

## Varieties of Incontinence: Towards an Aristotelian Approach to Moral Weakness in Moral Education

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### THE PROBLEM OF WEAKNESS IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL EDUCATION

The problem of moral weakness is not only among the most ancient and intractable problems of moral philosophy and psychology, but is also one which would seem to have considerable significance for the theory and practice of moral education; after all, no moral education which enabled young people to reason effectively to correct moral decisions or conclusions, but left them ill-equipped to *act* appropriately, could be considered entirely successful. The commonly acknowledged difficulties of weakness also clearly have their original source in the Socratic identification of virtue with knowledge, and are seriously exacerbated by Plato's subsequent dualist separation of the intelligible realm of mind and cognition from the sensible realm of body and sense experience. Nearer our own time, however, a similar separation of reason from experience in the moral sphere was to occur in the wake of the Cartesian restatement of dualism; Hume's general denial of the motivational power of human reason and his corresponding claim that the springs of moral action must therefore be affective rather than rational, was met by Kant's equally dualistic insistence that moral motives must be entirely untainted by natural inclination and grounded in the nature of practical reason alone.

In the present century, of course, neither of these viewpoints has lacked support; but whilst emotivist revivals of something like a Humean position have been significant and influential, the center stage of theorizing about moral life and moral education in the largely liberal-democratic climate of contemporary Western culture has been dominated by prescriptivist and contractarian perspectives which, in their rather different ways, owe more to Kant. Indeed, perhaps the single most influential theory of moral development and education of post-war years — that of Lawrence Kohlberg — precisely aspires to combine a constructivist conception of individual moral autonomy (derived from Kant via Piaget) with a contractarian view of interpersonal obligation, custom made for circumstances of democratic pluralism in which promoting personal choice and freedom *and* ensuring appropriate individual responsibility to others, by way of respect for the overlapping consensus, are equally commended as urgent social and educational priorities. Of course, there has been much general criticism of Kohlberg's conceptions of individual freedom, social responsibility, and moral formation; what matters for now is that some main criticisms of Kohlberg's theory have focused upon its conspicuous failure — predictable in view of its intellectual provenance — to account for those cases of moral shortcoming in which agents know exactly what they ought morally to do, but fail so to act.

Indeed, Kohlberg seems to have been among the first to appreciate this difficulty, and his own proposed remedy invoked a need to develop the so-called

“ego-strength” of moral agents via cultivation of a range of executive virtues of self-control, perseverance, patience, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> However, the resemblance of this maneuver to Plato’s similarly motivated proposal in the *Republic* to deal with weakness through training of the “spirit” should be obvious enough — and, of course, it fails for much the same reason; for how could a set of executive dispositions, developed quite independently of moral reason, be guaranteed to serve its interests (for not all spirited men are good men) if that reason is in itself impotent to control non-rational desires and inclinations? The Plato-Kohlberg strategy of importing executive psychological powers to resist moral weakness (construed as failure to obey reason) does not solve the problem, but merely pushes it back a stage.

In his own prolific writings on moral education, R.S. Peters is one of the more sympathetic observers of Kohlberg’s difficulties about weakness. For Peters, Kohlberg’s main problem consists in his failure to appreciate the importance for moral development of moral *training*; his observation that “the palace of reason is entered through the courtyard of habit”<sup>2</sup> is, of course, frequently cited, and he often invoked the authority of Aristotle in support of this view. Despite this, both the radical status and philosophical effectiveness of Peters’s response to Kohlberg’s problem may be doubted. The main trouble with Peters’ subtle and sophisticated interweaving of ideas from various philosophical sources is that it seems ultimately both rationalist and dualist. Indeed, Peters’ evident commitment to a fairly unreconstructed version of Kant’s moral foundationalism is arguably the most striking feature of his moral thought.

So, whilst Peters is certainly wont to insist that rational principles matter for effective moral practice, he nevertheless endorses an essentially instrumental view of their relationship, which invariably subordinates the second to the first; thus, though he sometimes (oddly) speaks of the value of teaching principles for “stamping in” behavior,<sup>3</sup> he more commonly views practical training as a device for reinforcing moral principles which have clear priority both for the rational justification of moral life and as goals of moral education. But this instrumental conception of the relationship of moral principles to practice also seems impotent to solve the problem of weakness; for if an agent who would have otherwise succumbed to weakness holds out under the influence of training, he acts from habit rather than reason, and is not therefore — on rationalist assumptions — acting as a genuine moral agent. Once again, introducing an executive power to plug the gap opened between reason and action by moral weakness does little more than underline the inadequacy of a rationalist theory of moral motivation.

