

Is Aristotle's Account of Incontinence Inconsistent?*

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McConnell, Terrance. "Is Aristotle's Account of Incontinence Inconsistent?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* IV(4) (June 1975), pp. 635-651.

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Article:

Included among the many topics on which Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an account of incontinence or *akrasia*. Many controversies have arisen among interpreters of Aristotle on this issue, and a few of these disputes will be discussed in this paper. In the first part of this paper I shall indicate the usual way of reading Aristotle's account of incontinence, which I shall call the natural interpretation. In the second section I shall raise some apparent difficulties with the natural interpretation by pointing out three passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which seem to be inconsistent with it. Finally, in the concluding three sections of this paper I shall argue that the three passages allegedly inconsistent with the natural interpretation can be shown to be consistent with the general line of argument that the natural interpretation takes Aristotle to be following. In showing how these passages can be reconciled with the usual way of reading Aristotle's account of *akrasia*, a much clearer and more complete picture of what his view is emerges. In addition, this reading makes Aristotle's account of incontinence more philosophically acceptable – though it is not without its problems — than it is normally supposed to be.

Part I

What I shall call the natural interpretation of Aristotle's account of incontinence is taken from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1146b 30 - 1147b 19.¹ In these pages Aristotle cites four different cases. Three of these cases show how one can act contrary to one's knowledge of how he ought to behave, and the fourth can be read as an *explanation* of incontinence. In the first passage (1146b 30-34) Aristotle distinguishes between one who has knowledge but is not exercising it, and one who has knowledge and is exercising it. Aristotle says that it would be strange to say that one knows what he ought to do and is exercising that knowledge but is still acting contrary to it. On the other hand, it is not at all strange to say that one knows what he ought to do but is acting contrary to it when he is not exercising that knowledge. Next (1146b 35 - 1147a 10) Aristotle discusses the practical syllogism. Such a syllogism has two premises, a universal one stating what ought to be done and a particular one that applies to the specific case at hand. In discussing these premises Aristotle is pointing out two different kinds of knowledge that are relevant in knowing what to do on a particular occasion. The first kind is knowledge of a general rule or principle of what one ought to do that is relevant to the particular situation, and the second is knowledge of the circumstances of the particular situation. Aristotle suggests that the so-called incontinent man either lacks knowledge or is not using knowledge of a particular premise (but not the universal premise). It would not be strange, Aristotle claims, for one to act incontinently if he lacked or was not exercising knowledge of the particular premise. But such incontinent action would be extraordinary if one both knew and was using knowledge of both premises. Thirdly (1147a 10 - 1147a 24) Aristotle indicates that there are certain cases in which we want to say that in a sense one has knowledge but in another sense that same person does not have knowledge. Examples of such a case are when a man is asleep, drunk, or mad. Analogously, Aristotle wants to hold, the incontinent person, under the influence of passions, in some sense has but yet does not have knowledge. All three of these cases, then, show how it is possible for one to act contrary to his knowledge of how he ought to behave. In all three cases such an action can only ensue if there is a defect in some form of knowledge other than the universal premise; that is, one

fails to know something in his particular situation or does not exercise the knowledge that he has, though what he fails to know is not a general principle of how he ought to behave. Such a person in some sense has knowledge, but in another sense does not.

The fourth case (1147a 25 – 1147b 19) can be taken as an explanation of *akrasia*.² The incontinent person knows the general principle that applies to his particular situation. The appetites interfere, however, and either prevent him from knowing that he is in a situation to which the general principle applies or prevent him from exercising his knowledge about the particular circumstances. One might say, with Santas,³ that this fourth case explains *akrasia* in that it not only shows that the incontinent man does not have knowledge in the full and complete sense, but it also indicates why the incontinent man acts the way that he does; *viz.*, he follows the dictates of his appetites.

Weakness of the will, then, is only possible because the incontinent man does not have knowledge in the full and complete sense. There is some sense in which he knows that he ought not to behave in the way that he does, but because he does not have or is not exercising knowledge about the particular situation he fails to act on this general knowledge of how he ought to behave. Given this, it seems that Aristotle holds the Socratic view that action contrary to full and complete knowledge of how one ought to behave is impossible. Any apparent case of weakness of the will can be shown to be a case where the agent's knowledge is defective; *i.e.*, not full and complete. This, then, I take to be the natural interpretation of Aristotle's account of incontinence.

