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## ARISTOTLE ON TEMPERANCE<sup>1</sup>

Charles M. Young

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

For Aristotle, practical wisdom and the virtues of character—courage, temperance, liberality, and the rest—are intimately bound up with one another. Virtue of character, he says, consists “in a mean state . . . that is defined by principle (*logos*), that is, by the principle by which the practically wise person would define it” (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6,<sup>3</sup> 1106b36–1107a2). Further, since “vice corrupts one, and makes one hold false views about the starting points of action” (VI.12, 1144a34–36), “it is not possible to be practically wise without being good” (a36–b1). When Aristotle discusses individual virtues of character in Books III through V, however, he does not address the question of their connections with practical wisdom. His concern is rather with demarcating their respective spheres of application, describing their correlative vices,

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<sup>1</sup>I adopt the most usual translation of *sōphrosunē*, despite its inadequacies, because the alternatives—“self-control” and “self-restraint”—are even less acceptable. Either of these alternatives carries the strong suggestion that a display of *sōphrosunē*, requires reason to defeat appetite in a struggle within the temperate agent, a struggle the existence of which Aristotle denies (see, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.3, 1104b3–7). Etymologically, *sōphrosunē* means something like “mental health”—being of sound (*sōs*) mind (*phrēn*)—and an ideal translation would capture this idea. At *Cratylus* 411e4–412a1, Socrates says that *sōphrosunē* is so-called because it involves the preservation of practical wisdom (*sōtēria . . . phronēseōs*), an etymology Aristotle apparently knows (*EN* VI.5, 1140b11–20; see also VII.8, 1151a15–20). The standard general treatment of the Greek notion is H. North’s *Sophrosune: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Alcibiades describing Socrates at Potidaea, in Plato’s *Symposium* (219e8–220a2).

<sup>3</sup>Henceforth I refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics* with “EN” and to the *Eudemian Ethics* with “EE,” to books with Roman numerals and to chapters with Arabic ones. Thus the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is EN I.1, 1094a1–3.

and defending the idea that they are mean states. Furthermore, when Aristotle does expressly raise the issue of the connections between virtue and practical wisdom in Book VI, he concerns himself only with virtue generally, and not with individual virtues.

Aristotle thus leaves it to his interpreters to explicate the connections he sees between particular virtues of character and practical wisdom. In the hope of discovering these connections, I have been working through the details of his discussions of the various virtues and vices in *EN* III–V and *EE* III. This paper presents a portion of that work: an account of Aristotle's view of temperance.

## I.

It will be useful to begin with the doctrine of the mean, Aristotle's idea that each virtue of character is a *mesotēs* or mean state.<sup>4</sup> According to this doctrine, there are two respects in which the virtues are mean states. First, each of the virtues is, Aristotle thinks, a member of a triad, and not (as Plato seems to have thought<sup>5</sup>) one of a pair of opposites. However natural it may be to think of courage as opposed to cowardice, or of temperance as opposed to profligacy, Aristotle tries to show in *EN* II.6 that each virtue is instead a mean state between two vices, one of excess and

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<sup>4</sup>A source of confusion in dealing with the literature on the doctrine of the mean is that in explaining the doctrine Aristotle uses two words—the adjective *meson* and the noun *mesotēs*—both of which can be translated as “mean.” Thus Rackham translates *mesotēs* as “mean state” and *meson* as “mean,” while Ross renders *mesotēs* with “mean” and *meson* with “intermediate.” As a result, it is not always clear whether, in discussing the doctrine of the mean, a commentator has in mind the idea (i) that a virtue is a *mesotēs* or (ii) that a virtue aims at what is *meson* in action and passion. When Urmson, for example, says “an emotion or action is in a mean if it exhibits a settled state that is in a mean,” only confusion results: the first occurrence of “mean” comes from *meson*, the second from *mesotēs*. (See J. O. Urmson, “Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean,” in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980), p. 161, originally published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973), pp. 223–230.) Aristotle of course sees a clear difference between (i) and (ii); indeed, as we will see, he argues from one to the other. To avoid confusion on this point, I translate *mesotēs* with “mean state” and *meson* with “intermediate” throughout.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, *Euthyphro* 5d, *Protagoras* 332a–333b, and *Republic* IV, 444e.

one of defect (1107a2–3).<sup>6</sup> Second, a virtue is a mean state in that it gives rise to actions and passions that are in some sense intermediate relative to the actions and passions characteristic of its associated vices. “While the vices fall short of, or go beyond, what is required in action and passion,” Aristotle says, “the virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate” (1107a3–6),<sup>7</sup> and “a virtue is a mean state (*mesotēs*),” he says, “because it aims at what is intermediate (*to meson*)” (1106b27–28).<sup>8</sup>

Temperance might seem to fit this doctrine quite well. Since the appetites (*epithumiai*) temperance regulates—those for food, drink, and sex—clearly admit of excess and deficiency, it is easy to suppose that we will find one vice involving excess, another involving deficiency, and temperance in between.

