

Hyperkrasia: structures of agency in self-oppression

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# List of Abbreviations

DA	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i>
DLA	Augustine, <i>De Libero Arbitrio</i>
DSM-V	American Psychiatric Association, <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed.</i>
NE	Aristotle, <i>The Nicomachean Ethics</i>
R	Plato, <i>The Republic</i>

# Introduction

## A. SELF-OPPRESSION: A REAL FORM OF HUMAN AGENCY

When we think of oppression, we tend to think of a person being oppressed by someone or something else: a domineering husband oppresses his wife or children; the structure of the labour market oppresses the already disadvantaged... Examples abound. But is it possible to oppress *oneself*?

This thesis is driven by the intuition that, although paradoxical, self-oppression is a real form of human agency. In the cases that I have in mind, an agent exhibits certain characteristics commonly associated with oppression: a pressured, controlled quality to agency that compromises agency by compromising choice. The agent feels as if she *has* to act the way she does, such that the action does not fully seem to be her choice. Yet, curiously, there is no identifiable third party to whom the oppression can be attributed. Rather, this seems to be the agent *herself*: she appears, therefore, to be both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Though self-oppression is a paradoxical form of agency, examples of the phenomenon seem fairly common. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which a woman called Beth explains how, worried about global waste and overconsumption, she tries to minimise her ecological footprint on the world:

A plan presents itself. I will cook my cabbage in the early hours of each morning, when the electricity is charged at 'night' rate: I already rise at five to boil a series of kettles, the hot water to be kept in a succession of flasks for hourly doling out of coffee, saving precious pence (and power) with every tepid cup. [...] I war my cabbage cold in the evenings, from then on, which fills me with a kind of sanctimonious despair.

I cannot solve the global issues of over-consumption, waste, and inequality – but I can, at least as far as my responsibility goes, not take more than I need. I will have no part in this wasteful system; I do not buy into its rules. I will take no apples, and they will have no place in me. My energy bills will be minimal; I put no extra demand on the system. I will not want. (Beth, 2017: 25)

Another example can be found in Shani Raviv’s autobiography, in which she relates her experience of her eating disorder:

In time I formulated a more precise list of “can” and “can’t” in my head that dictated what I was allowed or forbidden to consume. The point is not what was listed but to what extent this list dictated my life. It became my way of life. My manual. My blueprint. But more than that, *it gave me false reassurance that my life was under control*. I was managing everything because I had this list in front of me telling me what – and what not – to do. (Raviv, 2010: 55)

As a final example, consider the following statement written by self-confessed ‘super mom’ Jaimi Erickson, on a blog for full-time mothers:

When good things become rules and comparison drags our self-esteem into the gutter, Super-Mom Syndrome isn’t working. At the heart of all my efforts was a fear of failure with the most important thing I have ever been entrusted with.

How much is enough? And if it all depends on us, anything that goes wrong is on us. So we fix and cajole. We control and contrive. We stress and we push. With all we’ve got, we try to make life perfect.

And it is never enough. (Erickson, 2010)

In all of these passages, it is apparent that the agent feels very pressured: Beth *has* to reduce her negative impact on the world, Shani *has* to follow her list of

rules, and Jaimi *has* to keep pushing for perfection. I hypothesise that this pressure is an *oppressive* one, meaning it compromises these agents' choices: they don't fully seem to choose to act as they do. Yet, all these agents remain agents: they are the ones in control of their actions, and no one else is directly forcing them to act in this way. *They* are the ones, at least in an immediate sense, who are exerting the oppressive pressure (though, in some or all cases, we may want to trace the oppression back to others – a point to which I will return). I submit, therefore, that these agents display symptoms of self-oppression.

It must immediately be noted, though, that my intention is not to reinforce stereotypes: I do not suggest that all perfectionist mothers or conscientious eaters are self-oppressive by default. I cannot sufficiently stress that self-oppression, as I see it, is a *style* of agency, and as such independent of what the agent in question is doing or pursuing. Beth, Shani, and Jaimi seem self-oppressive because they behave in a certain manner, not because of *what* they do. In this thesis, as will become clear, I will avoid approaching the question of self-oppression by referring to the content of action.

## **B. PRELIMINARY CHARACTERISATION**

My hypothesis is thus that self-oppression is a real, and distinct, form of human agency. The headline aim of this thesis is to offer a conceptualisation of self-oppression, which demonstrates that it is a form of agency which is both possible and distinct from other forms of agency. Thus far, I have characterised self-oppression as having two defining features. First of all, it involves *self-control*: the agent is in charge of her own actions. This means essentially two things: (1) it means that someone is in *control*. Self-oppressive actions exhibit a particularly



controlled style of agency. On this basis, self-oppression differs from cases in which control is lost: think of someone caving into the urge to eat a second slice of cake, or the wanton agent who just goes along with whatever opportunity that arises. Such instances of agency – if we want to consider them agency at all – have a very different style than instances of self-oppression: they are impulsive, whilst self-oppressed actions are minutely regulated and directed. (2) But, crucially, self-oppression features *self*-control: it is the agent *herself* who is in control. Her actions are not, in any immediate sense, directed by someone or something else: she retains control over her actions. It is not so that a third party is forcing the agent to act, as is the case when, for example, I would hand my money over at an armed robbery; and neither is she manipulated, brainwashed, or anything of the sort. On this basis, self-oppression must be distinguished from third-party oppression and other forms of third-party interference such as undue influence.

A second characteristic of self-oppression is that it features *compromised* choice. The exerted self-control involves such a pressure that it seems to compromise the agent's choices: hence the analogy with oppression. This is not to say, of course, that *all forms of oppression* involve obvious pressure, or that oppression necessarily compromises choice.<sup>1</sup> But I do take these to be common and significant effects of oppression, and key aspects of the phenomenon I call self-

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<sup>1</sup> Surely, there may be forms of oppression which do not compromise choice: it may, for example, have a merely affective or psychological effect. Some people, who we may want to call oppressed, may *feel* unworthy or unrecognised, without this necessarily affecting their actions and so without necessarily compromising their choices.

oppression. In this thesis, I am invoking the notion of oppression to refer to situations in which an agent's choices *are* compromised, and it is in analogy with such situations that I describe self-*oppression* as such.

It is also clear that not *all* kinds of pressure compromise choice: indeed, we often make our choices under pressure, whether self-induced or not. Someone playing speed chess is under pressure to choose her next move quickly; a fire fighter on the job makes pressured high-stakes decisions. For this reason, not all cases which *look* like instances of self-oppression necessarily are. We often act under self-imposed pressure, but this does not always mean this pressure is compromising our choices. Someone who is very dedicated to a challenging project may exert a considerable pressure over herself, which is nonetheless *not* oppressive. There is thus something peculiar about the *kind* of pressure that seems to characterise self-oppression, such that it compromises choice.

Of course, what it means exactly to *choose* is also a contested issue: the term is used in many ways and contexts, not all of them compatible. I use it here in order to capture a specific aspect of agency which is hampered whenever an agent acts under a certain kind of pressure, which I call *oppressive* pressure. Pressure is oppressive, on my view, if the agent feels that she *has to* do – or *mustn't* do – certain things, in such a way that it doesn't seem to be fully her choice. My hypothesis, then, is that the self-control exercised by the self-oppressive agent involves an *oppressive pressure*, which compromises her choices. Of course, conceptualising self-oppression adequately will require spelling out how exactly the notion of choice is used here.

In self-oppression, choice is thus compromised in this primary sense: when the agent acts one way or another under such a pressure, she is not *fully*

choosing to. In addition, as we will see, self-oppression often compromises choice in a *secondary* sense as well. This because it tends to have further consequences on one's ability to exercise agency in other matters. Insofar as an agent is pressured into doing, or refraining from doing, certain things, she is also prevented from doing any *other* things: Beth, sleep-deprived from her nightly activities to save energy, may have to give up certain hobbies; or Jaimi, so preoccupied with perfecting her role as a mother, may feel that she is failing to be a good friend – both without really choosing to. This is a secondary way in which self-oppression, when severe, tends to compromise choice. This, however, is just a common, and not an essential feature of self-oppression.

In sum, my starting hypothesis is that

*self-oppression is a real form of agency, which features a form of self-control which compromises choice.*

### **C. THE PARADOX OF SELF-OPPRESSION**

My hypothesis is thus that self-oppression is a real form of agency. As I have described it thus far, however, it seems to be an *impossible* form of agency, and this for two reasons. First of all, the concept of self-oppression is inherently *paradoxical*. If the agent is both the oppressor *and* the oppressed, a philosophical riddle emerges: who is here oppressing whom? It seems that the self, in the term self-oppression, has a dual function: it exists both in the nominative (as the part that oppresses) and in the accusative (as the part that is oppressed). Untangling these two modes of the self will be crucial for developing an account of self-oppression.

Secondly, it is unclear how an agent could compromise her *own* choices.

To answer this question, I must specify how I understand choice in the context of self-oppression. My assumption so far is that self-oppression features an oppressive, choice-undermining pressure, but this needs to be explained further. How exactly can a pressure compromise choice? In cases of third-party oppression, we can often approach this question by asking whether the exerted pressure overrides the agent's will, thus in a sense overriding her agency. For example, if an oppressive husband forbids his wife to leave the house by herself, her staying indoors does not seem to be fully her choice. The reason for this is that her actions are not really her own, but are rather controlled by another. But if it is the agent herself who exerts the pressure, this kind of explanation isn't available: it is the exercise of her own agency which is oppressive, so its effect cannot be that agency is overridden. If I am the one who is in control of my actions, this seems to imply that my actions will be the result of my choices (and vice versa). Choice seems compromised if and only if the agent *loses control* over her actions, either due to impersonal forces or due to other agents. In self-oppression, however, actions are under the direct control of the agent. On what grounds, then, could her choices be compromised?

This second issue is, in fact, closely intertwined with the first. For the question of *who oppresses whom* corresponds to the question of how one can exercise control over oneself on the one hand, yet have one's choice compromised on the other. So, in self-oppression, who exercises self-control, and whose choice is compromised?

#### **D. THESIS AIM AND SCOPE**

As I described it so far, self-oppression appears to be impossible. The headline

aim of this thesis is to explain the apparent possibility of self-oppression by offering a conceptualisation of it which is both plausible and philosophically satisfactory. This conceptualisation should establish that self-oppression is a logically possible form of agency, which warrants its own category.

My strategy will be to carve out a space for self-oppression within a taxonomy of different forms of agency. Self-oppression is one of many ways in which one can act, and it exists alongside other regulatory styles, such as, for example, the one which I display when surrendering to the urge to eat a second slice of cake. To demonstrate that self-oppression warrants its own place within this taxonomy, I will spell out its *differentiae*: I will describe which features seem distinctive about it, and set it apart from other regulatory styles. This should demonstrate that self-oppression is indeed a distinct form of agency. In my preliminary characterisation, I already spelled out two *differentiae* for self-oppression: self-control and compromised choice. These *differentiae*, however, will need to be spelled out both more extensively and more systematically.

If this conceptualisation is to establish that self-oppression is not only a distinct, but also a *possible* form of agency, it must address the two issues raised in the previous section: who, in self-oppression, oppresses whom? And how can an agent compromise her own choices? My strategy to address the first problem will be to seek the right kind of mereology of the agent, which allows for this kind of internal constellation. In order to address the second issue, I will have to explain how choice can be compromised without agency being overridden: we must find out how an agent may be able to make choices, which are nevertheless compromised. Together, this calls for a mereology of the agent in which one part of the self can function as the controlling part, and in which another part is the

faculty of choice. My aim is thus to formulate an account of self-oppression which features a mereology of this kind, and which can be differentiated from other forms of agency.

This conceptualisation of self-oppression, however, will not provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for self-oppression. Nor will it determine the boundaries of the phenomenon. My aim is more modest: first and foremost, I want to establish that self-oppression is indeed a logical possibility, despite the paradox that might suggest that it is impossible. Further, although establishing rigid boundaries is not my aim here, I will undertake to exhibit how core cases of self-oppression differ from other forms of agency. My aim is thus to establish that (1) although self-oppression is intrinsically paradoxical, it is nonetheless both possible and actual, and (2) that it is a distinct phenomenon, significantly different from other forms of agency, which therefore warrants its own conceptualisation. My method for achieving these aims will be to offer a conceptualisation of self-oppression, exhibiting the psychological structure of some core cases, and showing how it differs from other configurations of agency.

## **E. OTHER CATEGORIES OF AGENCY**

It may not be clear, however, that self-oppression really warrants its own category. There may be existing categories of agency which manage to explain the examples of paradoxical agency which I have in mind. In this section, I will consider some of these categories, and explain why they do not manage to fully explain the cases at hand.

### E.1 The Notion of Compulsion

A first notion which comes to mind when trying to explain cases of self-oppression is, perhaps, the notion of *compulsion*, which seems very related. In compulsion, on a common understanding of the term, we also have a form of agency in which choice seems compromised due to an oppressive form of regulation, exercised by the agent herself. Self-oppression, however, is distinct from canonical forms of compulsion in at least one crucial sense. Compulsions, at least in their canonical form, are *egodystonic* – meaning that those who suffer from them do not identify with or endorse their compulsive actions. On common understandings of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder – the most common clinical example of compulsive behaviour – the condition is experienced as unwelcome and irrational by the sufferer. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM-V], for example, the first criterion for OCD is the presence of ‘[r]ecurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or impulses that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted’ (DSM-V, section II).<sup>2</sup> The compulsive agent thus experiences her own behaviour as *alien*.

The cases of self-oppression that interest me in this thesis, however, are not straightforwardly ego-dystonic – the self-oppressive agent’s relation to her behaviour seems more complex than one of simple dissociation. Though she may not be exactly pleased with her self-oppressive behaviour, it is, somehow, woven into her self-understanding, identity, or set of values. Beth, for example, *wants* to save the planet, thinking it a morally valuable aspiration; Shani is attached to the sense of self-worth she associates with weight loss; and Jaimi deeply *identifies*

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<sup>2</sup> See also Rachman and Hodgson (1980: 12-21).

with the role of a mother. This is quite different from common experiences of compulsion, in which the agent feels intruded by urges that feel alien to her. Of course, the canonical compulsive person is also *invested* in her behaviour – but in a different sense: the compulsive person is attached to her compulsions because they help her cope, for example, but the actions themselves are usually no integral part of her identity. In the cases of self-oppression which interest me, in contrast, behaviours are much more closely interwoven with the agent's sense of self.

It is on this basis, I submit, that self-oppression often features a form of self-control, albeit a complicated one, whereas compulsions, typically, do not. As Alfred Mele (2001) points out, one could argue that compulsive behaviours do not feature self-control because of the agent's dissociation:

People suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorders fall short of ideal self-control, on an orthodox conception of the disorders. Standardly conceived, one of the defining features is that the person recognizes [her] problem as a problem and regards relevant distressing thoughts, urges, and feelings of [hers] as unreasonable. An ideally self-controlled person would lack such mental states, or at least swiftly eradicate them should they arise. (Mele, 2001: 127fn)

We thus cannot fully explain the apparent possibility of self-oppression within existing accounts of compulsion. Though compulsion is certainly akin to self-oppression, the latter still seems to deserve its own category; and we can distinguish both forms of agency on the basis that, characteristically, only the former features a form of self-control.

But I have merely distinguished core cases of self-oppression from core cases of compulsion *on a common understanding* of the latter. But, of course, not



all approaches to compulsion conceptualise it in this way. One exception to this common characterisation of compulsion is found in David Shapiro (1981). In his book *Autonomy and Rigid Character*, he examines what he calls ‘rigid character’, a certain type of behaviour of which obsessive-compulsive behaviour is a primal example. Crucially, on Shapiro’s picture, rigid behaviour *does* involve an identification of the agent with her rigid self-regulation: ‘Even if it is true’, he writes, ‘that the rigid person lives under the authority of [her self-imposed regime], it is also true that [s]he [her]self imposes that authority, that [s]he respects it, identifies its aims and purposes as [her] own’ (Shapiro, 1981: 73-74).

Thus, on Shapiro’s picture, rigid behaviour *does* involve identification with the compulsive behaviour, and thus a form of self-control. Is he, therefore, offering an explanation of self-oppression? Not quite. For, on Shapiro’s description, this identification is something the agent herself is *unaware* of. Though she is, for Shapiro, *actually* exerting self-control, she will feel *as if* she isn’t because she does not realise that her compulsions reflect her truest desires. Shapiro asserts that ‘the rigid person experiences weakness of self-control when the directives of [her] will, which [s]he identifies as [her] wish, are contrary to [her] *actual but unrecognized* wish and intention’ (Shapiro, 1981: 71). The agent, in other words, fails to recognise that she *does* actually want to do the compulsive things which, on a conscious level, she dissociates from. As such, the dissociation experienced by the compulsive agent, according to Shapiro, is *false* at a deeper level: though she experiences a weakness of self-control, he contends, this agent is effectively exercising self-control.

Yet Shapiro’s account of rigid character cannot fully explain the possibility of self-oppression either. First of all, I have my reservations about Shapiro’s

set of assumptions in this context. If at all possible, I will avoid speculation about actual but unrecognized wishes and intentions, and take the identifications and dissociations of an agent at face value. My reservations about Shapiro's approach, however, are not the main issue here. Most important is the fact that, since the self-control featured in rigid character is 'unrecognised', Shapiro's compulsive agent does *experience* dissociation on Shapiro's characterisation. Shapiro thinks this dissociation is only superficial, and dissolves once we venture into the subconscious depths of the agent's psychology – but this does not take away from the fact that compulsion features an experience of dissociation on his account. The *phenomenon* Shapiro is trying to explain is, therefore, still compulsion on the common understanding, and after all distinct from the kind of cases I described as self-oppression. Even if we would concede that compulsive behaviour may involve an unrecognised form of self-control, the cases of self-oppression I want to explain do not feature the kind of *experienced* dissociation that compulsion does. On this basis, we cannot explain them away as instances of what Shapiro calls rigid character.

## *E.2    Internalised Oppression*

Another possibility to consider is that cases of self-oppression may in fact be instances of *internalised oppression*. When faced with examples of self-oppression, one may think the oppression can be traced back to other people, or to impersonal social forces: there may be systematic social pressures at work that are ultimately the source of the self-oppression. I agree that this may be so in some, or even all, cases of self-oppression. Notwithstanding, I want to resist *explaining*

*away* all cases of self-oppression in reference to larger oppressive structures, and this for two reasons. (1) First, I want to take seriously the *possibility* that there may be instances of self-oppression which cannot be traced back to such external forces. (2) Second, even when self-oppression would operate as a micro-mechanism of social-oppression, it is still a paradoxical form of agency which deserves being analysed in its own right. Explaining the possibility of self-oppression would mean explaining in what sense we can recognise the *agency* at work in internalised oppression, however paradoxical it seems to be. If we do not want to assume that, in internalised oppression, the agent is *but* a vessel for social oppression, we must take seriously the question how an agent can oppress *herself*. Internalised oppression is a category specifically designed to capture the wider social structures at play when an agent perpetuates her own oppression. An account of self-oppression could supplement such accounts by focusing more on the part played by the agent *herself* in such cases, and less on the wider oppressive forces which are causing her to do so.

For these reasons, in this thesis, I will mostly bracket the larger social structures which *may or may not be* at play in the genesis of self-oppression. My aim is to first of all understand its internal, psychological structures, regardless of its exact aetiology. Hopefully, the model of self-oppression constructed in this thesis might be useful, in further work, to consider self-oppression as an element of social oppression: for it seems definitely the case that oppression often involves, as a micro-mechanism, something like self-oppression. But that is not my aim in this thesis.

### E.3 Plato's Tyrannical Soul

Lastly, turning to the history of philosophy, there appear to be traces of the concept of self-oppression as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. In *The Republic* [R], Plato – through the voice of Socrates – describes what he calls ‘the individual of tyrannical character’, whose soul is like a city under tyranny (R 571a). In this individual, a certain type of desire reigns freely: a desire which ‘is a terribly bestial and immoral type of desire’ (R 572b). This desire is termed ‘a master passion’, and is said to have ‘absolute control of a man’s mind’ (R 573d). We thus have a style of self-regulation in which an agent’s own desire exerts tyrannical control. This control, indeed, appears to be of an oppressive kind: Plato does not mention choice, but he takes *freedom* to be compromised in this type of agent: ‘[Her] mind will be burdened with servile restrictions, because the best elements in [her] will be enslaved and completely controlled by a minority of the lowest and most lunatic impulses’ (R 577d). Agency is compromised as a result: ‘the mind in which there is a tyranny will also be least able to do what, as a whole, it wishes, because it is under the compulsive drive of madness’ (R 577e). Thus, a part of the agent’s own soul tyrannises her such that her freedom suffers from it. Plato’s tyrannical soul, writes Christine Korsgaard, ‘is consistently ruled and unified, though it is not self-governed. The tyrannical soul is a slave, a terrified and captive soul’ (Korsgaard, 2009: 171). Korsgaard, indeed, concludes from Plato’s description that ‘the tyrannical person does not really choose actions [...]. There’s one end [...] or act that [s]he’s going to pursue or to do *no matter what*, and it rules [her]’ (Korsgaard, 2009: 173).

Was Socrates – or Plato – here describing something like self-oppression? The tyrannical soul displays a controlled quality to agency, which is not

directly implemented by anyone or anything else, and yet this control seems to compromise her freedom of choice. She is thus controlled by a certain purpose or end such that her choices are compromised. Yet on Plato's description, the tyrannical soul seems qualitatively different from the self-oppressive agent. There is a 'suppressed' quality to agency, and arguably this pressure compromises choice: she is subdued by her own tyrannical desire. But does the behaviour of the tyrannical soul really feature self-control? It seems that, in the tyrannical soul, certain desires go unchecked, and are precisely *not* controlled by the agent. For this reason, her regulatory style is *impulsive* rather than self-controlled. In this context, it is worth mentioning how there is, according to Plato (or Socrates) 'also a touch of the tyrant about a man who's drunk' (R 573b). The behaviour of the tyrannical soul, in this sense, does not seem controlled at all, and more akin to forms of agency in which the agent caves in to certain impulses. Further, even if we want to say that her behaviour *is* controlled, it would still not amount to *self*-control. For, according to Plato, the tyrannical soul is unfree insofar as she cannot do what she wishes to do *most*. This indicates a level of dissociation from her own behaviour, which means the tyrannical soul would be more like the *compulsive* agent. In other words, even if we do not consider the tyrannical soul to be *impulsive*, we still have to consider her to be *compulsive*.

Of course, like much of Plato's work, this passage has been interpreted in varying ways. One point of disagreement is what *exactly* the tyrannical soul is controlled by. Whether or not it seems similar to self-oppression will, of course, depend on the answer to this question. In this context, Mark Johnstone (2015) lists no less than three common interpretations of this passage, which he rejects before proposing his own: he mentions 'the view that the tyrannical [person]'s

soul is ruled by [her] “lawless” unnecessary appetites, the view that it is ruled by sexual desire, and the view that it is ruled by a lust for power’ (Johnstone, 2015: 424). On Johnstone’s own view, the desire reigning freely in the tyrannical soul is rather a *bodily* one: ‘the tyrannical [person]’s soul is to be understood as ruled by a single, persistent, powerful desire for bodily pleasure: as much as [s]he can get, and however [s]he can get it’ (Johnstone, 2015: 424). But on all four interpretations mentioned, it remains clear that what Plato had in mind seems quite different from our cases of self-oppression: the tyrannical soul is obsessed by a certain *impulsive* desire. And even if her actions are meticulously *organised* in order to get what she wants, such that her behaviour cannot be called impulsive, it would still not be *self-controlled* since the agent does not identify with her tyrannical desire.

## F. THESIS STRATEGY

I thus maintain a distinction between self-oppression, as I have sketched it, and compulsive behaviour, internalised oppression, and impulsive behaviour. But, naturally, it is not so that the phenomenon of self-oppression *as I have sketched it* has gone entirely unnoticed. One author who makes reference to this phenomenon, for example, is Alfred Mele (2001). A main objective of his book, *Autonomous Agents*, is to differentiate between self-control on the one hand, and autonomy on the other. At the end of the first chapter, he raises the possibility of a style of self-control which compromises autonomy. ‘If this view of the situation is right,’ he writes, ‘autonomy is not *just* self-rule or self-government; for certain *kinds* of self-rule or self-government, on this view, are self-limiting, self-oppressing, and self-victimizing in a way that is at odds with a robust autonomy’ (Mele,

2001: 126). This, though differently formulated, seems very close to our description of self-oppression as featuring self-control yet compromised choice.

As an example of what he has in mind, Mele describes an agent called Zed, who is a high-achieving philosophy academic. Zed, on Mele's description, 'never finds enjoyment in his philosophical work itself; indeed, he frequently experiences his routine as oppressive' (Mele, 2001: 124). Importantly, however, Zed *consciously identifies* with his self-imposed regime:

Zed values his having these values, believing that his life would be empty without them. [...] It is Zed himself who values these things, not something alien to Zed. [...] These values *are* "his own," at last in the sense that they are *his*; indeed, not only does he possess the values, but he identifies with them, as well. (Mele, 2001: 124-125)

As such, when he acts in accordance with these values, this counts as an exercise of self-control. Yet, Mele writes, it may appear that Zed somehow is not fully autonomous.

The form of agency described by Mele seems definitely akin to self-oppression: if Zed is lacking in autonomy because he experiences his own self-control as oppressive, it also seems to be the case that his choices are compromised. Granted, the notions of autonomy and choice are not synonymous on every interpretation of them; but in this context I take them to be very closely related. If the notions, on my interpretation of them, do not exactly *overlap*, they are at least deeply connected: it may be that, wherever autonomy is compromised, choice is also often compromised at once, since the same kinds of factors and situations

which inhibit an agent's autonomy will tend to inhibit her choices as well.<sup>3</sup>

How, then, does Mele explain Zed's situation? Even though he is not committed to proving that agents like Zed effectively *are* lacking in autonomy, he does construct a possible explanation as to why this *may* be so. He suggests that, perhaps, there exists a connection between autonomy and the prospect of *flourishing*: 'we might hold', he writes, 'that to the extent to which [Zed's] conduct is a product of his self-victimization, it is not autonomous' (Mele, 2001: 125). Autonomy could thus be compromised in cases like Zed's, according to Mele, because the agent has limited prospects of 'personal satisfaction, enjoyment, and fulfilment' (Mele, 2001: 126). In other words, Mele suggests that self-control may compromise autonomy insofar as it causes the agent to suffer in a certain way. For, on the explanation he suggests, it is only when we can describe the agent as *victimised* by her own behaviour that autonomy would be compromised. Mele, in fact, takes this suggestion even further. He finishes the section by proposing that autonomy might require *mental health*: 'If, as one should think, being autonomous is compatible with the possession of continuous mental health, the latter serves as an appropriate element in a sufficient condition for personal autonomy' (Mele, 2001: 126). Thus, Mele here advances the hypothesis that human flourishing and autonomy somehow come as a pair, and draws a potential connection between autonomy and mental health.

Unfortunately, Mele does not go into further detail in this section. The

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<sup>3</sup> Note that Mele does not speak of choice in this context at all. In his book, he only uses the term when discussing *free* choice in the context of causal determinism (see Mele, 2001: 205 et seq.).



passage is just meant to flag the possibility that the conditions for personal autonomy, which he spells out in the rest of the book, might not be strictly sufficient, and that an additional condition of mental health *may* be required. But he does not devote any further attention to this possibility in the book. If we are to take Mele's cue here, and develop this suggestion, we would have to conceptualise self-oppression in reference to a diminished prospect for flourishing, or even diminished mental health.

But such a strategy seems problematic. The connection between autonomy (or choice) on the one hand, and flourishing and mental health on the other, seems to hold in theory nor in practice. First of all, this connection seems theoretically flawed. Mele makes an inference from the assumption that autonomy and mental health are 'compatible' to the idea that mental health could therefore be a sufficient condition for autonomy, but this is a non sequitur: the fact that X and Y are *compatible* does not at all entail that Y is part of the sufficient condition for X.<sup>4</sup>

Further, this connection does not hold in practice either. On what grounds would it be impossible that one would be autonomous, but miserable? Imagine a heroic firefighter, for example, who would prefer to spend more time with her family but feels she has a duty, which translates into an authentic wish, to save as many lives as possible. She does not find her job particularly satisfying or fulfilling, and is fuelled just by a sense of duty. This woman can very much be the victim, in a sense, of her self-control: certain possibilities of self-fulfilment

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Fabian Freyenhagen for pointing this out.

(e.g. how much she flourishes as a mother) are certainly closed off by her behaviour. But would she *therefore* be less autonomous than others? Does this entail that her commitment to her career does not reflect her own choice? This seems to be a strange suggestion. What is more, when we consider it in the context of mental health, the line of reasoning offered by Mele seems plainly dangerous: surely, we should avoid denying agents the capacity for autonomy or choice on the basis of their mental health.<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons, when conceptualising self-oppression, I will not take into account an agent's psychological or psychiatric status. Though self-oppression, as a form of agency, may often feature in certain psychological or psychiatric conditions, I do not mean to present self-oppression *as* such a condition. Thus, my taxonomical classification will not take into account whether it stems from, or is entangled with, any psychological or psychiatric issues. I will focus merely at the structures of agents' current behaviour.

In addition, questions regarding the nature of flourishing, and even the nature of mental health, are often difficult to approach in a content-neutral manner. As previously noted, I will not conceptualise self-oppression on the basis of *what* an agent is doing. My assumption is that self-oppression is a *style* of agency, and not a kind of action. I will thus not suggest that certain kinds of actions or endeavours are inherently self-oppressive. A self-confessed super-mom may or

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<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, quite a few authors assume some connection between autonomy or authenticity and mental health, without developing it into further detail. John Christman, for example, writes that conditions of autonomy 'relate to cognitive and normative competence – rationality, self-control, *absence of psychosis and other pathologies*, and so on' (Christman, 2009: 134, emphasis mine). For a discussion of the relation between mental health and the right to autonomy, see e.g. Atkinson (1991).

may not be self-oppressive, as may a celebrated athlete. My aim, in other words, is to conceptualise self-oppression in a way that is content-neutral: the characteristics of self-oppression which I will spell out concern the structures of agency only. This is not to say, of course, that there is never any sort of connection between the content and the structure of behaviour. One might have the intuition that certain kinds of behaviour are very prone to self-oppression. Indeed, I share this intuition – and ideally, our model of self-oppression will be able to track it to some extent. It also makes sense to look out for examples of the phenomenon in these places. But I want to avoid *relying* on this intuition when *conceptualising* self-oppression.

I conclude, therefore, that Mele’s brief suggestion – which, in all fairness, was only meant as that – cannot help us explain the category of self-oppression. Of course, my preferred approach might not be viable. It may turn out that we cannot coherently conceptualise self-oppression, or distinguish it from other forms of agency, without taking into the content of the agent’s behaviour, or even the status of her mental health. But the attempt, to me, seems worthwhile.

## **G. THESIS SUMMARY**

I will thus devise my own conceptualisation of self-oppression. It must be noted, here, that the strategy of this thesis will be rather unusual. Rather than being located within one specific philosophical tradition, it will draw on four different authors, belonging to different scholarships, in order to tackle the question of self-oppression. Whilst the scope of the thesis is too small to do justice to these scholarships in their entirety, I will demonstrate how each of them offers some

vital source material, which can be employed to develop the category of self-oppression. In the first four chapters, I will collect the required source material from the different scholarships. In a final chapter, I will organise the selected materials into an account of self-oppression, before applying this account to two case studies.

I will start, in the first chapter, with Aristotle's theory of action. This theory forms an excellent starting point for the thesis, since it offers a basic mereology of the agent, as well as a taxonomy of different regulatory styles. Though his taxonomy does not include a regulatory style that describes self-oppression, we can use its underlying conceptual building blocks to construe an additional category for self-oppression: accordingly, at the end of the first chapter, I formulate the category of *hyperkrasia*, designed to capture the phenomenon of self-oppression. This is not itself an Aristotelean category, but it draws on Aristotelean resources. I hypothesise that, in *hyperkrasia*, the part of the agent which Aristotle calls *practical reason*, and which is by nature authoritative, becomes *authoritarian*. We can thus pinpoint the part of the agent that becomes oppressive in self-oppression, which addresses our first major issue: who, in self-oppression, oppresses whom?

In consecutive chapters, I will supplement this Aristotelean picture with elements from other scholarships. In the second chapter, I turn to the works of St Augustine. The reason for this turn is that, on Aristotle's picture, we cannot explain *how* choice could be compromised in *hyperkrasia*. On Aristotle's view, the faculty of practical reason is *also* the faculty of choice, so practical reason could not coherently undermine choice on this view. In order to address this issue, I introduce Augustine's notion of *the will*. On his picture, the will functions

as a faculty of choice separate from practical reason. What is more, Augustine also introduces the notion of a *corrupted will*: such a will makes choices, but *cannot but* make the choices it makes. As such, I will argue, Augustine describes a way in which choice can be compromised without agency being overridden. This offers us the sort of account of choice needed to make sense of self-oppression – since, in self-oppression, it is the agent herself who compromises her own choices. At the end of chapter two, I hypothesise that a certain kind of exercise of practical reason has the potential to corrupt our will. This is not itself an Augustinian idea, but it draws on Augustinian resources.

On Augustine's picture, however, the will is corrupted through divine punishment. As such, he does not conceptualise the idea in a manner useful to us: for he was not concerned with how – if at all – other, more worldly factors can corrupt our will. To explain how our will may be corrupted in more profane ways, the third chapter turns to Michel Foucault, and more specifically to his account of modern *domination*. Domination, on my interpretation of Foucault, is a specific and insidious form of oppression, in which the behaviour of agents is controlled through the control of their own agency: domination does not control agents by overriding their agency through violence or force, but turns agents into a certain kind of *subject* which in turn leads them to act a certain way. Joining together two of Foucault's phrases, I propose that domination operates by "freezing" an agent's 'field of possible action'. Though Foucault does not himself speak of choice or the will, I submit that domination, thus understood, corrupts the subject's will and so compromises her choice. Though she may still act and choose "at will" within her field of possible action, I argue that her will is corrupted, and her choices compromised, insofar as this field is frozen. This,

again, is not a Foucauldian idea, but it draws on Foucauldian resources. Though this does not yet explain how *practical reason* can corrupt the will, it shows how the will can be corrupted by certain *oppressive structures*. This brings us closer to the idea of self-oppression: might similar oppressive structures occur internally, within an agent? My hypothesis will be that an agent's practical reason can corrupt her will by freezing her field of possible action.

But, before we can piece together our account of self-oppression, some elements of this hypothesis require some further elaboration. Though he coined the phrase, Foucault does not offer any account of a field of possible action: he only uses the phrase once or twice. Neither does he offer the conceptual tools to explain how a field of possible action might freeze: this is just my interpretation of what happens in domination. For these reasons, the fourth chapter turns to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Drawing on his phenomenological account of action, I develop a more substantial account of fields of possible action as consisting in *perceived* opportunities for action, which draw the agent toward action. I then argue that, when an agent perceives opportunities in a certain way, this can freeze her field of possible action: more precisely, this happens when she perceives certain opportunities as so *urgent* that any other opportunities seem unviable to her. This corrupts her will, since these opportunities will draw her to action with such force that she cannot but act on them. As such, this compromises her choices.

Finally, in a last chapter, I will present my account of self-oppression, which joins together the materials collected in the preceding chapters. My final hypothesis will be that a certain exercise of practical reason can influence an

agent's own perceptions such that it freezes her field of possible action, thus corrupting her own will and so compromising her choices. This, then, is my model of hyperkrasia. It establishes that self-oppression, as I described the phenomenon, is indeed possible, and simultaneously demonstrates how it is different from other forms of agency.

As mentioned, this model is not meant as to provide necessary or sufficient conditions for hyperkrasia. This, however, does not mean it is without further application. Taxonomy starts from observation, turning to classification in an attempt to get a grip on the observed phenomena. Once new categories for classification are casted, we can then return to the phenomena with a sharper lens. I will demonstrate that the proposed model of hyperkrasia can help us differentiate core forms of self-oppression from other forms of agency which formally share many of its characteristics. To this end, I will conclude the thesis with two brief case studies. We will consider the case of Sam, an agent who suffers from anorexia nervosa, and demonstrate how our account of self-oppression can explain some of the structures of her agency. Next, we will consider the case of Alex, a celebrated rock climber who keeps pushing for the extreme. I will demonstrate that, whilst Alex's agency in some ways resembles that of Sam, his does not count as self-oppressive. Crucially, this distinction is made not on the basis of *what* these agents are pursuing but *how* they pursue it: the proposed account of self-oppression differentiates it on the basis of the perceptual consequences of their self-imposed pressure, not on the basis of the actions they are pressuring themselves into.

Here, again, my aim is not to articulate the boundary conditions of hy-

perkrasia. Rather, my aim is to show that the proposed model helps us to articulate some significant differences between two cases that formally share much in common, and to show why one deserves to be called hyperkrasia while the other does not — and to do so in a way that is neutral as to the content of the action. Determining the boundary conditions of hyperkrasia is a task for further research, which I will not undertake in the thesis. In light of this, I end by raising some open questions regarding the scope and limits of the category of hyperkrasia as I have sketched it.



# I. Aristotle

## A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will consider Aristotle's philosophy of action as found in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth: NE), a ten-book work written around 340 BC. This turn to Aristotle may seem surprising at first. The NE, admittedly, is not devoted directly to the philosophy of action. Rather, it addresses the question of the good life: what does it mean, for humans, to live a good life, and how can we achieve this? But in spelling out an answer to this question, Aristotle maps out a rather elaborate theory of agency: the focus point of the book, one could say, is the development of a *moral psychology*. This moral psychology, I submit, forms a plausible starting point for this thesis, and this for a few reasons.

