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## When Virtues, Roles and Duties Fail: Early Greek and Chinese Accounts of *Akrasia*

**Abstract** Both the Mohist canon and the works of Aristotle recognize that people sometimes fail to act according to virtues, roles and duties, what in a Western context is called *akrasia* or “weakness of will,” an important topic in both Greek and contemporary philosophy. I argue that questions of *akrasia* are treated differently in the early Chinese and ancient Greek philosophy. Greek accounts focus on issues of will and control, while some Chinese thinkers treat *akrasia* as a lack of a skill, and the failure to act in the right way is less lack of will than lack of skill. I begin with a brief account of the problem of *akrasia* as first presented by Plato in the “Protagoras” and *Republic*, and developed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I then turn to *akrasia* in an early Chinese context, focusing on a very different Mohist view of *akrasia* as lack of a skill. Finally, I contrast the “skill” the Mohists find lacking with a very different account of skill in the *Zhuangzi*.

**Keywords** *akrasia*, Aristotle, Mozi, “Protagoras,” skill, Zhuangzi

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*Akrasia*—the inability to act according to what one thinks is right or best—is an important topic in both Greek and contemporary philosophy, but it is treated very differently in Chinese and Greek philosophy.<sup>1</sup> I begin with a brief account of the problem of *akrasia* as first presented by Plato in the “Protagoras” and *Republic*, and developed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I then turn to *akrasia* in an early Chinese context, focusing on a very different Mohist view of *akrasia* as lack of a skill. Finally, I contrast the “skill” the Mohists find lacking with a very

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<sup>1</sup> For surveys of the history of this term see Gosling 1990 and Steward 1998. For its history in Greek philosophy see Bobonich and Destrée 2007.

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## 1 Plato and Aristotle on *Akrasia*

In the Western philosophical tradition, the problem of *akrasia* begins with a Socratic paradox: the claim that “no one can knowingly do wrong.” In a discussion between Socrates and Protagoras on the nature of the virtues in the “Protagoras,” Socrates argues against a popular view that people are governed, not by knowledge (*epistēmē*), but by spirits (*thumos*), pleasure (*hedonē*), pain, erotic love and fear. Most people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is, because they are overcome by pleasure or pain or other emotions (352d5–e8). Thus knowledge is like a slave, who can be “dragged about” (352b4–c2). This account immediately sets up a contrast between a rational mind or soul and emotions that operate on and through the body. Socrates insists that knowledge is capable of governing, that whoever learns what is good and what is bad will be swayed only by it (352c3–8), and famously attempts to refute the popular view by denying the possibility of *akrasia*:

No one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course if he is free to do the better one. (Prot. 358b10–c4)

No one willingly goes after evil or what they think to be evil; it is apparently not in human nature. (Prot. 358c8–d2)<sup>2</sup>

Socrates appears to reject two possible explanations for *akrasia*: weakness of knowledge (so that it is insufficient to provide a basis for action) and weakness of desire (so that it does not adequately motivate correct action). Importantly, Socrates asserts that, as a matter of human nature, no one *can* act against their better judgment of what they should do. But he also rejects the idea that a person can act against her own belief; so whatever she does at a given moment, she believes at that moment, hence the paradox that “nobody errs willingly.” This view seems to presuppose a rational agent, for whom ignorance is the only explanation for *akrasia*. It is described as “intellectualist” in that rational desire or “will” is inevitably directed at something good, and humans fundamentally desire to be happy. So “bad choices” are cases of misunderstanding or ignorance.

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<sup>2</sup> Translations of Plato are from the Loeb Classical Library editions, sometimes modified.

The story changes in Republic IV (435c–440b), building on the Phaedrus account of a tripartite soul in which the rational faculty is a charioteer who drives the horses of spirit and appetite (Phdr. 246b). Republic IV presents examples of internal conflict, which seem to rehabilitate the possibility of *akrasia*. Here Plato recognizes a greater complexity of human motivation, and thus recognizes the possibility of conflict between multiple different and opposed desires. One example is a thirsty person who refrains from drinking (437d–439d). The rational desire to drink something that seems good can coexist with pure, irrational desire just to drink (437e4–5). The two conflict, for example, in the case of a person who is overcome by thirst but knows that the available water is contaminated. In the myth of Leontios, conflict occurs in Leontios’ self-reproach for looking at the corpses of executed criminals (439e–440b). Here, is his “epithumetic” desire to look conflicts with his “rational” desire to avoid shame by averting his eyes (439e). Finally, Plato quotes the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus restrains his desire for immediate vengeance against the suitors (441b). Here, the Homeric poet contrasts Odysseus’ uncalculating (*alogistos*) anger with his calculating spirit.<sup>3</sup>

