

# KONZEPTE

*Hefte für Philosophie*

1

*Praktische Identität*

Herausgeben von  
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## VORWORT DES HERAUSGEBERS

Konzepte sind Begriffe, die eingreifen. Zwischen *conceptus* und Konzeption stehend, bringen sie etwas auf den Punkt und entwerfen zugleich Zusammenhänge mit Perspektive. Wer ein Konzept hat, erfaßt eine Sachlage; das verhilft ihm zur Orientierung; und er handelt seinem Konzept gemäß. Hierbei kann man ihn auch aus dem Konzept bringen. Solche Konzepte lassen sich analysieren; sie koordinieren Erfahrenes; und sie beruhen auf Gründen. Konzepte erschließen. Konzepte gehen in die Irre. Konzepte sind umstritten.

Die neue Reihe widmet sich Konzepten, die das philosophische Denken anleiten und es als ein Denken in seiner Zeit kennzeichnen. Die Zugänge zu ihnen gehören keiner bestimmten Richtung an. Vielmehr ist die Bündelung unterschiedlicher Ansätze unter einem Konzept auch der Versuch, den notwendigen Pluralismus der Philosophie nicht in Indifferenz münden zu lassen. Wo es das Konzept verlangt, kommen zudem die Nachbarwissenschaften zur Sprache. In diesem Sinne stehen die „Konzepte“ selber unter einem Konzept: die Mannigfaltigkeit des Denkens im Dialog um einer Sache willen zu halten.



Sabina Lovibond, Oxford

## PRACTICAL REASON AND CHARACTER-FORMATION

Moral philosophy in the late twentieth century may be said to have woken up, or reawoken, to the possibility of approaching practical rationality from the standpoint of the Aristotelian tradition. According to that tradition, we become virtuous, and hence acquire practical wisdom, by developing the appropriate habits: that is, by a process that might be described today as one of *socialization*. This process depends on conditioning, but it is not one of *mere* conditioning, since it aims to establish not just an array of behavioural dispositions but a certain power of judgement – in Aristotelian terms, a distinctively ‘intellectual virtue’, consisting in the reliable capacity to assess *correctly* what is required of us by this or that real-life situation; and to do this despite the endless variety and unpredictability of the ‘lifeworld’. Aristotle refers to this capacity as *phronêsis* – ‘practical wisdom’ or ‘prudence’ in the standard English translations. The continuing significance for ethics of the idea of *phronêsis* is recognized by all those who want our philosophical understanding of practical reason to do justice to the untidiness of lived experience – the impossibility of devising explicit rules that will cover all contingencies in advance, but also the way this deficit is made good by a reliable, though *implicit*, form of intelligence on the part of the competent moral agent.

Yet over the same period – the closing decades of the last century – this notion of culturally transmitted moral intelligence also attracted a barrage of scepticism. Aggressive moral scepticism is of course not absent from the Greek philosophical tradition, as we know from several of the dialogues of Plato; but its predominant role in modern educational discourse has been that of a threat or problem which philosophy ought to equip us to defeat. However, from the 1960s onwards, a new wave of interest in questions about the construction and deconstruction of specific social identities and ‘knowledges’ began to cast doubt on some familiar postulates of the humanist tradition – that of personal autonomy, for example, or of the authorship of one’s own words and actions.

The starting-point for my discussion in this paper will be a position developed in my book *Ethical Formation*.<sup>1</sup> My purpose in that book is to discover what may be left of the idea of practical reason, once we have taken account of the sceptical or anti-humanist considerations I have just mentioned – to which I certainly want to concede their full force, not least because they themselves seem to be present in embryonic form in the ethics of Aristotle, and so to represent a negative or pessimistic moment *within* Greek ethical rationalism.

On its constructive side, *Ethical Formation* proposes a version of the so-called ‘practical reason view’ of ethics. By this I mean a conception of ethics which sets before us a certain ideal type: that of the ‘virtuous person’, the one who is duly sensitive to the *reasons that there are* for thinking, and in particular for doing (or not doing), certain things. We cannot ignore the challenge posed by Hume’s moral theory to the claim of objective status for (unconditional) practical reasons of any kind; but a powerful response is suggested by the idea that as competent adults we operate within a ‘space of reasons’ (to borrow a term from Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell), and that we learn to do this – both for theoretical and for practical purposes – by initiation into a culture or shared form of life.

