

# Framing the tendency to betray one's good intentions. Akrasia as a dialogical dynamic

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## Abstract

Akrasia, otherwise known as ‘weakness of will’, is a state of mind whereby people act deliberately against their better judgment. This paper aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding akrasia from psychosocial perspectives that assume the self is multiple and strongly interconnected with the relational flow of which it is a part. Drawing on key ideas from Dialogical Self Theory, we analyze the main dialogical dynamics that can generate akratic episodes with reference to how individuals organize their personal position repertoire, and to the relational and socio-cultural setting in which the actions are taken. The discussion enables us to identify some indicators to frame the tendency to betray one's good intentions, and to offer some suggestions on how to reduce the occurrence of the various forms of akrasia analyzed.

## KEYWORDS

akrasia, dialogical self, personal position repertoire, relational perspectives, weakness of will

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The term ‘akrasia’ (from the Greek *ἀκρασία*, lack of willpower and control, lack of restraint or weakness of will) indicates an individual's state of mind when they deliberately act against their better judgment (Mele, 1987, 2010; Rorty, 1980). Although this is a philosophical topic, and only recently considered in the sphere of psychology (Kalis et al., 2008), episodes of akrasia can be very common in our daily lives. To give an example, many smokers would like to give up the habit, well aware that

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this would benefit their health. In spite of their good intentions, however, they may be seized by such a strong desire to smoke that they might ask a passerby for a cigarette in a ‘moment of weakness’. Almost without realizing it, they find themselves with a lit cigarette between their fingers. From a certain point of view at least, they have acted against their own deliberations (Frattini et al., 2010; Monterosso & Schwartz, 2020). In another common instance of *akrasia*, we might have decided to take up a sport in order to lose weight and improve our physical condition eating too much over Christmas. Despite the knot in our handkerchief, we find ourselves procrastinating on the couch from one day to the next, although we are not immune to self-criticism and a crushing sense of defeat. Going against a preferred course of action is clearly a common experience, making *akrasia* a phenomenon with which we are forced to deal in our daily lives (Charlton, 1988). Episodes of *akrasia* seem to be associated with a feeling of regret for an action we have taken against our better judgment, or that we have failed to take although we had wanted to do so.

In a treatise on weakness of will, Elster (2008) describes a broad spectrum of *akratic* actions, grouping them into the following categories:

- (a) actions dictated by passion and emotion (e.g., I come home intending to engage in a pleasant conversation with my father, but within minutes I become angry, raise my voice, and bang my fist on the table);
- (b) actions related to temptation (e.g., finding a wallet full of money on the street, I decide to keep the money, despite feeling that I should return it);
- (c) actions related to procrastination (e.g., I know I should exercise more to improve my health, but I put off the activity from one day to the next);
- (d) actions related to noncompliance (e.g., I know it would be best to follow my doctor's orders, but I forget to take my medication);
- (e) actions related to impatience (e.g., I am reading a very compelling mystery book and, although I know I should savor it, I skip to the last page to find out who the murderer is);
- (f) actions linked to states of addiction (e.g., I do not want to smoke anymore, but even today I cannot stop myself from having a cigarette after lunch);
- (g) actions linked to rigid habits (e.g., I know I would be in a better mood today if I did not check my work emails, but I turn on my phone and read them without thinking).

Going beyond these cases illustrated by Elster (2008), more recent studies have tried to associate *akrasia* with behaviors relating to modern digital technologies (Valasek, 2022), such as ‘phubbing’ (when we snub the person we are speaking with to check our smartphones) (Aagaard, 2020), or considered how *akrasia* might emerge in the behavior of couples (Guizzard, 2011), in financial reasoning (Massironi & Chesini, 2016), and in groupthink (Szanto, 2017).

While these various types of behavior clearly each have their own peculiar characteristics, and would thus warrant a separate discussion, by referring to *akrasia* might be able to consider some features they share, and try to interpret them and understand why they occur. Taking this approach may be particularly relevant when we consider that the construct of *akrasia* has been used quite a few times - in social psychology at least - as an *explanans* (e.g., to name the forms of behavior analyzed in the above-mentioned examples), but rarely as an *explanandum*, an aspect that deserves a proper theoretical elaboration. *Akrasia* is a phenomenon that has been largely ignored by mainstream psychology because as it indicates a paradoxical condition that stands in stark contrast to post-positivist efforts to envisage the mind and its processes as linear and causal (for a review of the deterministic and rationalistic assumptions that *akrasia* violates, see Romaioli et al., 2008). Even the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), which essentially explores how people tend to resolve their internal

contradictions, sheds light on the compensatory mechanisms involved in such circumstances, but tells us little about the dynamics that can be triggered when individuals go *deliberately* against their own judgment. Take the example of someone who believes in the value of animal life but has no problem with eating meat. Socio-cognitive models have tried to illustrate the mechanisms that would allow the cognitive system to solve the dissonance: for example, the meat eaten and the live animals can be processed in two distinct categories, enabling the inconsistency to disappear (Aaltola, 2019). This explanation can cover how individuals cope with such a contradiction, but does not clarify how they can deliberately act against their better judgment, and how they can *phenomenologically* feel that they have betrayed their good intentions. It is quite important to seek an explanation for akrasia that takes into account this subjective evaluative dimension (cf. Frattini et al., 2010), when individuals perceive themselves as going against their best interests, without trying to justify their action or being self-defeating about it. In this sense, akrasia would take the form of a cognitive dissonance that is not fully resolved, but rather makes agents wonder how they could have taken a problematic action despite thinking it was the wrong thing to do, and consequently feel a sense of regret.