Part II

Had Aristotle's account of *akrasia* not gone beyond 1146b 30 - 1147b 19 there would probably be much less dispute about the accuracy of the above interpretation than there actually is. There are, however, other comments which Aristotle makes with regard to incontinence which seem inconsistent with the natural interpretation. The first of these that I shall mention occurs in Book VII, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

(A) Of incontinence one kind is impetuosity, another weakness. For some men after deliberating fail, owing to their emotion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion ... (1150b 19-22)

The reason that this passage does not seem to be consistent with the natural interpretation is that it seems to allow for a kind of incontinence that is ruled out by the natural interpretation. On the natural interpretation a person behaves incontinently because he does not have or is not exercising one of the parts of the practical syllogism necessary for completing his deliberation. That of which he lacks knowledge or of which he is not exercising his knowledge is the minor premise of the practical syllogism, *i.e.*, the particular premise about his present situation. On the natural interpretation this premise is obscured by passion. Impetuous incontinence, mentioned in passage (A), is easily explained in terms of the natural interpretation. The impetuous man, led by emotion, does not deliberate or does not complete deliberation. But it does not seem that the type of incontinence called weakness can be accounted for on the natural interpretation. If one assumes, as it initially seems plausible to do, that deliberation is like reasoning *via* the practical syllogism in that both are reasoning about action, and if the conclusion of both the practical syllogism and deliberation is an action, then the incontinent man could not reach a conclusion about what he ought to do without also doing it. But this seems to be just what Aristotle says the weak incontinent man does. This may lead one to say, then, that the conclusion of a practical syllogism or of deliberation is not an action but rather a resolution or a decision to act. But this move runs into problems too. On the natural interpretation incontinence is due to an ignorance of or failure to exercise the minor premise. But if that is the case, then how could the weak incontinent man draw the conclusion at all? And if one does in fact draw the conclusion and yet act contrary to it, as it seems the weak incontinent man does, then it seems that knowledge is being dragged about like a slave, and this is apparently inconsistent with what Aristotle says in Chapter 3 of Book VII (1147b 16-17).

So it seems either that Aristotle is inconsistent, that the natural interpretation is incorrect, or that passage (A) must be construed in some other way.

A second passage which seems to be incompatible with the natural interpretation is the following.

(B) And generally incontinence and vice are different in kind; vice is unconscious of itself, incontinence is not. (1150b 35-36)

Passage (B) seems to indicate that the incontinent man is conscious that he is incontinent; that is, he must know that he is incontinent. But if the incontinent man has such knowledge then he must be aware that he is in a position to act on his knowledge of a general principle of how he ought to behave. Otherwise he would not realize that he is acting contrary to the principle. But again it is just this case which the natural interpretation does not allow. That is, on the natural interpretation one never acts contrary to a general principle of how he ought to act knowing that the principle applies in that situation. It seems reasonable to say, then, that the incontinent man is not conscious of his incontinence. But passage (B) seems to assert the contrary. So, as in the case with passage (A), either Aristotle is inconsistent, the natural interpretation is incorrect, or passage (B) must be construed in some other way.

A third passage which appears to be inconsistent with the natural interpretation is found in Book I, Chapter 13 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

(C) There seems to be also another irrational element in the soul – one which in a sense, however, shares in a rational principle. For we praise the rational principle of the continent man and the incontinent, and the part of their soul that has such a principle, since it urges them aright and towards the best objects; but there is found in them also another element naturally opposed to the rational principle, which fights against and resists that principle. (1102b 13-19)

This passage seems to say that in both continence and incontinence the agent is in a state of conflicting motivations. In the case of the continent person the rational principle wins out and determines the action. In the case of the incontinent man the rational principle is occasionally defeated by appetite.⁴ The reason that passage (C) seems to be worrisome is that on the natural interpretation there is no genuine conflict between reason and appetite in incontinence. Since the incontinent man does not recognize that he is in a position to act on his general principles, he is not moved to do so. Since appetite is the only operant motivation in the incontinent man, there is no conflict of motivation. Further, if there were a conflict between rational motivation and appetite, and if the latter could overcome the former, as this passage seems to indicate is possible, then it would seem that knowledge could be dragged about like a slave. But Aristotle seems to rule out this possibility at 1147b 16-18. So, either Aristotle is inconsistent, the natural interpretation is incorrect, or passage (C) must be interpreted in some other way.

Part III

The question now arises, is there any way to reconcile passages (A), (B), and (C) with the natural interpretation? When one considers that passages (A) and (B) occur so close to Book VII, Chapter 3, it would be extraordinary if these two passages were blatantly inconsistent with the natural interpretation. One does not need to assume that great philosophers are infallible in order to doubt that such an inconsistency would occur. If one operates with even a *weak* principle of charity one will surely want to take another look at these apparently inconsistent passages. In this case one surely does not want to say, at least at the outset, that this is just another example of Aristotle being inconsistent. It is much more reasonable to re-examine both the natural interpretation and these three passages before one charges Aristotle with being inconsistent. I shall try to argue that passages (A), (B), and (C) are not incompatible with the natural interpretation.⁵ What is important, though, is that in showing that these passages are compatible with the natural interpretation one gets a much clearer picture of what Aristotle's account of *akrasia* really is. And the picture that emerges is

one that makes Aristotle's view much less counterintuitive than it ordinarily is supposed to be. In addition, not only are there passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which support my claim that Aristotle avoids this apparent inconsistency, but also several things that he says in his *Politics* lend even more credence to my reading. So I want to argue that the natural interpretation is not incorrect, but is rather *incomplete*. In showing that the three passages in question can be reconciled with the natural interpretation, one gets a more complete account of Aristotle's view.

