

The Akratic Gap.
Remarks on the Book VII of Nicomachean Ethics in Walter
Burley's Commentary

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Walter Burley's Commentary to the Nicomachean Ethics is commonly considered little more than an expositio littere. Nevertheless, in some notanda he raises open questions about the crucial gap between the conclusion of the practical syllogism and action. Within the interpretative framework of Saarinen's and Wood's works, I will focus on Burley's analysis of akrasia in book VII. The first point will be some questions related to a notandum, concerning the gap between intellect and will as typical of akrasia. Secondly, I will analyze it in the light of Burley's semantics, where conceptual tools developed in one science prove useful in solving problems of another discipline, in this case ethics. Finally, I'll address the Commentary's brief gloss about heroic virtue, as example of Burley's first steps in the use of measure languages in ethics, by analogy with the Oxford Calculators' techniques.

Keywords: *Walter Burley, Akrasia, Aristotle, Practical Syllogism, Semantics.*

1. Introduction

In his 1999 article *Walter Burley on akrasia: Second Thoughts*, Risto Saarinen complained about the little scholarly attention devoted to Burley's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹. Twenty years later, the situation has not changed much: a critical edition of the *Expositio super libros Ethicorum Aristotelis* (dated around 1333-1341) is still sorely needed – despite the fact that we do have an excellent manuscript tradition – and the secondary literature is equally lim-

¹ A sincere thanks to Laura Rosella, for her collaboration in the drafting and reviewing of the English version of this text.

Risto Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia: Second Thoughts*, «Vivarium», 37 (1999) 1, pp. 60-71: p. 60. On *akrasia* and weakness of will in Walter Burley and the fortune of his commentary to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see also Fabrizio Amerini, *14th-century Reactions to Burley*, in Alessandro Conti (ed.), *A Companion to Walter Burley. Late Medieval Logician and Metaphysician*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013, pp. 377-409; Iacopo Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, in Conti, *A Companion to Walter Burley*, pp. 321-46; Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought. From Augustine to Buridan*, Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 1994, pp. 131-46; Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 30-1; Rega Wood, *Willing Wickedly: Ockham and Burley Compared*, «Vivarium», 37 (1999), 1, pp. 72-93.

ited. In more recent times, however, the studies of Saarinen, Wood and Costa have at least promoted a renewed appreciation of the importance of this text, which remained part of the university *curricula* until the 16th century².

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on some key aspects of a *notandum* included in Burley's commentary on book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It focuses on the akratic's practical syllogism as formulated by Aristotle, but more broadly concerns the issue of acting against one's own best judgement. Burley's goal is to provide an *expositio littere* as faithful to Aristotle's text as possible, and effective for university teaching³. While this is certainly true, the commentary presents a two-tiered structure: in addition to the paraphrastic exposition, a dense apparatus of *notae*, *dubia* and *addendae* offers a critical and often original perspective on key points of the text. Certainly, Burley follows here the same pattern of previous commentaries, such as that by Eustratius of Nicaea and other Greek commentators⁴; but other aspects do not depend on these sources.

The *notandum* at hand is exemplary in this respect, also for the significance of the issue it raises: namely, the problematic but crucial relationship between the propositional level and the pragmatic context within the logical procedure of practical syllogism, i.e. between the level of language and that of action. In the structure of syllogism, action has indeed the role to connect the two levels, by determining a conclusion that should function as a rule of acting. In this paper, I firstly shall therefore outline the terms of the issue; secondly, I'll try a new interpretation providing a reading of the question in the light of Burley's semantics. For it is the latter that is at stake, when the relationship between the necessity of logical conclusions and the necessity of practical acting is put under scrutiny – or, in other words, when the semantic relationship between propositions and their ontological grounding is investigated. Finally, I shall propose a reading of another Burley's note about heroic virtue – at the end of the same book 7 focused to akratic phenomenons – within the context of the *Calculatores'* cultural *milieu* in the first half

² Cfr. Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, pp. 321-2; James A. Weisheipl, *Repertorium Mertonense*, «Mediaeval Studies», 31 (1969), pp. 174-224.

³ Cfr. Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, p. 91.

⁴ Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, p. 328.

of the 14th century⁵, to confirm the theoretical legacy of the apparatus of notes in the *Expositio super libros Ethicorum Aristotelis*.

2. Non de necessitate sequitur opus: judgment, choice, and action in akrasia

Burley's commentary on book 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics* is almost entirely devoted to the problem of *akrasia* (*incontinentia* in the text and in Latin sources). His account closely follows the Aristotelian text, in which the Greek philosopher established the framework of reference on *akrasia* that was subsequently accepted and discussed by all medieval commentators.

