

Philosophy 609: Handout 03. More on the practical syllogism in Book VII chapter 3.

Further remarks about NE VII chapter 3, the practical syllogism and incontinence: the problem is, how is reason overcome in incontinence?

practical syllogism: remember that “syllogism” signifies the putting together (*sun*, “with”) of convictions, opinions, propositions (*logoi*), which gives us *sullogismos*.

practical syllogism: there is a universal premise: “sweet foods are tasty (eatable).” This doesn’t mean that we go around saying this to ourselves; it means that we have this as a general background belief (along with billions of other propositions or opinions that we hold).

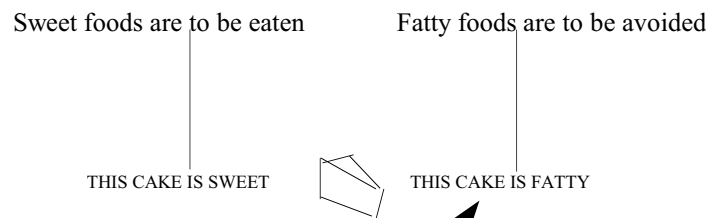
then, for the minor premise, we run into a piece of cake, and the particular belief arises, “this cake is sweet.” This belief is based on a particular encounter. It is more explicitly actualized than the general belief was.

the conclusion is not another proposition but an action: all things being equal, we eat the cake. The conclusion is not a predication but a performance.

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in incontinence we have two such syllogisms in tension one with the other: the one attracts (described above) and the other pushes away (“Fatty foods are harmful [to be avoided],” “this cake is fatty,” – I turn away from the cake).

note how everything is focused on the piece of cake facing me; the situation is concrete; the one piece of cake is the locus for a push and pull, two contrary forces deriving from different general propositions. The cake is both attractive and prohibiting.



Note how the premises are “logically linked.”

The drama of incontinence occurs in the minor premise of the prohibiting syllogism. This analysis spells out the logical possibility of incontinence.

That premise is an item of knowledge but it becomes known or held in an “intoxicated” manner. It is known, but in a dreamy manner. It loses its grip on us. We might say the words but we don’t really mean them at the moment. As a result, the prohibition wanes and the attracting syllogism takes over and we do its conclusion: we eat the cake. Later on, we regret what we did. Throughout this procedure, the general convictions, the major premises, remain intact. Reason as such is not overcome on that level. The particular opinion is the problem.

The reason for the dilution of the minor premise is the presence of the cake and the force of the attracting minor premise. Once the cake is no longer present, we come to our senses and regret what we did. If we say the words now, we mean what we say. During the tempting period, our particular reason was not so much overcome as weakened. We still know that fatty foods are harmful. Hence, we cannot really say that reason as such is overcome.

In the case of continence, the strong person (the continent) is able to hammer down the attractive minor premise, but he still has to struggle with it, even as he turns away from the cake.