Aristotle sometimes speaks as if he means to give an account of temperance as straightforward as this. In his preliminary sketches of the virtues in *EN* II.7, for example, he says:

Temperance is a mean state concerned with pleasures and pains, though not with all of them, and less so with pains;<sup>9</sup> profligacy is an

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<sup>6</sup>At *EN* II.8, 1108b35–1109a19, Aristotle argues that, although his doctrine of the mean matches each virtue with a pair of vices, it sometimes happens that one of the vices is “more opposed” to the virtue than is the other. Profligacy, for example, is more opposed to temperance than is insensibility, he holds, for the reason that human beings are naturally inclined towards pleasure. Here, I think, Aristotle is attempting to reconcile his doctrine of the mean with the appearance that virtues and vices are opposites. In the case of temperance, the problem facing him is to explain how insensibility could plausibly have escaped the notice of those who treated profligacy and temperance as opposites, and the fact that insensibility is rare is useful in this connection.

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle argues in *EN* V that, although justice is associated with only one vice (injustice), in all its forms justice aims at what is intermediate. Thus “it is a mean state, but not in the same way as the other virtues” (1133b32–33): it aims at what is intermediate, but it is not “between” two vices.

<sup>8</sup>Although I lack the space to argue it here, I believe that these are the only respects in which, for Aristotle, a virtue of character counts as a mean state, and that attempts to understand the doctrine of the mean in the light of other appeals by Aristotle to the notion of a mean state are, in consequence, misguided.

<sup>9</sup>*EN* III.10 differs interestingly from II.7 in its characterization of the sphere of temperance. II.7 says that temperance is “concerned with pleasures and pains, though not with all of them, and less so with pains” (1107b4–6). III.10 says, “We have said that temperance is a mean state

excessive state. People deficient in relation to pleasure occur hardly at all, with the result that they have no name. Call them “insensible” (1107b4–8).

Furthermore, this is basically the account of temperance that we find in the *EE*. There, after some observations on equivocity, Aristotle argues in III.2 that temperance and profligacy are concerned with tactile pleasures (1230b21–1231a26). He next notes that insensible people are deficient with respect to these pleasures while profligates are excessive (1231a26–29). Then he claims that the presence of excess and deficiency implies the existence of a middle state (1231a34–35), and he concludes that this middle state is temperance (1231a35–b4). Thus we have excess, deficiency, and temperance in between.

In the *EN*, however, matters are much more complicated. In the first place, the *EN* stresses very heavily the idea that temperance concerns those pleasures that human beings share with animals (see especially III.10, 1118b2–3, and III.11, 1119a6–10). The *EE* does note this fact (III.2, 1230b36–1231a17), but it makes nothing of it; the *EN* seems to turn it into a point of theory. A second complication has to do with the manner in which the *EN* demarcates the sphere of temperance. It draws a difficult distinction—one not found at all in the *EE*—between “common” (*koinai*) or “natural” (*phusikai*) appetites and “peculiar” (*idioi*) or “adventitious” (*epithetoi*) ones (III.11, 1118b8–15), and it restricts temperance to appetites of the latter sort (1118b15–28). Yet another complication is that the *EN* makes an attempt, albeit a brief one, to ground temperance in human well-being, connecting it with health and

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concerned with pleasures, for it is concerned less so, and in a different way, with pains” (1117b24–26). Thus II.7 includes pains within the sphere of temperance, while III.10 takes them out and suggests a reason why. Aristotle is reluctant in III.10 to include pain in the sphere of temperance perhaps because temperance regulates appetite and appetite has pleasure, not pain, as its object (see, for example, *EN* III.1, 1111a32–33). When he discusses the topic of temperance and pain in III.11, he says only that profligates feel more pain than they should when they are deprived of the pleasures of food and drink, while temperate people are not bothered (1118b30–33). The pain here is simply the pain of vicious people unable to indulge their vice and would be involved in the account of any virtue (see II.3, 1104b3–8); it is not peculiar to temperance. Strictly speaking, then, the statement of II.7, 1107b4–6, is an error, and III.10 does well to correct it.

fitness (1119a16–17); no such attempt is found in the *EE*. Finally, in the *EN*, temperance is not symmetrically related to the two vices with which it is correlated. The *EE* says that insensibility is rare (III.2, 1230b15–16), a point the *EN* also makes (II.7, 1107b6–7, and III.11, 1119a5–6). Usually, Aristotle explains why insensibility is rare by reference to human propensities: because we incline towards the pleasures of food and drink, he thinks, we will err on the side of profligacy if we err at all (*EE* III.2, 1230b16–18; *EN* II.8, 1109a13–19). But *EN* III.11 goes further than this, claiming that insensibility is not only rare but unnatural as well. “Insensibility is not human” (1119a6–7), Aristotle says. “A creature to whom nothing is pleasant, or to whom nothing is more pleasant than anything else, is very far from a human being” (1119a9–10).

In summary, then, the *EN* stresses a connection between temperance and animality; it deploys a difficult distinction between common and peculiar appetites; it connects temperance to health and fitness; and, in suggesting that insensibility is not a human possibility, it arguably represents temperance as a counterexample to the doctrine of the mean.<sup>10</sup> The straightforward account of temperance sketched earlier is clearly inadequate to these complications, and a subtler account of Aristotle’s view of temperance is accordingly to be sought.

