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ARISTOTLE ON TEMPERANCE¹

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When we were cut off from our supplies and forced to go without food, as is common on military campaigns, no one else endured it well. But when there was plenty to eat, he alone was really able to enjoy it.²

Aristotle thinks that the virtues of character -- courage, temperance, liberality, and the rest -- give rise to³ happiness, but he never tells us why. Worse yet, his views about happiness and about the virtues make it hard to see what explanation he could have given. EN I.7⁴ tells us that we are happy when our capacities for rational thought and rational action are realized with excellence.⁵ If so, the virtues which give rise to happiness would seem to be the intellectual virtues of practical and theoretical wisdom, phronesis and sophia. But courage, temperance, liberality, and the rest are virtues of character, not of the intellect (cf. I.13, 1103^a3-10). So why does Aristotle think they are sources of happiness?

In the hope of solving this problem eventually, I have been working through the details of Aristotle's discussions of the various virtues of character in EN III-V and EE III. This paper presents a portion of that work:⁶ my account of Aristotle's view of temperance.

I

A useful place to begin is with Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, his idea that each virtue of character is a mesotes or mean state.⁷ There are two parts to this doctrine, one ontological and one behavioral. Ontologically, a virtue is a member of a triad, not one of a pair of opposites. However natural it may be to think of courage as opposed to cowardice, or of temperance as opposed to profligacy, Aristotle argues in EN II.6 that each virtue is instead a mean state which is in some sense "between" two vices, one of excess and one of defect (1107^a2-3).⁸ Behaviorally, a virtue is a mean state in that it gives rise to intermediate actions and passions. "While the vices fall short of, or go beyond, what is required in action and passion," Aristotle says, "the virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate" (1107^a3-6).⁹ Aristotle takes the ontological thesis to be a consequence of the behavioral one. "A virtue is a mean state (mesotes)," he says, because it aims at what is intermediate (to meson)" (1106^b27-28).¹⁰

complications, and a subtler account of Aristotle's conception of temperance is accordingly to be sought.

II

We can begin to work towards a better account by trying to understand Aristotle's restriction of temperance to the pleasures¹¹ human beings share with animals. He argues for this restriction in EN III.10 as follows. First he distinguishes between pleasures of the body and those of the soul, and asserts that temperance has to do only with the former: "People are not called temperate," he says, "in relation to the pleasures of learning, nor profligate in relation to the pleasures of learning" (1117^b28-1118^a1). Next he sorts bodily pleasures into types by reference to the sensory modalities they involve, and, claiming that temperance is not concerned with the pleasures of sight, hearing, or smell,¹² he concludes that it is restricted to the pleasures of touch and taste, which human beings share with the other animals¹³ (1118^a1-23). Surprisingly, Aristotle goes on to exclude even the pleasures of taste from temperance. Tasting involves discrimination, he claims, and this is not what profligates enjoy.¹⁴ They seek rather the pleasure that comes from touch, whether in eating, drinking, or sexual activity¹⁵ (1118^a26-32). Because of this, profligacy -- and temperance as well -- is restricted to the animal pleasures that derive from the sense of touch (1118^a1-4).

How are we to understand Aristotle's restriction of temperance to animal pleasures? Usually, when Aristotle connects temperance to animal pleasures, his point is the simple one that the class of pleasures with which temperance is concerned happens to coincide with the class of pleasures to which the other animals are sensitive. He actually argues for this coincidence in the EE,¹⁶ and he makes the point in the EN as well, saying that "temperance and profligacy are concerned with the sorts of pleasures in which the other animals also share" (1118^b23-25). But the concluding remarks of III.10 break new ground:

Profligacy, then, corresponds to the most common (koinotate) of the senses, and it would seem that it is rightly reproached, because it belongs to us not insofar as we are human beings but insofar as we are animals. To revel in such pleasures, or to be excessively fond of them, is bestial. (1118^a1-4)

