

Moral Strength and Moral Weakness in Aristotle

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In book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that three character traits are to be avoided by the morally serious person: vice, moral weakness, and brutishness. While the opposite of vice is virtue, the opposite of moral weakness is moral strength, and of brutishness some form of divinity. This paper explores Aristotle's analysis of moral strength and weakness, focusing on the phenomenon of moral weakness and its causes.

Moral strength is the experience of excessive and idiosyncratic desires that are nevertheless resisted; the morally strong person knows the good and masters their desires accordingly. Like moral strength, moral weakness involves the experience of excessive and idiosyncratic desires, but unlike the morally strong the morally weak person gives in to these desires; the morally weak person knows the good but does what is wrong. Aristotle discusses various possible causes of moral weakness. One is the overpowering of reason by desire common among the young who lack habituation to virtue. Another cause is the effeminacy or softness characteristic of women and womanly men. I argue, however, that the most interesting cause of moral weakness in Aristotle's account is theoretical thinking or philosophy. The relationship between philosophy and moral weakness makes the condition of moral weakness an important subject of study in Aristotle's ethical theory.

In her recent book *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*, Ronna Burger argues that book 7 of the *Ethics* is a descent from the height of the preceding discussion of philosophy in book 6, much like the philosopher's descent back into the cave in book 7 of Plato's *Republic* (Burger, 132). This is the case even though book 7 of the *Ethics*, according to Burger, also represents the discovery of nature and despite the fact that Aristotle ultimately endorses in this book the Socratic teaching that virtue is knowledge (Burger, 134, 136-37, 151). In accord with this teaching Aristotle argues that Socrates, "was completely opposed to the view (that a man may know what is right but do what is wrong), and did not believe that moral weakness exists. He claimed that no one acts contrary to what is best in the conviction (that what he is doing is bad) but through ignorance (of the fact that it is bad)" (*NE* 1145b25-27).¹ Burger argues that a careful reading of Aristotle's analysis of the causes of moral weakness shows that Aristotle does not in fact refute this Socratic position but rather reaffirms it. In Burger's view Aristotle makes clear that knowledge in the "strict" or authoritative sense, that which is derived from the intellectual virtue of prudence, is never overcome in moral weakness (Burger, 142, 151). Moreover, Burger points out that with respect to knowledge in the secondary, non-authoritative sense, that which Aristotle says has not grown to be part of us but which is mouthed much as "an actor speaks his lines," neither is this

¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ostwald trans. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), 1999. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

overcome in moral weakness (*NE* 1147a23). Rather, at the moment we are acting in moral weakness, according to Aristotle, we are acting in a temporary ignorance much like persons who are asleep, mad or drunk (*NE* 1147a17, 1147b6-7) (Burger, 138). Thus, only when we temporarily lose our knowledge of what is right do we do what is wrong.

Aristide Tessitore, in *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*, like Burger argues that book 7 is a descent. In Tessitore's view, it is a descent from the height of the discussion of ethical virtue to the lower but more accessible target of moral strength (Tessitore, 52). Also, Tessitore agrees that in Aristotle's account the morally weak person does not act against what they actually know to be wrong, but rather act in ignorance of knowledge that is possessed in potential only (Tessitore, 56). Thus, in Tessitore's view Aristotle does not refute Socrates in the strict sense but rather vindicates his claim concerning the unassailable character of a certain kind of knowledge resembling prudence (Tessitore, 57). Nevertheless, according to Tessitore Aristotle preserves the phenomenon of moral weakness by focusing on the overcoming of knowledge in the secondary sense, largely through habit that forms a morally weak character (Tessitore, 57, 60). Moreover, unlike Burger, Tessitore points out that for Aristotle the "intense" or *melancholikos*, a type of character especially susceptible to moral weakness, is also likely to become extraordinary with respect to intellectual virtue (Tessitore, 61).