## II.

We can begin to work towards a better account by trying to understand Aristotle’s restriction of temperance to the pleasures that human beings share with animals. He argues for this restriction in *EN* III.10 as follows. First he distinguishes between pleasures of the body and those of the soul, and argues that temperance has to do only with the former: “People are not called temperate,” he says, “in relation to the pleasures of learning, nor profligate in relation to the pleasures of learning” (1117b28–1118a1). Next he

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<sup>10</sup>That insensibility is rare (or even non-existent) would not make temperance a counterexample to the doctrine of the mean (*pace* W. D. Ross, *Aristotle*, 5th ed. (London, England: Methuen, 1949), p. 207). But Aristotle says that insensibility is not human (1119a6–7), and this may mean that it is not a human possibility.

sorts bodily pleasures into types by reference to the sensory modalities they involve, and, claiming that temperance is not concerned with the pleasures of sight, hearing, or smell,<sup>11</sup> he concludes that it is restricted to the pleasures of touch and taste, senses that human beings share with the other animals<sup>12</sup> (1118a1–26). Surprisingly, Aristotle goes on to exclude even the pleasures of taste from temperance. Tasting involves discrimination, he asserts, and the pleasures of discrimination are not what profligates enjoy; they seek rather the pleasure that comes from touch, whether in eating, drinking, or sexual activity (1118a26–32).<sup>13</sup> Because of this, profligacy—and temperance too—is restricted to pleasures that derive from the sense of touch<sup>14</sup> (1118b1–4).

How are we to understand Aristotle's restriction of temperance to animal pleasures and to the sense of touch? Usually, when Aristotle connects temperance to animal pleasures, his point is the simple one that the class of pleasures with which temperance is concerned happens to coincide with the class of pleasures to which the other animals are sensitive. He actually argues for this coincidence in the *EE*,<sup>15</sup> and he makes the point in the *EN* as well, saying that “temperance and profligacy are concerned with the sorts of

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<sup>11</sup>It is interesting that the *EN* allows for excess and deficiency with respect to the pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell, while the *EE* does not. Perhaps the *EE* is silent on this point because it typically assumes that the presence of excess and deficiency implies, by itself, the existence of a virtuous mean state (see, for example, III.2, 1231a34–36, on temperance, and III.3, 1231b15–21, on gentleness). On this assumption, the mention of excess and deficiency with respect to the pleasures of sight, say, would have inclined the *EE*, implausibly, to recognize a virtue with respect to these pleasures. Because the *EN* makes no comparable assumption, it can mention such pleasures safely.

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle may go too far in his confidence that non-human animals take no pleasure in senses other than these. If pleasure is (found in) the unimpeded activity of a natural state, as Aristotle holds (see *EN* VII.12, 1153a14–15), there seems to be no good reason for thinking that animals' sensory pleasures are restricted to touch and taste.

<sup>13</sup>I will have more to say in Section VII about Aristotle's argument for eliminating the pleasures of taste from the sphere of temperance.

<sup>14</sup>According to *EN* III.10, 1118b4–8, not even all tactile pleasures—notably not the “refined” pleasures of the gymnasium—are regulated by temperance.

<sup>15</sup>*EE* III.2, 1230b22–35, isolates the class of pleasures with which temperance is concerned; 1230b38–1231a7 isolates the class of pleasures to which animals are sensitive; and 1230b36–38 notes that the two classes coincide.

pleasures in which the other animals also share” (III.10, 1118a23–25). But with the concluding remarks of III.10 he breaks new ground:

Profligacy, then, corresponds to the most common (*koinotatē*) of the senses, and it would seem that it is rightly reproached, because it belongs to us not insofar as we are human beings but insofar as we are animals. To revel in such pleasures, or to like them most of all, is bestial (1118b1–4).

The claims here that profligacy “corresponds to the most common of the senses” and that it belongs to us “insofar as we are animals” should be understood in light of the psychology of the *De Anima*, which argues that sense perception (*aisthēsis*) in general<sup>16</sup> and the sense of touch in particular are definitive of animality. Plants, as Aristotle understands them, can absorb nourishment directly from the environment. Animals lack this ability, and in consequence they need to be able to seize nourishment from their surroundings if they are to stay alive. This ability, Aristotle thinks, requires sense perception and especially the sense of touch. Touch is the crucial sense, in Aristotle’s view, because the properties of nourishment—hotness, coldness, wetness, dryness—are the proper objects of that sense (*De Anima* II.3, 414b6–14). The sense of touch, then, is part of what makes an organism an animal, and because it alone is common to all animals (see *De Anima* III.11, 433b31–434a2, and III.12, 434b18–25) Aristotle can describe it in the *EN* as the “most common” of the senses. But, since Aristotle counts human beings among the animals, touch for him is not simply a sense that human beings just happen to share with the other animals. It is rather a distinctively animal sense, and, in consequence, a sense that we human beings have “insofar as we are animals.”

In connecting temperance with animal pleasures, then, Aristotle does not mean simply that the pleasures with which temperance is concerned happen, as a mere matter of fact, to be pleasures to which the other animals are also sensitive. He has in mind the deeper point that temperance is concerned with the pleasures to

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<sup>16</sup>The bluntest statement of this idea occurs at *De Sensu* 1, 436b10–12: “Each animal insofar as it is an animal has to have sense perception, for it is by this that we distinguish between what is and what is not an animal.” See also *De Anima* II.2, 413b1–4.



which we human beings are sensitive precisely because we are animals, too. He means us to understand temperance as a virtue that regulates our relation to our animality.

