



ARISTOTLE ON INCONTINENCE

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Aristotle was interested not only in the practical wisdom of the virtuous man, but also in the practical failures of the non-virtuous. One form of failure particularly fascinated him: that in which a man decides that a certain course of action would be best for him, and then acts against his own judgment. Such a man is, for whatever reason, unable to live as he thinks he should. I speak of *such a man*, for Aristotle did not think that acting against one's best judgment was an isolated event that might occur once in an otherwise virtuous life. Acting against one's own judgment was, for Aristotle, a defect of character—a defect which has come to be known as incontinence.

One reason that incontinence is of interest to philosophers is that it is not clear how it is even possible. Socrates famously argued that no man can knowingly not do what is best. In broad outline his is a conceptual argument designed to show that we cannot make sense of a man's knowingly choosing a course of action when he considers an alternative action both available to him and better for him. For if he genuinely considered an alternative action to be better, how could we explain his not doing it? Thus, Socrates concluded, a bad act must be done in ignorance, under the false belief that it is for the best.

And yet Socrates, who is responsible for formulating the philosophical problem of incontinence, is also responsible for getting the issue sidetracked. For he formulated it specifically as a problem about knowledge or understanding (*episteme*): '...it would be strange—so Socrates thought—if when knowledge was in a man something else could master it and drag it about like a slave.' In this way, a very general question about how one could act against one's judgment was transformed into the rather specific and technical question of how one's soul could be in a particular state—having knowledge or understanding—without that state ruling. This is the form of the problem which Aristotle inherited from Socrates, and much of *Nicomachean Ethics* VII is given over to answering it—to showing how the knowledge in one's soul can be temporarily shut down by strong passions. Ironically, in trying to answer this question, Aristotle widens the concept of incontinence to include ordinary cases of succumbing to temptation where we might say that the agent 'knew better.' Though this will be of interest to any student of the human condition, there is a peculiarly philosophical problem about incontinence that is in danger of being overlooked.

Let us call incontinence a situation in which (a) an agent performs an action intentionally, (b) the agent believes that an alternative action is open to him, and (c) the agent judges that all things considered it would be better to do the alternative action rather than the one he performs. The concept of incontinence will help us to focus on what is of enduring philosophical interest about incontinence. On the one hand, there is no mention of any specific state of the soul, like knowledge or understanding, so the problem is freed from any particular conception of the soul (Socrates' or Aristotle's) which might seem peculiar to the ancient Greeks. On the other hand, the concept of incontinence is not so general that the philosophical problem gets lost. An ordinary case of succumbing to temptation counts for Aristotle as incontinence, but it need not be a case of incontinence: for there need be no evidence that at the time of his action the seduced agent judges that all things consid-

ered it would be better to do another action. Every case of incontinence is a case of incontinence, but not vice versa.

Incontinence poses a peculiarly philosophical problem, for it is hard to see how it is even possible. A psychologist or a novelist might tell us how humans work themselves into the tangled temptations that life presents, but there does not seem to be any way in which a person can behave incontinently. The reason is that an agent's beliefs, desires, values, and actions are intrinsically related to one another. We can see a being as an agent, as acting intentionally, only insofar as we can see his behavior within the schema of beliefs and desires that we attribute to him. It is among his beliefs and desires that we must find a reason for his acting as he does. But we are able to identify his beliefs and desires only via his intentional actions: by what he says and otherwise does. It is in these actions that what is of value to him is revealed; there is in principle no independent access to his values. One thus does not qualify as an incontinent merely by judging 'I ought not to X,' where X is some communal moral injunction, and then disobeying. In such a circumstance, the command 'thou shalt not X' has gotten some hold on one's conscience, but there is as yet no evidence that one has judged that all things considered it would be better not to X. The reason for the intrinsic relation of belief, desire, value, and action is the holistic nature of the mental. Each belief and desire is conditioned by indefinitely many others. Given any belief-desire pair on its own, we can have no idea of what action, if any, will result from it. One might at first think that if an agent is very thirsty and believes a glass of water is in front of him, he will proceed with drinking activity. But he will not if he also thinks that he will be shot by his captor for doing so. Unless, of course, he does not care about his thirst but does want to end his life. Given any action in isolation, we can, in like fashion, have no idea of the belief-desire pair which provides the proper explanation.

To see any action as intentional, it thus seems we must construct a rather complex, teleological conception of an agent, with a mutually conditioned web of beliefs and desires, acting purposefully in an environment which he more or less understands. Lying at the heart of the concept of intentional action is the presupposition of rationality. An intentional action, by its very nature, must look reasonable in the light of an agent's beliefs and desires. Any explanation of an intentional action must be part of a story which portrays the agent as a rational animal. Incontinence threatens this structure, and that is why it is philosophically interesting. Given the holistic nature of the mental, an agent's action may appear odd in the light of any particular belief-desire pair he has. But in an incontinent act, an agent has purportedly taken all his beliefs and desires into

consideration. The outcome of his deliberation is supposed to be an act which, on the one hand, is intentional and, on the other, contradicts his judgment of what it would be better to do.

