

ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF INCONTINENCE

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One of the better known theses in the history of practical ethics is Socrates' theory that no one ever commits an act knowing it to be bad. Both Plato (*Protagoras* 352 B C, 358 ff.) and Xenophon (*Memorabilia III*, 9, 5) represent Socrates as holding that if a man knows what is best he will do it; only when he ignorantly mistakes something bad for what is good does he do the bad thing. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle also attributes this view to Socrates and takes strong exception to it. Now despite Aristotle's declared opposition to this view, a number of commentators have interpreted his treatment of the issue to be actually the same as or at least compatible with that of Socrates. My purpose here will be to suggest that such interpretations are without sufficient textual basis. Accordingly I will not be concerned with questions of dating, compilation, and authorship connected with the *Nicomachean ethics*, but will restrict my remarks strictly to an exegesis of the text as it stands.

Referring to the commission of an act while knowing that it is wrong as "incontence", Aristotle remarks:

Now we may ask how a man who judges rightly can behave incontinently. That he should behave so when he knowledge, some say is impossible; for 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. (1145 b 22-25).

Aristotle goes on to say that this position of Socrates' contradicts observed facts. Of course Aristotle does not mean to assert that there are no cases of wrong-doing which are due to mistaken judgment rather than incontinence, but opposes this as the explanation of *all* evil action. For were such an explanation accepted for all cases of wrong-doing there should be no such thing as the experience

of yielding to the temptation to act contrary to what is judged to be good. On Socrates' account there would be no such thing as an unsuccessful subjective moral struggle. A man could often be faced with an agonizing decision as to what is good in a particular case, but could never be faced with an equally agonizing decision whether or not to act in accordance with the good once it is decided on. Aristotle on the other hand, believes cases of incontinence to be too common and obvious to be explained away, and proposes to give an alternative treatment [90] of the matter which allows for the experience of genuine moral struggle and self-conscious wrong-doing.

His account of how incontinence can and does in fact occur is given in four distinct but closely connected comments located at 1146 b 30 to 1147 b 5, here summarized as follows:

1. There are two senses in which one may have knowledge. One is to know something without presently contemplating it, the other is to be presently contemplating (exercising) it. Acting against the first would not be strange, while acting against the second would be.
2. There are two premises to a practical syllogism as well as to a theoretical one. A man may know the major premise and yet be not exercising or not have knowledge of the minor premise. Unless all the terms of the syllogism are actively known the correct action could not ensue.
3. A strong outburst of passion can cause a man's knowledge to pass from being contemplated and exercised to not being present to his mind and therefore in a sense not being possessed. Aristotle points out that sleep, madness and drunkenness are special states which affect knowledge in this way, and that such passions as anger and sexual passion do the same thing by altering the condition of the body (at times so severely as to be classed as madness rather than simply passion).
4. The practical syllogism follows the model of the theoretical syllogism but results in an act rather than a conclusion. But if two major premises are applicable to a particular situation as contained in a minor premise and one of these universal premises would bring about abstinence from the act but the other would lead to it, and an appetite to do the act were present, then the passion may directly move the man to commit the act in accord with the major affirming the pleasure involved and the minor asserting this act a case in point. This takes place without conflict of premises for only the appetite is contrary to the rule of abstinence, not the rules to one

another.

Now while it is certain that Aristotle wished that each of these comments be distinct - he introduced each with ἐτι - it will be contended here that there are distinct stages of one systematic account rather than completely different explanations able to be considered apart from, and as inconsistent with, one another. This latter view has been advanced by John Burnet in his book *The Ethics of Aristotle* (p. 299 ff). Burnet has contended that the first three are actually Aristotle's suggestions as to ways in which those who would defend the Socratic view could allow for a sort of action against knowledge on their own principles. These pave the way then, for the "real" explanation which is the fourth comment.

Now why does Burnet think this interpretation necessary? The reason behind construing the text this way is intimated by Burnet himself. We have in this text, says Burnet:

... four distinct λυσεις joined to each other by ἐτι as usual. The first three are dialectical and based upon the theory of "potential knowledge" which was first worked out by Plato in the *Theaitetos*. The fourth is the real λυσεις and is of a strictly psychological character. We need not expect to find the three first quite consistent with each other or with the fourth. (p. 299).

I believe that the last sentence quoted betrays the motive behind Burnet's interpretation. That is, apparently Burnet first saw the four remarks on incontinence as discrepant and irreconcilable, and as a result worked out a theory to get around the difficulty, namely, that the first three need not be taken as seriously as Aristotle's own, and therefore need not be reconciled to one another or to the fourth, "real", explanation.

