Aristotle on Softness: EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a9–1150b19

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Aristotle says being soft (μαλακός) is base (φαῦλος) and blameworthy (ψεκτός) (EN 7.1 = EE 6.1, 1145b9–10), and something to be ashamed of (αισχύνεσθαι; Rhet. 1384a1–3). He also says women are softer than men congenitally (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b15), and he famously considers women to be inferior to men in a variety of ways. That Aristotle does not like soft people is clear. But what deserves closer examination is what Aristotle means by “softness” (μαλακία), and why exactly he thinks this is a bad trait. Learning what, for Aristotle, is wrong with being soft can help us understand a disposition of character, different from akrasia and vice, that he thinks is deficient and reprehensible, thereby adding to our understanding of Aristotelian moral psychology, agency, and ethics. It can also illuminate Aristotle’s prejudices about women and other subordinated groups in ancient Greece that he, and many of his contemporaries, viewed as soft.

In the first chapter of Nicomachean Ethics 7 [= Eudemian Ethics 6], Aristotle says that the ensuing discussion will focus on “akrasia and softness … as well as self-control and endurance” (EN 7.1 = EE 6.1, 1145a35–36). Akrasia and softness are blameworthy character states, yet they are not as bad as vice. Self-control and endurance, in turn, are praiseworthy, even if they do not rise to the level of virtue (EN 7.1 = EE 6.1, 1145b7–9). Chapters 3 to 6 of the third common book focus on akarrasia and

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1 Books 4 to 6 of the Eudemian Ethics [EE] have come down to us as Books 5 to 7 of the Nicomachean Ethics [EN] in the extant manuscripts. They are typically called ‘common books’, and I will adopt this convention here.

2 Aristotle also says that democratic politics, which he does not favor, are “soft” (μαλακάς; Pol. 1290a28).

3 The idea that women, barbarians, and some hetero-divergent peoples are “soft” is pervasive in historiographical, literary, philosophical, and rhetorical texts from ancient Greece. For the association of women and μαλακία, see, e.g., Euripides, Seven Against Thebes, esp. Adrastos’ encomium of Hippomedon in 882–7. See, also, chapter 6 of Pseudo-Aristotle’s Physiognomics. (We will see Aristotelian references below.) For charges of softness against non-Greeks, see Herodotus’ contrast between “hard” and “soft” peoples and the idea that “soft lands breed soft peoples” (Historias 9.122), with the Ionians, the Lydians, and the Persians repeatedly being called “soft” in a pejorative sense. For other examples of negative attributions of softness to non-Greeks, see Xenophon, Cyra. 8.8.15, Hellenica 3.4.19; Isocrates, Philippus 5.124; Antiphanes (frag. 91 = Athen. 12.526d); and Athenaeus 12.540f–541a (= Clearchus, frag. 44 Wehrli). Famously, Thucydides has Pericles defensively claim that Athenians “pursue wisdom without softness” (φιλοσοφούμεν ἄνευ μαλακίας; History of the Peloponnesian War 2.40.1). For ‘μαλακία’ as designating non-cis men and men who are the passive members in homosexual intercourse, see, e.g., Aristophanes, Wasps 1455, Aeschines, Against Timarchus 131, Diogenes Laertius, Lives 7.173, and Plutarch, Moralia 88c. For scholarly discussions of attributions of the term ‘μαλακός’ to subordinated groups in Antiquity, see Redfield (1985), Georges (1994, esp. 184–185), Martin (1996, 124–128), Hunt (1998, 49 and 146), Hall (1989, 128 n. 82), Kurke (1992, passim), Flower and Marincola (2002), and Wrenhaven (2012, 48, 144, and 161), among many others.

4 Cf. EN 7.3 = EE 6.3, 1148a12–14; EN 7.10 = EE 6.10, 1152a34–35.
self-control, both in their “unqualified” (ἀπλῶς) and qualified forms.\(^5\) Chapter 7 finally returns to softness (μαλακία) and its contrary state, endurance (καρπρία). There, we are told akrasia and self-control are concerned with pleasures, while softness and endurance are concerned with pains (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a9–16). Yet, almost all scholarly discussions have focused on akrasia and self-control, while dismissing the remarks on softness.\(^6\) Indeed, scholars have called the distinctions and arguments in this chapter “disjointed,” “not sound,” “unsuccessful,” and “embarrassments.”\(^7\) And one interpreter was so appalled by the low quality of the arguments and by the internal tensions within the chapter that he even argued that the different sections in it “can scarcely have been intended originally to stand in their present relation,” and some, or perhaps all, may be the product of “an inferior thinker.”\(^8\)

Less harsh readers still tend to underplay the significance of the distinction between akrasia and softness. Some scholars simply assume that these character dispositions amount to the same state, or that one is a kind or species of the other.\(^9\) Other interpreters take Aristotle’s distinction between softness and akrasia at face value. On their view, these are different character states, but their moral psychological underpinnings are parallel or analogous.\(^10\) The akratēs, in some sense, knows what is best, but acts contrary to their best judgment because of their appetite for bodily pleasures related to

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\(^5\) Aristotle calls akrasia caused by an appetite for bodily pleasures (the pleasures that pertain to temperance and intemperance) “unqualified” or “plain” akrasia (EN 7.3 = EE 6.3, 1146b18–20), while akrasia caused by anger, or over property, profit, and honor are qualified forms of akrasia (EN 7.4 = EE 6.4, 1147b31–1148a2). See Lorenz (2009) and Cagnoli Fiecconi (2020) for helpful discussions about this distinction.

\(^6\) Aside from the commentaries by Cook Wilson (1879), Grant (1885), Stewart (1892), Burnet (1900), Gauthier and Jolif (1959), Hardie (1968), and other comprehensive commentaries, to my knowledge, Bobonich (2009) is the only piece that offers a sustained and dedicated discussion of this chapter in English.

\(^7\) See, Grant (1885, vol. 2, 221, n.3&4), and Cook Wilson (1879, 44–45) for these disqualifying remarks. Cook Wilson also suggests that the discussion is too short to learn much from it. But length of discussion has not prevented scholars from spilling significant amounts of ink when it comes to other Aristotelian concepts and arguments such as prime matter, practical truth in EN 6.2 = EE 5.2, the ‘phusikoteron’ argument for the necessity of friends in EN 9.9, the category of relatives, the problem of future contingent statements in De interpretatione 9, the human function argument in EN 7.7, etc.

\(^8\) Cook Wilson (1879, 25 & 45). Yet, there are no significant manuscript worries in this section of the text. (See note 41 for one problematic line.) Strikingly, Aspasius’ commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, the earliest extant commentary on any work by Aristotle, discusses the distinctions and arguments in EN 7.7 extensively and raises no issues concerning their legitimacy or value, which suggests that the chapter was in its present form as early as the first century CE. For an English translation of Aspasius’ commentary, see Konstan (2006).

\(^9\) Modrak, for example, says that Aristotle connects softness of character with moral weakness, and “describes akrasia (moral weakness) as a kind of softness” (1994, 215). Similarly, Nielsen says that “although Aristotle treats pleasure as the paradigmatic domain of akrasia, he also recognizes that there is such a thing as qualified akrasia with respect to pains, and this is softness.” (2015, 577). Grant says that softness and endurance are “subordinate states” to akrasia and self-control (1885, vol. 2, 193). These authors do not argue for these views, but we may think that their assumptions are based on a similar reasoning to the one defended by the second group of scholars I mention above.

\(^10\) For example, Henry says that “there are two other states of character similar to akrasia and enkrateia — viz., malakia (softness of character) and karteria (moral endurance) — but concern resistance to pain rather than pleasure (EN 7.7)” (2002, 259, n.8). Cook Wilson, in turn, argues that the motivational and moral psychological structure of the akratēs and the soft are “parallel,” with the only difference being that the former yields to pleasure and the latter to pain (1879, 17 and 45). Gould says that karteria and enkrateia “denote different strategies for responding to the same challenge” (1997, 177); both states “deal with internecine civil war” (179). And Curzer claims that “Aristotle defines endurance as overcoming a desire to avoid pain in order to act rightly, just as continence is overcoming a desire for pleasure in order to act rightly. (Aristotle sometimes subsumes both under the term “continence”)” (1992, 15).
food, drink, and sex. The soft, on the other hand, knows what is best but acts contrary to their judgment to avoid bodily pains related to the frustration of appetites concerning these very same objects. But, the thought goes, since there is not a significant difference between acting for the sake of satisfying some bodily appetite and acting for the sake of avoiding the pain that results from the frustration of that appetite, these authors dismiss the importance of the distinction. In either case, it seems that the consensus view is that the deficiencies of the akratēs and the malakos are analogous, and their motivations are, so to speak, two sides of the same coin.

My general goal in this paper is to show that the discussion of softness (μαλακία), and its contrary state, endurance (καρτερία) in the third common book is more philosophically valuable and coherent than previously acknowledged. I will argue against the idea that akrasia and softness amount to the same state, or that they are parallel or analogous in the way other interpreters suggest. Indeed, Aristotle says that, while akrasia and self-control are concerned with pleasures, softness and endurance are concerned with pains (1150a9–16); that the person who is self-controlled is stronger than (κρατεῖν) pleasure, but the person who endures resists (ἀντέχειν) pains, and these are different dispositions or attitudes (1150a32–34); and that endurance is less praiseworthy than self-control (1150a35–1150b1) and, I shall argue, he gives us reason to think that softness is more blameworthy than akrasia. These claims suggest that softness and endurance are idiosyncratic character dispositions that need to be understood in their own right, and that akrasia and softness (and enkrateia and endurance) differ in terms of their objects, moral psychological structure, and ethical worth. With this in mind, I will argue that softness consists in a disposition to give up acting in order to avoid the painful toil (πόνος) required to act as one should. Soft people try to avoid the painful effort required to carry out actions and enact plans. I will, then, use my interpretation to explain some infamous claims regarding the inadequacy of women for political rule in Politics 1.13.