According to Aristotle, the akratic is the person who, under the influence of passions and sensible desires, performs an act she knows to be evil. She has *prohairesis* (the capacity to make rational choices) and *boulesis* (the desire in accordance to reason that puts the deliberation of *prohairesis* into practice), but the force of her *epithumia* (sensible desire) is such that it prevents her from turning deliberations into action⁶. While aware that action *x* is preferable to action *y*, the akratic chooses to do *y*, thus failing to perform the practical syllogism. She does not place the particular judgement "this thing is sweet" under the universal premise "Do not taste any sweet thing", as the rules of logical inference would require, but under the opinion "all sweet things procure pleasure", thus acting contrarily to the judgement issued by intellect⁷.

Aquinas' *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, on which Burley's text is based, was grounded on the belief that *akrasia* is essentially a cognitive matter – a belief warranted by Aristotle's text itself⁸. Although Burley

⁵ Cfr. Daniel A. Di Liscia, *Introduction*, in Id., Edith Sylla (eds.), *Quantifying Aristotle. The Impact, Spread and Decline of the Calculatores Tradition*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2022, pp. 1-19; Daniel A. Di Liscia, *Perfections and Latitudes: The Development of the Calculators Tradition and the Geometrisation of Metaphysics and Theology*, in Id., Sylla, *Quantifying Aristotle*, pp. 278-327; Sylvain Roudaut, *La mesure de l'être: Le problème de la quantification des formes au Moyen Âge (ca. 1250-1370)*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2022; Edith Sylla, *The Oxford Calculators in Context*, «Science in Context», 1, 2 (1987), pp. 257-79.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1145b8-1145b20.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1147a25-1147b1-5.

⁸ Thomae Aquinatis *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, in Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia*, Vol. XLVII, 1-2, pp. 379-87. On *akrasia* in Thomas Aquinas, cfr. Riccardo Fedriga, Roberto Limonta, *Debolezza di volontà e libertà del volere in Tommaso d'Aquino*, «Giornale Critico della filosofia italiana», VII (2017), vol. XIII, Fasc. III, pp. 468-86; Riccardo Fedriga, Roberto Limonta, *Vivo ego iam non ego. Un singolare caso di incontinentia in Tommaso d'Aquino e le sue fonti*, in Fulvia

makes use of different sources, his key reference is clearly this Thomistic–Aristotelian framework. Importantly, however, the *addenda* interspersed in the text break up the linearity of Aquinas' mainstream. This opens up the possibility for a less literal and more theoretical approach, which is able to problematically interpret the relationships among the functions of practical syllogism ruled by intellect, on one hand, and the actions governed by the will on the other.

The cited *notandum* comments on *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b9-18:

[...] propositio circa quam decipitur incontinens et cuius ignorantiam habet, non est minor syllogismi practici, sed est conclusio in syllogismo practico. Verbi gratia, sit iste syllogismus practicus: nullum dulce gustare oportet, hoc est dulce, ergo hoc non est gustandum. Circa minorem huius syllogismi non decipitur incontinens, quia bene novit quod hoc est dulce. Sed circa conclusionem decipitur et eam ignorat actu propter concupiscentiam vehementem⁹.

Like Aristotle and Aquinas, Burley treats *akrasia* as a mainly cognitive phenomenon, and frames it in terms of the procedures of practical reasoning. Unlike Aquinas, however – and in line with his own account of logic, intended as a system of rules that govern the relationships among propositions –, he focuses on the connection between the mechanisms of inference and their consequences in the practical sphere.

The point here is not so much about the knowledge, or lack thereof, of the minor premise, nor about the inability to correctly place it under the major premise due to a contingent state of ignorance (as in Aquinas); but about the presence of impediments that not only blur the knowledge of the premises, making it a *scientia ligata*,¹⁰ but more importantly, meddle with the syllogism's inferential proce-

de Luise, Irene Zavattero (eds.), *La volontarietà dell'azione tra Antichità e Medioevo*, Università degli studi di Trento, Trento 2019, pp. 453-80; Denis J.M. Bradley, *Thomas Aquinas on Weakness of the Will*, in Tobias Hoffmann (ed.), *Weakness of Will from Plato to Present*, The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. 2008, pp. 82-114; Andrea Robiglio, *L'impossibile volere. Tommaso d'Aquino, i tomisti e la volontà*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2002, particularly pp. 123-52; Saarinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought*, pp. 118-31. At the same time, Aquinas did not hesitate to depart from Aristotle's position on even substantial aspects of the problem.