A primary reason is that it features a taxonomy of different moral dispositions, which can be read as a taxonomy of different forms of agency.<sup>1</sup> This taxonomy seems especially adequate as a point of departure for our purposes because of its strong structural underpinnings. Even though the different forms of agency are described as moral dispositions, Aristotle distinguishes them in reference to *how* actions are regulated by the agent, rather than on the basis of her actions. Thus, he essentially describes different ways of regulating action: his taxonomy, therefore, can also be read as a taxonomy of what we could call *regulatory styles*. This means that his approach is compatible with my aim of content-

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<sup>1</sup> These forms of agency will include behaviour in which the agent acts against her better judgment (that is, instances of what is often termed "weakness of the will"). I am aware that some might not want to include such instances in the realm of *agency*.

neutrality. Though, as we will see, Aristotle's taxonomy is not exactly content-neutral, we can bracket any elements which do not qualify as content-neutral, and work with its structural underpinnings only.

What is more, these regulatory styles are formulated by Aristotle in reference to a *mereological account of the agent*. Aristotle maps out and names some of the main elements of the human agent, and differentiates the different regulatory styles by describing different possible constellations of these parts. This mereology may help us address one of our main issues: namely the question of who, in self-oppression, is oppressing whom.

Another reason why Aristotle's theory of action forms an adequate starting point is that it includes a conceptualisation of choice, and pays considerable attention to the ways in which the process of choosing can be disrupted. The presence and absence of choice, in fact, can be included in the differentiae of the different regulatory styles. As such, his theory may also help us address our second major issue: namely the question how, in self-oppression, choice can be compromised.

In the first parts of the chapter, I will set out the basics of Aristotle's theory of agency, and extract a taxonomy of regulatory styles from his taxonomy of moral dispositions. It will turn out that this taxonomy does not include a regulatory style that fits our description of self-oppression. Yet, I argue, the NE offers some useful conceptual building blocks that can help us think about self-oppression. More precisely, I will identify *practical reason*, the part of the agent responsible for making and implementing our better judgments, as the part of the agent that becomes oppressive in self-oppression. I will posit that practical reason can be understood as our faculty of self-control, and that its naturally *authoritative*

nature can become *authoritarian*, thus turning oppressive. Accordingly, I will formulate an additional regulatory style, named *hyperkrasia*, designed to capture this situation.

This goes some way towards solving our first major issue: for we will have identified which part of the agent is oppressive in self-oppression. Aristotle's theory of action, however, does not allow us to address our second major issue: how is choice compromised in self-oppression? Since Aristotle takes practical reason itself to be the faculty of choice, the idea that practical reason could compromise choice is nonsensical on his view.

Thus, it is not just that Aristotle's theory of agency does *not include* a description of self-oppression: the problem is that self-oppression is *conceptually inconceivable* within it. This because his definition of choice captures a different kind of thing than the choice which I take to be compromised in self-oppression. As such, I will conclude, the possibility of self-oppression cannot be fully and coherently explained within this framework. Nonetheless, the negative results of this chapter will prove useful: for the specific ways in which Aristotle's theory fails to capture self-oppression will lead us toward our next set of resources.

## **B. ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF AGENCY: THE BASICS**

In this section, I will set out the basics of Aristotle's theory of agency, paying particular attention to his mereology of the agent and his conception of choice. But before I commence my reading, three cautionary remarks must be made. It must be noted, for one, that any explanation of Aristotle's views is highly dependent on interpretation. There exists considerable debate amongst scholars about how

his texts should be read, and the interpretation I advance is merely one amongst many. Though this interpretation is my own, at some critical points I have added support from other scholars, including Sarah Broadie (1994), Byron J. Stoyles (2007) and Ursula Coope (2010). Importantly, though, the primary purpose of my reading is a pragmatic one: I turn to Aristotle's theory to extract some vital source material for my account of self-oppression. And though I have sought to remain faithful to Aristotle's text, the hermeneutical validity of my reading does not bear on the larger project of this thesis.

Naturally, this specific agenda also implies a certain focus. As mentioned, I will particularly focus on Aristotle's mereology of the agent, his conception of choice and how it might be compromised, and some of the moral dispositions he describes. Settling on this lens means that certain aspects of his views will be left out, or not addressed in detail: many themes, concepts, and ideas that feature in the NE will remain largely or entirely untouched.

Finally, there is one way in which my reading of the NE will be significantly deviant: I will aim to make abstraction of the morally objectivist dimension of Aristotle's views.<sup>2</sup> His theory of agency, especially in the NE, is embedded in a normative conception of the good life.<sup>3</sup> My focus, however, will be on the

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<sup>2</sup> I refrain from calling Aristotle a moral *realist*, since it is unclear whether he would attribute a mind-independent existence to the Good. As we will see, it is clear that he takes the Good to be something which has an objective validity, and he thus prescribes to a moral objectivism. But as I understand the term, this does not necessarily make him a moral *realist*. This distinction, however, is of no further relevance in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> There of course exists debate regarding the extent to which Aristotle's views are prescriptive, and/or embedded in a moral objectivism or realism. For discussions of these topics, see e.g. Williams (1996) and Heinaman (1995).

regulatory styles that feature within this description. For Aristotle, as mentioned, these different ways of acting represent different moral dispositions, but I will single out their structural features and bracket their moral status. From now on, I will simply speak of regulatory styles when referring to these moral dispositions. Naturally, this approach has its limitations: the focus on the good life is central to the NE and Aristotle's theory of agency more generally, and it cannot be completely and consistently separated from his descriptions of agency as such. Bearing this in mind, however, I will attempt to bracket this normative dimension insofar as I can, in order to employ his theory of agency in the specific context of the thesis. At various points, I will emphasise the structural dimension of Aristotle's descriptions of agency and show that, for my purposes, it can be sufficiently separated from their moral dimension.

### *B.1    The Genus: Voluntary Action*

We can now turn to Aristotle's theory of action. A first step, if we are to spell out a taxonomy of regulatory styles, is to get a grip on the *genus* to which they all belong. When differentiating regulatory styles, what *kinds* of things are we differentiating? What is the general category to which they all belong? Regulatory styles, of course, are all forms of *agency*. Thus, we must first establish when, and on what basis, the movements of a person can be classified as a form of agency on Aristotle's view: what does it mean, for Aristotle, to *do* something?

Aristotle's answer to this question is fairly nuanced. On the most basic level, he distinguishes between voluntary, involuntary, and non-voluntary ac-

tions. Acts are voluntary (*hekousioi*), on his view, whenever the origin of the action lies within the agent. This means, on his description, that ‘the movement of the limbs that are the instruments of action has its origin in the agent himself, and where this is so it is in his power either to act or not’ (NE 1110a: 16-17).<sup>4</sup> Aristotle refers here simply to the locus of initiation: ‘if we are unable to trace our conduct back to any other origins than those within ourselves, then actions of which the origins are within us, themselves depend on us, and are voluntary’ (NE 1113b: 21-22).<sup>5</sup> The class of voluntary actions, for Aristotle, thus includes those performed by children and nonhuman animals: he writes that ‘both children and animals have a share in voluntary action’ (NE 1111b: 9).

Conversely, actions are *involuntary* (*akousioi*) when they are caused by a force that is not within the agent. As a general rule, Aristotle submits that actions are involuntary when they are *compulsory* (*biaioi*), which means that the action ‘has an external origin of such a kind that the agent or patient contributes nothing to it’ (NE 1110a: 1-2). These external factors can be impersonal forces, as well as other people: actions are compulsory, for example, ‘if a voyager were to be conveyed somewhere by the wind or by men who had him in their power’ (NE 1110a: 3-4). Thus, according to Aristotle, actions should only be termed compulsory when the origin of the action is external to the agent.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise specified, my citations are taken from the J.A.K. Thomson translation (1953) of the NE. My preference is for the Thomson translation as it reads most smoothly, but I have, at times, opted for the Harris Rackham translation (1934) as it tends to remain closer to the original text.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the *final* cause of any act always lies outside of the agent on Aristotle’s view: it is the object that the agent wishes to obtain through action.

Interestingly, this means that internal forces, such as strong urges or inclinations, do not result in compulsory action on his view: 'It is probably wrong', Aristotle writes, 'to say that acts due to temper or desire are involuntary' (NE 1111a: 24). This might seem counterintuitive. But Aristotle argues in clear terms that acting on strong internal forces is always voluntary and never compulsory, even though it is tempting to assume otherwise. First of all, he contends, it would be absurd to restrict the scope of voluntary action to include only those of adult human animals: 'on this view in the first place the capacity for voluntary action will not extend to any animal other than [humans], or even to children' (NE 1111a: 26-27). Secondly, he points out that our inclination to treat compulsory actions as involuntary is, in fact, an inclination to *only* treat our bad ones as such: 'when we act from desire of temper', he asks, 'are none of our actions voluntary? Or are our fine actions done voluntarily and our discreditable ones involuntarily?' (NE 1111a: 27). This, Aristotle argues, would be inconsistent: 'Surely', he writes, 'this is a ridiculous distinction, since the cause is one and the same [...]. It follows that actions due to temper or desire are also proper to the human agent. Therefore it is absurd to class these actions as involuntary' (NE 1111a: 27-1111b: 1-4).

The actions Aristotle is referring to here stem from desire or temper. As such, they are what I have called *impulsive actions*, which are desired but not endorsed by the agent. Aristotle does not here mention whether there may exist *compulsions* in the sense we nowadays tend to understand the term: compulsions, that is, which are desired *nor* endorsed by the agent, but caused by an urge she dissociates from. Would compulsions count as compulsory for Aristotle? Probably so. I take Aristotle's point to be that *impulses* are not to be counted as

*compulsory* because they follow our own desires. But *compulsions*, on the modern understanding, may best be classified as a subspecies of compulsory actions, caused by a factor external to the agent, insofar as the agent in question experiences the compulsion to be *alien* indeed.

Aristotle mentions a second way in which actions can count as involuntary, even if they are not compulsory: namely if they are executed in *ignorance*. For example, Aristotle writes, ‘one might kill someone with a dose of a drug intended to save his life’, not knowing the dose would be lethal (NE 1111a: 13). For Aristotle, an act done out of ignorance is not voluntary, even though the agent has technically speaking initiated it. In this context, the author further distinguishes between involuntary and non-voluntary action. Actions done out of ignorance are always non-voluntary. But only if the result of an action done from ignorance is undesirable to us, should it be considered involuntary: ‘Every act done through ignorance is non-voluntary, but it is involuntary only when it causes the agent subsequent pain and repentance’ (NE 1110b: 17-22). Otherwise, the action is simply non-voluntary: ‘[f]or if a [person] has done any act through ignorance and is not in the least upset about it, although [s]he has not acted voluntarily [...], [s]he has not acted involuntarily either, since [s]he feels no pain’ (NE 1110b: 17-22). Note, though, that Aristotle refers to a specific form of ignorance in this context. He distinguishes between acting *through* ignorance and acting *in* ignorance. Sometimes, when we are drunk for example, our ignorance is our own fault. In such cases, Aristotle asserts, we act *in* ignorance, and since this ignorance has its origin in us, these actions have their origin in us by proxy. This implies that they *are* voluntary: ‘An act is not properly called involuntary if the agent is ignorant of [her] own advantage’ (NE 1110b: 25-1111a: 1-



2).

In sum, Aristotle concludes, ‘an involuntary act is one performed under compulsion or as a result of ignorance, a voluntary act would seem to be one of which the originating cause lies in the agent [her]self, who knows the particular circumstances of [her] action’ (NE 1111a: 21-23). Voluntary action denotes purposeful, intentional conduct. We may thus refer to voluntary action as agency *proper*, and this category will serve as the genus to which the different regulatory styles, discussed in this thesis, belong.

Of course, it is hard to categorise agency as such, and it can be difficult in practice to judge whether a behaviour should be classified as a voluntary action. Aristotle admits that the line between voluntary and involuntary is not always clear-cut:

sometimes the act is done through fear of something worse, or for some admirable purpose; e.g. if a tyrant who has a man’s parents and children in his power were to order him to do something dishonourable on condition that if he did it their lives would be spared, and if he did not they would be put to death: in these cases it is debatable whether the actions are involuntary or voluntary. A similar difficulty occurs with regard to jettisoning cargo in bad weather. [...] Such actions are mixed, although they seem more like voluntary than involuntary ones. (NE 1109b: 36-1110a: 1-13)

But however blurry their boundaries, these categories remain useful concepts for us to understand the landscape of agency.

## B.2 Aristotle’s Mereology of the Agent

Thus, the realm of voluntary action forms the most basal level of agency on Aristotle's picture, and human and nonhuman animals alike share in it. But not all voluntary actions are the same: they are actions initiated by the agent, but – according to Aristotle – an agent can initiate actions in a number of different ways. Depending on how she does so, different regulatory styles ensue. As such, the different regulatory styles he describes form different species of voluntary action, spelling out a taxonomy of sorts. We will lay out this taxonomy shortly. First, however, we must discuss Aristotle's mereology of the agent: for his taxonomy is formulated in reference to, and on the basis of, this mereology. In the NE, he divides the agent into different parts, which can all take part in the genesis of voluntary action.

So how does Aristotle picture the human agent?<sup>6</sup> In the first chapter of the NE, he suggests that human beings have a distinct and *dual* nature. Their souls, he writes, can be divided into an irrational part on the one hand, and a more deliberative, reasonable part on the other: 'the soul is part rational [*eulogos*] and part irrational [*alogos*]' (NE 1102a: 27). In this passage, Aristotle describes the rational part as 'the rational element in our souls', but sometimes he also refers to it as the intellect (*noûs*).<sup>7</sup> I will simply refer to it as *reason*. Reason,

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<sup>6</sup> That is, the adult human agent. In what follows, these two qualifiers are implicit whenever I use the word 'agent'. This is not to deny that children and nonhuman animals are agents as well: both, as we saw, are capable of voluntary action and could thus be called agents. In this thesis, however, following Aristotle, I focus on adult human agents only.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, NE 1139a:18. It seems, though, that Aristotle is not wholly consistent in his use of the term *noûs*. At times, he seems to use *noûs* to refer to a specific *part* of the rational element in our souls: namely the theoretical part. Insofar as the term is used in the context of his theory of action, however, I will take *noûs* to denote the rational part of the soul in general, which also – as we will see shortly – includes a practical part

which is exclusively human on Aristotle's view, is the part that 'has' the rational principle (*logos*), meaning it has the capacity for rationality.<sup>8</sup> The irrational part of the soul, which lacks the rational principle, is also found in nonhuman animals.

These two parts of the human soul are further divided by Aristotle into different faculties. The irrational part consists in two different faculties. On the one hand, it includes our vegetative part (*to phutikon*), which is 'the cause of nutrition and growth' and which is found 'in everything that receives nourishment' (NE 1102a: 35-1102b: 1). This faculty is thus shared by plants, nonhuman animals, and humans alike. On the other hand, the irrational part of our soul also houses an appetitive and desirous faculty (*to epithumēton*).<sup>9</sup> This faculty is described by Aristotle as 'the seat of the appetites and of desire in general' (NE 1102b: 34, trans. Rackham) – the term he uses, *epithumēton*, is derived from the noun *epithumia*, which translates to 'desire' or 'yearning'. This faculty is found in humans as well as other animals.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the vegetative faculty, the appetitive faculty is a part of the human being *as an agent*: for, as we will see, it has

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(see Rackham, 1934: 328fn).

<sup>8</sup> The rational part of the soul is distinct from the rational principle itself [*logos*] (see NE 1102b: 15): Aristotle describes the rational part of the soul as the part that *has* the rational principle. I will reserve the term *reason* to refer to the rational part of the soul, which *has logos*, and will refer to *logos* itself as *the rational principle*.

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, for example in *De Anima* [DA], Aristotle also distinguishes the spirited faculty (*to thumikon*), which he does not mention in this passage (DA 432b:6). Later in the NE, he does mention temper (*thumos*). Interestingly, temper bears relations to both the rational and the irrational faculty (see NE 1149a: 26-7). It thus seems to occupy an interesting place in Aristotle's mereology of the agent. As it does not seem hugely relevant to this thesis, however, I will not here flesh out what exactly this place is.

<sup>10</sup> Note, though, that the appetitive faculty itself depends on our faculty of sense perception, which Aristotle does not mention in this passage. In DA, however, he assumes a

motivational power. It thus forms a first part of our mereology of the agent.

The rational part of the soul, equally, consists in two different faculties. Aristotle divides it into a *theoretical* and a *practical* faculty: he writes that the ‘two rational faculties may be designated the Scientific Faculty [theoretical reason, *to epistēmonikon*] and the Calculative Faculty [practical reason, *to logistikon*] respectively’ (NE 1139a:6-11, trans. Rackham). These faculties reflect the two things which our capacity for rationality enables us to do. (1) Firstly, it enables us to think about matters of fact and their explanation: we are capable, for example, of conducting scientific investigations. This is done by our faculty of theoretical reason. (2) Secondly, our capacity for rationality enables us to think about *what we do*. This is done by our faculty of practical reason. This faculty, therefore, like the appetitive faculty, can motivate us to act. It thus also belongs to the human being as an *agent*, forming a second part of our mereology.

In sum, on Aristotle’s picture, the human soul consists in an irrational and a rational part, each of which consists in two different faculties. The human *agent*, more specifically, consists in the two *motivational* faculties: the appetitive faculty, belonging to the irrational part, and the faculty of practical reason belonging to the part that has reason. Now we have sketched a basic picture of the human agent, we can consider how, for Aristotle, its different parts can play a role in initiating action.

### (1) The Rational Part Initiating Action

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close tie between the appetitive faculty and the capacity for sense perception, arguing that our desires cannot arise but in response to sensation (see DA iii.7).

Let us first consider how the rational part can initiate action. Because they possess the faculty of practical reason, human agents are capable of a uniquely human form of voluntary action: rational or deliberative action, which Aristotle calls *praxis*.<sup>11</sup> This, in short, is action which involves rational *deliberation* (*bouleusis*). On Aristotle's characterisation, practical reason is our faculty of *deliberation*: it allows us to consider different routes of action within a given situation, and judge which one is best. In contrast to other animals, which are bound to immediately and unreflectively follow their every inclination, humans can deliberate about what to do (see NE 1139a: 18-20).

Aristotle describes in detail how practical deliberation works. On his view, deliberation is guided by the question what would be the *right* thing to do. When we act rationally, we are guided by the ends we want to achieve: our aims and projects, the things we find important. Aristotle's term for these is *wish* (*boulêsis* – a term closely related to his term for deliberation).<sup>12</sup> He is clear that our wishes are always things we judge to be *good*. He writes that 'that what ap-

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<sup>11</sup> Most translators, though, simply translate *praxis* as 'action', without specifying that it is specifically rational or deliberative. Rackham explains in a footnote that *praxis* 'means rational action, conduct. The movements of animals, Aristotle appears to think, are mere reactions to the stimuli of sensation' (Rackham, 1934: 328fn). Though, at times, Aristotle does seem to use *praxis*, and its related verb *prattein*, in a more general sense, to denote voluntary action in general (see Irwin, 2000b: 315). When speaking of *praxis* in this chapter, I am referring to *deliberative* action specifically. I will further refine my interpretation of *praxis* when spelling out our taxonomy of regulatory styles (see section C in this chapter).

<sup>12</sup> From now on, when I use the term *wish* in this thesis, it is specifically in this Aristotelean sense.

pears *good* to each person is wished for by [her]' (NE 1113a: 24-25, trans. Rackham, emphasis mine). Our wishes, then, form the starting point of rational deliberation. This seems plausible: when reasoning about how we should act, we are guided by the question what we think is worth achieving.

We deliberate about what to do, then, in order to find out *how* we can achieve our wishes. Wishes, on Aristotle's view, are not particular things we want to achieve at a specific time or place, but things we *generally* aspire for. The task of deliberation, for Aristotle, is to select the appropriate courses of action which can help us achieve the things we wish for in particular situations. He writes that, in deliberation, agents '[f]irst set some end before themselves, and then proceed to consider by which it can be attained best and most easily' (NE 1112b: 16-18). For example, if I wish for physical health, my deliberation will help me identify those courses of action which should help me achieve this end: e.g. take the stairs instead of the lift, decline the third glass of wine, or go to bed early. Note that, for Aristotle, '[w]e deliberate not about ends but about means' (NE 1112b: 12). He seems to assume that our ends and values in life are a given, or at least he does not say much about how we come to have them. Our wishes can thus be considered the 'input' of practical deliberation.<sup>13</sup>

To explain how deliberation works precisely, Aristotle introduces the concept of the *practical syllogism*. The practical syllogism is analogous, but crucially different, to the demonstrative syllogism. The demonstrative syllogism is a form of *theoretical* reasoning: it consists in two theoretical premises – a minor premise and a major premise – which, paired together, result in a theoretical

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Aristotle's claim that deliberation is about means and not ends, see e.g. Cammack (2013), Cooper (1986), Thornton (1982), and Wiggins (1975-6).

conclusion. The minor premise is always a *specific* statement, whilst the major premise is a *general* statement. When faced with certain specific statements (for example, “Socrates is human”), reason recognises that certain general statements apply to them (“All humans are mortal”). The combination of a minor premise with a relevant major premise then yields a specific conclusion (“Socrates is mortal”). In the practical syllogism, in contrast, the major premise is a *general wish* (for example, “I should aspire for health”). The minor premise concerns a particular situation (at  $t_x$ ), in which different courses of action are available (I am offered a piece of cake). My practical reason reveals how, in this particular situation, this wish may be achieved (by not eating the piece of cake). Thus, rather than a theoretical conclusion, the practical syllogism is supposed to produce an *action* (I refrain from eating the cake). In the case of the theoretical syllogism, Aristotle writes, ‘the mind must *affirm* the conclusion, but in the practical syllogism it must immediately *act* on it’ (NE 11147a: 26-28).

Basically, the idea is that in deliberation, practical reason recognises specific situations *as* situations in which a certain wish may be achieved. A sensory perception thus offers an opportunity to further a valued end. Taking this opportunity is the *rational* connection between a particular situation and a general wish: given that I want to be healthy, and given my current situation in which I am confronted with cake, the rational thing for me to do is not to eat it. Sarah Broadie (1994) explains this point as follows:

The practical inquirer tries to identify a possible determinate action, the doing of which would render [her] circumstances, C, circumstances under which the practicable good or best is achieved. The chosen action (call it ‘A’) is like the theoretical middle term because it is selected as mediating in practical fashion between the agent’s situation and [her] objective. (Broadie, 1994: 225).

The practical syllogism thus starts from a rational wish. It seems, however, that the practical syllogism can also operate with more *specific* general rules for action, which are not exactly wishes, but are *aimed towards* a wish: I may, for example, operate with the general rule that I should avoid sugary foods, which *aims towards* my general wish for health. Of course, whether or not one assumes such a distinction depends on how narrowly one wants to define a wish. One could say that I *wish* to avoid excessive sugar consumption, just like I *wish* to take the stairs rather than the lift, and that these wishes can be clustered together into a higher level wish for health. Alternatively, one could say our wishes can often be attained through attending to general rules, and so we often come to operate with such rules when engaging in practical deliberation. These rules are not themselves wishes, but adopted by our practical reason because they tend to help us achieve our wishes. This seems to me the best explanation, but the distinction is of no further relevance here. We can say that practical deliberation always happens in light of our wishes, and our practical syllogisms always start from a general rule which either is, or is aimed towards, a wish. In what follows, I will speak of wishes, ends, and general rules interchangeably.

The task of practical reason is thus to find out how and when to apply general rules. But there seems to be a problem with this picture. For Aristotle maintains that practical reason cannot work with general or absolute rules. For Aristotle, doing what we think best cannot simply be achieved by following a specific set of rules: it requires endless practice, through which our practical reason becomes better at determining what should be done in each and every specific situation. ‘When we are discussing actions,’ he writes, ‘although general



statements have a wider application, particular statements are closer to the truth. This is because actions are concerned with particular facts' (NE 1107a: 30-3). "What should I do now?" is not a question which can be answered by appealing to a general rule, but to which may require a different answer in every single situation.

But there is a way out of this problem. With Broadie (1994), I assume that practical reason has a dual function. It is not just responsible for figuring out *how* a general rule can be applied at  $t_x$ : it also assesses whether or not this rule *should* be applied at  $t_x$ . The mere fact that we hold certain imperatives to be generally true does not entail they should always be applied (this would, indeed, be absurd: it is definitely good for my health to take walks, but I should not, therefore, spend every minute of my entire life walking). For this reason, practical reason, though it works with general rules, is still concerned with particulars, since it needs to figure out which rules to apply when. Broadie makes this point by saying that any deliberation about *how* to achieve a certain end at  $t_x$  always entails deliberation about *whether or not* this end should be achieved at  $t_x$ . Deliberation might reveal that a certain end may only be achieved in such a way at  $t_x$  that it is not, at  $t_x$ , desirable *all things considered*. 'Deliberating on the means to O', Broadie writes, 'may show that pursuing O under the actual circumstances would cost something one values more or something without which O would be useless or unsatisfying' (Broadie, 1994: 239). Deliberating is not just figuring out which means are available at  $t_x$  to achieve a certain end, it also, and simultaneously, means figuring out whether it is best to effectively achieve this end at  $t_x$  given how this may be done there and then.

One might think this explanation flies in the face of Aristotle's statement

that deliberation is about means, not ends: for this second function of practical reason seems to amount to deliberation about ends. But this is only apparently so. This is because whether or not an agent thinks a certain end should be pursued at  $t_x$  will depend on whether she thinks this is the *best*, or even a *good*, thing to do at  $t_x$  – given how it can there and then be pursued. As such, this is itself a deliberation about the best means to the highest end of doing what is *best*. As Broadie points out, Aristotle’s remark that deliberation is only about means, just means ‘that the practical agent does not ask whether [s]he would pursue [her] *formal end*, i.e. *doing what is best under the circumstances*’ (Broadie, 1994: 241, *emphases mine*).<sup>14</sup> This is always the ultimate objective of the agent, according to Aristotle, and *this* is itself never deliberated on.

In sum, on this interpretation, our practical reason does work with general rules, but in figuring how they can be applied at  $t_x$  it simultaneously determines whether it is best, all things considered, to effectively apply them at  $t_x$ . Before concluding this interpretation of Aristotle’s account of deliberation, one obvious problem requires addressing. The term “deliberation” seems to refer to a fairly conscious, and time-consuming, process. But, most of the time, we do not consciously reflect on what we should do – we simply do. If deliberative action must feature deliberation, it seems that the scope of this kind of action is quite narrow for Aristotle. Does this mean our actions are not deliberative most of the time? This seems a questionable implication, since deliberative action refers to

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<sup>14</sup> Similar points, that deliberation can be about ends insofar as they are themselves means to the formal end of the good, are made by Cooper (1986), Thornton (1982), and Wiggins (1975-6).

rational and distinctively human action. Surely, even when we do not consciously reflect about what to do, our actions are often both rational and distinctively human: our actions often still exhibit practical intelligence. To my mind, the most reasonable solution to this problem is to assume that Aristotle conceives of deliberation quite broadly. Broadie (1994) suggests that, even though Aristotle depicts deliberation as a quite conscious process,

it would have been natural for him to extend the concept so that it relates to situations which psychologically (or phenomenologically) differ from deliberation, but which exemplify the sort of logical and explanatory structure that deliberation exemplifies. (Broadie, 1994: 80)<sup>15</sup>

On my reading, therefore, practical reason does not necessarily involve thought, or at least not in any straightforward sense. It regulates action through applying general rules whilst weighing up whether these general rules should indeed be applied in a given situation. The outcome of this process yields an imperative, which can be described as an “I should”. But neither the starting point of practical deliberation, nor the outcome, is necessarily consciously formulated or intentionally implemented. (Indeed, on Aristotle’s view, the practical syllogism is supposed to *immediately* produce action.)

## (2) The Irrational Part Initiating Action

In sum, on the reading I propose, the function of practical reason is to determine, in every particular situation, what the best course of action is in *that* situation. If

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<sup>15</sup> This point is developed more extensively by Coope (2010). Another similar interpretation of Aristotelean deliberation can be found Segvic (2009).

all goes well, this should immediately result in action: if all goes well, for example, I immediately decline the cake. Of course, as most of us know, all does not always go well. Aristotle recognises that human beings don't always manage to act as they think they *should*. On his explanation, this is down to our appetitive faculty, belonging to the irrational part of the soul. Like practical reason, recall, the appetitive faculty has the power to initiate action: 'Desire', Aristotle writes, 'can set the various parts of the body in motion' (NE 1147a: 35). The problem is that its motivational power can operate independently of practical reason. Whilst our wishes are after what we think is good, our desires aren't necessarily: the motivational power of practical judgment is connected to what is *best*, whilst the motivational power of the appetitive part is often connected to *pleasure*. At times, we lust for things that aren't good. Though pleasure and the good are not inherently incompatible for Aristotle, they often are in practice, at the level of particular situations: our faculty of desire is often after pleasures that, at  $t_x$ , do *not* contribute to what we judge best. For example, when I am offered the cake, I could decline the offer and so contribute to my rational end of healthy eating – but I might *also* long for the pleasure of consuming it.

For this reason, our two faculties are often in conflict. According to Aristotle, then, our appetitive faculty has the power to disrupt the workings of practical reason. Whilst practical reason aims to help us achieve our rational wishes, desire can make this quite difficult: 'the rational part of the soul 'urges [the agent] in the right direction and encourages [her] to take the best course', Aristotle writes, but sometimes our appetitive faculty 'struggles and strains against the rational' (NE 1102b: 17-18).

Thus far our sketch of Aristotle's mereology of the agent. Depending on

the interplay of these different parts, an agent will display different regulatory styles. But before we can turn to our discussion of these, one more notion needs to be introduced: Aristotle's notion of choice. This way, we can take this notion into account when constructing our taxonomy of regulatory styles.

### B.3 Aristotle's Conception of Choice

Aristotle's term for choice is *prohairesis*.<sup>16</sup> It is clear that he very closely connects choice with practical reason. On his view, choice concerns the particular means which help achieve our wishes: Aristotle explains that 'wish is more concerned with the end, and choice with the means: e.g. we wish to be healthy, but choose things that will make us healthy' (NE 111b: 26-28). Choice, in other words, concerns the selection of the middle term of the practical syllogism; accordingly, it is the outcome of rational deliberation: 'the object of choice', Aristotle writes, 'has been selected as the result of deliberation' (NE 1113a: 3-5). In book III of the NE, Aristotle even explicitly defines choice as 'voluntary action preceded by deliberation' (NE 1112a: 17). As Broadie puts it, practical deliberation and choice 'are conceptually inseparable: just as the aim of deliberation is to reach a reasoned choice, so rational choice is reached only through deliberation' (Broadie, 1994, 179). Choice, for Aristotle, is clearly something that practical reason does: I submit, therefore, that practical reason can be considered our faculty of choice.

But, on Aristotle's definition, choice is connected with reason *as well as* with desire. Further on in book III, he writes that 'choice is a deliberate *desire*'

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<sup>16</sup> Though some translate this term differently, e.g. as *decision* (Irwin, 2010) or *pursuit* (Ross, 1954).

(NE 1113a: 12, trans. Rackham, emphasis mine),<sup>17</sup> and in book VI, it reads that ‘the origin of choice is *appetition* and purposive reasoning’ (NE 1139a: 32-33, emphasis mine). Judging from these passages, Aristotle’s view is that choice *definitionally* results from a combination of reason *as well as* desire. It thus appears to bear a connection with both our motivational faculties (though matters, as we will see shortly, are not that simple).

### C. A TAXONOMY OF REGULATORY STYLES

Finally, then, we can turn to our taxonomy of regulatory styles. In the NE, Aristotle describes a set of moral dispositions, which I will study as a set of regulatory styles: I will consider their differing underlying *structures*, and disregard their moral status. It must be noted, here, that Aristotle considers these regulatory styles to be more or less chronic configurations, since they are dispositions of character: they do not describe the structure of agency in individual actions, but rather the overall manner of organising action in individual agents. Nevertheless, these dispositions still describe how an agent so disposed will be inclined to act in every singular instance.

In what follows, I will discuss three of the dispositions he describes: *sōphrosunē*, *akrasia*, and *enkrateia*.<sup>18</sup> Note that, in the NE, these three dispositions all pertain to the sphere of (physical) pleasure and pain: they concern our self-regulation in the context of food, sex, sleep, and the like. I will, however, take

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<sup>17</sup> Trans. Thomson: ‘choice is a deliberate appetition’.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle describes many more moral dispositions in the NE, pertaining to different spheres including fear and confidence, anger, and honour.

them to represent *general* regulatory styles. In this section, I will show how these three regulatory styles be differentiated with reference to Aristotle's mereology of the agent, and discuss whether (as well as how) choice features in each of them.

### C.1 *Sōphrosunē*

The first regulatory style I will discuss is called *sōphrosunē*, often translated as temperance.<sup>19</sup> This is a very harmonious style of regulation: in *sōphrosunē*, practical reason and desire, though distinct faculties still, pull the agent toward the same course of action. In *sōphrosunē*, Aristotle writes, the faculty of desire 'is in complete harmony with the rational principle' (NE 1102b: 26-8). This is because the temperate agent only desires what she thinks is best: the temperate agent, Aristotle writes, 'is so constituted as to take no pleasure in anything contrary to [her] principle' (NE 1152a: 2-3). According to Aristotle, this is possible because the irrational part 'does in a way participate in reason, in the sense that it is submissive and obedient to it' (NE 1102b: 30-34). The temperate agent has successfully subjugated her desires to her reason. As a result, chasing what is good and chasing pleasure are not incompatible for her. In *sōphrosunē*, therefore, the practical syllogism works efficiently and without disruption. When I am offered the cake, I am not even tempted to accept it: I don't have a desire to eat anything I don't think is good for me. I decline the offer without any problems.

Strictly speaking, however, these are not the sole defining characteristics

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<sup>19</sup> I will leave *sōphrosunē* untranslated, but will adopt the term 'temperate' as the accompanying adjective.

of *sōphrosunē*. Aristotle considers *sōphrosunē* a *virtue*, which is a normatively robust classification: only those agents who have the *right* better judgment can be considered temperate for him. The temperate agent, strictly speaking, does not only as she judges best, but also makes a correct judgment. Aristotle's characterisation of it, therefore, also takes into account the content of the agent's judgment. A more precise characterisation of *sōphrosunē*, in this regard, is found later in the NE: in book VI, Aristotle writes that *sōphrosunē* requires the right kind of reasoning, and a correct corresponding desire (see NE 1139a: 22-26). But in this thesis, I am bracketing the morally objectivist dimension of Aristotle's views. On my adapted, content-neutral reading of *sōphrosunē*, its characteristics are simply that reason and desire align. What the judgment of the agent in question consists in does not matter.

So how can we classify *sōphrosunē* within our taxonomy? It is clear that it belongs to the genus of voluntary actions, since the origin of action lies within the agent. But what are the differentiae of *sōphrosunē*? First, since action is the result of successful deliberation, we must classify *sōphrosunē* as a form of *deliberative* action (*praxis*). As such, it is also clear that *sōphrosunē* features choice, since choice was defined as 'voluntary action preceded by deliberation' (NE 1112a: 17).<sup>20</sup> But choice was not merely connected to deliberation and practical reason: it also involved desire. But since, in *sōphrosunē*, the appetitive faculty is subjugated to reason and so aligns with it, we can see how this choice is at once

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<sup>20</sup> It might seem, at this point, as if the differentiae 'is a form of *praxis*' and 'features choice' are the very same thing. But, as we will see, matters are more complicated (see section C.3 in this chapter).



connected to the appetitive part. *Sōphrosunē* is thus a form of deliberative, voluntary agency, which features choice.

## C.2 *Enkrateia*

Our second regulatory style is called *enkrateia*, often translated as continence or self-control.<sup>21</sup> In *enkrateia*, the two motivational faculties of the soul are in conflict: the agent wants to do as she judges right, but is at the same time tempted by an opposing pleasure. On our example, I recognise that refusing the cake is the right thing to do for me, given my wish to be healthy. The sight of the cake, however, also triggers a desire for the pleasure of consuming it. In the face of this conflict, the enkratic agent manages to subdue her desires to her reason, and does eventually act in accordance with the latter: in *enkrateia*, Aristotle writes, the ‘irrational element which opposes and runs counter to reason [...] is obedient to reason’ (NE 1102a: 24-26). Though severely tempted to eat the cake, I manage to pull myself together and decline. In *enkrateia*, therefore, the workings of the practical syllogism are threatened but not disrupted.

Since it originates from within the agent, *enkrateia* must be classified as another form of voluntary action. Further, like in *sōphrosunē*, actions are the result of rational deliberation. This means *enkrateia* is also a *deliberative* form of action. On the same grounds, it must also feature choice: and Aristotle, indeed, confirms that the enkratic agent ‘acts from choice’ (NE 1111b: 14). *Enkrateia* can be differentiated from *sōphrosunē* because, in *enkrateia*, the appetitive faculty

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<sup>21</sup> I will also leave *enkrateia* untranslated – partially because I will attribute a different place to the notion of self-control within this picture of agency (see section C.3 in this chapter).

does not align with reason. The enkratic agent's actions are determined by her practical reason, but *not* by her appetitive faculty: she does what she judges to be right, without fully wanting to. There remains an inner conflict.

This characterisation of *enkrateia*, however, seems problematic. Choice, we saw, was connected to both the rational *and* the appetitive faculty. So how can *enkrateia* feature choice, if the appetitive part is subdued by the rational part? A simple, and plausible, solution would be to suggest that the enkratic agent experiences conflicting desires, one for pleasure and one for what is best. If – as Aristotle explicitly states – the enkratic agent makes a choice, this means she must have a desire to do so. But the enkratic agent *also* desires to do otherwise, which means she must also have a conflicting desire for pleasure. But this solution is complicated by an apparent contradiction on Aristotle's part: in book III, he asserts that it is impossible to desire two conflicting things at once: 'a desire', he writes, cannot 'be contrary [...] to another desire' (NE 1111b: 15). But how, then, is *enkrateia* possible?