Let us look first at passage (B). The problem that (B) presents is if the incontinent man can view himself as acting contrary to a general principle of how he ought to behave, then he must be aware that he is in a position to act on his knowledge of such a principle. If he is aware that he is in such a situation then he must both have and be exercising knowledge of all the elements of the practical syllogism, including the particular premise. But, of course, on the natural interpretation the incontinent person either does not have or is not exercising knowledge of the particular premise. If one takes Aristotle's claim that "incontinence is conscious of itself" to mean that the incontinent man is aware of or knows that he is behaving incontinently at the time of his behavior, then the passage seems to be inconsistent with the natural interpretation. One obvious move to make in order to save Aristotle is simply to posit a time lag and say that the incontinent man is aware of his incontinence only after-the-fact. Construed this way, passage (B) would be consistent with the natural interpretation. But to posit a time lag merely for the sake of rendering the passage consistent with the natural interpretation would surely be *ad hoc*. One must give other reasons for supposing that there is such a time lag. One such reason is the following. If one take Aristotle's claim "Incontinent men are aware of their incontinence (either at the time of or after-the-fact)" to refer to all incontinent men,⁶ then the impetuous man must be aware of his incontinence. Since the impetuous man is one who does not deliberate at all but is simply led by his emotions (1150b 20-22), it does not seem that he could possibly be aware of his incontinence at the time of the act. At the very least it would seem that in order to know that one ought to do an action A at time T one would have to have active knowledge of the general principle, the particular premise(s), and the conclusion (one ought to do A) which follows from them. In order for these conditions to be fulfilled, one would have to complete deliberation. Since the impetuous man does not deliberate at all (at least when he behaves incontinently), surely he could not be aware of incontinence at the time that he is behaving incontinently. But clearly even the impetuous man could be aware that he behaved incontinently after-the-fact. In fact, he would have to be capable of being aware of it after-the-fact, since according to Aristotle incontinent men repent (1150b 30). So I think that this provides one with a good reason to read in a time lag and hence be able to reconcile passage (B) with the natural interpretation.

A second way to try to render passage (B) compatible with the natural interpretation involves construing incontinence as a disposition.⁷ One might ask why, on Aristotle's view, can the vicious man not be aware of his vice (either at the time or after-the-fact). Aristotle clearly takes virtue and vice to be dispositions. So one could take the claim "vice is unconscious of itself" to mean either that the vicious man is not aware at the time of his act that it is vicious, or that the vicious man is not aware that he is disposed to act viciously. Either of these readings is plausible, since, I think, Aristotle would hold them both and for the same reason. If the vicious Man 'were aware of his vice, he would know that he was behaving contrary to universal moral principles and hence his behavior would be irrational (since he would have chosen to behave contrary to reason). Such behavior would be incomprehensible to Aristotle. If in fact Aristotle intended this passage to mean, that the vicious man is not aware that he disposed to do vicious acts, then it would be reasonable to say that he meant that the incontinent man is aware that he is disposed to behave incontinently. Off hand I see no reason for favoring one interpretation over the other, except that the latter gives one another reading of (B) which is compatible with the natural interpretation. It should be pointed out that this second way of showing how the incontinent man could be conscious of his incontinence is compatible with the first that I suggested. That is, there might be two senses in which the incontinent man is aware of his incontinence. He may be aware after-the-fact that a particular action was an incontinent one, and he may be aware in general that he is disposed to behave incontinently. The former sense of awareness could account for such

phenomena as remorse and regret, which Aristotle claims that the incontinent person experiences. Given this, the latter way of explaining how the incontinent man is aware of his incontinence may well be unnecessary.