⁹ *Gualteri Burlei doctoris egregii super decem libros Ethicorum expositiones expliciunt*, in Venetiis: per Octavianum Scotum Modoetiensem, 1481, VII.3, ff. 150vb-151ra (henceforth *Super decem libros Ethicorum*).

¹⁰ *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, VII.3, f. 150rb: «scientia [...] est ligata per concupiscentiam»; *ibidem*, f. 150va: «contra scientiam in universali ligatam e opinionem particularem in actu potest qui agere et agit, scilicet incontinens».

dures, hindering the natural transition from the plane of logic to that of action¹¹. What is at stake here is not the inability to perform the practical syllogism; indeed, the latter can correctly be taken to its right conclusions, with the akratic having full awareness of the truth of the premises and the correctness of the conclusion.

Under this interpretation, Aristotle's reference to the akratic's ignorance about the last proposition or premise (τελευταία πρότασις)¹² should not be taken as a reference to the minor premise, but to the proposition that concludes the syllogism. This means that the akratic is the person who fails not only cognitively, but pragmatically, for she is unable to bridge the gap between the two facets, as it were, of the conclusion: in facts, the conclusion can both be seen as the closing statement of the syllogism, and, at the same time, as the practical realization of the preceding reasoning. While set in a cognitive frame, the phenomenon of *akrasia* is not exhaustively explained by it. For the akratic failure does not concern the cognitive sphere only, but the relationship between cognition and choice, intellect and will, linguistic plane and ethical-ontological plane. This is what Saarinen refers to, when he underlines that «a person can thus know and will the premises but he does not necessarily will the conclusion»¹³.

Burley identifies in this failure the root of the incapacity to act according to one's best judgement. In so doing, he interprets in an original way one of the issues raised by Aristotle's text, setting it within the broader context of the relationship between language and reality¹⁴. Saarinen's suggestion shows how Burley managed to capture the key relationship between intellect and will, and consequently felt the need to tap into the voluntaristic tradition in order

¹¹ In Saarinen's classification framework, this is "model 2", corresponding to Burley's "fourth solution" (Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia*, pp. 62-4).

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1147b9.

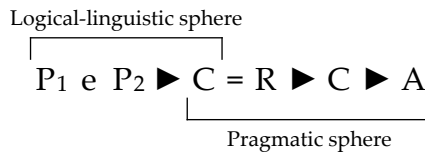
¹³ Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia*, p. 64. Saarinen's analysis quickly shifts the focus on a different aspect, namely the effects of desire on the body, but the point of interest here is rather the epistemic indeterminacy. According to this reading, what fails is not the necessity of the logical inferences, but its ability to secure the practical effects of its procedures.

¹⁴ It is true that in other passages of the commentary the English *magister* seems to subscribe to a more traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretation of *akrasia* as ignorance of the particular, and therefore as an inability to place the particular under the universal. But while this shift between interpretations is seen as a sign of inconsistency by some interpreters, I suggest it has some value. For Burley's approach can be understood as a two-speed model that allows to maintain a balance between the linearity of a didactic exposition and the problematizing function of a philosophical reading.

to tackle some of the problems a purely cognitive approach left unsolved. Certainly, Aquinas himself did make reference to both psychic faculties in his account, so Burley is not so much dissenting from Aquinas the philosopher and the theologian, as from Aquinas the interpreter of Aristotle. He feels free to do so in the name of full faithfulness to Aristotle's text, whenever he notices issues left unsolved by Aquinas' account.

Let us go back to Burley's text. If the akratic's failure lies in her inability to complete the practical syllogism, we still need to clarify how exactly such "completing" is to be understood. The traditional reading of the book 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics* interprets the akratic fallacy as the inability to place the minor premise under the correct major premise. On this reading, therefore, the turning point is the second premise. But it is worth remembering here that, in Aristotle's view, the true conclusion of a practical syllogism is action ($\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\tau\epsilon\iota\nu$)¹⁵. On one hand, Burley seems to subscribe to a propositional definition: the conclusion is simply the syllogism's final statement, which brings to completion the two premises and functions as normative criterion for the following act. On the other, Burley's critical observations in the *notandum* seem to outline a different and more complex view of the syllogism's conclusion.

It would thus share in both natures, as the following diagram shows¹⁶:



In this inferential pattern, the akratic gap occurs at the level of the conclusion, affecting its nature as a bridge between logic and ethics. At the intersection of these spheres, we find two elements: first, the impediments that hinder the execution of the practical syllogism; secondly and most importantly, the deliberations of the will according to the intellect's judgements. The incontinent's fallacy does not

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1147a31.