1. The Pains the Soft Cannot Endure

Chapter 7 of the third common book begins with a distinction between, on the one hand, akrasia and softness and, on the other hand, self-control and endurance:

Concerning the pleasures and pains, and desires and avoidances through touch and taste, which both intemperance and temperance were previously distinguished as concerning, it is possible to be in such a condition so that one is weaker than even those that the many are stronger than, and it is possible to be [in such a condition so that one is] stronger than even those that the many are weaker than. Of these, the ones concerning pleasures are the akratic and the
self-controlled; the ones concerning pains are the soft and the enduring. The disposition of the many is in between, even if they incline more towards the worse [ones]. (1150a9–16; emphasis added)\(^{11}\)

Περὶ δὲ τὰς δι’ ἁφῆς καὶ γεύσεως ἡδονὰς καὶ λύπας καὶ ἐπιθυμίας καὶ φυγάς, περὶ ὑπ’ ἑτ τε ἀκολούθια καὶ ἡ συφορούση διωράθη πρότερον, ἔστι μὲν οὖσα ἐχειν ἀκρατθαί καὶ ὅν οἱ πολλοὶ κρείττον, ἐστὶ δὲ κρατεῖν καὶ ὅν οἱ πολλοὶ ἠττον, οὕ τοις δ’ ὁ μὲν περὶ ἱδο νὰς ἀκρατήσῃ δ’ ἡ ἐγκρατής, ὃ δὲ περὶ λύπας μαλακὸς ὃ δὲ καρτερίκος, μεταξὺ δ’ ἡ τῶν πλε ἴστων ἔχεις, κἂν εἰ ἴστους μᾶλλον πρὸς τὰς χείρους.

Lack of self-control (ἀκρασία) and self-control (ἐγκράτεια) are related to how one deals with appetites for bodily pleasures. Softness (μαλακία) and endurance (καρτερία) are related to how one deals with aversions to pains. So much is clear. What is less clear is why Aristotle characterizes these states using the dispositions of “the many” (οἱ πολλοὶ) as a baseline, with the akratēs and the soft failing to be stronger than pleasures and pains that “the many” overcome. This seems more optimistic than Aristotle’s usual views about “the many” (e.g., EN 1.5, 1095b14–22), who are often described as prone to disordered passions and appetites.\(^{12}\) Indeed, in the last line of this quote, Aristotle says that the dispositions of “the many” verge towards the worse. The point must, then, be normative: the question is not what pleasures and pains “the many,” as a matter of fact, yield to or overcome, but rather what pleasures and pains they have a capacity to overcome, even if they regularly fail to do so.\(^{13}\) That the standard is normative, albeit grounded in what is achievable for human beings, is confirmed several lines later: Aristotle does not think that people who yield to extreme pleasures and pains are akratic or soft. Indeed, we tend not to blame people in such predicaments since they deserve “sympathetic consideration” (συγγνωμονικόν; 1150b8). As he tells us, we do not blame Philoctetes for yielding to the pain of the serpent’s bite, for it is more than one could be reasonably expected to endure (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b7–9). In contrast, there are pains and pleasures that healthy, adult people can be expected to control or resist, even if they frequently fail to do so. As Aristotle says, these are pleasures and pains “the many are able to successfully resist” (οἱ πολλοὶ δύνανται ἀντέχειν; 1150b11–13; cf. 1150b1). It is when we yield to these controllable pleasures and endurable pains that we are akratic or soft.

But the central point in these lines concerns the objects of akrasia and softness. Akrasia is concerned with pleasures and softness with pains. Aristotle says, however, that one is not akratic or soft with respect to any sort of pleasure or pain. The relevant pleasures and pains are those with which the

\(^{11}\) Unless otherwise noted, translations of EN 7.7 = EE 6.7 are based (with modifications) on the translation supplied in Bobonich (2009) and in Reeve (2014), and based on the text of Bywater. Other passages from the EN and from the Pol. are based on Reeve’s translation. For the EE, I used Inwood and Woolf’s (2013) translation.

\(^{12}\) See, Müller 2020 for a discussion of Aristotle’s view that human beings have an innate tendency to badness, understood as developing desires that go beyond, and often against, what is naturally good.

\(^{13}\) Grant (1885, vol. 2, 219) makes a similar point. In the same spirit, Bobonich suggests we can read “most people” weakly as meaning ‘most people whose choice is correct’ and “as a claim that is species-characteristic” (2009, 138, n.17). For a general, discussion of the ethical status of “the many” in Aristotle, see Garrett (1993).
The virtue of temperance (σωφροσύνη) and the vice of intemperance (ἀκολασία) are concerned. This claim may refer to Nicomachean Ethics 3.10, where Aristotle says that temperance relates to “bodily pleasures” (1118a2), and not to all sorts of bodily pleasures, but specifically to those related to touch and taste, which we share with other animals (1118a23–27). These, says Aristotle, are pleasures that follow from indulging appetites for food, drink, and sex (1118a31). But what about the pains in relation to which we can be soft or enduring? The answer to this question is not straightforward for, in EN 3.10, Aristotle says that temperance “is less concerned, and not similarly (οὐχ ὀμοίως), with pains” (1117b25; emphasis added). Indeed, he qualifies the “pleasures” that fall under the sphere of temperance and intemperance as “bodily” and as belonging to touch and taste, but does not mention pain in these lines.

Two proposals regarding the pains of softness have been offered in the secondary literature. Cook Wilson (1879, 45–47) considers as a possibility that the pains in question are those following the frustration of appetites for bodily pleasures, specifically, those appetites that intemperate people experience. This proposal is based on Aristotle's scant remarks about pain in his discussion of temperance and intemperance:

Concerning pains, we are not said to be temperate—as we are said to be courageous—for enduring them, nor intemperate for not doing so. Rather, an intemperate person is so called for being more pained than he should at not getting pleasant things (indeed, the pain too is produced in him by the pleasure), and a temperate one for not being pained at the absence of pleasure or at abstaining from it. (3.10, 1118b29–34; emphasis added)

περὶ δὲ τὰς λύπας οὐχ ἁστερ ἐπὶ τῆς ἀνδρείας τῷ υπομένειν λέγεται σώφρων οὐδ’ ἀκόλαστος τῷ μὴ, ἀλλ’ ο μὲν ἀκόλαστος τῷ λυπεῖσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ δεὶ ὑπὶ τῶν ἰδέων οὐ τυγχάνει (καὶ τῷ λύπην δὲ ποιεῖ αὐτῷ ἢ ἱδονῆ), ὁ δὲ σώφρων τῷ μὴ λυπεῖσθαι τῇ ἀπουσίᾳ καὶ τῷ ἀπέχεσθαι τοῦ ἰδέως.

These lines are typically taken to imply that temperance and intemperance are concerned with bodily pains related to the frustration of excessive and unnecessary appetites for food, drink, and sex. When we do not get what we want, we experience pain. Intemperate people have unnecessary and excessive appetites. When they cannot satisfy these appetites, they are painfully frustrated. On this

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14 There are interesting questions, which I cannot tackle here, such as why Aristotle restricts the bodily pleasures that pertain to temperance and intemperance to touch and taste. Why, for example, aren’t certain pleasures of vision (like sexual desires and pleasures arising from sight) included, or are included but only incidentally? Bobonich (2009, esp. 133–137) offers a helpful discussion of this issue.

15 Cook Wilson (1879, 46), Burnet (1900, 318), Gauthier et Joliç (1959, 87).

16 There is another way in which intemperance is related to painful appetites. Aristotle says that intemperate people go out of their way to cultivate painful appetites in order to feel intense bodily pleasures (EN 7.14 = EE 6.14, 1154b4–6). On this view, the intemperate person deliberately seeks painful appetites for the sake of experiencing the pleasures of satiation. I am grateful to Zack Brants for pointing this out.
interpretation, soft people try too hard to avoid the pains of frustrated appetites, specifically, the excessive and inappropriate ones that intemperate people experience.

Now, if these were the relevant pains, we may think there is no real distinction between akратίκη and soft people. For there is no clear way to distinguish between acting to indulge some excessive bodily appetite for food, drink, or sex, and acting to avoid the pain of frustration of that very same appetite. When it comes to behavior, drinking another glass of wine to pleasantly quench a craving, or to avoid the painfulness of abstaining from it, seems to amount to the same thing. Assuming the pains the soft fails to endure are the pains of frustrated appetites, Cook Wilson took the distinction between akrasia and softness to have no value. Indeed, some of Aristotle’s views about bodily pleasures and pains suggest that he does not distinguish neatly between appetites for pleasures of satiation and aversions to pains of frustration. For Aristotle, bodily pleasures related to appetites for food, drink, and sex “knock out” and “drive out” the pains of wants and deprivation (ἐκκρούει τὴν λύπην; EN 7.14 = EE 6.14, 1154a27; ἐξελαύνει λύπην; 1154b14). This suggests that bodily pleasures are attractive, at least in part, precisely because they avert the pains of frustrated desires.