Perhaps one reason for retaining both types of awareness – though by no means a conclusive reason – is that Aristotle frequently compares the incontinent person to the drunk (e.g., 1147a 18). It is surely true that an habitual drunkard is aware after-the-fact that he was drunk, and he also knows that he is disposed to get drunk. So perhaps the same is true of the incontinent person. It does seem, though, that in some cases a drunk person is also aware that he is drunk or getting drunk at the time of the act. And if Aristotle said this about the incontinent person, that would obviously seem to be inconsistent with the natural interpretation. One could, of course, assert that in this respect the analogy between the drunk and the incontinent person breaks down or is not applicable. But that would surely be too *ad hoc*, I shall, however, suggest later (section V) that even this aspect of the analogy between the drunk and the incontinent person can be handled in a way that is consistent with the natural interpretation. This will give one an additional reading of passage (B) that renders it consistent with the natural interpretation, and, in a qualified sense, will make the reading in of a time-lag unnecessary. But independent of this, I think that I have shown that there are two readings of passage (B) that are plausible and that render it consistent with the natural interpretation. Clearly, the latter of the two that I suggested is more dubious. One might well argue that claiming that passage (B) can be taken in both of these senses is simply to make it more complicated than it really is. In any case, I think that the first interpretation that I put forth is sufficiently supported by the text to indicate that the time lag should be read in and that (B) is indeed consistent with the natural interpretation.

Part IV

But is there any plausible way to save (A)? How could the incontinent man deliberate and still act contrary to the conclusion of his deliberation? It sounds like knowledge is being dragged about like a slave, and Aristotle denies that this is possible (1147b 17-18). It seems that there are two ways that one might claim could reconcile this passage with the natural interpretation. One line that one might argue is that while the completion of deliberation does at least sometimes involve full and complete knowledge, nevertheless part of this knowledge (though not the universal moral principle) can be temporarily lost. A second line that one might suggest is that just completing the process of deliberation does not itself constitute full and complete knowledge; that is, one may conclude deliberation and still not have full and complete knowledge of what he ought to do. I shall suggest that there are some textual grounds for holding that Aristotle has both of these lines of argument in mind. I shall, however, argue that the latter line can handle all cases of incontinent actions, while the former approach cannot.

The first line of argument is suggested by Gerasimos Santas. Santas points out⁸ that what the incontinent man is ignorant of, according to Aristotle, is not the general rule or universal moral principle (see 1147b 14-20 and the note to this passage). Rather his ignorance is of a particular premise or conclusion that brings the particular thing done under the general rule. So when, at 1147b 14-20, Aristotle says that "knowledge proper" is not dragged about like a slave, he means the universal premise. Rather, in the incontinent person passion overcomes what Aristotle calls perceptual knowledge, knowledge of one of the particular premises. So what Santas says is that before passion was aroused the incontinent person knew in a straightforward sense that he should or should not do the act in question. And after the passion ceases he once again knows what he should have done. So Santas concludes that "the man may know the rule, and may have the information but may not be exercising his knowledge of such information due to the influence of passion."⁹ This makes it sound like one can pass from a state of knowledge to one of ignorance and back to knowledge. And indeed Aristotle says, "The explanation of how the *ignorance is dissolved* and the incontinent man *regains* his knowledge, is the same as in the case of the man drunk or asleep and is not particular to this condition" (1147b 5-9, italics mine) This passage seems to indicate that Aristotle does allow that one can pass from a state of knowledge to ignorance and back to knowledge. So, with regard to (A), one may deliberate and know, fully and completely it seems, what one should do, but the passions arise and distort one's knowledge of the particular premise or conclusion so that one behaves wrongly because of temporary

ignorance. And since one is temporarily ignorant of a particular premise he does not know that the moral principle in question applies to his situation. Knowledge proper, therefore, has not been dragged about like a slave. The fact that the ignorance of the incontinent man is frequently compared to the ignorance of a drunk may lend plausibility to this interpretation, since in some sense it seems that a drunk has full and complete knowledge both before and after his drunkenness.

I think that this line of reasoning will account for two kinds of incontinent actions that the weak man might perform; that is, this line of reasoning shows that two of the possible types of incontinent action of the weak person are compatible with the natural interpretation. Both are actions with regard to which there is a time before the action when the agent is contemplating doing the action, but is subsequently overcome by passion. First, if the correct conclusion of one's deliberation is of the form "P should not do action A", and if there is a competing desire which moves one to do A in spite of the fact that it is forbidden, then as long as the possibility of doing A exists the elements of one's moral deliberation must be active and exercised if P is to abstain from doing A. So if the possibility of doing A were present for a long period of time, then it may not be unreasonable to think that one could lose some particular knowledge over that period. Secondly, if the conclusion of one's deliberation is of the form "P should do action A" where A is an act that P will not have an occasion or opportunity to perform until some later time T, then again there is a time lag and it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that a competing desire could eventually cloud and distort one's knowledge of one or more of the particular premises. So either of these two types of incontinent action of the weak man seems to be explicable and consistent with the natural interpretation.