¹⁶ *Legenda*: P1 e P2 = premises; C = conclusion; R = pragmatic rule; C = choice of the will; A = act.

lie in the alternative between cognitive incapacity and weakness of will, but in this short-circuit between intellect and will within the procedures that lead from judgement to acting. From the intellect's point of view, the conclusion may well be seen as the correct logical ending of the syllogism, yet the will seems incapable of taking in the result of the reasoning (which it nonetheless understands) and applying it in the practical sphere. Burley writes:

[...] ex opinione in actu de ista universali, omne dulce est gustandum, et ex opinione in actu de illa singulari, hoc est dulce, non de necessitate sequitur opus. Habens enim istas opiniones in actu potest impediri ab operando, sed si non impediatur de necessitate operabitur et gustabit hoc quod in actu opinatur esse dulce.¹⁷

Rega Wood has stressed the difference between Burley's and Aquinas' accounts. According to the latter, the akratic's mistake does not depend on the lack of knowledge of the universal, but on its wrong application to the particular. Therefore, the fallacy lies in the wrong use of the rules of practical syllogism: the incontinent does not make the right choice, since the intellect submits to the will an object wrongly judged as best. According to Aquinas, the will acts in accordance with its nature, but makes the wrong choice due to the intellect's preceding mistake in judging the object to be willed.

On the other hand, the stress placed on the coordinate action of intellect and will does not imply that the incontinent deliberately chooses what is evil. In Burley's account, desire leaves the syllogism's structures untouched and does not hinder the consequentality of their logical connections. It simply inclines the will towards the particular rather than the universal¹⁸; and "particular" here can mean, from time to time, "relative", "subjective" or even "wrong".

The universal and particular premises are well known to the incontinent: it is the will that ignores (chooses to ignore) what this entails. The will follows the directions of desire, i.e. the desirability of what is mentioned in the particular premise. Saarinen describes the

¹⁷ *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, VII.3, f. 150rb.

¹⁸ *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, VII.3, f. 150va: «Propositio universalis concupiscentiae est talis: omne dulce est gustabile, et per consequens delectabile, et incontinens syllogizando practice sumit minorem sub maiori concupiscentiae sic: omne dulce oportet gustare, hoc est dulce, et sequitur conclusio operationis, quia gustabit hoc dulce si non sit prohibitus. Mihi tamen videtur quod concupiscentia, cum sit passio existens in parte sensitiva, non habet aliquam universalem in quam inclinetur, sed solum inclinatur in particularia.».

situation as a voluntary, but not deliberate, choice. The cause of the mistake lies in the will (so it is voluntary), but the will does not have full awareness of its own actions (so it is not deliberate). Consequently, Saarinen argues that «ignorance is thus not the *cause of akrasia*, but rather its *effect*»¹⁹. The paradox, here, is only apparent: in the akratic's case, ignorance is certainly a cognitive deficit, but it depends on the pragmatic inefficacy of the practical syllogism. Such «insufficient reasoning» shifts the akratic gap from the intellectualistic framework of Aristotle and Aquinas towards a more voluntaristic account.

3. *The akratic syllogism in the light of Burley's Semantics*

Saarinen's analysis leaves us with the following question: «Why does Burley emphasize so much the insufficient reasoning as a major cause of *akrasia*?»²⁰. While not providing a definitive answer, he indicates three possible lines of inquiry. Let us consider the first one. According to this suggestion, the *Doctor planus et perspicuus* did not need to identify *akrasia* with ignorance and with a mistake in judging, since he had already clearly distinguished between judgment and choice²¹.

Such observation highlights a semantic lack between terms, propositions, and their extra-linguistic reference. Burley's theory of knowledge, as is known, has a realist nature. More specifically, the moderate realism of the first period acquires a radical form from 1324 on, following the discussion with Ockham on the problem of universals. Setting aside the issue of the relationship between these two phases and their exact role in Burley's thought²², we shall focus on his semantic theory of terms and propositions, as he formulated it in the Thirties, while he worked on the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. His semantics provides the *magister* with the relevant theoretical framework to deal with the philosophical issues raised by Aristotle's text.

¹⁹ Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia*, p. 69.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² For the debate between scholars who opt for a continuity between the two phases, and those who see a discontinuity, see Elizabeth Karger, *Walter Burley's Realism*, «*Vivarium*», 37 (1999), 1, pp. 24-40: pp. 24-6; see also Alessandro D. Conti, *Walter Burley* (Summer 2016 Edition), in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/burley/>>, section 2.