Roger Straughan is one of the few educational philosophers to have stressed the centrality of the question of weakness for moral education, having, in several places,<sup>4</sup> addressed it through an interesting distinction between different sorts of reasons for action. Basically, Straughan’s point is that the very idea of a reason for action is ambiguous between what he calls justificatory and motivational reasons. On his view, the problem of an agent who succumbs to weakness is that whilst he acknowledges that there is a strong justification for acting other than he does — a reason such that acting contrary to it makes his present conduct appear weak — the

reason is not presently *motivational* for him. But there seems to be some sleight of hand about this ingenious explanation, and it clearly will not do. After all, either the motivational reason stands in equal competition with the justificatory as a genuine reason — in which case it continues to remain a mystery why the agent fails to act upon that which he takes to have greater rational authority — or it acquires motivational force from its character as a desire or impulse in cognitive guise. In that event, moral reasons once more appear impotent to inspire moral action, and the liberal-rational view of moral agency again totters on the brink of a neo-Humean non-cognitivist theory of moral motivation.

#### BACK TO ARISTOTLE

Briefly, I believe that all these failures to resolve the problem of moral weakness follow from the larger failure of an essentially dualist-rationalist conception of moral autonomy — inherited by Kohlberg, Peters, and others from the Enlightenment — to account for the conceptual complexities of moral agency. Insofar as this is so, I believe that Peters comes nearest the root of the problem in recognizing the importance for understanding the growth of moral knowledge of Aristotle's ideas about moral habituation. Strangely, however, Peters seems not to have recognized the large extent to which an Aristotelian view of practical reason is incompatible with a Kantian or Kohlbergian foundationalist ethics, and that it is therefore not generally to be hoped that any problems of the second might be patched up with pieces of the first.<sup>5</sup>

The first respect, of course, in which Aristotle differs radically from Plato, and many post-Cartesian philosophers, is in his defense of a non-dualist philosophical anthropology. For Aristotle, reason and other cognitive capacities function — unlike Platonic intellects or Cartesian minds — within a larger economy of human affairs not characterizable independently of social, practical, and affective considerations and implications. To begin with, the capacities for moral reason in terms of which Kantians and others aspire to establish the very basic ground rules of moral life are confined by Aristotle to the more modest role of deliberation within already given frameworks of value. Thus, Aristotle's *phronesis* enshrines an "internalist" rather than an "externalist" conception of moral reason; far from expressing some detached and elevated "view from nowhere"<sup>6</sup> with respect to received values, moral reason is construed as operating for the improvement from the inside of certain already going moral concerns, and is to that extent bounded and contextualized by such values.

However, another respect in which Aristotle's *phronesis* can be regarded as "internalist" is that — unlike some later conceptions of practical reason — it acquires status as knowledge only through direct connection with *experience*. And, as the point of practical moral deliberation is, for Aristotle, not to acquire mere *theoretical* knowledge of the good, but to help us *become good*,<sup>7</sup> the relevant experience is less a matter of detached empirical observation, and more of successful engagement in personal and interpersonal contexts of human *practical* life. In short, moral knowledge is a matter of acquiring *dispositions* more than grasping propositions, and the role of *phronesis* is to inform or order our practical experience in the interests of effective moral agency. In turn, moral success and failure are construed

as functions of various sorts of interplay between reason, feeling, and circumstance — virtue amounting to the right ordering of positive and negative impulses or sentiments, and vice to the wrong ordering of them — and, of course, the key to right ordering lies in observance of the (golden) mean. Oddly, however, Aristotle's own explanations of particular virtues — as means between excesses and defects of emotion — do not represent especially effective applications of this particular idea. Aside from a familiar objection to the effect that recklessness seems not to be an obvious opposite of courage,<sup>8</sup> why should a mere absence of fear in the face of perceived danger be supposed to impel someone towards it rather than away from it? All the same, I believe that a defensible account of virtue, as a mean, is possible to the extent we remain faithful to the overall drift of Aristotle's account of virtue — especially to the idea of moral knowledge acquisition as a matter of complex interplay between reason and *practical* experience.