There is no straightforward way to determine what Aristotle thought about incontinence. His extended discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII is about incontinence, not incontinence, and Aristotle was interested in all its forms. Given an ethical outlook based on the idea that human nature was such as to be able to acquire the virtues, the exercise of which would be constitutive of happiness, the general problem of loss of control would be of great interest to him. And it is in his discussion of incontinence that Aristotle explicitly adopts his well-known methodological principle: a philosophical theory must *save the appearances*:

We must, as in all other cases, set the phenomena before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the reputable opinions ... or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the reputable opinions undisturbed we shall have proved the case sufficiently.

Among the appearances are how people act—the way they apparently do act against their better judgment—and what people say about how they act. A philosophical theory need not leave all the appearances intact, but the theory must make it at least plausible that these appearances appear as they do to pre-philosophical consciousness. Aristotle mentions Socrates' argument that incontinence is impossible, and then comments that his argument 'contradicts the plain phenomena.' Aristotle does not thereby disagree with Socrates' claim or fault any step of the argument. Even if he had accepted the Socratic position, Aristotle would have made this criticism: Socrates was willing to bequeath a paradox, whereas an adequate philosophical theory should go on to show why the many apparent cases do appear to be incontinence even though they are not. An adequate philosophical theory dispels paradox. One might say, roughly, that Socrates tries to show that incontinence is impossible by assimilating all cases of incontinence to incontinence, while Aristotle tries to save the appearances by showing that the apparent cases of incontinence are not generally cases of incontinence. Certainly, both Aristotle's general interest in loss of control and his conception of philosophical method commit him to considering a wide range of cases whose relation to incontinence is remote. So, if we are to find out what Aristotle thought about incontinence, we must extract it from his writings.

Incontinence presents a problem for self-consciousness. First, incontinence is an obstacle to our reflective understanding of man and his position in the world, incontinence blocks our progress. On the one hand, we have a philosophical argument that incontinence is impossible; on the other, there are many apparent cases of incontinence: ‘Thought is bound fast when it will not rest because the conclusion does not satisfy it, and cannot advance because it cannot refute the argument.’ Incontinence, Aristotle was well aware, is primarily a problem for those of us who are trying to understand the world and man’s place in it—whether or not we are also incontinent. Indeed, one might think that it is *only* insofar as we are philosophers that incontinence presents a problem: that if we were incontinent the experience of incontinence ‘from the inside’ would be no more problematic than any other experience of loss of control. In fact, Aristotle suggests that this is not so. Incontinence, insofar as it is a possibility, could only be the experience of a highly self-conscious being: one who has actively considered his position and judged that he should act in a certain way. The experience of incontinence (if it is possible) must differ from other forms of loss of control, succumbing to temptation, etc., by its highly wrought self-conscious ingredient. So, second, there must be an element of surprise for the self-consciousness of an incontinent: self-consciousness must, in the action, experience disharmony between itself and the agent of which it is purporting to be the self-consciousness: ‘That the man who acts incontinently does not, before he gets into this state, *think* that he will so act is evident.’ Aristotle intends this as a general claim: that all incontinent acts involve a certain degree of ignorance of how one will act. Ironically, though, the highly developed self-conscious consideration required for incontinence suggests that there will be a greater degree of ignorance in an incontinent act than in a mere case of loss of control.

Aristotle, like us, thought there was a necessary connection between judgment and action. Of course, we would give different accounts of this necessity. We are more concerned with the conceptual constraints on interpretation: that is, we believe that the judgments which can legitimately be ascribed to an agent must somehow be reflected in his actions. Aristotle was more concerned with judgments as the mental ingredients of the soul which necessitate an action. In one version of Aristotle’s practical syllogism, one judgment is universal, recommending that one perform a certain type of action: for example,

Everything sweet ought to be tasted.

The other judgment is particular, grounded in perceptual experience, saying that this is an action of the recommended type: for example,

This is sweet.

Whenever one believes these two judgments and self-consciously considers them together, one must straight-away perform this action. The action itself is the conclusion of the syllogism. Just as for us the necessary connections between judgment and action make incontinence problematic, so for Aristotle the practical syllogism as a model of deliberated action makes a pure case of incontinence problematic. For if the judgments were actively and self-consciously made, the chosen action would have to follow.