Leah Bradshaw argues, like Burger and Tessitore, that morally weak persons in Aristotle's view are incapable of the intellectual virtue of prudence (Bradshaw, 564). Yet, Bradshaw points out that the condition of moral weakness described by Aristotle in book 7 of the *Ethics* resembles the condition of women described in book 1 of the *Politics* (Bradshaw, 566). In the *Politics*, Aristotle claims that women are to be ruled by men in a political fashion—as equals—because women possess the deliberative faculty (*Pol* 1259a40).² Yet, rule is not to alternate between men and women but remain permanently in men because women's deliberative faculty "lacks authority" (*Pol* 1260a12-13) (Bradshaw, 564). Thus, deliberating correctly but apparently having no authority over their own passions, like the morally weak women must be ruled by others (Bradshaw, 566). Bradshaw concludes, however, that nothing in Aristotle's corpus shows that he viewed women's moral weakness as natural or biological rather than cultural (Bradshaw, 572).

Unlike Burger and Tessitore, I argue that book 7 is a natural progression from the discussion of the intellectual virtues in book 6 rather than a descent. The phenomenon of moral strength but especially of moral weakness, I argue, arises after the emergence of theoretical thinking and philosophy because, as Aristotle suggests, these intellectual activities can be a cause of this problematic moral condition. Moreover, although I agree that in the moral weakness caused by uncontrollable passion it is not prudence but rather knowledge in some secondary sense that is overcome, I argue that when philosophy is acting as cause it is precisely prudence that is overcome in moral weakness. Thus, although passion or desire on its own may never overwhelm prudence as Burger, Tessitore and Bradshaw maintain, I argue that perhaps when liberated by theoretical thinking and philosophy it can. Therefore, like Tessitore and Bradshaw, I believe that Aristotle, despite an initial agreement with Socrates, seeks to preserve the phenomenon of

²Aristotle, *Politics*. Carnes Lord trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1984. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

moral weakness. Also, I agree with Bradshaw that Aristotle associates moral weakness with a feminine character, but the focus of this paper is not the weakness of women but the potential philosopher. In suggesting that moral weakness is something that besets the beginning student of philosophy, I share an insight similar to Tessitore's that for Aristotle the *melancholikos*, while susceptible to moral weakness, is also inclined to extraordinary intellectual virtue.

This paper explores Aristotle's discussion of moral strength and moral weakness, focusing on Aristotle's account of the causes of moral weakness. Aristotle claims that moral strength and weakness are, like moral virtue and vice, "qualities to be sought and qualities to be avoided" (*NE* 1145b2). Moreover, in Aristotle's view moral strength and weakness operate in the same situations as virtue and vice (*NE* 1146b20, 1148a6-11, 1148b10-12). Despite these similarities, however, Aristotle nevertheless distinguishes these phenomena and brings moral strength and weakness to light against the backdrop of moral virtue and vice. We will thus begin with a brief overview of moral virtue and vice before turning to moral strength and weakness.

Moral Virtue and Vice

In book 2 of the *Ethics* Aristotle defines moral virtue as an activity of the soul in accordance with reason that determines the mean between excess and deficiency (*NE* 1106b35-1107a1). Virtue is an internal motion of the soul that culminates in an external action of the body, and actions, internal and external, that "hit" the mean, as it were, are virtues, excesses and deficiencies are vices. For instance, Aristotle presents the virtue of courage understood as a mean in the following way. In the external circumstance of danger in battle the passion of fear is aroused in the soul (*NE* 1115a25-30). If the soul is disposed to give in to this feeling of fear, it suffers from an excess of fear, which is the vice of cowardice (*NE* 1107b4). On the other hand, if the soul is disposed to suppress or ignore these feelings of fear, it suffers from a deficiency of fear, which is the vice of recklessness (*NE* 1107b3, 1116b34-1117a1). If the soul, guided by reason to the mean, is disposed to feel not too much fear nor too little fear but rather the median amount, this is the virtue of courage (*NE* 1107a35). Reason determines the mean and then guides the passions to it, which is then followed by an external action of the body (*NE* 1138b21-25).