Akrasia also seems to differ from forms of social hypocrisy (Goffman, 2021), such as the case of somebody who tells the family they want to stop drinking, but then grabs a glass of wine at the first opportunity when outside the home. This person is only pretending to show better judgment in order to make a positive impression on others, whereas in cases of akrasia there is no reference to a dimension of social desirability: the individual's better judgment emerges as a personal conviction that reflects their 'real' view of how they should and would, genuinely and truthfully, like to be.

Because of this paradoxical condition, as Romaioli et al. (2008) argued, akrasia poses many theoretical difficulties, making it hard to explain within the more traditional theories of human behavior (cf. Gauld & Shotter, 1977; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Searle, 2001). The present contribution proposes a more systematic framing of akrasia from perspectives of social psychology that emphasize the relational and dialogical nature of the self (Gergen, 2009; Hermans, 2001b; Marková, 2003; Romaioli & McNamee, 2021). These theoretical frameworks not only enable a more thorough understanding of the psychosocial dynamics that generate akrasia, but also identify conceptual tools and methods for assessing the subjective risk of akrasia and suggesting patterns for its resolution.

## 2 | A SHORT EXCURSUS ON AKRASIA

The debate on akrasia originates in classical philosophy. In *Protagoras*, Plato uses the figure of Socrates to address the issue of people acting against their better judgment (Plato, 1994). He says that people's choices are influenced by desire, pleasure, pain and love, but if they know what is right, they will never go against what their conscience suggests. So for Plato akrasia does not exist, and individuals would only take any problematic (or not preferred) actions out of ignorance. In other words, if someone continues to smoke cigarettes, it is simply because they are unaware that they are harming their health, or that good health is something they should strive for (Devisch & Dierckx, 2009). Plato maintained that virtuous behavior goes hand in hand with Reason, which comes from the individual's rational part, and implies a capacity to control the emotional and passionate sphere of the soul (Morris, 2006).

The term 'akrasia' only appeared later, however, in the writings of Aristotle (1953), who identified this paradox in people's ability to take the wrong action because they are too weak to do what is considered best. For Aristotle, akrasia was therefore not only possible, but also the typical condition of a certain type of person that he associated with character traits such as 'intemperance' or 'lack of restraint'. As he writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "the unrestrained man resembles a state which passes all the proper enactments, and has good laws, but which never keeps its laws" (Nic.

Eth. 1152a.20; H. Rackham, Ed). To give an example of this point of view, think of school students watching TV instead of studying: they may well be aware that studying is for their own good, yet they fail to behave accordingly; this is because of a deficit in their character and personal disposition (a weakness of will).

Having been debated in moral philosophy (Saarinen, 1994), by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century akrasia was attracting less interest, and it almost disappeared from the philosophical treatises (Fleming, 2010). It was only in 1969 that Davidson, one of the greatest exponents of analytical philosophy, published an essay entitled *How is weakness of the will possible?*, bringing the akrasia paradox back to other scholars' attention. Davidson (1980, p. 64) takes the merit for the first systematic definition of akrasia, according to which an individual acts in an akratic manner in accomplishing *b* if and only if:

- a) “the agent does *b* intentionally;
- b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *a* open to him; and
- c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *a* than to do *b*.”

Precisely because of its paradoxical connotation, akrasia is included in the broader category of ‘motivated irrationality’ (such as self-deception or wishful thinking), when individuals' intentional behaviors deviate from criteria of rationality (Davidson, 1985; Pears, 1982). Davidson disrupted the dualistic scheme proposed by the classical philosophers, which envisaged reason on the one hand (with its logical and rational criteria), and the emotional dimension on the other (seen as irrational and uncontrollable). He was among the first to enter into the domain of how people think, and how they organize their judgments about the world. He suggested that we divide the best judgments into two possible categories: absolute judgments and conditional judgments (the latter based on situations known to the agent). According to Davidson (2001), there are reasons that – at first glance (i.e., based on limited and circumstantial evidence) – would induce people to take a certain action, but these reasons are not consistent with a more general, decontextualized view that prompts people to formulate absolute judgments on what is the right thing to do. Davidson suggested that cases where the agent appears to act contrary to his best judgment by doing *y* instead of *x* are actually cases in which the agent had not made an absolute judgment that the best course of action would be to do *x* (cf. Searle, 2001).

Other authors (Elster, 1985; Peijnenburg, 2000) later showed that these two types of judgment could also be experienced as conflicting when the temporal dimension of events is taken into account. An instance of this is when actions prompted by conditional judgments are later undermined and challenged by a more general and decontextualized view of a situation, leading agents to disavow their own actions. As an example, let us take the case of an individual who decides to give alms to a beggar because, at first glance, this seems the right thing to do. Later on, however, the individual might consider the system of exploitation in which the beggar is implicated, and realize that giving alms has the effect of financing an organized crime network. The act of charity would suddenly lose its appeal, and change from being reasonable to being a problematic type of behavior.