It is sometimes said that Aristotle does not allow room for ethical conflict. The problem is that, once one has the relevant premises in mind, it seems one must act, regardless of what beliefs and desires one has. I do not think that this criticism is entirely fair. Aristotle explicitly recognizes the possibility of conflicts, and one can accommodate the practical syllogism to this possibility, if one treats the premises as the outcome of the conflict-ridden deliberative process. By the time the premises are asserted, the conflict has already occurred, and the judgment one now proceeds to make (and act upon) is of the form 'all things considered.' It is true, though, that Aristotle does not tell us how we go about considering all things. But however we do go about considering, Aristotle is aware that the world in all its particularity may present us with a conflict which did not exist at the level of universal judgments. For example, one may adhere to a general injunction forbidding one to eat pork. But when, at the latest nouvelle restaurant, the waiter brings a complimentary hors d'oeuvre of chocolate-covered bacon, one may find oneself eating it. This is not incontinence, for there need not have been any consideration of what to do. When the unforeseen conflict does arise, one's desire for sweets overrides or shuts down the countervailing judgment. One moves closer to a case of incontinence when the contingent conflict is one that one ought to have foreseen and taken account of in one's antecedent deliberations. If, for example, the judgment forbade eating highly calorific foods, then one should have foreseen that the presence of sweets would cause conflicts. One may, of course, be ignorant about even the most likely course of experience, but the more interesting case is that in which one is ignorant about oneself.

Aristotle's intricate discussion of the various ways one's knowledge or understanding can be shut down sheds almost no light on how incontinence might be possible. This is not a failure of the

discussion, because Aristotle is not here concerned with showing how incontinence is possible, only how incontinence actually occurs. Given that the premises of a practical syllogism necessitate the action-conclusion, Aristotle needs an account of how the premises might on occasion be blocked, rendered in-operative. He distinguishes various senses in which one can have knowledge or understanding: there is the sense in which one possesses the knowledge though one is not at present exercising it, and the sense in which one is actively contemplating. Aristotle accepts that a man actively exercising his knowledge could not act incontinently with respect to it, so he concentrates on those cases in which a man may possess the knowledge but somehow be prevented from exercising it. Strong angers or appetites may actually change the condition of the body, and, though in this condition one may still be able to state the arguments that a man who was genuinely exercising his judgments would state, this has no more significance than the case of drunks who are able to recite verses of Empedocles. The strong passions work like a drug which shuts judgment down, just as does wine or sleep. The man overcome with passion has knowledge in a more attenuated sense than the healthy man who is not contemplating: only the healthy man can exercise his knowledge at will. The passion-ridden man has knowledge only because when he recovers from his state he will then be able to exercise it. And, Aristotle says, one should look to the physiologist and not the philosopher for an account of how this recovery occurs.

It would be disappointing were Aristotle to assimilate incontinence to drunkenness, but that is not what he is doing. He is trying to explain one form of drunkenness—being drunk with anger in terms of another—being drunk with alcohol. This cannot be incontinence, for the drunk has little or no idea what he is doing. Nor is this a plausible model of how a man who has ethical virtue may be led to act against his judgment. For a virtuous man would not allow himself to get into a condition in which he could not exercise his judgment. This is merely an account of how a man may be overcome with passion, even though he ordinarily knows better: it is a case neither of incontinence nor of the breakdown of ethical virtue.

Aristotle does, however, drop a hint about a more serious form of practical failure:

For even men under the influence of these passions utter scientific proofs and verses of Empedocles, and those who have just begun to learn can string together words, but do not yet know; *for it has to become part of them-selves*, and that takes time; so that we must suppose that the use of language by

men in an incontinent state means no more than its utterance by actors on the stage.

Those who are first learning a subject are different from the alcoholic and emotional drunks whose judgment is shut down. The students may be performing at the peak of their mental capacities, and they may be making sincere assertions, but they have not yet learned enough to know what they are talking about; and they are mistaken in thinking that they have. Aristotle says that it is necessary for the knowledge to become a part of them. Aristotle means this literally, for the literal translation of the Greek is that one must become 'like-natured' to that which one is saying. Being like-natured consists, I believe, in the logos that one asserts being the same as the logos in one's soul. In the case of the learner, he may be able to state an appropriate logos, but his soul has not yet taken on the appropriate form. Although a man who has knowledge will be right about what he knows, one who is trying to acquire knowledge—or who sees himself as doing so—may suffer a peculiar form of ignorance: he may (mistakenly) suppose himself to know. The possession of knowledge guarantees at least the possibility of awareness of that knowledge, but one form of ignorance is the false sense of that awareness. When Aristotle likens the incontinent to the actor, the analogy is not, I suspect, meant to be that neither is serious about what he is saying. That would be a plausible construal if the analogy immediately followed the example of the drunken man reciting Empedocles. But, coming as it does after the example of the learner who does not yet know, and the requirement of being like-natured, the analogy between the incontinent and the actor is most likely to be this: neither the logos of the actor nor the logos of the incontinent expresses the true condition of his soul. There is no implication that the incontinent is aware of this or that he does not take his assertion seriously.

