Introduction

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A man in the United States resolves to overcome his addiction to drugs yet returns to doing them almost immediately (Weinberg, this volume). Members of a low-ranking caste in Nepal believe caste discrimination to be wrong in all instances, but nevertheless mete it out on the caste closest to them (Descheneaux, this volume). A Muslim woman in Indonesia asks a male hypnotherapist to help her become more pious, but when she wakes from the treatment, she makes sexual advances to him (Long, this volume). A man in the Ecuadorian Amazon declares drinking alcohol to be immoral yet hosts the whole village for a drinking party the next day and becomes stupefyingly inebriated (Mezzenzana, this volume). A young woman in the United States diagnosed as having an eating disorder resolves to maintain her health, then refrains from eating for days (Lester, this volume).

Do we think consistently about what it is best to do? Do we always resolve to do what we think it is best to do? Do we always act in line with our resolutions? Philosophers have long debated such questions through the concept of akrasia, an ancient Greek word often glossed into modern English as 'weakness of will', but also sometimes translated as 'moral incontinence'. This 'weakness of will' can refer both to the way in which a person behaves, or to the aspect of character that caused them to behave in that way. For the ancient Greeks, an akratic person acted in a way that was contrary to their own best judgment. They either acted contrary to what they thought was best, or they lacked the self-control (the continence) to act on their better judgment. It is for this reason that the akratic person is often described as 'morally incontinent'. At its heart, the philosophical debate about akrasia is about the nature of the inconsistencies between a person's judgments, intentions and actions. It is about whether people can act in ways that are contrary to their better judgments.

In this introduction, we show that social scientists ask questions that parallel this philosophical debate. Social scientists have sought to understand why people believe in inconsistent things, why they resolve to act in ways that

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are contrary to their best interests, and why they fail to act in line with their resolutions. Nonetheless, we also show that in pursuing these questions, social scientists have only rarely followed in the footsteps of philosophers to examine what it means for there to be inconsistencies between peoples' judgments, intentions and actions. The result, we argue, is a dominant trend of assuming that human beings mostly (if not always) act according to what they think it is best to do. This might seem like an innocent assumption to make, but as we show in the rest of this introduction, it has had serious consequences for social scientists' abilities to understand the social worlds that they study.

A key aim of this volume is to show that the above applies just as much to anthropology as it does to other disciplines. The dominant intellectual direction of anthropology has been to assume that the thing worthy of study is the variation between people. Because anthropologists have tended to assume that people act in ways that are coherent with their broader socio-cultural position, the actual relationship between people's judgments about how they should act and their actions has not been taken as a subject of ethnographic study. Coupled with a desire to show that people act 'rationally' within their social worlds, this has led to a widespread ethnographic neglect of situations in which those people feel that their own judgments, intentions and actions are inconsistent. Indeed, we argue that it has led to an implicit denial that inconsistency between action and judgment is really possible.

This denial directly echoes a controversial philosophical position – first expressed by Plato's Socrates – that akrasia does not exist. Socrates argued that no one truly acts against what they think is best because people always pursue what they see to be the good. Anthropologists' commitment to explaining what people do in terms of their own specific reasons unwittingly tethers the discipline to this contested argument. Moreover, it rules out further investigation into how humans bring together judgments and actions, and whether this might be culturally variable. This 'Socratic' approach to akrasia – especially when unacknowledged, unexamined, and uncontested – renders the discipline less able to grasp the complexities of inner life. The discipline is theoretically and empirically impoverished as a result.

In this volume, we challenge the model of human action that has been baked into our discipline by our neglect of the question of akrasia. We directly confront anthropology's position with the philosophical challenges to the Socratic argument. For over two millennia, philosophers have contended that the human psyche is more complex than Plato's Socrates maintained, and that there is a less straightforward relationship between our judgments, intentions and actions than he suggested. We pose these same challenges to anthropology and to the social sciences more broadly. What would it take for anthropology to consider the possibility that the relationships between judgment, intention and action regularly break down? How would this change the practice of anthropology? And what enduring ethnographic and theoretical puzzles would it allow us to solve?

Together with our contributors, we ask these questions ethnographically. We describe situations where people seem to act contrary to their own judgments, and we attend to how they and others evaluate their actions. We do not resort to the normal anthropological trick of using contextual evidence to reinforce our assumption that people never act against their own better judgments. Instead, we raise questions about whether the people in question really might be acting inconsistently, and whether (as Lubomira Radoilska argues in her chapter) they understand *themselves* to be acting inconsistently.

Do people act contrary to their better judgments? What are the important differences between the various ways in which they might do that? And, what does this mean for our understanding of the human? Asking these questions is essential to building an anthropology able to research, debate and understand the terrain of inner struggle, contradiction and inconsistency. This, in turn, gives us new ways to approach central problems in social science.

We contend that developing anthropological attention to akrasia also offers something distinctive back to the philosophical debate. As Lubomira Radoilska and Richard Holton both demonstrate in this volume, this kind of ethnographic investigation confronts the philosophical discussion with the richness, complexity and diversity of actual individuals' interior and social lives, as well as the full range of their variation across cultures. The philosophical debate is too important to be conducted without detailed ethnographic evidence of how people judge, how that relates to what they do, how they understand seeming discrepancies between their judgments and their actions, and the extent to which they take apparent inconsistencies to be a moral or practical problem at all.

The ethnographic evidence we present in this volume suggests that these issues are even more complex in practice than the already subtle debate has considered, and that they vary across the world in ways that a culturally specific philosophical discussion has not yet comprehended. We do not, however, exclusively offer this evidence as empirical information to be incorporated within existing philosophical theories; we also suggest that trying to construct a universal theory about the psychological properties of individual judgment and action may be the wrong way to go altogether. Philosophy's way of debating akrasia without considering cultural variation ignores the possibility that akrasia is relational and social to the point that its content, form and even existence could vary between relationships and across societies.

Our aim, in this introduction, is to repair the anthropological neglect of akrasia. We outline the assumed explanatory model of human action that produces this neglect, locate it as a particular position within the akrasia debate, and bring it into the full light of the philosophical debate. We start by detailing anthropology's approach to a related question: how rational is human judgment in the first place? This question is always in the background of the akrasia debate and of central importance to closely related debates in philosophy. It is a question to which anthropology has clear answers because

it has played a very important part in the discipline's history. As we show, this explicit anthropological argument against irrationality within people's thinking has also led to an implicit neglect, within the discipline, of the possibility that their judgments, intentions and actions do not line up.

Consistently Judging Well

Do humans think and judge consistently? In this section, we demonstrate how and why anthropology answers this question affirmatively by contrasting it with a certain kind of moral philosophy. We argue that this answer makes anthropology a 'science of consistency' and that this has important implications for its capacity to understand and investigate akrasia.

It is ordinary for many people in many societies to eat meat. Many people see it as perfectly legitimate to kill animals such as pigs for the purpose of consuming them. Yet, it is also common for such meat-eaters to treat other animals quite differently. In Europe and North America, for instance, many people who eat pork also keep pets such as cats and dogs. They typically experience a genuine sense of loss when their dogs die and are morally and physically repulsed by the thought of killing or eating them. It is perfectly ordinary to combine these two ways of treating animals. Such people are lovers of meat *and* lovers of dogs. But they are not lovers of dog meat.

Moral philosopher Peter Singer takes this activity as irrational in that it is inconsistent in two senses: externally and internally (Singer 2011; for more on the distinctions see Wilson 1974; Tambiah 1990). First, externally, it does not correspond with the way the moral world actually is. For Singer, the morally correct thing to do is that which prevents the most suffering. Greater mental capacity, he argues, enables living beings to suffer more (Singer 2010). Both pigs and dogs, as intelligent animals, deserve our respect – it is cruel to kill both species. For Singer, the judgment that it is morally legitimate to eat animals is irrational because it is just not true. It is inconsistent with the objective moral truth. Such people have judged incorrectly.