Elster (1979), in particular, proposes an explanation for akrasia that takes the passage of time into great account. There may be a change in an agent's personal dispositions regarding what they consider the right thing to do. By emphasizing the temporal dimension, Elster (2008, p. 12) expands the definition of akrasia as follows:

- (a) “the agent has reasons to do *x*;
- (b) the agent has reasons to do *y*;
- (c) in a moment of calm and serenity, the agent judges that the reasons to do *x* are stronger than the reasons to do *y*; but
- (d) the agent does *y*.”

Reformulating akrasia in this way makes the timing of the action more clearly distinguishable from the moment when the judgment is made, so that akrasia can be explained as a phenomenon of ‘preference reversal’. This process consists in agents changing their minds over time about what they believe to be their best choice, and it can be due to three main mechanisms: (i) hyperbolic discounting of the future; (ii) perceptual, cognitive or internal triggering mechanisms; and (iii) visceral influences, such as emotions and appetites. Considering the first mechanism, agents may have a choice between a less advantageous option *a* that is available at a time *t1*, and a more advantageous option *b* available at a time *t2*. At *t1* they prefer option *a* because it is more readily available. But at a time *tx*, they may reconsider and decide that they prefer option *b*, so they abandon their previous choice. This preference reversal can also occur as a result of external or internal stimuli, such as the sight a pack of cigarettes that rekindles the desire to smoke, or the sudden, transient activation of visceral influences. Using these arguments, Elster (2008) succeeds in explaining most of the akratic actions envisaged, but his explanation calls into question mechanisms that are essentially cognitive, or otherwise expressed in an individualistic approach to akrasia (Gillette, 2014; Montell, 2001). Here, we propose instead to understand the mechanism of preference reversal through more markedly psychosocial interpretations that include the Other in the dynamics that produce an agent’s judgments and actions (Glavenau, 2019; Romaioli & Contarello, 2022).

### 3 | THE MULTIPLICITY OF THE SELF (AND OF THE ‘BEST’ JUDGMENT)

Relational approaches (Gergen, 2009, 2015b) and Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans et al., 1992) seem to offer an alternative explanation for akrasia. The self is conceptualized as a multiplicity of voices (or I-positions), each capable of sustaining a specific form of intentionality. Our inner world is derived from the social world in which we move, which means that our judgments always reflect the different positions we hold in relation to a broader system of relationships (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gergen, 2008, 2014). In other words, whatever we claim to be our best judgment on any given occasion is always a reflection of one voice among many – a voice that, under different circumstances, might be overridden by other voices (Harré & Gillett, 1994).

Going into more detail, Hermans (2001b) suggests that I-positions can be distinguished as:

- (a) internal, encompassing the social and psychological roles we adopt in relations with others (e.g., ‘I as a husband’, ‘I as a nice person’, etc.); or
- (b) external, including the various others with whom we are used to interacting (e.g., ‘my wife’, ‘my father’, etc.). These second types of voice within the self (also named “inner others”) consist of voices that are attributed to others, but that are distinct from the voices of actual others (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Marková, 2006).

Internal positions (such as ‘I as a polite person’ or ‘I as a rebellious type’) emerge within a dialogue with external positions of the self (such as ‘my boss’, ‘my parents’, etc.), and become part of a personal identity repertoire. Similarly, external positions are part of the extended domain of the self and can be conceived as I-positions as well, in the sense that the other has the potential to function as a different position within the self. This theoretical extension has the advantage of freeing the self from any form of self-sufficient individualism: the internal voices of the self and the voices of others are coordinated in a dialogical space that shapes the individual’s psychological world.

As Hermans argues (2001a, p. 428), “the I has the possibility to move from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time. The I fluctuates among different and

even opposed positions, and has the capacity imaginatively to endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective Me's, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self."

It may be helpful to clarify that this idea of multiplicity is not intended as a reification of the other within us, or as the admission of mental instances from factual consistency (Brown, 2001). Rather, the way we use this framework in the present work should be seen as a metaphor for making intelligible the unfolding of ongoing relational and dialogical dynamics that, at various levels, organize and reorganize a person's self in the production of their judgments and actions. Along the lines proposed by Gillespie and Cornish (2010), the basic idea is to reinterpret subjectivity as a dynamic and contextual phenomenon that can be theorized in terms of dialogues between different (real and imagined) perspectives (Marková, 2003). This means that some of our intentions may change, depending on how the relational flow changes or, in other words, depending on how the dialogical space created between people, or between different voices of the self, generates specific meanings for the action to be taken.