According to Burley, the scientific description of reality requires a preliminary comprehension of the semantics of linguistic functions. This comprehension is based on the belief that the meaning of linguistic objects always depends on their ontological grounding, and that there is a fundamental isomorphism between language, concepts and reality²³. A proposition can be said to be true if and only if it describes the *veritas rerum*, i.e. the extra-mental existence or non-existence of what is conceptually asserted to be such, as well as the disposition of states of affairs in reality, beyond the logical-linguistic context and the consistency of its rules²⁴.

Burley's position belongs to a broader reflection on the meaning and the reality of universals. I shall only consider here the most relevant aspects for the semantics of the practical syllogism²⁵. Universals exist both *in re* and *in intellectu*. The former constitute what Burley calls *propositiones in re*, a key concept in his theory of propositions²⁶. They constitute an *ens copulatum*, i.e. a subject and a predicate that intellect combines according to different relations of identity. Such *complexa* represent the meaning of a proposition and its truth-maker. For linguistic statements are said to be true insofar as they have an ontological import and can be tied to a reference, i.e. insofar as their logical structure corresponds to that of a proposition *in re* in the aforementioned sense. As for false propositions, they are such insofar as they lack (correct) reference to the truth-maker, that is the propositions *in re*. In other words, they fail to correspond to an actual state of affairs; yet they have a meaning, because they refer to a mental proposition that Burley calls *esse obiectivum in intellectu*, and constitutes one of the two forms of the universal *in intellectu* (the other one being the universal as an act of cognitive apprehension)²⁷.

The *Doctor planus et perspicuus* thus operates a distinction between *sensus*, which is what the intellect understands of its object (wheth-

²³ Catarina N. Dutilh, *The Ockham-Burley Dispute*, in Conti, *A Companion to Walter Burley*, pp. 49-84: p. 52.

²⁴ Cfr. Laurent Cesalli, *Le réalisme propositionnel de Walter Burley*, «Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge», 68 (2001), pp. 165-221; Laurent Cesalli, *Meaning and Truth*, in Conti, *A Companion to Walter Burley*, pp. 85-133: pp. 126-9.

²⁵ Cfr. Cesalli, *Meaning and Truth*; Conti, *Walter Burley*, section 5.

²⁶ For the secondary literature on this topic, see Cesalli, *Meaning and Truth*, p. 123.

²⁷ The distinction closely resembles Ockham's two theories of the universal, first as a *factum* and then as a cognitive operation, which directly intentionates its objects without any conceptual or linguistic mediations. Thus, Burley's position seems somewhat halfway between Chatton's strong realism and Wodeham's theory, which identifies meaning with the mental reality of the *complexa significabile*.

er true or false), and *significatum*, which is always referred to, and legitimated by, an extra-mental grounding²⁸. In this way, he is able to differentiate between the intelligibility of a mental object and its truth, conceived as *adaequatio* of the logical bonds to the relationships holding among real substances²⁹.

We can now read the case of the akratic's syllogism within the frame of this semantic model. In this case, the inferential mechanisms that connect the premises to the conclusion fail to extend their action beyond the linguistic and cognitive sphere, as their nature would require (what Saarinen called "insufficient reasoning"). According to Burley's semantics, the conclusion has its *sensus* in the *esse obiectivum in intellectu*, i.e. in the mental proposition, but in the specific akratic's case it lacks *significatum*, insofar as it lacks reference to the *propositio in re* that would give it ontological grounding and thus make it true. *Akrasia* occurs and operates in this semantic gap between *sensus* and *significatum*.

The overlap between the conclusion as a linguistic statement and the conclusion as a pragmatic normative statement is mirrored in the relationship between mental propositions and *propositiones in re*. If the former have a cognitive and semeiotic nature, as *complexa* of signs that refer to some other thing as their meaning, the latter have an ambivalent nature, straddling the mental and the extra-mental dimension, just like the practical syllogism's conclusion. The *propositio in re* constitutes the (mental) composition of parts that are material (i.e. extra-mental), or more precisely, that bring along an unbreakable bond with the real *complexa* they are grounded on.