However, Singer also takes this activity as *internally* inconsistent. Regardless of the objective moral validity of eating meat and keeping pets, they are incompatible to Singer. How is it consistent, in one moment, to treat killing a dog as immoral, and yet, in the next, to slaughter a pig for meat? There is, for Singer, a logical contradiction between these two ways of behaving. If you are concerned about your dog's potential to suffer, you are, by implication, committed to being concerned about the capacity of other living beings of equal or greater mental ability to suffer when they are killed for meat. Singer sees such people as not only having judged incorrectly in relation to how the world is, but as judging badly in that their judgments do not properly relate to one another.

Both of these judgments are related to Singer's view that moral life has objective rules that are out there in the world, irrespective of the kind of social

relations one has, and that all these rules add up so that individual agents can follow them in a logical way. Thinking morally thus requires us to step out of our conventional ways of engaging with the world to see things as they truly are – a process that necessarily involves making our moral thinking more internally consistent too. As a utilitarian, Singer's way of distancing himself from the biases of people's ordinary moral thinking takes the form of trying objectively to calculate how much suffering is involved. The famous utilitarian judgment, for instance, that it is irrational to save your mother, rather than an eminent reforming bishop, from a burning building, relies on abstracting morality into the general principle of maximizing utility. The impersonal mathematical simplicity provides a yardstick against which to judge, from the outside, the contradictions of people's supposedly unsystematized everyday judgments.

Singer's utilitarianism is not the only show in town within Anglophone moral philosophy. But the other ones replicate this practice of standing back from everyday practice to judge its validity and address its internal contradictions – a mode of philosophizing which is normal and widespread within this tradition (Banner 2014). Utilitarianism is just one of the tools that can be used to perform this operation, with Kantian categorical imperatives being another example. Kantianism is also an example of another dominant theory in this tradition that similarly holds that there are no real contradictions between moral values. This kind of moral philosophy thus takes it as a given that moral obligations and moral truths exist objectively, that they are consistent with one another, and that the task of philosophy is to identify and criticize the errors and inconsistencies of everyday thought and practice. Our job, as moral agents, is to submit ourselves to this kind of rational inquiry so that we can make judgments that are more consistent with the way the world is and with one another.

This is a distinct way of seeing ethics and the task of philosophy. Moral philosophers from other traditions do not share this view, and the tradition from which contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy stems has not always shared it either. There are also other versions of contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy – clustered around the tradition of virtue ethics, but not confined to it – that contest the idea that moral life has objective rules, that all moral values cohere, and that the task of philosophy is to root out inconsistency in everyday thought and practice (Anscombe 1958; MacIntyre 2007; Nussbaum 1986, 1990; Williams 2011, 1993b, 1981; Laidlaw and McKearney 2023). Other branches of Anglophone philosophy also regularly operate in a far less judgmental and much more descriptive mode. The akrasia debate itself takes place between the philosophies of ethics, mind and action. The aim of the debate is to understand what humans actually think and do – principally, how consistent the relationship between judgment and action actually is in human life – rather than to pronounce upon how consistently they should think and act.

Anthropology is a natural ally of this latter kind of investigation, into how humans actually think and behave in their ethical lives, for two reasons: first, because of its long tradition of opposing external judgments; and second because of its distinctive interest in how people themselves understand and engage in their social worlds.

The discipline of anthropology emerged from colonial encounters in which Euro-Americans often judged the thought and practice of subject populations as objectively wrong. Europeans confronted 'tribal' societies with beliefs or practices (witchcraft, animism, cannibalism, magic) that they then assessed as obviously mistaken or morally wrong. Early ethnographic evidence reinforced the assumption that such populations arrived at wrong conclusions and did so through irrational thinking. The fact that logical thinking was taken within European societies to be definitional of a functioning mind, and indeed of humanity altogether, made these judgments central to racist arguments about the superiority of white and European races and the nonhuman status of others (Larsen and King 2018).

Some early anthropologists reproduced these judgments and tried to explain why people in such societies thought in this way. They argued that societies differed in how evolved they were – contemporary European civilisations having reached a higher state after having passed through the earlier stages these other societies were still stuck in. They argued that the state of evolution a society was in directly shaped the way that the people in it thought. At earlier stages in evolution, people were unable to think logically, consistently, and scientifically to the point that they were unable to understand the relationship between cause and effect, or the difference between fact and fiction.

Anthropology as we know it today was founded on the resistance to these explanations and the judgments of inconsistency they relied upon. Anthropologists argued that such beliefs were not, as they seemed, evidence that people were making mistakes, nor that they thought in ways that were less consistent and more 'primitive' than Euro-Americans. British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1976), for instance, studied the witchcraft beliefs of the Azande of Southern Sudan in the early twentieth century. It seemed impossible to deny that the Azande belief that witches caused misfortunes, illnesses and deaths was an error born of illogical thinking. The Azande maintained that when someone's toe became infected, a witch had done it; that when a granary collapsed and killed the people sleeping under it, it must be witchcraft; and that when anyone died, a witch must be responsible.

The Azande did seem to know that natural causes could explain how a toe could become infected, a granary could collapse and people could die. They obviously understood that in each of these cases, someone had stubbed their toe, termites had weakened the wood and the person had died from illness. However, the fact that the Azande also maintained, in the face of that empirical evidence, their belief that witchcraft caused these events suggested that

they were incapable of systematic scientific thinking about cause and effect, and that they could not identify or reconcile inconsistencies between their judgments.

Evans-Pritchard demonstrated that this external assessment of the Azande was empirically wrong. He showed that the Azande's witchcraft beliefs and practices did not explain gaps in their empirical understanding of cause and effect, which were perfectly well developed and not compromised by their belief that witchcraft was also at play. This was because witchcraft was not an answer to *how* this event happened that contradicted or replaced the naturalistic one. It answered a different question; namely, '*why* did it happen to these people now?' motivated by the further question, 'who should be held responsible?' What looked to be two inconsistent beliefs turned out to be quite consistent in practice.

It is unlikely there can be a scientific justification for asking such a 'why?' question as the Azande did, or for when and how we hold others responsible. And that may speak as much to the limits of science's capacity to address the full range of questions raised by individual and social existence, as it does to any supposed irrationality on the Azande's part. Furthermore, the fact, and the way, that the Azande asked that why question made it hard to maintain they were in any way less intelligent or consistent in their thinking. When pressed by Evans-Pritchard, the Azande articulated sophisticated arguments about why this question was worth asking: because people sleep under granaries all the time without dying, and granaries collapse all the time without killing people. There was something to explain, they contended, that Evans-Pritchard's way of thinking offered no answer to.

Indeed, the Azande turned out to be far more systematic and curious than their western counterparts in pursuing these why questions. A European might have initially imagined that witchcraft beliefs were a way for the Azande to hold up their hands, in the face of the limitations of their scientific explanations for things like buildings collapsing, and say, 'It just happens, we cannot know why!' But Evans-Pritchard demonstrated that it was ironically the Europeans who, in the face of the question as to why the building collapsed *when* it did, had no explanations to offer – and it was the so-called 'primitives' who rigorously questioned, searched for evidence and produced complex, worked out explanations.

This is one among many ways in which anthropologists find rationality, meaningfulness and consistency in what people think and do. Later anthropologists, for example, were concerned to understand the effects of modern capitalist transformations on the populations they studied without reducing them to mere bystanders or by-products of these processes. They brought anthropology's tradition of making sense of strange beliefs and practices together with a broadly Marxist framework in order to read beliefs in supernatural dangers (such as witchcraft) as ways of noticing, articulating and countering the violence, strangeness, and distorted nature of the structural market

forces such people face (Taussig 1977; Moore and Sanders 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Graeber 2011). These anthropologists thus averred that such beliefs were perfectly consistent and coherent because they rationally comprehended a very real vulnerability in the face of capitalism.