On what has been called the Intellectualist view, in the “Protagoras,” Laches and Charmides, Socrates is committed to the monistic psychology of a unified psyche governed by reason. A Pluralist view, based on Republic IV, allows for a moral psychology of conflicting impulses, and, for some, “rehabilitates” the notion of *akrasia*. Both approaches have important implications for moral psychology, and there is immense scholarly debate on the subject, including where the Intellectualist view ends and the divided soul begins.<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle’s most extensive treatment of *akrasia* is Book VII, chapter 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The text is complex, and subject to considerable disagreement, including about whether he ultimately endorses Socrates’ original view in the “Protagoras.” Book VII begins with a rejection of Socrates’ view that wrong action is incompatible with correct judgment. But if so, Aristotle asks, what kind of right belief is held by someone who acts from *akrasia*? Some deny that anyone who has *epistēmē* can also have *akrasia*: “it would be strange—as Socrates held—that if someone was possessed of *epistēmē*, something else could master it and drag it about like a slave” (NE VII.2 1145b21–24) and that this view “clearly contradicts the phenomena” (1145b28).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For more on inner conflict see Ferrari 2007, 167–71.

<sup>4</sup> Bobonich and Destrée (2007) for important scholarship on this issue. For example, Brickhouse and Smith argue for the possibility of a divided soul even in the Intellectualist dialogues. Rowe defends the Intellectualist view up to the Republic. Shields denies that there is any substantial disagreement between the two views. For a helpful sketch of these positions see Meyer 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ross’ translation here reads *phainomena* as phenomena. But if the term is understood in another meaning of “common opinion or belief,” in which case Aristotle is merely asserting that Socrates’ view contradicts common opinion, which it clearly does (see Steward 1998).

Aristotle maintains that *akrasia* arises out of human nature, for example, the case of eating sweets. We are warned not to eat them, but sweets are pleasant. Faced with something sweet, and appetite, our bodies are moved toward the very thing we have been warned to avoid (VII.3 1147a29–35).

... so that it turns out that a person behaves akratically under the influence (in a sense) of reason and opinion, and of opinion not contrary in itself, but only incidentally—for the appetite, not the opinion, is contrary to right reason. It also follows that this is why animals are not akratic, because they have no universal beliefs but only imagination and memory of particulars. (VII.3 1147a35–1147b5)<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, Aristotle seems to assert that people *can* choose actions they know to be inferior.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle also introduces a new distinction between a completely unreflective “precipitate *akrasia*” (*propeteia*) and “weak *akrasia*” or “clear-eyed *akrasia*” (*astheneia*, VII.7 1150a19–22; VII.8 1151a1–3). Precipitate akratics neither deliberate nor choose; they act as passion dictates without regret or internal conflict. By contrast, clear-eyed akratics deliberate and make a choice; but it is, as it were, the wrong one. They, according to Aristotle, are the real case of *akrasia*. Like Plato in Republic IV, Aristotle also recognizes the possibility of conflict between two opposite desires. Under his more extensive scrutiny, *akrasia* rises to the status of a stable feature of a person’s character. In summary, Aristotle ultimately endorses Socrates’ claims in the “Protagoras,” but presents a more complex psychology with roles for both rational governance and desires and passions.<sup>8</sup> *Akrasia* is explained in two very different ways: an “Intellectualist” view of *akrasia* as rational defect and an ethical view of it as lack of moral motivation.

This history presents many problems. First, the reliability of Aristotle’s testimony, since Plato never presents an explicit denial of *akrasia* as such. Second, if *akrasia* is a kind of change of mind, what causes it, and what does “changing one’s mind” really mean? Third, apparent disagreement between (the Platonic) Socrates and Plato becomes harder to specify that it initially appears. Reiteration of the slogan that “Nobody errs willingly” in Plato’s middle and late dialogues seems to endorse, rather than refute, Socrates’ original position. Nor does Plato ever use the term *akrasia*, which rather appears in Xenophon (Mem. 4.5) and

<sup>6</sup> For additional discussion see Wiggins 1980.

<sup>7</sup> According to the *Eudemian Ethics*, akratic action: “is to act through appetite contrary to what one thinks best” (1223b8–9). The *Magna Moralia* characterizes the akratic as one who “knows from reason that one ought not [to do the wrong thing], but gives in to pleasure and succumbs to it” (1203b5–6). For discussion see Steward 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See Bobonich and Destrée 2007, xvi–xx, which the following discussion closely follows.