This opinion stems, I believe, from failing to see that Aristotle is giving an account of *two* distinct types of incontinence in these four comments. The passage which gives us the key for understanding and relating the four comments by distinguishing the two sorts of incontinence they account for, occurs at 1150 b 19-28.

of incontinence one kind is impetuosity, another weakness. For some men after deliberating fall, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion...

What will be contended here is that any apparent discrepancies among the four comments can be resolved as due to the fact that different types of incontinence are being explained, rather than supposing it is unnecessary to deal with certain of the explanations as Aristotle's own.

The first of the four explanatory comments offered to clarify incontinence (1146 b 30-34) is not really an explanation of how it can occur nor a definition of any type of it. It is rather a preliminary logical distinction which is utilized throughout the remaining three comments and figures in all of them: We may be said to have knowledge in one sense but at the same time not to have it in another sense. Since Aristotle goes on to say that the two senses have to do with whether or not one is presently using the knowledge he has, the most obvious case of having but not exercising knowledge would be forgetfulness. For example, it may well be that I have memorized and on many previous occasions quoted a certain poem. Yet on an appropriate occasion I do not quote it because I simply fail to think of the poem at all, or perhaps, though I try to recite it I am unable to recall its wording. The claim that I have potential knowledge of the poem, may be confirmed by the fact that I can quote it all if someone gives me its first few words, or from my ability to distinguish it from other poems in a group shown or quoted to me.

This initial statement of the distinction between possessing and exercising knowledge does not go on to propose any causes for knowledge not being exercised at a given time. It simply states the distinction which, to be intelligible at all, would have to at least call to the reader's mind the case of forgetfulness. Since this first comment is not an explanation of incontinence but a distinction which will make explanation possible, strictly [92] speaking it cannot be classed under either of the two types of incontinence listed by Aristotle in the key passage quoted above (1150 b 19-28).

The second of the comments (1146 b 35-1147 a 9) introduces the practical syllogism into the discussion. Aristotle remarks that it may well be that a man knows a certain type of thing or action to be good, but at the same time be completely ignorant of whether x is a case in point or, in accord with the distinction drawn in the first comment, have potential knowledge of x which could constitute a minor premise but not be exercising that knowledge.

Now, unlike the first comment, this second comment does give us an explanation of a kind of incontinence by applying the distinction given in the first comment to the practical syllogism in a specific way. If there are two senses of knowing there are also two premises involved in practical action to which the two senses of knowing could apply, and this second comment applies that distinction to the minor premise alone.

Therefore it appears that the first two remarks were meant to be taken as closely related, the second asserting how the first is to be applied. In this way we are given to see how forgetting information which would have constituted the minor premise of the practical syllogism (having but not exercising the minor) would lead to failure to complete the syllogism and failure to bring about action in accord with the moral rule given in the major premise. This, then, falls under the type of incontinence the key passage (1151 b 21) calls “impetuousness” for it is failure to deliberate.

Before passing to the third comment a word is in order concerning the statement in 1147 a 7 that incontinent action resulting from failure to deliberate can occur owing to either “not having” or “not exercising” the minor premise. Since not having the information appears to be ignorance pure and simple, the question arises as to whether it should be classed as incontinence. For one is responsible for incontinent actions, and this would make one responsible for what one did not know. Although it is not clarified at this point, presumably Aristotle is referring to negligent ignorance as treated at 1113 b 30-1114 a 10, 15-31. In those passages he does clearly state that one is responsible for any evil resulting from negligence. In this way negligent ignorance can be classed with forgetting as two instances of failure to deliberate on the material which would have supplied the minor premise of the practical syllogism. Thus incontinence in the one case follows from reason failing to notice the material of the minor, in the other case by the forgetting of what was once noticed.

The first thing to be stressed about the third comment is that it directly claims to be another instance in the case of having but not exercising knowledge set out in comment two. It is stated that the influence of passion could as surely prevent deliberation by causing the minor premise to be unexercised as could the less dramatic cases of simple forgetfulness and negligence. The explicitly stated connection to the second comment, together with the character of the content of the third comment, leaves no doubt therefore that the third as well as the second comment is a variety under the class of impetuous incontinence distinguished in the explanatory key at 1150 b 19-28. The

difference between the two varieties seems to be *simply* that in the first case one fails to deliberate owing to forgetfulness or negligence, allowing the influence of emotion to go unrestrained and so [95] bring about action in accordance with appetite. Whereas in the second case one does not attempt to remember or deliberate due to the suddenness and force of passion. There is, therefore, a two-fold division within impetuous incontinence.