Anthropology's tradition of showing consistency underneath seeming inconsistencies goes hand in hand with the assumption – in stark contrast to that of Singer – that social life has patterns within it that can be uncovered. This is how anthropologists make sense of seeming inconsistencies or irrationalities as actually coherent, sensible and culturally particular thoughts and actions. Anthropologists, for instance, do not conclude that treating your mother differently from a bishop is evidence of thinking inconsistently. Instead, they demonstrate that 'mother' is an important category within a broader kinship system through which relations in a society are differentiated and structured. It is thus only inconsistent to save the mother from the burning building when you apply an external measurement that deliberately removes these patterns. When we leave the patterns in, saving the mother is a perfectly coherent thing to do that is consistent with how one lives out one's obligations to differentiated relations. Your job, as an anthropologist, is to understand the context enough for you to see the consistency. Judgments of inconsistency very rarely acquire authority within anthropological discussion – whereas demonstrations of the consistency of other people's thoughts very frequently do.[1]

Let us apply this logic to the example of the pet-keeping meat-eaters. Singer judges this as evidence of inconsistent thinking. Another way of thinking, however, is to show that it only *seems* that there is inconsistency. In fact, people have a consistent judgment that just does not show itself immediately. Anthropologists have shown that societies classify animals into different categories, and that different societies undertake that classificatory work very differently (White and Candea 2018; Douglas 2008). The English, for example, make a distinction between animals that can be companions and workers – such as dogs and horses – and those they raise for consumption. The *way* a society makes its divisions can also be used to draw further divisions between a society and another, such as between French people who eat horse and British people who do not consider it meat.

The assumption, in Singer's case, is that intelligent animals should be treated well and that, given dogs and pigs are both intelligent animals, people are being inconsistent in treating them differently. For Singer, when people pet their dogs, they are committing to treating intelligent animals well; a commitment they betray when they eat pork. Edmund Leach (1989), by contrast, argued that there is a more important contrast at work in English social life: between humans and food. Many animals fall into the cultural category of legitimate food. But, as 'man's best friend', a dog is regarded as closer to humans than to edible animals. Thus, despite the fact that dogs are literally edible, they cannot be food for English people any more than other humans

can (cannibalism and dog-eating both being considered barbarous, although probably not equally). It is not like the Jewish case where pork is considered food but prohibited as not kosher, but rather that dogs are not taken as food at all (Leach 1989, 154).

Petting a dog is thus based on a separation of dogs from edible animals. This separation is culturally distinct and thus contingent, but no less internally consistent for that. It is not that people are incapable of seeing the connection Singer wants to draw, but that they categorize the world differently. English people generally love their dogs and eat their pig meat, without ever mixing up the two practices. This is, indeed, not consistent with the specific proposition that Singer has imposed: to treat intelligent animals well. But that does not mean that there is actually an inconsistency here in people's own beliefs or practices here. They seem inconsistent only when one does not understand the patterns of their thought.

This practice of finding consistency was developed, in anthropology, alongside the 'doctrine of the psychic unity of mankind': the idea that all humans share the same cognitive capacities. This theory was originally developed to attack the idea that different 'races' had different levels of intelligence that stemmed from genuine biological distinctions (Larsen and King 2018). The side of psychic unity won the day in anthropology, and the doctrine has become central to anthropology's disciplinary identity ever since. Anthropologists assume that the people they study are not stupid, irrational, or unreflective and that Euro-Americans of any stripe, even if they are philosophers, scientists or anthropologists, are not able to think more logically or consistently (Shore 2000; Geertz 1975; see also McKearney and Zoanni 2018).

This commitment to the equality of human intelligence became closely tied to the demonstration of consistency, as can be seen by the fact that alternative ways of arguing for equality were not pursued. French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (2015), for instance, proposed a way of comprehending the thought of 'primitive' populations different from Evans-Pritchard's. He argued that 'primitive' thought was nonlogical and inconsistent but not because it was a bad or incomplete version of scientific thought. Rather, it was something quite different – closer to art and ritual than to empirical explanation (Tambiah 1990). Read sympathetically, Lévy-Bruhl was looking for a different way to resist the argument about the superiority of white races and Euro-American thought – one that enabled us to see the value and sense of other ways of thinking, without having to accept the value that Euro-Americans placed on rationality.

Evans-Pritchard (1934; 1965), however, famously responded that this argument did not do justice to the intelligence, practicality, and consistency evident in the thought of these supposedly 'primitive' people. Many contemporaries were won over by Evans-Pritchard's argument that Lévy-Bruhl sailed far too close to racist waters by conceding too much to the idea that non-Europeans might not display logic. For Evans-Pritchard, the best way to resist

external judgments of seemingly exotic non-European thought and practice was through an explicitly 'intellectualist' approach that emphasized the rationality of these populations (1933).

That said, most anthropologists do not generally treat humans as exhibiting consistency in the rationalistic and propositional way that a philosopher might imagine, or that the term 'intellectualist' might suggest. Leach's demonstration that English people are quite consistent in their relationships with animals, for instance, does not rely on those people stating consistent philosophical arguments about the relationship between different beliefs. Anthropologists generally investigate what people think in a more holistic way than through attention solely to the kind of propositional statements they make in response to direct questions. They tend to rely only very partially on interviews, and almost never on questionnaire responses to questions of belief. Leach found consistency, instead, in the thoughts embedded in the different things people do, the kind of contextual claims they made in those diverse practices, and in the typically implicit relationship between them.

Evans-Pritchard's demonstration of the Azande's coherence similarly only worked because it attended to the social contexts in which the Azande's claims were made. It did not demonstrate that the Azande thought consistently in exactly the same way as a Euro-American scientist might. It undermined the idea that the Azande *should* think like that when they were handling practical difficulties, conflicts with their neighbours, and the loss of their kin. The 'rationality debate' about Evans-Pritchard's Azande material further took aim at the idealized picture of European thought that was implicit in the judgment that they were thinking inconsistently. Scholars pointed out that the comparison between European scientific thought and Azande everyday interactions with their neighbours, local medical treatments, and ritual practices was bound to make Europeans seem more rational (Evans-Pritchard 1965; Wilson 1974; Tambiah 1990). By contrast, an anthropological approach to actual European thought would reveal that it also did not accord to the standards by which the Azande were being judged – and thus, that the flaw was in the measuring device, not the thing being measured.

Fellow British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1980) argued that Evans-Pritchard treated thought, above all, as fundamentally 'institutional'. She developed this into the claim that all societies must, by necessity, invent 'entities' to distribute responsibility. European civilisations, for example, created the eminently contingent and debatable idea of IQ to explain and regulate misfortunes, incapacities and violations through a particular kind of population classification. This is just one demonstration of the general point that all societies have a cosmology or a theology implicit in their thought and practice and that all social action is value-laden. Such values do not and cannot have the kind of scientific objectivity and neutrality that ideals of rationality typically measure us against. Similarly, no society escapes the kinds of questions about misfortune, and the potential for others to cause it

through ill-will, that the Azande used witchcraft to answer (Douglas 1973; 2008). Indeed, subsequent anthropologists demonstrated that such questions about who is to be held responsible for misfortunes are always contested within societies, and that they also vary across historical periods and social contexts (Gluckman 1955; Douglas 1980; 2006; Laidlaw 2013; Danziger 2006; Evans 2016; McKearney 2022).