### III.

With this point in hand, let us now turn to the heart of Aristotle's account of temperance: his distinction in *EN* III.11 between common and peculiar appetites. Aristotle draws this distinction because he means to restrict the sphere of temperance to peculiar appetites. He does allow for error on the side of excess with respect to common appetites, but he thinks that the nature of these appetites makes such excess rare: common appetites are appetites for nourishment and repletion, and thus tend to vanish when repletion is achieved (1118b15–19). There is also some evidence that he thinks that error regarding these appetites is a pathological condition, and not a moral failing, for he calls those who err to excess “mad-bellies,” *gastrimargoi* (1118b19).<sup>17</sup> Temperance and its correlative vices, for Aristotle, have to do not with these common appetites but instead with peculiar ones. “Regarding peculiar pleasures,” Aristotle says, “many people go wrong, and they go wrong in many ways” (1118b21–22). Those who err on the side of excess with respect to such appetites are the profligates (1118b25–27). Those who err on the side of deficiency are rare and have no name; Aristotle coins the label “insensible” for them (1119a5–11). The people who get it right with respect to peculiar appetites are of course the temperate (1119a11–12).

Despite the importance of this division in appetite to Aristotle's account of temperance, he does not say as much about it as one would like. He says that common appetites are universal to human beings: “Everyone who needs it desires solid or liquid nourishment, and sometimes both, while the young and lusty want sex, as Homer says” (1118b10–11). They are also natural (1118b9), and they are, as we have seen, directed towards nourishment and repletion (1118b9–11). None of these points holds for peculiar appetites. In the first place, such appetites are not universal: “Not everyone desires this or that sort of nourishment, nor does ev-

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<sup>17</sup>Aristotle seems not to know about anorexia. No doubt he would treat it too as pathological.

everyone desire the same things" (1118b12). Second, while it is natural to have preferences for certain foods rather than others (1118b13–15), the preferences themselves are individual peculiarities: "our own," as Aristotle puts it (1118b13). Finally, peculiar appetites are not directed simply towards nourishment and repletion. If they were, error with respect to them would be as rare as error with respect to common appetites. But Aristotle believes that error with respect to peculiar appetites is frequent: "Regarding peculiar pleasures," he says, "many people go wrong, and they go wrong in many ways" (1118b21–22).

To understand what Aristotle has in mind in speaking of common appetites, we need a brief look at his theory of nutrition, as put forward in the *De Anima*.<sup>18</sup> According to this theory, if a species is to propagate, its members must stay alive long enough to reproduce. This requires that they take in nourishment, which Aristotle explains as what is hot, cold, wet, and dry. In the case of animals, the need for nourishment is registered in the psychic states of hunger and thirst, the former being an appetite for what is dry and hot, the latter for what is cold and wet. Prompted by these appetites, an animal is led to seek repletion by eating and drinking appropriate substances. The ingested matter is then broken down by the process of digestion and built back up into the body of the organism by metabolism. In this way the animal's body is maintained, so that it can reproduce.

The common appetites referred to in *EN* III.11 are clearly the hungers and thirsts mentioned in this account of nutrition. Aristotle connects common appetites with physical needs (1118b10), and he says that they are directed simply towards nourishment, not towards particular sorts of nourishment (1118b9–12). Furthermore, his calling these appetites "natural" (1118b9) suggests that he takes them to have their origin in the bodily or animal nature of human beings, a suggestion buttressed by his calling these appetites "common" (1118b8) just after calling the characteristically animal sense, touch, the "most common" of the senses (III.10, 1118b1). That common appetites are grounded in our animal nature, finally, explains why they are universal to human

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<sup>18</sup>The remainder of this paragraph freely summarizes the relevant portions of *De Anima* II.3–4.

beings (1118b10–11). We may take it, then, that common appetites are simply hungers and thirsts.<sup>19</sup>

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

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

Regarding peculiar pleasures many people go wrong, and they go wrong in many ways. For when people are said to be fond of such-and-such, it is either because they enjoy things they should not, or because they enjoy them more than most people do, or because they don't enjoy them as they should; and profligates exceed in all these ways. For they enjoy things they should not (because the things are hateful); and if they do enjoy the things they should, they enjoy them more than they should, and more than most people (1118b21–27).

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

The distinction between common and peculiar appetites, then, is the distinction between appetites we have simply in virtue of needing food and drink and those we have in virtue of deriving physical pleasure from eating foods of certain sorts. Aristotle's presentation of this distinction as one between two kinds of appetite may well be misleading. Suppose I am hungry and am eating

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<sup>19</sup>Aristotle's "mad-bellies" (*EN* III.11, 1118b19) apparently have common appetites even without physical needs; anorexics have the needs without the appetites.

my favorite food, Athenian pastries. Aristotle will refer my eating at all to a common appetite and my eating Athenian pastries (rather than, say, broccoli) to a peculiar one. This makes it sound as if I have two appetites, one in respect of my need and another in respect of my preference. But, since the object of my common appetite is the same as the object of my peculiar appetite, though under a different description, Aristotle might want to say that my common appetite is the same as my peculiar appetite, also under a different description.<sup>20</sup> If so, his distinction between common and peculiar appetites is better seen, not as a distinction between two different kinds of appetite, but rather as a distinction between different grounds for our having the appetites we do. In the case at hand, I have a single appetite, but I have it for two reasons. I want to eat the Athenian pastries before me both because I am hungry and because I like to eat Athenian pastries.

