water' and 'addictive smoking'. In all these cases, the agents play their respective

roles to *produce* not voluntary action. The action concerned with respective episodes of *production*, for Aristotle, is called *poiesis*.

The notion of non-voluntary action sometimes does involve cases that express irrational feelings like *impulsive* or *appetitive* ways of behaving. For instance, the addictive smoker while seeing another smoker gets the feeling to light a cigarette for him-/herself. A person with a sweet tooth, while passing by a sweets shop, feels the urge to eat some sweets. Similarly, children are so fond of chocolates that they seldom lack an appetite for chocolate. According to Aristotle, ‘we should say that neither animals nor children do voluntary actions, given that the actions performed by them are caused by non-rational feelings’ (Aristotle *NE*, 1111a25-35). The smoker, sweets lover and children, possess *intense desire* to submit easily to their respective likings, but their actions are not voluntary. Animals and children do not perform any voluntary action because they do not deliberate on what they are supposed to do. Deliberation involves the agent’s *will* and it is essential in order to make a choice. Although Aristotle did not theorize the notion of *will*. It is implicitly involved in the discussion of the concepts ‘voluntariness, intentionality and rationality’ (Kenny 1979). The notion of *voluntariness* reflects the ‘*power of to do* and not to do the act.’ Aristotle mentions “When the origin of action is in him, it is also up to him to do them” (*NE*, III, 1110a15-20). The will here represents the notion of *ability* or *power*. Similarly, ‘the *intentionality* refers to the purposive attitude that is concerned with the goal of action and *rationality* that unfolds the relationship between practical belief and action’ (Kenny 1979). In this regard, choice or decision is not only a voluntary action that reflects one’s rational and intentional attitudes; rather, it shows a purposive performance of the agent.

Making a choice is an important aspect of the performance of voluntary action. As Bardie puts it “All actions are chosen... choice is a rational desire or desiderative reason. Hence, those incapable of reasoning are incapable of choosing” (1974). Children lack the power of deliberation when they choose to eat chocolate. Choice is very thoughtfully made by any rational agent. If voluntary actions are performed knowingly and deliberately, then what about actions that are brought out emotionally or done out of the *mere* expression of desire. One might argue that all cases of knowledge of action and deliberation on the consequences of action do not entail voluntariness. For instance, in the case of ‘being kind’ to someone is an expression of desire and emotion where one does not deliberate on the fact that s/he has to be kind. Rather, one exhibits kindness towards someone. One may also say that kindness expressed by the agent presupposes some reason. That is why one has to be kind. But there are also occasions where we act with kindness without having a proper reason – why we need to be kind. Being kind is thus a virtue. A virtuous person might sincerely express this as a part of his/her habitual action. But what happens when someone does not either deliberate or just rush to act. For Aristotle, it is essential that an agent acts in accordance with practical knowledge. Aristotle cites the cases of individuals who do not act in accordance with their conscious mind or *the will*– i.e., judgments taken after deliberation. Rather, these agents’ expression of their emotional inclination is directed towards something else. This is an expression of *mere* desire that shows the weakness of will – *akrasia*.

II

Akrasia is a case of self-indulgence. While doing the action, a self-indulgent person fails to *think* about the consequence of action. Rather s/he just *does* as s/he strongly *desires* to do it. As Aristotle believes, desire is the source of action; it has the power of motivating the agent to act in a particular manner. This power is connected with the nature of the soul, which initiates the movement to act. No movement is possible in the absence of desire.

The Aristotelian notion of the soul has three basic parts: nutritive, sensitive and rational. The possession of a sensitive soul is a necessary and sufficient condition for the capacity of desire; here perception is not distinct from desire. Aristotle classifies three forms of desire like appetite, spirit and wish (Aristotle *De Anima*, 2.3.1). Appetitive desire involves inclination for ‘pleasure and pain’ (Aristotle *NE*, 111b16-17). The spirited desire is associated with complex emotions such as confidence, honour, anger and envy (Aristotle *NE*, 1105b21-4). And the wishful desire is related to the selection of ends which belongs to the rational part of the soul (Aristotle *NE*, 1110 b 20-30). Considering the three divisions of the soul and its association with desire, Aristotle’s classification of the sources of action is either cognitive, desiderative, or both.

