

In Book VII of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle compares temperance with continence and self-indulgence with incontinence. Temperance and self-indulgence are the virtue-vice pair having to do with moderating one's passions. The temperate man does not have inappropriate emotional reactions; the self-indulgent or intemperate man is defined by his appetites, which drag him to and fro like a ship on the sea. In contrast, the continent man has inappropriate appetites, but, knowing that to indulge them would be wrong, he restrains himself. The incontinent man also knows that his appetites are wrong, but fails to resist them. Continence and incontinence are a pairing of traits which strongly resembles a virtue-vice pair. But in fact, Aristotle says that continence is not a virtue and incontinence is not a vice. Why does he reach this conclusion? What impact does it have on his moral theory as a whole?

Aristotle tells us that “incontinence is not a vice... for incontinence is contrary to choice while vice is in accordance with choice” (NE 1151.a.5) Presumably, “contrary to choice” refers to passion overcoming rational knowledge, and “in accordance with choice” means the opposite. Incontinence, then, is not a vice because “vice is unconscious of itself” (NE 1150b35) while incontinence is not. This distinction cannot hold for continence and virtue, however. That would imply that the virtuous man does not know that he is virtuous, that what he does is right, which seems implausible. In this case the distinguishing factor is not rationality but passion; the continent man has inappropriate appetites but resists them, while the virtuous or temperate man has nothing which he must resist. Aristotle says

...both the continent man and the temperate man are such as to do nothing contrary to the rule for the sake of the bodily pleasures, but the former has and that latter has not bad appetites, and the latter is such as not to feel pleasure contrary to the rule, while the former is such as to feel pleasure but not to be led by it. (NE 1152a)

This answer seems straightforward enough, but it has interesting consequences on the role of rationality in Aristotelian ethics. The discussion in Book VII makes it clear that rationality is immensely important; in the case of incontinence and vice, it is the distinguishing factor. This implies that doing wrong ignorantly is worse than doing wrong with the knowledge that it is wrong. But this doesn't seem entirely correct. Consider two young children who are fighting, hitting and biting and kicking each other. They do not have a full understanding of the wrongness of their actions, and so we do not blame them as we would two adults exhibiting the same behavior. In general, we are lenient in our moral judgments of children and others who are incapable of full rational thought. Because they cannot understand why their actions are wrong, we do not expect the same level of restraint as we do from a fully developed human being.

So why does Aristotle take this stance on moral knowledge? Aristotle says:

Now any one would think worse of a man if with no appetite or with weak appetite he were to do something disgraceful, than if he did it under the influence of powerful appetite, and worse of him if he struck a blow not in anger than if he did it in anger; for what would he have done if he *had* been strongly affected? This is why the self-indulgent man is worse than the incontinent. (NE 1150a25)

First we must consider what this implies about self-indulgence. At first glance he seems to be implying that the self-indulgent man experiences weaker desires than the incontinent man.

However, this need not be the case. Let us assume that both the self-indulgent and the incontinent man experience a similar range of passions, from weak to strong. Aristotle then is saying that the self-indulgent man will give in to weaker passions than the incontinent man. This seems plausible, since the incontinent man at least attempts to resist temptation, whereas the self-indulgent man doesn't even see a reason to put up a fight. In a situation involving a weak

temptation, the self-indulgent man will act while the incontinent man will restrain himself. Thus, the self-indulgent man is worse than the incontinent man because he will act on all bad appetites, even weak ones.

Still, we may be troubled by cases in which the appetite is strong enough that both the self-indulgent and the incontinent man act upon it. In such a case, we can still question why it is worse to act unknowingly rather than knowingly. On the one hand, Aristotle makes a good point when he says that the man who knows he is doing wrong is closer to becoming good than the man who doesn't know he is doing wrong. The man who knows has only to strengthen his resolve, while the man who does not know has to *realize* he is doing wrong, and only *then* take the path of the man who knows. On the other hand, does this lead to the kind of blame that Aristotle says it does? I am tempted to conclude that we can grant Aristotle the conclusion that the self-indulgent man is morally "worse" than the incontinent man in an Aristotelian sense, but in terms of blame I am less sure.

Aristotle also says that "The self-indulgent man, as was said, is not apt to repent; for he stands by his choice; but any incontinent man is likely to repent... the self-indulgent man is incurable and the incontinent man curable." (NE 1150b30) This is another reason that the self-indulgent man is worse than the incontinent man. It seems plausible that the self-indulgent man is not likely to feel remorse for his actions, because he does not realize that they are wrong. But does this then mean that he is incurable? If so, it has disastrous consequences for all of virtue ethics. No one would be able to improve themselves, to seek virtue or flee from vice, if viciousness had no cure. But there seems to be no reason to think this is so. Just because the self-indulgent man does not know that he is in the wrong does not mean that he cannot be convinced otherwise. Just as we teach children which actions are wrong and which are right, we can teach

the self-indulgent man that his indulgence is immoral. If we are successful, he becomes an incontinent man.

In Book VII Aristotle also makes some interesting points about the nature of moral knowledge itself. He draws a distinction between just “knowledge” and “practical knowledge.” Practical knowledge seems to be knowledge which we actually use; that is, knowledge becomes practical in the actual exercising of it. The incontinent man has knowledge, but lacks practical knowledge. Aristotle compares him to someone drunk or asleep. Of a sleeping mathematician, we may still say that he *knows* mathematics; but he is currently incapable of *applying* this knowledge. In the same way, the incontinent man *knows* that some of his actions are wrong, but is incapable of using this knowledge to restrain himself. This is how Aristotle circumvents Socrates assertion that it is impossible for anything to override knowledge, and that consequently people act wrongly *only* out of ignorance.

If the incontinent man possesses knowledge in general but lacks practical knowledge, and his counterpart the continent man has both, what of the temperate and intemperate men? It seems that the temperate man must have knowledge in general; again, to assert that he does not know he is doing right seems absurd. However, it is less clear that he has practical knowledge. In theory, the temperate man does right not just because he knows it is right, but because it is truly what he wants to do; this is what distinguishes him from the intemperate man. Thus, the temperate man appears to have *only* knowledge in general, as does the incontinent man, but to lack the bad appetites of the latter. The intemperate man, of course, lacks both.

From our initial question – why Aristotle asserts that incontinence is not a vice and continence not a virtue – we have considered several points. First, we saw that the immediate answer to this question had to do with the differences in emotion and knowledge between the

four types (continent, incontinent, temperate/virtuous, intemperate/vicious). This led us to troubling conclusions about the nature and blameworthiness of the ignorant wrongdoer. We may be able to concede to Aristotle the point that the incontinent man is, in the sense of a journey towards the good, farther along than the vicious or intemperate man; but it seems harder to show that he is less blameworthy. Moreover, the very notion of journey of moral improvement seems challenged by Aristotle's discussion of the nature of intemperance, which he takes to be incurable. Because the intemperate man thinks he is doing the right thing, he cannot change; but surely this cannot be right, since Aristotle's ethics is all about striving for virtue. Finally we used the distinction between knowledge in general and practical knowledge to add some final clarification to the four character traits discussed in Book VII.