## IV.

What philosophical work does the distinction between common and peculiar appetites do for Aristotle? The easiest way to see the distinction's importance is to look briefly at the *EE*, where it is not found. Here is how the *EE* tries to characterize the objects of temperance, profligacy, and insensibility:

One who is so disposed as to fall short of such things as nearly everyone must share in and take pleasure in is insensible, or whatever label is appropriate; and one who is excessive is profligate. For everyone by nature enjoys these things and has appetites for them, and not everyone is called profligate. The reason for this is that they do not feel more pleasure than they should when they get them, nor more pain than they should when they do not. Nor are they unfeeling, for they do not fall short in feeling pleasure or pain; if anything they exceed (III.2, 1231a26–34).

According to the *EE*, then, temperance and its correlative vices are concerned with things that “everyone must share in,” that

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<sup>20</sup>Aristotle would express this point by saying that, while my common appetite and my peculiar appetite are “incidentally” or “accidentally” (*kata sumbebēkos*) the same (see *Metaphysics* V.9), they are different in “being,” *to einai* (see, for example, *Topics* V.4, 133b15–25).

“everyone must take pleasure in,” that “everyone by nature enjoys,” and that “everyone by nature has appetites for.”

These can only be the objects of what the *EN* calls common appetites. But the *EN* sees clearly what the *EE* does not, that common appetites cannot define the sphere of temperance, since their very nature is such as to make over-indulgence in them problematic:

Eating and drinking simple food until one is over-replete goes beyond what is natural in amount. For the natural appetite is for the repletion of a need (III.11, 1118b16–19).

It is crucial to appreciate this fact about common appetites. Temperance is a virtue that regulates appetites occasioned by physical needs, and this much the *EE* sees. But it does not see what is problematic about temperance: if the appetites with which it is concerned arise in this way, why is a virtue needed for their regulation? Why don't the appetites simply vanish when the needs that occasion them are satisfied, at least in normal cases?<sup>21</sup> It is exactly this question that the *EN*'s distinction between common and peculiar appetites allows Aristotle to answer. The distinction drives a wedge between the physical bases of our appetites for food and drink, on the one hand, and the pleasures (beyond those of repletion) we may take in their satisfaction, on the other, permitting Aristotle to explain how over-indulgence can occur. The distinction allows for the possibility—indeed, the frequent circumstance—of one's wanting to eat something, even when one isn't hungry, because one likes to eat that sort of thing.

V.

We may now turn to Aristotle's account of temperance itself. Here again, what is distinctive in the *EN*'s account can be brought out by looking first at the *EE*. In characterizing temperance and its correlative vices, the *EE* says this:

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<sup>21</sup>Common appetites need not correspond exactly, either in strength or in duration, to the physical needs that occasion them, but Aristotle seems to assume that they will correspond closely enough (except in pathological cases) that temperance plays no role in bringing them into correspondence.

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

The *EE* thus characterizes temperance by contrasting it with the vices of insensibility and profligacy. It observes, first, that insensible people are deficient while profligates are excessive regarding the pleasures of food and drink (1231a26–34). Then it locates temperance between insensibility and profligacy, claiming that the existence of excessive and deficient states implies the existence of a mean state (a34–35), that this mean state is the best state (a35–36), and that this best state is temperance (a36–39).

The point to notice is that the *EE* offers no positive account of temperance. Instead, it treats temperance as a privative motivational state, calling temperate those who avoid the errors of the profligate and the insensible.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, it does imply that temperate people enjoy the pleasures of eating and drinking “as they should,” and that they do not feel more pain “than they should” when they fail to get them. But because it offers no explanation of what the proper enjoyment of food and drink consists in, it gives these fine phrases no real content.

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

The temperate person is moderately disposed towards [the pleasures

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<sup>22</sup>For the idea of a privative motivational state, see R. B. Brandt, “Traits of Character,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970), pp. 23–37. For modern accounts of temperance that also make it a privative state, see J. D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, England: Cornell University Press, 1978), Chapter 3; and P. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 132–133.

of eating and drinking]. For he does not enjoy the things that the profligate most enjoys; if anything he detests them. In general, he neither enjoys things that he should not, nor enjoys too much anything of this sort. When [such pleasures] are absent he feels neither pain nor appetite, except moderately, nor does he desire them more than he should, nor when he should not, and so on (III.11, 1119a11–15).

So far, we are no better off in the *EN* than we were in the *EE*—we have no idea of exactly what foods and drinks temperate people should and should not enjoy, or of how much they should enjoy them.

But where the *EE* comes up short, the *EN* goes on to describe more exactly the foods temperate people enjoy consuming:

But such pleasures as conduce to health and fitness [the temperate person] will desire moderately and as he should, as well as other pleasures that do not get in the way of health and fitness, so long as they are neither ignoble nor beyond his means. He who is otherwise disposed cares for such pleasures more than they are worth. The temperate man is not like this; he cares for them as right reason prescribes (III.11, 1119a16–20).