With respect to ignorance of the state of one's soul, the ethical virtues pose a special problem. A student of geometry, in a self-critical mood, could in principle carry out a thought experiment to determine whether he knew geometry as well as he thought he did. He could, for example, try to prove the Pythagorean theorem and derive consequences from it; and if he succeeded this would improve his confidence that he knew what he was talking about when he said that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. Of course, he might make a mistake in the proof and erroneously think he had proved the theorem when he had not. But we can easily imagine him discovering that he cannot prove the theorem, and in so doing he would discover that the logos he spoke did not reflect the logos of his soul. With ethical virtues, by contrast, there is no analogous thought experiment one could even in principle carry out. The ethical virtues, as Aristotle

repeatedly stresses, are taught not by verbal argument, but by habituation. One develops them through good ethical upbringing; and it is only after one has already acquired them that one is in a position to appreciate the reflective philosophical arguments which can be marshaled in their favor. That is why Aristotle does not think that lectures in ethics should be wasted on the young.” So, although a man who has acquired the ethical virtues will have a healthy sense of who he is and what he is like, it is relatively easy for the man who has not acquired the virtues to suppose he has. He will mouth the words of the virtuous man, and he will do so sincerely: for, insofar as he is capable of believing what he says, he does believe what he says. However, this capability does not run very deep. He will have heard a *logos* commending ethical virtue which he found compelling. But, according to Aristotle, “a mere *logos* will not teach ethical principles.” For the soul cannot acquire the *logos* simply by hearing it and assenting to it. The *logos* of ethical virtue can be instilled only through repeated actions, through a sustained and thorough ethical upbringing.

Aristotle says: ‘Badness escapes notice, but incontinence does not.’ What he means, I think, is this: even a bad man will be pursuing ends which he takes to be good—that is, good for him. That his ends are bad, even for him, will not be something he will appreciate. If he did, he would not pursue them. The incontinent, by contrast, will be brought face to face with his ignorance when he is put in a situation in which he must act on his purported beliefs. Here I think Aristotle is talking about incontinence, and not an ordinary loss of control, for there is no reason to suppose that the emotional drunk has any awareness of what he is doing. The incontinent, though, must confront the inescapable fact that what he says, however sincerely, is not like-natured with what he does. He is brought up short by his own action.

It was intolerable to Socrates that knowledge should be ‘dragged about like a slave.’ In a qualified fashion, Aristotle agrees: if one’s knowledge is active, it is impossible to act incontinently with respect to it. However, that does not imply that Aristotle thinks incontinence impossible: for he recognizes that one should not restrict the question as to whether incontinence is possible by conflating it with the question of whether it is possible to act against one’s knowledge. At the beginning of the discussion he notes that “some people agree with Socrates that nothing can rule over knowledge, but they hold that the man who simply has beliefs (a less prestigious mental state) can be ruled by pleasures.” Later, he explicitly recognizes that the problem of incontinence can arise even if one’s mental condition is only that of belief:

As for the suggestion that it is true opinion and not knowledge against which one acts incontinently, that makes no difference to the argument; for some people when in a state of opinion do not hesitate but think they know exactly. If, then, it is owing to their weak conviction that those who have opinion are more likely to act against their belief than those who know, there will be no difference between knowledge and opinion; for some men are no less convinced of what they think than others of what they know...

The problem of incontinence is ultimately that of acting against one's considered judgment. For Aristotle incontinence is possible when one's judgment is a sincerely held false conscious belief. This false belief is not a belief about the world but about oneself. An incontinent may, for example, truly believe that in *these* circumstances *this is* the right thing to do. His mistake lies in thinking that this is what he wants to do and this is what he will do. So the incontinent may well be right in his judgments about the world or about what is good. His mistake is about himself. A person can acquire such false beliefs about himself if he has not been well brought up. If one has not acquired the ethical virtues, it is easy to suppose one has. One will then assert an ethical logos, but one's actions will reveal to oneself and others that one's soul is not like-natured to what one says. Incontinence represents a failure of self-consciousness. Aristotle says that beasts are incapable of incontinence because they are incapable of formulating the universal judgment which would then be violated in action. As one moves from ordinary cases of incontinence to incontinence, the degree of self-conscious awareness becomes more acute, for one must have one's judgment actively in mind when acting against it.

But that implies that the discrepancy between thought and action must be all the greater. An incontinent is a stranger to himself: it is in his actions, not in his assertions, that he may discover who he is. 📖



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