- a. having but not exercising knowledge owing to forgetfulness (or not having knowledge through negligent ignorance).
- b. having but not exercising knowledge due to a passionate outburst of emotion.

In both cases incontinence results from failure to deliberate.

A problem arises with regard to the third comment, however, since it does not specifically mention the practical syllogism. In the second comment where it was specifically mentioned, the explanation of having unexercised knowledge was allowed only of the minor premise. But since the syllogism isn't even mentioned in the third comment the question arises whether passion can render a major premise as well as a minor inactive, or whether a major can be forgotten.

Now the strong connection between the second and third comments has already been pointed out, and it might be argued that good exegetical caution would dictate that no wider application of unexercised knowledge be allowed in the third comment than was specified for the second: even passion can only render a minor premise inactive. But if exegetical caution seems an inconclusive argument, Aristotle's own remarks at 1147 b 9-11 give it strong support:

Now the last premise being both an opinion about a perceptible object, and being what determines our actions, this a manⁿ either has not when he is in the state of passion, or has it in the sense in which having knowledge did not mean knowing but only talking...

Aristotle goes on to apply the same illustrative examples (of the mad and the drunk) that he gave in the third comment, which did not specify the premise intended, *to* the minor premise alone (1147 b 10-17). It seems reasonably certain, therefore, that Aristotle did not believe an end (major premise) could be either forgotten or rendered inactive by passion. Only the judgment of the concrete situation given *via* the senses is subject to these misfortunes. Aristotle even remarks

that if Socrates had only meant to say that knowledge of a major premise (“universal”) cannot be overcome by passion, he would agree.

The only passage that seems to go against this interpretation is the one at 1151 a 15-20.

For virtue and vice respectively preserve and destroy the first principle, and in actions the final cause is the first principle as the hypotheses are in mathematics...

But this only means that a state of vice corrupts the (intuitive) discernment of first principles, not that it can induce forgetfulness of them, nor that a sudden passion can drive them from the mind once they are known. [94] We must keep in mind that for Aristotle “vice” is the deliberate adoption of the universal “all pleasure is good and to be sought”. The remarks in this passage show Aristotle believed that in ethics this is no first principle at all and that the adoption of it would blind one to any genuine ethical rules.

The interpretation advanced thus far leaves the fourth comment (1147 a 25 - 1147 5), by process of elimination, as the one which explains the type of incontinence called “weakness” by the key passage. It gives an account of how appetite causes failure to stand by a deliberation after it has been made and while it is actively known, rather than how failure to deliberate may occur. Aristotle begins by contrasting the theoretical to the practical syllogism. Both have a universal premise and a minor concerned with particulars gleaned from perception, but whereas in the theoretical syllogism the soul must affirm the conclusion, in the practical syllogism the result is not a conclusion, but an action. Then, in order to illustrate incontinence through weakness, Aristotle gives the (rather unexciting) case of a man tempted to eat sweets. He points out that two practical syllogisms may be involved in this event since there are two major premises under which the minor “this is sweet” could be subsumed. One of the majors states that sweet things are pleasant and to be tasted, the other that sweet things are forbidden. Furthermore, appetite is present for sweets. This appetite forms an impediment in the way of the soul’s immediately acting on the syllogism whose major forbids sweets, creating a moral struggle. Aristotle emphasizes that the two major premises are not logically “opposed”, but it is appetite which opposes one and appeals to the other (114761-3).

In this case a moral struggle is brought about and wrongdoing occurs while the man is fully aware both that sweets are forbidden and that this is a sweet.

Crucial to seeing that Aristotle is representing the man as possessing active knowledge that his act is wrong are the two clauses at 1147 a 34, 35: “she says flee this; but appetite leads him to it”. It is important to correctly identify the antecedent of the feminine pronoun (“she”) which is the subject of the first of these clauses. What is it which issues the moral imperative? Is it the major premise? The whole syllogism? Or is there some other option?

That the subject of this clause (ἡμεν) refers to the major premise “sweet things are forbidden” seems to me very implausible. For the call to continence commands “flee *this*”, and I think it unlikely that Aristotle would describe a major premise as containing reference to a particular! Besides Aristotle has just used the literary figure of the major premise speaking at 1147 a 32 and represents it as forbidding to *taste* not commanding to *flee*.