These arguments are just some of the ways that anthropologists have softened a certain strong and intellectual interpretation of the commitment to consistency. Indeed, the history of anthropology can be read as an attempt to incorporate more of the messiness and inconsistency of individual and social life into its models, without risking the fundamental commitment to equal intelligence in the way that Lévy-Bruhl was seen to do. The once dominant schools of structural-functionalism and structuralism, for instance, lost ground when others argued that social life was not nearly so socially cohesive or symbolically coherent as these schools suggested. Many anthropologists have since adopted a more processual picture of social life as something that people do, rather than something merely imposed upon them (Laidlaw 2013). And this goes with a greater attention to particular individuals; the ways in which they develop and change, how they experience social life as fragmented and contradictory, and the role of their own character and decisions in shaping the lives they lead (Briggs 1999; Humphrey 2008; Bourdieu 1998).

The anthropological focus on the realities of everyday life directs us to focus on the ways in which humans are not perfectly rational beings, but instead creatures of desires, fragmented between the pull of multiple moral registers and multiple competing obligations (Briggs 1999; Humphrey 2008; Schielke 2009a; Mayblin 2017; Stevenson 2014; Robbins 2013b). There is an important history of debate around precisely this theme, and there is a significant, important and growing diversity of movements in contemporary anthropology that attempt to do just this (Berlant 2012; Laidlaw 2013; Das 2007; Mattingly 2014; Garcia 2014). Some scholars take this emphasis yet further by arguing that certain contemporary social conditions lead people's own subjectivities to be fragmentary and disordered (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007; Berlant 2012).

The result is that there is no disciplinary consensus in contemporary anthropology around what kind of consistency we should look for in the lives of our informants so as to dignify their intelligence and make sense of their thought and behaviour (Evans 2020). Anthropology now holds its commitment to finding consistency alongside an intellectual interest in going in precisely the opposite direction. It is, however, notable that few anthropologists have used this seriously to attack the idea that humans judge consistently. And the practice of dignifying informants by demonstrating how their seemingly contradictory judgments actually hang together remains just as strong – most strikingly in those intellectual traditions most inclined to emphasize fragmentation and disorder (e.g. Biehl 2005). Anthropology is explicitly committed to

avoiding the idea that people make poor judgments, and this has only become more important with successive attempts to decolonize our discipline and recognize the inequalities that structure social life.

None of this interest in messiness, therefore, makes anthropology any more disposed to external judgments about the inconsistency and irrationality of the people they work with. Making an external judgment of other people's logical and moral thought assumes that correct logical and moral judgment is always the same everywhere, that one knows what correct moral thinking is, and that one knows enough about how other people think and behave to judge it to fall short of these standards. Anthropologists, by contrast, continue to challenge the idea that any individual or society might have somehow overcome culturally particular thought patterns to the point that they might think in a way that is more neutral, logical, or consistent than others. Anthropological work still consistently undermines the superiority and distance of the position from which one could judge externally, or the judgment that another pattern of thought and practice is wrong and inconsistent (McKearney 2016; Robbins 2020b). And so anthropology's foundational assumption that all humans are of equal intelligence continues to make it a science of consistency to its core (Robbins 2007).

Consistently Acting on Judgments

The anthropological commitment to finding consistency *within* people's judgments has strong echoes of Socrates' argument that there is also consistency *between* people's judgments and their actions. Socrates denied that akrasia exists, in much the same way as anthropology has repeatedly aimed to demonstrate that people do not think inconsistently. In this section, we develop this analogy into the claim that anthropology implicitly (and largely unwittingly) follows Socrates' denial of akrasia – and that this places significant limitations on its capacity to understand human thought and action.

The Socratic argument that akrasia does not occur in human life relies upon the idea that we act consistently with our judgments. Suppose you are presented with an everyday decision such as whether or not to eat a burger. These are mutually incompatible courses of action. Many different things might incline you to refuse the burger: reducing the effect of livestock farming on the environment, fitting in with a vegetarian group of friends, wanting to lose weight. Many other things might incline you to eat it: the taste of it, your own need for protein and iron, deliberately showing your vegetarian friends you are not like them. But you must do one of the two: you cannot, logically, do both. And so you reconcile the inconsistencies between your different judgments to produce a single 'best judgment' about what to do.

It is important to clarify, at this stage, the meaning of 'best judgment' within the akrasia debate. The term does not refer to a judgment that anyone

else externally judges to be objectively correct. It simply refers to what the person judges, all things considered, to be the best thing to do. It is important that 'best' here does not have the specifically moral sense as implied by the word 'good'. It might well be, for example, that I decide the thing for me to do is give moral considerations far less weight and prioritize my own desires: thus, I judge it is best for me to eat the burger.

That is why Socrates, according to what we know of his thought through Plato's writings, assumes that once we have arrived at such a judgment, we will follow it in our actions. When there is consistency among a person's judgments, he maintained, there will be a consistency between judgment and action. 'Nobody', he famously said in the *Protagoras,* 'errs willingly' (Bobonich and Destrée 2007, xvi). People, Socrates claimed, act upon their perceptions of the good. To do something is to be internally committed to thinking it is good: that is a necessary condition for acting. Put differently, actions are the external expression of our judgments. A bad act can only 'be done in ignorance, under the false belief that it is for the best' (Lear 1988, 175).

Let us imagine, for instance, that we go on not to eat the burger, even though we said to ourselves that it would be best if we did. This action seems akratic. But, according to Socrates, this is not actually possible. Actions are the external outworking of our desires. And we cannot really desire anything if we do not think that it is good. Our decision not to eat the hamburger might *seem* to go against what we judged best. But Socrates would argue that this can only be because that is not what we *actually* judged. Perhaps the moral considerations were much more important to us than we realized, and we judged deeper down that not eating the burger was the thing to do. No action, he claims, is possible unless we actually believe it worth doing – believe it the best thing to do. So it must be that we only *seemed* to be convinced by the reasons to eat the burger, but we were still governed by another judgment.

This amounts to a denial that akrasia exists.

Socrates, and many who follow him in denying akrasia's possibility, hold an 'internalist' position on the relationship between judgment and action (Bratman 1979; Stroud and Tappolet 2003; Stroud 2014). What this means is that they hold there is a necessary rather than contingent connection between practical judgments and action. The position of the modern philosopher R.M. Hare, for example, was that when a person makes a moral judgment that they ought to follow a particular path of action, they are in effect assenting to do so (Stroud and Tappolet 2003, 2). That is, Hare thought that if a person seriously says to themselves, 'I ought to do *x*', then they are in effect making a resolution to actually do that thing (Stroud 2014).

Social scientists have not taken up explicit positions on these issues in the same way these philosophers have done. The idea that humans do not always *judge* consistently has always been a live one in the social sciences and in anthropology. That is why there have always been such strong arguments in favour of the idea that humans think consistently, as well as where there are

nuanced debates about this topic within contemporary anthropology. But the idea that humans do not *do what they judge best* has never even been acknowledged, let alone properly considered, within the social sciences and anthropology. Most of these disciplines have little to say about akrasia and show little prospect of developing a more complex picture of the relationship between judgment and action.

This does not, however, mean that the social sciences make no assumptions about this aspect of human life. More often, social scientists have attempted to explain away seeming inconsistencies between judgment and actions, thus betraying an implicitly 'internalist' take that akrasia is not possible. This is particularly evident in two of the most influential explanatory paradigms in the social sciences.

The first approach – dominant in certain kinds of economic, psychological and quantitative analysis – assumes that people are individual rational agents pursuing their own good. Such a view basically follows a Socratic line of reasoning that people ultimately do what they judge to be in their best interests. The second approach emphasizes the force of structural factors over individual lives. Sometimes this type of explanation makes no reference to people's own understanding of their actions at all but shows, instead, how action is effectively determined by their social location and formation. (This approach often aims to show, by contrast, what people's best interests *really* are by showing how their actions are determined by something other than their own free reflection). Neither of these two broad approaches investigates whether there is anything culturally variable about people's interior lives, nor anything more complex about the relationship between the way they judge a situation and the way they act within it (Laidlaw 2013). These two explanatory paradigms are simply two sides of an opposition between the freedom of the rational agent and structural imposition.