Aristotle. Does this make Socrates less, or Plato more Intellectualist than he first seemed? Fourth, there is considerable scholarly debate about Aristotle's account of *akrasia* and the extent to which he agrees with the early Socratic view. Other debates on Aristotle's views concern his handling of the dichotomy between reason and desires, and whether his understanding of *phronēsis* involves desires.<sup>9</sup>

Two views are of particular interest. One is that that Aristotle rejects Socrates' conclusion because judgments of good and bad or right and wrong are not the only sources of motivation; he recognizes that appetites and "spirited desires" also motivate human action. This view is a direct refutation of the position of the "Protagoras." The other is that Aristotle's account of *akrasia* was significantly influenced by Plato's tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*, which itself rejects the account of the "Protagoras."<sup>10</sup> Although Aristotle begins by seeming to disagree with Socrates' view that there is no *akrasia* (NE VII.3 1145b25–8), his analysis of the conflict between reason and feeling ends by concluding that Socrates was basically right (1147b13–17).

Especially interesting for the present discussion is Aristotle's reasons: Aristotle compares the akratic who regains knowledge to the person who is drunk or asleep (and then gets sober or wakes up, NE VII.3 1147b12). Aristotle remarks that the influence of strong passions resembles how a person may both have and not have knowledge: when asleep, mad or drunk because strong passions alter the state of the body (to *sōma methistasin*). As a result, the akratic have knowledge only in the same limited sense as those who are asleep, mad or drunk:

Their using the language of knowledge is no proof that they possess it. Persons in the states mentioned repeat propositions of geometry and verses of Empedocles; students who have just begun a subject reel off its formulae, though they do not yet know their meaning, for knowledge has to become part of the tissue of the mind, and this takes time. Hence we must conceive that men who fail in self-restraint talk in the same way as actors speaking a part. (NE VII.3 1147a17–23)

Aristotle's point is that this "talking knowledge" is not universal knowledge, so Socrates' view is correct, because what passion overcomes is not real knowledge. But what may be more interesting for our purposes is the way in which Aristotle

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<sup>9</sup> Thereby arguing that debates between "Humean" and "cognitivist" interpretations of Aristotle are misconceived. See Charles in Bobonich and Destrée 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Wilburn 2014 and Kraut 2017. According to one line of argument, Plato later came to accept the possibility of *akrasia*, and developed Republic account of the tripartite soul specifically to repudiate the psychology of the "Protagoras" and to explain *akrasia*.

describes “talking knowledge” as the lack of a skill, which could come with time.<sup>11</sup> I will return to this point in the light of the Chinese evidence.

The scholarship on *akrasia* in both ancient and modern contexts is extensive, and largely outside the scope of the present discussion.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Plato and Aristotle seem to agree on two important points. One is an opposition between *akrasia* and *epistēmē*. This must be inferred in Plato’s case, since he does not use the term. The other is a strong link between *akrasia* and the body, which is important for the present discussion. I now turn to a very different Chinese discussion of problems of *akrasia*.

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## 2 Chinese Accounts of *Akrasia*

The problem of *akrasia* in Chinese philosophy was first posed by David Nivison in 1996. He identifies it as what he calls the “paradox of virtue”: that a virtuous ruler already has what a sage might offer, while a king without virtue would not listen to sagely advice:

For, especially in a society in which concrete obligations, e.g. of filial piety, are role-defined and clear even if sometimes complex, *wanting* to be moral-being disposed or being sufficiently disposed to perform the role that you and everyone else knows you should perform—is the essential part of being moral. But if the teacher is to teach this disposition, to impart it, the student must already be disposed to accept the instruction, and so, apparently, must already have it. (Nivison 1996, 80)

Nivison’s study, which focuses on Confucian texts, starting with Confucius, notes that he is baffled, not only with those who know their roles and duties but “are cold to this ‘ought’,” but with those who are warm, but not warm enough (Nivison 1996, 81). As *Analects* 9.24 puts it:

子曰：法語之言，能無從乎？改之爲貴。...說而不繹，從而不改，吾末如之何也已矣。

The Master said: As to exemplary words, can one not follow them? But changing oneself is what is valuable. ... But as for those who are pleased [with those words] but do not unfold their aims, and assent to those, but do not change, I can really do nothing with them. (*Lunyu* 18: 617, Lau 1979, 99, 9.24)

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<sup>11</sup> Kraut (2017). Aristotle differs from Socrates on the power of emotion to challenge or bypass reason, which Socrates does not recognize.

<sup>12</sup> See Bobonich and Destrée 2007, xv–xx, Kraut 2017, Muller 2015, Pickave and Whiting 2008, Robinson 1977, and Rorty 1977 and 1980.