In this framework, *akrasia* can be studied as a preference reversal resulting from multiple alternating I-positions that individuals host in their lives. Each I-position has the potential to make its own best judgment, and to become salient in a given context, consistently orienting the individual's actions. For instance, 'working all day' might be the preferred action for the 'I as a career professional' position, but it becomes an impediment to achieving the goals of the 'I as a father' position, for which working more is less important than spending more time with one's children. Clearly, the judgment that agents express about their actions, whether it is preferred (best judgment) or experienced as problematic (*akrasia*), depends on the I-position salient at the time, and how it relates to the other I-positions of an agent's repertoire. The meaning attributed to the action may change, depending on the agent's point of view. For example, 'taking more exercise' could be the best option for the 'I as a sporty person' position, or for external positions such as 'my doctor' or 'my mother'; but that same action could interfere with the goals of the 'I as an enjoyer of life' position, or with external positions such as 'my friends'. Ultimately, episodes of *akrasia* would reveal the conflict that emerges when two or more opposing voices are expressed and compete for an individual's attention (Romioli, 2013; Wertsch, 1991). Unable to hear all their own voices at once, people betray one part of themselves for another. Lack of willpower or motivation would be only a *post hoc* explanation (cf. Romioli, 2021) that fails to take into account how individuals express a plurality of I-positions with different motivational centers and systems for interpreting reality (Minsky, 1986; Salvini et al., 2012). What is best for one part of the self is not necessarily so for another, just as the action that one part is motivated to take is not necessarily in the interests of the whole (assuming that this exists).

#### 4 | THE ORGANIZATION OF THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND FORMS OF AKRASIA

Although personal identity emerges as multifaceted and dynamic, our explanation for *akrasia* does not lean towards radical relativism, and suggest that agents organize their judgments and actions in ways that are always casual and unpredictable. Claiming that the best judgment is always such in relation to the specific I-position being expressed is not the same as claiming that it is infinitely changeable. In fact, several studies indicate that people's personal repertoires of positions are more or less circumscribed, and tend to be quite stable (Hermans, 2003). Positions of the self tend to become structured when patterns of interaction between individuals and their relational context are repeated with

some stability and recursiveness, emerging from the “social acts” in which people engage in everyday life (Gillespie, 2012). The repertoire is consistent with the set of meaningful others with whom an individual has entered into a relationship (external positions or inner others) and with the relative I-positions constructed over time to interface with them (internal positions). Some research shows that systematic methods can be used to map, reorganize and assess these personal repertoires (GonÁlves & Salgado, 2001; Hermans, 2006; Raggatt, 2000). For example, the ‘Personal Position Repertoire’ (Hermans, 2001a) is a method that consists in conducting a structured interview to: explore an individual’s main internal I-positions; capture the degree to which they dominate in the individual’s life; and measure their tendency to become salient or recede into the background in relation to certain circumstances or external positions. More recently, Aveling et al. (2015) have proposed mapping the positions of the self through a dialogic analysis of texts produced by speakers, which may prove even more effective in distinguishing which voice is speaking at the time, and to which audiences the utterances are being directly or indirectly addressed. With these premises, we can establish some conceptual coordinates that enable us to assess an individual’s risk of akrasia regarding the best judgments of certain I-positions. In relation to a given organization of the dialogical self that an individual expresses, it will be possible to clarify both the dynamics that generate specific forms of akrasia, and ways to deal with them.

To better locate our analysis, it should be noted that “the dialogical self entails two domains – intra-psychological and inter-psychological – both of which are equally important” (Valsiner, 2002, p. 252). In other words, an individual’s self tends to be organized through dialogues that include interaction with others, and through what Burkitt (2010) calls “micro-dialogues”, that are described as “a silent and invisible series of dialogues we hold for ourselves with the images and voices of others.” Both of these dialogues can become central to the production of akrasia, but the present contribution focuses mainly on the intra-psychological analysis of the repertoire of positions, seeking to capture the dynamics that may produce the experience of akrasia at this particular level.

#### 4.1 | Extension of the repertoire

The above-outlined framework enables us to examine an agent’s tendency to experience akratic episodes by analyzing their personal position repertoire. A first indicator to consider is the extent of this repertoire. People have a finite number of I-positions at their disposal, which coincides with the multiplicity of psychological and social roles they play, combined with the external positions with which they are used to interfacing. The extent of people’s personal repertoires varies, largely depending on the variety and abundance of contexts they experience in their daily lives (Hermans, 2012). To give an example, people who were born and grow up in the same community, interacting with only a few local people (family members or a small group of friends), will probably have a smaller repertoire of positions available to them than people who experienced multiple and diversified contexts of participation and affiliation, expanding their network of relationships. A first assumption we can make, then, is that individuals with a very large repertoire of positions are at greater risk of akrasia because they are more likely to have to endorse ‘multiple loyalties’. The more numerous the voices of the self that can take the upper hand in defining reality, the greater the possibility of having multiple intelligibilities available for the same action. This means that an action initially preferred by one I-position may subsequently be reconsidered in the light of the preferences of other I-positions. If an action is preferable for one I-position, but not necessarily for another, then shifting to different I-positions can give access to other points of view. The same action thus takes on a different meaning, and may change from being the best option to being dubious, secondary or problematic. An extreme case of this situation may be involved in the phenomenon of ‘inner cacophony’, i.e., a state of organization of the self’s

repertoire in which I-positions are poorly integrated with each other (Filip & Kovářová, 2017; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2002). In other words, individuals may have multiple, often incompatible or conflicting viewpoints at their disposal, and continually switch from one to another. They are unable to establish a hierarchy between their I-positions, and thereby identify a more consistent barycenter on which to base their actions in the world.