The claims here that profligacy "corresponds to the most common of the senses" and that it belongs to us "insofar as we are animals" should be understood in light of the psychology of the De Anima, which argues that sense perception (aisthesis) in general¹⁷ and the sense of touch in particular are definitive of animality. Plants, for Aristotle, are able to absorb nourishment directly from the environment. Animals lack this ability, and in consequence they need the ability to seize nourishment from their surroundings if they are to stay alive. This, Aristotle thinks, requires sense perception and especially the sense of touch. Touch is the crucial sense, in Aristotle's view, because the properties of nourishment -- heat, cold, wetness, and dryness -- are the proper objects of that sense (De Anima II.3, 414^b5-15). Possession of the sense of touch, then, is for Aristotle part of what makes an organism an animal, and because it alone is common to all animals he can describe it in the EN as "the

long enough to reproduce. This requires that they take in nourishment, which Aristotle explains as what is hot, cold, wet, and dry. In the case of animals, the need for nourishment is registered in the psychic states of hunger and thirst, the one being an appetite for what is dry and hot, the other for what is cold and wet. Prompted by these appetites, an animal is led to seek repletion by eating and drinking appropriate substances. The ingested matter is then broken down by the process of digestion, and built back up into the body of the organism by metabolism. In this way the animal's body is maintained, so that it can reproduce.

The common appetites of EN III.11 are clearly the hungers and thirsts mentioned in this account of nutrition. Aristotle connects common appetites with physical needs (1118^a10), and he says that they are directed simply towards nourishment, not towards particular sorts of nourishment (1118^a9-12). Furthermore, his calling these appetites "natural" (1118^a9) suggests that he takes them to have their origin in the bodily or animal nature of human beings, a suggestion buttressed by his labeling these appetites "common" (1118^a8) just after calling the characteristically animal sense, touch, the "most common" of the senses (III.10, 1118^a1). That common appetites are grounded in our animal nature, finally, explains why they are universal to human beings (1118^a10-11). We may take it, then, that common appetites are simply instances of hunger and thirst.²⁰

Peculiar appetites are another matter. They differ from common appetites first in being more finely focused: a common appetite is directed simply at nourishment, while a peculiar appetite is directed at a particular sort of nourishment. They also differ in what they require for explanation. Since common appetites are simply the psychic manifestations of physical needs, our having them can be explained solely by reference to physiology. But because peculiar appetites are more finely focused than common ones, our possessing them requires more by way of explanation. My needing food may explain why I want to eat something, but it cannot explain why I want to eat Athenian pastries rather than broccoli.

Where is the fuller explanation of peculiar appetites to be found? Surely in the fact that different people like to eat -- derive physical pleasure from eating -- different sorts of foods. Consider this passage from III.11:

Regarding peculiar pleasures many people go wrong, and they go wrong in many ways. For when people are said to be fond of such-and-such, it is either because they enjoy things they shouldn't, or because they enjoy them more than most people do, or because they don't enjoy them as they should, and profligates exceed in all these ways. For they enjoy things they shouldn't (because the things are hateful); and if they do enjoy the things they should, they enjoy them more than they should, and more than most people. (1118^a21-27)

Here Aristotle is clearly not talking about the pleasures we get simply from repletion; such pleasures could come from any sort of food. He is talking instead about the sense enjoyment we get from eating certain sorts of foods.

The distinction between common and peculiar appetites, then, is the distinction between appetites simply for food and drink and appetites for the

one's wanting to eat something, because one likes it, even when one doesn't need to eat.

V

We may now turn to Aristotle's account of temperance itself. Here again it will be useful to contrast the EN with the EE. In characterizing temperance and its correlative vices, the EE says this:

He who is so disposed as to fall short of such things as nearly everyone must share in and take pleasure in is insensible, or whatever he should be called; and he who is excessive is profligate. For everyone by nature enjoys these things and has appetites for them, and not everyone is called profligate. The reason for this is that they do not feel more pleasure than they should when they get them, nor more pain than they should when they do not. Nor are they unfeeling, for they do not fall short in feeling pleasure or pain; if anything they exceed. Since there is excess and deficiency concerning these objects, it is clear that there is also a mean state, and that this disposition is best, and that it is the opposite of both the others. Hence, if temperance is the best disposition concerning the things with which the profligate is concerned, the mean state regarding the pleasant sensible objects just mentioned will be temperance, a mean state between profligacy and insensibility. (III.2, 1231^a26-39)

