

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VII: Moral Weakness

Aristotle begins by reciting the opinions or current beliefs of the Many regarding moral weakness:

- I. Moral strength and tenacity deserve praise while moral weakness and softness deserve blame.
- II. The morally strong person tends to abide by the results of one's calculation (recall Bk. VI's distinction between the scientific and calculative elements of the rational part of the soul: we calculate or deliberate about things that could be other than they are); the morally weak person tends to abandon such results.
- III. The morally weak person, acting on basis of emotion, does what he knows to be base, while a morally strong person, knowing that certain appetites are base, does not give in to them but allows reason to guide his action.
- IV. A self-controlled person is called 'morally strong' and tenacious, although the converse may not hold. Also, a self-indulgent person is regarded as morally weak, with some people differentiating between the two.
- V. It is often believed that a practically wise person can't possibly be morally weak, while some hold that a practically wise person who is clever is morally weak.
- VI. It is believed that moral weakness is shown even in anger & in pursuit of honor and profit.

Aristotle comments on these common beliefs in the following ways:

1. Regarding III, the common opinion is opposed to Socratic moral theory, for Socrates held that no one willingly does wrong; wrong acts are explained as being due to ignorance. But, how might ignorance play a part in the actions of a morally weak person? Socratic theory is at odds with the observed moral facts: clearly, the morally weak person does not think he ought to act in the way that he does. Well perhaps, he simply fails to reason concerning the action before him when he is overcome by his emotions.

a) There is also a revised version of Socratic ethics found in Plato's Academy: nothing is better than knowledge, but many people act contrary to what they think is the better thing to do. Thus, a morally weak person doesn't have knowledge but mere opinion when he allows pleasures to overpower him.

b) But, if it were mere opinion and not knowledge, then we must say that one has a weak conviction resisting the passions, then we could forgive people for not sticking to their opinions when confronted with strong appetites. However, we don't forgive wickedness (or other acts deserving blame); so it must be something stronger than mere opinion or weak conviction which is overpowered by pleasures. Then, could it be practical wisdom that resists the appetites? That's absurd, for then we should have to say that a practically wise person could be morally weak at the same time. But, in Bk. VI we noticed that the practically wise person is a man of moral action, and that he possesses the other virtues & is good at reasoning about particulars.

2. Regarding IV: if being morally strong means having strong & base appetites, then morally strong person is not self-controlled. It is uncharacteristic of a self-controlled person to have excessive or base appetites, yet a morally strong person does have such appetites. Self-controlled person gives impression of having everything under control without any effort. However, morally strong person has a passionate nature (tempted by appetites to act wrongly) but resists temptation & heeds the call of reason, but not without a struggle.

3. Regarding I & II: if moral strength leads one to be guided by just any opinion, then morally strong person is bad, for then tenacity becomes stubbornness, if opinion is false. Also, if moral weakness makes a person abandon every opinion, then moral weakness must occasionally lead one to be good.

4. Regarding I & III: Sophists present an argument intended to show the absurdity of commonly-accepted moral views.

a) They try to show that moral weakness is the same as virtue:

1) If one is both foolish & morally weak, one acts contrary to one's convictions (e.g. 'Honor your parents') because of moral weakness.

2) But due to one's foolishness, one is convinced that good things are bad, so one should not do them.

3) So, one acts contrary to one's conviction & does what is good.

b) But, morally weak person has not been shown to be virtuous; rather, moral weakness (with folly) sometimes leads to one's acting in a **prima facie** virtuous way (but not completely virtuously).

5. Regarding II & IV: a self-indulgent person who prefers what is pleasant, persuaded that it is good, is better than a morally weak person.

a) Self-indulgent person may be persuaded to change one's mind; thus, he can be easily cured. Morally weak person however is persuaded that he should do one thing but he constantly does the other thing. Self-indulgent person appears to be re-educable whereas morally weak person appears not to be so.

b) Self-indulgent believes he should always seek the pleasure of the moment (chronically disposed this way). Morally weak person thinks he should not pursue it but does so anyway (acts intermittently this way). It's no good to say that morally weak person only has opinion, for he may think he has exact knowledge. Some people are just as firmly convinced of their opinions as others are of their knowledge.

In the practical syllogism, one premise, the universal, is a current belief, while the other premise involves particular facts falling within the domain of sense perception.

1) Everything sweet ought to be tasted.

2) This thing before me is sweet.

3) This thing before me ought to be tasted.

Now, when we have conflicting universal opinions, one opinion tells us to avoid that thing while appetite drives us to it. This then is the case where reason is defeated in moral weakness. The final premise consists in an opinion about an object perceived by the senses; this premise determines our action. So, morally weak person doesn't have this premise or has it in a weak sense of 'knowing'. It is sensory knowledge, not science, that is dragged about by appetite. One is morally strong when one follows the dictates of true reason & abides by the right choice. Morally strong person remains more steadfast than others.

6. One can't have practical wisdom & be morally weak at same time, since a practically wise person is one of good character. To be practically wise, one must know what one ought to do & be able to act accordingly. But, morally weak person is unable to act so.