## 4.2 | The degree of dominance

A second element concerns the dominance of certain I-positions, or the ability of a given I-position to override the others, and have more influence on an individual's life (Džinović, 2022; Konopka et al., 2018). The intensity of different I-positions in a personal repertoire can vary. Some I-positions are very strong and dominate the time and space in which the individual moves (Hermans, 2001b). Others emerge only occasionally and are peripheral to the person's life habits. The overall dominance of one I-position rather than another depends on the relationship it has with all the others: the degree to which it is transversal to different life contexts; how much other I-positions evoke it; how much it is legitimized by socio-cultural norms; or how competent it becomes in defending its own point of view or imposing its version of reality on the others. As Valsiner (2002) pointed out, the dialogical dynamics within the self are characterized by patterns of dominance and asymmetrical power relations, reflecting the socio-cultural context from which the voices within the self originate. "Just as certain discourses or dominant groups may marginalize or suppress the voice of less powerful others, so too may certain voices within the self dominate, undermine or silence others" (Aveling et al., 2015, p. 674). That is why it is always wise to consider inner dialogues as extensions of the socio-cultural milieu (Salvatore et al., 2019) in which individuals participate, making the internal dynamics of I-positions deeply interconnected with the assumptions, rules and values that are shared in a given context. Micro-dialogues are possible because of a partially shared fabric of social, historical and cultural assumptions that regulates the positioning of the self within an individual's environment. To give an example, the I-position "I as an independent person" will have the strength to express itself within an individual's repertoire the more the universe of values to which it refers is legitimized and shared in the social fabric in which the person lives. In social contexts where individual emancipation is not a value to strive for, or where obedience or cultural forms of collectivism are instituted as the main rule governing social relations, such a position will have fewer chances of being expressed, or it will only emerge when there are major contrasts with other voices dominating the scene.

Examining the degree to which the I-position from which we express a certain good intention dominates our other I-positions can give us a useful indication of our ability to remain adherent to the line of action it suggests. The more the I-position expressing a good judgment is dominant, the more likely we are to behave consistently and pursue the action it prompts. Conversely, if our I-position expressing the good judgment is weaker than other I-positions, we are less likely to take such appropriate action. To give an example, my 'I as a husband' position might prompt me to consider see marital fidelity very important, but I will probably only be faithful to my wife if my 'I as a husband' position has a dominant role in my life. This position has to be legitimized in the contexts in which I live, salient within my network of relationships, and dominant over other I-positions in my repertoire that might be interested in dating other partners.

## 4.3 | Conflicts and coalitions among I-positions

Another aspect to consider is that there may be coalitions among I-positions, as well as conflicts, within the same repertoire (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Puchalska-Wasył, 2016). Our ability to act



according to the better judgment of a specific I-position relates closely to how much such an action is consistent with the various other I-positions that we adopt in our daily lives. The more our inner voices converge or are allied in supporting a certain good intention, the easier it will be for us to adhere to it, and vice versa. Take the case of people who agree with their doctor's recommendation that they should avoid certain unhealthy foods, but are unable to do so. Such behavior is often attributed to laziness or lack of motivation, and poor compliance is explained as a weakness in the individual's character (Wright et al., 2009). Taking the perspective proposed here instead, we need to consider: 1) which I-position is addressing the doctor and formulating the intention to comply with the doctor's orders; 2) the degree of dominance of this I-position; and 3) how much the goal of the action may be shared by other I-positions in the repertoire. For example, 'avoiding junk food' might be worthwhile from the perspective of the 'I as a sick person' position, but the agent may spend little time in that position, and much more in others that give priority to other goals. Analyzing the repertoire might reveal that the idea of avoiding unhealthy foods is also supported by an 'I as a sporty person' position, by an 'I as a man' position, and by external positions such as 'my wife'. There may be other positions that go against my intention to avoid junk food, however, such as 'my friend Mary', with whom the agent shares a passion for such food, or an 'I as a person under stress' position that emerges most frequently when they binge on sweets. The good intention to maintain a healthy lifestyle is therefore pursuable when this better judgment begins to make sense for the agent as a whole, and for their social context. In other words, it must be consistent with the largest possible number of I-positions that an agent hosts in their daily life.

#### 4.4 | Antagonistic I-positions

The above assessment involves not only a purely quantitative calculation of the number of I-positions that can come together to defend a certain judgment, but also the presence of I-positions in a personal repertoire that can openly voice opposing opinions (Konopka & Zhang, 2021). It may be useful here to distinguish between two possible conditions: in one, the best intention of an I-position is simply judged as secondary, so it is not prioritized over other positions; in the other, the best intention of one I-position is clearly in contrast to those of others. This latter case is more problematic insofar as the benefit perceived by one I-position is seen as an impediment to another I-position's achievement of its goals, so the individual may be motivated to actively boycott one or the other. Take the I-positions 'I as a father' and 'I as a career professional': the intention to have a second child would be perfectly consistent with the former position, but it might interfere with the life plans of the latter. Whatever choice he makes in such a situation, the agent is likely to experience internal conflict and the sense of regret typical of *akrasia*, at least until the organization of the self has adjusted to changes in his situation.

Ultimately, the irreducibility of multiple I-positions gives rise to two possible scenarios: in one, the different voices of the self harmonize with each other; in the other they compete, and risk sabotaging each other. People's ability to remain adherent to a given good judgment thus derives from their ability to tune their different voices to that judgment, while failure to do so can lead to *akrasia*.