The relationship between cognitive acts and the material reality they refer to is also key to the problem of *akrasia*. Rega Wood has insisted on the fracture between intellect and reality, stressing what she sees as the crucial difference between demonstrative syllogism

²⁸ A similar attention to the grounding of concepts on reality features in the logical distinction between primary concepts (what Burley calls "a name of first intentions", for example when we define "mammal" as a sensible, animated substance endowed with udders) and the secondary concepts ("a name of second intentions", or the extensional concept of "mammal" as the species which groups all the individual mammals), which Burley formulated in the prologue of his *Ars Vetus*. The difference between these two sets of concepts lies in the different ways with which they cognitively intentionate their objects – the first directly, the latter through the mediation of the first – even though they both ultimately refer to the things of which they constitute the meaning.

²⁹ Cesalli defined it «a strict correspondentist theory of truth» (Cesalli, *Meaning and Truth*, p. 131).

and practical syllogism³⁰. In the former, the premises necessarily lead to the conclusion; in the latter, posing the premises correctly does not necessarily determine actions. It is equally important, however, to stress an analogy between the cognitive and the practical sphere, which depends on the semantic concept of *propositio in re*. In the case of the demonstrative syllogism, the absence of an isomorphic relationship between the propositions of the mental language and the *propositio in re* determines the falsehood and the cognitive inefficacy of the reasoning. Similarly, in the practical syllogism the function of the *propositio in re* is assumed by the conclusion. Though from different perspectives, both accounts pivot on what seems to be the fundamental philosophical requirement for Burley's semantics, i.e. the need for cognitive processes to be objectively and accurately grounded on extra-mental reality.

Wood puts it in terms of «partial causes»³¹. With this formula, she translates into philosophical terms the images used by Burley, for whom the action proceeds from the intellect's judgement not as a conclusion from logical premises, but «ut pluvia sequitur ad nubem»³². So there seems to be a fundamental «weakness of the link between intellectual judgement and practical execution»³³, a feature that brings Burley's position closer to Aquinas'.

It is tempting to pun on this «weakness of the link», and reformulate it as a kind of weakness of will. Under this interpretation, the weak link in the chain tying the intellect's judgement to action is to be searched in that thin layer connecting the decisional act of will to the intellect's reasoning. Burley introduces voluntaristic elements in Aristotle's and Aquinas' cognitive model of *akrasia*. He thus appears to be subscribing to a more nuanced interpretation of it, which brings him closer to the ethics of William of Ockham, his adversary in the debate on universals. Indeed, in the question 7 of his *Quaestiones variae*³⁴, Ockham develops an intentional theory of the will, in which the will is capable to deliberate not only about the means but also about the action's ends. He draws the

³⁰ Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, p. 90.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, VII.3, f. 150rb.

³³ Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, p. 91.

³⁴ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7 in *Opera Theologica*. Vol. VIII, eds. Girardus I. Etzkorn, Franciscus E. Kelley, Joseph C. Wey, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure NY 1984, pp. 323-407.

picture of a subject who is free to choose and act against the intellect's deliberations. Not unlike Burley – but without the same focus on the procedures of practical syllogism – Ockham asserts that the akratic is the person who knows the premises and the conclusions of the syllogism, but nonetheless acts against it: «[the akratic man] potest evidentiter scire primam maiorem, minorem et conclusionem, et tamen potest facere oppositum; igitur potest facere oppositum illius quod est dictatum a recta ratione.»³⁵ The *volitio efficax*, which would allow the akratic to operate in accordance with the intellect's deliberations, is suspended under the pressure of desire, and the will places the minor premise under a universal practical opinion produced *ad hoc* to satisfy passions. In Ockham's account too, therefore, the purely cognitive paradigm of *akrasia* as a mistake, due to the disturbance of sensible desire, is replaced by a different model, in which the relationship between psychic faculties is central³⁶.

Let's revert to Burley. What comes between the intellect's deliberations and the capacity of the will to understand the connections between terms and propositions and put them into practice? The English *magister* talks about premises that are *ligatae* by the effect of desire. The root of this bond seems to lie in the sensible sphere of the body and its passions: what is at stake is the combined action of external causes (i.e. the object of desire that generates passion) with an internal act of the will, which in turn chooses to neutralize the intellect's contribution by ignoring the logical nexuses between premises and conclusion and what they entail in practical terms³⁷. Between the available options – performing the best act (*x*) or the worst act (*x*) – the will chooses the latter or appears incapable of choosing the former, failing to execute the act the intellect indicated as preferable. The key lies here in the *scientia ligata*, which does not refer to a blinding of the soul's faculties – as in Aristotle's and Aquinas' account – but to a bond, a limitation of the available options that narrows down the range of action and paralyzes the will, leading it to act akratically. In contrast to the intellect, the will is not subject to the necessity of the syllogism's inferential mechanisms: in fact, choices are not guided by the search for logical correctness, but

³⁵ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, art. 3, in *Opera Theologica*, p. 367.