The EE thus characterizes temperance by contrasting it with the vices of insensibility and profligacy. It observes, first, that insensible are deficient while profligates are excessive regarding the pleasures of food and drink. Then it locates temperance between insensibility and profligacy, claiming that the existence of excessive and deficient states implies the existence of a mean state, that this mean state is the best state, and that this best state is temperance. The point to notice is that the EE offers no positive account of temperance. Instead, it treats temperance as a privative motivational state, calling temperate those who avoid the errors of the profligate and the insensible.²¹ To be sure, it does imply that temperate people enjoy the pleasures of eating and drinking "as they should," and that they do not feel more pain "than they should" when they fail to get them. But because it offers no explanation of what the proper enjoyment of food and drink consists in, it gives these phrases no real content.

The EN's account of temperance begins in the same way:

The temperate person is moderately disposed towards pleasures. He does not enjoy the things which the profligate most enjoys; if anything he detests them. In general, he neither enjoys things which he should not, nor enjoys too much anything of this sort. When [such pleasures] are absent he feels neither pain nor appetite, except moderately, nor does he desire them more than he should, nor when he shouldn't, and so on. (III.11, 1119^a11-15)

So far, we are no better off in the EN than we were in the EE -- we have no idea of exactly what foods and drinks temperate people should and should not

to take pleasure in what is bad for them, they are free to eat and drink certain things solely for the sake of the pleasure they bring. Eating and drinking may be activities in which we engage because we are animals, but temperate people are able to accept -- indeed, to welcome -- the pleasures these activities bring.²³

What about profligates and insensible people? Aristotle accuses the profligates of a multitude of sins. He says that they:

- a. enjoy things they should not (III.11, 1118^a23, ^b25),
- b. enjoy things more than they should (^b23, ^b26),
- c. enjoy things more than most people (^b23-24, ^b27),
- d. enjoy things in the wrong way (^b24), and
- e. prefer these pleasures to other pleasures (1119^a2-3).

Errors of three different kinds are attributed to profligates in these passages. First there are the errors in object cited in (a): profligates take pleasure in eating and drinking inappropriate objects. Then there are the errors in degree mentioned in (b), (c), and (d): even from appropriate objects, profligates derive more pleasure than is appropriate. Finally there is the error in preference of (e). Of these errors, the first is not unique to the profligate. Aristotle distinguishes profligates from incontinent persons on the grounds that the former do, while the latter do not, believe that the objects in which they indulge are appropriate (cf., e.g., VII.8, 1151^a11-14). No doubt errors of degree are also common to incontinent agents as well.²⁴ Thus it is the error in preference which is fundamental to profligacy: as Aristotle says, "the profligate is led by his desire to prefer the pleasures [of food and drink] to other things" (III.11, 1119^a1-3). The excessive state with respect to the pleasures of food and drink is at bottom a cognitive state, not an appetitive one. Profligates think that these animal pleasures are worthy of serious pursuit.

Those deficient with respect to the pleasures of food and drink are the insensible. Aristotle explains how they are deficient by saying that insensible people find nothing pleasant, and nothing more pleasant than anything else (III.11, 1119^a9). Their condition is thus that they experience and satisfy common appetites, and not peculiar ones. They eat and drink what is necessary to maintain their bodies, but they take no pleasure in doing so. Insensible people, then, are not to be confused with anorexics. Their problem is not that they eat and drink too little, but that they do not partake of the pleasures eating and drinking naturally bring. They disdain the pleasures temperate people welcome.

VI

Before summing up, I should deal with a few loose ends: taste, sex, and wine. Earlier I noted in passing that one curious aspect of Aristotle's account of temperance is that he excludes the pleasures of taste from its sphere. This idea is common to both the EE and the EN, but the EN offers a more effective defense of it. The EE offers us only the unargued claim that the other animals are insensitive to such pleasures, together with a point of folk wisdom to the effect that gluttons pray for long throats, not for long tongues (III.2, 1231^a12-17). The EN does better, saying that taste involves

elsewhere,²⁹ but our appetites for sex, unlike our appetites for food and drink, do not spring from physical needs.³⁰ We can live without sex, but not without food and drink.³¹ Aristotle ignores alcohol, then, because our appetite for it has no physical basis. And he treats sex uncertainly, because, although it does have a physical basis, it is not based in a physical need.