Now, perhaps this is too quick. Someone could argue that, even if there is no way to distinguish behavior in such cases, it may be possible to differentiate the desire for pleasure and the pain of frustration as different motives. Even if our motivations are not always transparent to us, it may be possible to distinguish getting one drink too many because of the pleasure we derive from it, from doing so to avoid the pain of not getting one’s alcohol fix. But even if Aristotle intended to separate these appetitive pleasures and pains as different kinds of motivation, he does not seem to think that they ground a distinction in character states. Indeed, Aristotle repeatedly says that the pains of

17 Cook Wilson (1879, 47).
18 See, Cheng (2017, esp. 402–405) for a discussion of these lines. See, also, Frede, who claims that Aristotle “seems to regard [pain] as the mirror image of pleasure” (2006, 263).
19 I, thus, agree with Cook Wilson (1879, 47) when he says that, in EN 3, 10–11, the desire for pleasure and the pain of such desire are not “constitutive of different characters.” Now, in EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, Aristotle does say that: “Of those people not choosing, one person is led because of pleasure, the other due to the avoidance of the pain from appetite, the result is that they differ from each other. [τῶν δὲ μὴ προαραμένων ὁ μὲν ἀγαπᾷ διὰ τὴν ἡδονήν, ὁ δὲ διὰ τὸ φεύγειν τὴν λύπην τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας, ἀπὸ διαφέρουσαν ἀλλήλων] (1150a25–27; emphasis added), which could arguably suggest that the types of motivation suggested above ground a distinction in character. My view, loosely following Cook Wilson (1879, 71–72), is that the distinction in a25–26 describes two motivations for akrasia proper: the akrasia acts for the sake of appetitive pleasures or to avoid the related pains of frustrated appetites. And I follow Grant and Burnet in their reading of ἀπὸ διαφέρουσαν ἀλλήλων (a27), who argue that this clause does not refer to the distinction in a25–26, but rather picks up the distinction made immediately before these lines between those who act wrongly without choosing and those who choose to act wrongly (a19–21 and a23–25). This is suggested by a27–30, which starts with ‘παντὶ δ’ ἄν δόξης…’ and, focusing on the intemperate and the akратίκη, argues that the former is worse than the latter due to the presence or absence of choice. After these lines, Aristotle returns to a distinction he had previously made (‘τῶν δὴ λεχθέντων’) in 1150a19–21 and a23–25, in this case, between those who act from choice because of pleasure and those who act from choice because of pain. The former, he tells us, is called intemperance and the latter is “a sort of softness” (that is, strictly speaking, not softness), perhaps widening here the sphere of pains pertaining to this vice, beyond what is discussed in EN 3.10–11.
frustrated appetites fall under the sphere of *akrasia* and self-control. Consider the following lines from the *Eudemian Ethics*:

Pleasure and pain are present in both *akrasia* and self-control. The person who exercises self-control feels pain when acting contrary to appetite, but enjoys the pleasure given by the expectation that benefit will later accrue or accrues even now as he maintains his health. (*EE* 2.8, 1224b15–19; emphasis added)

ἡδονὴ καὶ λύπη ἐν ἀμφότεροις ἔνεστι, καὶ γὰρ ὁ ἐγκρατευόμενος λυπεῖται παρὰ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν πράττων ἡδη, καὶ χαίρει τὴν ἀπ’ ἐλπίδος ἡδονήν, ὅτι ύστερον ὑφεληθήσεται, ἢ καὶ ἡδη ὑφελεῖται ὑγαίνων.

Self-controlled people experience, but overcome, the pains of frustrated desire. The *akratēs*, in turn, acts for the sake of appetites for pleasures related to food, drink, and sex, and to avoid the pains that they would have experienced if they did not satisfy these appetites.

In the third common book, Aristotle also says that *akrasia* and self-control are concerned with both pleasures and pains:

Of those concerned with bodily gratifications, though—the ones that we say a temperate and an intemperate person are concerned with—a person who, without having chosen, goes to excess in pursuing these pleasant things and avoiding the painful ones (i.e., hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and all those concerned with touch and taste), but contrary to his choice and thought, is called *akratēs*. (*EN* 7.4 = *EE* 6.4, 1148a4–11; emphasis added)²⁰

τῶν δὲ περὶ τὰς σωματικὰς ἀπολαύσεις, περὶ ἃς λέγομεν τῶν σώφρων καὶ ἀκόλαστον, ὁ μὴ τῷ προαιρεῖσθαι τῶν ἡδῶν διώκων τῶν ὑπερβολάς, καὶ τῶν λυπηρῶν φεύγων, πεύνης καὶ δύψης καὶ ἀλέας καὶ ψύχους καὶ πάντων τῶν περὶ ἁφῆν καὶ γεύσιν, ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν προαιρέσεων καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν, ἀκρατῆς λέγεται.

And again:

[W]e put people who lack self-control and intemperate ones in the same class (and also self-controlled people and temperate ones), but none of the others.²¹ This is because the former

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²⁰ The following lines say, however, that “people are also called ‘soft’ where these sorts of bodily pleasures and pains—but not any of the others—are concerned” (1148a11–12) But as others have pointed out, Aristotle is reporting here what people say, as the ‘λέγεται’ at a10 suggests (contrasts this with ‘λέγομεν’ at a5). This is compatible with his offering his own account of softness later. See, e.g., Stewart (1892), Gauthier and Jolif (1959), and Bobonich (2009, 146, n.33), with whom I agree on this.

²¹ Presumably, those who are not unqualified *akratēs*, but lack self-control with respect to some particular thing, such as anger. See note 5.
are concerned, in a way, with the same pleasures and pains. (EN 7.4 = EE 6.4, 1148a13–15; emphasis added)

τὸν ἀκράτη καὶ τὸν ἀκόλαστον τίθεμεν καὶ ἐγκράτη καὶ σώφρονα, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐκεῖνων οὐδένα, διὰ τὸ περί τὰς αὐτώς πως ἰδονάς καὶ λύπας εἶναι

Avoiding excessively the pains of hunger, thirst, and, in general, touch and taste is characteristic of the ἀκρατεία, rather than the soft.22

Akraia and self-control, then, are concerned with both appetites for pleasures related to food, drink, and sex, and the pains of their frustration. What are, then, the pains the soft cannot endure? To answer this question, Burnet proposes to distinguish the pain that results from the frustration of excessive appetites—those which trip akratic agents and intemperate people deliberately indulge—from necessary hunger and thirst. After all, Aristotle distinguishes necessary from unnecessary appetites in EN 7.4 = EE 6.4, 1147b20–30, 1148b15–20, and EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a16–25.23 According to this interpretation, the soft cannot endure the pain of basic hunger, while the ἀκρατεῖς avoids the pain of not eating in excess. As Burnet puts it: “[t]here is a pain of hunger, as well as a pain which arises from the unfulfilled desire of eating to excess” (1900, 320). The ἐνκράτης resists the desire to eat something he should not, whereas the καρτέρικος can endure hunger itself if need be. Gauthier and Jolif agree: “there is a violent desire for a satisfying drink, and this is the desire that dominates the ἀκρατεῖς, but there is also the pain of thirst, and it is this pain that constitutes a trial too strong for the soft person, while endurance allows one to withstand it” (641).24

Yet, there are reasons to resist this interpretation as well. If this reading were correct, Aristotle would be saying that people who cannot endure the pangs of hunger are soft, and that those who endure them are worthy of praise. But Aristotle does not advocate for asceticism anywhere. Eating excessively, or eating things we should not, is certainly bad. But nowhere does Aristotle argue that we should endure the pains of hunger or thirst, or that (all things considered) it is praiseworthy to do so for its own sake. Indeed, as he tells us:

22 The point is repeated in EN 7.3 = EE 6.3, 1146b9–11: “We must investigate first whether the ἀκρατεῖς acts knowingly or not and in what way knowingly and second, what sorts of things should we take a person who is ἁκρατεῖς and a person who is self-controlled be concerned with—I mean, whether they are concerned with every sort of pleasure and pain or with some determinate sorts” (emphasis added).
23 Aristotle also mentions intrinsically choiceworthy, but not necessary desires and pleasures, which can be pursued in excess, such as honor, victory, and wealth (EN 7.4 = EE 6.4, 1147b28–30), but these do not seem to be relevant to akraia and ἐνκρατεία of the unqualified sort.
24 My translation. Gauthier and Jolif go on: “il semble bien [qu’Aristote] suppose que le continent et le dur ne se distinguent pas seulement par leur attitude subjective, mais encore par le domain objectif: l’un domine les convoitises des plaisirs excessifs, l’autre supporte la peine née de l’insatisfaction des désirs naturels” (1959, 641). Bobonich agrees and goes further. He claims that the pains of frustrated, necessary desires are distinct from basic bodily pains of deprivation. His example: “when I am freezing, it is no doubt usually the case that my desire to be warm is (painfully) frustrated, but it seems also that being cold is painful in itself” (2009, 147). I am less certain than Bobonich that this distinction can be neatly made in this case, where the painful state of not being warm just seems to be nothing other than the pain of being cold.
Of the goods of the body there can be an excess, and it is by pursuing the excess, not the necessary pleasures, that a base person is base. For everyone enjoys gourmet dishes, wines, and sexual relations in some way or another, although not everyone does so in the way they should. (EN 7.14 = EE 6.14, 1154a15–17)

εἴστω δὲ τῶν σωματικῶν ἁγαθῶν ύπερβολή, καὶ ὁ φαινόμεν τῷ διώκει τὴν ύπερβολήν ἐστιν, ἀλλ’ οὐ τάς ἀναγκαίας πάντες γὰρ χαίροντα πῶς καὶ ὁφειν καὶ οἶνοι καὶ ἀφροδισίαις, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὄσι δεῖ.

Satiating hunger or quenching thirst are not a sign of softness, and enduring these necessary appetites is not praiseworthy. Indeed, Aristotle says that the person who does not satisfy these necessary appetites is not ‘καρτερικός’, but ‘κακοπαθητικός’:

[T]he person who does not withstand pain, even if it is better to do so, is soft; the one who endures all pain alike strictly speaking has no name, but is described metaphorically as hard, wretched, and miserable. (EE 2.3, 1221a30)

ὁ μὲν μηδεμίαν ύπομένων λύπην, μηδ’ εἰ βέλτιον, τρυφερός, ὁ δὲ πᾶσαν ὁμοίως ὡς μὲν ἀπλῶς εἰπείν ἀνώνυμος, μεταφορὰ δὲ λέγεται σκληρός καὶ ταλαιπωρὸς καὶ κακοπαθητικός.

