



WOW: Word Of the Week

Akrasia
January 8, 2025

A word for the new year. Akrasia. No power. The initial a (alpha in Greek) means no, without. Kratos—power. A-kratos, akasia. No power, or, without power. Akrasia describes a **lack of mental strength or willpower**, leading one to act against one's better judgment. In general, akasia is a lack of strength, perhaps physical but especially mental; lack of willpower; the tendency to act contrary to one's better judgment.

Akrasia is reflected in the phrase sometimes used when someone misbehaves, “And he knows better.” Where does this tendency to do worse than we know come from? Why are sometimes powerless?

I share a modern example of akasia. Social media scrolling is bad for you. Social media posts tend to be divisive, challenging, angry, combative, conflictive. Social media often pushes moral boundaries. Some people invest hours in scrolling, then feel bad after wasting so much time. Akrasia. Another definition says, “a lazy inclination toward base desires that we know are bad for the soul.”

But.... who wants to turn off the information overload? We love it. The online world, cultural and political drama, our new view of the world, a new amphitheater for personal entertainment. Akrasia always has consequences. We live in a world of extremes, opposing viewpoints that approve verbal hostility and violence, too often leading to physical hostility and violence.

The Stoic philosopher Seneca (d. AD 65) wrote about the gladiatorial games in Rome, “Unhappy that I am, how have I deserved that I must look on such a scene as this? Do not, my Lucilius, attend the games, I pray you. Either you will be corrupted by the multitude, or, if you show disgust, be hated by them. So stay away.”

Technology with its innovations has blessed us in many ways, giving incredible tools. But it also has its negatives. The world has shrunk. The amount of knowledge—even about things that do not matter—is incredible. We can see what we formerly only imagined. Social media “news” --culture wars, politics, multiplied things immoral and illegal, radical groups, outrage entrepreneurs, a flood of misinformation. So tempting, so addictive, we do not know how to turn it off.

For the Greeks, akasia was a vice. Laziness, lack of willpower, inclined toward baser things, bad for the soul. Among the woes of Matthew 23, Jesus spoke against the Pharisees for their akasia and hypocrisy.

Akrasia is lack of power. People act against their better judgment. People do things that are not good for them—and not good for others. The applications extend beyond social media. Things we do—and we know better! The new year, a good time to change habits. Will you find the power to change?