VII

In a final view of Aristotelian temperance, the element to stress is its connection with animality. For Aristotle, human beings are rational animals. As animals, we are naturally subject to appetites for food and drink, and we are sensitive to the pleasures the satisfaction of these appetites can bring. Aristotelian temperance concerns the place of such pleasures in human life. Since our animality is not the distinguishing aspect of our humanity, the pleasures relating to it should not be of major concern to us. Still, our susceptibility to these pleasures is grounded in the sort of creature we are: our animality is part of our essence. The field of Aristotelian temperance, then, is the relation of a rational animal to its animality, as expressed in the pleasures it takes in the animal activities of eating and drinking. Temperate people relate properly to their animality, and accord the pleasures attaching to it their proper worth. Insensible people and profligates, each in their own way, misjudge the pleasures and misjudge themselves.

Profligates over-value the pleasures of food and drink. Such pleasures, on Aristotle's account, do have value, but their value is limited. Eating and drinking are activities we engage in because we are animals; they are not distinctively human activities. Accordingly, the pleasures these activities bring are not distinctively human pleasures,³² and in attaching the importance they do to such pleasures, profligates value them more than they are worth. This failing, though, is symptomatic of a deeper one. Human beings have animality as their genus and rationality as their specific differentia. The distinctively human pleasures, then, are those which attach to rationality. It may be said, therefore, that in preferring animal pleasures to rational ones, profligates show that they do not understand the kind of being they are. Their preferences are evidence that they identify themselves not with their rationality, as Aristotle recommends (X.7, 1177^b26-1178^a8), but with their animality. They see themselves as animals, not as human beings, and to say that they are bestial is an accurate reproach (cf. III.10, 1118^b1-4).

Insensible people err in the contrary direction. The pleasures of eating and drinking are not worth as much as profligates think, but they are worth something, and insensible people go wrong in taking little or no pleasure in food and drink. Their error, like the profligates', reflects a more serious one. Our animality is not the most important part of our humanity, but it really is a part of it. Animality is our genus, and in taking little or no pleasure in food and drink, insensible people in effect repudiate this part of their humanity. As Aristotle puts it, "insensibility is not human" (III.11, 1119^a6-7); "a creature to whom nothing is pleasant, and to whom nothing is more pleasant than anything else is very far from a human being" (1119^a9-10). Profligates may identify themselves with their animality, but insensible people disown it altogether.³³ The name Aristotle coins for their condition, anaesthesia (insensibility) is singularly apt: anaesthesia is the

FOOTNOTES

¹ I adopt the most usual translation of sophrosune, despite its inadequacies, because the alternatives -- "self-control" and "self-restraint" -- are even less acceptable. Either alternative carries the strong suggestion that a display of sophrosune requires reason to defeat appetite in a struggle within the temperate agent, a struggle the existence of which Aristotle denies (cf., e.g., Nicomachean Ethics 11.3, 1104^a3-7). Etymologically, sophrosune means something like mental health -- being of "sound" (sos) "mind" (phren) -- and an ideal translation would capture this idea. The standard general treatment of the Greek notion is H. North's Sophrosune: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966).

² Alcibiades describing Socrates at Potidaea, in Plato's Symposium (219e8-220a2).

³ If a capacity is one the realization of which is part of what happiness consists in, I say that it gives rise to happiness and that it is a source of happiness. It is by now commonly held that, among the goods Aristotle recognizes, we should distinguish between (a) components of happiness, like courageous or liberal activity, and (b) instrumental means to happiness, like wealth. But this division ignores goods like the virtues themselves, which are (c) sources of happiness in the sense just explained, and also (d) embellishments of happiness, like good looks or fine children (cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1.8, 1099^a33-^b6, and 1.9, 1099^a26-28). These four kinds of goods are related in that instrumental goods affect the extent to which the virtues give rise to virtuous activity, while embellishments affect the degree of happiness enjoyed by the virtuously active.