However, I want to focus on one of the most surprising or counter-intuitive features of the ethics of practical reason, the ‘Socratic paradox’ to the effect that all wrong-doing is due to ignorance.<sup>2</sup> One of the first points to occur to anyone encountering this paradox is that there is, surely, abundant empirical evidence that people do sometimes act against their better judgement, even when that judgement is clearly present to their mind. But the defender of the paradox can reply by appealing to a contrapositive, or *modus tollens* argument: if you *do* the thing you profess to judge wrong, or not-to-be-done, then the evidence that you do in fact judge it to be wrong is not to be taken at face value. (One’s states of belief, at any rate about right or wrong action, may be something on which one does not have full authority to pronounce.)<sup>3</sup>

The Socratic paradox is more than just a historical curiosity, since there is a well-known modern discussion (by McDowell)<sup>4</sup> which seeks

<sup>1</sup> *Sabina Lovibond*, *Ethical Formation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002 (hereafter ‘EF’).

<sup>2</sup> See *Plato*, Prot. 358b7-c1; Meno 78a6; EF p. 88 for more precise formulations.

<sup>3</sup> See EF p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> *John McDowell*, *Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?* in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplements* 1978; also in his: *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

to rehabilitate it as an element in a cognitivist ethical theory. The revised Socratic thesis is that there is an *indefeasible internal connection* between (practical) moral judgement (namely, about what one ought to do here and now) and action.<sup>5</sup> But this has provoked criticism, notably from Michael Smith,<sup>6</sup> on the ground that it requires us to posit a special, morally loaded way of seeing or conceiving of our circumstances, which only the virtuous person possesses – and whose presence is demonstrated precisely by the fact that the virtuous person does the right thing in the circumstances in question.

That sounds like a worryingly tight circle; and clearly we have stepped outside the bounds of empirical psychological theory at this point. Yet the admittedly *non-empirical* character of the indefeasibility thesis may serve as a clue to what is most important and suggestive about it. The refusal to recognize anyone who acts against a (particular, occasion-specific) practical moral judgement (e.g. ‘I should not be doing this’) as *really holding* the belief expressed in that judgement should be seen, or so I have argued, as affirming an *ideal conception* of what it is to hold a moral belief – a conception under which the mere trotting-out of an opinion, even with apparent sincerity, cannot be accepted as proof of the speaker’s ‘really’ holding it (since the verbal performance is, of course, compatible with failure to match one’s actions to one’s words). And this ideal conception is implicit in Aristotle’s famous account of *acrasia* in NE VII, 3, which includes the proposition that at the moment of an *acrat*ic episode, the agent (who by hypothesis may still be saying ‘I know I shouldn’t be doing this’, etc.) is “like a drunkard reciting the verses of Empedocles” (1147a20) – i.e. there is a certain standard of *mental engagement with the words uttered* which in ideal cases (e.g. the practically wise agent, the sober presenter of Empedocles) is met, but which in certain off-colour or deviant cases is not. I propose, therefore, that the Aristotelian account of *acrasia*, considered on its Socratic side (that is, as maintaining that at the relevant moment there is some necessary item of knowledge which the agent loses, or loses sight of), incorporates what we may call an ideal conception of the *authorship* of one’s own moral judgements, and that this ideal is one to which we should think of ourselves as approximating in varying degrees; only the practically wise, who as such are immune to the risk of *acrasia*, conform to it fully, and thus represent the *telos* at which ethical formation aims.

<sup>5</sup> See EF p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

For me, a breakthrough in understanding Aristotle's treatment of *acrasia* came with the insight (for which I have to thank Myles Burnyeat)<sup>7</sup> that *acratia* behaviour can be seen as involving *regression* from a relatively advanced stage of moral development to a more primitive one: specifically, from a state in which one's motivational tendencies are relatively well integrated with what one is inclined to say about right and wrong action, to a state in which these things (the tendencies, and what one is inclined to say) are liable to diverge. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this phenomenon, given that (according to the Aristotelian picture) we all start out, as regards the process of character-formation, as primarily instinct-driven creatures, and are induced little by little to join in with various ways of speaking and acting (or, crucially, *refraining* from acting) which exhibit the values and attitudes of the surrounding society – the one into which we are being initiated. Since the relevant ways of speaking and acting (or refraining ...) will often be somewhat hostile to our repertoire of instinctual motives, in so far as these are concerned with taking what we want when we want it, ethical formation involves a degree of inbuilt difficulty; and it is in the face of this difficulty that we are liable (not just as children but as adults too) to lapse from the consistency of evaluative and practical outlook that we need to maintain, in order actually to *have* the moral character that we are taught to behave *as if* we had – i.e. in order to *be* the honest, considerate, courageous (etc.) individuals whom our upbringing requires us to impersonate. But conversely, this plausible account of *acrasia* as involving a temporary loss of one's footing on a demanding uphill path suggests a corresponding idea of the goal of ethical formation as the achievement of a perfect fit between the outward expression of moral attitudes and beliefs, and the inward reality of the character we present to the world through such expression (e.g. by *saying* what we think we, or others, should or should not be doing).