Perhaps Burnet’s idea was that enduring hunger and thirst is not good tout court and for its own sake, yet it is good and praiseworthy when there are fine reasons to endure these appetites. So, someone will not count as soft when they sate their hunger in ordinary circumstances, but they will be soft if they cannot endure hunger to, say, share their food with a friend in conditions of scarcity or stand their ground during a military campaign. Yet, this does not seem to be Aristotle’s position. For, as we will see in detail below, he says that self-control is more choice-worthy than endurance (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a35–1150b1). If the pains one is soft about or endures were the pains of hunger and thirst in contexts of hardship as the ones just described, the devaluation of endurance compared to self-control would be rather strange. In these contexts, resisting the pain of thirst or hunger seems harder and finer than resisting eating an extra slice of cake or getting drunk. And Aristotle seems to be sensitive to this, for he suggests that it is easier to be habituated to resist pleasures than to endure basic bodily pains (EN 3.12, 1119a20–25; cf: 1119a21–33).25 Indeed, Aristotle says it is surprising when soft people fail to endure pains (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b8), which suggests that the pains in questions are not the pains of thirst or hunger, for it is certainly not surprising when we fail to endure those in either regular or strenuous circumstances.

25 In these lines, Aristotle is mostly concerned with the pains related to wounds in the context of displays of courage, but the point he makes seems to be general. This makes sense: enduring hunger, thirst, or cold in order to defend your city seems hard and noble. See Bobonich (2009,147–149) for a discussion of this issue.
Both interpretations, then, encounter problems. We may be tempted here to follow Cook Wilson’s steps and simply give up on the text. Yet this is too quick. In the next section, I will propose a different interpretation of the pains of softness that preserves the distinction between akrasia and softness, and renders it coherent with other claims in the chapter.

2. Painful Toils

In this section, I will examine Aristotle’s own examples of soft characters. This, so to speak, bottom-up approach may help us appreciate the difference between akrasia and softness, and understand Aristotle’s account of this deficient character state.

Let us begin with Aristotle’s depiction of a soft character in EN 7.7 = EE 6.7:

Someone who is deficient concerning the things that the many both struggle against and can do so successfully is soft and dainty, since daintiness is a sort of softness. Such a person trails his cloak on the ground in order not to suffer the toil of lifting it up and, while imitating someone who is worn out, does not think himself to be despondent, similar to someone despondent though he is. (1150b1–5; emphasis added)

The image of the person who trails his cloak in order to avoid “toiling” (πονέω) suggests that the pain they avoid is, specifically, the pain of work—the painful effort required to carry out or execute an action—rather than the pain of unsatisfied cravings for food, drink, and sex. Aristotle calls this kind

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26 The origin of the image of the ἰμάτιον-dragger is unknown. The length of the ‘ἰμάτιον’ could be related to wealth and status, which is often seen as a cause of softness. (See notes 28 and 30.) Thus, the person who drags their cloak may signal affluence, which was often seen as a cause of softness. For some of these associations, see the country bumpkin who wears a ‘ἰμάτιον’ that is too short in Theophrastus’ Characters VI.4, the penurious man who wears cloaks that barely cover the thighs (X), and the gracefully trimmed cloak of the oligarch (XXVI).

27 According to the LSJ, ‘πόνος’ is a kind of pain related to hard work, toil, labor, and exertion. See Cheng 2019, esp. section 5, who argues that there is “an oscillation of the semantic field of πόνος between the physical energy to be invested [in activity] and its corresponding unpleasantness (cf. Pol. 1339b16–17: τῆς ... διὰ τῶν πόνων λύπης). This equivocal aspect is well embodied in the role of πόνος in physical training, where this word family can represent not only the activity itself, but also the pain inherent in this activity” (62; emphasis added). The word is frequent in Pindar’s descriptions of athletic exertion. See, also, Johnston 1994 for a similar characterization of ‘πόνος’ in Xenophon. Interestingly, ‘πόνος’ is frequently used to refer to the painful labor of birthing mothers (Historia Animalium 7.1, 582a20; 7.4, 584a28; 7.9, 586b28, b30, 586b35, 587a2).
of softness “daintiness” (τρυφη), a term generally associated with laziness, passivity, and a general disposition to avoid work and effort.28

We find a similar image in the following lines, this time from Aristotle’s discussion of courage in EN 3:

Dying to avoid material need, erotic desire, or something painful is the mark not of a courageous person but, rather, of a coward. For to flee from toils is softness, and someone like that faces up to death not because it is noble but because he is fleeing something bad. (3.7, 1116a12–15; emphasis added)

\[ τὸ δὲ ᾠπαθήσακεν φεύγοντα πενίαν ἢ ἐρωτά ἢ τι λυπηρόν οὐκ ἀνδρείον, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον δειλοῦ: μαλακία γὰρ τὸ φεύγειν τὰ ἐπίπονα, καὶ οὐχ ὅτι καλὸν ὑπομένει, ἀλλὰ φεύγων κακῶν. \]

Aristotle’s point here—one of the few passages that discuss suicide in the corpus—is that people who face death to avoid toils (ἐπίπονα) are not courageous, despite seeming to be so. Courage involves facing up to death because it is the noble thing to do. But those who face death because of longing or because they cannot get material comfort are not courageous; rather, they are cowards since they face death in order to avoid the toils they should undertake to remedy their condition. For Aristotle, these people are soft because they give up life to avoid the work, strain, and effort required to overcome material need, longing, or grief. Importantly, this does not entail that softness is cowardice: these people are not courageous because they face death, not on account of what is noble (as courage demands; EN 3.6, 1115a32–35), but due to their soft character. But what makes them soft is their failure to endure toils.29

The last example comes from the Rhetoric, where Aristotle discusses the reasons why people feel shame:

28 I translate ‘τρυφη’ as “daintiness” being aware of the difficulties to translate this word. A frequent translation is “luxury,” but this translation is misleading and fits poorly the use of the word in the extant sources. A survey of uses of this term in Classical philosophical, literary, historical, and medical texts reveals that it overwhelmingly refers to a personal trait or character disposition. While luxury, power, and wealth were seen as leading to ‘τρυφη’ and ‘μαλακία’—the idea being that privilege leads to entitlement, impassivity, and laziness—there were other, unrelated causes for these traits. See, e.g., Euripides, Bacchae 968–969 for a use of this term to describe someone being carried rather than going somewhere by foot. But ‘τρυφη’ was also generally considered to be characteristic of women and “feminine” men. For a textually based rejection of ‘τρυφη’ as luxury, see Gorman & Gorman (2014). See, also, note 30 below for the connection between power, wealth, status, and softness.

29 I thus disagree with Cook Wilson, who says that in EN 3.7, “μαλακία appears as a sort of δειλία” (1879, 33), and Heil (1996, 50–52, 65–68), who claims that courage is a form of karteria. As we will see below, Aristotle distinguishes softness and cowardice, and the pains the soft and the cowardly person respectively fail to withstand. Courage and cowardice pertain to pains specifically related to facing death for noble reasons, paradigmatically, in battle (EN 3.6, 1115a32–35; EE 3.1, 1229b3–12). ‘Softness’ and ‘endurance’, then, describe states of character different from the virtues and vices of temperance and intemperance, and courage and cowardice. Of course, people can be both cowards and soft, but we will see later that, for Aristotle, people can also be soft and courageous, and enduring and cowards.
[People are ashamed of] not standing up to toils that older people bear or those who are dainty or in high office or, on the whole, less able; for all these are signs of softness (Rhet. 2.6, 1384a1–3)

καὶ τὸ μὴ υπομένειν πόνους οὗς οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἢ τρυφώντες ἢ ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ μᾶλλον ὡντες ἢ ὅλως οἱ ἀδυνατώτεροι' πάντα γὰρ μαλακίας σημεῖα.

Again, softness is characterized by not facing “toils” (πόνοι), specifically, those which healthy, mature people are able to endure. We see in these lines, again, a connection between softness and daintiness (τρυφή): dainty, delicate people are soft, in that they do not endure the effort of acting and carrying our tasks and plans.³⁰

The relevant pains, then, are not the pains of thirst and hunger, either the necessary ones or those that go in excess or are inappropriate. Aristotle’s main examples of softness suggest that the pains in question are the toilsome pains of effort related to acting. These pains, as all these passages highlight, are πόνοι. It is not surprising, then, that in the Eudemian Ethics, Aristotle calls the excess of endurance (καρτερία) ‘κακοπάθεια’, a word that denotes laborious toil and strain.³¹

A quick look at Platonic uses of ‘μαλακία’ and cognates supports this reading. Plato often employs this term to pick out a disposition to avoid the labor required to carry out actions and projects. Consider the following lines from the Meno:

So, one should not be persuaded by that eristic argument [Meno’s paradox concerning inquiry], for it would make us lazy and is pleasant to hear for those people who are soft, whereas this one makes people active and ready to search. (Meno 81d5–c1)

οὔκον δεῖ πείθεσθαι τούτῳ τῷ ἐριστικῷ λόγῳ· οὕτως μὲν γάρ ἂν ἡμᾶς ἀργοὺς ποιήσει εἰς τοῦτο μαλακοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ήδὺς ἀκοῦσαι, δόδε δὲ ἐργατικοὺς τε καὶ ζητητικοὺς ποιεῖ·

In these lines, Socrates contrasts being soft (μαλακός) with being active or willing to work (ἐργατικοῦς). Meno’s argument gives someone a reason to stop inquiry, to remain passive, and so it suits people whose characters are prone to laziness. In contrast, Socrates’ arguments make people ready and eager to inquire.