⁴ Henceforth I refer to the Nicomachean Ethics with "EN" and to the Eudemian Ethics with "EE", to books with Roman numerals and to chapters with Arabic ones. Thus the first sentence of the Nicomachean Ethics is EN 1.1, 1094^a1-3.

⁵ The definition of 1.7 says that happiness is "activity of soul in accordance with excellence" (1098^a 16-17); 1.13, 1103^a 3-10 (among other passages), makes it plain that this definition includes both theoretical and practical activity.

⁶ For accounts of aspects of Aristotle's conception of courage, see my papers "Aristotle on Courage," in D. Howe, ed., Humanitas: Essays in Honor of Ralph Ross (Claremont, Ca.: Scripps College Press, 1977), pp. 194-203, and "Virtue and Flourishing in Aristotle's Ethics," in D. Depew, ed., The Greeks and the Good Life (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 138-156.

⁷ A source of confusion in dealing with the literature on the doctrine of the mean is that Aristotle uses two words -- the adjective meson and the noun mesotes -- both of which can be translated as "mean." Thus Rackham translates mesotes as "mean state" and meson as "mean," while Ross renders mesotes with "mean" and meson with "intermediate." As a result, it is not always clear whether in discussing the doctrine of the mean a commentator has in mind the idea (i) that a virtue is a mesotes or (ii) that a virtue aims at what is

¹² It is interesting that the EN allows for excess and deficiency with respect to the pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell, while the EE does not. Perhaps the EE is silent on this point because it typically assumes that the presence of excess and deficiency by itself implies the existence of a virtuous mean state (cf., e.g., III.2, 1231^a34-36, on temperance, and III.3, 1231^a15-21, on gentleness). On this assumption, the mention of excess and deficiency with respect to the pleasures of sight, say, would have inclined it, implausibly, to recognize a virtue with respect to these pleasures. Because the EN makes no comparable assumption, it can mention such pleasures safely.

¹³ Aristotle goes too far in his confidence that non-human animals take no pleasure in senses other than touch. If pleasure is (found in) the unimpeded activity of a natural state, as Aristotle holds (cf. EN VII.12, 1153^a14-15), there seems to be no good reason for thinking that animals' sensory pleasures are restricted to touch and taste.

¹⁴ I shall have more to say in Section VI (below) about Aristotle's argument for eliminating the pleasures of taste from the sphere of temperance.

¹⁵ According to III.10, 1118^a4-8, not even all tactile pleasures -- notably not the "refined" pleasures of the *gymnasium* -- are regulated by temperance.

¹⁶ EE III.2, 1230^a22-35, locates the class of pleasures with which temperance is concerned; 1230^a38 - 1231^a7 isolates the class of pleasures to which animals are sensitive; and 1230^a36-38 notes that the two classes coincide.

¹⁷ The bluntest statement of this idea occurs at De Sensu 1, 436^a10-12: "Each animal insofar as it is an animal has to have sense-perception, for it is by this that we distinguish between what is and what is not an animal." Cf. also De Anima II.2, 413^a1-4.

¹⁸ Aristotle seems not to know about anorexia. No doubt he would treat it too as a pathological. Cf., though, n. 21 below.

¹⁹ The remainder of this paragraph freely summarizes the relevant portions of De Anima II.3-4.

²⁰ Aristotle's *gastromargoi* (III.11, 1118^a19) -- our boulemics -- apparently have common appetites even without physical needs, while anorexics have the needs without the appetites.

²¹ For the idea of a privative motivational state, see R. B. Brandt, "Traits of Character," American Philosophical Quarterly, 7 (1970), pp. 23-37. For a modern account of temperance which makes it a privative state, see J. D. Wallace, Virtues and Vices (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), Ch. 3.

²² Cf., e.g., De Anima II.3, 414^a4-6; EN III.1, 1111^a32-3; EE II.7, 1223^a 34; and Rhetoric I.11, 1370^a16-18.