There is a third type of incontinent action, however, that I think the above line of reasoning cannot account for. It is just that case in which the conclusion of deliberation is "P should do A" where A is an action to be done now, but the weak incontinent man fails to do A in spite of the fact that he has completed deliberation and knows, *in some sense*, that he ought to do A. In this case it does not seem plausible to say that one has but then loses knowledge of one of the particular premise(s), since there is no significant time lag between the time that one deliberates and the time that the action is to be done. If such knowledge could be lost without a time lag, then one wonders in what sense one ever actively had the knowledge to begin with. This case, I think, must be handled by the second line of reasoning to which I alluded earlier. Suppose, then, that one has deliberated and the conclusion of his deliberation is "Do A" where A is an action to be done now. If concluding deliberation alone is sufficient for full and complete knowledge, then on the natural interpretation it is hard to see how one could fail to do A in this case. And yet surely the case of weakness that Aristotle describes must allow for this type of incontinent action. It would be much too *ad hoc* to say that weakness applies only to the first two types of actions described above. This would be tantamount of claiming that in the case of the weak incontinent person there must always be a lag between the time the agent deliberates and the time that he behaves incontinently. I know of no textual grounds for supporting this claim, and without such grounds the move seems suspect. Perhaps, then, one can show that an agent's having gone through the process of deliberation is not alone sufficient for saying that that agent has full and complete knowledge. But what else might be needed to have full and complete knowledge? At various places Aristotle distinguishes between natural virtue and virtue produced by habituation. He does so, for example, at 1151a 17-19. And at the outset of Book II, Chapter I, Aristotle draws a distinction between intellectual virtue and moral virtue, claiming that the latter comes about as a result of habit. In addition, in the *Politics* (1332a 40) Aristotle says that nature, habit, and rational principle are the three things that make one good and virtuous. It might be that with regard to at least some cases being properly habituated is necessary before one can correctly say that a person has full and complete knowledge. Part of what counts as full and complete knowledge may include something like a strong disposition to act on one's principles; that is, one's principles must be fully integrated into one's character. The following seems to suggest that Aristotle may well have held this view.

.... since some men (just as people who first tickle others are not tickled themselves), if they have first perceived and seen what is coming and have first roused themselves and their calculative faculty, are not defeated by their emotion, whether it be pleasant or painful. (1150b 21-24)

This passage, which one might call the "tickling passage," suggests that Aristotle held that one difference between the continent person and the weak incontinent person is that the former realizes that the passions will be aroused and takes the appropriate steps to ward them off, while the latter does not see the coming dangers.

On this reading what the tickling passage suggests is that not only does one have to have knowledge of the moral principle in question, but one must also be properly habituated if action in accordance with the moral principle is to be guaranteed. This same point is made more explicitly in the *Politics*. As I indicated earlier, in the *Politics* (1132a 40) Aristotle says that nature, habit, and rational principle are the three things that make men good and virtuous. Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes that these three things must be in harmony with one another. Aristotle first makes a general point about the relation of means and ends.

There are two things in which all well-being consists: one of them is the choice of a right end and aim of action, and the other the discovery of the actions which are means towards it; for the means and the end may agree or disagree. (1331b 26-30, Jowett translation)

The point here is that both the end chosen and the means toward that end must be right or correct. If either is wrong, one may fail to attain the good life. And this applies specifically to nature, habit, and rational principle. At 1332b 5-7 Aristotle says, "Wherefore nature, habit, and rational principle must be in harmony with one another; for they do not always agree" The implication is that even if rational principle has the correct end in mind, it is at least possible that the failure to be properly habituated can cause an agent to fail to be virtuous or do what he ought to do. This is made explicit at 1334b 10-12. "The rational principle may be mistaken and fail in attaining the highest ideal of life, and there may be a like evil influence of habit." Habit and rational principle must be concordant. Unless both are adapted to the right end, one may fail to be good. So it is possible for one to know the end that ought to be achieved, and yet fail to act in accordance with this knowledge. If being properly habituated is a necessary element of full and complete knowledge, then this is not inconsistent with the natural interpretation. This gives one an explanation of how the weak incontinent man can deliberate and still act contrary to the conclusion of his deliberation.

Perhaps an example would help to clarify the point being made here. Borrowing one of Aristotle's quaint examples, one may take "All sweet things should be avoided" as a universal moral principle. Given this, one must realize that certain passions will be aroused which are contrary to this general principle. As a result one must take certain steps which will enable one in each particular case to ward off these passions and act in accord with the moral principle. But the incontinent man fails to take these steps. So when he is in the appropriate situation, deliberates, and draws the conclusion "Do not do A", at the same time the contrary passion is aroused which would move him to do A (in the example, to eat the sweet). Since he has not taken the appropriate steps to ward off this passion, he fails to do what he ought to do. This is not a case of knowledge proper being dragged about like a slave, because the agent in question does not have full and complete knowledge. I am assuming, of course, that knowledge proper and full and complete knowledge are the same. This amounts to assuming that Aristotle's notion of knowledge proper involves a strong sense of the term 'knowledge'. This certainly seems to be true of Aristotle's notion of scientific knowledge. This is brought out clearly in Book I, Chapter 6 of the *Posterior Analytics* (74b 26-39). It is even more explicit, though, in a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle claims that "those who have just begun to learn a science can string together its phrases, but do not yet know it; for it has to become a part of themselves, and that takes time" (1147a 21-23). So if one has scientific knowledge it must be fully integrated in him and a definite part of himself. Since Aristotle limits knowledge proper in science to this strong sense of the term, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he does so in the realm of ethics as well. This would not violate

