

Phil 104, Friday, September 10, 2010
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII: 1–3

Continence and Incontinence:

Continence is not virtue, and incontinence is not vice. But they are related (they belong to the same “genus”).

- The *vicious* person thinks he ought to do the bad things, follows through, and enjoys it.
- The *incontinent* (weak-willed, *akratic*) person at least initially thinks he ought *not* do them, but then is pained by the deprivation and gives in.
- The *continent* person thinks he ought not do them, is pained by the deprivation, but resists.
- The *virtuous* person thinks he ought not do them, isn’t pained by the deprivation, and doesn’t do them.

	Belief (or choice, III: 2)	Action	Passion
Virtue:	+	+	+
Continence:	+	+	–
Incontinence:	+	–	–
Vice:	–	–	–

Although Aristotle observes that “men are said to be incontinent even with respect to anger, honor, and gain,” he focuses on the case of the pleasures of touch (i.e., food, drink, sex). So by “virtue” he ends up meaning the specific virtue of *temperance*—the mean with respect to the pleasures of touch—and by “vice” he ends up meaning the specific vice of *self-indulgence*—excess with respect to the pleasures of touch.

Why this focus? Perhaps: Continence and incontinence involves a kind of struggle between reason and passion, or between our humanity and our bestiality, and this struggle is most pronounced in the case of the pleasures of touch, which we share with other animals.

How is incontinence possible?

How can someone person both (i) know that what he does is wrong and (ii) do it?

According to Socrates (in, for example, the dialogue *Protagoras*), incontinence is impossible. If someone does what is wrong, he does it only by reason of ignorance.

“That he should behave so when he has 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. For Socrates was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such thing as incontinence; no one, he said, when he judges acts against what he judges best—people act so only by reason of ignorance.”

On the one hand, Aristotle thinks that *some part* of this view is *obviously false*. “Now this view plainly contradicts the observed facts.” On the other hand, he seems to assume that *another part* of this view is true. In *some* sense, incontinent people are ignorant.

Why does Aristotle assume that in *some* sense incontinent people are ignorant?

Why not say that there can be “clear-eyed” incontinence, in which one knows full that this thing one is doing is wrong, but does it anyway?

One answer may be that Aristotle holds that the conclusion of practical reasoning is itself an *action*. For example:

“Sweet food is bad for every man.”

“I am a man.”

“This is sweet food”

For Aristotle, the conclusion is not so much some *thought*, such as:

“*This stuff* is bad for me,”

as *actually refraining from*, this stuff.

“The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must... immediately act”

It follows that a person cannot both *reach* the conclusion of this reasoning and *fail* to refrain from the stuff, since concluding and refraining are one and the same. So the incontinent must, first, be “ignorant” of the conclusion and, second, must be subject to some other form of “ignorance”—or, at least, defect in reasoning—that prevents him from reaching the conclusion.

General lesson: If one holds that *judgments* that you should X are equivalent to, or entail, *your X-ing*, then one must deny clear-eyed incontinence: a case in which you judge that you should X, but do not X.

In what sense does Aristotle hold that incontinent people are ignorant?

1. *Incontinent people know at least beforehand that actions of such and such a kind are wrong.*

“For that the man who behaves incontinently does not, before he gets into this state, think he ought to act so, is evident.”

2. *Distinguishing between true opinion and knowledge doesn't help.*

3. *The ignorance is of the particular premise, not the universal premise.*

Universal premise:

“Sweet food is bad for every man.”

Particular premise obvious even to the incontinent:

“I am a man.”

Particular premise of which the incontinent man is in some sense ignorant:

“This is sweet food”

This particular premise is a bit of perceptual knowledge, rather than theoretical or scientific knowledge.

4. *The passions of the incontinent person affect his mind in some way like madness, drunkenness, or sleep.*

“But now this is just the condition of men under the influence of passions; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness. It is plain, then, that

incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk.”

5. *The fact that the incontinent person utters the relevant premise does not show that he knows it in the relevant sense.*

“The fact that men use the language that flows from knowledge proves nothing... 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.”

6. *The incontinent person has knowledge, but does not use it.*

“within the case of having knowledge but not using it we see a difference of state, admitting of the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it.”

The standard interpretation:

Passion somehow “blinds” the incontinent person to the particular premise. He is “ignorant” of it in the ordinary sense.

Problem: Would this make the incontinent person’s action “by reason of ignorance” (according to Aristotle’s definition) and so involuntary?

Answer: Perhaps it would only make it “in ignorance.”

Problem: The incontinent person isn’t “blind” to the particular premise:

“This food is sweet”

since Aristotle later says that the incontinent person “reasons” from the premises:

“Sweet food is pleasant for every man.”

“I am a man.”

“This food is sweet”

to indulging in the sweet food!

An alternative interpretation:

The incontinent person is “ignorant” of the particular premise, “This food is sweet,” only in a special sense: namely, he does not *use* it. (At least, he does not use it in the relevant way—after all, he does “use” it when he “reasons” from it to indulging in sweet food.)

“there is nothing to prevent a man’s having both premises and acting against his knowledge, provided that he is using only the universal premise and not the particular; for it is particular acts that have to be done.”

So Socrates is right, after all, that:

- i. In some sense, the incontinent person *is* ignorant.
- ii. What is overcome by passion is not *scientific or theoretical knowledge*, but *perceptual knowledge*. “And because the last term is not universal nor equally an object of scientific knowledge with the universal term, the position that Socrates sought to establish actually seems to result; for it is not in the presence of what is thought to be knowledge proper that the affection of incontinence arises (nor is it

this that is ‘dragged about’ as a result of the state of passion), but in that of perceptual knowledge.”

Review Questions:

1. How does Aristotle explain the fact that “the lower animals are not incontinent”?
2. Why does Aristotle find it inadequate to say that the incontinent person *only has a true opinion* that the action would be wrong, whereas the continent person *knows* it?
3. What assumptions, according to Aristotle, commits Socrates to the conclusions (i) that incontinence is impossible and (ii) that no one ever acts wrongly voluntarily (discussed in the last lecture)?