The former are examples of what the Western tradition calls *akrasia*. But, according to Nivison, Confucius makes a move that Socrates and his intellectual descendants do not. He associates *akrasia* with the failure to feel correctly, often manifested in rituals performed without proper feeling. In other words, as Nivison puts it, Confucius and most Chinese moral philosophers, assume that both feelings and actions are under the control of our will.

## 2.1 The Mohists on *Akrasia* as Lack of a Skill

This assumption comes under direct critique in the core Mohist chapters, but we can give two very different accounts of Mohist understandings of *akrasia*. One is Nivison's view that the akratic person is "a kind of rational calculator" who is simply intellectually mixed up. On this account of the Mohist view, Heaven desires human flourishing, so right action is the most reasonable and self-interested mode of action. As a result, people will always grasp it, given a properly constructed argument or model (Nivison 1996, 82).

Yet despite an account that leaves little room for virtue or moral sensibility, the Mohists seem to take the view that an effective argument for a set of beliefs or emotions is the equivalent of actually having those beliefs or emotions.

According to Nivison, the most articulate analysis of the problem of *akrasia* comes from Xunzi, who adapts and rejects the solutions of both the Mohists and Mencius. He retains the Mohist view that humans are moved by their desires, combined with calculations of self-interest. He also retains two important Mencian views: that self-cultivation is necessary for a good life, and that the senses naturally seek their objects unless an autonomous faculty of intelligent decision redirects them.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, for Xunzi, the intelligence is free to choose, but normally chooses "the best deal for the senses, all things considered, if it succeeds in considering all things" (Nivison 1996, 86). Thus the appetites are both given their due and controlled. Xunzi, like Socrates, denies the possibility of *akrasia*:

凡人莫不從其所可，而去其所不可。知道之莫之若也，而不從道者，無之有也。Among all people, no one fails to follow that which they approve and to abandon that which they do not approve. For a person to know that there is nothing as great as *dao* and yet now follow *dao*-there are no such cases. (*Xunzi Yinde* 85/22/67, trans. Hutton 2014, 244)

<sup>13</sup> Mencius ascribes moral autonomy to the "four sprouts" all humans are born with. But he recognizes the possibility of *akrasia*, for example, at 1A7.11, where Mencius teaches King Xuan of Qi the difference between not doing something and not being able to do it.

In a recent paper, Chris Fraser rebuts Nivison's claim that the Mohists have no explanation of *akrasia* beyond "sheer perversity."<sup>14</sup> Fraser aptly argues that in the core chapters the Mohists understand the ability to make (and act on) *shi-fei* distinctions of right and wrong a kind of know-how knowledge that resembles the ability to perform a skill. As a result, their explanation for moral failure is lack of relevant knowledge-of a particular kind-and *not* lack of sufficient motivation. But what kind of knowledge? Mohist texts describe three modes of such ignorance. The first is ignorance of a crucial distinction, for example, failing to perceive aggressive warfare as wrong, or condemning murder and theft, but not in the context of aggressive warfare. A second mode is making correct distinctions in language but failing to make them in action. A third case is the case of *akrasia*, when an agent approves of a course of action and tries to make it so, but fails (Fraser 2013, 195–97). In several passages in the "Inclusive care" (*Jian ai* 兼愛) chapters, there are statements that although rulers can bring their peoples to do the most difficult and dangerous things, inclusive care is not practiced because:

上不以為政而士不以為行故也。

rulers fail to embody it in their governments and ordinary people in their conduct. (*Mozi Yinde* 23/15/28–29, trans. after Mei 1927, 68)

我以為則無有上說之者而已矣。苟有上說之者，勸之以賞譽，威之以刑罰，我以為人之於就兼相愛交相利也，譬之猶火之就上，水之就下也。

It seems to me that the only trouble is that there is no superior who encourages it. If there is a superior who encourages it, promoting it with rewards and commendations, threatening its reverse with punishments, I feel people will tend toward universal love and mutual aid like fire tending upward and water downwards. (*Mozi Yinde* 28/16/81–83, trans. after Mei 1927, 194)

But here a problem arises. Is the behavior criticized by the Mohist authors truly *akrasia*, or is it a deliberate choice? Both chapters argue that people can be brought to practice inclusive care through an inherent inclination to conform to rulers' wishes. The problem is that rulers have not taken it as their *dao*, and as a result, the people have not adopted it as a standard.