Two kinds of foods are mentioned here: foods that contribute to health and fitness, and foods that are merely consistent with health and fitness (and that are neither base nor too expensive). It will be convenient to call foods that meet the first condition *healthful* foods, those that meet the second *treats*, and those that meet one or the other *wholesome* foods.

According to the *EN*, then, temperate people take physical pleasure in consuming wholesome foods. They are disposed to enjoy consuming what is healthful and not to enjoy what is unhealthful, and to this extent physical pleasure serves them as an index to the healthful. Had Aristotle restricted the enjoyments of temperate people to healthful foods, it would be reasonable to interpret his view of the temperate person's stance towards the pleasures of eating and drinking as one of mere acceptance: eating and drinking are activities in which, as animals, we must engage; we might as well enjoy the pleasures these activities naturally bring. But Aristotle's inclusion of treats within the category of

wholesome foods complicates matters. Apparently his idea<sup>23</sup> is that a temperate person will on occasion eat or drink something solely for the sake of the pleasure it brings. And his holding that temperate people will indulge in treats seems to suggest that, in his view, temperate people do more than merely accept the pleasures of eating and drinking even healthful foods. It seems to be Aristotle's view that, while eating and drinking are activities in which, being animals, we must engage, temperate people welcome—delight in—the pleasures these activities bring.<sup>24</sup>

Now that we know which foods temperate people take pleasure in consuming, we are in a position to give an account of Aristotelian temperance that makes explicit its connection with practical reason. For, in fixing the appetites of temperate people by reference to his list of wholesome foods, Aristotle's point cannot be that these appetites merely happen to come to rest on such foods. Such coincidence would be the mark of what, using the language of *EN* VI.13, Aristotle would call "natural" temperance—the normal result of a proper upbringing with respect to the pleasures of food and drink. His point must rather be that, in the case of temperate people, practical reason fixes appetite. One has Aristotelian temperance, in other words, just in case one's judgments as to which foods are wholesome determine one's peculiar appetites for food and drink.<sup>25</sup>

## VI.

The excessive state with respect to the pleasures of food and drink is profligacy. Profligates go to excess, Aristotle says, in enjoying "what they should not" (*EN* III.11, 1118b25) and in enjoying even what they should "more than they should or more than most people" (1118b26). Since the foods one "should" enjoy

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<sup>23</sup>Shared by G. H. von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 148, and N. J. H. Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 132–133.

<sup>24</sup>For a modern account of temperance with similarities to Aristotle's, see Dent, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5.

<sup>25</sup>I ignore the difficult question of the extent to which these judgments need to be correct.



are wholesome foods, part of Aristotle's point here is that, unlike the appetites of temperate people, the appetites of profligates are not fixed by Aristotle's list of wholesome foods. But why, exactly, are the appetites of profligates undetermined in this way, and why do they go to excess even in their enjoyment of wholesome foods? Aristotle does not answer these questions directly, but he says enough, I think, to allow us to see what he has in mind. For he regularly associates profligacy with a view about the worth of the pleasures of eating and drinking in human life. Profligates, he says, "choose [the pleasures of food and drink] instead of other things" (1119a2–3); they "like such pleasures more than they are worth" (1119a19–20); indeed, they "like [these pleasures] most of all," *agapan malista* (1118b4). The clear suggestion of these remarks is that the errors of excess characteristic of profligates derive from a mistaken view they hold of the value of the pleasures of eating and drinking. Profligates enjoy consuming what they should not, and derive more pleasure than they should from consuming what they should, because they take it that physical pleasure is worthy of serious pursuit.

Aristotle invents the term "insensible" for those who are deficient with respect to the pleasures of food and drink. Such people "enjoy the pleasures [of eating and drinking] less than they should" (III.11, 1119a5–6); they find "nothing pleasant, or more pleasant than anything else" (1119a9). Since Aristotle limits temperance to peculiar appetites, his point here must be that insensible people are deficient with respect to these appetites, and not, or not necessarily, with respect to common appetites. Thus we may presume, I think, that insensible people eat and drink what is necessary to maintain their bodies, but that they take little or no pleasure (beyond the pleasures of repletion) in doing so. Insensible people, then, are not to be confused with anorexics. Their problem is not that they eat and drink too little, but that they partake too little of the pleasures that eating and drinking naturally bring. They are insensitive to the pleasures temperate people welcome.

## VII.

Before summing up, I should deal with a few loose ends: taste, sex, and wine. Earlier I noted in passing that one curious aspect of

Aristotle's account of temperance is that he excludes the pleasures of taste from its sphere. This idea is common to the *EE* and the *EN*, but the *EN* offers a more effective defense of it. The *EE* offers us only the unargued claim that the other animals are insensitive to such pleasures, together with a point of folk wisdom to the effect that gluttons pray for long throats, not for long tongues (III.2, 1231a12–17). The *EN* does better, saying that taste involves the discrimination (*krisis*) of flavors, and arguing that it is cooks and wine-tasters who take pleasure in such discriminations, not profligates (III.10, 1118a26–30). The *EN*'s more effective exclusion of taste from the sphere of temperance is made possible, I think, by the greater stress the *EN* places on the connection between temperance and animality. Since, in the *EN*, temperance regulates pleasures that spring from our animality, Aristotle can argue with some plausibility that the pleasures of taste, because they involve discrimination, are too cerebral to rate inclusion.

