



ARISTOTLE
384–322 BC

Witness seems to be borne to this both by individuals in their private capacity and by legislators themselves; for these punish and take vengeance on those who do wicked acts (unless they have acted under compulsion or as a result of ignorance for which they are not themselves responsible), while they honour those who do noble acts, as though they meant to encourage the latter and deter the former. But no one is encouraged to do the things that are neither in our power nor voluntary; it is assumed that there is no gain in being persuaded not to be hot or in pain or hungry or the like, since we shall experience these feelings none the less. Indeed, we punish a man for his very ignorance, if he is thought responsible for the ignorance, as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; for the moving principle is in the man himself, since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance. And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws that they ought to know and that is not difficult, and so too in the case of anything else that they are thought to be ignorant of through carelessness; we assume that it is in their power not to be ignorant, since they have the power of taking care.

INCONTINENCE

(In 2 parts)

by Jonathan Lear

Part 1

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 judgement. 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 judgement was an isolated event that might occur once in an otherwise virtuous life. Acting against one's own judgement 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 judgement 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 considered 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 behaviour 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 judgement 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 judgement—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.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

It was good to chat with you again. At this retirement community we have a computer circle that is becoming more active, and I expect to spend more time with e-mail and researching in the near future.

A personal note or two: As I told you, our Great Books Group here has been busy for the last year. We have done two of the anthologies of extracts and essays and have now settled down to the regular series. We have reached the second set of readings, and had a very lively time with *Notes from the Underground*, just last

Monday evening. Add to that a weekly section on French and French literature, a poetry-reading group, a discussion group on history, and another one on religion/philosophy, a class on Shakespeare, a series where we are analyzing the Brahms German Requiem, my own study program on the history of the liberal arts (shades of Hutchins, Adler, McKeon, and a meticulous Frenchman named Hadot!), plus work on the New Testament Greek (a long-time hobby of mine): maybe all that rather disorganized activity will give you an idea as to why I have not done much e-mailing lately. As for connections with former colleagues, for the moment, anyway, I like to fall back on the telephone, and that puts me back, I realize it, into the late nineteenth or early twentieth century...

Thank you once more for your help; I look forward to getting back into business with the Center; and my best regards to you.

Yours cordially,

Hugh Davidson

Max:

Very little stirs my sermonic genes up like Dr. Adler's writings. I think it is safe to say that outside of my studies in the Scriptures and books about the Scriptures, nothing has provoked my thinking in the right direction quite like our dear friend.

I continue to buy his books at bargain book stores and give them away as gifts to many of my preaching friends.

Steven Lloyd

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