In fact, these paradigms can be brought together in the same model. Marxist and Peasant studies scholarship from the 1970s onwards, for example, combined these poles in the same way to explain why people do things that seem to go against their own interests – such as supporting social systems that seem to oppress them. This work argued that people often intelligently resist their predicaments, only in ways that are not obvious or comprehensible from the outset when we do not understand either the structural forces or the subtle forms of resistance to them. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work represented a particularly developed form of this argument. His theories did not assume an equal playing field in the way economics does, but rather showed how people's decisions are strategies for navigating situations in which their choices are confined and limited by hierarchical social games. This approach explicitly recognized how structural and cultural factors shape and limit the decisions people have available to them, while it also treated these people as rationally choosing between available options in the way an economist might imagine (Bourdieu 1984).

Marxist scholars have also sometimes proposed variations upon the 'false consciousness' theme; that is, that people's social circumstances have forced or indoctrinated them into a viewpoint that is directly against (what the analyst thinks is) their real interests (Godelier 1977). This explanation seems to seriously consider the idea that social forces might influence people's interior lives; however, it does so only by showing people thinking rationally with the information given to them and doing what they *think* is rational to do. Marxist approaches thus preserve the same Socratic commitment to seeing people's actions as pursuing *what they see as good,* but they do so by turning people into suffering 'victims' of larger forces (Robbins 2013a; Wilk 2001). Marxist theories thus continue to assume that all action is internally consistent with what people *think* is in their best interests, while simultaneously maintaining the authority of the analyst to point out that this is not what is *really* best for them.

In this volume, Darin Weinberg demonstrates, for instance, that the social sciences have interpreted addiction as either a purely rational choice, or as behaviour that is not self-directed but rather determined by social forces outside an individual's control. This simplistic duality is not confined to the study of addiction. It is not uncommon for a social scientist to try to rescue people from their own sense that they are acting in ways that do not express what they think they ought to do by showing that their actions are either rational or not actually free. The social sciences have traditionally focused on these two options. The reason for this, we argue, is because most social scientists implicitly adopt a Socratic position on akrasia that people act in line with their judgments of what is best, even if the actual question of akrasia is never made explicit. More often than not, social theory works only because it is premised on an implicit denial that akrasia might be up for debate – by excluding it as a possibility from the off.

Anthropology's traditional interest in the diverse ways that people actually experience their own worlds should have led its practitioners to be more interested in the quotidian complexities of human life. Its method of participant-observation is even centred around paying careful attention to the differences between what people do, what they feel they should do, and what they say they do (Malinowski 1987). In these conditions, an ethnographic and theoretical exploration of akrasia might well have taken off. We propose that the reason it did not is because of most anthropologists' deep commitment to consistency as a way of understanding social life and as a way of dignifying the people they study.

This neglect of akrasia as a possibility is even true for what might be the most concerted effort to recognize the complexities of human ethical life. The anthropology of ethics challenges the trends in social science that we have identified as preventing a deeper investigation of the complexities of people's interior lives (Laidlaw 2002; Zigon 2009; Mattingly 2014; Faubion 2001). Central to this movement is a rethinking of the nature of agency itself. Many

anthropologists within the movement reconceptualize freedom not as the use of rational choice, in opposition to cultural limitations, but rather as a capacity for reflection developed in and through one's social relations (Faubion 2011; Mahmood 2001; Laidlaw 2010; see also Foucault 1992). Social relations, in this model, not only shape the information we have or the situations we act within, but also the *way* we reflect ethically upon them (Heywood 2015). Yet, this idea is not intended to diminish but rather expand the role of the individual within our analyses: giving more space to the freedom our complex interior processes afford us. The point is that people's behaviours do not need to be rationalized as either functional economic responses or as coming from false consciousness (Keane 2015). We can search for explanations in terms of how they distinctively and freely evaluate their relational worlds (Robbins 2013a; Lambek 2000; Laidlaw 2013).

The anthropology of ethics represents an important break from other versions of social science. But the demonstration of how people are not dupes, but rather reflective, intelligent, and conscious, has also been argued to deepen the idea of humans as consistent and rational animals (Mittermaier 2012; Das 2014; Englund 2008; Kapferer and Gold 2018). This is more obviously true of the scholars that follow their informants' own focus on consistency through keeping to resolutions (for more on this argument, see Evans 2016, 2017, 2020). But it is also true of those arguments that explicitly focus on ambivalence, failure and fragmentation. This scholarship also treats people's difficulties as coherent and reflective responses to the diverse social patterns and moral imaginations they live within (e.g. Schielke 2009a, 2009b; see also Laidlaw 2013; Mayblin and Malara 2018). These arguments thus end up implying, in sharp contrast to Radoilska's attention to similar instances in this volume, that these are not really failures to be good, but evidence of belief in a diverse set of values.

If work in the anthropology of ethics shows us how diverse people's judgments of the good are, it also still assumes that people, nevertheless, continue to act in line with those judgments; that is, that their action is rationally related to their ethical thinking. Many such arguments deliberately avoid concluding that something has gone wrong with people's will by instead demonstrating how their actions make sense in a more complex social context. Even attempts to explicitly foreground people's moral struggles unintentionally reproduce Socrates' denial of akrasia, and thus foreclose rather than open up questions about the relationship between judgment, intention and action.

When, how and why do people judge themselves and others as judging poorly, failing to act on good intentions, and failing to formulate the good intentions their judgments would merit? Anthropologists do not know because we have been so concerned not to impose a judgment upon them that we have never asked. We have relied so heavily on understanding social behaviour as having meaningfully linked and consistent patterns that we have not seriously inquired into whether human beings themselves consistently

link their own judgments to their actions. The result is not simply that we have an embarrassing paucity of empirical material on this question, but also that a discipline that aims to be empirically and theoretically open to the full diversity of human experience has actually taken up a highly particular and highly controversial position on it. Anthropology is a science of consistency that neglects the possibility that there might be, in human life, a complex relationship between judgment, intention and action.

Philosophical Inconsistencies

Unlike anthropologists, philosophers have debated the questions around akrasia for over two millennia. Indeed, few philosophers have been content to simply conclude the discussion of akrasia with Socrates' simple denial of its possibility. In doing so, they have developed a wide variety of sophisticated resources for handling the topic's intricate complexities.

Within philosophy, the push back against Socrates began immediately, by some accounts, within Plato's own corpus. How to interpret the development of Socrates' words within Plato is a subject of debate. Some see Plato's thought as evolving so that he came to view emotions and appetites as things that prevent us from judging, rather than reflective judgments in and of themselves (Nussbaum 1986). Thus, the conflict between a judgment and an appetite becomes a conflict between two unlike things. When we eat the burger, on this interpretation, we do so because we are captive to our unthinking hunger, rather than consciously choosing to go against our better judgment.[2] On this interpretation, Plato did not end up making any more room for akrasia than Socrates. In other interpretations, however, Plato's position moved away from Socrates so significantly that, by the time he was writing the *Republic*, he could argue that akrasia did, in fact, emerge out of the presence of competing motivations underlying human action (Bobonich and Destrée 2007, xvii).

Aristotle, more explicitly than Plato, rejected the Socratic position with a detailed description of akrasia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he described it as a practical failure of character (Lear 1988, 174–75). For Aristotle, the truly virtuous person was one who was not conflicted by opposing desires, but instead experienced harmony and unity (Lear 1988, 167–68). Aristotle's vision of human flourishing was of a man who had managed, through the inculcation of habit, to align his desires in a single direction in which happiness and goodness were one and the same. Such a man was not akratic, for he felt none of the conflict that would typically lead to akrasia, and he felt his desires to always align with his judgments. For Aristotle, such a man possessed complete self-control (*enkrateia*). At the other end of the scale, the ignorant and the unfree – who, for Aristotle, included slaves and women – were also incapable of akrasia for different reasons.