This apparent mystery can be solved by looking at the original Greek terms used by Aristotle. Interestingly – and crucially – it turns out that he uses several different words, which can all be translated as "desire". These different terms each carry different meanings and nuances. It might thus be that Aristotle, rather than contradicting himself, is speaking of different *kinds* of desire in the relevant passages. The different Aristotelean terms for desire are neatly distinguished by Giles Pearson in his book *Aristotle on Desire* (2012). Pearson argues that, with the term 'orexis', Aristotle denotes a broad category of desires, which includes three different forms: (1) *epitumia*, understood as the desire for pleasure; (2) *thumos*, understood as the desire for retaliation; and (3) wish or *boulêsis*,

understood as a desire for what we rationally grasp as good (see Pearson, 2012: 68-74). Pearson thus classifies our wishes, for the things we judge to be good, as *rational desires*. The idea is that, if we wish for something because we judge it to be good, we have a rational desire for it. When we think we *should* aim for something, we must also, in some sense, *want* to do it. To support his interpretation, Pearson refers to a crucial passage in *De Anima* [DA], where Aristotle writes about the human soul that ‘in the rational part there will be *boulêsis*, and in the non-rational part *epithumia* and *thumos*; and if the soul is tripartite there will be *orexis* in each part’ (DA 432b: 4-7). This establishes that *orexis* can encompass both rational and non-rational desires, whilst *epithumia* denotes a non-rational desire specifically, and *boulêsis* denotes a specifically rational desire. Crucially, Aristotle often uses the more general term *orexis* to refer to a specifically rational desire, distinct from *epithumia*.

This solves our mystery. When we return to the passages in Aristotle which appear contradictory, we can see that he uses a different term for desire in each. When defining choice as deliberate appetite, Aristotle uses the more general term *orexis*. We can posit that he uses this more general term here to denote *boulêsis*, a wish or specifically rational desire. This seems plausible. Making choices indeed involves some desire of sorts, namely our wishes: they are desires *by* practical reason for what we judge to be good. Thus, choice is indeed connected with desire, but only with *boulêsis* (i.e. *orexis* insofar as it is rational). Crucially, then, when stating that desires cannot be conflicting amongst themselves, Aristotle uses the word *epithumia*. What Aristotle means, in this passage, is just that an agent cannot at once have an *epithumia* to  $\varphi$  and an *epithumia* not to  $\varphi$ : I cannot, at once, long to eat the cake and long not to eat it. But one *can* have

a certain *epithumia* to  $\phi$  whilst *rationally* desiring not to  $\phi$ : I can long the pleasure of consuming the cake, and at the same time rationally desire not to eat it.<sup>22</sup> For Aristotle, the latter scenario would not entail an *inherent* conflict between desires, since they are desires of a different kind.

This, then, is precisely what happens in *enkrateia*: the agent experiences a conflict between two kinds of desire, one rational and one irrational. In his descriptions of *enkrateia*, Aristotle indeed uses the word *epithumia* to describe the desires that rebel against reason (see e.g. NE1145b: 14). Thus, we can differentiate *enkrateia* as follows: like *sōphrosunē*, it is a form of deliberative voluntary action, which features choice. But in *sōphrosunē*, the agent's rational desire (*orexis/boulēsis*) and her appetite (*epithumia*) align, whilst in *enkrateia*, the agent's rational desire is in conflict with her appetite.

### C.3 Akrasia

This brings us to our last regulatory style: *akrasia*, often translated as weakness of the will, or sometimes as incontinence.<sup>23</sup> In *akrasia*, the appetitive and the rational part of the soul are also in conflict, pulling the agent in opposing directions.

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<sup>22</sup> Rackham interprets this passage in the same way. In a footnote, he explains that Aristotle means 'you cannot feel two contradictory desires at once', meaning that 'you cannot strictly speaking at the same time desire to eat the cake and desire not to eat it' (Rackham, 1934: 130). But, he adds, 'you can of course desire two incompatible things: you may want to eat your cake and have it' (Rackham, 1934: 130).

<sup>23</sup> Translating *akrasia* as "weakness of will" seems to me mistaken. On Aristotle's view, as will be discussed later on (see section A in the next chapter), there seems to be no conceptual space for something like a will, that is, some faculty *independent of practical reason* that can *choose* to do wrong. Hence, I will also leave *akrasia* untranslated. Richard Sorabji (2004) agrees with this point: he writes that the discussion of *akrasia* is 'spoken

Aristotle writes that ‘in [akratic] persons their impulses run counter to their principle’ (NE 1102b: 24, trans. Rackham). But, unlike the enkratic agent, the akratic agent does not manage to subdue her appetitive faculty: she gives in to her impulses, against the directs of her reason. On our example, I devour the offered piece of cake, despite judging it better not to. Akrasia thus refers to those instances of agency which I have preciously called *impulsive*.

When desire trumps reason in this way, this seems to *corrupt* practical reason. For, according to Aristotle, we still *use* it, but for an end we do not judge to be good. We can still find the right means to achieve our desired end (I know, for example, that I must eat the cake to achieve my end of pleasure), and so our actions still result from a practical syllogism of sorts (see NE 1147a: 25-1147b: 3). But the starting point of the syllogism – the practical end it is after – is not endorsed by practical reason at  $t_x$ . We could say, therefore, that the practical syllogism is here *corrupted* by desire: it no longer operates in the service of reason, but is corrupted by the appetitive faculty.

What does this mean for our classification of *akrasia*? Like *sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia*, *akrasia* belongs to the class of voluntary actions: for the origin of the action, the appetitive faculty, is internal to the agent (this was, indeed, emphasised by Aristotle when he defined the category of voluntary actions).<sup>24</sup> But is it a deliberative form of voluntary action? And does it feature choice?

These questions, as will shortly become apparent, are quite hard to answer. But before we can address them, we need to introduce a further nuance

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of as Aristotle’s explanation of weakness of will. But this is a misnomer’ (Sorabji, 2004: 11).

<sup>24</sup> See section B.1 in this chapter.

into our picture of *akrasia*. For, according to Aristotle, *akrasia* comes in two different forms. At times, he explains, the inner conflict between reason and desire is overt. But in other cases, desire befalls the agent so suddenly that she fails to even consider what the best course of action would have been. Accordingly, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of *akrasia*: weakness (*astheneia*) and impetuosity (*propeteia*). The weak agent goes through a process of deliberation, yet fails to act in accordance with its outcome: these agents ‘deliberate and then under the influence of their feelings fail to abide by their decision’ (NE 1150b: 20). The impetuous agent, in contrast, *skips* the process of deliberation and acts immediately upon a desire, which only later she finds at to be at odds with her reason: these people ‘are carried away by their feelings because they have failed to deliberate’ (NE 1150b: 20-21). At the time of the action, therefore, the impetuous agent experiences no inner conflict, but afterwards she regrets it: this indicates that her rational faculty, in retrospect, rejects the course of action taken. This is why her actions also count as akratic.

We saw that *akrasia* is a form of voluntary action, and this clearly holds for both these types. But does *akrasia* belong to the narrower category of *deliberative* action? This is debatable. At first glance, it seems that *akrasia* cannot be a form of deliberative action, because akratic actions are generated independently – indeed, *in spite* – of practical reason and its deliberations. Since it is only in virtue of our practical reason that we are, for Aristotle, capable of deliberative action, one might want to conclude that akratic actions fall outside of this category.

This, however, seems to have some strange implications. On this reading, *akrasia* would be a reversal to animal action: for it would amount to *mere*

voluntary action, in which nonhuman animals also take part. But this seems too strong of a claim. For *akrasia* still is a distinctively *human* form of voluntary action: in both its forms, it still *involves* rational deliberation. In the case of weakness, this is plain to see: for what is distinct about the weak agent is that she does form a better judgment, yet fails to translate it into action. This sort of action, surely, does not occur in nonhuman animals – they do not act against any better judgments. Even though the weak agent does not *follow* her better judgment, the sheer fact that she has formed one surely sets her kind of agency apart from *mere* voluntary action.

Moreover, this also seems true for impetuosity. Granted, one could argue that this form of *akrasia* really is like animal action, since the faculty of practical reason appears to be entirely bypassed. I would, however, argue against this interpretation. For, as Aristotle sketches it, impetuosity is only a form of *akrasia* because it involves *post factum* regret. The wanton agent, who acts on impulse but does not regret her actions later, would – I take it – not be impetuous for Aristotle. Regret, in other words, is a constitutive element of impetuosity. And since this regret is only possible in light of *rational deliberation* after the fact, impetuosity is a form of agency which necessarily involves deliberation. It is, therefore, also a distinctively human form of agency – again, regretting a past impulsive action is a situation a nonhuman animal will just not find itself in.

Nevertheless, it seems that, for Aristotle, deliberative actions are those which effectively *result* from rational deliberation, and not those which merely involve it. At the very start of the NE, Aristotle makes it clear that *praxis* is always

aimed at the *good* (see NE 1094a: 18-22).<sup>25</sup> We must thus conclude that *akratic* actions are not deliberative, since they do not aim at the good. *Akrasia* may involve some activity of practical reason, but since this deliberation does not affect action, akratic actions are not deliberative.

Thus, *akrasia* is excluded from the category of deliberative action, whilst also seeming more distinctly human than the more general class of *mere* voluntary action. As such, there seems to be a blank spot in Aristotle's classification of agency. This, in fact, is precisely suggested by Ursula Coope (2010). She argues that the category of 'human intentional action', which features heavily in modern philosophical discussions, has no real place in Aristotle's theory of action (Coope, 2010: 439). Aristotle's category of voluntary action, she suggests, seems 'too broad a category' to capture it, whilst that of *praxis* seems 'too narrow' (Coope, 2010: 439). And it is precisely *akrasia* which would fall in between these two Aristotelean categories for Coope. Her reason for this, however, is different from mine. Coope's reason is that the akratic agent can still use a distinctively human form of *calculation* in order to obtain her desired end, even if this end is not rationally endorsed: for Aristotle, she writes, 'the akratic person can calculate how to get the object of [her] desire', and '[t]he capacity for calculation is a reasoning power and is distinctively human' (Coope, 2010: 444.) She thus refers to the fact that, even though it is corrupted, *akrasia* still involves a practical syllogism of sorts, which is a specifically human kind of reasoning. My reason for classifying *akrasia* as a distinctively human form of agency was, instead, that it still involves

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<sup>25</sup> He writes that 'among the ends at which our actions (*praktōn*) aim there be one which we wish for its own sake, while we wish the others only for the sake of this [...] It is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good' (NE 1094a: 18-22).



rational deliberation, even if its outcomes are not translated into action. Coope, therefore, offers an *additional* reason as to why we might want to invoke a separate category of agency, which is narrower than voluntary action but broader than deliberative action, and to which instances of *akrasia* belong.

This point does not further matter here. In any case, it is clear that *akrasia* is not deliberative for Aristotle. Our next question is whether it features choice. *Prima facie*, it would seem that it does not. We saw that choice refers to actions which follow the outcome of rational deliberation. Deliberative action and choice, therefore, seem to come together. Indeed, Aristotle states that '[t]he irrational animals', which have no share in deliberative action, also 'do not exercise choice' (NE 1111b: 12, trans. Rackham). It seems to follow that *akrasia*, which we established was not deliberative, doesn't feature choice. Aristotle even appears to confirm this when he writes that, when our actions do not follow from reason, they do not count as chosen: the akratic agent, he writes, acts 'not from choice but in opposition to it and to [her] reasoning' (NE 1148a:9).

Notwithstanding, I want to argue that *akrasia* can feature choice. Indeed, Aristotle explicitly writes about the akratic agent that her 'moral choice is sound' (NE 1152a: 17, trans. Rackham). How can we understand this claim? And about which akratic agent is he speaking? The key to understanding this claim, I submit, is to distinguish between *choice* on the one hand, and *chosen action* on the other. Though Aristotle defines choice as voluntary *action* resulting from deliberation, I propose to understand choice as the *mental resolve* to act in accordance with the outcome of deliberation. Choice, on this interpretation, refers not to an action, but to an agent's *commitment* or *resolution* to act. Being the outcome of deliberation, choice refers to the moment an agent *decides on* the best possible

course of action in a particular situation. Chosen action, then, refers to action which is in accordance with the choice one has already made.<sup>26</sup>

If we understand choice this way, we can see that one type of *akrasia* does not feature choice, whilst the other does. Clearly, impetuosity does not. This form of agency, recall, did not involve any deliberation before action: these agents ‘are carried away by their feelings because they have failed to deliberate’ (NE 1150b: 20-21). It follows that the impetuous agent does not make a choice about what to do – she just acts. But what distinguishes impetuosity from weakness, I submit, is that the weak agent *does* make a choice. This type of akratic, Aristotle writes, ‘does not keep to the resolve [s]he has formed after deliberation’ (NE 1152a: 17-18, trans. Rackham). This means that she has gone through a process of deliberation, and made a decision how she *should* act on this basis. Thus, I submit, she has made a choice. The problem is that her desires keep her from acting upon it: the weak ‘deliberate, but then are prevented by passion from keeping to their resolution’ (NE 1150b: 20, trans. Rackham).<sup>27</sup> Thus, I suggest, what happens in weakness is that the appetitive faculty prevents the agent not from making a choice, but from translating that choice into action. When Aristotle writes about the akratic agent that her ‘moral choice is sound’ (NE 1152a: 17,

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<sup>26</sup> In this context, it is also worth mentioning Aristotle’s claim, made in book VI, that ‘[t]he origin of action (the efficient, not the final cause) is choice’ (NE 1139a 32-33). If choice is the *cause* of action, then surely it does not *coincide* with action.

<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, in these two passages, Aristotle does not use the Greek word for choice (*prohairesis*). But the words which Rackham translates as ‘resolve’ and ‘resolution’ refer to the outcome of deliberation – they are forms of the verb *bouleuō*, which means “to deliberate” (see Liddell and Scott, 1843/1940: 324). On this basis, and given that he speaks of akratic choice in other passages (e.g. NE 1148a: 9, 1152a: 17), I take these terms to mean the same thing as choice (*prohairesis*) in this context.

trans. Rackham), and that she acts ‘in opposition to it’ (NE 1148a:9), therefore, I assume he is speaking specifically about the weak akratic.

But whether *akrasia* involves choice or not, akratic *actions* are clearly never chosen: they are, in the end, controlled by the appetites and not by reason. It is for this reason, I submit, that *akrasia* is not a form of deliberative action: it is only when choices are also translated into action that we have deliberative actions for Aristotle. What is distinctive about deliberative action is not just that it features choice, but that this choice is also converted into action. This happens in neither form of *akrasia*.

We have now differentiated our two forms of *akrasia*. But there might be a significant issue with the reading I have advanced. In a 2007 paper, Devin Henry discusses Aristotle’s concept of weakness, which he calls ‘genuine akrasia’. Genuine akrasia, Henry explains, presents us with a more serious philosophical riddle than impetuosity (which he calls ‘drunk-akrasia’): whilst we can explain instances of impetuosity by pointing to the absence of deliberation, instances of weak *akrasia* cannot be explained in this manner. The genuinely akratic agent knows very well what she *should* do. As such, genuine akrasia appears as a mystery: on what basis does she fail to act on this knowledge? Of course, we could say that it is her desire for an opposing pleasure which prevents her from doing so. But this answer, Henry argues, fails to *explain* the case at hand: for, as we have seen, the *enkratic* agent (which Henry calls ‘self-controlled’) *also* desires a pleasure opposed to her reason. This means that the weak and the enkratic agent share the same disposition, and so this disposition is in itself not a sufficient explanation for weak akrasia. On this basis, Henry concludes, Aristotle fails to explain *why* the genuinely akratic person yields to her pleasures

whilst the enkratic agent doesn't: 'genuine akrasia cannot be explained solely in terms of the agent's beliefs because [her] beliefs are identical to those of the enkratic person who exhibits self-control in the same situation' (Henry, 2002: 267).

Henry's solution to this problem is to posit that genuine akrasia lacks in rational *desire*: 'for Aristotle', he asserts, 'genuinely akratic behaviour is due to the *absence* of an internal conflict that a desire for the proper pleasures of temperance would create if the akratic person could experience them' (Henry, 2002: 257). That is, whilst the weak akratic shares a desire for *bad* pleasure with the enkratic agent, she does not have a conflicting desire for the pleasure that acting on her better judgment will bring. The enkratic agent, in contrast, does possess a desire for the good. This, Henry suggests, can *explain* why the enkratic goes on to to the right thing, whilst the weak akratic doesn't. It is through the force of this desire that the enkratic person can control herself: 'the source of the self-controlled person's ability to restrain her appetite is an opposing desire for the pleasures associated with being temperate' (Henry, 2002: 265). Conversely, Henry argues, it is the absence of this sort of desire which leads the genuine akratic to err: 'the source of the genuinely akratic man's *inability* to restrain his appetite should be the *lack* of an opposing desire for those same pleasures' (Henry, 2002: 265).

Henry's suggestion has serious implications for my argument that *weak* akrasia features choice. Though the author does not refer to these notions, his claim is clearly that weakness does not involve any rational desire (*orexis/boulêsis*). For this is precisely 'a desire for the pleasures associated with being temperate'. But since choice, as we have seen, requires rational desire for

Aristotle, this would imply that weakness *cannot* involve choice. Consequently, Henry's solution to the problem of *weakness* presents a challenge to my interpretation of it.

The worry in dismissing Henry's reading is that, if we maintain that genuine *akrasia* does involve choice, we cannot *explain* why the akratic agent acts differently from the *enkratic* agent. In a response to Henry, however, Byron J. Stoyles (2007) proposes a less strict, and very appealing, rendition of Henry's argument. One of Stoyles' worries regarding Henry's suggestion is that it is, indeed, 'inconsistent with Aristotle's assertion that the akratic [person]'s choice is good' (Stoyles, 2007: 200). But, Stoyles argues, we can hold on to Henry's solution to the problem of weakness, without subscribing to his conclusion that the weak agent necessarily lacks any rational desire. His suggestion is simple and effective: we can assume, he suggests, that the weak agent's rational desire is *outweighed* by her desire for the wrong pleasure, without being entirely absent. He writes that 'Henry has, perhaps, overstated his case here – it is not clear that we need to assume the akratic [person] lacks *all* desire for the proper pleasures of temperance. It could be that [her] desire is simply outweighed by the desire for bodily pleasures' (Stoyles, 2007: 199). Put differently, on this weaker reading, *akrasia* does involve an inclination towards the good (i.e. *orexis/boulêsis*), but an *even stronger* inclination towards pleasure (i.e. *epithumia*).

On this interpretation, we can take the weak agent to make choices also: 'On this reading,' Stoyles writes, 'both the self-controlled [person] and the akratic [person] choose, or form deliberative desires for a temperate course of action, but the akratic [person]'s choice is outweighed by [her] appetitive desires' (Stoyles, 2007: 201). It is for this reason that she fails to convert her choice

into action. As such, we can maintain that weak akrasia involves choice, but not chosen action: 'On the weaker version of Henry's thesis considered above,' Stoyles concludes, 'the akratic [person] does choose correctly, but this choice, in the form of a deliberative desire, lacks sufficient force to overcome [her] appetite for pleasure' (Stoyles, 2007: 205). I thus maintain, with Stoyles, that the weak akratic does make a choice. This is an interpretation also supported, *inter alia*, by Broadie (1994): 'Sometimes, she writes,

an agent *reaches a rational choice* – a judgment of what it is best to do given his situation – and *fails to act on it*, not for any good reason nor because of external interference, but because [s]he does not want to do it or wants to do something else more. [...] That is what the incontinent person does: so far as [her] choice fails to affect [her] behaviour, [s]he might as well never have made it. (Broadie, 1994: 266-267)

In sum, on the reading I have advanced, choice is a mental resolve to do the right thing which involves reasoning (deliberation or *bouleusis*) and an accompanying rational desire (*orexis/boulêsis*). Choice, *if* translated into action, produces deliberative action. If it is to be translated into action, the agent's rational desire must be stronger than any opposing irrational desires. In *sôphrosunê*, the agent has both a rational desire (*orexis/boulêsis*) and an appetite (*epithumia*) for what is good. She makes a choice to do what is good and effortlessly translates it into deliberative action. In *enkrateia*, the agent has a rational desire, as well as a conflicting appetite. She chooses to do what is right, and because her rational desire is *stronger*, she effectively manages to do so. The weak akratic, then, also chooses to do what is right, but has conflicting appetites which are stronger than her rational desire. As a result, she does not manage to turn

this choice into action. Lastly, the impetuous agent, under the spell of her appetites, forgets about her rational desires altogether and follows her desires without even making a choice.

#### C.4 Aristotle's Moral Objectivism

I have now presented my interpretation of Aristotle's theory of agency in full, and extracted from it a basic taxonomy of regulatory styles. A last issue, however, is whether Aristotle's theory is sufficiently content-neutral for our purposes. Arguably, Aristotle's view of agency seems all too interwoven with his moral objectivism. His notions of deliberation and choice, for example, have a robustly normative undertone. The reason for this is that, according to Aristotle, what is *good* is an objective given. On Aristotle's view, the ultimate highest good for humans is *Eudaimonia*, which may be translated as happiness or human flourishing. *Eudaimonia*, Aristotle writes in the first chapter of the NE, is what all human actions must eventually aim at: it is 'the end to which our actions are directed' (NE 1097b: 20-21). Even though it cannot be spelled out in absolute terms what exactly this good life consists in, Aristotle does think people can be clearly on the wrong or the right path towards it. In light of this view, Aristotle thinks our choices about what to do can be misguided. In book III of the NE, he distinguishes between a wish for the good, and a wish for the apparent good: 'absolutely and in truth the object of wish is the good, but for the individual it is what *seems* good to [her]' (NE 1113a: 24-25, emphasis mine). Our wishes and choices can thus be right or wrong independently of what *we* think. Aristotle, in fact, describes a fourth regulatory style, *akolasia* or self-indulgence, in which the agent makes the

wrong choice. On his description, the self-indulgent agent is *misguided*: she ‘yields to [her] appetites from choice, considering it *right* always to pursue the pleasure that offers’ (NE 1146b: 23-24, trans. Rackham). She chases pleasure without realising this is not the right thing to do. This conveys the idea that our practical reason, on Aristotle’s picture, functions as a moral compass of sorts, meant to track the *true* good: he writes, indeed, that ‘the best part of us [...] is thought to rule and lead us by nature, and to have cognizance of what is noble and divine’ (NE 1177a: 13-16, trans. Rackham). This seems to imply that, for Aristotle, our deliberations take place not in light of what *we personally* judge to be best, but rather in light of what *is* best.

Yet we can, without much trouble, bracket Aristotle’s moral objectivism here. For, crucially, Aristotle still takes the self-indulgent agent to make *choices*: this agent, he writes, ‘is carried away at [her] own choice’ (NE 1146b 24). Even though she pursues her every appetite, her actions count as chosen; for she judges it best to do so. This demonstrates that Aristotle *does* assume the agent’s individual judgment remains deeply subjective. Whilst the possibility of making a *wrong* choice does reflect Aristotle’s moral objectivism, it equally demonstrates that, essentially, it is still the *agent* who makes choices on his view. The self-indulgent agent makes wrong choices – but she makes choices all the same. This suggests that choice, for Aristotle, has a *structural* component also: it is the outcome of individual deliberation, which takes place in light of what the agent herself thinks is best. And it is this individual process precisely which interests us in this thesis. When considering the structures of agency at work within the individual agent, the only relevant element for us is how an agent makes her *subjective* judgment about what to do. As such, it is of little relevance for us whether



or not this judgment is ‘mistaken’ in reference to an ultimate objective good or not.

Thus, we can simply understand deliberation and choice as a process and its outcome that take place in light of an *individual’s* idea of that is good. Admittedly, this implies a slight deviation from Aristotle’s view. But it is only slight. The most significant implication for our taxonomy is perhaps that bracketing this morally objectivist dimension of *akolasia* dissolves its distinction with *sōphrosunē*. For both agents do what they think is right, without experiencing conflicting desires. Structurally, therefore, *akolasia* is the same as *sōphrosunē*: the only thing that sets them apart, on Aristotle’s picture, is that the temperate agent does what is morally right, whilst the self-indulgent agent makes morally bad choices. For this reason, the self-indulgent agent has no place in our taxonomy of regulatory styles – the category disappears along with the moral objectivism it is grounded in.

## **D. HYPERKRASIA: AN ADDITIONAL REGULATORY STYLE**

### *D.1 The Locus of Self-Control*

Now we have sketched our taxonomy of regulatory styles, we can finally turn to our main question: can we include a philosophically satisfactory conception of self-oppression within this taxonomy? Our preliminary characterisation of self-oppression, recall, was that it is *a form of agency featuring a form of self-control which compromises choice*. In order to answer this question, therefore, we first need to establish where on Aristotle’s architectonic of agency we can locate *self-control*. Thus far, we have constructed our taxonomy without reference to this

notion. As I see it, we should understand self-control as the ability to act in accordance with one's better judgment: the self-controlled agent is the agent who manages to act as she thinks she should. Within Aristotle's framework, this means that *practical reason* is our faculty of self-control. Actions are self-controlled if and only if they are controlled by practical reason. This means, in turn, that self-control is exclusive to the class of deliberative actions.

On this picture, neither type of *akrasia* features self-control. Since the akratic agent acts *against* her reason, she does not exhibit self-control. In fact, "akrasia" is a conjunction of *krateia*, the Greek word for 'power', and the prefix *a*, which indicates an absence.<sup>28</sup> In *akrasia*, practical reason is not in power, it does not *control* action. When we succumb to our desires, self-control is lost. In contrast, both *sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia* feature self-control. In the case of *enkrateia*, this is rather obvious: indeed, as mentioned, this notion is often translated as self-control. Conjoining *krateia* with the prefix *en*, it literally translates to 'in power'. But it seems reductive to classify only *enkrateia* as featuring self-control: for in *sōphrosunē* also, actions are in accordance with reason. It just costs less effort: since there are no desires going against reason, there is nothing that needs to be overcome. But to suggest that the temperate agent, who does as she judges best without trouble, has no self-control seems counterintuitive.

It becomes clear, then, that none of the regulatory styles described match our description of self-oppression. There are no forms of agency, in this taxonomy, which feature self-control but compromised choice: for both regulatory styles which feature self-control (*sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia*) also feature choice.

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<sup>28</sup> See Liddell and Scott (1843/1940:990).

Thus, this category of agency appears to be a blank spot on Aristotle's taxonomy of regulatory styles.

## D.2 Anaesthesia

Aristotle, however, mentions yet another regulatory style in the NE, which has been left out of our discussion so far: *anaesthesia*, or insensitivity. He describes this as a very rare disposition, in which the agent has a 'defective response to pleasures' (NE 1107b: 6). It is an agent 'to whom nothing is pleasant and everything indifferent' (NE 1119a: 9-10). On this basis, he presents it as the opposite of *akrasia* (see NE 1151b:23-32). It may sound like, in *anaesthesia*, there is too much self-control, such that it destroys the agent's capacity for pleasure. Might this description capture the phenomenon of self-oppression? It seems not. Aristotle writes that the anaesthetic agent does *not* act in accordance with reason: this agent, he writes, 'finds too little enjoyment in bodily pleasures, and fails to abide by the right principle in this respect' (NE 1151b: 23-32, emphasis mine). Indeed, in this passage, Aristotle presents *anaesthesia* as the counterpart of *akrasia*. His suggestion, therefore, seems to be that the anaesthetic agent would fail to abide by her own principles, just like the akratic. But instead of doing so because she is too tempted to do something else, her problem is that she can't be bothered to do as she seems right. It is not clear what Aristotle thinks *anaesthesia* looks like, but we might imagine someone who is feeling quite depressive, and who, though she thinks it would be better to eat, or go for a walk, just can't bring herself to. She would thus act against her better judgment. On this picture, it is clear that the anaesthetic agent does *not* act from practical reason. As such, we must conclude that the anaesthetic agent does not exercise self-control.

Admittedly, it is unclear whether the anaesthetic agent fails to abide by her *own* principle, or whether she fails to do what is best in reference to Aristotle's objective standard. Aristotle mentions *anaesthesia* twice in the NE. In book VII, as we have seen, he presents it as the counterpart of *akrasia*. But in book II, he presents it as the counterpart of *akolasia*, in which, recall, the agent mistakenly thinks one ought to always pursue pleasure. This suggests that the anaesthetic agent, conversely, mistakenly judges that pleasure ought not to be pursued at all. This would mean that the anaesthetic agent is defective in her response to pleasures not by her own judgment, but by Aristotle's objectivist judgment about the right amount of pleasure required for the good life. On this picture, the anaesthetic agent *does* exercise self-control – just in a way which Aristotle deems objectively excessive. On this reading, however, *anaesthesia* is a regulatory style which, just like self-indulgence, is grounded in the moral objectivism that I am bracketing. The category of *anaesthesia*, therefore, cannot help us conceptualise self-oppression on either interpretation.

But most importantly, on either interpretation, the phenomenon this category attempts to capture seems different from that of self-oppression. For a deeply *insensitive* agent would not regulate herself with the urgent kind of pressure which characterises self-oppression. The anaesthetic agent, as Aristotle describes her, does not want *enough* – whilst the self-oppressive agent, if anything, wants *too much*. She is hyper-motivated, rather than under-motivated. If my sketch of the anaesthetic agent as depressive and unbothered is correct, she seems far removed from the self-oppressive agent.

### D.3 Hyperkrasia: Practical Reason Becoming Authoritarian

So I maintain that Aristotle's taxonomy does not include a category for self-oppression. Using the conceptual building blocks offered in the NE, however, we can construct an additional regulatory style, designed to capture the possibility of self-oppression. If we recall our initial sketch of the phenomenon, we remember that self-oppression is marked by a distinct manner of self-regulation: namely a very *controlled* one. Yet, this control is exercised by the agent herself, and not by another party. As such, I propose, it makes sense to assume that the faculty of *practical reason* plays a significant role in self-oppression, since this is, on the picture I have presented, the faculty of self-control. But, crucially, there was something particular about *how* the agent controls her actions: the way agency is controlled is of an *oppressive* kind. For this reason, I hypothesise that in self-oppression, practical reason becomes oppressive.

Practical reason, on this scenario, would cease to be merely authoritative, and become *authoritarian*. In this context, it is worth emphasising how practical reason, as Aristotle sketches it, is already *authoritative*. Aristotle argues that it must *discipline and subdue* our appetites, which becomes clear at several points in the NE. At the end of book I, he explains how the faculty of desire 'does in a way participate in reason, in the sense that it is *submissive and obedient* to it' (NE 1102b: 31-32). At the end of book III, he reiterates this point more strongly: 'appetites', he contends, must be

rendered *docile* and *submissive* to authority [...]. These appetites [...] must in no way [be] opposed to the *dictates* of principle – this is what we mean by 'docile' and 'restrained' – and just as the child ought to live in accordance with the directions of his tutor, so the desiderative element in us ought to be *controlled* by rational principle. (NE 1119b: 7-15, emphases mine)

He also writes that the rational part 'is thought to rule and lead us by nature' (NE 1177a: 13-16, trans. Rackham), and repeatedly describes this part as 'the most dominant part' in us (NE 1168b: 34, trans. Rackham). When we exercise self-control, we indeed feel the *weight* of our self-prescribed rules, exerting a certain pressure. My assumption, then, is that this quality of practical reason is liable to excess: its authority runs the danger, that is, of becoming authoritarian. The very self-relation that makes self-control possible can turn oppressive. And this, I submit, is what happens in self-oppression.

How might we imagine this? My proposal is that, in self-oppression, the agent places extreme value upon a certain end, or set of ends. That is, she has a set of extremely powerful wishes. As a result, the agent feels an extreme *pressure* to achieve these ends whenever she can: if there are any means available, she will feel like she *must* take them. Normally, as we have seen, a wish is a *general* preference. It functions as the general rule that something is worth pursuing. Part of the function of practical reason, as we saw, is to assess not only how it can be applied, but also when it should be: practical reason assesses, that is, when a general wish is effectively worth pursuing in practice. In hyperkrasia, however, the wishes are so powerful that practical reason will almost always judge them worth applying: the agent will pursue this wish, or set of wishes, almost whenever she can.

This means she will tend to pursue these ends at the cost of other ends. When several different rules may be applied at  $t_x$ , and one of them is a rule she is fixated on, she will feel pressured to pursue this one over others. What is more, given her fixation on these ends, the self-oppressive agent may find ever more

intricate means to achieve them. She may find ways to pursue these wishes which, to another agent, might not even occur. Thus, in self-oppression, the agent not only feels extremely pressured to pursue specific wishes whenever she finds a way, she will also tend to find many ways. She will find more situations, in other words, in which these general rules *can* be applied.

On this depiction, self-oppression would feature self-control as we defined it: for the agent successfully follows the regulations of her practical reason. She feels *pressured* to pursue them, but this pressure is fuelled by her own valuation of them. When she prioritises a certain end above others, it is because she values it more. It is on this basis that we can distinguish self-oppression from compulsion on the popular understanding: for compulsion, recall, typically involves a pressure which is experienced as *alien*, induced by a factor the agent dissociates from. In self-oppression, however, the pressure is in line with the agent's own aims and projects.

Crucially, however, I hypothesised that the pressure featuring in self-oppression was *oppressive*, meaning it compromises the agent's choice. When the agent sees a way to pursue a certain kind of wish at  $t_x$ , practical reason exerts such a pressure on the agent to do so that she no longer feels this is her choice. We saw that practical reason judges what is the best thing to do in a given situation, yielding what I called an "I should". In self-oppression, I submit, this "I should" is an "I *must*", such that the agent feels like she has no choice. The mental resolve to act *this* way is not a choice, but something that *has* to be done. Her self-control thus compromises her choices.

On this basis, we can construct self-oppression as a mirror case of *akrasia*. In *akrasia*, the agent's actions aren't chosen, because she is overtaken by her

appetitive faculty. Her agency is compromised by the sway of her desires. In self-oppression, in contrast, the agent's actions aren't chosen because she is overtaken by her *practical reason*. The idea, then, would be that choice is compromised as it is in *akrasia*, but due to the sway of a different part of the agent: in *akrasia*, it is the appetitive part which disrupts agency and compromises choice; in self-oppression, it would be practical reason that does so. The agent does not fail to follow her regulations, but they demand such rigorous accordance that she feels pressured into doing so. Instead of a loss of self-control, there is *too much* of it. Accordingly, I propose to term this new regulatory style *hyperkrasia* – conjoining the Greek *krateia* and the prefix *hyper*, which indicates an excess. Hyperkrasia, then, would be a *deliberative* form of agency, since it is controlled by reason, but hyperkratic actions would not be *chosen*.

As such, I hypothesise that

*self-oppression, or hyperkrasia, is a real form of human agency, in which practical reason becomes authoritarian, exercising a form of self-control which compromises choice.*

Further, I hypothesised that self-oppression also tends to compromise choice in a secondary way: because it tends to take over her life. This can also be explained on this characterisation. Insofar as the agent feels that she *must*  $\varphi$  because it offers a means towards an end she is fixated on, not only is her choice to  $\varphi$  compromised: she also cannot really choose any alternative routes of action. Thus, whenever she pursues the ends she is fixated on, a whole variety of other wishes are pushed to the background. Moreover, if the self-oppressive agent finds every more intricate ways to pursue her most powerful wishes, this will happen in more and more situations. As a result, these wishes can take over most



of her life.

In light of this characterisation, we can refer back to the potential examples of self-oppression mentioned in the introduction. Beth, Shani, and Jaimi all act in accordance with their own values and projects. Yet, the manner in which they do so involves a high degree of pressure: pressure, moreover, which seems to tamper with their sense of choice. They feel they can only but pursue a certain set of ends. What is more, their lives seem *taken over* by this: most situations are experienced to offer opportunities to further their ends. They feel like they must take these up, at the cost of other opportunities they may encounter. Perhaps these agents will also, in addition, perceive *more* opportunities to further these ends: they might find more, often far-fetched and intricate, ways to achieve their aim than would a non-hyperkratic agent. Shani may pursue further weight loss by getting up at 4.30 in the morning to exercise, or she may learn sophisticated ways to hide her food in her napkin during dinner to avoid consuming it. And Beth sees ever more elaborate ways of minimising her ecological impact, to the extent that it dominates most of her life: her habit of boiling cabbage during the night to only use electricity at night rate, in fact, is an example of how she finds *ever more* ways to further her ends.

Before concluding this section, it must be noted that at least one author has picked up on the possibility of hyperkrasia. George Ainslie, in his *Breakdown of Will* (2001), explicitly wonders whether the capacities of practical reason could become so powerful that they end up compromising choice. He writes that, to exercise self-control,

we need to think in terms of our *general preferences*, not our particular ones. This is something Aristotle already knew: he constructs agency with reference

to general and particular premises, and explains that *akrasia* is in fact a “victory” of a particular preference over a general preference. Personal rules are ‘general premises’. It is difficult, as a human being, to learn to think in those terms, but we do have the capacity to. But what if this capacity actually becomes so powerful that we cannot *but* think in general terms – do we not lose freedom of choice in any particular situation? (Ainslie, 2001:87)

Ainslie, however, just mentions this idea in passing – he does not unpack it much further. I will try to do so in the rest of this thesis.

#### *D.4 Problems with Hyperkrasia*

The concept of hyperkrasia thus seems to broadly capture the phenomenon of self-oppression. Moreover, it allows us to address part of our first problem: *who is oppressing whom in self-oppression?* For we can now, thanks to Aristotle’s mereology of the agent, identify practical reason as the specific part of the agent that is oppressive (that is, as the part of the self operating in the nominative mode).

There is, however, a significant issue with the concept of hyperkrasia. Within Aristotle’s framework, it is a *conceptual impossibility*. I have suggested that, in hyperkrasia, choice would be compromised due to the sway of practical reason. Underpinning the concept of hyperkrasia, therefore, is the assumption that practical reason can, as much as impulses and undue influences, *undermine* choice. But this assumption is explicitly at odds with Aristotle’s understanding of choice. Actions, for Aristotle, are chosen *if and only if* they are controlled by practical reason: as soon as an agent manages to act in accordance with practical reason – that is, as soon as she exercises self-control – she is translating her

*choice* into action. Any action which is controlled by practical reason is, therefore, necessarily chosen on his view. Thus, as the attentive reader may have already figured, to exercise self-control as I understand it simply *is*, on Aristotle's framework, to translate one's choice into action. All *deliberative* action is, therefore, by default the result of choice. Though there can be choice without self-control (as happens in weak *akrasia*), for Aristotle there cannot be self-control without choice. Consequently, it is impossible for Aristotle that practical reason would both control action *and* compromise choice.