³⁶ Cfr. Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, pp. 74-6, pp. 82-4, pp. 87-9.

³⁷ A subject «can thus know and will the premises but he does not necessarily will the conclusion», Saarinen, *Walter Burley on akrasia*, p. 64; cfr. also Saarinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought*, pp. 142-3.

by practical ends, and the merit of the *notandum* is that of highlighting how crucial this friction is for the akratic phenomenons.

Burley, therefore, does not reject the Aristotelian intellectualism that underlies his commentary, but shifts his attention from the interpretation of the syllogistic mechanisms to the broader issue of the relationship between logic and ontology; that is, from what could be interpreted as a pure technicality to a long-lasting philosophical question. It would probably be an exaggeration to claim that Burley consciously decided to systematically apply methods belonging to other scientific fields to moral matters. But we do have some grounds to suggest that Burley's approach is to put to good use the theoretical tools he elaborated in his logic and ontology studies. In fact, we can notice that the *notandum*, when tackling the practical syllogism, focuses on the ontological grounding of propositions, which lies at the core of his theory of *propositiones in re*. The English *magister* thus shows an ability to apply a range of conceptual and methodological tools in different contexts. He does so also when he exploits logical notions in some *notanda* of the *Expositio*, for example when he asks whether the statement "the incontinent gives up on any choice" is a self-evident proposition³⁸.

A similar method will be applied by the Oxford calculators, though in more organic and systematic form. Indeed, in the contemporary and immediately successive ethical debate, these *magistri* will confidently apply the language of natural sciences to ethical and theological issues³⁹. Suffice it to mention here the case of Richard Kilvington, for his relevance in the ethical debates of the first half of the 14th century. In his *Quaestiones super libros Ethicorum* (which can be dated to 1332, thus contemporary to Burley's commentary), Kilvington systematically employs the vocabulary and the methods of physics to the analysis of virtues and their transformations, described as following the same intensification and remission processes of natural phenomena⁴⁰.

³⁸ Cfr. Wood, *Willing Wickedly*, p. 92.

³⁹ About the Commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the fourteenth century, see István P. Bejczy, *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages. Commentaries on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, 1200-1500*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2008.

⁴⁰ Cfr. Richard Kilvington, *Richard Kilvington's Quaestiones super libros Ethicorum*, edited by Monika Michalowska, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2016, particularly pp. 12-8.

4. Concluding Remarks

The case study of *akrasia* in Burley's *Expositio* has shown a textual strategy that deploys a two-tiered commentary: a basic framework modeled on Aquinas' *Sententia Ethicorum*, offering a literal interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, on one hand; and a paratext with *dubia* and *notanda*, which delve into some crucial ethical issues, emerging from Aristotle's text, on the other. Accordingly, we might say that the fortune and historical role of Burley's commentary in the 14th century's ethical debate move along two lines.

Firstly, the commentary had a vast success. It was reprinted and widely spread across university *curricula* throughout the whole 16th century, thanks to its faithfulness to Aquinas' orthodox theology and certain valued formal features, among which its analytical accuracy, perspicuous exposition, adherence to Aristotle's text, and didactic efficacy, achieved through the indexes and synopses provided at the end of each chapter⁴¹. The *Expositio* thus appears as a complete collection of the issues presented in the text and in the commentary traditions, organized and discussed in the light of more recent interpretations.

By contrast, the historical fortune of the themes addressed in the *notanda* is quite different. The solutions offered to specific problems can hardly be understood as part of a homogeneous and coherent theory; but it is precisely this unsystematic nature that turns them into a rich repertoire of intuitions, hypotheses and readings that fed the contemporary debate, particularly the Oxford calculators' ones⁴².

We can take as an example a passage from the end of book 7 of the *Expositio*, devoted to heroic virtue⁴³. Burley makes reference to a Greek commentary, which he attributes to Eustratius, and adumbrates the possibility of understanding heroic virtue not as an independent form of virtue, but as a supreme degree or superior level

⁴¹ On the professional efficacy of Burley's commentary and its paratext in the manuscript BnF Lat. 6459, see also Ayelet Even-Ezra, *Lines of Thought. Branching Diagrams and the Medieval Mind*, CUP, Chicago 2021, pp. 62-3.