In book III, chapter 2 of the *NE*, Aristotle explicitly discusses the concept of wish. According to Aristotle, wishful desire is associated with choice, i.e. the “deliberate desire of things in our own power” (Aristotle *NE* 1113b11). Towards this end, he maintains that “wish relates... to the end, choice to what contributes to the end,” in the sense that “we wish to be healthy, and we choose those actions which will make us healthy” (Aristotle *NE*, 1111b 26-7). In this regard, wish is in the form of desire associated with reason while choice evokes desire “in accordance with...[rational] deliberation” (Aristotle *NE*, 1113a12). Thus it opens up a way to understand the relationship between the choice and desire *vis-à-vis* wish. We can argue, following these points mentioned in *De Anima*, that when a man *desires* to choose, he expresses his wish, not appetite or spirit. This expression is about a *continent* or rational action. Desire as the starting point action; it is a sort of capacity in the soul that initiates motion (Aristotle *DA*, 3.10.4). Ultimately, Aristotle points out that desire is a faculty that acts not in isolation but in coordination with reason (*DA*, 10, 433a17 – 19).

Human desires are by nature egoistic but if we wish to be ethical in our approach then there is a need for cultivating rational action. Aristotle mentions that human desire is not always rationally nurtured. This is to say, desire is not always in coordination with reason. Sometimes desire is such that it goes against the moral principles that are rationally formed; where the agent fails to differentiate between right and wrong. The agent in this situation is mainly concerned with gaining pleasure. Here, the desire as a faculty steer away agent’s attention and succeeds in suppressing the rational power of deliberation. Reason fails to be in coordination with desire. Desire only forcefully motivates the agent to act irrationally. Aristotle calls this is a case of *akrasia* – the weakness of will.

The akratic agent fails to think rationally. Being under the influence of strong desire, the agent fails to understand the consequence of his/her action. Nevertheless, Aristotle maintains that there persists some sort of necessary connection between thinking about or *contemplating* (Shields 2008) the best thing to do and doing it. *Contemplation* has a spiritual association with human life. Human behaviour is only intelligible because there is normally a connection between the content of thought and action. How thoughtful is the agent while articulating an action? The agent *ought to* know what the action means to him/her when an action is undertaken. This shows that contemplative thinking on the part of the agent is a necessary condition of forming the right action. For Aristotle, such a mode of thinking is rationally formed. But the problem remains because desire has the potential power of motivation. The 'desires have distinct phenomenology. There can be no action without desire.' This reveals that desire is the underlying source of action, as we have mentioned, but it has to coordinate with reason in order to overcome certain instinctive factors and act with the help of virtues. Reason provides a normative scope to nurture the desire more in the light of virtues. On this, Jonathan Dancy opines that 'If asked what motivates us to act, the answer cannot be 'a desire' unless this is intended in purely trivial sense – that what motivates us to act is our being so motivated' – that is, 'having a motivating reason' – a goal (Dancy 2003). Being motivated to act shows that the content of action is not merely associated with desire; rather, the desire is already being nurtured in the light of practical reason. Therefore desire is only an initiating force for any kind of action where the end of action is being formed in coordination with reason and virtues. Thus the normative condition sets reason and virtue decides whether the actions are continent or incontinent. In this sense, desire is the root cause of both continent and incontinent actions. When the agent is unable to maintain a balance by drawing coordination between desire and reason then it is a failure - i.e., the agent who fails to control his/her *will* shows how the *weakness of will* finds a way out.

III

Aristotle claims that reason as a faculty is significant for correlating desires and beliefs to bring about action in the *right* way. Action performed in the right way is *desirable*. Searle's disagreement with this Aristotelian thesis is basically to show that 'irrational and non-rational actions are caused by desires and beliefs' (2001). Obsessive behaviours are indeed examples of human irrational attitude where the agent acts against his/her own rational decisions, commitments, and ultimately fails to recognize the very intent of their desire. On the contrary, Searle argues that action is caused by intention which is related to desire and belief. Intention, desire and belief are mental states that explain action. A deliberated action shows the intentional relationship between intention, belief and desire that is expressed in the form of *willing*. When the agent intends to choose, it shows that s/he is willing to do something or be engaged in deliberation to make choice, and the outcome, for Searle, is an *intentional action* (Searle 2001). However, Searle cautions us, reiterating that deliberation as a rational act need not be conceived as figuring out *means* to an *end*,

which is the case with the desire-centric model proposed by the classical action theory including Aristotle's (2001). He proclaims, 'it is 'absurd' to suggest that *desire* would lead to sound deliberative route' (2001). He further states that "Absurdity is due to ground the reason on certain psychological element of motivational set; it depends on the existence of a desire, broadly construed, then and there; and the absence of that desire that agent has no reason, regardless of all other facts about him and his history" (2001). Searle's disagreement is mainly concerned with desire as the basic ground of the reason of action. He finds it ridiculous as desire by nature is *inconsistent* and *non-detachable* (2001). A person is often easily inclined towards anything that he finds in the world. That intentionality of the desire shows how the world is *intentionally* connected with the mind, which is termed as *world-to-mind* direction of fit.