Fraser argues that the Mohist Dialogue chapters (46–49) further develop Mohist ethical ideas from the core chapters; and link moral worth to agents' character and intentions, thereby clarifying Mohist views of moral motivation and suggesting what a Mohist approach to *akrasia* might look like (2013, 177). The second chapter of the Dialogues, "Gui Yi" 貴義 (Valuing Morality), offers advice on personal moral discipline, including a recommendation to persevere in

<sup>14</sup> Fraser 2013, cf. Fraser 2011, 2016, 2018, and Fraser and Wong 2008.



the path of morality even if they fail occasionally. It makes the skill analogy explicit:

爲義而不能，必無排其道。譬若匠人之斲而不能，無排其繩。

If you undertake to practice *yi* [morality] but are not able, you must not abandon *dao*. To give an analogy, a carpenter who saws [a straight edge] but is not able does not abandon the marking line. (*Mozi Yinde* 82/47/21, trans. after Mei 1927, 448)

As Fraser points out, this passage focuses on ability (*neng* 能), described by analogy to the carpenter's ability—or failure to adhere to the model or standard of the straight edge. In other words, as Fraser puts it: “when people say the right things but then fail to act properly—the Mohists ascribe this sort of akratic failure to a form of incompetence, not insufficient motivation” (Fraser 2013, 197). He argues that this incompetence is analogous to a defect in performing a skill, so that the Mohists presumably analogize the remedy for akratic failure to the remedy for skill-less “practice.”

In other words, ongoing practice and training allows agents to become able to recognize correct distinctions and to act on them properly. Using *dao* as guide, they eventually will develop the skill to do this reliably, just as an apprentice carpenter gains skill in straight sawing and the ability to internalize the guidance of the marking line. Again as Fraser puts it: “For the carpenter, the eventual outcome is skill mastery; for the moral agent, it is virtue” (Fraser 2013, 198).

But how does the carpenter attain skill mastery? As Fraser points out in a Mohist context, Mohist conceptual language constitutively influenced all later Chinese philosophy, including the *Zhuangzi* and *Xunzi* through originally Mohist concepts such as *shi-fei* 是非 (this/right versus not-this/wrong), *bian* 變 (distinction drawing, disputation, dialectics), *zhi* 治 (order), and *fa* 法 (models), in particular by their concept of *dao* (way) as a set of skilled practices for guiding action by means of *shi-fei* distinctions (Fraser 2016, 20).

So if what Aristotle would call enkratic action (discussed below) is a skill, how is it learned? One consistent Mohist recommendation is the use of standards:

天下從事者，不可以無法儀，無法儀而其事能成者無有也。雖至士之爲將相者，皆有法，雖至百工從事者，亦皆有法。百工爲方以矩，爲圓以規，直衡以水，以繩，正以縣。無巧工、不巧工，皆以此五者爲法。

To accomplish anything whatsoever one must have standards. None have yet accomplished anything without them. The gentlemen fulfilling their duties as generals and councilors have their standards. Even the artisans performing their tasks also have their standards. The artisans make square objects according to the square, circular objects according to the compasses; they draw

straight lines with the carpenter's line and find the perpendicular by a pendulum. All artisans, whether skilled or unskilled, employ these five standards. (*Mozi Yinde* 3/4/1–4 [Fa Yi 法儀], trans. Mei 1927, 26)

These standards are analogized to the objective standard of the will of heaven:

是故子墨子之有天之，<sup>15</sup> 辟人無以異乎輪人之有規，匠人之有矩也。今夫輪人操其規，將以量度天下之圓與不圓也，... 是以圓與不圓，皆可得而知也。此其故何？則圓法明也。匠人亦操其矩，將以量度天下之方與不方也。... 是以方與不方，皆可得而知之。此其故何？則方法明也。故子墨子之有天之意也，上將以度天下之王公大人之為刑政也，下將以量天下之萬民為文學出言談也。... 故置此以為法，立此以為儀，將以量度天下之王公大人卿大夫之仁與不仁，譬之猶分黑白也。

Therefore the will of Heaven is like the compass to the wheelwright and the square to the carpenter. The wheelwright tests the circularity of every object in the world with the compass ... therefore whether an object is circular or not is all known, because the standard of circularity is all established. The carpenter also tests the squareness of every object in the world with the square ... therefore whether any object is square or not is all known. Why so? Because the standard of squareness is established. Similarly, with the will of Heaven Mozi will measure the jurisdiction and government of the lords in the empire on the one hand, and the doctrines and teachings of the multitudes in the empire on the other. ... With this as the model and with this as the standard, whether the lords and the ministers are magnanimous or not can be measured as (easily as) to distinguish black and white. (*Mozi Yinde* 45/27/63–73 [Tian Zhi Xia 天志下], cf. Mei 1927, 298–300)