On the other hand the minor premise which does refer to a “this” is a simple judgement of fact devoid of ethical approval or disapproval; it is an “is” not an “ought” statement.

Does the pronoun refer, then, to the whole practical syllogism? This would seem more probable *than* either of the two alternatives just considered. But “syllogism” is a masculine noun. If Aristotle had in mind the word “syllogism” as the unspecified subject which commands “flee this”, we would expect the pronoun to be “he” rather than “she”.

Now there are in the text two feminine nouns which could serve as [95] antecedents of the unspecified pronoun issuing the call to continence. These are “conclusion” (114 a 25-26) and “soul” (1147 a 27). However one of the main points of the preceding section has been to tie “conclusion” to the theoretical syllogism alone and to insist that practical syllogisms result in actions not conclusions. Therefore, to take “conclusion” as the antecedent of the Subject commanding continence would be entirely incompatible with Aristotle’s view of The practical syllogism.

This leaves “soul” the only candidate. And since “soul” is used both as the subject of “to conclude” and ‘to act’, it is entirely in keeping with the text to take it as the antecedent of the unspecified subject which orders “flee this”. That it should issue such a command is wholly consistent with Aristotle’s view that in a practical syllogism the soul must act *unless impeded*. Since in this case the soul is impeded from governing bodily action by the interference of appetite,

its call to continence is the only action left to it.

The importance of this point is that if it is the soul which orders continence, there can be no doubt that both practical syllogisms are actively known by the incontinent man. There is no failure to deliberate so it is not the impetuous sort of incontinence which the first three comments explain. Clearly it is weakness: the failure to stand by a deliberation once it is made. So we find in the fourth comment an account of the common experience of succumbing to temptation, of having appetite win control over behavior despite the active knowledge that what *ought* to be done is to “flee this”.

Furthermore, the possibility of appetite controlling action in the face of active knowledge fits with what Aristotle has written elsewhere concerning the functions of the soul and their relations. In *De Anima* 432 a 21-28, 434 a 12 - b5, 414 b 2, as well as other sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹ and *Eudemian Ethics*² Aristotle declares that sensory appetite has two parts: wish and desire. The former heeds the judgments of reason while the latter has no deliberative element at all but is ruled by sense perception or sensory imagination. Because the two parts of appetite have different objects of affection they sometimes conflict, and where desire is stronger than wish incontinence through weakness (of wish) results.

However, the interpretation just presented which finds Aristotle actually disagreeing with Socrates is anything but a majority opinion. Most commentators seem to have ignored the key text (1150 b 14-28) which indicates that two sorts of incontinence are being explained. Without this clue, the pronoun-subject issuing the moral command has often been too hastily assumed to refer to the nearest textual antecedent - the major premise. Having thus failed to realize that the text presents the incontinent as possessing active knowledge that his act is wrong, many interpreters have taken suppression of the minor premise to be the upshot of all four explanatory comments. And this mistake has led to criticizing Aristotle for failure to really give account of the experience of succumbing to temptation following a moral struggle, and for presenting in rebuttal of Socrates a [96] view essentially the same as, and wholly compatible with, the Socratic view he set out to refute!³

¹ *N.E.* 1139 a 1-5, 1166 b 18-25.

² *E.E.* 1223 a 26-27, 1246 b 12-25.

³ Besides those reviewed here see for example:

J. E. C. Weldon, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. The MacMillan Co., London

In his book *Aristotle*, W. D. Ross, for instance, states that though Aristotle appears in other writings to be aware of the fact of moral struggle, he fails to account for it here. J. A. Stewart makes a stronger statement in his *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics*:

... this chapter by applying, the distinction of actual and potential knowledge to explain ἀκρασία a makes a mental struggle impossible, there being no actual knowledge for appetite to struggle with ... (Vol. II, p. 142).

In his famous essay “A Plea for Excuses”, J. L. Austin also understands Aristotle to explain incontinence only through passion. This mistake, says Austin, collapses “succumbing to temptation into losing control of ourselves.” He chides this pseudo-Aristotelian view with the remark that “We often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse.” The irony is that this is precisely what Aristotle’s criticism of Socrates would allow.

In the exposition of H. H. Joachim, Aristotle is again construed as failing to account for a genuine moral struggle. Joachim holds that the incontinent man completely falls to subsume the minor premise under the ethical universal:

And the appetite - the desire to taste this sweet thin - collides with the application of the major premise ... If the ἀκρατής is to carry out his good principle, the minor term - this percept - must be clearly seen, by a present perception, as a case of the principle. But this minor term is being vividly realized by the ἀκρατής as a case of another major premise (v.z. “sweet things are pleasant”) and this experience is enforced by his ἐπιθυμία (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 229).