To understand this intentional fit, it is important to know about the nature of intentionality. For Searle, intentionality is a feature of the mind or the property of mental states, which means directedness (1983). Desire, belief, and intention are mental states possessing directedness, by which they represent things in the world. To have a desire for a good pair of shoes shows the *directedness* of the desire that has reference in the world. Corresponding to this desire, I *believe* that good pairs of shoes are available in the showroom. The desire will be fulfilled *if I intend* to visit the showroom and choose a good pair that I wish to have (1983). The intention thus is the proximate cause of action. The choice of purchasing a good pair of shoes not only signifies that choice is an intentional action but also unfolds how choice is formed by undergoing deliberation; where I finally succeeded in fulfilling the desire. This fulfillment unfolds the *direction of fit* that operates in two levels between *the mind to the world* and *the world to the mind* (1983). To have a desire for a particular variety of shoe is to have the world in certain way. But for Searle, the inconsistency in the choice is very much embedded in the intentional attitude of desiring. Hence if desire is treated as a source of motivation of action, then there is a high probability of volatility in intentional action.

The consistency in intentional action rather presupposes rationality as something indispensable for free and effective action. "There is a need to create desire-independent reason, a reason for doing something regardless of what was in your motivational set when the time comes to do it." (Searle 2001) To form intentional action in the right way, there is a need to maintain consistency in primary and secondary desires. Suppose I have a desire to play hockey and maintain adequate fitness to play the game, they are two different types of desires. My desire to play hockey is the primary desire whereas to be physically fit for the game is a secondary desire. Unless the secondary desire complements the primary desire, inconsistency would result in the process of motivation for playing the game. One has to practically think about possibility of playing the game. The use of practical reason is thus very significant while explaining intentional action. Searle writes, "Practical reasoning is typically about adjudicating between conflicting desires, obligations, commitments, needs, requirements and duties" (2001). The rational deliberation is necessary to resolve conflict and understand the normative condition of the act of desiring. Deliberation is a logical process of unfurling the reasoning of performing action. Suppose that I *promise* to represent hockey in the institute, I must be able to recognize my *commitment* to the team. Over

and above, being part of the team is also an *obligation* (Searle 2001). In this way, the agent rationally reconstructs the reason for achieving ends by adopting the right means. Thus rational reformulation of desire shows that deliberation is normatively conditioned in order to form desire-independent action.

Considering the above model of the desire-independent reason for action, Searle points out that if one encounters a case of *akrasia here*, then it is certainly an unusual happening. It occurs due to the lack of sufficient conditions of action. He writes, “It does not matter how you structure the causes of action in the form of antecedent intentional states – beliefs, desires, choices, decisions, intentions – in the case of voluntary actions, the causes still do not set sufficient conditions and this opens up the way for weakness of will” (Searle 2001). Often, causes are structured as antecedent conditions for bringing about action. If the agent is motivated and decided to do something, *akratic* action is still possible. Decisions, intentions, even if rationally grounded, are still not sound enough to completely cease the *akrasia*. The failure to resist temptation or change the decision at a later stage and undertake something else is natural. In other words, decision does not necessarily entail action (Searle 2001). Even if one is rational and has an opportunity to carry out the decision, change still occurs as something natural to human life. The change in the decision occurs due to *the gap* and gives rise to three such types: ‘between reason for action and decision, decision and initiation, and initiated action and action towards completion’ (Searle 2001). To make a choice or decision sufficient is to undertake effort intentionally throughout, from intention of action to till the completion of it. As there are many loose points in everyday life situations, one may not put the reason effectively. Therefore there is a natural *gap* that opens up ‘between the process of deliberation and the information of intention, and also between the intended action and actually undertaking the action’ (Searle 2001). The Searlean model thus shows intentionality is self-reflective; the agent not only intends to act but also can reflect upon the intentional action.