This is not to say that Aristotle would not consider hyperkrasia to be a case of agency gone wrong. One may think, in this context, of an Aristotelean concept which hitherto has not been mentioned: the idea of the mean (*meson*), commonly referred to as "the golden mean". This notion plays a central role in Aristotle's ethics. He argues in the NE that we must, as a rule of thumb, strive for the right balance between vices of excess and vices of deficiency: he writes that 'every knowledgeable person avoids excess and deficiency, but looks for the mean and chooses it' (NE 1106b: 5-6) and that 'virtue aims to hit the mean' (NE 1106b: 16). We shouldn't eat too much, nor too little; we should be courageous, but not cowardly or brazen; and so on. In light of this, one might suggest to understand *hyperkrasia* as a vice of excess: just as agents should chase the right amount of pleasure, they should perhaps also exercise the right amount of self-control. But this is not a viable route of argument, and this for two reasons. (1) First, this move would rely on Aristotle's moral objectivism: we can only classify hyperkrasia as a vice of excess in reference to an objective measure of where the golden mean lies. Since the hyperkratic agent does follow her own regulations, her actions are *not* excessive by her own judgment. (2) But, second, even within

the Aristotelean framework, excess and deficiency do not per se compromise choice. The self-indulgent agent, recall, *chooses* to indulge in excessive pleasures. The mere fact that someone doesn't hit the mean – whether this mean is an objective given or not – does not entail, for Aristotle, that she doesn't make a choice. Classifying hyperkrasia as a vice of excess thus still wouldn't allow us to explain how it compromises choice.

But there may be an obvious reason why hyperkrasia may compromise choice. Because the agent is so pressured to pursue a certain set of ends, it may happen that she finds herself unable to pursue any other valued ends *even* when she wants to. We saw that the self-oppressive agent both feels an enormous pressure to aim for certain ends where possible, and tends to find ever more possibilities to do so. As a result, it may happen that practical reason ends up sabotaging its own workings. We saw how practical deliberation is responsible not only for finding out *how* a certain wish can be achieved at  $t_x$ , but also for assessing whether it *should* be achieved at  $t_x$ , given how this is possible there and then. We can see how hyperkrasia may lead an agent to aim for certain ends even at times when, all things considered, she *herself* judges it better not to. When this happens, practical reason sabotages its very own workings: for it fails to implement, at  $t_x$ , the route of action which it judges to be best at  $t_x$ . Jaimi may, at certain times, actually think it better to prioritise her own health over her children: she also has a wish to prosper personally. But she finds herself incapable of compromising on the care for her offspring when these situations arise. As such, she becomes unable to reach her other goals and bring into practice her other values.

In such situations, the agent arguably loses her self-control. For, given the circumstances, her judgment is that she should *not* pursue her most valued

end there and then. Yet she finds herself unable to act accordingly, and pursues it anyway. It is clear, then, that the agent here does not act from choice, and indeed in opposition to it. Her agency, in fact, closely resembles that of the akratic agent. The key difference is that she is not swayed by an appetite for pleasure, but by her own valuation of a certain end: she fails to yield to the *overall* judgment made by her practical reason due to its excessive valuation of *this one* end. We thus really have a case of practical reason sabotaging *itself*.

In such cases, hyperkrasia does compromise choice as Aristotle understands the notion. But, on my characterisation, this self-sabotage of practical reason is merely a common effect of hyperkrasia, and not one of its core features. An agent may be self-oppressive even when she does not lose self-control in this way. Hyperkrasia compromises choice because of the pressure it inflicts upon the agent, and not because – and if and when – she wants to go against it. On such a view, practical reason would only oppress in moments where the agent *would* choose to act differently than she does. But those moments, as I see it, merely *reveal* the agent's underlying hyperkratic disposition, which is present also in other moments. Practical reason can exercise a pressure which can properly be called *oppressive* even if the agent does not wish to go against this pressure in a specific instance. The extent to which this pressure is oppressive just becomes most *visible* in moments where she does wish to go against it, but this does not mean it is only *then* oppressive. In other words, in hyperkrasia, practical reason compromises choice also when it does not self-sabotage.

Thus, so far, we cannot explain that or how choice is compromised in hyperkrasia within the Aristotelean framework. This means that, at this point, the category of hyperkrasia does not and cannot solve our second problem: the

question how exactly choice is compromised in self-oppression. Relatedly, and consequently, Aristotle's theory also cannot *fully* resolve our first problem: for, on his mereology of the agent, it is unclear which part could be *oppressed* by practical reason. An obvious suggestion might be that practical reason oppresses the appetitive part – was it, in fact, not in its nature to do so? But the appetitive faculty, as Aristotle sketches it, is a mere animalistic faculty of impulses and urges. As such, it is not the kind of thing which can be said to be meaningfully *oppressed*. It can be subjected, subdued, controlled and overcome – but *oppression* denotes the subjugation of something which has a more meaningful form of agency, something which is capable of making choices. My assumption, indeed, is that pressure is *oppressive* when it compromises choice. Thus, if we cannot explain how choice is compromised in hyperkrasia, we also cannot explain which part of the agent is oppressed. Our first issue, therefore, also remains partially unresolved.

This problem is further reflected in Aristotle's wholemeal identification of (practical) reason with the *self*. On several occasions in the NE, Aristotle indicates that reason, or the rational part of the individual, should be considered her true self. In book X, for example, he writes that reason 'is the true self [*einai ekastos*] of the individual' (NE: 1178a: 2), and in book IX, he writes that 'the intellectual part [...] appears to be a [person]'s real self [*ekastos einai*]' (NE 1166a: 19, trans. Rackham), and that the intellect is the [person] [her]self' (NE 1168b: 34-35 – 1169a: 1). Thus, Aristotle refers explicitly to reason as most truly representing the agent:

as in the state it is the dominant part that is deemed especially to be that whole, so it is with [hu]man[s]. [...] Also it is our reasoned acts that are felt to be in the

fullest sense *our own* acts, *voluntary* acts. It is therefore clear that a [person] is or is chiefly the dominant part [i.e. reason] of [her]self. (NE 1169a: 4-5, trans. Rackham)

Cooper (1986), discussing these passages, confirms that Aristotle

is thinking of a person as identical with that in [her] which properly ought to decide what [s]he is to do and which controls and guides [her] inclinations and desires in their job of moving [her] limbs and generating actions—in short, with [her] practical reason. (Cooper, 1986: 172)

Since practical reason holds, as starting points for guiding action, our values and projects, this of course makes sense. Equally, when identifying practical reason as our faculty of self-control, I agree that this part of the agent indeed reflects her self. I would, however, disagree with Aristotle's *wholemeal* identification of practical reason with the self. For, on this picture, there seems to exist no 'self' beyond practical reason, which could be meaningfully oppressed by it. To make sense of self-oppression, we have to posit a separate faculty of choice, which could be meaningfully oppressed by practical reason.

It thus seems that we need a different account of choice. When Aristotle speaks of choice, he is describing another *kind* of thing: the kind of rational choice which *prohairesis* refers to is not the kind of choice which seems compromised in cases of self-oppression. If we are to explain how hyperkrasia compromises choice, we will need an alternative account of choice. Furthermore, this alternative account would also require an alteration of, or an addition to, our mereology of the agent. For we would have to link our account of choice to a faculty separate from practical reason: only this way will we be able to explain

how choice can be compromised *by* practical reason, and point to the part of the agent which is *oppressed*.

## E. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, we cannot coherently construe a category for self-oppression within Aristotle's theory of action. But this outcome, though seemingly negative, is in fact hugely useful. First of all, Aristotle allowed us to refine our initial hypothesis: we will hold on to the idea that in self-oppression, practical reason becomes authoritarian. The notion of hyperkrasia thus remains useful. Secondly, we know what we need to do next: our task is to find an approach to choice which ties it less strictly to practical reason and self-control. Of course, this does not mean these notions aren't strongly connected: this connection is after all deeply intuitive. We are not after a conceptualisation of choice that entirely severs it from practical reason. Ideally, we want to conceive of choice in a way that *connects* it with self-control, but without making this connection overly strong. This would allow us to distinguish between self-control which is simply *authoritative* and self-control which has become *authoritarian*. It is only the latter that seems to come in the way of choice. In the next chapter, this set of requirements will lead me to the works of St Augustine.



## II. St Augustine

### A. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I turn to the works of St Augustine for new source materials to further develop our conception of hyperkrasia. Again, this turn may seem surprising. But Augustine, as I will show, offers us a crucial piece of the puzzle that is self-oppression: namely the notion of the *will*, understood as a faculty of choice separate from practical reason. This notion is of interest to us, I will argue, since it loosens the connection between practical reason and choice. Once we include a notion of the will into our picture of the agent, the idea of hyperkrasia is no longer incoherent: if the will, rather than practical reason, is our faculty of choice, we can posit that it is the will which is oppressed by practical reason. We can thus answer our first hard question in full: who oppresses whom in self-oppression?

What is more, Augustine's conception of the will can also help us address our second hard question: it helps us think about *how* choice would be compromised in hyperkrasia. As we will see, the account of choice which Augustine links to the will is fairly complicated, but in a way that seems useful for our purposes. More precisely, he depicts the human will as *corrupted*, meaning that it is *dispositioned* to choose a certain way, and hardly (if at all) able to choose otherwise. I will argue that, insofar as any will is so dispositioned, the choices it makes are compromised; yet, since it is still making a choice, agency is not overridden. Augustine's notion of a corrupted will thus offers us the sort of account of choice needed to make sense of self-oppression: for it offers a way to understand how

choice can be compromised without agency being overridden (as it would be, for example, when a domineering husband forbids his wife to leave the house). This is promising because, in self-oppression, it is the agent herself who – through the exercise of her own agency – compromises her own choices: so if we are to explain how it works, we need an account of how choice can be compromised without agency being bypassed or overridden. I will hypothesise that, in self-oppression, we can understand the will to be corrupted by practical reason, which compromises the agent's own choices without preventing choices from being made. As such, Augustine will aid our project in two ways: invoking the notion of the will renders it conceptually possible that practical reason compromises choice, and his notion of the corrupted will helps us think about *how* this may happen.

It will turn out, however, that Augustine can only help us so much. Firstly, as I will show, he still ties his notion of the will, and his related notion of choice, very tightly to reason. As a result, the idea of hyperkrasia remains inconceivable on his framework: it seems that, for Augustine, *practical reason* could never corrupt our will and compromise our choices. Secondly, Augustine overall offers little explanation as to *how* our will could be corrupted by a factor like practical reason. His claim is that our will is corrupted through the power of divine punishment, which does not further help explain the possibility of hyperkrasia. For this reason, the next chapter will turn to yet another set of source materials.

## **B. INTRODUCING THE NOTION OF THE WILL**

It is fairly widely – though not univocally – accepted that Aristotle did not have

a notion of the will.<sup>1</sup> The will is usually understood as a faculty which has the power to choose between different courses of action: shall I keep the secret or spill it? Shall I eat the cake or not? On Aristotle's picture, an agent does not choose between actions in this way. How she acts is determined, as we saw, by whichever desire – rational or irrational – happens to have the strongest pull, and there is no decisive mental moment at which the agent *wills* the one or the other route of action. This point is clearly summarised by Michael Frede (2011). On Aristotle's picture, he explains, '[o]ne acts either on a rational desire, a willing, or on a nonrational desire, an appetite. In the case of conflict, there is not a further instance which would adjudicate or resolve the matter' (Frede, 2011: 24). There is no *additional* mental moment of choice between the conflicting desires. The outcome is determined not by a moment of weak or strong will, but by the respective force of the competing desires. For this reason, Aristotle saw no need to invoke an additional faculty with the power to determine action, as he believed that the sheer force of reason and the sheer force of desire both suffice to explain all our actions.

Of course, as we have seen, Aristotle *does* assume that we make choices, and so assumes a faculty of choice – practical reason. But the kind of choice made by practical reason, for Aristotle, only concerns the means by which we can achieve what we already judge best. On Aristotle's account, Frede states, 'choice does play an important role. But choices are not explained in terms of a will but in terms of [...] the exercise of reason's cognitive abilities to determine how in this situation the good might best be attained' (Frede, 2011: 27). Thus, *if and*

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<sup>1</sup> See, *inter alia*, Sorabji (2004) and Frede (2011). Of course, this is not univocally agreed upon. Irwin (1992), for example, argues that it was Aristotle who "discovered" the will.

when the agent acts rationally, the specific ways in which she does so are chosen. But if she fails to act rationally, this is not by choice, and does not involve any choice. For Aristotle, the capacity for choice is associated with reason only, and choices are either rational or not made at all. As Frede explains, for Aristotle,

[o]ne can choose to follow reason. But if one fails to follow reason and acts on a nonrational desire, *it is not because one chooses not to follow reason and, rather, chooses to do something else*. So the choice one makes in Aristotle is not, at least necessarily, a choice between doing X and not doing X, let alone a choice between doing X and doing Y. It is a matter of choosing to do X or failing to choose to do X, such that X does not get done. (Frede, 2011: 28-29)

Of course, when he describes the self-indulgent agent, Aristotle does assume her choice is irrational: but it is, as we saw, only objectively so, and the agent *herself* mistakenly thinks she ought to choose this way. In this sense, the self-indulgent agent does not make an irrational choice *proper*, since she does not act against her *own* better judgment. Thus, however odd it may sound to modern ears, on Aristotle's view choice does not require multiple options.

Arguably, Aristotle's picture of agency does not manage to explain the whole array of human action. For example, it seems that his theory leaves no space for the possibility of *weakness of the will*.<sup>2</sup> Although *akrasia* is often translated as such, it seems to me that weakness of the will refers to another kind of phenomenon: namely to a form of agency in which an agent *chooses* to do the wrong thing, rather than fails to do the right thing. It refers, in other words, to

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<sup>2</sup> One author who agrees that Aristotle indeed does not yet speak of weakness of the will is Sorabji (2004). Another author who agrees *akrasia* and weakness of the will should be treated as distinct phenomena, but on different grounds than me, is Holton (1999).

the possibility of *irrational choice*. The akratic agent, as should now be clear, does not *choose* to act as she does. She is a mere vessel for her irrational appetites. But some may feel – myself included – that we can *also* do the wrong thing by choice, and willingly disregard our better judgments.

Furthermore, in the last chapter, we saw how Aristotle's theory of agency also failed to capture the possibility of self-oppression. Aristotle's notion of choice commits him to the claim that *if* an agent exercises self-control by translating her better judgment into action, this action is *de facto* her choice. As such, he cannot conceive the possibility that choice could be meaningfully compromised by an oppressive exercise of practical reason. As such, it seems that on Aristotle's picture, two forms of agency remain unaccounted for. This is due, in both cases, to the tight connection he draws between practical reason and choice. On his picture, when actions do *not* follow better judgments, they are not properly *choices* at all, which excludes the possibility of weakness of the will. Conversely, when actions *are* motivated by better judgments, they are automatically seen as full-blown choices, which excludes the possibility of self-oppression.

The notion of a *will*, then, seems to resolve the first issue – the apparent possibility of irrational choice. Introducing the notion of the will as a faculty of choice which is independent from reason (as well as desire) yields a radically different account of choice. If we choose with our will and not just with reason, we can choose not only amongst different *means* to the rational end of doing what is best, but also amongst other, irrational ends. When we have conflicting rational and irrational desires, the outcome is not settled by whichever desire is

strongest: the outcome is settled by our will, which chooses amongst the different options. We could refer to this kind of choice as elective choice.

It is clear, then, that the idea of elective choice helps account for the apparent possibility that humans can make bad choices – it accounts, indeed, for the possibility of a *weak will*. I want to examine, however, whether this notion of the will, and its accompanying account of choice, can also address our problem: the apparent possibility of self-oppression. To do so, I will rely on the views of Augustine, who – at least according to a popular narrative – was among the first to develop such a notion.<sup>3</sup> His most extensive discussion of the will is found in *On the Free Choice of the Will* (Latin: *De Libero Arbitrio*, henceforth: DLA). This work, which he wrote between 387 and 395, consists in three books and is written as a dialogue between Augustine and his friend Evodius. In this chapter, I will confine my discussion of Augustine’s views on the will and choice to this work.

### C. AUGUSTINE’S CONCEPTION OF THE WILL

In a sense, Augustine is concerned with the very problem we just discussed: he wants to explain the possibility of irrational choice. His concerns, however, are of a theological nature. In the DLA, his investigations into the structures of human agency are part of a theodicy: Augustine is concerned with explaining the possibility of evil in the face of his belief in a good and almighty God. How can it

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<sup>3</sup> This narrative was famously defended by Albrecht Dihle in his Sather Lectures (published in 1982), but is not without its critics. It was challenged, for example, by Frede (2011) in *his* Sather Lectures: Frede argues that Augustine’s notion of the will is essentially adopted from the Stoics (see Frede, 2011: 153 et seq.). Meanwhile, Irwin (1992) maintains that it was Aristotle, and not Augustine, who discovered the will.

be that people do *evil* if God created them, and the whole universe in which they exist? Surely, so Augustine reasons, we cannot hold God responsible for evil. So how can it be that the people created by him do bad things? In his elaborate answer to this question, Augustine outlines his own mereology of the agent, which includes the faculty of the will, and so brings with it a distinctive account of choice. I will discuss this mereology, and the accompanying account of choice, in what follows. In doing so, I will – where possible – bracket the theological underpinnings of Augustine’s views, and focus only on its structural features.

In many respects, Augustine’s mereology rings very Aristotelean. For example, he shares Aristotle’s starting point that nonhuman ‘animals lack reason’ (DLA 1716.53) and takes reason to be a central defining feature of human agents. Augustine places humans above other animals in light of this: he asserts that ‘reason [*ratio*] or understanding [*intelligentia*]' is that ‘in virtue of which a human being is superior’ (DLA 1.7.16.55). This human feature, Augustine writes, resides in the soul (*animus*), and is referred to either as reason (*ratio*), as mind (*mens*), or as spirit (*spiritus*). Though, to be precise, reason does not seem to be exactly the same as the mind, but rather a faculty of the latter: Augustine specifies that ‘even if reason [*ratio*] and mind [*mens*] are not the same, surely only mind can make use of reason’ (DLA 1.19.68). Thus, much like in Aristotle, the human soul has a rational part, here referred to as the mind, which ‘has’ reason.

Equally, on Augustine’s picture, human agency differs from mere animal action in virtue of this faculty of reason. According to Augustine, nonhuman animals merely follow their impulses: ‘every action in an animal’s life is pursuing physical pleasures [*voluptates corporis*] and avoiding discomforts’ (DLA 1.8.18.62). Human souls also have irrational impulses, to which Augustine refers,

interchangeably, as lust (*libido*) or desire (*cupiditas*).<sup>4</sup> But next to irrational impulses, our souls also have a mind, our faculty of reason, which allows us to reign these in: Augustine asserts that ‘the mind must be more *powerful* than desire for the very reason that it rightly and justly dominates desire’ (DLA 1.10.20.71) and that lust can be ‘subjugated to the mind’s full governance’ (DLA 1.9.19.69). Thus, in contrast to other animals, human beings can manage their impulses through their reason: Augustine claims that ‘a human being should be called “in order” when these selfsame impulses of the soul [*irracionales animi motus*] are dominated by reason’ (DLA 1.8.18.63).

Clearly, for Augustine, being guided by reason means doing the *right* thing. It is evident that the faculty of reason is capable of distinguishing bad from good, and can dominate lower desires in light of what is best. Granted, whether or not an action is irrational for Augustine does not just depend on the agent’s own better judgment. His theory of agency is, again, embedded in morally objectivist assumptions: he speaks of ‘the law referred to as “supreme reason” [*summa ratio*]’, which ‘should always be obeyed’ (DLA 1.6.15.48) and which ‘is the law according to which it is just for all things to be completely in order’ (DLA 1.6.15.51). Accordingly, for Augustine, a human agent lives the *right* life when she follows this eternal law through employing her faculty of reason: ‘when reason (or mind or spirit) governs irrational mental impulses, a human being is dominated by the very thing whose dominance is prescribed by the law we have

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<sup>4</sup> These are synonymous: Augustine writes in Book I ‘that lust [*libido*] is also called “desire” [*cupiditas*]’ (DLA 1.4.9.22). It is not made explicit by Augustine whether nonhuman animals also experience lust and desire, or merely irrational impulses which *in human beings* amount to lust and desire.



found to be eternal' (DLA 1.8.18.65).

It is thus clear that for Augustine, even more explicitly than for Aristotle, it is objectively given which actions and decisions are good and which aren't. But, here as well, I will bracket the moral objectivism in which this theory is embedded. This is possible because Augustine, like Aristotle, does consider our better judgments to be first and foremost *individual* judgments. He assumes, indeed, that agents can be mistaken in their judgments: he differentiates between those who sin in ignorance – those who 'do not see how they should be' – and those who try to do right, but fail to – those who 'see it but [...] are not able to be such as they see that they should be' (DLA 3.18.51.174, see also DLA 3.18.52.177). Since he assumes that one can do wrong in ignorance, it is clear that actions are judged to be *wrong* on his view in light of the objective rational order of the universe, and not simply because the agent judges them to be. But, given *that* he distinguishes between agents who are ignorant of what is good, and those who know but fail to act on this knowledge, Augustine also assumes that reason is an individual faculty, separately at work in individual agents. It is only through our individual minds that we have *access* to the law of supreme reason. I thus consider, again, the faculty of reason first and foremost as a part of the individual agent, capable of making individual better judgments – regardless of whether these judgments are considered objectively errant or just.

Thus, on Augustine's picture also, our reason functions as a faculty of better judgment. For Augustine, however, such a faculty of reason does not guarantee that one acts in line with it. The mere fact that someone possesses, and uses, a mind does not mean that their mind is effectively in charge: 'most people are fools', he asserts, and 'the fool is someone in whom the mind does not have

supreme power' (DLA 1.9.19.66-67). These people, of course, do have a mind, but 'it does not govern' (DLA 1.9.19.70). Thus, a 'mind may be present in a human being without being dominant' (DLA 1.9.19.70). People regularly do irrational things – this is precisely the problem his theodicy intends to explain. Of course, Augustine here has in mind both situations in which agents sin in ignorance, and those in which they sin despite knowing better. Since I am bracketing Augustine's moral objectivism, my discussion of irrational action on his account only considers instances of irrational action in which an agent acts against *her own* best judgment, and not those in which she ignorantly fails to abide by an objective moral standard.

Thus far, Augustine's theory of agency seems fairly similar to Aristotle's. Augustine's picture diverges, however, when he explains *how* irrational action is possible. For Augustine, this situation cannot be explained by appealing to the sheer force of irrational desire. It cannot be explained, that is, by assuming that the agent has a desire which is stronger than the pull of better judgment. On Augustine's picture, irrational desires have no such power. The reason for this is that, according to Augustine, that which is lower cannot dominate that which is higher. Since irrational desire is lower than reason, the former cannot possibly subjugate the latter: we should not think, Augustine writes, 'that lust is more powerful than the mind itself', for this would be a case of '[t]he weaker commanding the stronger' (DLA 1.10.20.71). When someone is dominated by desire, therefore, this cannot be down to desire being the stronger force.

But, Augustine reasons, neither can it be that *reason* empowers an irrational desire by endorsing it. For reason, being superior and just, would never enslave the mind to an irrational desire (even though, being superior, it has the

power to): ‘whatever the nature may be that is appropriately superior to a mind powerful in virtue,’ he writes, ‘it cannot be unjust. Thus, even this nature, despite having the power, will not enslave a mind to lust’ (DLA 1.11.21.75). It makes no sense, for Augustine, to assume that we could do something irrational through the power of reason.

Thus, desire cannot, and reason would never, authorise irrational action. As such, Augustine concludes, this phenomenon can only be explained by invoking the notion of the *will* (*voluntas*):

since anything equal or superior to a governing mind possessed of virtue does not make it the servant of lust, [...] and since in addition anything inferior to it could not do this, [...] we are left with this conclusion: Nothing makes the mind a devotee of desire but its own will [*voluntas*]’ (DLA 1.11.21.76)

This way, Augustine adds a significant element to Aristotle’s moral psychology: he introduces the notion of the will, which is a faculty separate from both reason and desire.

On Augustine’s picture, the will is a faculty of choice: he links his notion of the will with the possibility of *free choice* [*liberum arbitrium*]. More precisely, the will has the power to *choose* between reason and desire, by electing which one to endorse in action. Augustine explains that the mind is sensitive both to the judgments of reason and to desire: ‘the mind is affected by impressions derived from higher things and derived from lower things’ (DLA 3.25.74.255). Crucially, it has the power to *choose* which impression to authorise: the mind, Augustine writes, ‘accepts what it wants from each source’ (DLA 3.25.74.255). And this is possible by virtue of the will: ‘what each person *elects* to pursue and embrace is located in the will’ (DLA 1.16.34.114). Thus, when an agent acts, a better

judgment in itself, nor an irrational desire in itself, suffices to explain this action for Augustine. On his picture, the agent needs to *assent* to either form of motivation through her will before it can actually result in action.

As such, Augustine's account of choice differs radically from Aristotle's. Choice, for Augustine, is a mental resolve to act a certain way, independent from one's better judgment. The sort of choice that he associates with the will seems *elective* rather than *intellectualistic* (though, as we will see shortly, the matter is more complicated than that). We saw that for Aristotle, the faculty of choice was practical reason: as a result, one could not make *irrational* choices on this view. Augustine, in contrast, locates the moment of choice not in the faculty of the intellect, but in the separate faculty of the *will*. This marks a significant difference with the Aristotelean picture, and Ancient Greek intellectualism more broadly. As a result, Augustine's account of choice seems more *elective* (or *voluntaristic*): both rational *and* irrational courses of action may be chosen.

This also means there can be no significant gaps, on Augustine's view, between the mental moment of choice and chosen action. On Aristotle's picture, an agent could choose to act a certain way but fail to translate it into action. On Augustine's picture, if an agent chooses to do something, *this is* how she will act. Or, how an agent acts reveals what she has chosen to do. (The only way in which an agent could choose to act a certain way, yet fail to also *do* it, is if there are external interferences: I resolve to drive to the supermarket but a snow storm has lead the roads to be closed off. But an agent cannot due to herself fail to act upon her own choice: her action *tells us* which choice she has made.)

This picture of human agency and choice, then, allows Augustine to address the problem of evil which worried him. To the question as to *why* we do

evil, Augustine answers that ‘we do it out of free choice of the will [*ex libero voluntatis arbitrio*]’ (DLA 1.16.35.117). It is a *bad will* which is the origin of evil actions: ‘the mind becomes a slave to lust only through its own will: it cannot be forced to this ugliness by what is higher or by what is equal, since it is unjust; nor by what is lower, since it is unable’ (DLA 3.1.2.8). By placing the locus of agency here, he places the origin of evil actions within human agents, and not within God: ‘Surely I find nothing I might call mine if the will – by which I am willing or unwilling – is not mine! Accordingly, if I do anything evil through it, to whom should it be attributed but me?’ (DLA 3.1.3.12). Since my evil actions are the result of my own choice, I am ultimately responsible for them.<sup>5</sup> As such, the notion of the will helps address Augustine’s principal worry.

In more general terms, this means Augustine’s notion of the will can explain the possibility of irrational choices. For Augustine, *every instance* of irrational action implies irrational choice. When I do bad things, this is never because of a ‘surrender’ to my desires: it is because my *will* has allowed it. There is thus no thing as *akrasia* for Augustine. Alternatively, however, we could simply add the possibility of weak-willed action to our taxonomy of regulatory styles, alongside *akrasia*. If an agent follows her desires against reason, this can either be because she succumbed to an overwhelming desire, *or* because she willingly assented to her desire.

But can this notion of the will, and its related notion of elective choice,

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<sup>5</sup> Strangely, this seems to hold both for evil actions done in ignorance and those done despite a better judgment. Though I am not considering those done out of ignorance in this thesis, it is remarkable that Augustine thought humans who *mistakenly* do the wrong thing are fully and ultimately responsible for this.

also help solve *our* problem? On Aristotle's picture, practical reason could not possibly compromise choice, since it was itself the faculty of choice. But if we locate the faculty of choice in the will, we *can* examine the possibility that practical reason could compromise choice. We can imagine, more precisely, that practical reason reigns with such tyrannical power that it compromises the power of choice of the will. On this picture, practical reason would hamper the agent's capacity to *choose* amongst different ends, by compelling her to each time, where possible, to pursue the very same ends. Accordingly, I hypothesise that

*hyperkrasia is a real form of agency, in which practical reason becomes authoritarian, exercising a form of self-control which compromises choice by oppressing the will.*

On this formulation, our hypothesis now addresses our first major problem: the question of *who oppresses whom* in self-oppression. If we assume that practical reason oppresses the will, we can locate both the 'oppressor' (the nominative element of self-oppression) and the 'oppressed' (the accusative element) within a single agent. Furthermore, since the will is a faculty of choice for Augustine, his model also allows us to address our second hard question: namely *how* choice is compromised in self-oppression. But to properly address this question, we must closely consider the *kind* of choice Augustine links to the will, and how, if at all, it can be compromised. These questions will be tackled in the next section.

## D. THE CORRUPTION OF THE WILL

When Augustine speaks of the choice of the will, he speaks of the *free* choice of the will specifically: his term for the elective capacity of the will is *liberum arbitrium*. Thus, on his picture, freedom is an important element of choice. But the exact status of this freedom is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, Augustine seems to understand it as the freedom to do otherwise. At times, he sounds very optimistic about the potential strength of the human will, and the kind of freedom to choose it possesses. For example, he writes about sin – i.e. doing the wrong thing – that, ‘since it is voluntary, [it] is placed within our power. If you fear it, you must not will it; if you do not will it, it will not exist’ (DLA 2.20.54.205).

At other times, however, we can sense a deep pessimism in Augustine’s picture of the freedom of the will – especially in book III.<sup>6</sup> In this book, he discusses the fallen condition of humankind, and its effects on the human will. He posits that, because of the punishment received for Original Sin, human beings are *dispositioned* to sin. This means we are dispositioned to act irrationally. In Augustine’s words, we are afflicted with what he calls ‘ignorance’ [*ignorantia*] and ‘trouble’ [*difficultas*]: we are either unable to distinguish wrong from right, or we are unable to do the right thing even though we try. It should be no surprise, Augustine writes, ‘that we do not have free choice of the will to elect what we do rightly, due to ignorance; or we see what ought to be done rightly and will it, but we cannot accomplish it due to the resistance of carnal habits’ (DLA 3.18.52.177). As a result, we seem effectively unable to do the right thing: ‘as

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<sup>6</sup> This pessimism only grew stronger in Augustine’s later writings, such as *On Reprimand and Grace* (*De Corruptione et Gratia*) and *On Grace and Free Choice* (*De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*).

matters stand now,' Augustine writes, 'human beings are not good, and they do not have it in their power to be good – either because they do not see how they should be, or because they see it but they are not able to be such as they see that they should be' (DLA 3.18.51.174). The human will, therefore, does not seem to be *free* exactly on this picture. Even if we bracket the possibility of "ignorant" actions, which are *objectively* irrational for Augustine, we are left with a picture of human agency on which we are doomed to act against our *own* better judgments.

Of course, the theological dimension of Augustine's thought reaches much farther than his divine, and so objective, moral standard for right and wrong. As mentioned, he takes this plagued human condition to be the result of the Fall from Eden. Before the Original Sin committed by Adam, Augustine explains, the human will *was* free and able to choose the right thing: 'When we speak of free will to act rightly,' he explains, 'obviously we are speaking of it as human beings were originally made' (DLA 3.18.52.179). Ever since Original Sin, however, the human condition has been condemned, and its nature has become corrupt: 'to not be able to hold oneself back from lustful actions due to the relentless and tortuous affliction of carnal bondage, is *not* human nature as originally established, but the penalty after being damned' (DLA 3.18.52.179). As such, in the moment of Original Sin, human beings seem to have *lost* their freedom of the will: postlapsarian agents do not have a free will to act rightly, but are enslaved to the flesh.

It is no mystery why Augustine complicated his picture in this way. He was worried that an emphasis on the freedom of the will would invite the as-



sumption that human agents can achieve the good without the assistance of divine grace. This was an assumption made in Pelagianism, a belief which Augustine vehemently opposed. But it does make Augustine's account of choice very complex. If we are unable to do the right thing, this surely seems to imply that our evil choices are not exactly *free*. For, in that case, we have lost our freedom to do otherwise. Augustine, however, strongly emphasises that the will is *nevertheless* always free to choose, and that we sin by our free choice of the will. He maintains that it is through the *free* choice of the will that anyone sins (see, for example, DLA 2.18.47.179). This certainly is puzzling. How can we have the freedom to choose, but not the freedom to choose the right thing? This is the tension, and the difficulty, which lies at the heart of Augustine's picture of human agency. Though this tension obviously arises from Augustine's theological concerns, I want to consider it more closely. My reason for this is a hunch that, despite its theological context, this tension tracks an idea also interesting outside of this context – and which, indeed, might prove useful for developing our notion of hyperkrasia.

So how can we understand this tension? I propose that the fallen will must still be understood as a faculty of choice, but one which has been *corrupted*. Due to this corruption, the will is disposed to endorse desire, and thus disposed to make a *certain* choice. On this interpretation, although we technically have a choice between different options, we are not *equally* capable of choosing every option. But this does not change the fact that we do have a choice. This may sound paradoxical, but it is not contradictory. If I am dispositioned to choose a certain way, I am still dispositioned to *choose*. Consider this simple example: if I ask you to choose between a red and a green lolly, and promise to give you ten

pounds if you choose the green one, you will likely be *dispositioned* to choose the green one. But you will still *choose*: I am not directly forcing you to pick the green lolly. The point is that your *agency* is not bypassed or overridden: it remains intact, you remain an agent in the full sense.

I submit, then, that Augustine has a similar thing in mind when describing the human disposition to sin. For Augustine, our fallen condition dispositions us to make sinful choices, but it is still *us* who do the choosing. We still sin of our own accord – we are not literally forced by anyone or anything to commit the sins we commit, in which case our will would be *bypassed*. Rather, we play some active role in our sins, even though this role was imposed upon us by our fallen condition. Our will is thus not overridden or bypassed – we are still choosing agents.

The fallen human will, however, is not just *influenced* in the way that I influence your will when offering financial rewards for picking the green candy. Augustine paints the fallen will to be *corrupted*.<sup>7</sup> As he describes the situation, the fallen agent is more than just influenced: she is *practically unable* to choose otherwise than she is dispositioned to. Humans, on Augustine's picture, are practically unable not to sin: they try to, yet *cannot* do the right thing. It is on this basis that their will seems corrupted, rather than just influenced. Arguably (though this may depend on your financial situation), offering you ten pounds will not *corrupt* your will, and you should remain fairly able to pick the red lolly if you so please. If you *try* to, but *cannot*, pick the red lolly, the situation would indeed seem quite concerning, and we may start to think your will has indeed

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<sup>7</sup> Frede speaks of an 'enslaved' will (Frede, 2011: 166) in this context. Dihle (1982) writes that the will is 'perverted' (Dihle, 1982: 130).

been *corrupted* by my offer. In such a case, it seems that your *freedom* of choice has been affected. Nevertheless, you are *still* doing a form of choosing.

When a will is corrupted, I submit, the choices it makes are compromised. This means, first of all, that a corrupted will is still capable of choice. To say that the will is *corrupted* is not to say that it is being *bypassed*. I am not physically forced to pay my sister's rent. But choices made by a corrupted will, I argue, are significantly *compromised*. Since, on Augustine's picture, we do not have the freedom to do the right thing, the *elective* element of our choices seems nearly absent. Therefore, though we still have a choice, the *freedom* of this choice is compromised. An analogy might make this point a bit clearer. If my sister threatens to reveal a dark secret to my parents unless I pay her rent, she is clearly manipulating me. But if I choose to pay her rent, this remains my choice: I can technically choose *not* to do so, and have my secret exposed. It is my choice, because what I do, regardless of the circumstances, remains *up to me*. Yet it seems fair to say this was a compromised choice on my part. Similarly, for Augustine, we sin out of our own choice. But, I suggest, this choice is compromised because, after Original Sin, our will has been corrupted, and our freedom to choose diminished.

Admittedly, this interpretation seems at odds with certain parts of the text. Augustine, as we have seen, maintains that our sinful choices are still *free*. There are, however, several indications that he *did* assume our fallen state to imply diminished freedom. This is most apparent in the context of a hitherto undiscussed element of Augustine's thought: the need for divine grace. As briefly mentioned before, Augustine opposed the belief of Pelagianism because it de-

nied the necessity of divine grace for overcoming sin. *Contra Pelagianism*, Augustine was convinced that without grace, humans are doomed to remain stuck in their fallen state of being. Though he discusses the need for divine grace more elaborately in later works, this assumption is already present throughout the DLA. He speaks, for example, of ‘God Who set us free’ from our ‘state of sin’ (DLA 2.13.37.143). For Augustine, only with the aid of grace are we able to do what is right. But this, I submit, commits him to the claim that only divine grace can restore our freedom of choice. If we can only do what is right after receiving grace, we cannot be truly free before. This implies that the state of sin undeniably contains an element of unfreedom: the freedom of our choices must indeed be limited so long as we remain in sin. This supports my claim that these choices are, at the very least, not *fully* free, and thus compromised.

This interpretation is in part supported by Frede (2011).<sup>8</sup> On his reading, Augustine must indeed mean that after the Fall, our will is no longer free to choose. He argues that, ‘according to Augustine, in our present [fallen] state we are not free. We do not have a free will in the sense that we have a will which is actually free to choose’ (Frede, 2011: 167). For Augustine, Frede claims, only the sin of Adam and Eve was truly chosen in freedom. All ensuing sins are *not*:

It is crucial for Augustine’s position that we committed this original misdeed of our own free choice. This, though, does not mean that all our sins are a matter of our free choice. They are not. Except for the original sin, they are the product of the choices of our already enslaved will. (Frede, 2011: 166)

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<sup>8</sup> Frede’s reading of Augustine is not entirely the same as mine. But we share the view that, in our fallen state, our choices are not *free*, even though we still make choices.