#### 4.5 | Best judgment and the context of action

As mentioned earlier, our ability to behave according to the dictates of a given good judgment is closely related to how consistent that judgment is with the various I-positions that we occupy in our

daily lives. That said, the I-positions we occupy in the space and time in which we should take action become crucial to our ability to adopt the preferred behavior (Raggatt, 2014). This makes it important to assess the influence of the I-position expressing a given judgment in the context of the action to which it refers. For instance, from the 'I as a good guy' position, I might formulate the intention to be more caring towards my mother. My ability to pursue this goal will depend on how prominent the 'I as a good guy' position becomes in my interaction with my mother, or at least on how much my previous I-positions in relation to her are in line with this intention. If antagonistic positions – such as 'I as an independent person' or 'I as a rebellious son' – prevail in the interaction, I will behave towards her with the goal of emphasizing my independence (which has now become a priority over my intention to be more caring).

Clearly, this type of assessment is feasible when we express judgments or intentions that are very precise, or that refer to circumstantial contexts of daily life. For example, an intention to 'go on a diet' may seem vague at first glance, but on closer observation refer to a clearly-defined spatial-temporal context. For the purposes of the analysis we are suggesting, it is worth considering the I-positions that come into play when we sit at a table with our usual dining companions, or when we go shopping at the supermarket.

The above considerations also apply to more general judgments prompting a deliberate action that refer to decontextualized behaviors or to ethical and moral imperatives (Passini, 2010). It is important to examine the degree to which the I-positions that formulate such judgments are dominant, and the amount of consensus for said judgments among the different I-positions in a person's repertoire. For example, the good intention 'to avoid hurting others' may belong to the position 'I as a kind person'. Our ability to follow up on this good intention will depend on how much this position affects the various spheres of our life, permeating our relationships. The more kindness is fundamental to the way in which others perceive us, the more we will be in a position to take actions compatible with this type of image. If our intention to avoid hurting others is of value to other I-positions as well, our actions will be more consistent with it across the various life contexts we experience. From an 'I as a career professional' position, for instance, we can guess how such an intention might influence whether or not we get promoted at work. If our intention to be kind is in line with the more general goals of this latter position, it becomes easier to pursue – even in situations involving not the 'I as a kind person' position, but the 'I as a career professional' one.

## 5 | “REMEDIES” FOR AKRASIA

Given the above-mentioned dialogical dynamics, we can distinguish between different forms of akrasia. For each of them, we propose some possible solutions below, bearing in mind that many problems brought to a psychologist's attention can be interpreted as cases of akrasia, and therefore be the object of counseling, psychotherapy or psychosocial interventions more generally (Chiara & Romaioli, 2020; Faccio et al., 2013; Nasser, 2013; Romaioli & Bresolin, 2014). My aim is not to propose new techniques for dealing with akrasia, but to suggest a framework that can restore complexity when psychologists risk explaining their clients' problems merely in terms of a generic “weakness of will”, attributing them some sort of deficit, viewing them with suspicion, and failing to recognize the multiple perspectives people may hold. Experts should be able to choose the most appropriate intervention, depending on the dialogic dynamic generating the akratic episode to remedied. The theoretical framework outlined here can serve as a basis for: grasping the value of well-established psychological methods as tools for re-organizing a personal repertoire of I-positions; and identifying other, more specific approaches as they pursue the explicit goal of improving the degree of agreement

between the various voices of the self regarding a certain good intention (for more on strategies for turning conflicting voices of the self into allies, see Romaioli et al., 2022).

A first form of akrasia can be the result of an overly broad and fragmented repertoire of I-positions. In this case, it stems from people's difficulty with anchoring themselves to a single best judgment; instead, they tend to oscillate between several possible judgments, and this makes the meaning of a given action vague and ambivalent. A remedy for this form of akrasia consists in integrating the individual's repertoire of I-positions (Passoni et al., 2021). Generally speaking, the extent of integration of their I-positions is an indicator of their ability to follow up on their good intentions. To pursue this goal, it may be helpful for them to explore the worldviews of their I-positions, placing them in relation to one another (Dimaggio & Stiles, 2007). Within the dialogic perspectives, this more general orientation is seen as an attempt to raise the level of *dialogicality* (Marková, 2003), or mutual interaction between different positions in a repertoire. If there is no communication between the viewpoints of different I-positions, the gap between the individual's behavior in one I-position and their judgments in other I-positions in their personal repertoire may become wider (Chiara & Romaioli, 2021). To facilitate the integration process, it may be crucial to develop what the literature calls a 'meta-position' (Barresi, 2012), meaning a privileged stance from which individuals allow themselves to observe their multiplicity in an effort to put it in order. From this meta-position, they can explore the different points of view of the various I-positions in their repertoire, and establish a set of priorities, choosing which of their numerous good intentions are most worth pursuing.