## 2.2 A Zhuangist Counter-Example

We can pursue the analogy by contrast to a starkly different account of models in *Zhuangzi* 13, where Wheelwright Bian describes his own skill very differently:

不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。

But to be not too calm and not too strong is something you “get” in your hands and respond to in your mind. The mouth cannot put it into words, and there is a knack to it. I cannot explain it to my son, and my son cannot receive it from me, which is why I am seventy years old but am still cutting wheels. (*Zhuangzi Jishi* 13: 490–91, cf. Mair 1994, 128–29)

<sup>15</sup> Here, 之 should be read as 志. See *Mozi Yinde* 45, n. 2.

But *why* cannot Wheelwright Bian teach his skill to his son? One reason is that his wheel-cutting conspicuously does not use a compass or any of the other precision implements that are consistently associated with the work of skilled artisans. By contrast, the *Mozi* compares the intentions of heaven (*tian zhi* 天志) to the wheelwright's compass and the carpenter's square:

子墨子言曰：“我有天志，譬若輪人之有規，匠人之有矩，輪匠執其規矩，以度天下之方圓，曰：‘中者是也，不中者非也。’今天下之士君子之書，不可勝載，言語不可盡計，上說諸侯，下說列士，其於仁義則大相遠也。何以知之？曰我得天下之明法以度之。”

Mozi said: As for me having the [concept of] the will of Heaven, the metaphor [example, *pi*] is like the wheelwright having a compasses and the carpenter having a carpenter's square. The wheelwright and carpenter use compass and square to measure all square and circular things and say: those that hit the mark [*zhong*] are right [correct]; those that don't hit the mark are wrong [incorrect].”<sup>16</sup>

This is a metaphor of accurate fit, and it clearly refers to wheelwrights using a compass to “hit the mark” (*Zhong* 中).

The Mohist account of moral distinctions as skill is also echoed by Xunzi, who uses compasses and wheelmaking in his famous analogy about human nature:

木直中繩，輮以爲輪，其曲中規，雖有槁暴，不復挺者，輮使之然也。

Through steaming and bending, you can make wood as straight as an ink-line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. (*Xunzi Yinde* 1/1/3–4, trans. Hutton 2014, 1)

Elsewhere, Xunzi analogizes the certainty they provide about squareness and roundness to the *junzi*'s use of the rites.<sup>17</sup> Xunzi also distinguishes the standards they provide from the fluid arguments of Hui Shi and Deng Xi.<sup>18</sup> These passages clearly show that artisans such as carpenters and wheelwrights used compasses and squares to measure their wheels and right angles. In other words, the skill of making moral distinctions involves correctly applying a standard or model to a

<sup>16</sup> *Mozi Yinde* 41/26/41 (“Tian Zhi Shang”天志上), translation my own, cf. Mei 1927, 140. See also *Mozi* 4/2–3, 27/63–67 and 28/44–45 (Mei 1929, 13, 149 and 156) and Graham 1978, 316 (Canons).

<sup>17</sup> *Xunzi Yinde* 39/11/43, Hutton 2014, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Xunzi Yinde* 71/19/30–35, Hutton 2014, 205.

situation. To push the analogy a bit further, this means knowing how to use a compass and square, and also knowing when to use them, for example not trying to draw a circle with a T-square or a right angle with a compass. Both are good standards and models, but only if used for the right job.

But Wheelwright Bian appears not to do use these models. He is first described as cutting a wheel and putting down his hammer and chisel, with no mention of a compass. Had he used one, there would be no obvious reason he could not teach his son to chip wheels. But instead, he seems to operate “free-hand” with a hammer and chisel. He is not an ordinary wheelwright.

How do we know this, and rule out the possibility that the text simply didn’t mention the compass? Four passages in the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly and explicitly criticize the use of compass and square. The first appears in Chapter 8:

且夫待鉤繩規矩而正者，是削其性者也；待繩約膠漆而固者，是侵其德者也；屈折禮樂，响俞仁義，以慰天下之心者，此失其常然也。

To depend on the carpenter’s curve, inked cord, and compass and square to make things straight is to pare away your nature. To depend on cords, knots, glue and lacquer to hold together is to violate virtuosity [*de*]. To bow and crouch for rites and music and smirk and simper over benevolence and rectitude [*ren yi*] to soothe the world’s heart-minds is to lose the constant. (*Zhuangzi Jishi* 8: 321, cf. Graham 1986, 201)