Aristotle identifies and discusses twelve moral virtues and their corresponding vices in books 2-5 of the *Ethics*. They are: courage, self-control, generosity, magnificence, high-mindedness, ambition, gentleness, righteous indignation, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness and justice. Of special significance for us is the virtue of self-control, as Aristotle illuminates moral strength and weakness in the unqualified sense against the background of this specific virtue and its corresponding vice. According to Aristotle, "we must understand by 'moral weakness' and 'moral strength' only that which operates in the same sphere as self-control and [the vice of] self-indulgence" (*NE* 1148b11-12).

Self-control is the mean with regard to the desire for pleasure. To feel and act on an excess of the desire for pleasure is the vice of self-indulgence, and, in very rare instances, to feel and act on a deficiency of the desire for pleasure is the vice of insensitivity (*NE* 1107b5-8). Self-control, Aristotle argues, deals specifically with the physical or bodily pleasures of taste and touch, and of touch it concerns only the sexual parts of the body (*NE* 1118a25-1118b7). Moreover, Aristotle further subdivides these pleasures of taste and touch into two kinds: the universal or "natural" kind, such as the

desire for food and drink when hungry and thirsty and for sexual pleasure when “young and vigorous,” and the idiosyncratic kind or those desires particular to the individual (*NE* 1118b8-14). Self-control is understood as achieving the mean with regard to the universal bodily pleasures, but it is an extreme with regard to the idiosyncratic pleasures; the self-controlled person, according to Aristotle, neither desires nor enjoys any of them (*NE* 1119a11-18). Self-indulgence, on the other hand, is an excessive desire for and indulgence in both the universal and the idiosyncratic pleasures (*NE* 1118b21-27).

Moral Strength and Weakness

Moral strength, Aristotle argues, arises in the same situations that the virtue of self-control does (*NE* 1146b17-21, 1148b11-12). Yet, moral strength is a different phenomenon than self-control. The morally strong person has excessive and idiosyncratic desires for bodily pleasures but resists and then masters them; they know that their desires are “wrong” or that indulgence in them is a vice (*NE* 1145b10-11, 1146a9-14). Although the desires of the morally strong person go beyond the mean, their reason does not, and it is to reason that the soul, as it were, remains firm. The self-controlled person, on the other hand, does not have excessive and idiosyncratic desires to begin with (*NE* 1146a11). Rather, their desires pursue what reason has determined are the right and good things, such as a moderate of food and drink and a moderate amount of sexual pleasure. Thus, according to Aristotle, “while a morally strong man has base appetites, a self-controlled man does not and is, moreover, a person who finds no pleasure in anything that violates the dictates of reason. A morally strong man, on the other hand, does find pleasure in such things, but he is not driven by them” (*NE* 1152a1-3).

Examples of morally strong persons would be people who quit smoking or stop eating sweets in contrast to self-controlled people who never smoked or who prefer vegetables to cake. Again, Aristotle would suggest that a person who desires to commit adultery but resists and keeps their vows to their spouse is morally strong, whereas a self-controlled person is someone who desires their spouse and never another. These examples illustrate that for Aristotle, whereas morally strong persons resist and then master desires because they know they are “wrong,” self-controlled and morally virtuous persons can pursue and enjoy their desires because they are “right” to begin with. Thus, Aristotle indicates that moral strength is not a virtue; it is a condition inferior to the virtue of self-control.