Aristotle's claim (at 1094b 15-26) that knowledge in the latter realm is less precise than knowledge in the former. But, one may object, on this reading the incontinent man does not have knowledge of the general moral principle, and Aristotle claims that he does have such knowledge (1145b 13). I think, however, that this objection can be met. It is surely true that one can know *p* without knowing all of the logical consequences of *p*. In an analogous manner, it seems possible that one could know (at least in the propositional sense of the term) a moral principle without knowing all of the steps that he needs to take in order to be able to adhere to that principle. In such a case one could say that the incontinent man knows the moral principle, but his knowledge is not knowledge in the full and complete sense. The tickling passage suggests that this is the case with the weak incontinent man, and the passages that cited earlier from the *Politics* lend support to this. It should be recalled that what I have said here has been directed at those incontinent actions that involve no time lag between the time of deliberation and the time when the agent fails to do what he ought to do. But this analysis applies just as well to the cases where there is a time lag. That is, one might explain the failure to act on the conclusion of one's deliberation where there is a time lag between the time of the deliberation and the time when the action could be carried out in the same way that I have suggested for the case where there is no time lag. The agent does not have full and complete knowledge in the sense that he is not properly habituated. More interestingly, the second line of reasoning can consistently explain the cases where there is a time lag in the same way that the first line does. On the second line one would simply add that the reason knowledge of the particular premise(s) becomes clouded is that the agent is not properly habituated. But the first approach cannot handle cases where there is no time lag, and the second line can. So it seems that the second line of reasoning suggested to reconcile passage (A) with the natural interpretation is the stronger one.

There is yet another reason for preferring the second approach of reconciling passage (A) with the natural interpretation to the first one. If one were limited to the first line of reasoning it is hard to see how one could account for the genuine conflict between reason and appetite that is suggested by passage (C). The reason that there could be no *genuine conflict* on this view is that reason and appetite are never operative at the same time. One is moved by appetite because one does not, at that time, have knowledge of some particular circumstance(s). In the absence of such knowledge the agent does not know that the moral principle in question applies to his situation. So he is not *at that time* moved to act on that principle. And if he were not so moved it would seem that there is no genuine conflict here. By contrast, the second approach allows for the genuine conflict that passage (C) indicates occurs (as I shall argue in section V).

There are, however, at least two objections that can be raised against what I have just argued. First, is it the case that the incontinent person knows that he ought to take steps to ward off the oncoming passions? If he does know that he ought to do this and yet fails to do so, then it seems that his failure to do what he ought to do is a case of incontinence which the natural interpretation has ruled out. In other words, from the general moral principle "One ought to do A" there seems to be something of a derived obligation that one ought to take all those steps that are necessary to enable one to do A. If one *knows* that he has this derived obligation but fails to adhere to it, then one has a case of incontinence that Aristotle says is not possible, at least according to the natural interpretation. If one tried to explain this latter incontinent action in terms of another competing passion, it is obvious that one would encounter the same problem again or be led to an infinite regress. But now suppose, as I have suggested earlier, that the incontinent man *does not know* that he has these derived obligations. Since in this case he does not know that he ought to take certain steps which themselves are necessary in order that he be able to adhere to the initial moral principle, one wonders why Aristotle would say that the incontinent man is blameworthy, as he does at 1145b 10.¹⁰ So it seems if Aristotle does avoid the inconsistency in the way that I have suggested he is still left with a significant problem. But there is an answer to this. Aristotle does say that we are sometimes responsible for our ignorance.

Indeed, we punish a man for his very ignorance, if he is thought responsible for the ignorance, as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; for the moving principle is in the man

himself, since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance. And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws that they ought to know and that is not difficult, and so too in the case of anything else that they are thought to be ignorant of through carelessness; we assume that it is in their power not to be ignorant, since they have the power of taking care. (1113b 30 - 1114a 3).

So on Aristotle's view there are some cases of ignorance for which one may be held blameworthy. And it certainly seems that one would be responsible for not knowing that he should take certain steps to enable him to ward off passions which are contrary to a moral principle and might be aroused. One surely ought to know the general circumstances in which he, as a moral agent, will operate. It seems quite reasonable to say that ignorance of this matter would be due to carelessness. So Aristotle can quite reasonably hold the incontinent man blame worthy for not knowing what steps to take to ward off such passions. So I think that my view can handle the first objection.