³⁰ The idea that people “in high office” are “less able” and soft is, at first sight, puzzling. But it was a common trope in Ancient Greek texts. Power and wealth result in a process of softening. They make people lazy, entitled, and unaccustomed to do things themselves. For this, see, for example, Bischoff (1932) who, in his study of Herodotus’ Histories, focuses on the “softening” process of power and wealth: an opulent lifestyle brings softness, and this is “the curse of every ruling power” (638).

³¹ The entry in the LSJ defines ‘κακοπάθεια’ as stress, strain, misery, and laborious toil.
The connection between softness and executive failure is also present in the *Gorgias*, in a comment by Callicles:

[B]y superior people I do not mean cobblers or cooks, but those who are intelligent about the affairs of the city, about the way it is to be well managed. And not only intelligent, but also brave, competent to accomplish whatever they have in mind, without slackening off because of softness of the soul. (*Gorgias* 491a7–b)

πρῶτον μὲν τοὺς κρείττους οἶδον οὐκ χαλκοτόμους λέγω οὐδὲ μαγείρους, ἀλλ’ οἶ δὲν εἰς τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράγματα φρόνιμοι ὄνων, ὡστὶν ἄν τρόπον εὑ οὐκοίτο, καί μὴ μόνον φρόνιμοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀνδρεῖοι, ἵκανοὶ δόντες ἃ ἄν νοήσωσιν ἐπιτελεῖν, καί μὴ ἀποκάμνωσι διὰ μαλακίαν τῆς ψυχῆς.

Softness of the soul is associated with slackening off, which is in turn contrasted with being determined and accomplishing what one has in mind. This is different from being clever or intelligent. Someone can think and deliberate correctly but, if soft, they will fail to execute or carry out their plans.

Similarly, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates chastises his interlocutor for showing daintiness (τρυφή)—as we saw, a kind of softness—and, asking Euthyphro to change his attitude, he requests that he “shows zeal” (συμπροθυμήσομαι) and “exerts himself” (σύντεινε σαυτόν) when answering what piety is (11e–12a). In the *Republic*, in turn, Plato connects daintiness (τρυφή) with a propensity to avoid “toiling at the things of the body or the mind” (απόνους καὶ πρός τὰ τοῦ σώματος καὶ πρός τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς; 8.556b–c) and says that daintiness (τρυφή) and softness (μαλακία) are a “slackening and relaxation” (χαλάσει τε καὶ αἴνεσε) of the spirited part of the soul (θυμοειδές) (9.590b).

We find similar associations in Xenophon’s works. In the *Hellenica*, for example, a group of “barbarians” are described as “soft, that is, unused to toil because they always rode in carriages” (μαλακοὺς δὲ καὶ ἀπόνους διὰ τὸ ἀεὶ ἐπ’ ὄχημάτων), and they are compared to women (3.4.19). And in his *Apology*, when Socrates enumerates different ways of corrupting the youth and demands evidence that he is to blame for any of them, he lists falling “into softness from laboriousness” (ἐκ φιλοπόνου μαλακῶν; 19.6) as distinct from falling from temperance, moderation, and sobriety into excess, luxuriousness, and drunkenness (ἐκ σωφρόνου υβριστῆν; ἐκ εὐδιαίτου πολυδάπανον; ἐκ μετριοπότου οἰνόφλυγα; 19.5).

The focus on toils (πόνου) was picked up by the writer of the *Magna Moralia* in the corresponding sections to *EN* 7.7 = *EE* 6.7:

Again, *akrasia* and softness are not the same thing. For softness and the soft person is he who does not undergo toils—not all of them, but such as anyone else would undergo, if he had to;
whereas the ακρατής is someone who is not able to endure pleasures but succumbs to them and lets himself be led by them. (2.6, 1202b32-37)\textsuperscript{32}

Πάλιν ἡ ἀκρασία καὶ ἡ μαλακία οὐκ ἔστων ταύτῶν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ μαλακία ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ μαλακὸς ὁ μῆ ὑπομένειν πόνους, οὐχ ἀπαντας δὲ ἀλλ’ οὐς ἀναγκαῖοι ἢν ἄλλος τις ὑπομένειεν, ὁ δ’ ἀκρατής ὁ μὴ δυνάμενος ὑπομένειν ἱδονᾶς, ἀλλὰ καταμαλακιζόμενος καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦτων ἀγόμενος.

The idea that softness and endurance concern toils is also present in Aspasiaus’ extant (and the earliest) commentary to book 7 of the Nicomachean Ethics, where he tells us that “an enduring person withstands toils and suffering” (ὁ μὲν γὰρ καρτερικὸς ὑπομένει πόνους καὶ ἀλγηδόνας; 130.32) and “the enduring and the soft are so in regard to toils and bodily pains” (ὁ δὲ καρτερικὸς καὶ μαλακὸς περὶ τοὺς πόνους καὶ τὰς λύπας τὰς σωματικὰς; 131.4–8; emphasis added).\textsuperscript{33}

The soft person, then, is prone to avoiding the painful effort required to enact goals and carry out actions. Furthermore, these people find acting more toilsome than they should, just like the ακρατής finds eating excessively more pleasant than they should. It is important to note that the effort required is not extraordinary or unendurable. As Aristotle says, it is “something to be amazed at” (θαυμαστόν; 1150b8) when people give up acting in order to avoid these pains. What the soft person deems as excessively toilsome are endurable efforts. Neither do these pains involve danger or fear. These pains, unlike the pains that the courageous person withstands, do not threaten one’s physical integrity or life. They are not the sort of pains that, did one withstand them in ordinary circumstances, would be a sign of nobility or great praise. Indeed, in a passage from the Eudemian Ethics, Aristotle argues that softness is not cowardice, and endurance is not courage:

Some people are very soft in some respects and still courageous, while some who are hard and enduring can be cowards. It seems to be pretty much a special attribute of courage that one be disposed in a certain way where death and the pain of death are concerned. Take two people, the first capable of enduring, as is reasonable, heat and cold and other such pains that are lacking in danger, but soft and terrified in the face of death from no other feeling than its sheer destructiveness; the second soft in the face of those discomforts, but impassive in the face of death. The first would be thought cowardly; the second courageous. In fact, we talk about danger only in the context of those kinds of fearful things that bring close the possibility of destruction. (3.1, 1229b3–12)

\textsuperscript{32} Translation by Stock in Barnes (1995).

\textsuperscript{33} Thomas Aquinas seems to have understood the pains one can be soft about or endure in this way. In his commentary to EN 7.7, he says that “the delicate are those who cannot endure toils (labores),” And toil “is opposed to relaxation or rest (remissio sine quiet).” (ST, Q1 38) This is brought out by the fact that softness (mollities) is contrasted with perseverance (perseverantia), a word that suggests executive drive and determination to act and carry out plans and commitments.
above.

For a soft person, what Aristotle says, indeed, we saw above that akrasia and self-control are related to appetites for pleasures, but also to pains corresponding to the frustration of these appetites. Similarly, we should expect that there will be pleasures corresponding to the pains of exertion and toil. And this is precisely what Aristotle says:

The man fond of amusement also seems to be intemperate but is soft. For amusement is a relaxation, since it is a rest. And the man fond of amusement is among those who exceed with respect to this. (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b16–19)

dokei de kai o paidiowdeis akolastos einai, esti de malakos, h gar paidi aaneis estin, eite anaptanas, ton de pros taun ypervallonton o paidiowdeis estin.

For a soft person, relaxing is more pleasant than it should be. Someone who is too fond of amusements aimed at rest and relaxation is soft. Relaxation in its due measure is necessary, but not as an end. As Aristotle says, “happiness does not lie in amusement (pайдía)”, and it would be foolish to engage in “serious matters and to toil” (σπουδαζεων de kaì ponein) for the sake of “relaxing” (αναπαισει). Indeed, relaxation should itself be for the sake of “activity” (ενεργεια) and to carry out the work required by “serious matters” (τα σπουδαια), for people “cannot toil continuously” (αδυνατουντες de sunechous ponein) (EN 10.6, 1176b26–35). A serious, engaged life, it seems, requires effort and strain.

34 Contra Cook Wilson (1879, 46) and Heil (1996, 50–52, 65–68), who claim that courage is a form of karteria. See note 29 above.
Notice, also, that amusement (παιδία) is different from leisure (σχολή) spent in intellectual pursuits. Aristotle generally values leisure devoted to contemplation and associates it with the origin of philosophy (Pol. 8.3, 1338a8–12; cf. EN 10.4, 1174b17–23; 10.5, 1176a4–29). But valuing leisure spent in contemplation does not amount to valuing laziness, or pointless amusement and relaxation. Indeed, one should avoid “not working hard or spending any money for the purpose of intelligence” (διὰ δὲ φρόνησιν μηδὲν ποιεῖται καὶ ἡδέος ἀπέχεσθαι τῷ τῶ ἀκρατῶ ὑπομένειν) and exert every effort so as to possess this intelligence that will have a cognition of the truth” (VIII, 47.1–4). 35 And, although Aristotle seems to despise toiling for the sake of money and certain kinds of paid work that “render the body and soul of people useless for the practices and activities of virtue (τὰς χρήσεις καὶ τὰς πράξεις τὰς τῆς ἀρετῆς)” (Pol. 8.2, 1337b9–12), he sees as a good character trait to be driven and executive so as to successfully stick to and carry out actions and resolutions constitutive of a serious, virtuous life.

We are now ready to come back to some of the problems discussed in the previous section. If my reading is correct, we can see a clear distinction between the character of the ἀκρατὴς and the soft. Indeed, giving in to appetites for food, drink, and sex on account of pleasure is different from giving up acting as one should because of the painful toil it requires. But two worries remain. As mentioned, Cook Wilson argued that the chapter’s content is so problematic that it must be a combination of disconnected materials, not all by Aristotle himself. One of Cook Wilson’s reasons for holding this view was that, as seen, in EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a9–16, ἀκρασία and self-control are said to be concerned with pleasures, while softness and endurance are concerned with pains. Yet, as argued, the examples in the rest of the chapter and book portray soft agents yielding to pleasure (like the person fond of amusement), and we saw that akritic agents yield to the pains of frustrated appetites.