Aristotle's philosophical position differed with respect to different groups of people. Aristotle held a fully internalist view of the relationship between judgment and action for the truly virtuous. They always did what they judged best, and this is why akrasia was not possible for them. Aristotle's view of women and slaves was, however, entirely externalist in that he thought their actions were not governed in any way, shape or form by their judgments. To Aristotle, these latter populations thus could not be akratic for entirely the opposite reason to the fully virtuous citizen.

Aristotle's ethics, however, was directed to an intermediate category: free male citizens who had yet to achieve virtue. Though they had the potential to reach it, their actions were not yet ruled by their judgments about what was best in as much as they gave in to passion and temptation. Therefore, if they were to cultivate themselves properly, the relationship between their actions and judgments would become more and more internalist over time.

Aristotle sees these individuals as having both internalist and externalist possibilities. His thought emphasizes that the prospect of reconciling their judgments and actions, as well as the reality of 'the divergences that can result between an agent's evaluation of her options and her motivation to act' (Stroud 2014). It is precisely this combination of this possible relationship between judgment and action, alongside the possibility of its breakage, that makes akrasia possible for such individuals in Aristotle's thought (Mele 1987, 97). For these citizens, akrasia is a possibility because judgments do have *some* relationship to their actions, just not a relationship of perfect identification. In other words, for Aristotle, it was precisely those qualities that enabled a person to envision a coherent ethical end that also made them vulnerable to being akratic. In the memorable phrasing of Amélie Rorty, 'Akrasia is a disease that only the strong can suffer' (Rorty 1983, 176).

Aristotle's argument takes akrasia as the defect of the potentially, but not yet fully, virtuous. It thus relies on the idea that a truly ordered human existence would not feature akrasia. For some, this sidesteps the fundamental philosophical challenge of akrasia, for it does not show how incontinence in the very strict sense is possible (Lear 1988, 181). That is, Aristotle does not show that a person capable of arriving at all things considered best judgments is also capable of acting contrary to those judgments. Aristotle can thus still leave his readers with the fundamental question of whether it is possible to provide an explanation of akrasia that shows how a person might act inconsistently with what they believe and judge to be true.

Efforts to provide an answer to this question continue to dominate the modern philosophical debate about akrasia, with varying degrees of success. Most philosophers agree that we should be able to demonstrate that the strong version of akrasia is possible. But they do not agree on how.

The modern philosophical debate took on a new urgency in 1970 when Donald Davidson published 'How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?' (2001). In very broad terms, Davidson agreed with Socrates that the idea akrasia exists

poses a genuine philosophical problem we cannot neatly resolve by simply pointing to instances of people acting strangely. Like Socrates, he felt that if a person truly judges one course of action to be better than another, then that person will *want* to carry out the better action. And like Socrates, he assumed that free humans will choose to do what they *want* to do. His solution to explaining how akrasia is, then, actually possible thus involved distinguishing between different kinds of judgment. Davidson argued that sometimes people act on partial judgments, rather than on their all-out judgment of what the right thing to do might be.

This raised an important question about just what good judgment looks like, and whether humans always have such a thing as a 'best judgment'. We pick up this question from an anthropological perspective in this volume by exploring societies in which it is not assumed that humans judge consistently, and where there is consequently little social expectation that people will have such a thing as a 'best judgment' in the first place. We see these as social realisations of Davidson's argument, i.e. it is only if we have 'best judgments' in the first place that the philosophical problem of akratic inconsistency can exist.

Nonetheless, many commentators have felt that Davidson, like Aristotle, sidesteps the actual problem of akrasia, because he shows only how humans can be akratic in limited and irrational ways (i.e. when they act on something less than their 'best judgment'). Davidson does not actually explain how it is possible for us to freely, reflectively and intentionally act against our best (all things considered) judgments (Stroud 2014).

Philosopher Richard Holton generated a new wave of discussion on akrasia by distinguishing between akrasia and weakness of will (Holton 1999). The distinction is as follows: Akrasia is when someone does not do what they judge best to do, or does do something they judge it is best not to do. Weakness of will is, by contrast, when someone does not do what they intended to do, or when do something that they intended not to do. Both of these involve a breakdown between one's reasoning processes and one's actions, but they are of different kinds.

Let us return to our meat-eating example. Weakness of will occurs if someone breaks their intention not to eat meat because their emotions disabled their capacity to judge, or swayed them to make a new judgment that eating meat was OK. Neither of these would, however, constitute akrasia. If an emotion or appetite effectively forced one to act in a certain way by disabling one's capacity to judge, then one would not be acting freely, consciously and willingly. And if one now had a new 'best judgment' that eating meat was OK, then one would not be acting against it. Both of these cases, however, would still involve a contradiction of a previous intention, and thus constitute weakness of will. Holton's focus on weakness of will enabled him to account for our repeated failure to do what we judge, at a certain point in time, to be the best thing to do without needing to prove the philosophical possibility of akrasia.

Holton's focus on the intentions that make weakness of will possible provided a way of seeing abstract 'best judgments' in people's actions. The intentions Holton was interested in are *resolutions* to act in a certain way in the future based on evaluations made in the present, such as resolving to get up in the morning when one knows one will be tired. Such intentions save us from having to consider all things all the time, and instead allow us to arrive at a decision that will guide future action. Holton focused, in particular, on 'contrary-inclination-defeating intentions' that are specifically designed to counter our temptations to act in a way that goes against our current reasoning (such as deciding to be vegetarian in order to resist the opposing impulse to eat meat).

Intentions, in this way, are ways in which we concretize our 'best judgment' in a given moment, and they attempt to mediate that judgment into a future situation. They are technologies for breaching temporal gaps between present judgments and future actions. Because Holton focuses on the observable things that people do, his concept has obvious resonances with anthropology, which is why many of the contributors to this volume have found it productive to work with.

Amélie Rorty expanded the debate in another direction by identifying the possibility of what she calls akratic breaks in a wide variety of places. Traditionally, the akrasia debate has focused on the possibility of a broken relationship between judgment and action. While Holton directs us to focus on the more specific relationship between intention and action, Rorty demonstrated that there are even more places when an akratic break between these can occur, such as when we hold that something is best to do, but fail even to form an intention to do it. Alternatively, she shows how people can assess themselves as having morally erred even by failing to form the right kind of judgment – as in cases of implicit racism, where people have yet failed to translate some of their principles into their ways of seeing the world. This is a possibility that Radoilska explores at length in this volume, and that anthropology's tradition of attending to the relationship between people's judgments can help shed even further light on.

In conclusion, throughout the history of philosophy, it has proven surprisingly difficult to actually show that people can be akratic. This is despite the fact that it seems, intuitively, to be the case that akrasia is a possibility within human life. At the very least, there is no universally agreed upon explanation of how akrasia is possible, and the problem continues to give rise to new and rich debates. Even if very few people fully agree with Socrates anymore, his basic contention that action follows judgment continues to haunt the philosophical debate. We thus find philosophy in a situation analogous to anthropology: torn between the competing inclinations to emphasize the consistency of the human subject, and to attend to the mess and disorder of human life. But philosophy, in stark contrast to anthropology, has a developed debate about these topics, with sophisticated resources for analysing the terrain of

inner struggle, in which scholars propose complex intellectual solutions. In particular, philosophers have sufficiently challenged the Socratic argument such that it is impossible to assume its model of human judgment and action is self-evident. This philosophical resistance challenges the implicit anthropological assumption that people's actions are always explicable by reference to their way of seeing and judging the world.