⁴² Even-Ezra has described in similar terms the function performed by tree diagrams as paratext of some manuscripts between the 13th and 14th centuries. In that case, the autonomy from the text is ascribed to the peculiarities of the visual representation; but the function would be the same as that of Burley's commentary. See Roberto Limonta, *Pensare per diagrammi. Modi cognitivi e pratiche testuali nella filosofia del XIII secolo*, «dianoia», 34 (2022), pp. 103-11.

⁴³ Wood underlines how Burley, in some *notanda*, departs from Aquinas' position to remain faithful to Aristotle's explanation of *akrasia* as a voluntary though not deliberate action. Cfr. Costa, *The Ethics of Walter Burley*, pp. 344-5.

of individual virtues. He thus suggests a quantitative conception of ethical phenomena:

Secundo notandum circa virtutem heroicam quod ipsa non est specie distincta a virtutibus communiter dictis, scilicet a fortitudine, mansuetudine, temperantia et sic de aliis. Nam in specie cuiuslibet virtutis superexcellencia ultra communem modum hominum est virtus heroica, quod patet hic per Eustratium dicentem quod si quis fiat fortis super omnem fortem, eius fortitudo est fortitudo heroica et divina, [...] et sic de aliis speciebus virtutis. Unde in qualibet specie virtutis moralis est reperire virtutem heroicam, ut liberalitatem heroicam, mansuetudinem heroicam et sic de aliis⁴⁴.

To this, we must add the *dubium* that concludes the *notandum*: «Utrum autem virtus heroica manens heroica, aut bestialitas, habeat gradus demonstrantes secundum magis et minus vel sit supremus gradus sue speciei non determino ad presens»⁴⁵. The question is left unanswered, for the commentary does not delve into it any further, and what it follows is a cursory comparison between *malicia* and *bestialitas*, and then a distinction between two interpretations (*large* and *stricte*) of the latter. Burley probably refers here to that Aristotle's passage, in the book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which distinguishes four degrees in all kinds of goodness or badness⁴⁶: perseverance, continence, temperance, up to heroic virtue as the highest degree. Burley's *dubium*, however, does not simply repeat Aristotle's distinction but projects it onto the virtues, with a stress on the quantitative function of heroism with respect to the fundamentally qualitative perspective of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

This framework based on degrees of intensity adumbrates a quantitative language, in which the *virtus heroica* is not a particular species of virtue (*specie distincta*; by contrast, Ockham will define it a *qualitas*, different from other virtues, in the already cited question 7 of the *Quaestiones variae*)⁴⁷; it is rather part of a system of degrees of perfection, which measure the intensity of each virtue according to standard units and where it appears as a *supremus gradus* of each virtue; a similar approach to that of the Oxford calculators and to their use of quantitative languages.

⁴⁴ *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, VII.1.1, fol. 145va.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1145a15-b20. Cfr. also Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniensis*, III, d. 34, q. unica, 22.

⁴⁷ Guillelmi de Ockham, *Quaestiones variae* in *Opera Theologica*. Vol. VIII, p. 273.

It would be misleading, here, to equate the glosses to the painstaking analysis deployed in the commentary. Nor is it legitimate to load these annotations with a full-blown quantitative theory of ethical phenomena they certainly did not have. But neither would it be fair to dismiss them as isolated suggestions: the *notanda* paratext responds to a precise interpretive strategy that aims at addressing some of the text's unsolved issues. From this point of view, the *Expositio* made available crucial tools to the ethical debates of the 14th century:

1. An accurate and literal interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whose lack of originality made it especially useful for teaching purposes, as a repertoire of ancient, medieval and contemporary commentaries. This was particularly important for *magistri* like the Oxford calculators, whose reflections were above all aimed at undergraduate students and scholastic disputes.
2. A two-tiered commentary model, in which the apparatus of *notanda* outlines the possibility of a less rigid methodology and a greater freedom in offering unconventional reading hypotheses. This structure allowed Burley to open up to more problematic considerations and to sources that were not strictly in line with the fundamentally thomistic framework.
3. The focus on the intersection between logic and practical level, theory and praxis – rather than the relationships between soul faculties – as a crucial point in the analysis of the akratic cases.
4. The example of an approach that exploits the intersection of fields of knowledge to tackle philosophical problems, like, in the case of *akrasia*, ontology, ethics and propositional semantics: the focus on the practical implications of the syllogistic mechanisms is motivated by the same concern, in Burley's semantics, about the grounding of the mental propositions.

While certainly not conclusive or systematic, such observations could have the value of pointing at a fruitful direction of search, aimed at shedding light on the role of Burley's ethics in the Oxford ethical debates in the mid-14th century.