



...virtue has never been as respectable as money.

—Mark Twain

INCONTINENCE

by Jonathan Lear

Part 2 of 2

Aristotle, like us, thought there was a necessary connection between judgement 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 judgements which can legitimately be ascribed to an agent must somehow be reflected in his actions. Aristotle was more concerned with judgements as the mental ingredients of the soul which necessitate an action. In one version of Aristotle's practical syllogism, one judgement is universal, recommending that one perform a certain type of action: for example,

Everything sweet ought to be tasted.

The other judgement 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 judgements 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 judgement 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 judgements 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 premisses 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 premisses as the outcome of the conflict-ridden deliberative process. By the time the premisses are asserted, the conflict has already occurred, and the judgement 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 judgements. 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 judgement. 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 judgement 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 premisses of a practical syllogism necessitate the action-conclusion, Aristotle needs an account of how the premisses might on occasion be blocked, rendered inoperative. 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 judgements 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 judgement 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 judgement. For a virtuous man would not allow himself to get into a condition in which he could not exercise his judgement. 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 themselves*, 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 judgement 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 judgement. For Aristotle **incontinence** is possible when one's judgement 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 judgements 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 judgement 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 judgement 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. 



* Chapter 5.4 from his book *Aristotle: the desire to understand*, Cambridge University Press (1988). Jonathan Lear graduated from Yale University, he studied at Cambridge University in England, and earned his Ph.D. from Rockefeller University before training as an analyst. He is currently the John U. Nef Distinguished Service Professor of Social Thought, of Philosophy, and in the College at the University of Chicago. He works and teaches primarily in the philos-

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