An Anthropology of Akrasia

In this volume, we devote anthropological attention to instances when people feel their own actions to be in conflict with their judgments. In doing so, we focus on the kind of cases that social scientists have traditionally sought to tidy up through neat explanations that show that people are really more consistent than they seem. We consider whether human action might have a much more complex relationship to judgment than anthropology has yet considered. Do people always act as they judge it is best to? And do people always intend to do what they think it is best to do? Do people act, in other words, in line with how they think?

We want to challenge the assumption that akratic inconsistencies exist primarily in the eye of the observer (and can thus, through analysis, be expelled). We do so not from the naïve conviction that we could simply prove empirically that akrasia does exist, or even to argue for any particular side in the ongoing philosophical debate; we do so, instead, to open up a crucial ethnographic perspective on an issue to which anthropologists have never attended. Our challenge, in other words, is not just to countenance the idea that people may be in some kind of inner turmoil, but to confront analytical interpretations of that turmoil so as to understand why it is so often explained away. We use the resources of the philosophical debate to develop our anthropological capacity to attend to akrasia in ways that do not push it away from view, but rather allow us to reflect more deeply on the complexity of the relationship between judgment, intention and action in human life.

The philosophical debate demonstrates that describing situations that look like akrasia is never straightforward or simple. Even trying to state what is going on in the mind of an akratic person involves going deep into contested philosophical questions (Williams 1993a). As anthropologists, we use the debates about whether or not akrasia exists to question actions that look like akrasia and to ask whether the relationship between judgment and action has broken down in any given instance or whether it only seems to have done. We draw upon the distinctions between akrasia and other forms of inner struggle to help us distinguish the kinds of breakdown that we observe and that our interlocutors describe. More broadly, we use the contentious nature of the philosophical debate to create breaks in the tight relationship we assume

between judgment, intention and action. Doing so opens up new ways of researching, describing and analysing human behaviour.

The chapters offer different examples of what an anthropology that takes akrasia seriously might involve, and they say that better than we could for them. Here, we lay out just two of the wider issues that these chapters raise and that an anthropology of akrasia might lead to.

Issue 1: Can Akrasia Have Its Origins in Collective Life?

This question has often been overlooked in the most well-known philosophical debates about akrasia, which has a resolutely individualistic focus. But those philosophers who have considered it have produced a body of work around the concept of 'endemic akrasia' that speaks directly to (though not always in agreement with) anthropology's own traditions of thinking about the effect of social life on human judgment and action.

Philip Pettit, for example, has written about whether there are kinds of collectives that might closely enough resemble a unified and rational agent such that they are capable of akrasia (Pettit 2003). In our current age, for example, we might want to talk about the akrasia of polluting corporations who may be explicitly committed to sustainability while routinely acting in direct contrast to this aim. We might want to think of whether committees who fail to motivate themselves to do what they all agree is right are 'akratic'. In this volume, Ivan Deschenaux takes up a similar question in relation to caste in Nepal, by developing an ethnographic way to take this possibility seriously in relation to a pressing question of social science.

A slightly different perspective on this question can be found in the work of Amélie Rorty, who argues that we should understand the manifestation of individual akrasia from an epidemiological and demographic perspective (Rorty 1997, 649). 'Just as a disposition to chronic bronchitis may indicate a toxic environment,' Rorty explains, 'so individual akrasia may indicate social disorder' (Rorty 1997, 649). For Rorty, a pattern of individual akrasia across a group can be understood as an endemic condition, born of particular social structures, institutional frameworks, and political discourses. As such, she argues the correct response to endemic akrasia is not to be undertaken at the level of the individual, but rather at the level of political and economic reform (Rorty 1997, 657).

This work has resonances with contemporary work in anthropology on the shaping of psychic life by social and political conditions. We know, for example, that certain social conditions exacerbate the perils of substance addiction or schizophrenia (Marrow and Luhrmann 2017). Social scientists also frequently examine how far violence, precarity and poverty can shape people's capacities to construct coherent lives. In short, we know there are situations in which people are pushed by social forces towards acting against

their own judgments about what it is best for them to do morally and for their own interests.

Can the idea of endemic akrasia add something to these debates in social science? The idea of endemic akrasia foregrounds the wilful, free nature of the individual, while also pointing toward the way that structures of power might constrain him or her. As an analytical frame, it keeps front and centre the idea of the person who freely goes against their better judgment while complicating the idea of that freedom. It is, we believe, a helpful complication of the old sociological debate between structure and agency, and it refuses to allow easy dissolution of the question into either extreme. Some philosophers even argue that diagnosing people as akratic can be a better way to maintain our focus on their rationality and coherency than the other option of treating them as simply determined in their actions (one classic social science approach), or more generally irrational (an option that anthropology will always be inclined to reject, and that has shown to be particularly problematic when analysing the decisions of people in poverty).

Part of the challenge of endemic akrasia is that it forces us to think of coherence, continence and *strength of will* (in short, all those things that enable a person to resist the social forces that might induce endemic akrasia) as goods whose availability depends upon a person's social position.[3] We should be wary of the ways this idea has been pursued, from Aristotle's argument that only free men could be properly strong-willed, to the conclusion that poor people are the authors of their own poverty. But the idea of *strength of will* might also provide new routes away from those old dangers, while enabling us to take into account more of the complexity of their relational and interior lives. An anthropology that is open to the idea of endemic akrasia might therefore be one that is able to explore why and how people can have their possibilities for action curtailed without reducing them to the level of rule-following automatons.[4] As Richard Holton argues in this volume, taking this possibility seriously may well enable anthropology to realize its full potential to speak back to the individualistic focus on akrasia that is dominant in both the philosophical debate and in understandings of human action more broadly.

Issue 2: How Can We Analyse and Account for Variation in the Ways in Which People Experience and Respond to Inconsistency between Judgments and Actions?

Philosophers are not the only people interested in the question of whether a person's action is linked to their evaluative judgment. Indeed, humans everywhere make judgments about the relationship between other people's actions and judgments (Austin 1956; Strawson 1962; Hughes et al. 2019; Lambek 2015, 2010). 'He doesn't think about what he does'; 'she's careless'; 'she's very deliberate.' These are statements we hear all the time. All of them are comments

about whether a person's judgments are informing and guiding their actions. They thus model different understandings of how judgment, intention and action can break down within the human psyche. The contributors to this volume show that these understandings are not everywhere the same. There is, instead, a staggering variation in the ways that people treat what might look like moments of inconsistency: from a whole host of ways in which they struggle with a feeling of having acted out of line with strong resolutions, to societies in which no-one seems in the slightest bit concerned about the idea that they might act incontinently. This raises the possibility that seemingly purely psychological relationships between judgment and action might also depend on social differences.

We propose we can use the philosophical distinction we outlined earlier to contrast those societies that have a more 'internalist' interpretation of the mind, with others that tend to follow an 'externalist' reading of what people do.

Societies that tend toward 'internalism' are those in which a strong social emphasis is placed on the idea that action is a deliberate emanation of a person's decisions, and these societies are consequently likely to feature elaborate discourses about what to do when people's decisions do not translate into action. Contemporary work in the anthropology of ethics has showcased a range of ethical projects that involve an active attempt to cultivate a correspondence between desire, judgment and action, particularly Islamic reform movements in which people seek to make their outward behaviour correspond directly with their inner desires (Laidlaw 1995; Mahmood 2012; Evans 2017, 2020; Deeb 2006). These ethical projects are similar to the Aristotelian tradition that we have engaged with in this introduction, in that they see akrasia as a basic problem of human nature that requires work to be fixed. In the case of Islamic reform movements, this is perhaps of no great surprise given the common genealogy they share with Western philosophy that goes back to ancient Greek thought.