As moral strength operates in the same sphere as the virtue of self-control, so moral weakness operates in the same sphere as the vice of self-indulgence (*NE* 1146b17-21, 1148b11-12). Moreover, as moral strength, despite being similar, also differs from self-control, so moral weakness differs from self-indulgence in the following way. The morally weak person, according to Aristotle, has excessive and idiosyncratic desires for bodily pleasures and gives in to them. Yet, they “know” they shouldn’t, that their desires are “wrong” or will lead to vice (*NE* 1145b10-14). Thus, unlike the soul of a morally strong person which remains firm with reason, the soul of the morally weak person follows their desires beyond what their reason has determined is the mean. The self-indulgent person, like the morally weak, has excessive and idiosyncratic desires for pleasure and gives in to them. Yet, unlike the morally weak, they are unaware that such pleasures should not be indulged (*NE* 1146b22-24). Thus, whereas the morally weak “know” that what they are doing is wrong, the self-indulgent think that what they are doing is right. Moral weakness, therefore, involves acting against what one would

rationally choose to do, whereas the self-indulgent act according to choice (*NE* 1146b22, 1148a6-10, 1151a5-10). Aristotle thus suggests that moral weakness is not, in the strict sense, a vice, and that self-indulgence is worse.

Moral weakness also differs from moral strength. Both morally strong and morally weak persons have excessive and idiosyncratic desires, and both know that such desires should not be indulged. Yet, it is the morally strong person who resists and then masters these desires while the morally weak person gives in and pursues them. Moral weakness thus seems to be a condition in between moral strength and self-indulgence. Like the morally strong, the morally weak person “knows” that their desires are wrong, but like the self-indulgent they nevertheless give them free reign. This odd relation of moral weakness to moral strength and self-indulgence leads to the question of whether or not moral weakness, as Aristotle describes it, is in fact a plausible condition. Can a person really “know” that what they are doing is wrong but do it anyways, despite their wish to do what is right? Why don’t they resist like the morally strong person, or in the end rationalize their behaviour such that they actually think that what they are doing is right, like the self-indulgent person?

The plausibility of moral weakness as a condition is of interest because, in his analysis of it, Aristotle seems to contradict Socrates’ famous teaching that “virtue is knowledge.” Aristotle acknowledges that Socrates did not think that moral weakness existed, arguing that if a person knew an action was bad they would not do it (*NE* 1145b25-27). All vice and improper behaviour, Socrates suggests, is the result of ignorance. To shed light on the plausibility of moral weakness as a condition, we need to consider what Aristotle thinks are its causes, and in what sense he thinks a person “knows” what they are doing is wrong.

Causes of Moral Weakness

The first cause of moral weakness discussed is the intensity of the passions of the soul. Aristotle argues that if the passions of the soul become so intense such that they overpower or over-rule the reason of the soul, moral weakness results. According to Aristotle, “fits of passion, sexual appetites, and some other such passions actually cause palpable changes in the body, and in some cases even produce madness. Now it is clear that we must attribute to the morally weak a condition similar to that of men who are asleep, mad, or drunk” (*NE* 1147a15-18). If we are like sleepy, mad or drunken men when acting in the grip of passion, and thus suffering a temporary “loss of mind,” as it were, we are not actually acting in the presence of knowledge but rather in moments of temporary ignorance (*NE* 1147b6). Aristotle thus indicates that the moment one acts in moral weakness due to the intensity of passion, one’s knowledge or what Aristotle class one’s “active knowledge” is not in “use,” it has been overpowered by passion (*NE* 1146b30-35).

This explanation of the cause of moral weakness, however, does not appear to explain the difference between the morally weak and the morally strong person. The morally strong have intense passions and desires, but they can resist and master them when they “know” such passions and desires are wrong. Why can’t the morally weak resist and master their desires in similar situations? If they both “know” equally why does the “knowledge” of the morally weak temporarily go into disuse when experiencing intense passion, whereas the “knowledge” of the morally strong does not?

Aristotle suggests that the morally weak are usually young persons who lack the habituation to virtue that brings the passions of the soul under the internal control of reason. According to Aristotle, like sleepy, mad or drunken persons who can “repeat geometrical demonstrations and verses of Empedocles,” and like an actor speaking their lines, “beginning students can reel off the words they have heard, but they do not yet know the subject” (*NE* 1147a19-21). A young person, therefore, can “repeat the formulae (of moral knowledge),” which they don’t yet feel (*NE* 1147a23). Rather, in order to retain knowledge when in the grip of strong passions, Aristotle asserts that, “the subject must grow to be part of them, and that takes time” (*NE* 1147a22). Avoiding moral weakness, therefore, requires that we take moral knowledge into our souls and let it become part of our character. This internalization process the young have not had time to complete.