A second worry that can be raised about the above account is the following. If being properly habituated is part of what is involved in full and complete knowledge, then Aristotle's account of incontinence may be such that it rules out by definition any possible counterexample. It would seem that any case to which one can point and say that it is an instance of an agent acting contrary to his moral principles, Aristotle can always reply that he has not been properly habituated and so is not acting contrary to full and complete knowledge. I agree that this objection is worrisome for Aristotle's account, but it is not clear that Aristotle would have thought so. After all, Aristotle defines the man of practical wisdom as one who always acts in accord with his universal moral principles (1144b 30-33). So too by definition one cannot act contrary to full and complete knowledge. It is ironic that Aristotle's account of *akrasia* is usually rejected as false because people do exhibit weakness of the will in cases he would not allow. But these cases are ones in which Aristotle would say that though the rational principle (or the end) may be right, the agent is not properly habituated (does not have the right means). It is thus not a case of incontinence because the agent does not have full and complete knowledge. So as it turns out it is more likely that Aristotle's view is philosophically suspect not because it is false but because it is unfalsifiable. It is not clear what might count as a counterexample to his view. There may, at least, be a way to correct this defect; there is no way to save a view that is patently false.

Part V

Finally, is there any way to read passage (C) so that it is consistent with the natural interpretation? Is there any way on the natural interpretation that there could be a genuine conflict between reason and appetite? If what I said in attempting to reconcile passage (A) with the natural interpretation is correct, then passage (C) can be handled too. (C), it will be recalled, is worrisome for two reasons. First, since the natural interpretation seems to rule out the possibility of the incontinent man being able to recognize at the time of his action that he is in a position to act on his general moral principles, it seems that he can not be moved to do so. In that case, the only operative motivation in the incontinent man will be appetite. Hence there can be no conflict of motives. If, as I argued above, it is possible for one to know the moral principle, draw the conclusion that he ought to do A, and yet not have full and complete knowledge (and as a result sometimes fail to do what he ought to do), then it is possible that there could be a conflict between reason and appetite, though there could be no conflict if the agent had full and complete knowledge. If there were a conflict in this latter case it would not really be genuine, since full and complete knowledge could not lose. The second worry that (C) presents is if appetite wins out in its conflict with reason, then knowledge has been dragged about like a slave. But this worry can be handled too. The reason that one can say that knowledge proper has not been dragged about like a slave is that the agent does not have full and complete knowledge. What the incontinent man lacks knowledge of, at least in some cases, is what I have called 'derived obligations'. As a result, he has not properly trained himself so that he can overcome certain temptations. He knows (at least in the propositional sense) what he ought to do, and so he is to some extent moved to do so. But not having trained himself sufficiently, appetite sometimes wins out. On this interpretation there is some sense in which

the continent person has a more complete and fuller knowledge than does the incontinent person. And yet in another sense they both know the moral principle in question. So at least in the case of the weak incontinent man there can be a conflict between reason and appetite. Passage (C), therefore, is consistent with the extended version of the natural interpretation.

It is important to note, I think, that the case which explains why (C) is not inconsistent with the extended version of the natural interpretation is just that case where the weak incontinent person knows the general moral principle that applies to his situation but may still act contrary to it. Unless being properly trained and habituated is part of knowledge proper, this is surely a case of knowledge being dragged about like a slave. As I have already indicated above, if one tries to reconcile (A) with the natural interpretation by positing a time lag between the time of one's deliberation and the time for action, and then claiming that perceptual knowledge may be lost during the interval (thus the weak person has not acted contrary to full and complete knowledge), one will not be able to handle passage (C). The only case where it is plausible to say that there is a genuine conflict of motivations is that case where the agent knows that the moral principle applies to his situation (and so, to an extent, is moved to act on that principle) but is still moved by the appetites to act contrary to the principle. Thus the reconciliation of passages (A) and (C) with the natural interpretation hangs on the same point, and this is not merely coincidental.

I should also note that my reading of (A) and (C) gives one an additional way to handle passage (B), though, as I have said, I think that it can be handled independently. (B) says that the incontinent man is aware of his incontinence. If one can know a moral principle without knowing all of the steps that one ought to take to ward off any potentially conflicting desire, then one can be aware *at the time* of his action that he is behaving incontinently and still not be acting contrary to full and complete knowledge. All that I have shown, though, is that the *weak* incontinent man can be aware of his incontinence at the time of his action. It seems that for the impetuous incontinent man a time lag is necessary. But this is not inconsistent. It simply shows that the weak incontinent man can be aware of his incontinence in a way that the impetuous man cannot. Notice, though, that if one takes the first line of reasoning in handling passage (A), one cannot allow for this additional way of reconciling passage (B). According to the first account the weak incontinent person is not aware at the time of his action that the moral principle in question applies to his case. So he could not at that time be aware that he was behaving contrary to the principle. This seems to be one more reason for favoring the second way of handling (A).