IV

Following the discussions on the Aristotelian and the Searlean notion of desire, desire-independent reason and *akratic* action, three main points can be further analyzed. Firstly, action originates from *desire* but when performed it goes through the trajectory of rational evaluation. Secondly, *akratic* actions are natural but could be treated as irrational actions. And lastly, incontinency arises from the *failure* of rational scrutiny. Considering these three points, we need to further analyze the causal relationship between desire, reason and action. David Charles, a contemporary moral psychologist and Aristotelian, maintains that desire is inextricably psychophysical. As every human being’s *desire*, one can locate the notion of desire with reference to human thoughts and attitudes. Desire is not exclusively mental as Aristotle supposes. Charles seems to undermine the Cartesian distinction between the physical and the mental. He argues that if this distinction is presupposed and desire is located in the realm of the mental only, one must ask ‘how desire can move the body?’ To this question, Charles replies that human desires are located in human beings and not in

the soul or the mind. Charles has given an assumption that it is the *agent* who feels hunger and *desires* food. In a sense, the *person* needs food but not his mind (Pakaluk & Pearson 2011: 20). The whole exercise of feeling and expression of hunger or desire for food, for Charles, refers to the ‘bodily instrument’ - the mechanism or the means through which desire is articulated. This instrument is called *pneuma* in Greek, which refers to ‘*soul-stuff*’ – that which animates the body (Maria 2014). It is this stuff that makes an agent think and *desire* something. When a person desires or pursues the desire – the entire pursuit is called desire (2014). The desire thus belongs to a person. The notion of person is comprised of both the physical and the psychological. In this paper, we are using the term agent and person interchangeably. When the person expresses hunger and desires food, s/he also makes a further attempt to *know* the desirable eatery that is available to satisfy his/her hunger.

In the context of Aristotelian moral psychology, reason plays an important role in the formulation of *desirable action* – moral action. ‘Actions originate with desire, but eventually, the intent of the action is being evaluated by reason in order to perform desirable action. One finds that reason over powers the desire through deliberation’ (Irwin 1975). In other words, there is a self-reflective thinking that helps in judging the content of motivation or the motivating element of desire, i.e., what the desire stands for. If something is being desired by the agent, then what does it *mean* to him or her? Does the act of desiring go well with the moral condition of action? In this regard, Aristotle’s emphasis was on the performance of virtuous action that results from deliberation and contributes to the wellbeing of the person. The virtues act as imperatives for performing desirable action.

Sometimes the agent is forced to choose a course of action; it might appear to others that the agent is directly involved in *doing* the action. But in reality, the agent would know *whys*/he is carrying out the action. The reason of his/her action, if it involves an external *force* which goes against the *will* of the agent then, it will be considered involuntary. It might also happen that we don’t really like to perform an action but we do it because it appears *desirable* in that very moment. Aristotle’s example of the sailor’s choice of throwing goods overboard in a stormy sea is to save the boat and its people. For Aristotle, it is *desirable* to save the people and the boat rather than the goods. As we find it, for the sailor who encounters this critical situation (Aristotle 1999), throwing goods is involuntary as he is *forced to* throw them. On the other hand, he knows that he is doing this act for the *good* of the boat and other passengers. So the *desirable action* is voluntary. The explanation of the sailor’s voluntary action is teleological. And a teleological explanation is necessary for defining choice.

While critiquing Aristotle’s teleological perspective of action, John Searle (2001) has advocated *desire-independent* action. We have briefly discussed this alternative account of Searle’s notion of action that is based on reason. The central claim in his thesis is that only irrational actions are caused by desires and beliefs. Rational actions, on the other hand, are *desire-independent*. Searle claims that reason functions in a typical way showing *a gap* between intentional states such as desires, belief and decision that the agent undertakes when s/he performs an action. That is, the agent’s actual making of a decision and pre-deliberated thoughts refer to two different states. The agent being the *cause of* action *ought* to be free from desire. For instance, if

someone wants to reduce weight, s/he should cut down on smoking, consuming alcohol and eating too much at parties, etc. If in spite of knowing all these, s/he intends to smoke and drink, then the intention of quitting smoking and drinking gradually weakens. Searle points out, “If that were how the world worked in fact, we would not have to act on our intention; we could so to speak, wait for them to act by themselves. We could sit back and see how things turned out. We can’t do that, we always have to act” (Searle 2001). A person might have the desire to smoke, drink and eat excessively while also having the desire to reduce weight. To have these two desires simultaneously is to live in conflict of desires. This conflict shows inconsistency in the motivation to perform desirable action. As a result of this conflict, the agent might commit *akratic* action.