To be sure, from Aristotle's famous analogy between becoming good and skill acquisition — his claim that we learn to be honest or courageous much as a craftsman improves by practice — it is clear that he takes moral life to be concerned as much with the cultivation of positive dispositions as with the control of negative ones. Indeed, unlike some other great moral theorists, Aristotle appears to regard effective moral agency as actually *rooted* in natural human association — kinship, friendship, love and so on — and hence as by no means concerned exclusively with the denial or suppression of affectivity. From this perspective, however, deviations from the mean may occur in relation to *either* the negative or the positive underpinnings of human moral response; so whilst it might seem implausible to regard courage as a virtue opposed to two vices of excessive or insufficient fear, it may be less so to conceive someone as falling short in circumstances requiring prudent resolution, *either* through too much fear *or* through an excess of enthusiasm or zeal. In short, it may be more in tune with Aristotle's overall account to construe the doctrine of the mean as a story about two different aspects of moral shortcoming in relation to the involvement in virtues of both positive *and* negative human sentiments.

#### ARISTOTLE ON INCONTINENCE

Aristotle, of course, attempts a more detailed account of the nature of moral shortcoming in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To this end, he first identifies three basic types of moral excellence — heroic virtue, virtue, and continence — and three kinds of vice — incontinence, licentiousness, and bestiality — though the live distinction in his account of moral defect is that between incontinence and vice or licentiousness. The distinction between the virtuous and continent is basically between those who have mastered moral virtue to a degree where they no longer experience conflict between right reason and their natural inclinations, and those who — whilst still prey to conflict and temptation — are yet invariably successful in exercising self-control with the aid of right reason. The distinction between the incontinent and vicious, on the other hand, is between the morally weak — who, though they know at some level what is morally better, yet pursue the worse — and the wanton who care little for what is morally better or worse, but simply pursue present pleasures. All the same, it may well be that Aristotle's own somewhat disappointing account of moral weakness — to the extent that it focuses on certain

motivational failures of reason — follows from an inability to break away finally from the Platonic terms in which the problem had hitherto been discussed. Certainly, from a virtue-theoretical perspective, it may seem anomalous to construe the problem of incontinence as that of how to close the gap between reason and action — for Plato's moral realism seems due to a certain reluctance to conceive moral knowledge in anything other than quasi-theoretical terms. He is thereby unable to sidestep certain ethically familiar problems concerning the relationship of theory to practice which are liable to arise on such a conception; for example, if moral knowledge is primarily a matter of the grasp of true propositions, why am I not constrained in the moral sphere to act on a moral belief as I am epistemologically constrained in the sphere of empirical enquiry to believe a scientific fact?

Although it is often said that the Greeks had no conception of the will, Aristotle certainly seems to have been closer than Plato to such a conception in terms of his pioneering distinction between theoretical and practical reason. Moreover, in locating the sources of moral and other agency in the second more than the first, he is well placed to appreciate the hard value conflicts and dilemmas which inevitably follow from an agent's recognition of competing practical goals, and the essentially defeasible character of evaluative deliberation. Indeed, Aristotle's favored solutions to incontinence are mostly predicated on notions of inferential failure, reflecting circumstances in which, through ignorance or self-deception, agents may fail to pursue certain processes of practical reasoning to their logical conclusions. At the same time, it seems that Aristotle does follow his philosophical predecessors at least to the extent of regarding the main shortcomings exhibited in *akrasia* as basically intellectual failures — or, at any rate, failures predicated on various sorts of denial of the claims of reason and truth; on his own terms, however, it is not obvious that they need be so construed.

To see this, we should first recall that acquiring moral knowledge is, for Aristotle, tantamount to mastering moral virtues — and virtues are principled *dispositions*; in short, for genuine moral knowledge, an agent requires both principles and experience — specifically, to have learned to deliberate and apply principles in the rough and tumble of human practical affairs. It is therefore crucial to appreciate that although *phronesis* is necessary to assist our recognition of what is (sometimes beyond question) the right thing to do, it is not sufficient for the virtue which *is* moral knowledge — until underpinned or reinforced, so to speak, by a disposition to pursue the relevant good. A general failure to see this has bedeviled much moral theory and led to endless ill-starred controversies concerning the relationship of reasons to conduct in moral motivation.