If moral weakness is characteristic of the young who have not yet taken moral knowledge into their souls, thereby allowing them to temporarily forget or lose their knowledge when overcome by desire in the act of moral weakness, it would seem that Aristotle’s account of moral weakness does not in fact contradict Socrates’ teaching that no one voluntarily does what they “know” to be wrong. Virtue does in fact seem to be knowledge, and, as Aristotle asserts, “we seem to be led to the conclusion which Socrates sought to establish. Moral weakness does not occur in the presence of knowledge in the strict sense” (*NE* 1147b14-15). Thus, it is only knowledge in a secondary sense, knowledge that is still external and not internal to the soul, which is overcome by passion in moral weakness. Yet, what does Aristotle regard as knowledge in the “strict sense,” that type of knowledge which is impervious to moral weakness and which leads him to this Socratic position? Aristotle initially suggests that such knowledge flows from the intellectual virtue of prudence or practical wisdom. According to Aristotle, “[It] would be absurd [if] (it is practical wisdom that resists the appetite): for it would mean that the same man will have practical wisdom and be morally weak at the same time, and there is no one who would assert that it is the mark of a man of practical wisdom to perform voluntarily the basest actions” (*NE* 1146a4-8). Aristotle therefore indicates that morally weak persons lack practical wisdom or the virtue of prudence (see Burger, 139, Tessitore, 56, Bradshaw, 566, and Hardie, 269-71)³

Not only youth but also effeminate men, Aristotle suggests, lack prudence and are therefore subject to moral weakness. The moral weakness arising from effeminacy is slightly different from that which arises from the passions of youth. Whereas the young may be unable to do what they “know” is right because they cannot resist the desire for pleasure, the effeminate cannot do what they “know” is right because they cannot resist the pains that most people can (*NE* 1150b1-2, 11-12). Such men, according to Aristotle, suffer from softness usually more characteristic of women than it is of men (*NE* 1150b15). Signs of softness in men are “let[ting] [one’s] cloak trail, in order to save [oneself] the pain of lifting it up,” and a man who “plays the invalid without believing himself to be involved in the misery which a true invalid suffers” (*NE* 1150b3-5). In other words, men who are soft tend to allow a general messiness or unkemptness about their person, and will feign sickness to avoid arduous tasks and situations.

³This is not to suggest that morally strong persons possess the virtue of prudence. According to Aristotle the prudent person possesses all of the moral virtues, whereas the morally strong person does not (*NE* 1146a9). Rather, it perhaps suggests that the morally strong person is on the way to prudence, unlike the morally weak.

In the *Ethics* Aristotle attributes moral weakness to effeminate or womanly men, but in the *Politics*, as Bradshaw argues, he seems to attribute it to women themselves (Bradshaw, 566-67, 570). In the context of explaining why the virtues of men and women differ such that men's virtues are "ruling" virtues and women's virtues are "serving" virtues, Aristotle claims that women's "deliberative" faculty "lacks authority" (*Pol.* 1260a12, 19-25). Understood to mean that a woman's reason lacks authority within her own soul, it seems to suggest that for Aristotle women cannot control their passions in order to do what they may know to be right, a condition similar to that of moral weakness. If this is true of women, Aristotle suggests that like the morally weak, others should rule them.