On Frede's reading, therefore, postlapsarian choices, though still choices, are in fact not free. They are, in this sense, akin to the kind of choice I make when I pay my sister's rent.

Frede acknowledges that this interpretation seems at odds with Augustine's recurring claims that we sin out of *free* choice of the will. Augustine's language in this context, Frede admits, is indeed confusing: 'He talks as if the choices and decisions we make even after the fall were an exercise of our *liberum arbitrium*. And this cannot but create the impression that, even after the fall, we retain a free will. But this is not so' (Frede, 2011: 167). The key to understanding Augustine here, he suggests, resides in the distinction between the freedom to choose (*libertas*) and simply having a choice (*liberum arbitrium*): 'It is, for Augustine, one thing to have freedom (*libertas*) and hence a free will and another thing to have *liberum arbitrium*' (Frede, 2011: 167). Even though his term for choice is *liberum arbitrium*, which literally translates to *free choice*, to have *liberum arbitrium* does not imply that one also has *libertas*, and thus it does not imply that one's choices are *free*. All *liberum arbitrium* means for Augustine, Frede explains, is 'that it is up to us, that it is in our power to give assent or not, that it depends on us whether or not we choose to act in a certain way' (Frede, 2011: 168). After the fall, Frede explains, our will lost its freedom (*libertas*) to choose, and became *enslaved*. But it remains capable of choice: 'for Augustine, the fact that we enslaved ourselves does not mean that it no longer depends on us how we choose' (Frede, 2011: 168). It merely means that our choices are no longer free.

It is on this basis, then, that I consider fallen choices *compromised* – a point with which Frede seems to agree. As he puts it, after the Fall 'our choice is

no longer free but *forced*' (Frede, 2011: 168, emphasis mine). Thus, with Frede, I am assuming that postlapsarian choice is compromised, and this because fallen human agents, having lost the freedom to choose, can only really choose sin.

A few things must be noted here. On my interpretation, a will is corrupted if it is influenced such that it *cannot but* choose a certain way, and so its freedom to choose is affected. This amounts to a claim that the corrupted will chooses to  $\varphi$  and *cannot choose*  $-\varphi$ . It is important to note that this claim has physical nor metaphysical underpinnings. The point is not that an agent with a corrupted will is physically incapable of choosing  $-\varphi$  (it remains physically possible for me to not pay my sister's rent). Neither is the point that it is, in this world, metaphysically impossible for her to choose  $-\varphi$  (the question whether or not causal determinism is true doesn't bear on anything here: if I say I couldn't but pay my sister's rent, my claim is not a metaphysical one). The agent whose will is corrupted is *practically* unable (not to)  $\varphi$ , but this does not mean she is *strictly* incapable in the sense that she would be if there was a physical or metaphysical impossibility at play. Indeed, if this were so, it seems the possibility of making a choice at all would collapse.

It seems that Augustine would agree with the last point: the corruption of the human will does not seem to entail, for him, a metaphysical impossibility not to sin. This, at least, seems implied in his discussions about free will in the face of divine foreknowledge, which implies a form of determinism. The kind of corrupted will humans possess after the Fall, for Augustine, is not metaphysically determined, for then the possibility of choice would collapse altogether: 'if it is necessary that [someone] sin [...] then there is no choice of the will in his sinning,

but an unavoidable and fixed necessity instead' (DLA 3.3.6.21-22). Whether Augustine thinks a corrupted will implies a physical impossibility of sorts, though, is less clear: for he does emphasise how we sin 'due to the resistance of carnal habits' (DLA 3.18.52.177). But this need not mean there is a strict physical impossibility as play: it may just be a very strong resistance.

Though this is a complicated, and slightly paradoxical, account of choice, it could be quite useful for our purposes. For a key idea underpinning this account is that choice may be compromised even though the agent still exercises her agency, and makes choices. On this view, therefore, choice can be compromised not only by factors which override our agency through sheer force, but also by factors which influence our agency through influencing our will. Crucially, in self-oppression, it is in such a way that choice must be compromised: since it is the agent herself who compromises her own choices, choice cannot be compromised in a way which bypasses or overrides her agency.

I hypothesise, therefore, that Augustine can help us refine the category of hyperkrasia in two main ways. Firstly, his notion of the will as a separate faculty of choice allows us to locate the part of the agent which is being *oppressed*: I will posit that practical reason oppresses the will, thus compromising choice. Secondly, the idea of a *corrupted* will makes this idea more comprehensible. For it helps us understand *how* choice could possibly be compromised even if the will remains functional: we can posit that, in hyperkrasia, practical reason oppresses the will by *corrupting* it. The self-oppressive agent exercises self-control in such a way that she, practically speaking, *cannot but* follow her own regulations. When she finds a way to pursue an end she is fixated on, she feels so pressured to act upon it, that not doing so seems impossible. Shani, perhaps, cannot

*choose* between having dessert or not since she cannot break her general rule to eat nothing after dinner; and Jaimi might feel like, say, she *cannot but* give up on her personal hobbies in order to spend more time with her children. Though the self-oppressive agent remains an agent and a maker of choices, these choices are therefore compromised.

My hypothesis, therefore, is now as follows:

*hyperkrasia is a real form of agency, in which practical reason becomes authoritarian, exercising a form of self-control which compromises choice by corrupting the will.*

This formulation thus allows us to argue that choice is compromised in hyperkrasia, whilst simultaneously recognising the fact that hyperkrasia is a form of agency. One of our challenges, recall, was to explain how an agent could ever compromise her *own* choices. The notion of a corrupted will goes some way towards explaining this possibility. Of course, one thing we will need to do is further explain *in what way exactly* the agent ‘cannot but’ do a certain thing when a will is corrupted, and how *practical reason* may achieve this effect. This will be discussed in the coming chapters, but a crucial element here will be the fact that self-oppression involves a self-inflicted *pressure*. Its power to corrupt the will has something to do with the pressure it can exert upon it. When one thinks of Augustine’s image of the sinner, whose will is corrupted to chase evil pleasures, we may not think in terms of *pressure* exactly (but rather, for example, in terms of impulse or temptation). Evidently, the will of the self-oppressive agent will be corrupted in a slightly different way.

A final thing to note here is that, on this characterisation, the hyperkratic agent’s will is corrupted, and her choices compromised, *whether or not* she wants



to act differently than she is dispositioned to. When practical reason sabotages its own workings, as mentioned, the agent may want to break one of her own general rules without feeling able to. In such a case, her choices – if we can speak of choice here at all – are very obviously compromised. This is a possible result, and a sign, of a corrupted will. But even when the agent has no intention of breaking these rules, her will is corrupted if she is so strongly dispositioned to follow them that she is practically unable not to.

### **E. LIMITATIONS OF AUGUSTINE'S FRAMEWORK**

But, although Augustine's theory of agency helps us further elaborate our picture of hyperkrasia, it can only help us so much. The reason for this is twofold: (1) first, as I will demonstrate shortly, Augustine's account of choice turns out to be fairly intellectualist after all. Though he introduces the will as a separate faculty of choice, he assumes the will is free *if and only if* it follows reason. Thus, the idea that *practical reason* would corrupt the will, and so compromise its freedom, is after all inconceivable within his framework. (2) Second, Augustine also fails to explain *how* exactly a will can be corrupted. Since he assumed that our will is corrupted through divine intervention, he did not to explain how such corruption might be possible due to other factors – let alone an internal factor such as our practical reason. But as such, Augustine's notion of a corrupted will seems conceptually too thin to serve as a foundation for our account of hyperkrasia. Let us discuss these two reasons in turn.

On Augustine's view, our will is corrupted as the result of divine punishment. My hypothesis is that our practical reason could have a similar effect on

our will: corrupting it, dispositioning it to always pursue a specific set of wishes, and thereby compromising its freedom to choose. On Augustine's picture, however, such a scenario seems inconceivable. To see this, we must closely consider Augustine's understanding of freedom. It is clear that he draws a very strong connection between freedom and reason. This connection is most apparent in his discussion of divine grace. We saw that, on Augustine's view, the only way we can achieve true freedom is through the aid of divine grace. Crucially, on his description, divine grace sets us free through allowing us to *see* what is *right*: he writes that grace 'reveals all true goods' (DLA 2.13.36.141). It thus seems to restore our freedom by restoring our intellect, and its capacity to distinguish good from bad.

In a 2004 paper, Joseph Lössl argues that divine grace indeed works through a restoration of sorts of the human *intellect*. He writes that 'the primary gift of grace is intellect. The work of grace begins in the intellect' (Lössl, 2004: 67). Thus, grace grants us freedom through restoring our intellect. Our will, in other words, is only free if our intellect is in full function: 'for Augustine' Lössl writes, 'freedom, that is full moral functioning, of the will cannot be assumed, unless the intellect, too, is in full working order' (Lössl, 2004: 57). The idea, therefore, is that grace, by showing us what is good and what is not, renders us finally capable of doing the right thing. As such, grace indeed sets us free: after receiving grace, we are no longer dispositioned to sin, but able to act as we think right (or, more precisely, as *is* right – but this morally objectivist dimension is bracketed in my interpretation).

At first glance, it might seem that divine grace thus corrects our corrupted will, such that its capacity for elective choice is restored, and the will is

genuinely free to choose again between different courses of action. But such a reading would underestimate the strength of the connection which Augustine draws between freedom and the good. True freedom, for him, does not just mean *being able* to do the right thing, it means *actually doing it*. This means, however, that the state of grace almost mirrors the state of sin. In our fallen state, though there was some form of choice, we were practically unable to do what is right. After divine grace, we are practically unable *not* to. As such, grace reverses the situation such that only doing the *right* thing becomes really doable. When our will regains its original freedom through divine grace, it *will* act in accordance with the insight of our intellect, and leads us to do what we think right.

Lössl shares my view that this freedom to do the right thing might seem more like a *compulsion* to do the right thing. But this, he argues, is not a real compulsion on Augustine's view: 'if under the spell of grace, will may seem at first as if under duress. This, however, rather than actually being duress, may turn out to be a first phase of liberation, initiated by a change at the intellectual level' (Lössl, 2004: 69). If the will runs along with the intellect, and cannot but, this still amounts to freedom for Augustine – or, more precisely, *only this* amounts to freedom.<sup>9</sup> Being "compelled" by reason does not amount to being compelled: 'in Augustine's view,' Lössl concludes, 'in the intellect there is no compulsion' (Lössl, 2004: 61).

This relates back to the question of intellectualism. In an important

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<sup>9</sup> An idea, in fact, which we will find later in Kant. Arguably, Augustine's model of choice is a forebode of many more to come: the most famous example being the Kantian notion of autonomy, according to which free actions are those in accordance with our self-prescribed rules, and thus the principle of reason.

sense, invoking the will, as Augustine does, marks an important move away from Ancient Greek intellectualism, toward a more voluntaristic model of agency. It is tempting, however, to overstate this move. In his account of freedom, we hear the echoes of Greek intellectualism: if we choose sin, we are not fully choosing freely. Only if and when we follow reason are we making full-blown choices. Though there is, on Augustine's model, a place for irrational choice, these choices are by default compromised. We are only choosing freely if we choose what we think right. On this reading, therefore, uncompromised choice is not *really* elective either, as it can only really act upon the good.

This, of course, is a picture deeply embedded in Augustine's moral objectivism. Reason, on his view, refers to the absolute divine principle – the order of the universe as God designed it. To receive grace, then, is to be able to see and do what is right in accordance with this absolute principle. But if we bracket this moral objectivism (insofar as that is possible), the picture is as follows: our choices are free only if and when we can do as we judge best. What this requires is a deep understanding of our *own* true goods – the things we find valuable. Once we have such an understanding, we are able to make free choices and resist conflicting temptations where needed.

Of course, as said before, some connection between reason and choice is only plausible: the things I rationally value should, normally, very strongly inform my choices. But if I *cannot but* act in accordance with practical reason, aren't my choices compromised? Such a situation, I submit, sounds exactly like self-oppression: I am so compelled by my practical reason that I practically *cannot but* follow its regulations. But on such a scenario, for Augustine, I have reached the epitome of *freedom*. Thus, even though I can only practically do one

thing, my freedom is not restrained but maximised on this scenario. We can thus not say that, though there is some choice, it is compromised because I cannot but act this way. It is clear, therefore, that self-oppression is inconceivable on this kind of view. Even if a disposition to sin indeed compromises our free choice, it would make no sense for Augustine to suggest that a disposition to follow our reason could do so. For this, on his view, is precisely the *epitome* of freedom – *the manner in which* we comply with our reason cannot itself compromise our choice.

Thus, arguably, Augustine would resist the idea that practical reason could corrupt our will. Of course, this does not keep us from positing it could. But there was a second reason why Augustine cannot further help us: he does not offer us any details as to *how* one's will may be corrupted by profane factors. The notion of a corrupted will, for Augustine, only makes sense within the context of divine punishment. This makes it difficult to even *imagine* how a profane factor like our practical reason could have the same effect. Thus, regardless of whether he would object to the idea that practical reason can corrupt the will, he could not help explain *how* this may work. Augustine's moral psychology is embedded within a specific theological framework, and at some points it becomes difficult to use his concepts, in any rigorous manner, outside of it.

## F. CONCLUSION

Even though we cannot fully confirm our hypothesis within Augustine's framework, we can retain some of his ideas: we will keep our hypothesis that practical reason corrupts the will in hyperkrasia. The next step, then, will be to further

elaborate how this may happen. To this end, we must obtain a sense of how *profane* factors may be able to corrupt our will. How could our choices be compromised without our agency being bypassed, but rather through a certain kind of influence on our agency? To answer these questions, the next chapter will turn to the works of Michel Foucault.

### III. Foucault

#### A. INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter, we saw how Augustine's notion of a corrupted will helps further conceptualise self-oppression. Augustine, however, could not help explain *how* the will may be corrupted by something other than divine punishment, let alone our practical reason. For these reasons, this chapter will appeal to an entirely different scholarship: in order to further develop the idea of a corrupted will, I will consult the works of Michel Foucault. More precisely, I will argue that Foucault's account of *domination* offers a profane example of how our will can be corrupted, and this by *oppressive* structures specifically.

In brief, I will argue that Foucault allows us to distinguish between two different forms of oppression: repression and domination. Both, I will argue, compromise the choices of the oppressed agent, but they do so in a different manner. On the reading I will propose, *repression* denotes a form of oppression which employs repressive tactics, which directly and forcefully steer the actions of the oppressed agent. Domination, in contrast, refers to a form of oppression which works in a more insidious, and indirect manner: it controls the agent *through* her own agency, by influencing the *field of possible action* within which she can act. On this basis, I will argue that *repression* oppresses the agent by *overriding* her will, whereas *domination* oppresses the agent by *corrupting* it.

As such, Foucault's account of domination offers an example of how a certain form of oppression may compromise an agent's choices by corrupting

her will. The key insight to take away from this chapter will be that certain factors can influence which possibilities for action an agent will see as *viable* for her, thus influencing how she will act. If this influence is such that the agent, as a result, *cannot but* choose certain options, this corrupts her will. In a next step, I will hypothesise that internal factors – more precisely, practical reason – can also have this kind of effect – and that this is what happens in self-oppression.

Constructing this Foucauldian account of domination, admittedly, will require a fair amount of interpretation. First of all, Foucault's terminology is far removed both from my own and from those employed by Aristotle and Augustine: Foucault rarely ever uses the notion of the will, and does not really speak of choice. Indeed, he can hardly be said to offer a theory of *agency* at all. His is, amongst other things, a theory of *power*. As I will demonstrate, however, Foucault's account of power pays considerable attention to the effects it has on agency. I will focus on these and, where needed, translate his views into the terminology of this thesis. Most importantly, I will formulate how different forms of power, as Foucault characterises them, can be said to have an effect on the agent's *will* and *choices*. Admittedly, this endeavour will not be simple, partially because Foucault himself was not very consistent when using his *own* terminology. For example – as he readily admits – he did not use the term *domination* in the same way throughout his entire oeuvre. Thus, before I can translate his concepts and ideas into the language of this thesis, I must first of all interpret them on their own terms.

Another thing to note is that, in doing so, I will assume a relative coherence within Foucault's thought over the years. Though there is certainly an evolution traceable in his works, I think his earlier and later works can be read as



part of the same project (though this, admittedly, is a contentious issue within Foucault scholarship).<sup>1</sup> Given this assumption, I will draw on a variety of resources, published over the years, to construct my reading, without compartmentalising these resources into specific periods of thought.

But before developing my interpretation, I want to emphasise that – again – the usefulness of my reading does not depend on its hermeneutical validity. My primary aim is not to present an ultimate exegesis of Foucault’s views on power and domination (which are often as obscure as they are interesting). My reading of Foucault is developed with a specific aim in mind: to understand how certain oppressive structures may be said to corrupt our will, with the eventual aim of explaining the possibility of self-oppression. That being said, my interpretation of Foucault lies fairly close to that of Amy Allen (2000, 2008). In developing my interpretation, I will provide some additional support from her where appropriate.

## **B. POWER VERSUS REPRESSION**

As noted, I will argue that Foucault allows us to distinguish between two different forms of oppression, namely repression and domination. But before we can understand Foucault’s distinction between repression and domination, we must first understand his account of *power*. For both forms of oppression are, for Foucault, specific ways in which power can operate.

Foucault develops his view on power in opposition to what he takes to

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<sup>1</sup> Dews (1989), for example, argues that Foucault’s later works entail a radical break with his earlier works.

be a common *misunderstanding* of it. He worries, more precisely, that common conceptions of power tend to reduce it to *repression*. According to Foucault, we think of power as essentially a negative force, capable only of prohibition and elimination. Though Foucault does not offer a rigorous conception of the term 'repression', I will employ this term to denote a specific category of power, which operates in this negative manner. It is important, Foucault contends, to understand that repression is only one specific manifestation of power, and that power is in fact a much wider category. Though it is true that power sometimes works this way, Foucault argues, it doesn't always: our mistake is that we conceive of power in *general* as repressive.

He denounces this common equation of power and repression, for example, in a series of lectures given at *Collège de France* in 1976. He stated there that 'what is now the widespread notion of repression cannot provide an adequate description of the mechanisms and effects of power, cannot define them' (Foucault, 1976/1990a: 18).<sup>2</sup> In his lectures, Foucault does not further elaborate on this matter.<sup>3</sup> But he does in some of his other studies: for example in *The History of Sexuality vol. I*, which was published in the same year.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Foucault examines the development of discourses around sexuality. In doing so, he challenges what he calls the 'repressive hypothesis': the idea that, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, we have lived in an age of repression, in which it was forbidden to

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<sup>2</sup> This citation is taken from the David Macey translation of these lectures (Foucault, 1976/1990a). At other points in the chapter I have also used the Katy Soper translation (Foucault, 1976/1980).

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, in fact, promises to critically re-examine the notion of repression in the next lecture, but this promise was not kept.

<sup>4</sup> Some editions of *The History of Sexuality I* are subtitled *The Will to Knowledge*.

speak of sex. This is a commonly held belief, but in fact, Foucault contends, sex has been the continual object of discussion during these past centuries: 'around and apropos of sex,' he writes, 'one sees a veritable discursive explosion' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 17). Foucault takes these discourses to be manifestations of power relations: there was a 'multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 18). For example, Foucault explains how sex became the subject of medical investigation, and of religious examination through the practice of confession – both insidious strategies of power to control our sexuality. Foucault worried that, if we maintain the view that sex was simply not spoken about, we are blind to the ways in which power relations were (and are) operative, and controlling us, in the domain of sexuality.

This specific study, however, has implications reaching far beyond the realms of sexuality. Like his other studies, it has a seemingly narrow focus, but is embedded in a larger project: to lay out the structures and techniques of modern power.<sup>5</sup> When formulating the wider objective of this book, he presents it as challenging a certain representation of power, which he terms the 'juridico-discursive' representation (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 82). This representation, Foucault argues, reduces power to repression: it presents power as pervasively *negative*. The power depicted, Foucault writes, 'is a power that only has the force of the negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of other studies which focus on a particular topic or context, but in doing so disclose the structures of power more generally, are *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1977) and *Madness and Civilisation* (1961/1967).

only of positing limits, it is basically anti-energy' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 85). As a result of this widespread conception, we generally think of power as interfering with our actions directly, chalking forcefully the limits of what we are allowed to do: it presents power, Foucault writes, as 'a mere limit placed on [our] desire [...], as a pure limit set on freedom' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 86). Though the book itself focuses on power in the context of sexuality, Foucault is explicit that this 'juridico-discursive' representation of power transcends this narrow context, and is in fact pervasive throughout Western societies:

one must not imagine that this representation is peculiar to those who are concerned with the problem of the relations of power with sex. In fact it is much more general; one frequently encounters it in political analyses of power, and it is deeply rooted in the history of the West. (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 83)

Foucault clearly thinks this representation to be false, or at least incomplete. On this representation, he writes, power is not recognised 'except in the negative and emaciated form of prohibition', and as a result 'the deployments of power [are] reduced simply to the procedure of the law of interdiction' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 86). As such, this representation 'is by no means adequate to describe the manner in which power was and is exercised' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 87-88).

This misconception of power, Foucault argues, has always been *partially* inadequate. According to Foucault, the major premodern power form – which he calls *sovereign power* – had a very obvious repressive dimension. Power *can* be repressive, and especially in its older forms, it often was. But, on my interpretation at least, sovereign power was never *merely* repressive according to Foucault. Thus, juridico-discursive representation 'was useful for representing' this

power, 'albeit in a nonexhaustive way' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 89). But, according to Foucault, this misrepresentation of power has become particularly pressing in modernity. Whilst in sovereign power, the repressive dimension was indeed significant, modern power employs fewer and fewer repressive tactics. According to Foucault, the juridico-discursive conception of power 'is utterly incongruous with the new methods of power [...]. We have been engaged for centuries in a type of society in which the juridical is increasingly incapable of coding power, of serving as its system of representation' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 89). Thus, whilst the juridico-discursive conception of power only partially blinded the reality of sovereign power, it misses the workings of modern power almost entirely. It is, therefore, *especially* unfit to capture the modern power situation.

It is against the backdrop of this observation that Foucault sets out to rethink power. If we want to understand the wider reality of power, especially in modernity, we must overcome our purely negative way of thinking about it: 'We shall try to rid ourselves of a juridical and negative representation of power' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 90). In other words, Foucault urges us to stop thinking of power as repression. Notably, though, it is irrelevant for our purposes whether Foucault is entirely right in claiming that power is commonly misunderstood in this way. Nor does it matter whether older forms of power were entirely or just predominantly repressive, and to what extent modern power forms no longer are. What is important is that Foucault tries to conceptualise a specific form of power which is *not* repressive. This conception of power, as I will demonstrate, is useful for our purposes – regardless of the exact role of this power form in history. I will spell out this conception of power in the following

section, with particular focus on how power, thus understood, can affect *agency*.

## C. POWER AND AGENCY

### C.1 Power as a Productive Force

But how, then, must we think of power instead, if not as repression? The simplest answer to this question seems to be that power is essentially a *productive* force: Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality I* that ‘relations of power [...] have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play’ (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 94). What he means is that power, rather than merely telling us what not to do, actively shapes the society we live in: it influences what we do, how we speak, the way we relate to each other. Foucault, indeed, submits that ‘[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 93). It *produces* our reality.

More precisely, on Foucault’s view, power does so through complex networks of human relations, operating at all its levels: power, for Foucault, is essentially *relational*. If we are to understand how power can shape our reality, we must understand that it is at play at all times, between *all* people. This means that we must not imagine power as emanating from one specific source, directed at another person: it is not possessed by one party over another, be it the sovereign or the state over its citizens, the father over his child, or the tutor over her pupil. Rather, it moves between all people: ‘Power’, Foucault contends, ‘is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’ (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 94). Power is thus not only operative where it represses or forbids (though this is where it

may be most visible): it is operative throughout the whole of human society, since it features in all human relations. In a late interview, he explains that ‘in human relations, whatever they are – whether it be a question of communicating verbally, as we are doing right now, or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship – power is always present’ (Foucault, 1984/1987: 123).

It is this productive dimension which is the essence of power for Foucault, whilst the repressive dimension of power, if at all present, is merely accidental. He reiterates this point in an interview about *The History of Sexuality I*: ‘In general,’ he states, ‘I’d say that interdiction, refusal, prohibition, far from being the essential forms of power, are only its limits, its worn, extreme forms. Above all, relations of power are productive’ (Foucault, 1977/1980a: 9). Note that, since this productive dimension is the essence of power for Foucault, we must assume that it is also present in repressive power forms (a point to which I will return).<sup>6</sup> Foucault is mostly concerned, however, with modern forms of power, which are almost exclusively productive. According to Foucault, the specific tactics and strategies which modern power develops – which we will discuss shortly – are increasingly efficient in structuring and shaping the social body. If we keep thinking of power as just repression, we remain blind to the ways in which modern power, ever more profoundly, is producing the world around us

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser (1981) agrees with this assumption (see Fraser, 1981: 285). This is also supported by Foucault’s statements in another 1977 interview, in which he suggests that this productive dimension of power was *the condition of possibility* of sovereign power: the manifold of power relations between all people, he states, are ‘the concrete, changing soil in which the sovereign’s power is grounded, the conditions which make it possible for it to function’ (Foucault, 1977/1980b: 187).

in this way.

## C.2 Power and its Effect on Agency

As Foucault sketches it, the productive dimension of power is immense, complex, and manifold: on his view, the workings and effects of power pervade the whole of every human society. Power reproduces itself amongst all people, in every kind of relationship, and from there runs through and shapes our entire reality. Power, indeed, 'is everywhere' (Foucault, 1976/1990b: 93). As such, the productive dimension of power is hard to capture. But its most essential effect – or, at the very least, the effect which is most interesting for our purposes – is that it influences our *agency*.

That its effect on agency is at least a key effect of power for Foucault becomes very apparent in a 1982 essay entitled *The Subject and Power*. In this essay, Foucault suggests that the *essence* of power is that it influences our actions. The essay includes a section entitled 'What constitutes the specific nature of power?', in which he defines a relationship of power as *a mode of action upon actions*:

what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future. (Foucault, 1982: 789)

Foucault's suggestion here is that what *defines* power is that it influences how individuals act. 'The exercise of power', he submits, 'consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome' (Foucault, 1982: 789).



The question, of course, is how power relations can accomplish this. Foucault's answer, in short, is that they shape our *fields of possible action*: he describes the exercise of power 'as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions' (Foucault, 1982: 789). This means that, when an agent is 'faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up' (Foucault, 1982: 789). Power relations influence the horizon of our agency: they influence which *possibilities* for action will present to me.

Importantly, this means that the individual subjected to power remains, in a vital sense, an agent: Foucault writes that 'the one over whom power is exercised' is 'thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts [...The exercise of power] is always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action' (Foucault, 1982: 789). Agency, in other words, is not in the first instance bypassed or blocked by power: power, instead, runs through it.

It is this production of fields of possible action, I propose, which truly constitutes the *essence* of power on Foucault's conception: 'what would be *proper* to a relationship of power', he writes, 'is that it be a mode of action upon actions' (Foucault, 1982: 791, emphasis mine). Thus, we now have a better grasp of the more productive, positive dimension of power, which Foucault takes to be essential to it: it structures human societies, by structuring the possible actions of the people which constitute them.

### C.3 *Fields of Possible Action: Repression vs Subjection*

Given that it is the *essence* of power to act upon actions, this must be its effect

regardless of how it operates. Therefore, on the reading I advance, power structures our fields of possible action both in its repressive and in its non-repressive forms. The manner in which power achieves this, however, is vastly different in both cases. Power can thus achieve its object – structuring fields of possible action – in different ways. In what follows, I will lay out an interpretation of how both forms of power can achieve this, building on Foucault's remarks in *The Subject and Power*.

First of all, power can structure fields of possible action through the use of repressive tactics. This, obviously, is what happens in repression. It is true that, in repression, power relations *are* predominantly negative: they prohibit, forbid, or apply force. This, however, is not the essence of repressive power: it is merely its strategy. The essence lies in its effect on agency: through employing its repressive tactics, repressive power structures the field of possible action of whomever it represses. For example, if we imagine a sovereign who threatens to kill a citizen if she doesn't obey, this threat will structure her field of possible action: presumably, it will present her with the possibility of obeying.

This means that, in cases of repression, power *does* act 'directly and immediately on others'. Granted, Foucault wrote in *The Subject and Power* that power does *not* act immediately on others, but *rather* acts upon their actions. This, at first glance, reads as an exclusive disjunction. On my reading, however, power *can* act immediately on others, or, more precisely, it can employ tactics which do so. The point is that the effect is still the same: through acting upon agents directly, repression *also* acts upon their actions. There is thus no exclusive disjunction between acting directly upon others and acting upon their actions. It is just that, if and when power acts upon agents directly, this is not the essence

of power, but merely its strategy. Its essence is that, through whatever strategy, it structures agents' fields of possible action.

This reading seems consistent with Foucault's position in *The Subject and Power*. Most notably, he remarks that power may sometimes employ *violence*: 'the bringing into play of power relations does not exclude the use of violence any more than it does the obtaining of consent; no doubt the exercise of power can never do without one or the other, often both at the same time' (Foucault, 1982: 789). This, on my reading, refers to the fact that power can manifest as repression: in many instances, for example, sovereign power did employ violence, and thus operated in an explicitly negative way. But, for Foucault, this was not its *essence*, this was not what makes it *power*: 'But even though consensus and violence are the instruments or the results,' Foucault contends, 'they do not constitute the principle or the basic nature of power' (Foucault, 1982: 789). The essence of power, rather, lies in its effect on the agency of those affected.

In sum, on my reading, repression is a specific form of power, and the essential element which makes it *repression* – that it acts upon subjects directly – is *not* the essential element which makes it *power* – that it acts upon the actions of individuals. But Foucault, of course, is more concerned with modern forms of power, which structures agent's fields of possible action *without* using repressive tactics. Rather than explicitly enforcing or closing off certain possibilities, modern power *indirectly* steers the agent towards certain courses of action. It is here, then, that power acts upon the actions of individuals, *without* acting upon them 'directly and immediately'.

To understand how modern power can achieve this, we must understand one of its main strategies – or perhaps even *the* main strategy of modern

power: the strategy which Foucault calls *subjection* (*assujettissement* – sometimes translated as *subjugation*). With this term, he refers to the process by which power influences individuals through influencing the kind of individual they are. Power, Foucault writes, repeats ‘the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks [s]he is not thinking’ (Foucault, 1976/1990a: 60). This, for Foucault, is a key effect of modern power: he states in his lectures at *Collège de France* that ‘it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals’ (Foucault, 1976/1980: 98). ‘In other words’, he states, ‘individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application’ (Foucault, 1976/1980: 99). Though this, on my reading, holds true for power in all its forms, modern power is perfecting the strategy of subjection for Foucault. Around the eighteenth century, he writes in *The Subject and Power*, we saw ‘a new distribution, a new organization of this kind of individualizing power’ (Foucault, 1982: 783).

When power influences individuals in this way, Foucault says, it produces *subjects*: this ‘is a form of power which makes individuals subjects’ (Foucault, 1982: 781).<sup>7</sup> The subject, on his account, thus refers specifically to an

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<sup>7</sup> A minor thing to note, here, is that the subject does not coincide with the agent as a whole: subjectivity seems to be tied to a specific aspect or dimension of the person as an agent. Foucault highlights this in a later interview, where he states that the subject ‘is a form and this form is not above all or always identical to itself. You do not have towards yourself the same kind of relationships when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up in a meeting, and when you try to fulfil [sic] your desires in a sexual relationship. There no doubt exist some relationships and some

individual who has been shaped by relations of power: hence the term subjection. Crucially, Foucault's choice of term here reflects the dual, and in a sense ambiguous, position of the agent who is shaped by power. On the one hand, the subject is an effect of the power relations influencing her, and passively subjected to them. But on the other hand, the subject is an active agent with thoughts, feelings, and habits; and it is precisely *through* these thoughts, feelings, and habits that modern power achieves its goals. Foucault writes that '[t]here are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to [her] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject' (Foucault, 1982: 781). As Allen (2008) puts it,

Foucault's analysis of subjection brilliantly captures the ways in which power constitutes forms of identity that both constrain subordinated subjects by compelling them to take up subordinating norms, practices, and so on while simultaneously enabling them to be subjects with the capacity to act. (Allen, 2008: 72)

This notion of subjection sheds light on how modern power can influence agents without directly interfering. By turning individuals into *subjects*, power impacts on the constitution of the individuals it affects, thereby shaping what they are and *thus* how they will act: the way I am constituted as a subject, the kind of individual I am, will naturally influence what kinds of things I will do.

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interferences between these different kinds of subject but we are not in the presence of the same kind of subject. In each case, we play, we establish with one's self some different form of relationship' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 121). Thus, any agent always shares in in a myriad of interwoven subjectivities.

In his lectures at *Collège de France*, Foucault describes ‘the level of on-going subjugation’ as ‘the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, *govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors etc.*’ (Foucault, 1976/1980: 97, emphasis mine), and in a 1984 essay he describes his project as ‘a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of *what we are doing, thinking, saying*’ (Foucault, 1984: 46, emphasis mine). Therefore, when power produces subjects, it thereby *structures their field of possible action*. As such, subjection is a non-repressive strategy, employed by modern power, to achieve its essential effect: it is a way for power to influence how we act, without directly overriding our actions.

But how does this work exactly? Some examples might clarify the matter. We can here refer back to Foucault’s study of discourses surrounding sexuality. His point is that sexuality is not just repressed, but also controlled through the production of specific kinds of sexual subjects, who understand their thoughts and desires surrounding sex in a certain manner, which in turn will influence their actions (see, e.g., Foucault, 1984/1985: 5). But let us also construct our own example. I will sketch an example of an agent who is influenced by certain, non-repressive, relations of power. Imagine a girl, Emma, who grows up in a modern democratic society. As she develops, she comes to position herself in the world in a certain way: the way she responds to situations, how she interprets events, how she acts in general will depend on the kind of individual she is becoming. This, on Foucault’s picture, is largely the result of a myriad of power relations, continually acting upon her, and disclosing different *fields of possibilities*. One specific example could be her interactions with others who relate to her

as a woman. These interactions can influence which kinds of possibilities will present on Emma's horizon: possibilities which are traditionally linked to the concept of femininity. If Emma has been gifted countless baby dolls as a toddler, and is perpetually assumed to yearn for motherhood, this may lead her to become a mother – this possibility will emerge on her field of possible action. Additionally, she may learn to comport her body in certain ways, keep her hair long, shave her legs, understand herself as rather shy and bad at maths, a great fan of pink, et cetera. Simultaneously, certain possibilities might remain hidden for Emma: let's say that, at a certain point, the possibility of becoming an astronaut doesn't feature in her field of possible action. Thus, her existence has deeply been shaped by the social body she exists in, and the kind of subject she became because of it.

Emma's subjectivity, and consequently her actions, are thus informed by relations of power. In the case described, however, power influences Emma's actions without employing any repressive tactics. No one is directly interfering with her actions: she is not forced by anyone to shave her legs, or to become a mother, and no one is keeping her from pursuing a career in space travel. It is just that Emma sees herself to be the kind of person who does, or does not, do these kinds of things. We thus have an example of modern power, structuring someone's fields of possible action in a non-repressive manner.

#### **D. DOMINATION**

This brings us, at last, to Foucault's notion of *domination*. Though he uses the term throughout his oeuvre, Foucault is not very consistent in the way he uses it. On the reading I will advance, domination denotes those instances of *modern*

*power* which amount to *oppression*. This characterisation requires some further explanation. Hitherto in the chapter, we have not yet spoken of oppression – it is a term which does not really feature in Foucault’s framework.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear in his writings that he considers certain forms of power to be illegitimate, harmful, or at the very least suspicious. It is those forms of power which I will consider to be *oppressive*.

It seems quite obvious that *repressive* forms of power, as I have defined them, can be classified as oppressive (we will get to the reasons as to why exactly). On my reading, however, this is not necessarily the case for modern forms of power. Especially when reading his earlier works, it is certainly tempting to think that *all* power is oppressive for Foucault, and he often seems to equate power with domination. On my reading, though, not all modern power amounts to domination. Unlike repressive tactics, which are *inherently* oppressive, the tactics of modern power *may or may not* amount to oppression. It is only the oppressive forms of modern power, I submit, which Foucault refers to as *domination*. I thus take oppression to be the *general* category of power to which both repression and domination belong.

#### D.1 Power versus Domination

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<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, at times, Foucault does speak of oppression. For example, in his 1976 lectures, he suddenly invokes it as separate from both domination and repression (see Foucault, 1976/1980: 16-18). When I speak of oppression, it will be in the general and generic sense which I describe here, and not in the specific (but unclear) sense Foucault alludes to in these lectures.



The question, then, is on what basis we can distinguish non-oppressive from oppressive instances of modern power: how, that is, we can distinguish modern power in general from domination. This is definitely not self-evident. Foucault is not always clear about the distinction between power and domination, and does not offer a rigorous conception of domination at all. Although he uses the term fairly frequently throughout his entire oeuvre, he failed for a long time to specify what he meant by it.

This relates to a prominent issue in Foucault scholarship. Some scholars have argued that Foucault is, in fact, unable to distinguish between power and domination at all: they claim that, even if Foucault did not *mean* to say that all power is domination, he fails to explain on what basis we may distinguish legitimate from illegitimate manifestations of power. A well-known version of this criticism was formulated by Nancy Fraser (1981), who argues that Foucault, whilst clearly worried about illegitimate manifestations of modern power, lacks the conceptual tools to distinguish it from other forms of modern power.<sup>9</sup> In her paper, Fraser credits Foucault for his ‘important insights into the nature of modern power’ (Fraser, 1981: 272). ‘For example’, she writes, ‘Foucault’s account establishes that modern power is “productive” rather than negating. This suffices to rule out liberationist politics which presuppose that power is essentially repressive’ (Fraser, 1981: 272). But, she writes, in analysing these productive strategies of power, Foucault suspends ‘the standard modern liberal normative framework which distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate exercise of

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<sup>9</sup> A similar criticism is made, amongst others, by Grimshaw (1993). The only way Foucault can single out instances of domination, according to Grimshaw, would be to introduce a robustly normative measure into his account.

power' (Fraser, 1981: 273). His analysis of power, in this way, aims to be normatively neutral.