Often people living in such traditions want to cultivate themselves away from akratic action, and they may have developed sophisticated techniques of the self to do this. The 'intentions' Holton outlines are one such ethical technology for ensuring that future actions conform to judgments and elaborate variations upon the intention are common within many internalist societies. Christian confession, for instance, renders even lapses in behaviour as an occasion to reinforce the normativity of avoiding sin (Robbins 2004; see also Mayblin and Malara 2018). Whether people see it as possible to eradicate akrasia altogether will depend on the particular conception they have of human nature. A good example of this is the Christian conception described by Bialecki in this volume, which is strongly shaped by Augustin and sees action as having a normative relationship to judgment that is always breaking down.

Other traditions problematize akrasia as something that is produced out of particular social conditions or relationships. Here, the work to cultivate

oneself out of akrasia is likely to take a very different form, for it will involve not only working on the self, but also its environment. Indeed, anthropologically speaking, the intentions Holton outlines are a more individualistic kind of ethical technology in comparison to more social ones that can create more public and relational links between judgment and action. There is a long anthropological tradition that looks at religious and political rituals as tools to bind action more tightly to intentions (e.g. Bloch 1974; Rappaport 1999; Robbins 2015).[5] Other forms of contemporary governance, particularly in the form of psychological management, similarly make such connections normative through the regulation of everyday life, examples of which can be found in the chapters by Lester and McKearney (see also Davis 2012; Lester 2019; Weinberg 2005).

Several chapters in this volume nonetheless demonstrate sharper differences still in that they represent societies that have a more 'externalist' theory of mind and action. Within these traditions, there will be far less of a concern to link actions to judgments, decisions and desires. In these settings, akrasia appears very differently, and may not be problematized at all. People pay less attention to inconsistencies between judgment and action in these settings, and when these inconsistencies are recognized, there may be little attempt to rectify them. These traditions offer the sharpest challenge to anthropological theory, for they allow ways of being a human subject that do not sit easily with our discipline's need to make action sensible in light of, and consistent with, people's judgments. Francesca Mezzenzana's chapter on the drinking habits of the Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon, for instance, offers a rich ethnography in which we can explore such challenging possibilities.

The idea of a society with a fully 'externalist' theory of mind might at first sound strange, but we think that there are examples with which most anthropologists will be familiar. Take, for example, those Melanesian societies in which people stick resolutely to a doctrine of the 'opacity of minds', refusing out of principle (at least in public) to reflect upon what others are thinking (Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Stasch 2008; Robbins 2008, 2020a). In those, and analogous societies, no clear link between evaluative judgment and action is likely to be drawn for anybody (see also Danziger 2006; Carey 2017; Mezzenzana 2020). This makes it practically impossible to hold people to account for their previous intentions or declarations and often means that people do not make them in the first place. Ethnographers, for instance, have attested to an almost total absence of the promise: a highly internalist ethical technology inasmuch as it creates a normative social link between a statement of what someone will do and their future actions (Robbins 2001, 2008, n.d.; Carey 2017).

In practice, few societies exhibit such extreme features. Rather, people are likely to variously evaluate the actions of their fellow humans according to either internalist or externalist principles in a more variegated way, depending on the kind of social relations and contexts they are in. This, in itself, raises

new questions for an ethnographer. What kinds of action receive internal and which external forms of accountability? Are people in different social situations, and differing social positions, held responsible differently according to varying understandings of how their judgments relate to their actions?

We raise these questions because we believe that the chapters in this volume challenge the basic philosophical position, often assumed since Aristotle, that akrasia is a state that most people would seek to overcome. Instead, some of these chapters raise the idea of akrasia being – for some people at least – an unremarkable possibility or even a desired end itself. And Radoilska's chapter reflects on more recent philosophical debates about these issues. This all leads to a question that challenges the very foundations of the akrasia debate, namely, are there versions of human life in which there is so little expectation that an individual's actions and best judgments will be co-ordinated that akrasia itself cannot even be considered a philosophical puzzle?

Conclusion

Taking akrasia seriously does not mean adopting a philosophical certainty about it. The idea of akrasia poses a question and not an answer.[6] The philosophical debate has not arrived at any consensus about what akrasia is, how we can identify it, or whether it is even possible. And that is precisely our point. At the moment, these questions are not contentious within anthropology because they are not even acknowledged. Many of the issues are under the surface of our most important contemporary debates, and at stake in the ethnographic issues we consider. But we do not recognize the depth, complexity and contested nature of the philosophical questions they involve. Thus, we ignore important material and unwittingly make highly debatable assumptions in our interpretations of thought and behaviour without even realising we are doing so. Taking akrasia seriously as a concept means opening ourselves to the questions it poses about human life and social action.

The philosophical debate about akrasia offers an impressive array of resources for considering and confronting those questions. As the contributors to this volume show, many of those resources can be readily integrated into an ethnographic investigation of how different societies approach conflicts between judgment and action. Doing so immediately reveals the sheer variety of ways people conceive the self, its component parts and how they can relate to action. In the same way that the position philosophers take on akrasia reveals much about how they conceptualize humans as thinking and acting creatures, ethnographic attention to these topics uncovers new ways of seeing and analysing different social approaches to human ethical judgment and action.

The contributors to this volume do more than just draw upon the akrasia debate to begin an ethnographic and analytical conversation about akrasia

within anthropology. They also demonstrate a wide diversity of ways of understanding the person that do not fit neatly with any of the common assumptions underlying the various different positions in the philosophical akrasia debate. The philosophical debate, for example, gives pride of place to consistency, as seen through the implicit but pervasive assumption that its absence is a problem requiring not only moral wrangling but also philosophical analysis. These chapters ask whether that might be more of a culturally specific concern than philosophy recognizes. There are social conditions that reinforce the sense that inconsistency is a concern, but there are also those that render it unproblematic, uninteresting or unremarkable. What if many of our confusions and debates about akrasia stem from a highly particular conception of the role consistency must play in human life? What if it does not have to play that role at all?

If analytically repurposed, the kind of deep ethnographic understanding that has kept anthropology out of the akrasia debate can offer something back to philosophy. When anthropologists attend to the intrapersonal complexities the akrasia debate concerns itself with, they expose connections between people's inner terrain and the broader relational and social world they live in. Akrasia may be a complication of the individual, but that individual is a social actor, and their experience of akrasia cannot be understood without a grasp of what society means for them. The result of our ethnographic investigation is to reveal relationships people have with their own judgments and actions that depart from universal philosophical models of the person. And this raises questions about whether and how the very possibility of the internal complications of akrasia may depend, more than we had imagined, on our external relationships. If this is so, it is about time that ethnography enters the debate.

In this volume, we have borrowed much from philosophy to form our own arguments. It is our hope that this idea can, in turn, offer philosophers new ways of discussing an ancient problem. And it is our hope that this will open up for anthropologists, too, new ways of conceiving and investigating the complexity of human beings in their social relations.

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Notes

1. Insiders and outsiders to the discipline have sometimes articulated this position as a form of moral relativism (e.g. Geertz 1984). But this is just one of the ways in which the anthropological aversion to external judgments can be articulated without resorting to the shaky philosophical argument for relativism (e.g. Laidlaw 2013). Anthropological practice has never relied on a relativist philosophical argument about morality, and it is thus a mistake to think the discipline's challenge to external judgments can be undermined by undermining moral relativism.
2. This argument parallels anthropological theories that attribute social forces with the ability to cloud people's judgment, although Plato's idea is that proper judgment is overrun not by forces in society, but by appetites within the person.
3. On strength of will, see Holton (2003).
4. Compare with Laidlaw (2013) on the 'science of unfreedom'.
5. Though the potential for ritual to sever the links between intention and action are just as important (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994).
6. We are indebted to Anastasia Piliavsky for this observation.

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