To overcome the *akratic* motivation, there is a normative demand that merely intending or *willing* is not enough but also needs *contemplation* – that is, constant deliberation is necessary to strengthen the will. Hence a rational person must deliberate – think reasonably about what *ought* to be done. Being engaged in deliberation, one intends to remain free from the clutches of desires and beliefs. The freedom from desire and belief shows how the agent acts with *free will* (2001). Thus does Searle trace out the notion of *free will* while mentioning the *gap* between the intentional states like desire and belief, and the act of making a decision? The notion of *freedom* is integral to the agent and part of the process of decision making.

However, in the case of *akratic* action, the agent fails to take a right decision due to his/her appetitive attitude where the agent is found to over indulge in gratifying his/her desire. The strong presence of desire and passionate involvement entails loss of self-control, which leads one to commit *akratic* action. In this situation, the agent fails to use *reason* freely; in fact, the *free will* seems to succumb to the pressure of *desire*. Such failures, for Aristotle, are not necessarily due to the lack of obligation and commitment but rather to the proper cultivation of reason and virtue. On the contrary, the case of Searle’s narration of *akratic* action shows that a lack of commitment and obligation is traditionally conceptualized by Socrates. For Socrates, *akrasia* is a case of *moral failure* (Brickhouse and Smith). The doctrine of moral failure in human action is not to be explained with reference to the agent’s appetites or passions; rather, it is to be defined with reference to *cognitive failure*. Thus, the moral psychological study of Socrates would claim that the incontinent action – *akratic action* is impossible. This doctrine is clearly attributed to Socrates by Aristotle.

Moral psychology construes the notion of *cognitive failure* for two reasons; i) the agent’s adherence to *false assumption*, (Brickhouse and Smith 2010). and ii) for *miscalculation* (Shields 2008). The notion of *false assumption*, as pointed out by Brickhouse and Smith, refers to a supposition of *false beliefs*. To believe something without knowing its truth value is not in accordance with the desire for action. If beliefs are false, then the execution of desire might lead to the failure of obtaining the desired end. Hence if someone desires to perform a good action, it is essential to reflect on the set of assumed beliefs. Every good action demands that the intent of the desire as a source of initiation of action should also be examined with regards to a set of genuine beliefs. Christopher Shields, on the other hand, puts forward suggestively that *miscalculation* in Socratic moral psychology must reflect upon

analysing the consequences. If the agent *knows* what his desired action leads to, but he is incapable of executing knowledge at the right hour, then the agent shows lack of *contemplative* thinking. To make a calculation is ‘to understand what the agent is doing - being able to follow what he is doing’¹ (Rhees 1998). If the agent is not careful enough to attend to his/her own engagement, it would lead to *moral* or *cognitive failure*. The Searlean thesis of *desire-independent action* would certainly consider that this Socratic approach represents a lacuna on the part of the agent and therefore he would construe it as *cognitive or moral failure*.

Furthermore, the good action is *desirable* action where the agent’s sincere effort is to make out the very intent of its *desirability*. That is, to reflect on whether the *motivating desire* of an action is good at all! The intentional deontic element of desire thus becomes the ‘motivating force for an action that directs the agent to evaluate the motivating reason *inter alia* is called desiring’ – ‘a desire is a motivating reason.’ (Dancy 2000) For Searle, the intentionality is intrinsic to mental states such as desire and belief, which essentially characterizes intentional action. The *intentionality of desire* and the *intentionality of intention* seem to be qualitatively different as in the case of intentional action where in the content of desire is already being evaluated and further obtains a level of intentionality of intention that bears a rational content. Intentional actions are rational, which justifies why the agent finds that something is desirable to act on. So the motivating reason for Searle is not merely a fact of *desiring*; rather, the motivating reason is a *desire-independent reason*. (Searle 2001) The reason is grounded in the condition of *desirability* that transcends the realm of mere self-interest of the agent. Thus *desire-independent reason* acts as a *motivating reason* for the agents overall good.

Aristotle also makes it clear that the way Socrates thinks about the making of a desirable action is false (Aristotle 1999). Aristotle’s moral psychology is based on *reason*, which is central to the “the function of man” (2010). Reason is central to the function of man that helps in examining the content of desire and provides justification of action. This justified reason could be right and wrong. Aristotle believes that reason need not be the motivating source behind every action. For example, habitual action, which is developed over a period of time by undergoing certain moral education, can lead to spontaneously intending to do virtuous actions. In such a case of habitual action, reason hardly plays an explicit role. Good habits are a source of happiness in them and have the power of motivating to perform goodaction. Though good actions are initially products of rational deliberation, virtues generate constant reliance on reason (Brickhouse and Smith 2010). The desirable action ought to be *virtuous action*.