The context is a claim that constancy does exist in the world (*tianxia you chang ran* 天下有常然). But, the argument continues that real constancy is not bent by the carpenter’s curve, straightened by the inked cord, rounded by the compass or squared by the carpenter’s square.<sup>19</sup>

Another passage describes the use of compass and square by potters and carpenters:

陶者曰：“我善治埴，圓者中規，方者中矩。”匠人曰：“我善治木，曲者中鉤，直者應繩。”

The potter says: “I’m good at managing clay; my circles are true to the compass, my squares to the [carpenter’s] square.” The carpenter says: “I’m good at managing wood; my bends are true to the [carpenter’s] curve, my straight edges correspond to the plumb line.” (*Zhuangzi Jishi* 9: 330, Graham 1986, 204)

<sup>19</sup> 曲者不以鉤，直者不以繩，圓者不以規，方者不以矩。 *Zhuangzi Jishi* 8: 321, cf. Graham 1986, 201.

Its point is to criticize the use of precision instruments as models. A third passage goes further in its rejection of these instruments:

毀絕鉤繩而棄規矩，攬工倕之指，而天下始人有其巧矣。

Smash the carpenter's curve; snap the plumb line, throw away the compass and square. Crush the fingers of Craftsman Chui and at last throughout the world people will have their skills [*qiao*]. (*Zhuangzi Jishi* 10: 353, cf. Graham 1986, 209)

This passage clearly prefers some kind of genuine skill (*qiao*) to the misguided (some pun intended) precision of artisans' instruments. A fourth passage makes this point explicit by associating Carpenter Chui with the ability to draw without reference to precision instruments:

工倕旋而蓋規矩，指與物化而不以心稽。

When carpenter Chui drew a figure it was true to compass and square; his finger shared in the transformations of things and he did not use his heart-mind to calculate. (*Zhuangzi Jishi* 19: 662, cf. Graham 1986, 138)

Here the deliberative use of the heart-mind is analogized to precision instruments. The combined force of these passages is three fold. First, all reject—in different ways—the use of precision instruments. Second, this rejection includes an association of these mechanical aids with conventional virtues. This point is especially important because the term *guiju* 規矩—“compass and square”—lost its literal meaning and became a metaphor for moral regulation. For example, Mencius analogizes the perfect squares and circles they produce to sages' mastery of human relationships: “Compass and square produce perfect squares and circles; sages are the perfection of human relations.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, they recommend a different kind of perception—arising from inner nature (*xing*) or virtuosity (*de*). And it is this, not the mechanical ability to chip a round wheel, that Wheelwright Bian cannot teach his son.

Now let us return to Fraser's view of moral distinctions as skill and *akrasia* as a lack of skill knowledge, rather than motivation. For the Mohist, these skills are supported by the models provided by the artisan's precision instruments. But even so, they must be used in the right way. For example, the maladroit artisan who tries to use a compass and fails to draw a right angle does not suffer from a lack of moral motivation. Nor is the problem a lack of propositional knowledge

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<sup>20</sup> 規矩，方員之至也；聖人，人倫之至也。 *Mengzi Zhengyi* 4A: 490 (4A2), translation my own. Cf. 4A1, 6A20 and 7B5. For further examples of these metaphors see Raphals 2003.

about the properties of right angles or right triangles. She suffers from a lack of skill in using the wrong tool to do the job.

The *Zhuangzi* account of skilled performance parses the problem differently, but still hangs on skill. The *Zhuangzi* rejects compass and square in favor of a different kind of “freehand skill.” It is not clear what *akrasia* would consist in in the *Zhuangzi*, given its complex account of agency. But in line with accounts of “virtuosity” in the *Zhuangzi*, a Zhuangist account of *akrasia* might plausibly also treat it as a kind of lack of skill.

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### 3 *Akrasia* in Comparative Perspective

In conclusion I return to Plato and Aristotle and the view introduced here, of *enkrateia* as a skill and *akrasia* as its absence. On this account, *enkrateia* is a skill, whether we understand it as the Mohist correctly using standards and models analogized to the precision instruments of the artisan or its Zhuangist alternative of skilled “freehand” performance that explicitly rejects compass and square. Despite their very different accounts of it, skilled performance is a concern both texts share, albeit applied to very different kinds of performance. What does this view of *akrasia* do for us?

Discussions of *akrasia* in Plato and Aristotle offered two primary accounts: an “Intellectualist” account of *akrasia* as rational defect and a moral account of *akrasia* as lack of moral motivation. Much of the contemporary debate by Hare (1952; 1963; 2001), Davidson (1970; 1982) and others, and some interpretations of Plato and Aristotle view *akrasia* as a matter of moral motivation. One striking effect of a Chinese account of *enkrateia* as a skill and *akrasia* as its absence account for *akrasia* without any discussion of moral motivation.