Prudence and Philosophy

Thus far we have discussed two causes of moral weakness: the inability to resist the desire for pleasure that Aristotle suggests is characteristic of the young, and the inability to endure the onslaught of pain apparently characteristic of women and womanly men. Moreover, in such cases of moral weakness Aristotle indicates that it is not knowledge in the "strict sense," that which flows from prudence or practical wisdom, which is overcome by the desire for pleasure or the passion to avoid pain, but rather only knowledge in a secondary sense, that which is external, as it were, and has not become part of the soul. Aristotle, however, also raises another possible cause of moral weakness that again has to do with the precise way in which knowledge is present in the soul. To understand this cause of moral weakness we must briefly return to Aristotle's discussion of the intellectual virtues in book 6 of the *Ethics*.

In books 2-5 of the *Ethics* Aristotle discusses the moral virtues understood as means between excess and deficiency. Book 6 is the beginning of Aristotle's analysis of the intellectual virtues. In order to better illustrate the nature of the various intellectual virtues, Aristotle begins by dividing the rational part of the soul into two parts: the calculative or practical part and the scientific or theoretical part. Practical reason apprehends things which "admit of being other" than they are (*NE* 1139a9). The objects of practical thinking, therefore, are the changing particulars or the changing realities. Theoretical reason, on the other hand, apprehends things, which "do not admit of being other than they" (*NE* 1139a7-8). The objects of theoretical thinking, therefore, are the unchanging realities or universals. According to Aristotle, both parts of reason look for "truth" but in different ways. For practical reason, "truth," or the objects of study, are the good and the bad (*NE* 1139a28). For theoretical reason the objects of study are the true and the false simply (*NE* 1139a28). These two types of thinking, Aristotle argues, give rise to five intellectual virtues. Practical thinking grounds the virtues of art and practical wisdom, the latter more commonly translated as "prudence," and theoretical thinking grounds the virtues of science, intelligence and theoretical wisdom, the latter more commonly translated as "philosophy." We will focus on prudence and philosophy as described by Aristotle in book 6.

Aristotle defines prudence as deliberating well about what is good and bad for human beings (*NE* 1140b4-5). The end of such deliberations can be the good and bad for ourselves as individuals, and for our families and cities, the good and the bad for us understood collectively (*NE* 1140b9-10). Aristotle thus closely associates prudence with "political wisdom" (*NE* 1141b24). Political wisdom includes the art of legislation, in which the legislator legislates the virtues, and acting where the law is silent by issuing

decrees and exercising equity (*NE* 1141b25-28, 1147b19-23). Prudence, in Aristotle's account, is thus concerned with the moral virtues. The lawmaker, exercising prudence, legislates the moral virtues for the citizens, and it is also an internal source of moral virtue for the person who possesses it (*NE* 1144a13-19). Prudence, therefore, is that part of reason which determines the mean between excess and deficiency, thus allowing for and bringing the moral virtues into being.

In contrast to prudence, which deliberates about the good and bad for human beings, philosophy, as presented by Aristotle in book 6, deliberates about the true and the false, what is and is not. Aristotle initially gives two characterizations of philosophy. First, it is defined as the combination of intelligence and science, and thus as the ability to directly apprehend universal principles (intelligence) and the knowledge which flows from them (science) (*NE* 1141a19). Aristotle then characterizes philosophy as knowledge of things higher than human (*NE* 1141a21). Examples of such things are constituent parts of the universe, such as sun, moon, stars, earth, air, fire and water, and, as we shall see, such things as "white" and "straight." According to Aristotle, "if 'healthy' and 'good' mean one thing for men and another for fishes, whereas 'white' and 'straight' always mean the same, 'wise' must mean the same for everyone, but 'practically wise' will be different" (*NE* 1141a23-24). Aristotle thus suggests that because the good and healthy for men is not the same as it for fishes, it is the concern of prudence or the practically wise, whereas because what is white and straight is the same for men and fishes—they are universal realities—it is the concern of philosophy or the theoretically wise.

The implication of this presentation of philosophy, apparently unconcerned with the good and the bad for human beings, is that it is an intellectual virtue unconcerned with moral virtue. Philosophy thus appears to be morally neutral, and Aristotle has raised the possibility of an intellectual realm above or at least different from the moral realm.