The agent who expresses a good intention from non-dominant positions gives a different profile of akrasia. In this case, the difficulty is not so much the extreme oscillation of the best judgment, but the inability to affirm it in the face of other positions that dominate the personal repertoire. Generally speaking, one possible solution is to make the I-positions supporting a certain judgment more dominant within the repertoire, without forgetting that the voices' dominance may reflect socio-cultural values and assumptions over which psychologists have no direct influence. The dominance and power structure of a person's "real" context is reflected in the dialogical relations between I-positions, such that some voices can temporarily be more or less "privileged" or "silenced" (Wertsch, 1991). To re-organize the dominance of the voices within the repertoire, it is important to make the position expressing the judgment salient in different life contexts, and therefore in relation to as many external positions as possible. This particular logic applies to a well-known principle used in various therapies for smokers, who are told they should make their intention to quit smoking public: doing so makes the I-position that formulates this intention more salient.

In another, closely related form of akrasia the I-position that expresses a certain best judgment becomes irrelevant in the context in which the preferred action should be taken. In this case, the I-position with the good judgment needs to be made salient precisely where the action should be taken. There are techniques based on this logic that can be seen as attempts to evoke a certain I-position in the context where it can most usefully be expressed. One example is "nudging" (Engelen, 2019), by means of which particular behavioral responses are induced through the evocation of stimuli in situations where they are more essential (think of the sound a car makes when we do not fasten our seat belts). Another involves the use of therapeutic strategies such as the "fixed role assignment" (Neimeyer & Winter, 2007), in which clients are assigned behavioral scripts to adopt in certain social circumstances.

A further form of akrasia analyzed concerns situations where a given judgment is not shared by the multiple I-positions in a person's repertoire. In this case, the individual should be invited to examine how the best intention expressed by one I-position might also be of some relevance to other I-positions, and gain their support. People can be trained to interpret a good intention from various perspectives, and to grasp the favorable implications it might have for the values and life projects pursued by their

other I-positions. This particular intervention can be considered as an innovative strategy because it directly addresses the question of the degree to which good intentions are shared by the voices – an issue rarely examined in the specialist literature, but very relevant to our analysis of akrasia.

Finally, a particularly worrying form of akrasia stems from having I-positions that are openly in conflict with each other. The best judgment that one I-position expresses may be completely the opposite of one supporting another I-position, and this can immobilize the individual or make them engage in self-boycotting behavior. In this case, the remedies for akrasia can move on at least two fronts. One consists in inviting the individual to reconsider the areas that the conflicting positions have in common, as done in many therapies for couples when the therapist tries to identify, together with the partners, a common ground from which to start. The idea here is to explore potential commonalities between the interests of one I-position and those defended by another, and thus review the conviction that they are so divergent. A second possible approach involves training the I-position that expresses a given good intention to construct rhetorically effective narratives (Rimaioli, 2022), the goal being to reach a consensus, or prevail over the antagonist position (“my reasons outweigh yours”), or make dissent more tolerable (“I know you think that way, but ...”).

This last point emphasizes an obvious drawback of such an approach, namely that asking about solutions for akrasia implies considering akrasia a problem in itself. Instead, we have shown that episodes of akrasia stem largely from the presence of different perspectives from which individuals may judge the same event. An action that goes against a given better judgment simply confronts different universes of values and norms, and opting for one course of action or another inevitably amounts to making a partial choice.

## 6 | CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

To understand akrasia, it helps to abandon the idea that a self making judgments and taking action in the world is a coherent unicum. Some scholars have attempted to explain akrasia in terms of intrapsychic mechanisms governing the production of judgments and actions. The present contribution aims instead to interpret akrasia by putting the self into context, rereading it as something more akin to a procession of voices constructed in social interaction processes (Gergen, 2015b; Hermans, 2001b). As Elster (1985, p. 24) argues, “if an individual believes that he ought morally to do what it is best to do, but in a particular circumstance does not do it, to prevent the first belief from exerting the influence on him that it ought to have can only be a division in his mind”. In the framework proposed here, such a division in the mind is not seen as accidental, nor is it only attributable to the problematic cases that become evident in the variety of actions associated with akrasia. From the psychosocial and relational perspectives, this division reflects the deeply social condition of individuals, who organize their mental space by reflecting on the roles and significant others that animate their daily lives.

Borrowing key concepts from Dialogical Self Theory, we have identified a set of dynamics that can produce particular forms of akrasia, relating each to a specific organization of an individual's personal repertoire of I-positions. We have outlined the main conditions that carry a greater risk of akrasia, which are: (a) the presence of a large and poorly-integrated repertoire of I-positions; (b) the non-dominance of I-positions that express good intentions; (c) the scarce relevance of these in the context where the action is taken; (d) the fact that “the” best judgment is not shared by several I-positions; and (e) the presence of antagonistic I-positions. While treating each condition separately for explanatory purposes, it is clear that a comprehensive framing of akrasia should take all these indicators into account at the same time, and any interactions between them. For example, the extent of an individual's repertoire might not be a harbinger of akrasia if their I-positions converge more or less

on a given good intention. At the same time, if there are antagonistic I-positions in their repertoire, and some of them emerge as dominant, the resulting akrasia may be particularly difficult to manage.

In line with the concept of ‘strategic rationality’ (Elster, 1985, 2008), some possible remedies have been suggested that take the dialogical dynamics generating akrasia into account. In general, people can be made aware of their own multiplicity so that one part of their self can guard against the tendency of other parts to betray certain good intentions. Interventions have been used to provide solutions by: a) integrating an individual’s repertoire of I-positions; b) making the I-positions that express good intentions dominant; c) activating I-positions that support a judgment where the action is to take place; d) focusing multiple I-positions on the same goal; and e) countering antagonistic I-positions.