However Searle argues that “there cannot be a separate faculty of rationality distinct from such capacities as those for language, thought, perception, and the various forms of intentionality, because rational constraints are already built into, they are internal to, the structure of intentionality in general and language in particular” (2001). Reason or rationality is not a faculty that is disassociated from thoughts, expression and perception. Just as perception, thoughts and expressions are intentional in nature, rational attitude is also intrinsic to the agent’s *intentional attitude*. In other words, to say that human beings are rational beings is to say that their thoughts, actions and speech exhibit

¹Rush Rhees illustrates the *grammar* of calculation referring to language and understanding language.

intentionality. Intentionality is a feature of the psychophysical existence of human life. Unlike David Charles, Searle tries to show that reason, in the rationality tradition of action, is uniquely placed but does not bear the Cartesian outlook. An action is voluntarily performed and therefore the agent is held morally responsible for both performing *incontinent* and *continent* action.

However, the Aristotelian notion of incontinent or *akratic* action can only be overcome through the cultivation of reason and virtue. For Aristotle, action originates in the agent's desire, but the agent has the *power* to overcome the force of desire. The power expresses *the will* of the agent, as we have mentioned in the first section of the paper. The will as *power* is nothing but a confluence of attitudes such as voluntary, rational and intentional, which form purposive action. John Akrill explains this *power* as 'power of man' that does something in knowledge, not in ignorance. The knowledge involves: 'person, the instrument and the result' – i.e. what the agent carries out, how s/he carries out and what would be the consequence (Akrill 1978). One may know well that his/her action would bring bad consequence, but still, she commits that action due to a lack of rational ability and cultivation of good habits. Virtues are purposively cultivated to develop good habits and improve moral character. The teleological account of action is agent-centric; the agent makes a purposive choice. The content of desire is contained in the purposive act of bringing about an action. Hence the content of desire is examined rationally and also in the light of virtue in order to perform a *desire-independent action* – moral action.

V

In the case of *incontinent* or *akratic* action, there are two possible theoretical standpoints through which Charles construes the Aristotelian account *moderately*: One is desire-based theory, and the other is intellectualist-based theory. The desire-based theory emphasizes the attitude of valuation, whereas the intellectualist account articulates the motivational reason to explain action. The attitude of valuation is essentially grounded in practical reasoning which helps in evaluating the intent of the desire. The '*akratic desire* is inappropriate because its satisfaction is inconsistent with satisfaction of *desire*.' If the first desire to perform is *x*, then the *akratic desire* would be *y*, where *p*, the person though desired to pursue *x* but all in a sudden gets motivated by the *akratic desire* namely the *y* – the performed *akratic* action is *y*. The inconsistency discloses two different satisfactory ends that the person aims to achieve. One fails in the *akratic* case to comprehend appropriately why *y* is suddenly being intended? Is this choice of *y* *unconditional*? The unconditionally something could be good in itself but the case of *akratic* desire is something that is *irrationally* aimed at. Charles examines little more than that. For him, if the initial desire begins as a source of action, then it 'focuses on the picture of good' (Charles 1984). Further, if that picture results in inconsistency, then it becomes *irrational* (1984) to suppose something unconditionally good. The two contrasts of good directedness result in irrationality. Thus, for Charles, 'to judge *y* over *x* as good', as Davidson points out while explaining the cause of *incontinent* action, is problematic. It is because 'judging is a rational action which Aristotle replaces with virtues' (1984). As virtues fulfill the

condition of desirable action, virtuous actions are desirable action. Keeping this in mind, one would like to know how the initial desire for action is connected with valuation. ‘Desire as a non-cognitive motivational state plays distinctive role in practical reasoning;’ there is not much clarity whether value and desire are related. However, desire has some element of motivational reason that could also be outsourced through its association with beliefs and character. Charles assumes a *causal* relationship between the desire and the process of valuation (1984). It is in this context that the motivating reason of action becomes an essential factor to consider for the desirable action. This brings out the relationship between desire and belief. As belief is a factor of intellectual or rational consideration. *Akrasia* will be caused if there is ‘split between the valuational and motivational factors’ (1984). Practical reasoning that acts as a source of evaluation legitimizes the decision. Unless the person integrates desire, motivational factors and practical reason, *desirable action* will hardly follow. For Charles, the *akratic* action is an outcome of the *failure of integration*. The split that occurs in absence of integration leads to total failure – it is the failure of a person; the lacuna is not faculty-centric where the operation of reason, desire and belief are to be treated separately; rather, Charles’ non-Cartesian standpoint, as we have discussed earlier, entails a person-centric approach to *akrasia*.