But Aristotle gives us the philosophical resources to answer this worry. The distinction between ἀκρασία and softness by means of pleasures and pains is compatible with thinking that there are pleasures and pains proper to both. (Indeed, EN 7.4 = EE 6.4 1147b21–23 may suggest this much.) Some remarks in EN 3.11, 1118b–1119a can help us see this. There, Aristotle talks about the pains of frustrated bodily appetites for food, drink, and the like, and says that in these cases, (1) the pain is produced by (ποιεῖ) pleasure (1118b32), (2) that the agent is pained at the absence and abstinence from pleasure (τῷ μὴ λυπεῖσθαι τῇ ἀπουσίᾳ καὶ τῷ ἀπέχεσθαι τοῦ ἡδέος; 1118b32–33), and (3) that she is pained because of (δι’ ἡδονήν) pleasure (1119a5). The pains of frustrated appetites are dependent on pleasures and defined in relation to them. The pain my daughter feels when she is not allowed to have a second serving of ice-cream depends on the pleasure of eating ice-cream—a pleasure with which (I am ashamed to confess) she is well too familiar. Similarly, we can think of pleasures which are felt, as Aristotle says, because of pain, and so are dependent on it. The pleasure I feel when I slouch on my couch upon skipping my morning jog is dependent on the painful effort I experience when I force myself to run. (And, indeed, as I become a regular jogger and my pain subsides, so does my pleasure

35 Translations of the Protrepticus are based on the edition and translation by Hutchinson and Johnston (2018).
in avoiding the jog.) As Aspasius says in his commentary, “the soft person too pursues pleasures while fleeing toils (πόνοι), but incidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκός),” yet “the very being (τό γέ εἶναι) … of the soft person is the avoidance of pains,” and the same applies to ἀκρασία with respect to its proper pleasures and its incidental pains (131.7–10). The idea, then, is that ἀκρασία and ἐνκρατεία are primarily about pleasure, and derivatively about the pain one feels by depriving oneself of those pleasures. And softness and endurance are primarily about painful toils, and secondarily about those pleasures felt on account of avoiding these pains.

There is a different, more difficult problem for my view. In 1150a9–16, Aristotle says that both ἀκρασία and self-control, and softness and endurance, are concerned with the pleasures and pains with which temperance and intemperance are concerned. And toils and pains related to acting are not mentioned in relation to temperance and intemperance in EN 3. However, since Aristotle’s discussion of temperance and intemperance focuses almost exclusively on pleasures, we may have some license when thinking of the pains with which they are concerned. Indeed, the discussion of pains in 3.10, 1118b29-34 only says that we are pained at not getting pleasure, but it is not explicit about what these pleasures and pains are. And, as Aristotle says elsewhere, “the intemperate person is said to be such in many ways” (EE 3.1, 1230a36). It is also relevant to mention that, in the common books, Aristotle tells us that temperance “preserves practical wisdom (σῳζόνσαν τὴν φρόνησιν) since pleasure and pain can “ruin or distort the sort of supposition concerning what is doable in action” (EN 6.5 = EE 5.5, 1140b12–15). This may arguably expand the sphere of hedonic states that fall under the purview of temperance and intemperance. The pleasures and pains in question seem to be those that can affect one’s judgement of what to do, and the impression that a certain action is toilsome and strenuous certainly does that. Interestingly, Pol. 2.6, 1265a28-38 suggests that temperance combined with too much austerity leads to painful toils (ἐπίπονα), thereby linking this virtue with the pains and pleasures of acting and relaxing. We should keep the possibility open, then, that temperance may not simply be about experiencing bodily pleasures and pains related to food, drink, and sex in the right amount and manner, but also about experiencing the toils and pleasures of action and relaxation as one should.

3. The Moral Psychology of Softness

In the previous section, I argued that the soft person avoids the pains of toils, and enjoys the resulting pleasures of rest and relaxation, while the akratic pursues the pleasures of indulgence of appetites for

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36 It may be relevant to remember here that the material under discussion belongs to one of the common books shared by the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics. If the common books are Eudemian, as it has been argued, then we should not expect the views in EN 3 to strictly answer to, and cohere with, the claims in EN 7 = EE 6. (In favor of this view, see Kenny 2016, Bostock 2000, and Inwood and Woolf 2013. For lucid arguments against this position, see Primavesi 2007 and Frede 2019.) A discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but I simply note that my analysis is consistent with, and could support the view that, the account of softness fits in contextually better with the EE than the EN, thereby complementing arguments that hold that the discussion of ἀκρασία and the treatment of pleasure in the third common book belong more naturally to the EE. (Consider, for example, the discussion of ‘καρπεῖα’ and ‘κακοπάθεια’ in the EE mentioned in page 9.) For discussions of this complicated issue, see, for example, Rowe 1971, Kenny 1978 and 2011, Jost 2014, Di Basilio 2022, and Hutchinson and Johnson (forthcoming).
food, drink, and sex, thereby avoiding the corresponding pains of frustrated appetites. These
dispositions of character, then, relate to different objects: *akrasia* and self-control are concerned with
the objects of bodily appetites for food, drink, and sex, and the excessive and unnecessary pursuit of
pleasures related to these objects. Softness and endurance, on the other hand, are concerned with the
painful effort required to carry out and execute ordinary actions and plans. Importantly, just like the
akratic and the self-controlled person experience appetites, pleasures, and pains that the temperate
person does not (or that she experiences to a lesser degree), both the soft and the enduring experience
acting as more toilsome and painful than they should.

But Aristotle makes a further distinction between *akrasia* and softness (and self-control and
endurance). He tells us that there is a moral psychological asymmetry between these states, which in
turn determines that they have different ethical worth:

The self-controlled is opposed to the akratic, and the enduring to the soft; for endurance
depends on resisting, but self-control depends on being stronger. And to resist and to be
stronger are different, just as not being weaker is different from winning. For this reason, self-
control is more choiceworthy than endurance. (*EN* 7.7 = *EE* 6.7, 1150a32–b1)

εἰναι δὲ τῷ μὲν ἀκρατεῖ ὁ ἐγκρατής, τῶ δὲ μαλακῶ ὁ καρτερίκος· τὸ μὲν γὰρ
καρτερεῖν ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἀντέχειν, ἡ δ' ἐγκράτεια ἐν τῷ κρατεῖν. οὖτος δὲ τὸ ἀντέχειν καὶ
κρατεῖν, ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ μὴ ἴττάσθαι τοῦ νικᾶν· διὸ καὶ αἵρετῶτερον ἐγκράτεια καρτερίας
ἐστὶν.

The difference between *akrasia* and softness, then, does not merely lie in the fact that they have
different objects; their moral psychological structure is different. Endurance, says Aristotle, is not a
matter of being stronger, but of holding out. And being stronger and holding out are different, like
“not being weaker is different from winning.” Softness, it seems, involves failing to hold out.

Cook Wilson is, again, skeptical about the philosophical value of this distinction (1879, 45). As he puts
it, “since holding out means that the man does not allow the pain to determine his will, it is *kratein*
[being stronger] in the fullest sense” (45), and so, *contra* the distinction in these lines, endurance
involves being stronger as much as *akrasia.* But this is not a charitable way to read Aristotle’s claims.
Given the different objects of *akrasia* and softness, we should expect this moral psychological

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37 Cook Wilson (1879, 17) also argues that these lines cannot have been penned by the same author of the first section of
the chapter because 1150a9–16 describe both the self-controlled person and the enduring as “being stronger” (*κρέιττοι*)
and these, later lines reserve “being stronger” (*κρέιττοι*) only for the self-controlled agent. Stewart (1892) agrees with
Cook Wilson that the distinction is not philosophically sound, but he argues that these lines are not in conflict with the
claims in 1150a9–16, and that there is no reason not to attribute both passages to the same author, for the beginning of
the chapter “only says that the ἐγκράτης and the καρτερίκος are stronger ... than the average man, where pleasures and
pains are concerned” (194), while 1150a32–50b1 refer to these agents’ dispositions toward pleasure and pain. I agree with
Stewart that these lines supplement the characterization in 1150a9–16, and do not supersede or contradict what is said
there. Bobonich (2009, 144) also agrees.
distinction. There is an important difference between bodily pleasures for food, drink, and sex, and the painful toil of executing actions and plans. Things that appear to be pleasant to us present themselves as objects of choice (EN 2.3, 1105a30). When something appears to be pleasant, it opens a course of action that has it as its goal. In contrast, the pain felt when carrying out an action or activity is an internal obstacle or an impediment for it. For Aristotle, when an action or activity is painful, then we tend to carry it badly or not at all (10.5, 1175b17–24). This determines an asymmetry between akrasia and softness. The akratēs acts in ways that conflict with her commitments (or what she is reasonably expected to do), and she does so in pursuit of some external object, which appears to her (incorrectly) to be pleasant, and so good. The soft, in contrast, gives up acting to avoid the inherent pain of doing so. Her commitments, then, do not “resist” or “hold out” (ἀντέχειν) in the face of the pains she anticipates would attend their execution.

The moral motivational structure of these two cases is, then, different. Aristotle compares the struggle of these agents with a battle. But how does this work as a struggle between opposing motivations within someone? In the case of akrasia, one’s resolution to act in a certain way is defeated by one’s appetite for some seemingly pleasant object. In the case of softness, in contrast, one’s motivation to do something is balanced out by one’s motivation not to do it, due to the effort and inherent pain required to carry it out. This is a case of a balance of motives, in which no action results. In this sense, the commitments of a soft person do not “hold out” (ἀντέχειν). Soft people are, then, irresolute; they do not persist in their commitments; they are too easily deflected from the path they have (or would) chosen.