This perfect fit can be described (on Aristotle's behalf, as it were) as the distinguishing mark of full (or genuine, or complete) 'authorship' of the utterances (and other expressive items, e.g. gestures) through which we present a moral personality to the world. And we can propose to Aristotle a perhaps more appealing (though still *a priori*) reformulation of the Socratic thesis that no one acts against ethical knowledge (or belief). According to this reformulation, the thesis will maintain that "we do not act against those practical beliefs, or morally loaded 'concep-

<sup>7</sup> See Myles Burnyeat, Aristotle on Learning to be Good, in: Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

tions' of our circumstances, of which we have achieved full authorship, but only against those we have appropriated in a more partial or opportunistic way".<sup>8</sup> This allows us to read Aristotle – like the Platonic Socrates – as offering a certain redescription of the akratic episode whereby it is no longer necessary to credit the agent with two contradictory beliefs (e.g. (i) 'It would be all right to do *a*', representing the thought expressed in what he actually does; and (ii) 'It would not be all right to do *a*', derived from some general practical principle that is relevant to the case at hand). But on our proposed (re)reading of Aristotle, the belief that becomes inoperative at the moment of akratic action (here, 'It would not be all right ...') is to be seen as "not having been definitively converted from an *interpersonally available thought content* (the status such thoughts possess for us in our initial encounters with them) into a *thought content to which the utterer is related as author*".<sup>9</sup>

The role played in the Socratic story by the idea of what one *knows* or *believes* one ought to do is filled here, in a less purely epistemic idiom, by that of what one has fully or unequivocally *converted into a thought of one's own*, so that one stands towards it in the relevant (ideal) relation of authorship. Just as the Socratic theorist will agree that it is possible to act against what you *appear* to know or believe, but don't really, so the Aristotelian (as interpreted here) will agree that it is possible to act against something that *appears* to be one of your beliefs, but isn't really, since as far as you are concerned it still retains a certain (merely) public aspect – the aspect of a bit of thought content which you have appropriated from the communal stock, at the prompting of your own current objectives or impulses. (I am no Heideggerian, but if I were I would perhaps want to refer at this point to his idea of *das Man*. Closer to home for me, however, is an intriguing recognition by the Oxford philosopher R. M. Hare in *The Language of Morals*<sup>10</sup> of 'degrees of sincere assent' to a moral judgement, 'not all of which involve actually obeying the command [assented to]'. This is a corollary of Hare's well-known doctrine that some uses of moral language are – untypically – not prescriptive, because they are placed either explicitly or implicitly within inverted commas; that is, the speaker distances himself or herself from the action-guiding force the words usually carry, indicating that the

<sup>8</sup> EF, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> EF, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 169-70.

speech act in which they are now figuring is an act of *connivance* with the way people generally talk, rather than an actual engagement in it.<sup>11</sup>)

We can proceed, now, to stage an encounter between this account of acrasia – or rather the ideal conception of authorship that underpins it – and the theoretical anti-humanist considerations I mentioned at the beginning, for which I think an excellent source is Derrida’s criticism of J. L. Austin in his 1971 essay “Signature Event Context”.<sup>12</sup> A detailed exposition of those considerations is not possible here, but the main thing we need for present purposes is the post-structuralist insight that the *public intelligibility* of language is grounded in a certain *structural anonymity*: that is, that my ability to convey a thought to an audience by expressing it in (English) words depends on the availability of those words not just to me but to *any* speaker (of English) – and for any communicative purpose to which the speaker may see fit to put them. Against Austin’s (classically ‘humanist’) assumption that there is a normal use of language in which one *speaks seriously* or *means what one says*, and in contrast to this, an *abnormal* (or ‘parasitic’ or ‘etiolated’) use in which language suffers a “sea change”, or becomes “hollow and void”,<sup>13</sup> Derrida argues – and as he points out, Austin too admits – that *all* language in its actual use is subject to this kind of lapse from the ideal of full permeation by the conscious intention of the speaker. In other words, it is in the nature of language to allow of more or less *un-serious* citation, of mere ‘lip-service’, and of the irresponsible grafting of extant forms of words into new contexts – ‘irresponsible’ in that sometimes there may just not be an answer to the question of whether one *really means* what one is saying.