Donald Davidson’s notion of presupposition of *unconditional reason* for incontinent action seems to be problematic for Charles as we have mentioned above, and also for Searle. For example, while undertaking an action *akratically* the person has an unconditional reason for doing *x*, which s/he finds better than doing *y* if one uses practical reason to hold unconditional judgment. Davidson writes, “Every judgment is made in the light of all the reasons in this sense that it is made in the presence of, and is conditioned by, that totality” (Davidson 2002). A judgment is an outcome of the use of practical reasoning and in *akratic* cases, the person goes against his/her own judgment. There could be multiple reasons for committing an action. Every action is therefore conditionally formed with a reason – is a *prima facie* condition which are good, obligatory, right, etc. He writes, “To avoid our recent trouble, we must suppose that ‘*x* is better *prima facie* than *y*’ does not contradict ‘*y* is better, *prima facie*, than *x*’, and that ‘*x* is *prima facie* right does not contradict ‘*x* is *prima facie* wrong.’ But then the conclusion we can draw, in every case of conflict (and hence of incontinence) will be that ‘*x* is better, *prima facie* than *y*’ and ‘*y* is better *prima facie* than *x*’” (2002). It is logical to prefer *x* over *y*, and there is no contradiction even if the preference is changed to *y* over *x*; provided *y* is supported by a reason. When a reason is stated for a preference; it is stated considering the *practical wisdom* of the person. The incontinent person only acts and judges irrationally. Here, being irrational follows from person going against his/her own judgment. The irrational reason is intelligible as it falls within the preamble of logic. All rational men/ women will accept the reason as a *directive* (2002). Therefore, “The *akrates* does not as is now clear, hold logically contradictory beliefs, nor is his failure necessarily moral failure” (2002). The incontinent action is rather based on a certain consideration which is not desirable. The consideration is conditional and contrasted between ‘conditional evaluative judgment’ and ‘evaluative judgment’ (2002). The conditional evaluative judgment is formed from the person’s own point of view considering his own practical wisdom. It is contrasted with evaluative judgment – that is, *desirable*. With

respect to this, Davidson explains that the *prima facie* desirability condition – what is desirable or obligatory, - *ought to be performed* (2002).

Although Davidson denies the case of *moral failure* in the case of committing incontinent action, still his *cognitive humility* argues in favour of ‘*virtue of continence*’ – it is hard but helpful to act on the *principle of continence*. The hardship is actually a struggle to follow the *prima facie obligation* that one encounters passion and reason. The will or *conscience* has to judge estimating the strength of both sides and take decision in favour of either of them (Davidson 2002). He further expresses his profound humility while suggesting, “But there is no reason in principle why it is any more difficult to become continent than to become chaste and brave. One gets a lively sense of the difficulties in St. Augustine’s extraordinary prayer: ‘give me chastity and continence, only not yet’” (Davidson 2002). It is desirable to perform continent or *enkratic* action. The virtue of being an *enkratic* person is grounded in the very aspiration and commitment to undertake desirable action. As we understand, Davidson spells out the spiritual urge with humility referring to the verses of Augustine. There is a normative demand to undertake struggle against all odds including the forces of *akratic* attitude and intend performing *enkratic* action to strengthen the will to achieve *moral success*. As success comes as increment, achievement of moral perfection can only be achieved if and only if the person undertakes this as a habit. As Davidson rightly warns saying Aristotle mentions that it is ‘impossible to be habitually incontinent’ (2002). The obstacle for moral success is thus nothing but failure to resist and undertake something *unconditionally*.

Searle challenges that *akratic* failure does not imply any *unconditional* reason as Davidson believes. Rather, for Searle action is necessarily conditional. The rational of making a ‘*conditional* value judgment is not an *empirical* statement’ (Searle 2001). Rather, for instance, the conclusion that Davidson (Davidson 2002; Searle 2001) derives P3: ‘There are incontinent actions’, from P1: ‘If an agent wants to do *x* more than he wants to do *y* and he believes himself free to do either *x* or *y*, then he will intentionally do *x* if does either *x* or *y* intentionally.’ and 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*.’, - demands *interpretation*,’ (Searle 2001) P3 does not necessarily follows, rather is construed with a false assumption that P1 and P2 are causally related. It would be also a false assumption that ‘agent’s intention to do right thing could be unconditional’ (2001). To be conditional is to have a reason for action. The failure to supply *desirable* reason does not make the action *desire-independent*. The agent thus might as well fail to supply why he has done it. It may show imbalance in motivation. (Mele 1983) Motivation could be unconditional but deliberation in the evaluative mode of thinking is conditional. According to Searle, “The problem of weakness of will is not how I can reconcile two apparently inconsistent judgments; rather the problem is that having made only one judgment, I can than act contrary to that judgment? And answer is that I do not make another judgment in order to act; I can just act. That is in this sort of case, I have an intention-in-action with no prior intention and no prior deliberation” (2001). Intention-in-action refers to *thinking per se* – thought that the agent lives within that very moment of experience. When the agent confronts with an *akratic* situation – thought, the level of temptation becomes very high and thereby he *fails* to resist the temptation (2001). This is