Though this suspension allowed Foucault to focus fully on the workings of power, Fraser argues, it eventually causes him trouble. For, she contends, situations of power *aren't* normatively neutral: 'Granted,' she writes, 'there can be no social practices without power, but it doesn't follow that all forms of power are normatively equivalent, nor that any social practices are as good as any other' (Fraser, 1981: 282). Crucially, Fraser argues, Foucault *himself* assumes an implicit distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of modern power: 'it is clear', she writes, 'that Foucault's account of power in modern society is anything but neutral' (Fraser, 1981: 282). For example, Fraser notes, 'Foucault does not shrink from frequent use of such terms as "domination", "subjugation", and "subjection"' when describing the modern power regime (Fraser, 1981: 282). Foucault seems quite clear, Fraser argues, that modern power as he analysed it isn't necessarily harmless. Yet, given his purported normative neutrality, he cannot substantiate his normative intuitions about the dangers of modern power: he is unable, according to Fraser, 'to distinguish better from worse sets of practices and forms of constraint' (Fraser, 1981: 282). The problem is that he does not offer us any tools to substantiate this distinction: Foucault's framework 'has no basis for distinguishing, for example, forms of power which involve domination from those which do not' (Fraser, 1981: 286).

In an interview conducted in 1984, however – *after* Fraser published her paper – Foucault offers a brief sketch of what he means by domination. In the interview, he admits that he was not always clear in his use of terms: 'I am not sure, when I began to interest myself in this problem of power, of having spoken

very clearly about it or used the words needed' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 130). He then goes on, at last, to distinguish power from domination: 'It seems to me', he states, 'that we must distinguish the relationships of power [...] and the states of domination' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 130).<sup>10</sup>

So how does he distinguish both? In the interview, Foucault describes *power* as 'the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 122), and as 'strategic games that result in the fact that some people try to determine the conduct of others' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 130). This is consistent with our definition of power as acting upon actions and structuring fields of possible action. Foucault then describes *domination* as a specific arrangement of power relations, in which these relations have lost their usual flexibility. In states of domination, he writes, 'relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and frozen' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 114). Foucault uses the term '*figé*', which can be translated as fixed, frozen, or solidified. In the interview, he uses a range of similar metaphors to describe the state of power relations in domination: relations of power are "blocked" (*bloqué*), rendered "immobile" (*immobile*) and "fixed" (*fixe*). The crucial characteristic that he wants to capture is *inflexibility*. The underlying assumption here is that, normally, relations of power are flexible and ever-changing: relationships of power, Foucault emphasises, 'are changeable relations, i.e. they can modify themselves, they are not given once and for all' (Foucault, 1984/1987: 123). But, in a state of domination,

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<sup>10</sup> Though, curiously, in an interview given just the year before, he ponders whether the distinction between power and domination 'is not something of a verbal one' (Foucault, 1983/1984: 378).

‘the relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical’ (Foucault, 1984/1987: 123). Thus, on this suggestion, power is domination when its workings have become all too firmly fixed.

## D.2 The Category of Oppression

We have now, following Foucault, characterised domination as a specific kind of power constellation. This general sketch of domination, however, does not firmly establish *on what basis* power here amounts to oppression – that is, why precisely it is an illegitimate, or suspicious, form of power. What is it about *fixed* or *frozen* relations of power that make them domineering?

I submit that one reason why domination, thus conceived, amounts to a form of oppression is that it *compromises choice*. Power, we saw, always structures agency. But in domination, as I will show, it structures agency in such a way that choice is compromised. Accordingly, I propose that a power situation is oppressive if (though not per se only if) it affects agency in such a way that it *compromises choice*. In what follows, I will demonstrate how both repression and domination can be said to compromise choice, thus classifying them both as forms of oppression. I will do so by examining the *way* in which they structure agents’ *fields of possible action*.

It is fairly evident that instances of repression, as I have characterised them, belong to the category of oppression. This becomes clear once we refer back to the tactics employed in repressive power: repressive tactics, as we have seen, directly take away certain possibilities from the agent, or force her into certain ones. It thus directly narrows agents’ fields of possible action. Agency, if not entirely bypassed, is definitely overridden: the repressed agent acts not in

her own name, as it were, but merely follows the will and orders of her oppressor. As such, I submit, repression compromises choice in a fairly straightforward manner: the agent's actions are, in a sense, not her own, but the result of repressive power relations narrowing her field of possible action. If it was up to her, her field of possible action would look different. She cannot do as *she* wants.

It is less clear, however, when *modern* power relations amount to oppression. We saw that modern power indirectly structures agents' field of possible action. When does this influence compromise their choices? To find out, we must examine the way in which modern power relations, and strategies of subjection, are affecting agency: when can we say they compromise someone's choices, and when do they not? This question, however, brings us to another pertinent issue in Foucault scholarship, which is discussed at length by Allen (2000). Many authors have argued that Foucault's conceptualisation of modern power implies what Allen calls 'the death of the subject'. These critics, Allen writes, 'argue that Foucault claims, or that his archaeological and genealogical works imply, that the subject is *merely or nothing more* than the effect of discourse and power' (Allen, 2000: 115, emphasis mine). In other words, the worry is that, if subjects are constituted through power relations in the way Foucault describes, they are their merely passive product, and as such not really *subjects* in any real sense. If true, this hypothesis has many implications. For our purposes, its most important implication is that, if the subject goes, the possibility of *agency* seems to go, too: 'the death of the subject', Allen writes, 'implies the death of agency' (Allen, 2000: 117). Linda Alcoff (1990), for example, writes that she

fail[s] to see how there can be agency within this kind of analysis. If we are the effects of a totalized power/knowledge and do not ourselves have causal control

over power/knowledge, then in what possible sense can we be said to have effective agency? (Alcoff, 1990: 76).

Lois McNay (1992) agrees: 'Foucault asserts the autonomous perspective of subjects, but his assertion is undermined by his failure to explain theoretically how such autonomy is possible' (McNay, 1992: 153).<sup>11</sup>

But if this is so, this would mean that the notion of choice, and many of its associated concepts used in both philosophy and psychology, are out the window. Accordingly, if our criteria for oppression are formulated in reference to the agency of those who are oppressed, and more specifically the status of their choices, it seems that we can no longer conceptualise oppression in any meaningful sense. If the effects of modern power indeed erase the possibility of agency, this implies that modern power cannot, in a meaningful sense, be distinguished from domination. In fact, if subjugation indeed *dissolves* agency, we might have to conclude that, wherever power employs strategies of subjugation, it is *always* oppressive. We might have to conclude, in other words, that modern power as Foucault describes it *always* and *necessarily* amounts to domination – whether he meant to suggest this or not.

In her paper, however, Allen convincingly argues against the “death of the subject” hypothesis. The crucial point to note, she contends, is that the subject is not *merely* the effect of power. She writes that

Foucault is very careful never (at least not as far as I am aware) to say that the subject is *merely* an effect of discourse and power. Instead, he says that it is *an* effect of discourse and power. [...] To say that subjects are the products of forces

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<sup>11</sup> Allen (2000) mentions several other authors who formulate this sort of criticism, including Habermas (1987), Hartsock (1990), and McCarthy (1991).

that are largely out of their control, as Foucault does, is not to say that they have no control over anything whatsoever. (Allen, 2000: 120)

So, on Allen's reading – which I endorse – the fact that a subject is constituted through relations of power does not alter the status of this subject as an *agent*. There is thus scope for agency left on Foucault's picture: modern power always affects, but doesn't therefore destroy, agency.

This means that my strategy, to distinguish modern power from domination in terms of their different effects on agency, remains available. But I still need to demonstrate that domination, as Foucault sketches it, can be said to compromise choice. In order to do so, I will further develop his brief characterisation of domination given in the interview, by pairing it with his notion of fields of possible action. If power relations structure an agent's field of possible action, and domination consists in *frozen* power relations, it follows that domination involves *frozen* fields of possible action. By implication, I propose, power amounts to domination when the fields of possible action it produces are fixed and inflexible. This yields a slightly more substantial account of domination: we can define it as *a power situation in which power relations, through the production of subjects, structure and freeze agents' field of possible action*. The idea is that an agent is stuck in a certain kind of subjectivity, which controls her agency by restricting the kinds of possibilities available to her.

Allen (1999), in fact, proposes to reformulate Foucault's characterisation of domination in a similar way. She writes that Foucault's description of states of domination as *congealing* the network of power relations seems too

strong, and suggests ‘instead [...] that in such states, power networks are *constricted*, so that the range of options that are available for those in subordinate positions to exercise power is limited’ (Allen, 1999: 45). On this basis, Allen concludes, ‘Foucault does offer a way of distinguishing between power and domination that, even if it is not completely adequate as it stands, can easily be reformulated to be consistent with the spirit of the bulk of his writings about power’ (Allen, 1999: 45).

At this point, the sketched difference between a flexible field of possible action and a frozen one remains a bit abstract. We can clarify the general difference by returning to the example of Emma. Imagine that Emma, at an early age, takes an interest in outer space. She is never encouraged to explore this interest, and forever after gifted princess dresses and baby dolls. She sees that only her male classmates are taken seriously when they dream of certain careers, such as that of an astronaut. The girls talk about motherhood and becoming a housewife. Let us also imagine that, at a later age, the possibility of becoming an astronaut doesn’t feature on her field of possible action, even though she is aware of this possibility *in abstracto*. Thus far, we can say that Emma’s field of possible action has been shaped by power relations. In and of itself, this does not suffice to conclude that she exists in a state of domination. As Foucault explains, power relations are everywhere, and they act upon us all without exception. How any modern subject understands herself, and how her field of possible action is shaped, is always informed by her social context, rife with power relations. We only have a case of domination if an agent’s field of possible action is *congealed*, meaning she cannot act differently than she does, because she cannot move beyond the particular way in which she is constituted.



When would this be the case, and how can we tell? Imagine, for example, that Emma reads a book about a young girl becoming an astronaut, and thinks it is weird of this lady to want to be an astronaut, as this is not appropriate for girls. If, after reading the book, Emma still can't see herself become an astronaut, this serves as an *indication* that, in this respect at least, her possibility field is frozen. And in this respect, then, we can consider her the subject of domination. The crucial point is not that her field of possible action was shaped or structured a certain way, but that it seems *fixed* in a certain way: it does not seem sufficiently flexible. She operates within a fixed set of possibilities that she *cannot* truly see beyond. It is not just so that, because of the specific power context she exists in, she is constituted a certain way: she seems unable to be or become otherwise. (The precise mechanisms at work here are likely complex and manifold: it might be, for example, that she has learnt to gain recognition through the performance of certain set gender roles, and the prospect of breaking them carries the threat of losing her source of recognition. Or it might be that Emma finds comfort in having her identity spelled out for her, so she must not face the difficult task of self-constitution, and so she eschews non-conformity.)

On this characterisation of domination, I submit, we can classify it as a form of oppression: I argue that, if power freezes my field of possible action, it thereby compromises my choices. This, admittedly, is not self-evident. For, unlike in repression, the dominated agent retains a significant degree of agency: she acts and chooses without any direct interference. But, I suggest, we can explain how her choices are compromised in reference to the idea of a corrupted will.

On my characterisation, recall, a will is corrupted if it is dispositioned to

choose a certain way, such that it is practically impossible not to make this very choice. We can see how precisely such a thing happens in domination. The dominated agent is dispositioned to act a certain way – namely according to the patterns prescribed by her subjectivity. But, crucially, she is stuck in this subjectivity and thus in its patterns, such that other ways of acting *cannot* seem to enter her field of possible action. As such, she cannot but act in the way she does. We have reason to believe that Emma, for example, is not just dispositioned to act in a certain way, but so dispositioned that she *cannot but* act this very way: it seems that she cannot but, in those areas where this is possible, act in a gender-conforming manner. In this way, I submit, her will is corrupted: for it *cannot but* choose one of these options, and is *practically* unable to pursue any alternative routes. On this basis, then, I submit that the dominated agent makes compromised choices. She still makes choices; but insofar as they are made within a frozen field of possibilities, I submit, these choices are compromised.

We can now reformulate the difference between repression and domination in terms of their effect on the agent's will, and the *way* in which they compromise choice. I submit that repression *bypasses*, or at least *overrides*, the will of the repressed agent. Though it may be too strong to claim that her agency is bypassed altogether – for she is still acting – it does seem fair to posit that her will is overridden. When I am directly interfered with, and forced into (refraining from) doing  $\varphi$ , I cannot exercise my own will – I am, in a sense, forced to exercise someone else's. On this basis, it is also clear that my choices aren't really my own. Domination, in contrast, can be said to *corrupt* the agent's will. Without being overridden, as happens in repression, the will of the dominated agent is still ac-

tive. It is, in a much deeper sense than in repression, the agent's own. The dominated agent is still, in an important sense, an agent, and a maker of choices. But, crucially, the horizon within which the will is operative is constrained: for the agent's field of possible action is frozen. We thus have two distinct forms of oppression: domination and repression, both of which compromise choice, but in a different manner. Repression directly compromises choice by forcing certain possibilities upon an agent. Domination, in contrast, fixes its subjects into a certain horizon of possibilities. (Of course, these two categories are conceptual, and in reality the distinction may not always hold as clearly.)

### D.3 Domination and the Corrupted Will

Thus understood, Foucault's notion of domination sheds further light on *how* a will can be corrupted. We saw that a corrupted will means the agent cannot but choose  $\varphi$ , but we could not explain in what sense precisely this agent *cannot but*  $\varphi$ , since this impossibility did not correspond to any physical or metaphysical impossibility to  $\neg \varphi$ . The idea of a frozen field of possible action offers one possible explanation as to *how* such an agent *cannot but*  $\varphi$ . Foucault's crucial insight, in this context, is that agency has an important *perceptive* dimension: our agency takes place within a *field of possible action*, which consists in the possibilities for action we can see. Importantly, our field of possible action consists in those possibilities that we can see as viable for *us* specifically – not in those we are merely aware of in the abstract. This field of possibilities is the context within which the will operates – within which agency takes place and choices are made. Factors influencing this field will, consequentially, influence the operation of the will. Crucially, then, certain factors may *freeze* our field of possible action. In this case,

something influences which possibilities we *can* see as viable. This will restrict the scope of our field of possible action, and thus restrict our agency. When our field of possible action is frozen, possibilities outside of this field, even if we are aware of them, will not seem viable to us. And this corrupts our will: for it is forced to operate within a fixed set of possibilities. We thus are dispositioned to  $\varphi$ , in such a way that we *cannot but*  $\varphi$ . And the reason for this is that we practically *cannot* see certain kinds of possibilities as viable routes of action.

This does not mean, though, that this kind of agent can just do *one* thing. Indeed, a whole array of possibilities remains open to her: Emma, for example, can make different kinds of choices in all areas of her life. Importantly, when a field of possible action is frozen, this does not mean that agency is bypassed. It is still, indeed, a field of *possible action*. One way to capture this idea is to say that the agent's will is still operative. Crucially, however, her field of possible action, within which the will is operative, is frozen. This means that the agent is *dispositioned* to act within this frozen field. As such, we can say that her will is corrupted.

In light of this, we can refer back to the difference between a will which is merely dispositioned to  $\varphi$ , and a will which is corrupted. If I offer you ten pounds to pick the green lollipop, this should normally only disposition you to do so. But you will probably still perceive picking the other one as a viable option, as something which you could do. In contrast, when my sister threatens to reveal my secret, perhaps *not* paying her rent to appease her will just seem unviable to me. The difference between these respective influences, indeed, reflects the difference between the effects on agency of power in general and those of domination specifically.

The notion of a frozen field of possible action thus tracks the same kind of tension which pervades Augustine's notion of a corrupted will: how an agent, even though still exercising agency, nonetheless makes compromised choices. Notably, these choices are not compromised because of any direct interference or any sort of strict impossibility to do otherwise; nor are they only compromised if the agent intends or wants to do otherwise. They are compromised insofar as she is dispositioned to  $\varphi$ , because she cannot *perceive* any alternatives as viable.

## E. CONCLUSION

In sum, the notion of a field of possible action allows us to see how a will may be corrupted: it allows us to see how, through influencing her field of possible action, an agent's options for choice can be constrained *even* if none are explicitly forced upon her, nor taken away. In domination, this happens through *subjection*: the dominated subject will understand herself and the world in a certain way, which determines which possibilities she can see as open to her, as the kind of things she does and can do. My proposal, then, is that this account of domination can, roughly, serve as a model for the kind of oppression that takes place *internally* in self-oppression. In the previous chapter, I hypothesised that, in hyperkrasia, practical reason compromises the agent's own choices by corrupting her own will. Thus far, however, we could not yet explain what exactly this would look like, as we had no detailed account of how a will could be corrupted. Foucault's account of domination, then, offers us a more elaborate description of how this may happen. Drawing on these insights, we can further elaborate our account of hyperkrasia: we can now posit that practical reason corrupts the will

by freezing the agent's fields of possible action. With this further insight, we can refine our hypothesis:

*hyperkrasia is a real form of agency, in which practical reason becomes authoritarian, exercising a form of self-control which freezes the agent's field of possible action, thereby corrupting her will and compromising choice.*

Whenever the hyperkratic agent finds a way to pursue the end she is fixated on, her field of possible action freezes: for, due to her self-inflicted pressure, she is dispositioned to then pursue this end, in such a way that *not* doing so just doesn't seem like a viable option. She thus cannot but  $\varphi$ , because she does not see other possibilities as viable. Her choice to  $\varphi$  (and, by extension, her choices to  $\neg \varphi$ ) are in this sense compromised.

Of course, there are limits to the analogy with domination. For one, the precise way in which the will is corrupted seems somewhat different. For Foucault, domination is a form of oppression which does not necessarily feature any *pressure*. When he describes instances of modern domination, he describes subjects which are *obedient*, and almost mindlessly follow certain patterns of action. In hyperkrasia, in contrast, there is a pressure involved: this, on my description, is a characteristic element of self-oppression. Practical reason can freeze a field of possible action through the implementation of a certain kind of *pressure* – which compels her so strongly to choose  $\varphi$  that not doing so does not seem viable. In other words: in domination, the possibilities an agent will see before her are fixed by her subjectivity; in self-oppression, they are fixed because of a pressure to act a certain way. In this sense, the effects of domination and self-oppression on an agent's field of possible action are similar, but the exact manner in

which this effect is obtained may differ.

Foucault thus allows us to further elaborate our account of hyperkrasia, and my proposal is that in hyperkrasia practical reason corrupts the will by freezing the agent's field of possible action. Before we can examine *how* practical reason may corrupt an agent's own will, however, we must further unpack some of the ideas I have proposed in this chapter. The key notion I will adopt from Foucault is that of a field of possible action. The reason for this is that this notion gestures towards a *perceptive* dimension in agency, which deeply influences our actions by shaping the horizon within which our agency takes place. But, at this point, the idea of a field of possible action, and how it can be frozen, is insufficiently clear. A field of possible action, consisting in the options for action which seem viable to me, is just my interpretation of a turn of phrase only once mentioned by Foucault. To understand whether and how an agent may freeze her *own* field of possible action, we need a deeper understanding of how this can happen in general. Thus, before we can understand how agents may do this to themselves, we must further unpack the general notion of frozen fields of possible action. What are the features of a field of possible action? What kinds of possibilities does it consist in? What does it mean for a possibility to seem viable? How can we tell if a field of possible action is frozen? How exactly can this happen?

For these reasons, the next chapter will not quite yet turn to the question of self-oppression. Instead, it will build a more elaborate account of the notion of field of possible action, and how such a field can freeze. In doing so, it will turn to yet another philosophical tradition: phenomenology. More precisely, I will consult Merleau-Ponty's account of action, which pays considerable attention to

the role of perception in agency – and more specifically the perception of opportunities for action. Only once we have a more robust account of frozen fields of possible actions, formulated against the backdrop of Merleau-Ponty's thought, will I construct our final account of hyperkrasia – something I will get to in the final chapter.



## IV. Merleau-Ponty

### A. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I showed how Foucault's notion of a field of possible action brings into view an approach to agency which looks not just at the agent, but also at how the agent perceives herself and the world around her. Foucault, however, does not offer an account of what he means with this notion; nor does he offer any conceptual tools to further develop it. In order to do so, we need a set of philosophical tools which can help spell out the way in which an agent perceives possibilities, and how this relationship informs her agency. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of action – in which *phenomenal fields* play a key role – offers something of this sort.<sup>1</sup> Loosely drawing on this account, I will offer a more substantial and detailed characterisation of fields of possible action. In a next step, I will explain how a field of possible action, thus understood, may *freeze*. More precisely, I will suggest that when this happens, a certain opportunity is *hypersalient* for an agent, which means that it solicits her to act with extreme urgency. This has as a result that other opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> One may wonder whether this turn to Merleau-Ponty is justified in light of Foucault's own rejection of the phenomenological tradition (see, for example, Foucault, 1966/2002: xiv). But my aim is not to marry the whole of Foucault's project with the phenomenological tradition. My aim is merely to further develop one of Foucault's insights drawing on some specific aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thought – and this, again, for the specific purpose of conceptualising self-oppression. That being said, I think there do exist some stark similarities between Foucault's and Merleau-Ponty's thought. For detailed discussions of the relation between Foucault's thought and phenomenology, see, e.g., Crossley (1994), May (2003), and Han (1998, part I).

seem *unviable* to her, which excludes them from her field of possible action. I then hypothesise that, in hyperkrasia, *practical reason* has precisely this effect.

This chapter thus turns to yet another scholarship to further complete our picture of hyperkrasia: phenomenology. Again, I will not be able, in this chapter, to do justice to the vastness and complexity of the phenomenological tradition. I will merely single out a few philosophical tools which we may use to understand self-oppression, found in the works of Merleau-Ponty. This means I will only discuss those elements of his thought which are of direct relevance to this thesis – my characterisation of his views is by no means complete. It also means I will focus mostly on whichever reading of his works is most useful for my purposes, rather than engaging in interpretative exegesis. For these reasons, I will mostly rely on Merleau-Ponty's thought as presented in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1978), since this work contains a great deal of his views on human behaviour and action. Moreover, for the most part, I will rely directly on Komarine Romdenh-Romluc's (2011, 2012) reading of Merleau-Ponty's account of action. This reading is but one interpretation, and is certainly not compatible with all others. But, again, I am merely appealing to Merleau-Ponty in order to take some of his conceptual building blocks for developing my account of hyperkrasia.

## **B. MERLEAU-PONTY AND PHENOMENAL FIELDS**

In the previous chapter, I loosely characterised fields of possible action as consisting in those routes of action which seem viable to an agent. This characterisation was construed in light of a Foucauldian, and political, reading of fields of possible action. Foucault, as we have seen, used this turn of phrase to describe

the effects that specific modern power relations have on individuals' agency. Accordingly, I suggested that fields of possible action are frozen whenever *power relations* are (namely in states of domination). In this chapter, I will offer a more *general* interpretation of the notion of fields of possible action, and how they can be frozen. For the notion can also be applied in a much wider context. Fields of possible action – on my view – are not just constituted through power relations: which routes of action present to someone depends on a variety of different factors, and not all of them can be reduced to relations of power. My field of possible action can be informed, for example, by my habits or the state of my mental health; as well as factors like an unexpected snow storm, or the way in which the shelves at a supermarket have been organised. Similarly, they can also be *frozen* by things other than power relations. From now on, when speaking of fields of possible action, I am doing so in the *general* sense, and not in the specific Foucauldian sense.

In order to construct this more general interpretation of possibility fields, we must consider how they are constituted, and how they can be frozen, not just by power relations but in general. It is these questions, I suggest, which Merleau-Ponty's account of action can help us answer.

### *B.1 Phenomenal Fields*

Merleau-Ponty's account of action, which is a phenomenological account, is of course deeply embedded in his wider account of *perception*. One of the most crucial aspects of perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is that it is not just an objective, but also a deeply subjective matter. Perception is always perception by a specific subject: 'I cannot view the world from nowhere,' Romdenh-Romluc explains, 'I

always perceive the world from my own particular perspective' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 19). This means, for Merleau-Ponty, that we do not, first and foremost, perceive things in the world as objects with quantifiable features (such as weight, size, or colour). Rather, we immediately perceive them as things which have meaning, which *speak to us*. The "world" as we perceive it is a meaningful context in which to exist, and in which everything exists in a meaningful and interconnected manner – rather than just an objective arrangement of things which can be observed "from nowhere". Another way to put this is that we always immediately *interpret* the world: when I hold a pan, I do not perceive a metal round object with a black stick poking out – I perceive a *pan*, which is something to cook food in. My perception of the object is an immediate interpretation of it. And this holds for the world around us in general.

Another important aspect of perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is that we perceive the world as inviting us to *respond* to it. The pan, for example, invites me to cook food in it (though, depending on the context, it might also invite me to do other things: e.g. slam a wooden spoon on it in order to use it as a percussion instrument). We perceive the world as a set of possibilities which invite us to respond this way or another. As Romdenh-Romluc explains this point,

[t]he perceiver perceives their environment as 'inviting' them to interact with it in certain ways, as 'offering' certain possibilities for action and 'disallowing' others. In other words, the perceiver is not confronted with things that have merely 'objective' properties such as size, shape, and so on. Instead, things look edible, reachable, kickable etc. (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 74)

Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it more cryptically, 'to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call' (Merleau-Ponty,

1945/1978: 160-161). As such, our perception continually invites us to respond.

Merleau-Ponty calls the world as it appears to perception the *phenomenal field*: ‘The phenomenal field’, Romdenh-Romluc writes, ‘is the worldly region that is presented in experience, considered as it appears to the perceiver’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 104). This, for Merleau-Ponty, consists in a collection of perceived invitations to respond. My hypothesis, then, is that the notion of a phenomenal field can help illuminate that of a field of possible action. But before I propose my account of fields of possible action in its light, we must first get a better grip on Merleau-Ponty’s account of phenomenal fields.

A first thing to note is that Merleau-Ponty does not always refer to the content of perceptual experience as the phenomenal field: he posits that, through perception, the phenomenal field gets transformed into the ‘*Lebenswelt*’, ‘which is the intersubjective world of more or less determinate things’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 23). Romdenh-Romluc explains that the phenomenal field refers to the stage of perception which comes *before* the *Lebenswelt*: the content of the phenomenal field is just phenomena, whilst the *Lebenswelt* is imbued with meaning. Note, however, that according to Romdenh-Romluc, ‘[n]o clear line can be drawn between the phenomenal field and the *Lebenswelt*, which retains elements of ambiguity and indeterminacy’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 23). We sometimes see things without being sure what they are, encounter new interpretations of certain objects, et cetera. Romdenh-Romluc points out that the phenomenal field ‘itself admits of varying stages’, and that sometimes, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s analysis focuses on the *Lebenswelt*, but at other times it focuses on the phenomenal field’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 23). For the sake of simplicity, I disregard this distinction and simply refer to the content of perception as the ‘phenomenal field’. Thus

understood, the phenomenal field *is* imbued with meaning.

## B.2 How are Phenomenal Fields Formed?

A next question is how phenomenal fields, thus considered, are constituted: what determines which opportunities to respond I will perceive? According to Romdenh-Romluc's reading of Merleau-Ponty, there are three main factors determining my phenomenal field: (1) what I *can* do; (2) *where* I am; and (3) what I am *currently* doing. In addition, Romdenh-Romluc holds that our phenomenal fields are also determined in part by (4) what we *could* do. In this section, I will consider these four factors in turn.

### (1) *What we can do: our motor skills*

Which opportunities for action I perceive, first of all, depends on what I *can* do. Merleau-Ponty refers to our physical capacities as *motor skills*. Romdenh-Romluc explains that motor skills *are physical abilities to do something*: 'To possess a motor skill', she writes, 'is to be able to do something. They encompass very simple capacities, such as the ability to scratch oneself, through to more complex skills, such as the ability to play guitar' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 77). According to Merleau-Ponty, an agent normally only perceives opportunities for action which she has the motor skill to perform. If I am not capable of, say, riding a bicycle, I will not perceive a bicycle as inviting me to do ride it. Thus, the content of our phenomenal field first of all depends on what kinds of things I am *capable* of doing. 'The perception of an opportunity to act', Romdenh-Romluc explains, 'is simultaneously an awareness of oneself as possessing the power to perform that action' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 106). When, during my gardening session,

I perceive a possibility of pulling out some weeds, this presents to me as something which I *can* do: I can move my arm in the right direction, grasp the roots at an appropriate point, get my muscles to pull them away from the earth with adequate force, et cetera.

This relates to the fact that a phenomenal field is always specific to the person who perceives it: accordingly, perceived invitations for action are always opportunities specific to the perceiving agent. Perceived opportunities are always opportunities *for me*: 'I perceive my environment as demanding certain actions; I perceive it as requiring *me* to act in certain ways' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 106). When I perceive the opportunity to pull out some weeds, this does not present as something *someone* could do. It presents specifically as an invitation to me: it is something *I* can do.

In fact, according to Romdenh-Romluc, the very perception of a certain possibility to  $\varphi$  is itself already an exercise of my motor skill to  $\varphi$ . This is so, she explains, because knowing how to do something *involves* recognising opportunities to do so. 'Acquiring a motor skill', she writes, is 'partly a matter of learning to perceive opportunities to exercise it' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 77). Once I am able to do a certain kind of thing – cook rice, pet a dog – I will recognise opportunities to do so whenever they arise. I can only recognise these opportunities as such *because* I am capable of taking them up. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, recognising these opportunities is itself already an exercise of my ability to do these things. In sum, Romdenh-Romluc puts it, 'motor skills furnish the subject with ways of perceiving the world' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 78).

(2) *Where we are: our environment*

Secondly, the content of our phenomenal field is also determined by where we are: our perception is first of all a perception of our direct environment, at a specific time and place ( $t_x$ ). Usually, I will only perceive opportunities for action which are actually possible at  $t_x$ : I must perceive my environment as *suitable* for them.<sup>2</sup> What I can do at  $t_x$  heavily depends on what can be done at  $t_x$ . ‘To exercise any motor skill,’ Romdenh-Romluc writes, ‘one must be in the right kind of environment – for example, to exercise my skill at horse-riding, my surroundings must contain a horse’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 77).

Note that what a perceived environment will invite me to do is not just a function of its “objective” features. The opportunities I perceive, are perceived in light of my *perceived* environment, not my environment “as such”: ‘motor skills are not exercised in response to the agent’s environment where this is understood in merely physical terms. They are exercised in response to the agent’s *perceived* surroundings’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 81). My perceived environment is always seen from my very particular perspective, and as such imbued with meaning: a bike only invites me to ride on it because I interpret it as a bike, which is something-to-ride-on. But one’s perceived environment also includes, for example, one’s *social landscape*, i.e. the social and cultural meaning a certain setting has to the perceiver. Merleau-Ponty observes in *The Phenomenology of*

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<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, there seem to be exceptions to this rule. Romdenh-Romluc argues that agents can sometimes exercise motor skills which are ‘relevant to merely possible environments’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 95), rather than their actual one – for example when a kickboxing instructor fights an imaginary opponent. Clearly, her environment is not exactly *suitable* for fighting as it lacks an actual opponent, but because the agent can imagine a suitable scenario, she is able to exercise these motor skills.



*Perception* that ‘the conventions of the social group, our set of listeners, immediately elicit from us the words, attitudes and tone which are fitting’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1978: 106). For example, during a business meeting, I will perceive this environment as inviting me to avoid using swearwords. This also relates to the fact that, as Romdenh-Romluc points out, ‘perception has an affective or emotive dimension’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 74), which also influences which opportunities for action will invite me. Romdenh-Romluc writes that ‘Merleau-Ponty describes perceptual experience as having an affective dimension which contributes to the subject’s perception of their surroundings as requiring certain forms of behaviour’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 78-79).

This underlines, once more, how our perceptions of the world are deeply individual. My personal history, the state of my mental health, or the way I understand myself can all influence how I perceive an environment, and thereby influence which opportunities for action I will perceive in it. If I am particularly shy, for example, it might simply not occur to me to talk to a stranger at the bar, whilst another person may walk in and immediately strike up a conversation with the person next to her.

### *(3) What we are currently doing: our task or project*

A third major factor influencing our phenomenal field, according to Romdenh-Romluc, is what Merleau-Ponty calls our current task or project: that which we are in the process of doing at a given time. At any given  $t_x$  – unless, perhaps, we are unconscious – we are always already in the process of doing something. This will disclose to us those opportunities in our environment which are *relevant*: my task functions as a “filter” for the opportunities open to me at  $t_x$ , and generally

discloses those that relate to it. For example, when I am gardening, I am more likely to perceive the opportunity for specific activities such as cutting the grass or pulling out weeds, than, say, doing a pirouette, even though this is a possible route of action for me at  $t_x$ . Romdenh-Romluc explains that '[t]he behaviour one perceives one's surroundings as requiring is partly determined by one's current task or project' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 74). In this context, she refers to an example given by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942/1963) of a player on a football field. The field presents to the player in a certain manner: 'They do not merely see the spaces between the players on the opposing team as places where no one is standing, but as 'openings', that is, opportunities to pass the ball to a team mate or to progress towards the goal' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 75). Crucially, the field only shows up as such because the player is engaged in the project of football-playing: 'the player only perceives the pitch like this when they are playing football. If they accidentally wander on to the pitch during a game whilst walking their dog, they will see the ball as to-be-avoided, rather than as to-be-intercepted' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 75).

#### (4) What we *could* do: The Power to Reckon with the Possible

On the picture presented so far, our phenomenal field consists in perceived opportunities for me at  $t_x$  which are relevant to my current task. But our phenomenal field, on Romdenh-Romluc's reading at least, contains *more* perceived opportunities than that: it is not restricted to *task-related* possibilities only. She argues that a normal agent will also perceive opportunities for action which relate to *merely possible* tasks, which she would be capable of performing at  $t_x$ . This is due, Romdenh-Romluc argues, to what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the power to reckon with the

possible'. 'One manifestation of this power', she writes, 'is the perception of opportunities for action, over and above just those that relate to what one is currently doing' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 94). As such, 'the normal subject [...] also perceive[s] the world as requiring actions that relate to merely possible tasks' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 95). For example, when I am gardening, I may not only perceive opportunities to pull out weeds and cut the grass, but I may also perceive the opportunity of jumping into the swimming pool, even though this is not relevant to my task at  $t_x$ . This means that our phenomenal field can also include possibilities which go beyond our current task.

In fact, on Romdenh-Romluc's reading, this is *always* the case. In normal agents, she argues, the capacity to perceive alternatives is always present *and* exercised. On her reading, any normal agent *continuously* perceives alternative possibilities. She is clear that 'the power to reckon with the possible is implicated in *all* of the normal human agent's behaviour. One *always* perceives more possibilities for action than those that correspond to one's current task' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 100, emphasises mine). Thus, our phenomenal field not only *can* include alternative possibilities: it *always* includes them.

This might seem odd. In many situations, it feels like I don't perceive any alternative routes of action. When I go downstairs in the morning, and absent-mindedly start brushing my teeth whilst reminiscing my dreams, it does not occur to me to do anything else. One may doubt that, in this moment, I perceive any alternative invitations for action. Yet we must assume that the power to reckon with the possible is always minimally present. This becomes clearer once we recall how low the threshold is, for Merleau-Ponty, to perceive an invitation to ac-

tion. On Merleau-Ponty's account, simply to *recognise* something implies perceiving an opportunity for action: 'To recognise something', Romdenh-Romluc writes,

is to perceive it as familiar, and things appear familiar when one is skilled at – or in the habit of – interacting with them. To perceive something as familiar is thus to perceive it as something for which a particular form of behaviour is appropriate. (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 94)

When I walk past the shower, for example, I do not *first and foremost* see it as a large glass box – I first of all perceive it as something to-wash-myself-in, even if I do not consider doing so in that moment. As such, I perceive the shower as inviting me to act, thus disclosing an alternative route of action – *even* if this invitation is not currently relevant to me, and *even* if this invitation doesn't occur to my conscious mind. The power to reckon with the possible is thus continually exercised, even if we are fully absorbed in our projects.

In sum, for a large part, the opportunities we perceive at  $t_x$  will be ones relevant to our current task. But we also always perceive invitations to alternative possibilities. This is not to say, of course, that an agent will perceive *all* opportunities an environment offers at  $t_x$ . there are many opportunities within any environment, which I am capable of taking up, but which I do not perceive. This will be particularly the case for far-fetched opportunities: for example, in my current environment, I could use the plant pot on my office desk to smash the window: but – before constructing this example – I did not perceive this opportunity at all.

### B.3 Urgency and Saliency

Our phenomenal field thus consists in perceived opportunities to act. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, we do not just perceive opportunities to act as if from a distance, seeing what might be done at a certain time: when we perceive an opportunity, it always already *solicits us*. It ‘pulls’ us, as it were, towards action. ‘[P]erceived demands for action’, Romdenh-Romluc writes, ‘immediately *draw forth* the agent’s behaviour’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 90, emphasis mine). The agent does not just perceive opportunities to act, but is simultaneously and immediately invited to also act on them: ‘at any one time, the agent does not perceive their surroundings as offering a disparate collection of actions. Instead they perceive it as *demanding* a certain form of behaviour’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 75, emphasis mine). Here, it really comes to the fore how, on Merleau-Ponty’s account of action, the perceptive and the executive dimension of agency are very tightly knit together.