Some plausibility, but not a lot. If Aristotle means to exclude taste altogether from the sphere of temperance, he surely goes too far.<sup>26</sup> In the first place, people are commonly led to eat or drink too much because they like the taste of certain foods. Aristotle appreciates this fact elsewhere—the case of incontinence analyzed at *EN* VII.3, 1147a24–b5, for example, makes taste the culprit—and it would be unfortunate if no place could be found for the pleasures of taste in his account of temperance. Second, it is only by restricting taste to the discriminations typical of cooks and wine-tasters that Aristotle is able to argue that the pleasures of taste are not the concern of temperance. But the proper object of taste is not the differences between flavors but the flavors themselves (see *De Anima* II.10, 422a17). And, while Aristotle is no doubt correct in supposing that profligates (as such) do not take pleasure in gustatory discrimination, this is not a sufficient reason for him to think that the pleasures of gustation itself play no role in profligacy.

The key to understanding Aristotle's exclusion of taste from temperance is the distinction between common and peculiar appetites. As we have seen, Aristotle grounds common appetites in

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<sup>26</sup>And *epi mikron* at III.10, 1118a27, may show that he would stop short of this.

physical needs and peculiar appetites in individual preferences. But he is silent on the question why particular people have the preferences they do. One person may like Athenian pastries and another broccoli, but Aristotle offers no explanation of why this might be. His silence here is understandable, for it is not likely that there is any structure to the variety of explanations for why people like to eat the things they do.<sup>27</sup> They may like to eat certain foods because they were trained to eat them, because the foods are healthful, because they were forbidden those foods as children, because the foods have pleasant associations, or—crucially for our present purposes—because they like the taste of those foods. Thus there really is a place for the pleasures of taste in Aristotle's account of temperance, albeit a small one: they enter in as one of the explanations for why people like to eat and drink the things they do.<sup>28</sup> Still, Aristotle seems right to have excluded the pleasures of taste from the sphere of temperance proper. Taste may explain why we have some of the preferences we do, but it is in respect of the preferences themselves, and not their grounds, that temperance is displayed.

A second curious feature of Aristotle's official account of temperance in *EN* III.10–12 is that it slights sex and ignores alcohol altogether.<sup>29</sup> Sex is mentioned twice (III.10, 1118a31–32, and III.11, 1118b11), but it does not receive serious attention. Wine is mentioned once (III.10, 1118a28), but only to make the point that profligacy is not concerned with pleasures taken in discriminating flavors. The explanation for these curiosities is to be found in Aristotle's connecting temperance to physical needs. Aristotelian temperance is not concerned with alcohol, I suggest, because Aristotle sees no physical need for alcohol in normal human beings. So too with sex. We do have a natural appetite for sex, Aristotle concedes elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> but our appetites for sex, unlike our appetites

<sup>27</sup>Indeed, Aristotle says at *EN* III.11, 1118b9, that such pleasures are "adventitious" (*epithetoi*) and at *Metaphysics* VI.2, 1026b26–27, that "there is no science of the incidental."

<sup>28</sup>For the other animals, Aristotle thinks, taste serves as an index to the nutritious. See *De Anima*, III.13, 434b22–24, and *De Sensu* 1, 436b15–17.

<sup>29</sup>Elsewhere Aristotle does include both sexual activity and alcohol within the scope of temperance and profligacy. See, for example, *EN* VII.14, 1154a17–18.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, *De Anima* II.4, 415a22–b7. Here Aristotle goes so far as to say that all of a living creature's activities, including nutrition, have as their end the propagation of its species.

for food and drink, do not spring from physical needs.<sup>31</sup> We can live without sex, but not without food and drink.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle ignores alcohol, then, because our appetite for it has no physical basis. And he treats sex uncertainly, because, although it does have a physical basis, it is not based in a physical need.<sup>33</sup>

## VIII.

I have argued that, for Aristotle, temperate people are those whose judgments as to which foods are wholesome determine their appetites for food and drink. This is, I think, a plausible view of temperance. But it is worthwhile, in addition, to appreciate the special expression Aristotle gives to his view with the language of his metaphysical psychology.

The point to stress is his insistence on connecting temperance with animality. For Aristotle, human beings are animal in genus. As animals, we are naturally subject to appetites for food and drink, and we are sensitive to the various pleasures the satisfaction of these appetites can bring. Aristotelian temperance concerns the place of such pleasures in human life. Since our animality is not the distinguishing aspect of our humanity, the pleasures relating to it should not be of major concern to us. Still, our susceptibility to these pleasures is grounded in the sort of creature we are: our animality is part of our essence. The field of Aristotelian temperance, then, is the relation of a rational animal to its animality, as

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<sup>31</sup>Note that even when Aristotle gives sex as an example of a common appetite he does not connect it with a need: "Everyone who needs it desires solid or liquid nourishment, and sometimes both, and the young and lusty want sex, as Homer says" (*EN* III.10, 1118b10–11).