Importantly, the failure of akritic agents and soft people to act as they should is not the result of a choice (προαιρέσις). Aristotelian says that, unlike intemperate agents, who act on account of choice (διὰ προαιρέσεως), the akratēs and the soft do not choose to act (μὴ προαιρομένων) as they do (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a25–32). But does this mean that they act “against their choice” (παρὰ τὴν προαιρέσεως), as remarks on akrasia in previous chapters suggest (e.g., EN 7.4 = EE 6.4, 1148a10–11)? In some cases, this is surely the case. For example, when I decide to go for a jog and fail to stick to my deliberated decision due to the anticipated pain of doing so. But the soft person who trails his cloak does not seem to be a case in which the agent acts against a prior choice, as is suggested by Aristotle’s remark that “they do not think themselves to be despondent,” yet they are (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b5). Notice, however, that there are two different ways one can act “without choosing” (μὴ προαιρομένων). One way is to act against a deliberated choice. The gluttonous akratic who is resolved to abstain from eating another portion of food, and nevertheless eats it, seems to fit this model well. But another way to act without choosing is to act without having made any resolution, one way or another. Some cases of akrasia, such as impetuous akrasia (προπέτεια) (1150b17–25), do not seem to involve a deliberated choice before action. The same, I take it, applies to softness. Often,

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38 Aristotle says that proairesis (choice) is a deliberative desire for things that are up to us (EN 3.3, 1113a10–11). Deliberation (βούλησις) precedes proairesis. One forms a proairesis to do things towards one’s end based on deliberation (βούλησις) (EN 3.3, 1113a1–15).
these agents’ actions clash with their general commitments, even if they did not explicitly deliberate about the issue at hand. Regret after acting can be a sign of this. But, at other times, they may not have any commitments whatsoever. Yet, they are not intemperate because they were prompted to act as they did, not from choice, but from an aversion to painful effort (1150a25–27).

We can see that there are a range of cases that fall under the category of softness (just as there are different qualifications for akraia): from the person who deliberately decides to go to a political rally but, when the day comes, stays home because they slack off, thereby acting against their deliberated resolution; to the person who never made an explicit resolution to vote in the elections and fails to go to the polls to avoid the burdensome drive, but they generally endorse being politically active as a value; to the agent who never deliberated about these things or has any relevant overall commitments, but fails to form, and stick to, the correct resolution so as to avoid exertion. Still, these agents are not intemperate since they do not actively and deliberately choose their behavior and act from such a choice (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150a19–25).

This moral psychological difference allows us to understand Aristotle’s claim that self-control is more choice worthy than endurance. And we may suspect Aristotle thinks, also, that softness is more blameworthy than akraia. After all, as he says, “it is something to be amazed at…” (θαυμαστῶν; 1150b8–13) when people are soft, while the failure of the akratés does not arouse the same sort of surprise. The reason for this may lie in the fact that the soft agent abandons her engagements and commitments to avoid the pain of carrying them out. In this case, there is no competing good, as in the case of the akratés for whom the cookie or the extra drink appears to be good. The failure of the soft is, one could say, all theirs. They did not have it in them to do what they should. In contrast, in the case of akraia, we can point to another culprit besides our own self, namely, the enticing food or tempting drink. Leaving aside whether this view is correct or not, I think we indeed tend to reproach more someone who slacks off because they do not want to go through the effort of doing what they should and is reasonably expected of them, than someone who succumbs to temptations posed by bodily appetites for food, drink, and sex. Think here of the contrast between not grading your student

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39 A proper treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper. I am generally sympathetic to Cagnoli Fiecon (2018)’s thesis that akraia is characteristically against one’s general commitment to act on one’s conception of one’s ends overall, rather than always against a deliberated choice. Aristotle, she argues, may employ a broad notion of προαιρέσις that refers to “the agent’s commitment to act on her conception of her ends even when this commitment does not issue in a choice to perform a particular action” (229). At least in the case of softness, I find it telling that Aristotle does not characterize this disposition as necessarily involving acting ‘παρά τὴν προαίρεσιν’. These agents simply do not choose (μην προαιρεσιμένων), but rather act from an aversion to pain.

40 Aspasia seems to read the distinction in this same way: The intemperate person acts from choice. In contrast, the soft and the akratés do not act from a choice, which simply means that they act from an appetite or aversion (132, 10–15). This leaves open whether they violated any prior choice they had made or to which they are committed overall.

41 1150a19–20 is problematic from the point of view of the manuscript. The line attributes to the intemperate acting ‘καὶ ὑπερβολὴ ἡ προαιρεσία’, rather than necessarily from choice. Commentators opt to emend this line. Many substitute it by ‘καὶ ὑπερβολὴ καὶ προαιρεσία’, that is, the intemperate goes for excessive pleasures and acts from choice. Bywater suggests ‘ὑπερβολὴ’ for ‘καὶ ὑπερβολὴ’, the meaning being that the intemperate pursues pleasures because they are excessive, that is, by choice. The emendation is tolerable. See Burnet (1900, ad loc.)
papers because you gave in to the temptation of meeting a flame, and not grading because of how toilsome you find this activity to be and do nothing instead. My claim is that Aristotle would find both actions reprehensible, but one more forgivable than the other, or at least more intelligible. To put the point slightly differently, I think if one were to ask this person: “why didn’t you grade the papers?” and they responded: “because I had a date,” we would think her answer articulates a reason or explanation, albeit a bad one, while we may be less sympathetic to someone who said, “because I did not want to do it.” This, we may think, is simply not a reason at all. In the case of akrasia, we can point to the object of one’s temptation to explain one’s failing, while in the case of softness, there is no one but oneself to point to when explaining why one failed to do what one had to.

4. Women’s Softness

We are now ready to see some of the payoffs of taking the distinctions in this chapter seriously, and of my interpretation. Nicomachean Ethics 7.7 (= EE 6.7) contains interesting remarks about the differences between men and women, which can help us explain some of Aristotle’s claims about women’s political deficiencies in Pol. 1. Aristotle says that women are congenitally softer than men:

[I]t is something to be amazed at if someone does this [giving up] concerning things that many can successfully struggle against, and if he gives up and cannot act against these—unless it is because of his congenital nature or because of disease, as there is congenital softness in Scythian kings or as female differs in relation to male in this regard. (EN 7.7 = EE 6.7, 1150b12–16; emphasis added) 42

Θαυμαστόν … εἴ τις πρὸς ἀσίαν πόλλοι δύνανται ἀντίχειαν, τούτων ἤττᾶται καὶ μὴ δύνανται ἀντιτείνειν, μὴ διὰ φύσιν τοῦ γένους ἢ διὰ νόσου, οἷον ἐν τοῖς Σκυθῶν βασιλεύσαν ἢ μαλακία διὰ τὸ γένος, καὶ ὡς τὸ βήλον πρὸς τὸ ἀρρεν διέστηκεν.

If my interpretation is correct, women’s softness consists in a disposition to give up tasks due to the effort they require, and to experience actions as more toilsome than they are.

42 The reference to the softness of Scythian kings is obscure, although in accordance with frequent attributions of softness to non-Greeks in the extant sources. (See note 3 above for references.) Aspasia’s commentary reads ‘Persian’ instead of ‘Scythian’. Commentators refer to Herodotus’ Histories 1.105: “the Scythians who pillaged the temple [of Aphrodite], and all their descendants after them, were afflicted by the goddess with the ‘female’ sickness: and so, the Scythians say that they are afflicted as a result of this and also that those who visit Scythian territory see among them the condition of those whom the Scythians call ἑναρῆς.” The meaning of ἑναρῆς is obscure. Scholars point to the Hippocratic Air, Waters, and Places, where Scythians called ἑναρῆς are said to be impotent, live like women, do women’s work, talk like women, dress like them, and “play the women’s part.” ‘Ετι τε πρός τούτων εὐνουχία γίνεται οἵ πλεῖστοι ἐν Σκύθῃ σαὶ γυναικεῖα ἐργάζονται καὶ ὡς οἱ γυναῖκες διαιτεῦνται διαὶ νόσου τοῖς ἅμιοις […] ένθάδεν στόχῳ γυναικείην καταγνόντες ἕως τῶν ἀνδρείων γυναικεῖοι στοιχεῖοι καὶ ἐργάζονται μετὰ τῶν γυναικῶν ἢ καὶ οὐκέτας, ΕΕ 6.7. The author attributes as a cause for this “condition” excessive horse-riding and venescence, contrary to the providential explanations allegedly preferred by the Scythians. In support of this naturalistic explanation, the author points out that this “condition” only affects powerful Scythians because this class rides horses more frequently, thereby linking softness with power and wealth, a connection we saw before (notes 28 and 30).
With this background in place, we can examine some of Aristotle's infamous remarks about women in the *Politics*. For Aristotle, “the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to natural inferior, and that of ruler to ruled” (1254b14–15). A man “rules his wife the way a statesman does” (1259a37), but unlike other cases of political rule in which ruler and ruled take turns to govern, Aristotle is clear that the male rules over the female “permanently” (1259b9). According to Aristotle, the view that men should rule over women is grounded in, and justified by, natural differences in their souls:

Most instances of ruling and being ruled are natural. For rule of free over slave, man over female, man over child, is exercised in different ways, because, while the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in them in different ways. The slave is completely without the deliberative capacity; that female has it, but it has no authority (*akuron*); the child has it, but undeveloped. (*Pol.* 1.13, 1260a8–14; emphasis added)