But, as we have sketched it so far, a phenomenal field consists in *several* perceived opportunities to act: at any  $t_x$ , I thus perceive a number of different opportunities at once. Clearly, not all of these can effectively draw me into action. On Merleau-Ponty’s view, I will take up those invitations for action which solicit me *most strongly*. In this context, Romdenh-Romluc introduces two helpful notions: *urgency* and *saliency*. In her 2011 book, she mentions that ‘perceived demands for action differ in their urgency’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 95). It is those demands which are ‘perceived as most urgent’, she writes, which will ‘initiate action’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 95). In a 2012 contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, she further illuminates this point. She there defines the urgency of a perceived demand for action as ‘the strength with

which [it] draw[s] the agent to act' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 200). Urgency thus refers to the strength of a solicitation. She also introduces the joint notion of *salience*: 'The urgency with which the agent is solicited', she writes, 'will depend on what might roughly be called the salience of the affordance for the agent' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 200).<sup>3</sup> Salience is thus a quality of an opportunity perceived by an agent, which determines how strongly this perception will solicit her to act: an agent, Romdenh-Romluc writes, 'will experience those affordances that are most salient for her as soliciting her most strongly. Less salient affordances will solicit her less strongly' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 200). In this context, the etymology of the term is quite illuminating: *salience* comes from the Latin *salire*, which means *to leap*.<sup>4</sup> Salience, indeed, refers to the quality of standing out from one's surroundings: salient opportunities are those which, for a certain agent, 'leap out' over others.

In sum, the different perceived opportunities to act, which make up the agent's phenomenal field at  $t_x$ , will have different degrees of salience for her, soliciting her with corresponding urgency. Her behaviour, then, 'will be drawn forth by the most urgent solicitations' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 2000). A next question is what *determines* the salience of a perceived opportunity. One of the main factors determining salience, Romdenh-Romluc points out, is the agent's current *task* or *project*. Which opportunities to act will 'leap out' for me over others at  $t_x$  will be deeply influenced by what I am doing at  $t_x$ :

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<sup>3</sup> Romdenh-Romluc uses the notion 'affordance', which overlaps with my use of the term 'opportunity'. Roughly, it refers to something an agent is physically capable of doing in a certain environment.

<sup>4</sup> See Hoad (1996: 414).

What the agent is currently doing makes certain opportunities for action – those that are relevant to her current task – salient for her. These opportunities will then solicit her more urgently, and so play a greater role in drawing forth her behaviour. (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 204)

For example, when I am painting in my shed, this will render relevant opportunities in my environment more salient – such as colour-mixing, selecting the right brush, or taking some distance from the canvas to assess whether I got the perspective right. Other opportunities which I may perceive in my environment, such as riding the bike stood at the back of the shed, will be less salient for me and thus not draw me into action.

My current task thus confers salience upon certain opportunities. Note, though, that other factors may also influence the salience of perceived opportunities. Romdenh-Romluc mentions that, '[n]o doubt, there are a number of different factors that contribute to salience' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 204). For example, when a task may be achieved in a variety of ways, other factors will further determine which way is most salient to me: I decide to check in on my grandfather, who is in hospital, but my aversion to hospital environments makes the opportunity to give him a phone call a more salient way to perform this task than paying him a visit in person. Furthermore, *which* tasks I will take up in the first place will depend on which tasks are most salient for me. This can again be determined by many factors. When I am in a good mood, for example, I might be more inclined to donate to the local food bank when visiting the supermarket, but when I have just lost my job, I may grumpily pass by the food bank and not

donate anything to it.<sup>5</sup> My mood here influences the salience of a perceived possible task, and so determines whether I take it up at all. (If I do take up the task, this *in turn* will render relevant possibilities salient for me: I grab some tins from the shelf to donate, etc.)

## C. FIELDS OF POSSIBLE ACTION

### C.1 Phenomenal Fields and Fields of Possible Action

This concludes my initial sketch of Merleau-Ponty's notion of a phenomenal field. On the picture I have presented, largely following Romdenh-Romluc's reading, a phenomenal field consists in several perceived opportunities for action, which have different degrees of salience. The most salient opportunities will draw the agent into action. I will now explain how the notion of a phenomenal field may illuminate the notion of a *field of possible action*. In this section, I will discuss the relation between phenomenal fields, as Merleau-Ponty understands them, and fields of possible action, as I understand them. The main difference, I suggest, is that some perceived opportunities belonging to my phenomenal field at  $t_x$  may nevertheless not belong to my field of possible action at  $t_x$ . This can happen in three main ways: (1) a perceived opportunity may not be an opportunity to *act* proper; (2) a perceived opportunity may not be an *actual* possibility; (3) a perceived opportunity may not seem *viable* for the agent. I will discuss these three possibilities in turn.

(1) A first possibility is that a phenomenal field may include perceived

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of the effects of good mood on helping others, see e.g. Isen and Levin (1972).



opportunities to *respond* to the world which – arguably – aren’t opportunities to *act* proper. We saw that, for Merleau-Ponty, agents perceive their surroundings as a set of opportunities to *respond* to the world. But, some might argue, not all opportunities to respond are necessarily opportunities for *action* in the full sense of the term. Thus far, I have not distinguished between perceived invitations to *respond* to the world and perceived invitations to *act*.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, however, I may sometimes perceive the world as inviting me to *respond* but not *per se* to *act*. For example, if I look at my coffee mug, this can appear to me as something-to-drink-from. But it may also appear as a dear friend’s gift. In the latter case, my perception may invite me to respond to it with, say, warm feelings. But this is not, some might say, an invitation to *action* exactly.

Admittedly, for Merleau-Ponty, *all* perception involves activity. He holds that perception is always *active*: it is not just the passive reception of sense data, but always implies a sort of active engagement with the world. ‘Perception on this account’, Romdenh-Romluc writes, ‘is an activity of the perceiver. [...] They invest their environment with a bodily significance’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 97). But this does not mean that the kind of activity involved in perception amounts to *agency* in the full sense. Moreover, it does not mean that the responses we perceive the world to demand *themselves* amount to actions proper.

Granted, Merleau-Ponty argues that even *thought* is expressed and therefore embodied – he conceptualises private thought as silent speech, which he argues is a bodily activity (see Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 187-188). As such,

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<sup>6</sup> Romdenh-Romluc does not seem to make such a distinction, though she sometimes speaks of *behaviour* and other times of *actions*, a distinction which may reflect a similar difference.

even a sense of gratitude when I look at my mug might count as a bodily activity for Merleau-Ponty. But even if we grant this, this *still* does not mean every expression or bodily activity amounts to action proper. All responses to the world may be bodily activity, sure, but this does not, in any obvious way, classify them as actions.

It remains, of course, an open question where precisely to draw the line between proper actions and mere responses, and some may not want to draw this line at all. Remaining agnostic as to whether or not all responses amount to actions proper, I will from now on speak of perceived invitations to *act* specifically. Thus, erring on the side of caution, I propose that a field of possible action consists solely in perceived opportunities to *act* – whether or not one wants to include all opportunities to respond within that group. I thereby leave it open whether there *may* be perceived possibilities to respond which belong to my phenomenal field, but which would be excluded from my field of possible action because they are not possibilities to act proper. This is a first, potential, difference between phenomenal fields and fields of possible action.

(2) A second potential difference concerns the fact that some *perceived* opportunities for action may be *actually false*. It may happen that a phenomenal field includes perceived opportunities to act which do not correspond to *actual possibilities*. Whenever I perceive a possibility to  $\varphi$ , I *implicitly assume* this is an actual possibility for me at  $t_x$ : I both take myself to be capable of performing  $\varphi$ , and I take the performance of  $\varphi$  to be actually possible in my current environment. But my perception may be mistaken. It may be, for one, that my motor skill to  $\varphi$  is defective, such that I may perceive an opportunity to  $\varphi$  but lack the phys-

ical capacity to perform  $\varphi$ . An example of such a case is in fact discussed by Merleau-Ponty himself in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: he discusses the case of a veteran with a phantom limb. The veteran still perceives certain opportunities for action – he might get up from his chair in an attempt to walk – even though he is no longer capable of actually performing these actions. According to Merleau-Ponty, the veteran has defective motor skills: he can still exercise them insofar as he can perceive opportunities to do certain things, but is no longer able to effectively perform them.

Secondly, it may happen that my environment isn't actually suitable to  $\varphi$  at  $t_x$ . Normally, I only perceive opportunities to  $\varphi$  if they are *actually possible* at  $t_x$ .<sup>7</sup> But it may happen that I perceive an opportunity which isn't actually there, not because my motor skill to do  $\varphi$  is defective, but because  $\varphi$  isn't actually possible at  $t_x$ : for example, I might see a swamp but take it for a patch of grass I can walk on.

In both these cases, I perceive an opportunity to act which isn't an *actual* opportunity. This means I will not be able to act upon these possibilities: there is a technical barrier, as it were, between the perceived opportunity and my execution of it. Such a perceived possibility, on my view, will belong to my phenomenal field but not to my field of possible action. Thus, a field of possible action at  $t_x$  consists only in perceived opportunities to *act* which are *actual* opportunities at  $t_x$ .

(3) Lastly, there is a third way in which a perceived opportunity may

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<sup>7</sup> Though, as noted, Romdenh-Romluc argues that an agent may also respond to possible environments in some cases (see footnote 2 in this chapter).

not belong on an agent's field of possible action. Sometimes, an agent may perceive an opportunity to act, which she is physically capable of performing, and which is technically possible at  $t_x$ , yet feel unable to take up this opportunity in action. On a visit to Chicago, my friend and I are on the 103<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Willis Tower, which has a glass-bottomed observation deck. My friend, keen to take some pictures on the deck, heads over there and urges me to come along. But the very sight of the glass floor makes me feel nauseous, and I feel like I just *cannot* step onto the deck. If this feeling of inability is sufficiently strong, we might want to say this opportunity, though belonging to my phenomenal field, does not belong to my field of *possible action*. Or, to give another example, a robber holds me at gunpoint and commands me to hand over my wallet. Technically, it is possible for me to *not* hand it over. But in that moment, as I fear for my life, this opportunity just doesn't seem available to me. It may belong to my phenomenal field, but it is arguably excluded from my field of possible action.

As mentioned, in these cases, there is no technical barrier preventing me from acting upon the perceived opportunity: it is technically possible to walk onto the deck, for example, and I also have the motor skills to (it just requires that I walk onto it). My apparent inability to act on this opportunity seems rather a perceptive issue. There is something about the way I *perceive* this opportunity that keeps me from acting upon it: I do not perceive it to be a *viable* opportunity for me. We could say that there is a *perceptive barrier* preventing me from acting upon it, which excludes it from my field of possible action.

In sum, on my characterisation, a field of possible action consists in perceived opportunities to respond which (1) are opportunities to *act*, (2) are *actual* opportunities at  $t_x$ , and (3) do not lie behind a perceptive barrier.

## C.2 Frozen Fields of Possible Action

This, finally, brings us to the main question of the chapter: how may a field of possible action, thus conceived, be frozen? In the last chapter, I proposed that a field of possible action is frozen if an agent is forced to make choices within a fixed set of possibilities, such that she *cannot but*  $\varphi$ . This, I argued, is one way in which our will can be corrupted. I have also specified that the agent's inability to  $\neg \varphi$  is not of a metaphysical or physical kind, but rather a *perceptive* issue: the agent cannot perceive opportunities to  $\neg \varphi$  as viable. On this basis, I propose that the key to further conceptualising the idea of a frozen field of possible action is the newly introduced notion of a *perceptive barrier*. In brief, my proposal is that, when an agent's field of possible action is frozen, this is due to a *perceptive disposition*, which leads to recurrent perceptive barriers. In this section, I shall unpack this proposal in further detail.

First of all, we need to get clear on the notion of a perceptive barrier. How are perceptive barriers possible? What are their characteristics? As mentioned before, a perceptive barrier has nothing to do with physical or metaphysical impossibilities. It is also clear that a perceptive barrier does not mean the agent does not *perceive* certain opportunities: it is, precisely, a barrier lying *between* the agent's phenomenal field, which consists in perceived opportunities, and her field of possible action. I definitely *perceive* the opportunity to step onto the Willis Tower deck. Neither is my problem that this opportunity does not *occur* to my conscious mind: my friend is asking me to join her on the deck, making me very aware of the opportunity. The problem lies rather with *the way* I perceive this opportunity.

How an agent perceives opportunities to act thus can, I hypothesise, prevent her from acting upon them. But how precisely could that work? I want to explain how this is possible in reference to the notion of salience. More precisely, I propose that perceived opportunities can be *hypersalient* for an agent. When an opportunity to  $\varphi$  is hypersalient for an agent at  $t_x$ , it solicits her with *extreme* urgency, such that *not* doing  $\varphi$  just doesn't seem viable to her. As a result, any opportunity which involves *not*  $\varphi$ -ing at  $t_x$  seem inaccessible to her: they come to lie behind a perceptive barrier. This barrier is a *perceptive* one because it results from the way the agent perceives the opportunity to  $\varphi$ , and consequently all other opportunities on her phenomenal field at  $t_x$  which involve not  $\varphi$ -ing. As I look at the glass floor of the observation deck, my fear makes the opportunity to *avoid* the deck hypersalient: it seems *so* urgent to me that any opportunities which involve *not* avoiding it don't stand a chance at drawing me into action. I am too strongly solicited by the very urgent opportunity to avoid it. As a result, the opportunity to walk onto the balcony seems unviable to me: I feel like I just *can't*.

This, I submit, freezes my field of possible action. Since any opportunity which involves not  $\varphi$ -ing seems unviable to me, I am forced to act and choose within a fixed possibility set. Of course, the hypersalient opportunity to  $\varphi$  may itself comprise many others: I can avoid the observation deck by just standing there, by walking around inside of the building, or by buying something to drink in the café. But whichever choice I make, I am practically precluded from choosing certain perceived opportunities – namely the ones which I perceive to be unviable, and which thus lie behind a perceptive barrier.

Note that there is only a perceptive barrier if a certain perceived opportunity is *hypersalient*, such that any conflicting opportunities seem *unviable*. The mere fact that one opportunity is *more* salient than others is not enough to cause a perceptive barrier: indeed, as we have seen, this is always the case. A field of possible action consists in several perceived opportunities, with different degrees of salience, only *one* of which can be most salient at  $t_x$ . This, in itself, does not mean the agent feels *unable* to act upon any of the other, less urgent, opportunities. To clarify the difference, let us construct a parallel Willis Tower example. In this parallel case, the sight of the glass floor does not make me feel queasy at all. Yet, as my friend calls me onto the deck, I see that it is quite crowded. Though I have no problem with crowds, I don't really fancy squeezing past sweaty strangers. I tell my friend I will wait inside whilst she takes her pictures. On this description, I don't feel *unable* to step onto the deck. I just happen to prefer another course of action. The opportunity to avoid the deck, therefore, is not hypersalient: it just happens to be the most salient. I can still perceive other opportunities as viable, and they are not, therefore, excluded from my field of possible action in this case. It seems fair to say that there is no perceptive barrier preventing me from acting upon them.

But I suggested that, when a field of possible action is frozen, this is due to a *perceptive disposition*, leading to recurrent perceptive barriers. A frozen field of possible action, as I conceive of it, is part of a *temporally extended condition*. The agent does not just have a perceptive barrier in one specific situation, in which one individual perceived opportunity is hypersalient. The situation is *recurring*. As such, I propose that, when a field of possible action is frozen, an agent

has a perceptive disposition to perceive certain *types* of opportunity as hypersalient. This means that, *whenever* she perceives an opportunity of this type, it tends to solicit her with extreme urgency, resulting in a perceptive barrier.

Note that such an agent tends to perceive certain *types* of opportunity as hypersalient, and not just *one* opportunity. Any perceived opportunity to  $\phi$  is a perceived opportunity at  $t_x$ , and thus unique to that particular time and context. The opportunity to open my curtains yesterday morning was a different opportunity than the one to open my curtains this morning. But opportunities can be classed into different *types* – for example, one type of opportunity is “curtain-opening”. Any particular perceived opportunity, then, does or does not belong to this type. (Note, though, that opportunity types need not overlap with a certain motor skill. One opportunity type, for example, could be “avoiding interactions with my grandmother”. Particular opportunities belonging to this type could require a wide variety of motor skills: it could mean I refrain from answering the phone, hide behind the sofa when she visits, or turn around when I run into her on the street. It does seem plausible, however, to assume that opportunity types will often relate to certain kinds of *tasks*.) If an agent has a perceptive disposition to perceive certain *types* of opportunity as hypersalient, this means that, time and time again, her perception of particular situations will throw up perceptive barriers: namely whenever, or almost whenever, she perceives an opportunity of this type. The perceptive disposition, in other words, comes into effect when the agent’s phenomenal field features a possibility of the relevant type. It is only then that a perceptive barrier emerges, and it is only then that the agent’s field of possible action is frozen.

This kind of perceptive disposition thus need not imply that the agent’s



field of possible action is constantly frozen. When an agent has a perceptive disposition to perceive a certain opportunity type as hypersalient, this will *often* freeze her field of possible action: namely whenever (or almost whenever) an opportunity of this type features on her phenomenal field. But at times when she does not perceive any opportunities of this type, there will be no perceptive barriers, and her field of possible action won't be frozen. Clearly, the extent to which such a disposition will affect someone's life depends on how often opportunities of the relevant type occur.

Let us consider two examples. In some cases, an agent's field of possible action is practically permanently frozen. Consider, for example, the case of Mary, who suffers from severe agoraphobia. Due to her intense fear of public spaces, Mary hasn't left her house for several years. She has a perceptive disposition to perceive opportunities of the type "involving staying inside my house" as hypersalient. Clearly, this type of opportunity constantly features on her phenomenal field. It is not so that Mary only perceives such opportunities from time to time: much to the contrary, she *constantly* perceives them. This means that her field of possible action is *always* frozen: for it always features hypersalient opportunities. Opportunities which are *not* of this type, therefore, always lie behind a perceptive barrier. When Mary passes by the front door, for example, she recognises it as a front door and so something-through-which-to-leave-the-house. She thus perceives an opportunity to leave the house. Yet she will not perceive it as viable, and so it does not belong to her field of possible action. Opportunities of this type, which involve *not* staying inside of the house, are continually excluded from this field because of the way Mary perceives them.

But a frozen field of possible action may also be a more intermittent occurrence. A second example concerns the case of Fred. Fred suffers from OCD, and is compelled to wash his hands exactly every hour, at the strike of the clock. Since this is a compulsion, opportunities of the type “washing my hands at the strike of the clock” tend to be hypersalient for him. Whenever another hour has passed, Fred perceives an opportunity of this type. This opportunity will, in that moment, solicit him with such force that other opportunities, which are *not* of the hypersalient type, appear unviable to him. For example, Fred may leave his toast to burn because, just as it started to turn black, an hour had passed and so he felt compelled to go wash his hands. When the phone rings at this time, he will not answer it, and even if he really needs the bathroom, he will still first wash his hands. In this moment, I argue, all these opportunities are excluded from his field of possible action. Though Fred may perceive these opportunities, and is physically capable of taking them up, they lie behind a perceptive barrier, and so are, in this moment, excluded from his field of possible action. Fred’s field of possible action thus, basically, freezes every hour. (Note, though, That Fred’s disposition may affect his life also at other times. When his family invites him to come out on a hike, for example, he has to decline, knowing that such a trip would not allow him to wash his hands at any regular interval.)

Further, note that the *scope* of frozen fields of possible action may vary: Mary’s, for example, is usually much wider than Fred’s. Mary’s always includes a wide variety of options. At any given time, she will usually perceive *several* hypersalient opportunities: she may watch a film on TV, do some laundry, read a novel, call her sister. All of these are hypersalient for her because they involve

staying indoors. The hypersalience is thus not restricted to one specific opportunity at  $t_x$ , but pertains to *any* opportunity at  $t_x$  which is of the right type. Mary, indeed, lives her whole life taking up opportunities of this type. Hypersalient opportunities for Fred, in contrast, only include opportunities to wash his hands, and this at specific times. Whenever he perceives an opportunity of this type, his field of possible action becomes extremely narrow: he can only really follow his compulsion.

We now have an initial sketch of what it means for a field of possible action to freeze, and how this can recurrently happen because of an agent's *perceptive disposition*, leading her to perceive certain types of opportunity as hypersalient. A few further nuances need to be added at this point. A first important point is that exceptions are always possible. It can always happen that a certain opportunity, though it *tends to* be hypersalient for an agent, is *not* hypersalient under extreme circumstances. Fred, as the clock almost strikes 7, notices that his beloved cat is about to be run over by a car and rushes outside in order to rescue the animal. Or Mary, as her house sets on fire, runs outside in a panic. Saving the cat and escaping the fire are, in those moments, perceived to be *more* urgent by these agents than the opportunity which is usually hypersalient for them. For this reason, we can only speak of a *disposition* to perceive certain types of possibility as hypersalient, or say that a certain type of possibility *tends to* be hypersalient for an agent.

This possibility of exception reflects a further fact about the sort of disposition I have been describing: it seems to come in degrees. A very powerful perceptive disposition will very rarely allow for exceptions: Mary, for example,

may flee her house when it sets on fire, but feel unable to leave even if she urgently needs to see a doctor. Basically, the strength of the disposition corresponds to the quantity of *incentive* that is required to overcome it: the more exceptional exceptions, the more powerful the disposition. (Note, though, that this is not a direct function of how *probable* an exception is. Consider the case of Mary. Imagine that we know, but Mary doesn't, that her house is very *likely* to catch fire. It is thus *likely* that she will perceive the opportunity to escape, and so leave the house, as more urgent than any opportunities to stay indoors. This fact does not, all of a sudden, render Mary less *disposed* to stay indoors. It just has become more likely that there there will be an exception, because of contingent circumstances.)

In sum, there seem to be two factors which determine how deeply an agent's life will be affected by this kind of perceptive disposition: it will depend on how powerful this disposition is, and on how often opportunities of the relevant type occur in an agent's life.

### C.3 Corrupted Will and Compromised Choice

In the previous chapter, I already suggested that a frozen field of possible action corrupts the will and compromises choice: I suggested that the will always operates within a field of possible action, and if this field is frozen, the will cannot but make choices within this field – meaning the choices it makes are compromised. I also suggested that this is due to a perceptive issue: when a field of possible action is frozen, the agent practically cannot perceive possibilities outside of it as viable. This suggestion can now be further developed: I submit that a perceptive disposition, of the kind described, can corrupt an agent's will. It leads the

agent to perceive a certain opportunity type as hypersalient, which means she will not perceive any other opportunities as viable. These opportunities will thus lie behind a perceptive barrier, which reduces her field of possible action to the hypersalient opportunities: her field of possible action is thus frozen. The will, operating within this field, *cannot but* pick a hypersalient route of action: it is thus corrupted. This, notably, is not due to any physical or metaphysical inability to do otherwise, but due to the agent's perceptive disposition.

A corrupted will, thus understood, compromises the agent's choices. But a compromised choice is still a *choice*. Mary, for example, may choose between taking a nap or doing the laundry. But insofar as this choice takes place within a frozen field of possible action, in which one type of opportunity is hypersalient and others seem unviable to the agent, I submit this choice is compromised. Admittedly, in some cases, a frozen field of possible action *may* prevent the agent from making choices at all. In the example of Fred, it is unclear whether his choices to wash his hands are compromised choices, or whether they should not count as choices at all. His choice is definitely compromised, on the basis that other opportunities are excluded from his field of possible action. But insofar as his field of possible action only really contains one opportunity, we might have to conclude that choice, for Fred, is in that moment simply absent. (Indeed, as he washes his hands yet another time, he might really not feel like this is by choice, or that he does so *against* his will.) On the other hand, some might still want to count his action as an exercise of agency, since he is not literally forced to wash his hands. In either case, my argument is that, *if* he makes a choice, it is a compromised one.

We now have a more substantial characterisation of how a field of possible action may freeze, and so corrupt an agent's will. A few more things must be noted before concluding this section. First, on the proposed explanation, an agent's choices are compromised if they are made within a frozen field of possible action, *regardless* of whether she *wants* to act upon any of the possibilities which are excluded from this field. The choices of an agent who has no intention or desire to act upon the opportunities which lie behind a perceptive barrier are compromised all the same. Of course, often, an agent may actually *want* to take up a perceived opportunity which does lie behind a perceptive barrier. Mary, for example, may dream of taking a walk in the nearby park. But even if she has no intention to do anything of the sort, the choices she makes are still compromised because of the frozen field of possible action within which they are made.

Another point is that this is not necessarily the only way in which choice can be compromised. It may very well be possible that an agent's field of possible action isn't frozen, but that her choices are compromised in another way. All I am after is an explanation of how choice may be compromised, which can explain how it is compromised in the example cases of self-oppression.

Lastly, a potential worry must here be addressed. It seems, one may object, that our fields of possible action are often frozen in many a way. Most people, for example, have a strong urge to survive and will generally perceive opportunities which ensure continued survival as hypersalient. Is anyone avoiding death, therefore, an agent with a perceptive disposition which often freezes their field of possible action? I admit this renders the concept quite thin, but am prepared to bite the bullet here. Perhaps the same general structure, which I have described as a frozen field of possible action, applies to this description. The

main point I want to make about frozen fields of possible action is that it is a way in which our choices *can* be compromised, even though we are still acting agents: if an agent engages in action within them, this can compromise their choices. And sometimes, indeed, my urge for survival may compromise my choice in this way: if someone puts a gun to my head and forces me to hand over my money, I will probably claim that my doing so was a very compromised choice. Handing over the money was, in that situation, hypersalient for me, making conflicting opportunities seem unviable.

#### D. CONCLUSION

In sum, I have argued that perceived opportunities can be hypersalient for an agent, which makes any alternative perceived opportunities seem unviable to her. This creates a perceptive barrier, which excludes these alternative perceived opportunities from her field of possible action, thus freezing it. This happens on a structural basis if the agent has a *disposition* to perceive certain types of opportunity as hypersalient.

But which factors can thwart our perception of possibilities in this way? It seems that a field of possible action may freeze in a number of different ways: Fred's OCD and Mary's agoraphobia are but two examples, in which a psychological condition has this effect. Another way, of course, in which this can happen is through the exercise of relations of power: my suggestion, recall, was that Foucauldian domination (on my interpretation) freezes fields of possible action. Through structuring and fixing the subject's self-understanding, modern power influences which possibilities will be salient for a certain agent. In *domination*, power renders certain types of opportunity *hypersalient* for the subject: Emma,

for example, may perceive opportunities to conform to female gender norms as hypersalient, such that breaking these norms won't seem like a viable option.

Technically, the list of factors influencing our perceptive dispositions – which opportunities will tend to be more or less salient for us – is endless. Equally, a perceptive disposition to perceive certain opportunities as *hypersalient* may have many different kinds of causes. Social pressures, manipulation, obsessions, fears, addiction, traumas, delusions, psychological dispositions – they can all to varying extents have this sort of effect. To give a real-life example, a gambling addict confessed in a radio programme that receiving notifications about the amount of money she had already lost had no effect on her. It could not deter her from continuing to gamble.<sup>8</sup> We can explain this within our framework by positing that her field of possible action is frozen when she is in the process of gambling: the opportunity to keep gambling is hypersalient in that context, with such force that alternatives to that possibility don't seem viable to her.

This brings us, at last, to the question of self-oppression. My last hypothesis was that, in hyperkrasia, it is an agent's *practical reason* which freezes her field of possible action. We can now hypothesise that, in hyperkrasia, practical reason disposes an agent to perceive certain types of possibility as hypersalient. This way, the agent's own self-regulation corrupts her will, and compromises her choices. So, my hypothesis is now that

*hyperkrasia is a real form of agency, in which practical reason becomes authoritarian, exercising a form of self-control which tends to render certain types of opportunity hypersalient for the agent, which freezes her field of possible action, thereby corrupting her will and compromising choice.*

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<sup>8</sup> "You and Yours" on *BBC Radio 4*, 30 May 2019.



Note that, on this newer formulation, it is clear that hyperkrasia does not involve a permanently frozen field of possible action. It involves an on-going perceptive *disposition*, which *tends to* freeze the agent's field of possible action.

In the next chapter, I will carve out the final details of this account of hyperkrasia, before putting this account to work by applying it to two case studies.

## V. Self-Oppression: An Account

### A. AN ACCOUNT OF SELF-OPPRESSION

My hypothesis is thus that practical reason has the power to freeze an agent's field of possible action in the way described, and that this is what happens in self-oppression. The question, of course, is how practical reason can achieve this. Answering this question requires that we get clear on which role practical reason can play in a Merleau-Pontyan account of action. This is perhaps not obvious. For this picture of action appears to be quite different from the Aristotelean picture which formed our starting point, and in which my notion of practical reason remains partially embedded. According to Aristotle, as we saw, the generation of rational action could be explained as follows. The agent has a set of rationally held wishes (rational desires for the kinds of things she generally aims or aspires for in life, which she judges to be worth pursuing). She perceives, through sensation, a particular situation. Her practical deliberation reveals how, in that situation, she may best achieve any of her wishes, and whether a certain wish is indeed worth pursuing under the given circumstances. This can, but need not, happen through conscious deliberation. If all goes well, the agent acts accordingly. The structure of (rational) action generation, in brief, can thus be represented as follows:

*sensation* → *practical reason* → *action*.

Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, appears to hold a very different view of action. As we

have seen, on his account, agency can be explained in terms of responses to perceived environments: we continually respond to perceived invitations for action *by acting*. For Merleau-Ponty, however, this does not seem to require any practical deliberation. For we are immediately *solicited* into action by our perceptions: ‘perceived demands for action’, Romdenh-Romluc explains, ‘*immediately* draw forth the agent’s behaviour’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 90). I perceive an opportunity, which directly summons me into action: as I pull out weeds, or walk to the shop, I need not deliberate about what to do, nor make any obvious better judgments. Romdenh-Romluc writes that ‘[o]nce an agent has become skilled at some activity, they can perceive opportunities to engage in it, and immediately respond to those perceptions by acting’ (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 79). The structure of action generation on this account, therefore, rather seems to be something like this:

*sensation* → *action*.

Practical reason plays no obvious role in this picture. If I want to argue that it can exert a tyrannical power over agency, I must first establish that, on the picture I have presented, it can exert any power over agency at all.

There is, I submit, is a meaningful place for practical reason on this picture of agency. In brief, I propose that practical reason can influence action by conferring *salience* upon perceived opportunities. In the last chapter, I already mentioned that factors other than an agent’s current task can influence salience. In her 2012 contribution, Romdenh-Romluc’s argues that and how *thought*, in Merleau-Ponty’s framework, can influence action in a variety of ways by influencing the salience of perceived opportunities. I want to make a similar point

about practical reason. Note, though, that these are similar but *different* points. On my view at least, it is not clear to what extent, if at all, the workings of practical reason require any form of thought, however unreflective, on the part of the agent. What I have in mind when I speak of practical reason is a form of *regulated* behaviour, clearly aimed at what could be described as a valued end. It is manifest in action through “regularisms”: specific forms of behaviour which aim at a valued outcome. This behaviour follows regulations for action, regardless of whether these regulations are explicitly formulated in, or applied by, any form of thought. Though practical reason probably involves some thought in its most paradigmatic form – reflective deliberation – I will keep the question open if and in what way it requires thought of any kind in its other forms. The question of what thought is, and whether and to what extent practical reason involves thought, is not one which can be addressed within the scope of this thesis.

So how can, on my suggestion, *practical reason* influence action within a Merleau-Pontyan framework? We saw that practical reason, for Aristotle, operates in light of the agent’s valued ends. This valuation of ends, I propose, adds an affective dimension to the agent’s perceptions of related opportunities, such that these will be more salient for her. Surely, when we perceive an opportunity to further a valued end, this will solicit us quite strongly. If I find it important to recycle properly, for example, the opportunity to throw my empty can into the correct bin will be more salient in light of this wish. As such, I propose, the sound functioning of practical reason should render opportunities which are in line with one’s *wishes* more salient than others.

Though this picture integrates elements of Aristotle’s theory of action with that of Merleau-Ponty, some care is needed here. As we saw, for Aristotle,

practical reason comes in *after* perception: once the agent, through sensation, has taken in her current circumstances, practical reason figures out which course of action to take, in light of the agent's wishes. On my proposal, however, practical reason can influence action *through* influencing the way she perceives opportunities. The structure of action generation is thus as follows:

$$\text{Practical reason} \rightarrow \text{sensation/perception} \rightarrow \text{action}^{62}$$

Note that, on my view, practical reason *can, but need not*, operate through explicit deliberation. At times, in a given situation, I may wonder what to do, or wonder which out of several options is the best one. I then rely on my practical reason to make an explicit decision. This decision, then, once made, will confer salience upon opportunities which are relevant to the selected task, and consequently solicit me to act. But, often enough – probably most of the time – opportunities which contribute to a valued end will immediately be quite salient for me, just because I value this end. On both scenarios, the salience, and thus my perception, of the respective opportunities has been influenced by my practical reason. Practical reason thus confers salience upon those opportunities which

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<sup>62</sup> Romdenh-Romluc, in fact, makes a similar point about *thought*, but we can replace 'thought' with 'practical reason': The traditional view takes [practical reason] to have sole responsibility for producing action. Perception plays a role in guiding actions, but it does so by providing sensory input for [practical reason], which then produces action as its output. On the Merleau-Pontyan account, however, [practical reason] never has sole responsibility for producing action. The agent's behaviour is always also controlled by her perceived environment. Thus the Merleau-Pontyan model does not conceive of [practical reason] as a 'middleman', standing between perception and action' (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012: 210-211).

are relevant to an agent's wishes: either because we decide, through our practical reason, to take on a certain task, or because the task, thanks to practical reason, already solicits us. Indeed, the more we become habituated to applying our own general rules, the more easily this will happen.

As such, I conclude that the concept of practical reason can coherently be integrated within a Merleau-Pontian framework of agency. Having spelled out how practical reason may feature in the generation of action, we can now return to my hypothesis that, in hyperkrasia, an agent's practical reason can *freeze* her own field of possible action. We saw that practical reason can influence agency by rendering different types of opportunities more or less salient: it can influence the force with which opportunities solicit us. In hyperkrasia, however, practical reason does not just render opportunities of a certain type salient: it tends to render them hypersalient, thus placing other opportunities behind a perceptive barrier. The type of opportunity which tends to be hypersalient for the self-oppressed agent are those which are relevant to an end or wish she is fixated on. This means that, whenever she perceives an opportunity of this type, which allows her to further contribute to this end, it will solicit her with such *urgency* that other opportunities will not seem viable to her. On this characterisation of hyperkrasia, we can thus explain the oppressive pressure, which characterises it, in terms of this *urgency*. This pressure is oppressive insofar as it compromises the agent's choice, by placing alternative routes of action behind a perceptive barrier.

## **B. OVERVIEW**

In this section, I will summarise how I arrived at my final hypothesis in reference

to the previous chapters. First of all, we can refer back to Aristotle's mereology of the agent. On his picture, *practical reason* was the faculty responsible for the exercise of self-control, understood as the ability to aim towards a valued end through action. It is the workings of this faculty which, on my proposal, become authoritarian in self-oppression. Thus, in the first chapter, I pointed at *practical reason* as the oppressive element of the agent at work self-oppression. In light of this, I constructed the notion of hyperkrasia: a style of agency in which practical reason 'takes over' agency such that choice is compromised. This yielded the following hypothesis:

*in self-oppression, or hyperkrasia, an agent's practical reason becomes oppressive.*

But on this hypothesis, it was unclear which part of the agent was then *oppressed* by practical reason, and, relatedly, how this could compromise choice. In our second chapter, we introduced Augustine's notion of the will, understood as a faculty of choice separate from practical reason. This allowed us to posit that practical reason can *oppress* the will, and in this way compromise choice. We also saw how Augustine gave us the notion of a *corrupted* will, which is still capable of choosing but can only really make *compromised* choices. This, I argued, could help us understand how choice can be compromised in self-oppression without being absent. Thus, we arrived at the following hypothesis:

*in hyperkrasia, an agent's practical reason corrupts her will, thus compromising choice.*

This gave us the basic internal structure of self-oppression: an agent, though still

very much an agent acting though her own will, nonetheless makes compromised choices because her will has been corrupted by her practical reason. On Augustine's model, however, we could not explain exactly what happens here: *how* could practical reason corrupt the will?

We thus still needed an explanation for how *practical reason* could corrupt an agent's will, and so compromise choice without her will being bypassed. The beginnings of an answer, I argued, can be found in Foucault's account of *domination*, in which subjects are dominated without being directly interfered with. I argued that, in domination, power relations 'freeze' an agent's field of possible action, meaning she will only perceive certain kinds of possibilities as viable. I concluded that in domination, therefore, power relations corrupt the subject's will: she still makes her own choices as an agent, yet, operating within a frozen field of possible action, is disposed to make only certain choices. This helped us understand *how* a will could be corrupted without being bypassed: through an influence on her field of possible action. A frozen field of possible action can be said to 'corrupt' the agent's will without bypassing it: for the agent's perception of possibilities forms the setting within which the will operates. Thus, though the agent is still an *agent*, her choices are compromised. My hypothesis was that something similar might happen in self-oppression:

*in hyperkrasia, an agent's practical reason corrupts her will, thus compromising choice, by freezing her own field of possible action.*

But Foucault did not offer us the tools to understand *how* practical reason could do so. Indeed, he simply did not conceptualise the notion of fields of possible action at all. Before considering the idea of self-oppression in light of



this notion, I constructed a more robust account of possibility fields and how they can freeze: in a fourth chapter, I drew on Merleau-Ponty to further elaborate this idea. On the interpretation I advanced, a frozen field of possible action means that a perceived opportunity is hypersalient for an agent, such that alternative opportunities seem unviable to her.