Chinese accounts of *akrasia* also contribute to intellectualist accounts. Xunzi repeatedly seems to assert some version of rational choice:

凡人莫不從其所可，而去其所不可。知道之莫之若也，而不從道者，無之有也。Among all people, no one fails to follow that which they approve and to abandon that which they do not approve. For a person to know that there is nothing as great as the Way and yet now follow the Way—there are no such cases (quoted above). (*Xunzi Yinde* 85/22/67, trans. Hutton 2014, 244)

聖人縱其欲，兼其情，而制焉者理矣。

Sages follow their desires and embrace all their dispositions, and the things dependent on these simply turn out well-ordered. (*Xunzi Yinde* 81/21/67, Hutton 2014, 231)

These claims are surprising, given Xunzi’s strong view of the appetites as natural

motivators of human behavior.<sup>21</sup> Both Socrates' denial of *akrasia* in the "Protagoras," Nivison's intellectualist view of *akrasia* in the Mohist core chapters, and Xunzi's denials that anyone who understands *dao* might not follow all suggest an intellectualist view.

On another version of the intellectualist account, appetites subvert the authority of reason by misdirecting its focus (Wilburn 2014). For example, in Republic VII Socrates likens appetitive pleasures to "lead weights" that "bind" souls to the realm of becoming, and drag reason downward and away from true reality (Rep. 519a–b). In the Phaedo Socrates claims that that pleasure and pain are nails that "rivet" the soul to the body and make it share the body's beliefs and desires (Phd. 83c–d). And despite his intellectualist position, Xunzi also claims that desires can subvert understanding of *dao*, and lead to infelicity:

以道制欲，則樂而不亂；以欲忘道，則惑而不樂。

If one takes *dao* to regulate one's desires, then one will be happy and not disordered. If one forgets *dao* for the sake of one's desires, then one will be confused and unhappy. (*Xunzi Yinde* 77/20/31–32, Hutton 2014, 221)

Other interpretations of Xunzi allow for emotional predispositions of non-sages to subvert the hegemony of rational decision:

性者、天之就也；情者、性之質也；欲者、情之應也。以所欲為可得而求之，情之所必不免也。

Human nature is the accomplishment of Heaven. The dispositions are the substance of the nature. The desires are the responses of the dispositions to things. Viewing the objects of desire as permissible to obtain and seeking them are what the dispositions cannot avoid. (*Xunzi Yinde* 85/22/63–64, Hutton 2014, 243)

Hutton's interpretation of this passage argues that "deeming something permissible" (*ke* 可) is not the equivalent of (Western) rational choice and does not map onto common Western ways of distinguishing between reason and desire (Hutton 2016, 219–21). In summary, viewing *enkrateia* as a skill offers us a new perspective on the intellectualist-moral motivation debate. This Chinese account of *akrasia* allows us to bypass the entire question of moral motivation, but also offers a different "intellectualist" account than the Greek discourse on *akrasia*.

This view of *akrasia* also shifts our view of the role of the body. Instead of viewing the body negatively as the entry-point of befuddling appetites that "drag

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<sup>21</sup> See Hutton 2016. For an account that recognizes the role of the appetites see Stalnaker 2006, 74–75 and 137–38.

*epistēmē* about like a slave,” a skill-based view of *enkrateia* reconfigures the body as the site of learning such a skill. As a wide variety of recent scholarship has shown, skilled performance is a context in which the body can lead the mind and reason to clearly good effect. Indeed, physical mastery and the dominance of embodied skill is a hallmark of virtuosic performance. Another point to note is that virtuosic performances centrally engages the body, but not on appetites. The mediocre carpenter or wheelwright is not necessarily in the grip of inappropriate passions. He is more likely to suffers from inattention or clumsiness.

If *enkrateia* is a skill, we may also ask what kind. On the Mohist account, skill involves closely following an objective guide or model. But a very different Zhuangist account of skill rejects compass and square for a subtler “inner compass” that cannot be expressed in words or taught directly. Finally, Aristotle contrasts the speech of the akratic who can, for example, quote Empedocles while drunk, with the fully realized epistemic knowledge of the enkritic (1147b10–12). A (possibly embodied) skill account of *enkrateia* readily accounts for this difference. The maladroit carpenter may well be able to describe the use of compass and square, but that is different from knowing how to use them. If the expert carpenter is Mohist, he will be able to use the compass to draw a perfect circle. If he is Zhuangist—and virtuosic—he will eschew it but draw the circle nonetheless.

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