normally the case with a normal person. Searle is clearly suggesting that the situation that individuals who are victims of addictions, have obsessions and working under compulsions could be differently treated. The normal person is a rational person who can form relevant rational judgment and have unconditional intention. For Searle, a normal person must have the ability to form *desire-independent reason* for action. One can have a causal explanation of behaviors of drug addicts who lack a serious will to form reason for oneself and do something in the future. A normal person's commitment for future action shows the 'ability to bind *the will* now and create a *reason* for the future act only because it is the manifestation of the freedom' (Searle 2001) – the freedom of *will*.

As we have mentioned earlier, the will has the adjudicating power of making a decision. Not intending to execute the decision by undertaking it in action or not able to resist the temptation, for a normal person, seems to us are indicators of *motivational failure*. A motivated reason for action is not only rational but also has certain normative grounding which could be construed through purposeful living that binds the *prior intention* with *intention-in-action* and connects to future intention. The lack of deliberation not only would result in irrationality but also weaken the moral commitment. The irrational attitude exhibits inconsistency and weakens the interest to rationally pursue the intention in a normative order of life. As a result, structure of social life rationally weakens the power of *the will* and consequentially a person *morally fails* to execute right decision.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the Aristotelian thesis holds that actions originate in desire, though some desired actions may be rationally weak. This necessitates an examination of the *content* of desire in light of reason and virtue, both of which are crucial for the formation of *desirable action*. While Searle does not deny the role of desire in initiating action—indeed, he assumes it, given his view that *akratic* (i.e., weakness of will) actions are natural to human agency—he nonetheless insists that intentional actions reveal a *deontic intentional attitude*, which is fundamental to the constitution of desirable action.

Despite their differences, both Aristotelian and Searlean models of desirable action appeal to normative conditions. In the Aristotelian framework, this involves maintaining a distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary (which includes both involuntary and non-voluntary) actions. A moral-psychological reading of Aristotle reaffirms the foundational role of reason and virtue as constituting the normative grounding of desirable action. The *normative element* in desirable action is, in this sense, *desire-independent*: it arises not merely from impulse but from moral reasoning that integrates both evaluative judgment and motivational intent. In contrast, *akratic* action lacks such moral grounding, and this deficit in moral reasoning compromises the formation of desirable action.

Davidson's emphasis on *enkratic* (self-controlled) action highlights the importance of moral aspiration and commitment, arguing that moral success is possible only through the strengthening of the will. Searle, likewise, recognizes that commitment

to future action is integral to the will, and he maintains that the absence of commitment and obligation weakens the agent's capacity for moral action. When the will succumbs to intense desire, moral failure becomes inevitable. Although Davidson critiques Aristotle, he does not deny that certain forms of wrongdoing are rooted in vice, nor does he reject the Aristotelian view that habitual akrasia is incompatible with virtue.

Moreover, akratic action, when undertaken unconditionally, results in moral failure. Davidson attributes such failure to *unconditional reason*, but this view is rejected by both Charles and Searle. For Charles, moral failure stems from a lack of integration among desire, belief, and reason—a *cognitive failure* at the level of agency. Searle, by contrast, critiques both Davidson and Charles by arguing that motivational reasons for action are *conditionally* formed. For Searle, *enkratic* action must be grounded in *desire-independent* but *evaluatively grounded* reasoning. The akratic agent, lacking such evaluative reasoning, suffers from both motivational deficiency and weak resistance to temptation. Hence, moral failure for Searle is primarily a *motivational failure*.

Taken together, these varied accounts converge on the insight that moral failure arises when an agent acts on intense desire at the expense of normative elements such as commitment, obligation, responsibility, and virtue. In such cases, the motivational basis for distinguishing between merely desired and truly desirable actions is weakened. Ultimately, moral failure results from excessive self-indulgence, which undermines the agent's normative orientation. Thus, practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and a morally resolute will are indispensable for the performance of desirable action.

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