<sup>32</sup>*De Anima* II.4, 415a23–26, and especially 416a19, treat nutrition and reproduction as strictly parallel in their contribution to propagation, and *EN* VII.4, 1147b24–28, describes both activities as necessary. But, while it may be true that the ultimate purpose of nutrition is the preservation of species, the fact remains that nutrition also preserves individual organisms, and this is not true of sexual activity.

<sup>33</sup>There are, of course, various ways in which Aristotle could bring sexual activity and the consumption of alcohol into the scope of temperance. He might say, for example, that it would be characteristic of temperate people to enjoy these activities properly, even though such enjoyment does not exhibit temperance proper—as it would be characteristic of courageous persons to bear up well in a prisoner of war camp, even though this does not (on Aristotle's account) exhibit courage proper.

expressed in the pleasures it takes in the animal activities of eating and drinking.

Profligates over-value these pleasures. Such pleasures do, on Aristotle's account, have value—temperate people, as we saw, do take pleasure in eating and drinking, and they will even consume certain foods solely for the sake of pleasure. But the value of these pleasures is strictly limited. As activities we engage in because we are animals, eating and drinking are not distinctively human activities, and the pleasures these activities bring are not distinctively human pleasures. The distinctively human pleasures are rather found, Aristotle thinks, in activities he associates with rationality,<sup>34</sup> the human differentia, and it is these activities, according to him, that should fill our lives, so far as possible (X.7, 1177b26–1178a8). It may therefore be said that, in the importance they attach to the pleasures of eating and drinking, profligates in effect submit to their animality. And to call them bestial is a fair and accurate reproach (III.10, 1118b1–4; see also *EE* I.5, 1215b30–36).

Insensible people err in the contrary direction. The pleasures of eating and drinking are not worth as much as profligates think, but they are worth something, and insensible people go wrong in taking little or no pleasure in food and drink. Their error, like that of profligates, reflects a more serious one. Although not the most important part, our animality is a real part of our humanity.<sup>35</sup> It is our genus, and in taking little or no pleasure in food and drink, insensible people in effect repudiate this aspect of their humanity. As Aristotle puts it, “insensibility is not human” (III.11, 1119a6–7); “a creature to whom nothing is pleasant, and to whom nothing is more pleasant than anything else is very far from a human being” (1119a9–10). Profligates may submit to their animality, but insensible people disown theirs altogether. The name Aristotle coins for their condition, *anaisthēsia* (insensibility), is singularly apt: *anaisthēsia* is the lack of *aisthēsis* (sensation), which the *De Anima* makes definitive of animality.

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<sup>34</sup>In *EN* X.5, Aristotle makes pleasure relative to the activity in which it is taken and uses this idea to define the class of characteristically human pleasures as those that perfect or complete the characteristically human activity or activities.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. *Parts of Animals* I.5, 645a26–28: “If anyone supposes the study of the other animals to be worthless, he ought to hold the same opinion also about himself.”

Temperate persons avoid either extreme. Unlike insensible people, they do take pleasure in food and drink; unlike profligates, they take only limited pleasure. What limits their appetites, moreover, is what gives rise to the appetites in the first place: animality. For temperate people take physical pleasure only in eating and drinking what is good for their bodies, or at least not harmful to them. In their relation to their animality, then, temperate people differ both from profligates and from insensible people. Profligates submit to their animality; insensible people repudiate theirs. The achievement of temperate people is that they acknowledge their animality without submitting to it.

## IX.

I conclude by locating Aristotle's conception of temperance, and Plato's too, in relation to the Greek ideal each seeks to articulate. Greek temperance has two distinguishable aspects, one intellectual and one moral.<sup>36</sup> Intellectual temperance is a matter of self-knowledge. It contrasts with *hubris*, arrogance, and consists in a consciousness of one's place and of the limits that this implies. It is intellectual temperance, mainly, that Plato seeks to define in the *Charmides*. Moral temperance is a matter of self-control, not self-knowledge. It contrasts with *akolasia*, profligacy, and involves the control of spirit, and especially of appetite, by reason. This is the state Plato tries to define in *Republic* IV, and what concerns Aristotle in the *EE* and the *EN*.<sup>37</sup> But both Plato and Aristotle—each in his own way—manage to combine the two aspects of the Greek ideal in their accounts of moral temperance. For Plato in the *Republic*, reason controls appetite only when appetite accepts the hegemony of reason: a person is temperate, Socrates says, “when the ruling element [reason] and the ruled elements [spirit and appetite] agree in the belief that reason ought to rule, and the latter two do not rebel” (*Republic* 442c11–d1). Thus Plato represents moral temperance as the product of a kind of intellectual temper-

<sup>36</sup>See North, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup>Aristotle alludes to intellectual temperance at least twice in the *EN*. In IV.3, he contrasts the magnanimous man, who rightly considers himself worthy of great things, with the *sōphrōn* or unassuming man, who is worth little and knows it (1123b5). And at IV.4, 1125b12–13, he notes that we praise the unambitious man as *sōphrōn*.

ance: reason controls appetite when appetite knows its place in the community that is the soul. Aristotle makes moral temperance the product of a different kind of intellectual temperance. For him, people properly control their appetites when they are properly inflected towards their animality—when they acknowledge it without submitting to it. To have Aristotelian temperance, then, is to embody the recognition that one is animal in genus and rational in species. It is to know one's place in the community of souls.<sup>38</sup>

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