I argued that this can happen in a variety of ways. One such way, then, is what I would call self-oppression. Practical reason, when it becomes oppressive, has precisely this effect on the agent's field of possible action. It has the power to change the way she perceives possibilities: when it becomes oppressive, it tends to render certain types of possibility hypersalient. As such, in self-oppression, the agent's will is often, sometimes even continually, corrupted by her own practical reason. We thus arrive at our final hypothesis:

*in hyperkrasia, an agent's practical reason influences her perception of possibilities, such that it tends to freeze her field of possible action, thus corrupting her will and compromising her choice.*

On this hypothesis, we can address both problems mentioned in the introduction: namely (1) who oppresses whom in self-oppression, and (2) how choice is compromised. It is practical reason which oppresses the will, and choice is compromised because the will is forced to operate within a frozen field of possible action. The will, on this mereology, though it is the seat of agency, is the part of the agent which is considered *oppressed* in self-oppression: it operates under such pressure from practical reason that it is dispositioned to act upon those opportunities which practical reason renders hypersalient. As such, the model of hyperkrasia establishes that self-oppression is a *possible* form of

agency, which can be coherently conceptualised.

### C. FURTHER POINTS

Before applying this model of hyperkrasia to two case studies, I want to clarify a few further points. First of all, on the model I proposed, an agent may be self-oppressive *even* if she, using her practical reason, recognises the situation as one which calls for exception of the general rule. In this case, the agent thinks she should *not* act upon the perceived opportunity, yet finds herself unable to refrain. This is what happens when practical reason sabotages itself. On my characterisation, however, an agent may be self-oppressive without such forms of self-sabotage. If her practical reason causes in her a perceptive disposition which throws up perceptive barriers in the way described, she may be self-oppressive even if she has no desire or intention to overcome these perceptive barriers.

Secondly, on this model, whether a form of agency amounts to hyperkrasia does not depend on what an agent is aiming for, but solely on the manner in which she aims for it. In line with my commitment to content neutrality, I consider regulations self-oppressive only because of the *manner* in which they are implemented and the effects this has on the agent: an agent is only self-oppressive if her self-control thwarts her perception of certain types of opportunities, such that perceiving them freezes her field of possible action. This means we could have a submissive housewife who is not self-oppressive – though this seems to me, admittedly, rather unlikely – and an athlete or artist who is. Of course, certain endeavours may invite self-oppression more than others. Perhaps, there even exist certain ends which one cannot but pursue in a manner

which invites self-oppression: certain ends, that is, can only be pursued in a rigorous manner. As such, they may *very often* result in self-oppression when pursued. (We can think here, perhaps, of athletes trying to break absurd records.) But even in those cases, if there is self-oppression, this is only because of the manner in which the end is pursued, and not because of the end itself.

Further, note that self-oppression may itself have further causes. On many occasions, for example, self-oppression may function as a micro-mechanism of social oppression. The values and ends one feels one ought to aim for might be internalised oppressive regulations, which abide in one's culture: a Western woman in the 1970's may have internalised the idea that the female role was that of a housewife, and this may have subsequently influenced her perception of possibilities. What is crucial for self-oppression is that it is an agent's practical reason which is *directly*, i.e. in the first instance, responsible for how the agent perceives opportunities. The agent must, in a significant sense, *herself* hold the internalised values and ends. This may or may not itself be the result of wider oppressive structures.

In this context, note that the subject of *modern domination*, on Foucault's analysis, displays at least some form of self-oppression. Instances of modern domination, recall, operate precisely through shaping the constitution of the subject. This way, her status of domination is perpetuated by her own self-understanding: as such, the dominated subject takes some part in her own oppression. In this respect, modern domination always already implies something like self-oppression. An important difference, though, to which I will briefly return later, is that this self-relation characterising domination does not involve the

*pressured quality* to agency which I include in the core characteristics of hyperkrasia.

#### **D. TWO CASE STUDIES**

It has now been established that self-oppression, as I have described it, is a form of agency which is both possible and actual. The model of hyperkrasia I have constructed resolves the apparent paradox of self-oppression, and, as I have tried to show, allows us to make sense of the three core examples of self-oppression that were introduced at the start of the thesis. In demonstrating both the possibility and the actuality of self-oppression, and by offering a conceptualisation of it, I have tried to demonstrate that it indeed warrants its own category. My aim was not to demarcate the exact limits and scope of the category by spelling out a set of exact criteria. I have, instead, described a mereo-psychological model of what is going on in some of what I consider to be *exemplary* examples of self-oppression.

But, even though this model of hyperkrasia is *but* a model, and not an exact definition, it is not without further application. In this section, I will demonstrate that it can help differentiate core cases of self-oppression from other forms of agency which, in many respects, share a lot of formal features. In the introduction, I mentioned that self-oppression may seem quite similar to another form of agency, which also involves high levels of self-control and self-induced pressure, yet which does not compromise choice. If I really value something I have committed to, I will feel a pressure to act accordingly, and the exercise of my self-control will indeed involve pressure. This in itself does not seem to compromise my choice. How can we distinguish this from self-oppression? Of

course, in the one instance, practical reason exerts an *oppressive* pressure which compromises choice, whilst in the other instance practical reason does not compromise choice. But this merely begs the question. How do we distinguish forms of pressure which are oppressive, and so compromise choice, from those which are not? We are now, having a model of hyperkrasia, better equipped to answer this question.

Looking at this model, we see that a key distinction lies in the way in which the agent perceives opportunities. In brief, if *not* acting in accordance with the self-induced pressure seems plainly *unviable* to her, it seems that we have a case of self-oppression. But, one might argue, would this not be the *ideal* result of commitment? If an agent commits to something, and consequently perceives conflicting opportunities as unviable, does this not *exemplify* commitment? For it seems that, in commitment, we self-prescribe certain regulations for action which are supposed to inform our agency in the future. These regulations spell out what kind of possibilities are in line with our commitment and which aren't. I thereby choose, quite radically, *against* a large number of incompatible future routes of action. For example, if I resolve to eat more healthily, this will inform how I will perceive the opportunity to consume a glazed doughnut. If eating the doughnut no longer appears viable to me, due to a prior commitment I made, does this really compromise my choice to do so? Doesn't this, indeed, instead, *exemplify* choice?

Yet I submit that we *can* distinguish commitment from self-oppression, using the framework I have proposed. Normally, commitments will indeed impose a certain pressure on us, which *influences* our perception of certain possi-

bilities. Surely, in order to be capable of directing ourselves as we wish, and attaining the goals we value, we need to employ certain techniques of control to regulate our different desires and inclinations, and we must see to it that they are implemented. Practical reason helps us detect which possibilities are in line with our rational ends, and which aren't, *and* influences how we perceive these. That is, practical reason should indeed influence the salience of different kinds of opportunities. Normally, however, such self-imposed pressure does not make these opportunities *hypersalient*, such that other possibilities seem *unviable*. Practical reason normally *structures and shapes* our field of possible action, but without *freezing* it. Only when practical reason freezes fields of possible action, and this on a structural basis, can we speak of *self-oppression*. The difference maps onto the distinction between an influenced will and a corrupted one; and to the distinction between the effects of power and those of domination on my reading of Foucault.

Another way of conceiving this difference is in reference to the distinction between the authoritative and the authoritarian operation of practical reason. In regular agency, practical reason is authoritative: when prescribing what should be done, practical reason implements its authority, usually in light of our commitments. It has a certain power over us. As I perceive the possibility of eating the glazed doughnut, I will feel the authority of my practical reason telling me it's a bad idea. Self-oppression, however, occurs when my practical reason becomes *authoritarian*. On this scenario, it tends to freeze my field of possible action. Rather than perceiving the consumption of the doughnut as a bad idea, I perceive it to be completely unviable. I feel like I just *cannot and couldn't* do

it, and this because of a perceptive barrier implemented or caused by my practical reason.

Of course, in practice, it may be hard to draw the line between mere commitment and hyperkrasia. It can be a challenge to pinpoint exactly the agential reality corresponding to the conceptual and linguistic differences which, on my account, separate both. When is practical reason authoritative, when authoritarian? When do I perceive an opportunity as just very unappealing, and when as unviable? To demonstrate how my model of hyperkrasia can help making this distinction in practice, I will conclude the thesis with two case studies: I will consider the case of Sam, an agent who seems to be self-oppressive, and contrast it to the case of Alex, an agent who, though his agency shares many characteristics with that of Sam, seems to be merely deeply committed. Together, these case studies should supply the reader with a stronger sense of how mere commitment can be distinguished from self-oppression – and this without taking into account the content of action.

A key element of hyperkrasia, as I conceptualised it, is that the agent cannot perceive certain opportunities as viable. This, of course, is hard to prove: for we cannot access another agent's perceptions. An important aid in detecting cases of self-oppression, therefore, is to look out for its *tell-tale signs*: certain mannerisms, qualities of agency, which are not conclusive evidence that an agent is self-oppressive, but which can serve as a strong indication. They are not themselves any necessary or sufficient criteria for hyperkrasia, but strongly suggest that the internal constellation of agency is akin to the one described as hyperkrasia. Two tell-tale signs of hyperkrasia have already been referred to throughout the thesis: I mentioned how hyperkrasia often results in the self-sabotage of

practical reason, and that it has a tendency to take over the agent's life. Another indication of hyperkrasia could be an unwillingness to consider alternative possibilities when they arise. Indeed, some other tell-tale signs of hyperkrasia might have been mentioned by Mele (2001) when describing Zed.<sup>63</sup> Zed's 'limited prospects for satisfaction, enjoyment, and fulfilment', for example, may be a strong *indication* that his possibility field is frozen. The fact that he persists in the face of this agony *indicates* that he is so invested in being an academic philosopher that other possibilities just don't seem viable to him. When conducting the two case studies, I will point out some tell-tale signs, indicating that the agent falls either inside or outside of the category of hyperkrasia.

#### *D.1    The Case of Sam*

One area in which questions of self-control and choice are recurrent is that of food and eating. To conduct our first case study, I have carefully constructed a mock agent, Sam, who suffers from anorexia nervosa (hereafter: anorexia). This is a condition characterised by severe restriction of calorie intake and often excessive exercise, leading to extreme weight loss. It often features an intense fear of fat and weight gain.<sup>64</sup> Before constructing the example of Sam, I consulted several first-person accounts of people diagnosed with this condition, including autobiographies, interviews with researchers, interpretative phenomenological analyses, online blogs, and essays. In addition, I also consulted some medical and academic

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<sup>63</sup> See section F in the Introduction.

<sup>64</sup> See DSM-V (section II).



analyses of the condition.<sup>65</sup> These resources informed the construction of my example. Though Sam in no way represents any individual person featuring in the consulted sources, her comportment, thoughts, and story are all inspired by actual descriptions of how anorexia can manifest.

But before we start, I want to add in a few caveats regarding this case study. It is very important to emphasise that, by employing this case study, I am *not* suggesting that all people diagnosed with, or portraying symptoms of, anorexia should be considered self-oppressive. Nor do I wish to suggest that these symptoms, even if they indicate a self-oppressive style of agency, cannot be understandable responses to both personal and societal challenges. Anorexia is very often a coping mechanism. Though its name may suggest otherwise, self-oppression does not mean that the self-oppressive agent is in any way to blame for her condition. This holds true for all cases of self-oppression, and perhaps especially so for cases of anorexia which seem to feature self-oppression.

Another thing to note, in light of this case study, is that the pool of agents diagnosed with anorexia is internally very diverse. Diagnostic criteria group together a wide variety of patients, many of whom manifest very differing configurations of agency. This becomes apparent when studying individual cases: despite the obvious overlap in symptoms, many subtle differences emerge in

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<sup>65</sup> Altogether, I consulted the following resources: Arnold (2007), Beth (2017), Bowman (2006), Bruch (1978), Charland et al. (2013), de Rossi (2010), Dunkle and Dunkle (2015), Fox et al. (2005), Gremillion (2003), Halse et al. (2007), Hope et al. (2010, 2013), Hornbacher (1998), MacLeod (1981), Malson (1998), Mulveen and Hepworth (2006), Raviv (2010), Saukko (2008), Steiger and Jean (1999), Szmukler (2013), Tan et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2011), Taylor (2008), Waldman (2015), Williams and Reid (2010), and Woolf (2012).

different diagnosed agents, and even within the same agent during the course of the condition. I have, in my case study, described some features which are of common occurrence in those diagnosed with anorexia. This does not imply, however, that all agents diagnosed with this condition exemplify those very features.

Lastly, I have not constructed any deeper psychological explanation as to why Sam, in my example, developed anorexia. The underlying causes of anorexia are the subject of much debate and controversy.<sup>66</sup> It is likely that, within any individual, the causes of the condition are both manifold and complex, and that causes are quite diverse across different individuals. My aim is merely to sketch a certain kind of behaviour, a style of self-regulation, which is at least common in those diagnosed with the condition – regardless of its underlying aetiology.

Sam is an 18-year-old student, who is in her first year of University. She studies History and is immensely thrilled to do so. Her weight is fairly average, and she is not very concerned about her appearance. Nonetheless, a Summer Ball is coming up in a few months, and she wants to lose some pounds to fit in her dream dress. She reads in a magazine that cutting out carbs is an efficient way to lose weight, and so she decides to do so until Summer Ball comes. She still

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<sup>66</sup> Some theories attempt to explain anorexia in terms of its underlying psychology, arguing, for example, that it results from a refusal to grow up; that it functions as a coping mechanism in the face of current or past abuse; or that it is an overdeveloped form of perfectionism (see for example Crisp (1997), Tice et al. (1989), and Bruch (1978)). Other theories point towards cultural and sociological factors, such as contemporary Western beauty standards (see for example Bordo (1993) and Gordon (2000)). Lastly, some researchers suggest that biological, genetic, or chemical factors play a role in the development of the condition (see for example Casper (1984) and Holland et al. (1988)).

eats well, leaves aside rice and bread whilst she increases her vegetable intake. The strategy works: after a few days, Sam already notices a slight difference in her weight. She feels happy and accomplished, and decides to also take up jogging. And so, every morning, she goes for a run. She loses a little more weight: it feels good, and gratifying. Sam enjoys feeling in control and successful – both things she really values and aspires for, and her successful diet helps her achieve them. Slowly, she decides to cut out more foods: besides carbs, she also stops eating fatty foods (anything that will feel or look greasy) and sugary stuff (she starts checking food labels and, to her horror, discovers how many foods have an alarming sugar content). Later on, she starts to feel uncomfortable about the idea of grease and oil altogether: she refuses to eat anything which is fried or baked with oil or butter. To be on the safe side, she prefers to just eat raw vegetables. She figures, however, that carrots actually taste quite sweet. So she decides to leave out carrots – and perhaps orange foods altogether. Only green foods can be trusted. Further, Sam only one wants to use one fork, which she knows for sure has been cleaned of all and any traces of fat or unsafe foods – this fork is the *safe* fork. She keeps it in her room, so that others cannot use it.

Sam also keeps increasing the length of her morning run. After a while, she has lost a significant amount of weight: much more, in fact, than she set out to lose. Yet she continues to abide by her diet and exercise routine. They become very important aspects of her life, which she tends to prioritise over other things.

In the meantime, Sam starts to get a little isolated. She starts to avoid situations in which food is being consumed: the sight of it makes her feel quite nauseous, and the expectations of others that *she also* participates in the consumption of these horrible goods really annoys her. Her friends ask her out

on a weekend trip, but she declines: she just wants to be able to run for a few hours in the morning, and eat her rationed portions of safe and weighed and non-oily foods, without comments or witnesses.

Sam's dorm mate, Frank, starts to worry about her. He decides to cook a meal and invite her to eat it together. Sam figures she has done very well the past weeks, and that it's fine to have just this one meal. But as she joins Frank at the dinner table, she is filled with dread: he scoops some vegetable stew onto her plate, and Sam feels horrified at the sight: slices of bright orange carrot, *full of sugar*, little specks of olive oil floating atop the broth, chunks of carb-y potato. Her stomach drops in anguish. *I cannot eat this*. With her fork, she singles out a piece of broccoli (*broccoli is safe*), and whilst Frank isn't watching, she quickly dabs it with a napkin so as to remove as much oil as possible. She munches it slowly, and anxiously. After a few minutes, she makes up an excuse to leave.

One day, Sam seriously sprains her ankle during her morning run. Though she is in severe pain, she continues running: she hasn't met her target yet, and does not stop until she does. The next morning, she notices her ankle is all swollen and blue. She realises, deep down, that running will be very painful, and make things worse. But the thought of skipping her morning run makes her anxious and uncomfortable. The fact that she even considers doing so fills her with a terrible sense of guilt, and she almost feels as if she can feel her body swell up at the very idea.

Two weeks later, Sam's parents are coming over to visit. In the meantime, Sam has become extremely thin. Her parents are shocked upon seeing her, and inquire about her wellbeing. Sam insists that she is fine, just preparing for Summer Ball, and that she has everything under control. But as her parents take

her out for dinner, Sam claims to have eaten *just* before, and that she is too full to eat (in fact, she has a box of green crudities prepped to consume later on). Her parents, however, don't buy the story. Her father, worried but angry, offers Sam an ultimatum: either she eats pizza along with them, or she is coming back home with them that very night. This would mean dropping out of University, something Sam absolutely does not want to: she loves her course and is a very promising and enthusiastic student. She figures it must be worth just eating the pizza, and double her amount of exercise in the morning. As her pizza arrives, however, again she is overcome with horror. The disgust she feels for the greasy food in front of her is visceral. *Come on*, she thinks, *you know you are capable of eating this. You know how to eat!* She tries to cut off a piece and brings it to her mouth. But she can't do it. Her hands tremble at the realisation, and she feels tears welling up. She can't *bring* herself to do it.

Sam's parents take her home the same night, much against her will. During the following days, which feature many fights and frustrations, they try desperately to force Sam to eat anything other than her measured amount of vegetables, but to no avail. As Sam collapses one afternoon, she is taken to hospital. Only there, as the hospital environment brings home to her how severely she has compromised her health, does she manage, though with difficulty, to eat a small portion of the food that is brought to her.

I submit that Sam displays many features of self-oppression or hyperkrasia. Her practical reason has become tyrannical, making certain possibilities appear unviable to her. Throughout the story, Sam's practical reason plays an important role in regulating her behaviour. It tells her how to achieve her valued end of weight loss: cut out carbs, cut out greasy foods, go for a run every morning.

Sam follows these directs consistently. Initially, or in and of itself, this appears to be her choice: in light of the approaching Summer Ball, she *decides* to self-impose certain regulations. This is done in light of a clear goal, which she values. Given her goal of fitting in the Summer Ball dress, Sam reasons that the rational thing to do is to lose some weight. As time progresses, Sam comes to value the project of weight loss itself: for whatever reason, it is something she deeply identifies with and which she finds hugely important for her self-esteem. Accordingly, she expands her set of self-prescribed rules which allow her to further this project.

In this respect, Sam's practical reason appears to function well. But, I submit, we have good reason to think that at some point, her practical reason becomes oppressive. Looking at Sam's story, we can find some *tell-tale signs* of self-oppression. Most notably, Sam cannot bring herself to break certain of her general rules *even* when she decides to. We saw that, on some occasions, Sam *decided* against her own rules: e.g. to please her dorm mate Frank, or to prove to her parents that she was doing fine. Her practical reason here made judgments in light of *other* values and ends she holds. Despite her decision, however, she could not bring herself to eat the food in front of her. Equally, though she did not decide to skip her morning run, her sprained ankle did give her a sense that perhaps she should: nevertheless, she could not perceive this as a viable option.

In these moments, Sam did not manage to translate her *mental resolve* to act a certain way – eat the stew, eat the pizza – into action. In those cases, her practical reason sabotages its own workings. In a sense, her agency resembles instances of *akrasia*. But the reason *why* she cannot translate her choice into action is not an overwhelming desire for an opposing pleasure, but rather the urge

to comply with an opposing practical regulation. In those instances, Sam's practical reason sabotages its own workings.

These moments offer a strong indication, I submit, that Sam's practical reason has become oppressive. They suggest that her practical reason implements certain general rules with such force that breaking them seems unviable for her. She feels *so* pressured to act towards her valued end, implementing her general rules, that not doing so, even just once, does not seem viable to her. As such, I hypothesise that certain types of opportunity tend to be *hypersalient* for Sam: namely those which allow her to pursue her valued project of weight loss. Whenever she perceives such an opportunity, her field of possible action freezes over: alternative opportunities come to lie behind a perceptive barrier.

This is indeed a *perceptive* barrier, for Sam knows she is technically and physically capable of breaking her own rules. Sam, clearly, perceives the possibility of eating the vegetable stew or the pizza: she decides to do so, which implies she recognises the possibility, and recognises it consciously. The same thing holds for the possibility of skipping her morning run. Yet she perceives herself to be incapable of taking up these possibilities. This is not because she has lost the physical capacity to eat greasy or orange foods or *not* go for a run; and neither does she think it is technically impossible to eat the foods in question or skip the morning run. But altogether, because of how appalling and horrifying these things appear to her, doing so seems unviable. The idea *repulses* her.

Remember, though, that hyperkrasia is a condition. This perceptive barrier is present also when Sam has no intention or wish to overcome it. She tends to perceive certain types of opportunity as hypersalient because she is *disposed* to do so. This type of opportunity, I hypothesise, is *also* hypersalient for Sam

when she has no intention to act differently. This means that Sam is not just self-oppressive in instances where her practical reason self-sabotages: rather, these instances *bring to the fore* her self-oppressive disposition. Of course, this disposition may not be as *visible* in other moments. When her practical reason does not self-sabotage, it is much harder to tell whether or not Sam is self-oppressive, or merely committed. Therefore, it is mainly from those moments in which practical reason self-sabotages that we can *infer* Sam's condition is probably a self-oppressive one.

But even in other moments, we can detect some other indicators of self-oppression: for example, Sam often doesn't even *consider* breaking her rules despite having reasons to. This indicates that her practical reason has a diminished sensitivity to exception – affecting its second function, of assessing whether pursuing a valued end is worth it, all things considered, in a certain situation. When her friends invite her on the weekend trip, it seems a given that she will not join: going would render it more difficult to follow her self-imposed regime, and thus this route of action seems simply unviable. She doesn't even consider whether the trip might be worth the risk of breaking her commitment a little. Of course, people will have differing opinions as to what makes for a *good enough* reason to give up on a commitment. Equally, the mere fact that someone doesn't consider doing so does not imply she is self-oppressive. But, if it happens regularly, consistent failure to take certain kinds of possibilities in consideration can be another *tell-tale sign* of self-oppression.

We can also see that Sam's valued end takes over her whole life, which is a common effect of hyperkrasia: because the agent cannot but further this valued end whenever she finds the opportunity to, and often also because she



finds ever more intricate opportunities to. This definitely seems to be the case for Sam: opportunities to further her goal of weight loss almost continually feature on her phenomenal field. In almost every situation, there is something that she *must* do. Insofar as she cannot but do so, other opportunities will remain behind a perceptive barrier: she may be offered some sweets by a friend, she may be sat in a café where salted nuts are placed on the table, she may feel tired as her alarm goes off in the early morning, in time for her morning run, and see the snooze button on her phone. Sam, however, will not perceive these possibilities as viable, even though she perceives them. This also holds for more significant opportunities: for example, both her academic life and her social life suffer from her condition. Her field of possible action is thus continually, or almost continually, frozen. We can see how, as a result, Sam's anorexia has a very widespread effect on her overall agency.

## D.2 The Case of Alex

In the second case study, I will consider an agent whose behaviour closely resembles self-oppression, but does not fit in the category of hyperkrasia as I have conceptualised it. Jointly, then two case studies should show how our model of hyperkrasia can help differentiate self-oppression from other styles of agency which merely look like it.

I will consider the case of Alex Honnold as presented in the 2018 National Geographic documentary *Free Solo*. The documentary follows Alex, who is an expert in so-called “free solo” climbing – an extremely dangerous variety of climbing in which there is neither assistance of another party nor a rope. Alex has decided he wants to free solo El Capitan (commonly referred to as ‘El Cap’),

a 3,200-foot rock wall in Yosemite National Park which no one has climbed free solo before. Given that Alex would be climbing without a rope, the risk of death is tremendously high.

On the surface, Alex's case bears some similarities to that of Sam. His project, naturally, requires a high level of commitment. He needs to train extensively, and learn the climbing route by heart – something which he does by taking countless of meticulous notes, writing out in detail every single move of the route. Alex, evidently, displays a high degree of self-control in implementing these measures in his life.

Moreover, this self-controlled lifestyle is naturally accompanied by a fair amount of pressure. Free solo climbing the El Cap really is a big dream for Alex. This pressure only increases once he agrees to filming the documentary: money, time, and effort have gone into it, so if he decides *not* to free solo the El Cap, this would all be for nothing. When discussing the documentary with his crew, Alex recognises that he can give up anytime, but clearly feels this would be a major disappointment.

Meanwhile, other areas of his life are pushed to the background. He admits that rock climbing has overall 'been a negative' for his dating life, and he lives in his van as he travels around to climb (Free Solo, 2018). 'If I had some kind of obligation to maximise my lifespan,' he states, 'obviously I'd have to give up soloing' (Free Solo, 2018). But, clearly, he does not think he has such an obligation. What is even more striking, perhaps, is that Alex was speaking to his partner, Sanni, when he made this statement. This, however, seems to be in line with his overall valuation of his climbing career: at the beginning of the documentary, for example, he states that he 'will always choose climbing over a lady' (Free

Solo, 2018). Given the goal he set himself, all these things are in a sense the *rational* thing to do. But may Alex's practical reason here operate in a tyrannical manner?

It seems not. There is at least one significant difference between Sam and Alex. In contrast to Sam, Alex remains capable of perceiving giving up his project as a viable option. Throughout the documentary, there are many indications that this is the case.

In this context, one interesting fact is that free soloing El Cap is a deeply *scary* prospect to Alex. He describes how, for many years, he thought about doing it but found the idea too terrifying: 'I've always wanted to', he states, 'but then I've always been like, "That's too scary"' (Free Solo, 2018). So it seems, in fact, that free soloing El Cap was *previously* perceived by Alex as unviable, because he was too scared to. But, as he improved as a climber and became more familiarised with the climbing route, he started to see the possibility before him. Alex thus actively influenced his perception of an abstract possibility, which he found very valuable, such that this possibility *became* viable for him, and thus could enter his field of possible action. In other words, Alex has carefully and meticulously trained himself to *render* this possibility viable. What Alex is doing, therefore, seems to involve in fact a deliberate, and careful *expansion* of his field of possible action: 'I try to expand my comfort zone by practicing the moves over and over again. I work through the fear, until it's just not scary anymore' (Free Solo, 2018). Alex's practical reason, in this respect, does not render perceived possibilities unviable – it does precisely the opposite.

In itself, however, this does not yet establish that his field of possible action is not at the same time frozen. Perhaps Alex only put so much effort into

rendering this one possibility viable, against the odds, because he felt like he *had* to do it – because all alternative possibilities, which implied *not* doing it, just didn't seem viable to him. Or perhaps, once he put so much effort into it, at a certain point *not* climbing El Cap became unviable for him: perhaps changing his perception of this one possibility, in order to make it viable, made him feel so invested in it that he felt he couldn't but take it up in action.

But this does not seem to be the case. This is already apparent in the way he speaks about the project. For example, at the beginning of the documentary, he states that free soloing the El Cap might just not be for him:

But the thing is I'll never be content, unless I at least put in the effort. Because, like, if I do all the work and I'm still like, "This is messed up," then maybe it's just not for me, maybe it's future generation, you know. Or maybe just somebody who has nothing to live for. (Free Solo, 2018)

And when he mentions that he would always choose climbing over a lady, he hastens to add: 'At least you know, so far', suggesting he remains open the possibility that another valued end may become more important in his life (Free Solo, 2018).

But the strongest indication that Alex is not self-oppressive comes when he actually stops his first ascent of the El Cap not long after he starts. The crew went out before dawn, all the cameras were set up, and Alex started his much-anticipated free solo climb. But he wasn't feeling it, and decides to give up. He clearly feels gutted, and feels as if he is letting his crew down. But despite the pressure from himself and others, *not* climbing the El Cap free solo remained a *viable* possibility for him. Though doing the free solo climb was a very salient

opportunity for him, it thus was not *hypersalient*. Alternative opportunities remained available. This, indeed, much reassured his worried friend and crew member Jimmy Chin: ‘What made the big difference for me is that he did turn around [...]. He didn't feel the pressure to have to do it because we were there. And I really, like that to me said a lot [sic]’ (Free Solo, 2018).

On this basis, I submit that Alex's agency is not self-oppressive, despite his high degree of self-control and the pressure under which he makes his choices. Again, the aspects of his agency I have highlighted to support my case are not meant to be conclusive proof: they are merely strong *indications* that Alex's behaviour falls into the one, rather than the other, category of agency.

In sum, although my account of hyperkrasia does not spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for self-oppression, it does provide a model which can differentiate similar cases – my model of hyperkrasia can thus help bring out a crucial formal difference between two cases that share some important formal features. Moreover, it can do so in a way that is neutral as to the content of the action. Hyperkrasia specifically involves an alteration in the agent's perceptions: only once certain possibilities no longer appear viable to an agent, are her choices compromised by her pressured exercise of self-control. *What* the agent in question is doing is not the point of focus here.

## **E. SCOPE AND LIMITS OF HYPERKRASIA**

Of course, these two case studies by no means define the limits of the category of hyperkrasia. Some open questions remain. One set of questions concerns the relation between hyperkrasia and *moral duty*. For an agent who responds to a call of duty may appear very akin to the self-oppressive agent. When we feel we

have a moral obligation to do something, we may perceive any alternatives as plainly unviable. Let us consider another example. Adam is a 32-year old tree surgeon who adopted a vegetarian diet when he was 25. He stopped eating meat because he finds it an immoral practice: he deeply values animal rights and welfare. His actions are thus fuelled by a sense of moral duty. Adam effortlessly lives his life without ever being tempted to eat any animal products. In fact, the very idea of eating them has become strange to him: the possibility of eating a ham sandwich seems as to him not just unappealing, but simply absurd – as absurd, say, as eating the novel he is reading. On our model, then, Adam’s sense of moral duty appears to compromise his choices: opportunities to eat animal products no longer feature on his field of possible action, and this is the field within which choices are made. Adam, arguably, doesn’t even *perceive* the possibility to eat meat, so he cannot really choose to do so. Moreover, this is the result of Adam’s own self-regulation: he decided to refrain from eating meat because he judged this the best thing to do, and over time his practical reason has influenced his perception of opportunities accordingly.

Does this mean Adam is self-oppressed? It seems not. The reason for this is that Adam’s agency does not display any *pressured* quality. Though he does exercise self-control, and regulates his actions in accord with his values and judgments, this self-control is not exercised with any sort of *pressure*, let alone a pressure we could call *oppressive*. His practical reason seems hardly tyrannical or authoritarian. Adam, in short, does not experience the sort of pressure characteristic of self-oppression. But another vegetarian agent, Eve, may very well be self-oppressive. Eve experiences a high amount of pressure to stick to her diet,

and perceives certain opportunities as unviable as a result of this pressure. Depending, perhaps, on the further specifics of Eve's case, we may here indeed have a case of self-oppression. So the presence of *pressure* can here serve as a meaningful differentia.

Of course, this raises some questions regarding the scope of the category of hyperkrasia. Might there exist *pressure-free* forms of self-oppression? Could one, for example, become so used to one's own self-oppression that the pressure resides, and a rigid, but calm way of acting takes over? This question, which is an important one, relates back to Foucault's worries about modern forms of domination: they do not cause any conflict or resistance, and the dominated subject may not even experience any sort of pressure. But, for Foucault, the *obedient* subject has fallen victim to the most worrisome form of oppression of all – precisely because it causes no resistance. Might there exist similar forms of self-oppression? In this case, the controlled and pressured quality of agency would be merely a tell-tale sign of self-oppression, and its absence would not mean the agent is not self-oppressive. Thus, there *might* exist forms of self-oppression which, though they do not meet the current description of hyperkrasia, we might still want to classify as self-oppressive.

Further, another set of questions remains open. In the case of Adam, the fulfilment of moral duty may not involve any self-inflicted pressure. But there are certainly cases in which dutiful agency *does* involve an urgent pressure, *and* seems to compromise choice in the sense I have described. In the case of Eve, we may accept the conclusion that we have a case of self-oppression. But in other cases, some may resist this conclusion. On my way to work I pass by a pond, in which a child is drowning. I immediately decide to jump in, in order to save

the child: this is something I do whilst feeling an enormous amount of pressure. Full of adrenaline, I am fuelled by a sense that I *must* save the kid. This pressure, indeed, is of such a nature that any alternative possibilities simply seem unviable to me. It is technically possible for me to just continue on my way to work, but if you ask me, I will probably tell you that in this situation I did not really have a *choice*. So, on this scenario, my practical reason tells me what I *ought to do*, with such force that I feel like have no choice. Doesn't this, then, amount to self-oppression?

An initial reply to this question could be to point out that hyperkrasia is a disposition, and not something which arises on occasion. The agent must have a continued disposition to perceive certain types of opportunity as hypersalient. But we could say, in response, that I *have* such a disposition: *whenever* I perceive an opportunity to save a drowning child, it will be hypersalient to me – or, more generally, whenever I perceive an opportunity to save someone's life. Indeed, most agents with a functioning moral compass will be so dispositioned.

Yet I admit that there seems to be a distinction between moral agents in general and self-oppressive ones. But where precisely lays the dividing line? To this question, I have no decisive answer at this point. My inclination is that there may be a difference in either the *kind* or *degree* of pressure that features in these cases. One possibility, for example, is that the difference lies in how easily a sense of moral duty gets triggered. Most agents will feel a duty to save the drowning child if they pass by it, but they will feel no *ongoing* sense of duty to save as many lives as possible. If an agent would feel such a pressure in many or most situations, her style of agency may move closer to the category of hyperkrasia. If an agent, guilt-ridden, feels compelled to spend every single penny on charities and



NGO's of all sorts, or refuses to visit A&E when severely injured just in case it would prevent *other* people from being saved, we may have reason to think her disposition is not just a moral one, but also a self-oppressive one. Note, in fact, that this kind of *moral self-oppression* is quite reminiscent of the case of Beth, one of our core examples of self-oppression.

Alternatively, one might want to argue that my commitment to content-neutrality has, at this point, outlived its usefulness. One might want to argue that, if we are to maintain a distinction at all between moral duty in general and self-oppressive moral duty, we can only revert to the content of the agent's behaviour or values. These possibilities cannot be further discussed within this thesis.

A fair amount of questions thus remains unanswered. As is the case for the classification of animals, the classification of forms of agency is no exact science, and perhaps never a finished business. Perhaps further research will reveal that we should divide the category of hyperkrasia into further subspecies, and adjust the differentiae of the species as a general category (much like taxonomists had rethink what it means to be a *mammal* upon discovering the platypus). Though this is not to suggest that the exercise of classification is futile: to conceptualise forms of agency is nothing less than to offer a framework for understanding, and coming to terms with, the fabric of our everyday lives.

# Conclusion

This thesis started from the intuition that self-oppression is a real and distinct form of agency. As initial support for this intuition, I mentioned three cases as possible examples. Self-oppression, however, is a paradoxical form of agency: an agent is both the oppressor *and* the oppressed, and so compromises her own choices. How is such a form of agency possible? The main objective of the thesis was to offer a *conceptualisation* of self-oppression, so as to establish that it is indeed a possible form of agency, which warrants its own category. Accordingly, I devised the category of hyperkrasia. I have characterised this category as involving, in its core form, an exercise of practical reason which is oppressive. This means that it exerts such a pressure on the agent to pursue a certain valued end (or set of ends) that *not* doing so, in most circumstances, seems unviable to her. As such, she cannot but act in the way she does, because she cannot perceive alternative possibilities as viable. Her oppressive practical reason thus results in a perceptive disposition which compromises her choices.

This account of hyperkrasia resolves the paradox of self-oppression: it allows us to explain *which part* of the agent is oppressive (namely practical reason), and how an agent can compromise her own choices (the influence of her practical reason on her perceptions can make it so). It thus establishes that self-oppression is a real *possibility*. Further, it also establishes that self-oppression as a distinct form of agency: for it manages to explain the possible examples of self-oppression, mentioned in the introduction, in a way that other categories cannot, thus spelling out how these examples are significantly different from these other

categories.

In addition, I have demonstrated that this model of hyperkrasia, though by no means spelling out any necessary or sufficient conditions, can be used as a tool to detect self-oppression, and distinguish it from forms of agency which are formally quite similar. To this end, I have spelled out some tell-tale signs of hyperkrasia. These are not necessary conditions, but strong *indications* that an agent is self-oppressive. Most notably, hyperkrasia can lead practical reason to sabotage its own workings: an agent may want or decide to act against a certain principle, yet find herself unable to. Another common effect of hyperkrasia is that the end (or set of ends) on which the agent is fixated takes over her life: both because, whenever she sees an opportunity to further this end, she usually cannot but take it up and so disregard her other valued ends; and because the agent tends to find ever more opportunities to do so.

This project has aimed to contribute to the philosophy of action by specifying the existence of a specific form of agency, which closely resembles some other forms, yet which also seems significantly different. In doing so, I have also offered an explanation of how choice can arguably be compromised through the exercise of one's own agency. But beyond this merely academic aim, this thesis also hopes to contribute to our general understanding of human agency in all its odd and complex configurations. Hopefully, the category of hyperkrasia helps *make sense* of certain forms of agency which are otherwise quite difficult to grasp. This further understanding may be of use not just within philosophy, but also at the personal level and even in medical or psychiatric contexts. If the phenomenon is indeed as common as it seems, it will figure both in our daily lives and among those whose agency has been affected by certain psychological or

psychiatric conditions. Though hyperkrasia is definitely not designed to be a diagnostic tool – and though, in itself, it is not a psychiatric condition – it could be a useful category to comprehend the structures of self-oppressive agency which may often accompany certain conditions. As such, it can provide a crucial background understanding when dealing with such agents. Furthermore, the category of hyperkrasia may be of use in a more political context. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, the psychological structures of self-oppression as I lay them out in this thesis might be useful, in further work, to consider self-oppression as a micro-mechanism of social oppression.

My project of differentiating self-oppression is, of course, not hereby completed. My characterisation is by no means, and not intended as, a conclusive definition of self-oppression: some open questions remain regarding the scope and limits of the category. May there exist varieties of self-oppression, for example, which do not feature any pressure? Or might there be forms of agency which match my description of self-oppression, yet differ in a yet unspecified sense? These are open questions, which can be taken up in further research.

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