As we have also seen, however, there are *two* principal dimensions to moral practice — the cultivation of positive attitudes to what *is* good or worthwhile, and the acquisition of capacities to resist temptation to what is discernibly *bad*. But, in that case, it follows that agents need to beware of several distinguishable kinds of moral failure: first, failures to cultivate attitudes and inclinations towards what is better; second, failures to acquire capacities for resistance to the worse; and third — where these are different again — failures to acquire the discipline necessary to

endure any hardship, suffering, or setbacks encountered in the pursuit of what is worthwhile. Thus, instead of understanding the problem of moral weakness in Platonic dualist terms, as a difficulty about how a quasi-theoretical form of knowledge might be operationalized in practice, one can construe it more as one about how the various shortcomings which are liable to follow from insufficient concern for what is good, on the one hand, and insufficient resistance to what is bad, on the other, might be effectively avoided in practice. For though it is likely that some of these problems are conditioned by failures of inferential or other intellectual kinds which serve to disable an agent's capacity to reason wisely through certain personal and social conflicts, they do not all seem to be of such a kind. Indeed, it may be all too clear to the *akrates* what ought to be done in a given circumstance, but when it comes to it, his nerve simply fails him; likewise, it may be abundantly clear to the *akolastos* that his dissipation is wickedly harmful both to himself and to others, but for one reason or another, he lacks either the attitudes conducive to endorsing right values or the will to acquire the relevant virtues.

But it now begins to appear that questions of incontinence, weakness and *akrasia* concern not so much a single difficulty, as a complex cluster of problems related to different and diverse aspects of the moral psychology of the virtues. Indeed, Aristotle's own suspicion to this effect is exhibited clearly enough in his complex moral psychology, his pioneering distinctions between such significantly different levels of moral malfunction as *akrasia* and *akolasia*, and his further distinctions between different kinds of failure — of both judgment and self-discipline — within these categories. In one place, for example, he recognizes a difference in the sphere of *akrasia* between intemperance and impetuosity, regarding the latter (not unproblematically) as less culpable than the former on the grounds that outbursts of anger are more episodic and amenable to rational control than the sways of appetite.<sup>9</sup> At all events, it is clear that on Aristotle's model for understanding the psychology of the virtues, there are different varieties of *akrasia* — which is also but *one* level of moral defect or weakness — and hence, his account contains rich resources for identifying a range of moral shortcomings which cannot but be of immense interest from a moral educational point of view.

#### VARIETIES OF VIRTUE AND VIRTUE ETHICS.

I cannot here, of course, undertake the complex and detailed analysis of moral weakness which would seem to be required for a virtue-theoretical understanding of the nature of moral life, but it may be useful to offer suggestions concerning a possible point of departure for such analysis. Indeed, I believe that Aristotle himself offers a useful clue to further analysis in his distinction between the weakness of intemperance and the weakness of impetuosity lately noticed. For in addition to recognizing that the practical moral knowledge of Aristotelian virtue is a matter of the complex interplay of reason, feeling, and habituation, we might also recall that the Greeks emphasized the importance for full moral development of four principal qualities traditionally known as the *cardinal* virtues. And one plausible reason for so referring to wisdom, justice, temperance and courage, of course, is not only that these are indispensable moral qualities, but that each of these particular virtues represents a specific form of moral indemnity against a certain variety of human

weakness or shortcoming.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Aristotle's contrast of the *akrasia* of intemperance with that of impetuosity may indeed be construed as marking a difference between diverse sources of moral failure in human nature.

On this view, temperance is a common label for a genus of virtue under which various forms of proper control of physical *appetites* for food, drink, and sexual gratification would seem to fall as species, whereas control of anger or of impetuosity would be a particular instance of that more general capacity to govern our passions and emotions which is commonly held to be well exemplified by courage. But though being able to control our appetites and passions is morally important, it should be clear that moral life requires rather more than courage and temperance, for a courageous and temperate person might yet be an unjust or unfair one; hence the need for justice as the archetypal *social* virtue which equips us for positive reciprocal and other-regarding interpersonal relations. Finally, however, the wise judgment inherent in *phronesis* is also clearly needed to complete any acceptable vision of moral life — not only because as a crucial *intellectual* virtue it can guard us against the moral pitfalls of dishonesty and ignorance, but also because the practice of any moral virtue is likely to require that rational evaluation of circumstances which only *phronesis* effectively provides. However, we should also recall that corresponding to each of these general types or categories of moral virtue are several different ways in which a moral agent may fall short of the ideal mean; thus, taking courage as the typical virtue concerned with the judicious governance of unruly appetites, it is clear that a person may err either through the excess fear, which results in cowardice, or the excess of zeal or insufficiency of caution, which issues in fatal recklessness.