Although the present paper ultimately proposes a relativistic approach to akrasia – in which each position is capable of expressing its own best judgment, and this may generate conflicts between them – the proposed framework enables us to avoid being accused of “radical relativism”. Some authors (cf. Cavalieri, 2016) have warned that, if human beings’ best judgment is multiple and changeable, it also risks compromising their “rational side”, opening the door to moral degeneration (Aaltola, 2016, p. 128). Our analysis shows instead that an individual’s diverse perspectives are limited by the extent of their personal repertoire of positions, and regulated by the dynamics operating between them. That said, akratic phenomena can still be studied without reducing them to a trivial concept of “anything goes”, and preserving the idea that judgments and actions emerge not as a distillation of an individual mind (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010), but rather from a relational process that takes place between individuals, and can be replicated in a person’s inner dialogue (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004).

Future studies could empirically examine the theoretical framework proposed here, and the consistency of the indicators suggested as more or less suitable ways to examine an individual’s risk of akrasia. Some work is already underway to study noncompliance with medical treatments, relating it to the organization of the dialogical self (Herrera, 2022).

A limitation of the above approach consists in that it only examines the dynamics that generate akrasia as if they were expressed within a structured dialogical space, assuming a partial crystallization of its organization. In other words, we do not take into sufficient account the fact that the meaning attributed to an action is not just the byproduct of a mind, however polyphonic and socialized it might be; it also belongs to the relational interchange alive in the here and now (Gergen, 2015a; McNamée, 2012). As Burkitt (2010, pp. 314–315) put it, “in any joint activity... we can constantly switch between micro-dialogues and interpersonal interchange, because we exist as “I for myself,” “I for others”, and there are “others for me.” Indeed, we may experience this simultaneously while engaged with others in dialogue, being constantly aware of our own feelings or how we might be appearing to others, while they will be forming impressions of us, just as we are of them”. Considering a more markedly interpersonal level of analysis would make the framing of the dynamics that generate akrasia more articulated, to the extent that it becomes necessary to include exquisitely intersubjective phenomena such as social positioning. As Gillespie (2012, p. 41) clarified, “social positions arise in social interaction by virtue of the different positions participants take vis-à-vis each other... In each social interaction, the social positions cannot be defined in isolation, rather they are always defined in part by the complementary social position”. In every human interaction, then, we position ourselves and are positioned by our interlocutors, so that our actions – and the meaning we attribute to them – are the outcome of an interactive dynamic rather than of a deliberate plan deriving from a self-contained subjectivity. To give an example, somebody might intend to help an elderly person by offering them their seat on a bus, but – instead of being grateful – the elderly person may feel discriminated and be annoyed. As Gergen (2006) argues, the meaning of a person’s action is inherent in the ‘supplements’ that the recipient of the action adds, and a shared meaning of what is happening is reached as a function of these co-actions. In the same way, speaking about communicative gestures,

Gillespie (2012, p. 41) wrote that “it is the future response of the audience which finalizes the meaning of the utterance and thus defines the boundary of the utterance”. Whether a gesture of kindness is interpreted as an ageist attitude may depend on the relational process in which several agents are involved (Romainoli & Contarello, 2019), so the meaning that the action will acquire is at least partly unpredictable and uncertain. During social interactions, individuals might be led to change the meaning attributed to their action through a process of position exchange (Gillespie, 2012) that would allow them to experience the other's perspective on what happened. In such circumstances, the agent might blame the self acting a moment earlier in light of the consequences of the action, and the new meaning attributed to it. The relational process would therefore make the patterns of intelligibility emerging in the social arena more fluid and indeterminate. In that case, akrasia – when somebody claims to have taken an action against their better judgment – could be analyzed as a further conversational move that serves the purpose of preserving the relationship between the partners involved, trying to justify the action taken as problematic during the interaction (Romainoli & Favaretto, 2011).

Another limitation of the present discussion can be seen in the difficulty people face in being aware of the full spectrum of their I-positions. As Aveling et al. (2015, p. 672) argued, Dialogical Self Theory and methods such as the Personal Positions Repertoire turn the I-positions “into something that participants speak about, rather than a position they speak from,” and this brings us up against the limit of our introspective capabilities. For example, some authors spoke about “shadow positions” that can be peripheral to individuals' judgments but still exert a considerable influence over how they organize their behavior (Konopka et al., 2018). Other authors introduced the idea of “implicit positions” (Konopka & Zhang, 2021), or aspects of the self that may be proto-linguistic as they are archaic or linked to abstract and implicit meanings of a given culture (Valsiner, 2007, 2009). These positions would tend to be expressed through emotional acts or motions, rather than through merely discursive processes leading to deliberate actions. Although the expression of these positions could not really be described as cases of akrasia (because they would violate the requirement that akratic actions be performed deliberately), a more thorough understanding of these aspects of the dialogical self could shed light on why we sometimes fail to follow through on our good intentions.

Ultimately, the more research expands on the complexity of the dialogical self, the more sophisticated our analysis of people's tendency to betray their good intentions could become. The present work can be seen as a first step in this unexplored direction, hinting at new possibilities for theoretical development and practical application.

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