Philosophy and Moral Weakness

Returning to moral weakness and its causes in book 7 of the *Ethics*, Aristotle explains the third cause of moral weakness by reference to the practical syllogism. To take an example of the practical syllogism from book 7, if the major premise, incorporating a universal reality, is "Everything sweet ought to be tasted," and the minor premise, incorporating a particular fact, is "This apple before me is sweet," then the conclusion of the syllogism is "I ought to taste this apple" (*NE* 1147a28-31). Aristotle, as will become apparent below, indicates that moral weakness can have its source in the major premise of the syllogism, and thus in the type of universal knowledge that we hold.

To illustrate the moral weakness that may arise from the reasoning involved in a practical syllogism, Aristotle puts forward the example of two syllogisms, the major premise of each being known by a single person simultaneously. According to Aristotle:

Suppose that there is within us one universal opinion forbidding us to taste (things of this kind), and another (universal) opinion which tells us that everything sweet is pleasant, and also (a concrete perception) [...] that the particular thing before us is sweet [...] (The result is that) one opinion tells us to avoid that thing, while appetite [...] drives us to it. (This is the case we have been looking for, the defeat of reason in moral weakness)(*NE*1147a31-36).

The two syllogisms, simultaneously present to the mind of a single person, are as follows. 1) Major premise: “Sweet things should not be tasted;” minor premise: “This apple before me is sweet;” conclusion: “I should not taste this apple.” 2) Major premise: “Everything sweet is pleasant;” minor premise: “This apple before me is sweet;” conclusion: “I should taste this apple.” The action following upon the conclusion of this second syllogism would be a case of moral weakness, or doing what one knows to be wrong according to the major premise of the first syllogism. The conclusion, however, to the second syllogism, flows from the universal reality in its major premise.

Considering these two syllogisms, especially their major premises, it seems clear that Aristotle means to suggest that moral weakness flows from a certain way of thinking or type of knowledge that propels persons to act against what they know to be morally right. The knowledge that “sweet things should not be tasted,” the major premise of the first syllogism, is knowledge of good and bad, right and wrong for human beings, which flows from prudence grounded in practical thinking. It is not this type of knowledge that causes us to act against what we know to be right, as it is the source of our knowledge of right. The knowledge that “everything sweet is pleasant,” the major premise of the second syllogism, is of a different order. This is knowledge of true and false or what is and is not without regard to good and bad, right and wrong. The moral fact that we should not taste of sweet things does not make it any less true or real that if we did taste of such things we would feel pleasure or our taste buds would be excited. Thus, this type of knowledge can cause us to go against what we know to be right. However, this is precisely the type of knowledge that Aristotle describes as flowing from philosophy grounded in theoretical thinking.

Prudence, Aristotle suggests, is that which grasps the mean or what is morally virtuous. It grasps what is good and bad, right and wrong for human beings, and thus what one should and should not do. Yet, Aristotle also suggests that a problem develops if philosophy emerges as a possibility. Philosophy grasps what is true and false and thus what is or is not regardless of whether it is good or bad for human beings. It is thus liberating in a way, as it can cause the passions and desires in the soul of the potential philosopher to “slip the leash,” as it were, put their by habit and the prudence grounded in practical thinking. Moral weakness thus results as the desires surge toward what philosophy has just shown to be true, rather than to what prudence has determined is morally right (but see Hardie, 282-83).

I would like to conclude by briefly pointing to what Aristotle suggests are two possible solutions to the problem of moral weakness arising from the emergence of theoretical thinking and philosophy. The first is the discovery of a type of pleasure that is not physical—a pleasure of the “soul,” as it were—and along with this a new understanding of philosophy. Aristotle begins to discuss such a pleasure and understanding of philosophy in the last four chapters of book 7. The suggestion is that this pleasure of the soul can attract those who think theoretically or philosophically and thus prevent them from slipping into moral weakness. The second possible solution is the phenomenon of friendship, which occupies the whole of the next two books of the *Ethics*.

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