The claim that women’s deliberative capacity is not authoritative (*ākuron*) has been interpreted in a number of ways. According to ‘interpersonal’ interpretations, Aristotle is saying that women, as a matter of fact, do not have political authority over men.43 But Aristotle clearly states that the differences between women’s and men’s suitability to rule are natural. The lack of authority of women’s deliberative capacities is grounded in the way in which the parts of the soul are present in them, which suggests this is a statement about women’s psychology. More importantly, the *akuron*-claim is supposed to justify the view that women and men are, in general, not equally suited for governance. This reading leaves us with a circular explanation for why women should not rule: they should not be given political authority because they have not been given political authority.44 Normative versions of the interpersonal interpretation attempt to answer these worries. Deslauriers (2003, 229), for example, argues that the scope of women’s deliberative capacity is by nature restricted to matters related to the household. Now, since the household is subordinated to the city, which is a man’s highest sphere of deliberation, women’s deliberations are naturally subordinated to his deliberations. But the question still stands: we want an explanation of why the scope of the deliberative capacity of women is restricted to the household. The *akuron*-claim is supposed to explain and justify why women’s deliberations are restricted in this way.45

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43 E.g., Swanson 1992, 56, Mulgan 1994, esp. 199.
44 A point noted in Riesbeck 2015, 143.
45 See Karbowski 2014, 444–445 for an objection along these lines.
According to ‘intrapersonal’ interpretations, Aristotle is describing what he takes to be a natural difference between men and women.⁴⁶ Within this family of interpretations, we can distinguish two different readings. For some scholars, women’s deliberative capacities themselves are defective or inoperative.⁴⁷ Specifically, women cannot grasp goals on their own, and so they cannot deliberate adequately. But, as it has been noted, if women cannot deliberate and determine the best course of action on their own, they would not be able to be virtuous or flourish. Indeed, Aristotle says that good deliberation is necessary in order to be virtuous and flourish (EN 6.13, 1144b31–3; Pol. 7.1, 1323b21–3).⁴⁸ Yet, for Aristotle, women can be ethically virtuous, even if their virtue is different to that of men (Pol. 1.12, 1260a18–20).⁴⁹ Moreover, Aristotle says that men should delegate the organization of whole domains related to the household to women (EN 8.10, 1160b32–5). This suggests that women can deliberate correctly in these spheres and adequately grasp ends.⁵⁰

A different version of the intrapersonal interpretation holds that women are constitutionally akратic. They deliberate well, but they chronically give in to passions.⁵¹ But there are some problems with this reading, too. Aristotle says that both men and women can resist irrational impulses through habit and reason. The fact that women are more naturally disposed to akrasia does not mean that they inevitably suffer from it. Akrasia can be cured (EN 7.8 = EE 6.8, 1150b29–34).⁵² Moreover, it seems that Aristotle thinks women can stick to their rational decisions in the household domains of which they are in charge, and this includes carrying out practical and managerial tasks—specifically, deciding how property should be stored and distributed, managing servants, and educating children (Pol. 3.4, 1277b24–5).⁵³ If they were constitutively akратic, Aristotle would not argue that they can be in charge of overseeing these important tasks. This interpretation, then, cannot account for why women should have authority over economic and managerial decisions and tasks pertaining to the household, yet not those in the public arena.⁵⁴

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⁴⁶ Perhaps, for Aristotle, bodily differences that exist for the sake of sexual differentiation and reproduction result in their deliberative capacities not being authoritative. See Leunissen 2017, especially chapter 6, for a defense of this view.


⁴⁸ A point argued in Connell 2021, esp. 31–2.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of women’s virtue in Aristotle and the defense of the view that women are fundamentally as capable of virtue as men, see Connell (forthcoming).


⁵³ Aristotle thinks women have proper tasks to fulfill in the household. “For straightaway the tasks are divided, and husband and wife are different. They provide for each other, their particular talents being put towards what is common” (EN 8.12, 1162a16–33; Connell’s translation). In Politics I.13, 1260a14–24, Aristotle says wives are “helpers” (ὑπηρεταί) of their husbands, the master–craftsmen of the household. This suggests that men delegate to women (even if under their supervision) certain tasks for the good of the household. In III.2, 1277b24–5, Aristotle assigns different tasks to men and women in the household: the man procures, and the woman preserves (φυλαττείν). Aristotle also says that women will contribute to the education of children (VII.15, 1336a31). See Karbowski 2014, esp. 454, for an account of these feminine roles. See, also, Brill 2020 for a discussion of wifely virtues and the role of women in the household in Aristotle.

Based on my interpretation of softness, we can offer a different reading. As seen, women are softer than men, and softness involves being prone to give up in situations where others would have persevered, due to the perceived effort and toil required to act as expected. Aristotle thinks this is a constitutive handicap in women relative to men. This, arguably, springs from a deficiency of spirit.\textsuperscript{55} For Aristotle “all females are less spirited (ἀθυμότερα) than males” (\textit{HA} 8.1, 608a33; cf. 608b8–18), and so are “softer” (μαλακότερα) than them (608a35). Since “ruling and being free invariably derive from this capacity [i.e. spirit]” (\textit{Pol.} 7.7, 1328a6–7), women are less suited for ruling. A flailing spirit manifests in an inability or reluctance to go through the pain and effort of enacting resolutions and decisions, and doing what one should.\textsuperscript{56} And this, as seen, is different from being constitutively akratic. Female citizens can think, calculate, plan, and make decisions like men do, but they tend to give up and fail to enact plans, decisions, and actions due to a failure to withstand toilsome labor.

Aristotle’s claim, then, is that men should rule because they are better suited to the task. If this is right, \textit{Politics} 1.13 does not argue that women lack the intellectual and deliberative capacities to reach the right decisions through rational reflection. Neither are women constitutionally and chronically akratic. Women tend to lack resolution to enact their decisions and practical judgments due to the effort required to do so. Yet, even if women tend to get more easily dispirited than men and they give up too quickly, they can oversee household chores and command servants and children, for their spirit is strong enough to carry out these sorts of tasks, facing the obstacles they involve without giving up. This is the case, presumably, because in the household they rule over animals, children, and slaves, which are easier to command. Importantly, the difference in spirit between men and women is a matter of degree (\textit{HA} 8.1, 588a22). And, as seen, Aristotle even acknowledges that “there may be exceptions to the order of nature,” and some women may be fitter to rule than some men (\textit{Pol.} 1.12, 1259a38–b5). Thus, women are not absolutely unsuited to ruling; rather, men are fitter than them for the task. And there will even be exceptions to this generalization. Indeed, this is a natural fact, and, like all natural facts, it holds always or for the most part.

Given their spirited nature, Aristotle thinks men are natural leaders. Due to their relative softness, women should not be assigned the task of ruling the city. The natural propensity of women to give up goals in situations that demand toil and perseverance will result in men successfully imposing their will on them. But what explains this external result is a psychological, and thus natural, difference between women and men: soft people are less likely to succeed in implementing their practical

\textsuperscript{55} Nielsen 2015 and Connell 2021, esp. 35f emphasize women’s natural propensity to be easily dispirited and link their handicap in spirit to their political deficiencies. However, Nielsen endorses that this results in a women being more prone to \textit{akrasia} of the impetuous type, and Connell endorses an inter-personal reading.

\textsuperscript{56} Interestingly, Aristotle says that spartan women live intemperately and “daintily” (τρυφερῶς) which, we saw, is a kind of softness (\textit{Pol.} 2.9, 1269b22-23). Sparta, being led by their women, overvalued wealth (1269b-1270a).
judgments because they tend to give up too quickly. So, it is even good for women to be ruled, as otherwise their inaction may hinder their flourishing and well-being (Pol. 1.5, 1254a20–22).

5. Conclusion

Softness and endurance differ from *akrasia* and self-control in their objects, moral psychological structure, and ethical worth. Soft agents experience actions to be more toilsome than they are, and the perceived painfulness discourages them from doing what they should in ordinary circumstances. Softness is a deficiency of character that is largely executive and consists in a tendency to give up acting. It involves being prone to laziness and inaction due to the toil required to act and carry out plans, actions, and decisions. It is likely Aristotle associated this deficiency of character with a handicap in spirit, and it is clear he thinks this deficiency tends to affect some groups more than others, notably women compared to men. Softness undermines not only personal, but also political agency. Women’s deliberative capacities are not authoritative because they tend to give up their practical judgments quicker than men, due to the painful effort required to carry them out. The view that personal and political agency requires strength, determination, and will to power may give us pause, yet, if I am right, it is central to this author’s views, and we should take the time to unpick the assumptions on which it rests, and the implications it carries.

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57 I thus favor Nielsen’s intrapersonal interpretation of women’s dispiritedness (though I disagree with the view that this means that they are constitutionally akratic), rather than the interpersonal reading proposed in Connell 2021: “For Aristotle, women can deliberate and stick to their resolutions. This means that their resolutions are not internally ineffective but externally so (...) This has to do with their lack of spirit” (35); “a woman’s unauthoritative deliberative capacity is in relation not to her internal mind but to the group situation – in which she cannot make it that her own decision affects others’ actions” (43); “[t]he spirited nature of men means that they have ultimate control in the household and in the city. Women are most often unable to override their decisions. Thus, a woman in such a world has to keep her own counsel and bide her time” (55). But note that if this was the case, then men would (and should) also control the domestic decisions that Aristotle says men should delegate to women. Also, if the difference only concerned women being silenced and their will overridden by men who, due to their stronger spirit, can subdue them, it is not clear whether this would provide a justification for the rule of men or merely an explanation for the brute fact that they, as a matter of fact, subdue women. Yet, as Connell agrees, Aristotle’s *Politics* is normative (Pol. 1.6, 1255a12–40). Aristotle is trying to give us a justification for this distribution of tasks between men and women. What ultimately provides the justification is that women, on account of their psychology, are less good at sticking to their resolutions, enacting their decisions, and persevering in their goals due to how toilsome and effortful they appear to be to them.

58 *Pol. 1.5, 1254a20–22: “For ruling and being ruled are not only necessary, they are also beneficial, and some things are distinguished right from birth, some suited to rule and others to being ruled.”*
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