This is essentially the view of A. Grant also since he holds that both practical syllogisms could not be known simultaneously. Grant says:

and N.Y., 1892, p. xliL

J. Gillies, *Aristotle's Ethics and Politics*. T. Cadwell and W. Davies, London, 1813, vol. I, p. 426.

Aristotle's Dictionary Ed by T. P. Kiernan, Philosophical Library, N.Y. 1962, pp. 135,136.

It would be impossible to act contrary to a complete syllogism which applied the knowledge of the good to a case in point; for the necessary conclusion to such a syllogism would be a good action (*The Ethics of Aristotle*, vol. I, p.267 ff.).

And this statement is made in the face of the text which plainly states that the action follows a practical syllogism *unless impeded* (1147 a 30)! Both Joachim's and Grant's opinions make the soul's call to continence [97] inexplicable by denying the fact that the text represents the incontinent man as actively knowing both syllogisms.

In his recent study *Aristotle's Concept of Moral Weakness*, J. J. Walsh does at least recognize that the text depicts the incontinent man as knowing both syllogisms. But then he interprets the call to continence as issued by the major premise rather than the soul and so understands the fourth comment to explain incontinence as suppression of the minor premise just as did the second and third comments. And since suppression of the minor is not compatible with both premises being actively known, Walsh declares the text inconsistent and carelessly written.

Still another interpretation which sees Aristotle's view to be essentially the same as Socrates is that of Prof. E. M. Adams of the University of North Carolina. In response to questions concerning his paper "Value Judgments and Action" re to the A.P.A. convention in Philadelphia (Dec.1966), Adams granted both that the text represents the incontinent as knowing both syllogisms and that the soul issues the call to continence. He still felt, however, that the fourth comment offers suppression of the minor premise as the explanation of incontinence. But unlike Walsh, Adams does not conclude the text therefore inconsistent. Instead he hypothesizes a lapse of time between the soul's call to "flee this" and the yielding to the influence of appetite. During this lapse, Adams holds, the knowledge of the minor premise is suppressed by appetite so that the incontinent act is not committed against active knowledge. On this view Aristotle's position, like that of Socrates, fails to allow for any moral struggle or self-conscious wrong-doing.

While this opinion is in several respects an improvement over those just reviewed, it still does not take into consideration that two kinds of incontinence are being explained. Furthermore I can find no textual evidence whatsoever for interpreting the incontinent man to have active knowledge when his soul says "flee this" and not to have active knowledge when "appetite leads him to it" These two independent clauses (1147 a 34, 35) are correlated by the particles $\mu\epsilon\nu$ and $\delta\epsilon$ and the main

verbs of each are in the present tense. On any natural reading they are describing simultaneous, not sequential, events.

Nor should Aristotle's remarks concerning the return of passion-suppressed knowledge to the mind of the incontinent which immediately follow the fourth comment be allowed to mislead us. The fact that these remarks refer again to the illustration of the drunk repeating verses of Empedocles shows that Aristotle is adding an after-though to the *third comment* where this illustration was previously used.

In summary, the interpretation being advocated here seems to me to have several advantages over the critical opinions just reviewed. For one it is in accord with Aristotle's own estimation of what he was doing. He ought he was disagreeing with Socrates. Of course it's possible that someone could start out to rebut a certain viewpoint and merely present that view over again. But to do so in the space of a few short paragraphs would be so gross a blunder, that we should at least hesitate to conclude that a thinker of Aristotle's stature had done so. More important is the fact that a strict reading of the text supports Aristotle rather than his critics. If care is taken to notice that two sorts of incontinence are being explained, [98] if care is taken in identifying the antecedent of the pronoun ("she"), which issues the moral imperative, and if the two clauses describing the moral struggle and incontinent act are seen as depicting contemporaneous events, then there appears no textual basis for the accusations that this section fails to seriously disagree with Socrates.

Furthermore, the proposed interpretation is so well supported by what Aristotle says elsewhere of the relation of reason to wish and desire that this latter doctrine seems almost specifically designed to allow for wrong-doing in the face of active knowledge of its reprehensibility. In doing so Aristotle has in fact given an account which allows for the reality of moral struggle and self-conscious wrongdoing. He has, therefore, presented a view which is neither the same as nor compatible with the Socratic view as he understood it.