It would seem to follow from this, of course, that if the promotion of virtues is taken to lie at the heart of the moral education of young people, any teacher or parent who undertakes such development is likely to require a quite sophisticated and subtly nuanced appreciation of the structural complexities of human moral psychology. For example, if Aristotle was right to draw at least some parallel between moral learning and learning in the practical arts, and to have supposed that any effective moral education requires a degree of training — and I am not personally inclined to doubt this — it becomes a matter of urgency to understand the different ways in which reflection and practice are interrelated and balanced in different spheres of the virtuous life. Regarding this, I see no reason to doubt Aristotle's view that learning to control the appetites is interestingly and significantly different from learning to control fear or temper, or his suspicion that the latter may be more amenable to the voice of reason than the former — though it is a moot point whether this makes it more or less excusable; and, of course, it is nowadays a fairly commonplace view that reason is significantly implicated in emotional life.

But if we are inclined to view justice as a genuine virtue more than a mere distributive principle — and Aristotle's own discussion of the topic is unfortunately less than helpful on this matter — then the processes of education for justice must be rather different again. Indeed, it is arguable that basic to the development of justice is that capacity to decenter and take seriously the rights, needs, and interests of others which is generally enshrined in the idea of respect for persons. Once more,

however, whilst this is clearly enough a matter of complex interplay between reason and feeling, there seem to be diverse views of the relationship. Thus, whilst some writers on moral education seem to have seen respect for others as largely dependent upon the grasp of formal principles of equal treatment, others — notably in progressive educational traditions — have viewed it as primarily rooted in early, possibly pre-rational, experiences of positive human association; indeed, there is even a pedagogical analog of the mean in the writings of those progressives<sup>11</sup> who have held that serious problems of sociopathology may follow from excesses or defects of love and attention in early life. Finally, of course, the development of certain intellectual habits and capacities — notably those enshrined in *phronesis* — are crucially presupposed to the acquisition of virtue and virtues in general. However, whilst liberal-rational theorists often seem to have emphasized problem-solving and action guidance as primary functions of moral reason and judgment, it is arguable that the need for moral wisdom is greatest in cases where self-deception, special pleading and rationalization have been allowed to obscure what might be otherwise an unproblematic view of what we should morally do.

But where might teachers in schools — who rightly recognize the moral formation of the young as an important part of their educational mission — seek the knowledge presupposed to the promotion of this highly complex and sophisticated ethical ideal of the development of virtue? In recent times, of course, we appear to have been encouraged to construe moral education as a fairly technical — perhaps even specialist — enterprise, predicated upon the promotion of largely cognitive capacities to address and solve certain artificially constructed and decontextualized moral dilemmas on the basis of certain purported discoveries of experimental psychology. However, the virtue-theoretical opposition to the liberal-Enlightenment conception of moral life, and experience from which such a view of moral education derives, also represents a rejection of such an abstracted and technicized view of moral reason; indeed, many recent philosophers inspired by Aristotle have precisely urged the abandonment of foundationalist ethical theories in favor of detailed attention to the varieties of pre-theoretical human moral experience inherent in the myths, art, and literature of diverse human cultures of different times and places.<sup>12</sup> To that extent, embracing a virtue-theoretical understanding of moral life and education does not require the acquisition of any new-fangled technical expertise, but only our return to a familiar and readily accessible pre-theoretical experience of human moral triumph and failure, as a basis upon which to build an educated appreciation — with the help of that vast repository of human wisdom which has and will always continue to inform such appreciation — of the rich nuances of ordinary human motivation and association.

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1. L. Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education," in *Moral Development, Moral Education and Kohlberg: Basic Issues in Philosophy, Psychology, Religion and Education*, ed. B. Munsey (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1971), 79-84.

2. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 314.

3. *Ibid.*, 274.

4. Especially, Roger Straughan, *I Ought to but...A Philosophical Approach to the Problem of Weakness of Will in Education* (London: Windsor, 1982).
5. See David Carr, "After Kohlberg: Some Implications of an Ethics of Virtue for the Theory of Moral Education and Development," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 15 (1996).
6. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
7. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 30.
8. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1964), 205.
9. Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 172-75.
10. See David Carr, "The Cardinal Virtues and Plato's Moral Psychology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 151 (1988).
11. See, for example, Homer Lane, *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954).
12. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). In general, the account of moral rationality defended in this essay has affinities with Nussbaum's — though I also suspect significant differences, especially regarding the question of the implicatedness of reason in emotion as such.