I think, then, that passages (A), (B), and (C) are consistent with the natural interpretation. Having first considered passage (B), we saw immediately that there is a very simple way to reconcile it with the usual way of reading Aristotle. One need only to suppose that there is a time lag and that the incontinent person is aware of his incontinence only after-the-fact. Since the impetuous man could only be aware of his incontinence after-the-fact (and must be aware of it in order to repent), one has good textual grounds for reading in the time lag. One may wonder, though, why it turns out that with regard to the weak incontinent person one does not need to read in the time lag. The reason for this, I think, is that Aristotle's fourth case (1147a 25 - 1147b 19), which can be taken as an explanation of *akrasia*, is, as it stands, an explanation of impetuous incontinence only. Aristotle explicitly says (1147b 10-18) that the incontinent man either does not have knowledge of some particular circumstance or has it only in the way that the drunk does. For this reason knowledge proper is not being dragged about like a slave. The defect in the agent's knowledge explained here is just the defect that the impetuous man has. Even if Aristotle had only allowed for impetuous incontinence, passage (B) would still have appeared troublesome. But in showing how the impetuous man can be aware of his incontinence, one has also shown how the weak person might be aware of it after-the-fact. In resolving the difficulties that passages (A) and (C) present, however, one sees an additional way that the weak incontinent person may be aware of his incontinence and it is at the time of his action.

Once Aristotle has introduced the notion of weak incontinence we see that his explanation of *akrasia* in the fourth case is incomplete. His general point that action contrary to knowledge proper is not possible still holds. But on the basis of Aristotle's fourth case, it has been thought that the only way that one could behave contrary to his moral principles is if at the moment of his action he did not know that the act was wrong. But passages (A) and (C) are inconsistent with this. In explaining how the weak man is able to act against his general moral principles, one must emphasize that on the Aristotelian story one does not have knowledge proper until one's moral principles are fully integrated into his character and a definite part of himself. This happens only when one sees to it that he is properly trained and habituated. So with regard to the three passages in question, Aristotle's account of incontinence is not inconsistent; but it is more complicated than it initially appears to be,

Footnotes

* In writing this paper I have benefited greatly from discussions with and the critical comments of Professors Norman O. Dahl and Vicki L. Harper. I should particularly note that in setting out the problem (sections I and II) that I discuss here closely follow Professor Dahl's account in his unpublished paper "Aristotle on Practical Reason and Weakness of the Will."

1. All references to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are to the W.D. Ross translation.
2. Gerasimos Santas, in his paper "Aristotle on Practical Inference, the Explanation of Action, and *Akrasia*," *Phronesis*, Vol. 14 (1969), pp. 162-189, views this case in this way, as does Professor Dahl in his paper.
3. Santas, p. 182.
4. There is also a passage in *De Anima* (434a 12-14) which can be construed in the same way that I have suggested that passage (C) be construed. This passage, however, is somewhat obscure and the interpretation of it is quite controversial.
5. Santas, in the paper referred to above, and Anthony Kenny, in his paper "The Practical Syllogism and Incontinence," *Phronesis*, Vol. 11 (1966), pp. 163-184, both attempt to deal with some of these puzzles and closely related matters. Though I do not critically discuss their accounts in my paper, except for a small part of Santas's paper, I am not entirely convinced that either of their accounts can adequately handle all of the apparently inconsistent passages. Of course, the reader must decide this for himself.
6. It seems to me that one must take this passage to refer to all incontinent men. The reason for this is that the paragraph in which it occurs is intended to set off the incontinent man – not just some incontinent men – from the vicious one.
7. I do not give any arguments for construing incontinence as a disposition. I should point out, though, that others have also taken it as a disposition. James J. Walsh, in Chapter IV, particularly p. 95, of *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness* (Columbia University Press, 1963), also construes incontinence as a disposition, though as far as I can tell he does not give an argument for this interpretation either. In opposition to this general view, Donald Davidson, in his "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?", *Moral Concepts* (Oxford University Press, 1970), ed. Joel Feinberg, pp. 96-97, claims that for Aristotle weakness of the will cannot be a character trait.
8. Santas, pp. 184-185.
9. Santas, p. 185. This assumes that the conclusion of one's deliberation is a resolution rather than an action.
10. This objection was pointed out to me by Norman Dahl. The response that I make to it was suggested to be by Vicki Harper.