While this is offered as an entirely general commentary on the relation of individual speakers to the languages they speak, my own interest in it has been centred on our relation to the language we are expected to acquire through *ethical* upbringing in particular. I think it is arguably true that that part of our upbringing sets us the task of *making our own* certain patterns of practical judgement which are characteristic, or constitutive, of the moral outlook of our predecessors (the ‘Aristotelian claim’, if you like); but also that there is a certain structural impossibility surrounding this task – that is, an obstacle in the way of discharging it *completely* (though obviously the difference between one de-

<sup>11</sup> For references see EF p. 98, note 31.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Signature Event Context*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in his *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> See EF p. 104 for references.

gree of success and another may be of great importance to us); and that this impossibility creates space for a permanent element of alterity in our actions. By this I mean an element not fully absorbed or digested by our ‘rational self’ – the self with which Austin (along with the rest of us *qua* heirs of the Greek rationalist tradition) assumes that we identify ourselves for the purpose of speaking ‘seriously’.

Although my studies in Greek philosophy don’t usually plunge me into interpretative controversy, I thought it might be interesting to say a few words about the kind of approach to Aristotle with which the remarks I have just made seem to me to have an affinity. One name I would like to mention is that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* – first published in German in 1978.<sup>14</sup> This short book consists of a loosely connected series of studies based on the assumption that there is a fundamentally unitary philosophy which Plato and Aristotle hold in common, and which Gadamer calls the ‘logos philosophy’. Logos-philosophy is that way of doing philosophy which studies extant ways of talking, not as a substitute for direct attention to the reality in which we are interested, but as our best or only way of discovering the articulation of that reality and rendering it intelligible (a suggestion to be found in Plato’s *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*).<sup>15</sup>

The account of *acrasia* I have been developing belongs to the tradition of logos-philosophy in that it takes as its starting-point the existence of a common, or public, culture into which we are initiated by upbringing, including moral upbringing. On its moral and aesthetic side, this common culture finds objective expression – not solely, but centrally – in the *logoi* or forms of words used to register our experience of value, both positive and negative, and to share that experience in conversation. Logos-philosophy as applied to ethics pictures the individual who undergoes ordinary processes of upbringing or character-formation as achieving, at the ideal limit, a fixed (stable) character in which some acceptable reading of the surrounding culture is achieved and internalized. To the extent that ethics opposes instinct, this process of internalization, I’ve suggested, will be uphill work; episodes of regression will be unsurprising (which of course is not to say that they are ‘perfectly understandable’, meaning perfectly all right), and the ideal limit will never in practice be reached (or, to offer a word of warning

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; hereafter ‘IG’.

<sup>15</sup> See *Plato*, *Phaedo* 96a ff.; *Phaedrus* 264e ff.

to the ‘philosophy of consciousness’: we are never entitled to believe in our own case that it *has* been reached). The successful appropriation of the ethical understanding our culture makes available to us depends, according to the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, on habituation in the right way of acting; both Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *NE* can be regarded, with Gadamer, as reflections on the “relationship between *êthos* and *logos*”, and in any case “Aristotle’s ethics itself presupposes the Socratic-Platonic turn to the *logos* and rests upon the foundation of it”.<sup>16</sup> (For example, Aristotle appeals to Plato in *NE* II: “As Plato says, one must somehow be brought up from one’s earliest youth to be pleased and pained by the right things”; and Plato does indeed say in *Republic* III that if we learn to do this in youth “before we are able to grasp the reason for it” (*prin logon dunatos einai labein*), then “when reason comes we can welcome it, recognizing it by virtue of kinship.”<sup>17</sup>)

Another natural alliance for anyone minded to place character-formation at the heart of moral philosophy would be with a scholar such as Lloyd P. Gerson of the University of Toronto (in his *Aristotle and Other Platonists*).<sup>18</sup> Gerson’s project is to read Aristotle – not just the ethical writings but all the main themes of his philosophy – through the prism of the Neoplatonic commentators of late antiquity. These commentators, Gerson argues,<sup>19</sup> worked on the assumption that Aristotelianism was to be understood as a variant form of Platonism, criticizing and seeking to improve upon the parent philosophy, yet remaining in harmony with its leading ideas – notably, the systematic unity of the cosmos; the ontological priority of the intelligible over the sensible; and the deployment of a hierarchical model in ethics, aesthetics and epistemology. Now, Gadamer does not figure in the index or bibliography of Gerson’s book, and conversely Neoplatonism does not appear to be more than an occasional reference point for Gadamer; so we may take it that these two have converged by widely separate routes on their shared conviction of a unified Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy (a conviction maintained in defiance of the twentieth-century orthodoxy inherited from Werner Jaeger, according to which Aristotle developed in the course of his career in an empiricist direction and away from his Platonist origins). However, the convergence is certainly striking, and it is apparent in certain passages of Gerson’s discussion of Aristotle’s

<sup>16</sup> IG p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Aristotle*, *NE* II, 3 (1104b11-12); *Plato*, *Republic* III, 402a.

<sup>18</sup> *Lloyd P. Gerson*, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005 (hereafter ‘AOP’).

<sup>19</sup> AOP ch. 1.