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TASTE, TOUCH, AND TEMPERANCE IN *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* 3.10

The aim of this paper is to clarify the nature of a link between Aristotle's account of temperance (σωφροσύνη) in *Eth. Nic.* 3.10 and his treatment of the five perceptual modalities—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—in the psychological and biological works.[1] The precise character of this link has not been properly understood within the scholarly literature and if the standard contemporary view of the link is to persist unchecked, Aristotle will be left open to charges of inconsistency both in respect to certain of his claims regarding perception and in respect to his views on the relation between ethics and psychology. I offer an analysis that both illuminates the specific nature of the link and saves Aristotle from charges of inconsistency.

Let us accept that, for Aristotle, the moral virtues are non-relative insofar as each is a specification of what it is to be suitably disposed to act in appropriate ways regarding a sphere of experience that is grounded in a universal and necessary feature of human life.[2] Let us also accept that, while dialectic (argument from common opinions: ἔνδοξα) is the method of ethics, Aristotle believes that the study of ethics requires a degree of familiarity with psychology and that the truths of ethics cohere with the truths of psychology (see *Eth. Nic.* 1.13, 1102a18–27).[3] The issue is whether the standard contemporary view provides an adequate account of what Aristotle says about perception within his discussion of temperance.

In *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, Aristotle limits the scope of temperance, and its related vices of profligacy (ἀκολασία) and insensibility (ἀναισθησία), by way of an extended dialectical argument.[4] First, he excludes the pleasures of intellect from the scope of

[1] It is widely agreed that certain of Aristotle's claims regarding perception in *Eth. Nic.* 3.10 are best understood in light of his theory of perception, which is set out in *De An.* and elaborated in *Sens.*, *Part. An.*, and *Hist. An.* See J. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics* 1 (Oxford, 1892), 309–11; J. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford, 1988), 67–70; C. Young, 'Aristotle on temperance', *Philosophical Review* 97 (1988), 521–42, at 527–8; C. Freeland, 'Aristotle on the sense of touch' in M. Nussbaum and A. Rorty (edd.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford, 1992), 227–48, at 238–41; and T. K. Johansen, *Aristotle on the Sense-Organs* (Cambridge, 1998), 221–2. Young goes farther than others by attempting to provide a comprehensive account of the theoretical underpinnings of the link. His account has been highly influential. Thus, I shall refer to it as the standard contemporary view.

[2] See M. Nussbaum, 'Non-relative virtues: an Aristotelian approach', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), 32–53.

[3] The paradigm example of Aristotle's use of dialectic to reach truths in ethics that cohere with truths in psychology is the ἔργον-argument in *Eth. Nic.* 1.7. In that argument, Aristotle employs a tripartite division of living creatures that reflects the taxonomy of psychological capacities which is set out in *De An.* 2.2–3. (Humans possess intellectual capacities, perceptual capacities, and nutritive capacities. Animals lack intellectual capacities, while plants lack both intellectual and perceptual capacities.) However, the crucial premises in the argument are drawn from what 'we say' (φαμεν, 1098a8) and from what 'is believed' (δόξειεν, 1097b28; δοκεῖ, 1097b27 and 1098a7). While his treatment of the human ἔργον is in complete harmony with his own psychological theory, Aristotle makes no explicit appeal to that theory within the argument. On the role of dialectic in the ἔργον-argument, see J. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), 69–70; T. Roche, 'On the alleged metaphysical foundation of Aristotle's *Ethics*', *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988), 49–62; and R. Bolton, 'The objectivity of ethics', in J. Anton and A. Preus (edd.), *Aristotle's Ethics: Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* 4 (1991), 7–28.

[4] The argument in *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, like the ἔργον-argument in *Eth. Nic.* 1.7, rests on a survey of

temperance, by noting that we do not call people who are ambitious or love learning either temperate or profligate (1117b32–3). Second, turning to the pleasures of the body, he excludes the pleasures of the distal senses—sight, hearing, and smell—from the scope of temperance, by appealing to our knowledge of predatory animals, like the hound and the lion. These animals, Aristotle claims, are pleased merely *κατὰ συμβεβηκός* by the sight, sound, and scent of their prey (1118a16–18). In contrast, Aristotle suggests, they are pleased *καθ' αὑτό* by the meal (1118a22–3). At this non-terminal stage in the argument, Aristotle offers a subordinate conclusion:

περὶ τάς τοιαύτας δὴ ἡδονὰς ἡ σωφροσύνη καὶ ἡ ἀκολασία ἐστὶν ὧν καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ζῶα κοινωνεῖ, ὅθεν ἀνδραποδώδεις καὶ θηριώδεις φαίνονται· αὗται δ' εἰσὶν ἁφὴ καὶ γεῦσις.
(*Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1118a23–6)

He asserts that temperance concerns (at most) the pleasures that all animals share in (*κοινωνεῖ*, 1118a25). These pleasures, which are common to all animals, are the pleasures of touch and taste. Third, Aristotle goes on to exclude the pleasures of taste from the scope of temperance by noting that cooks and wine-tasters take pleasure in flavour, and yet are not held to be profligate, and by mentioning a bit of folk wisdom concerning a gourmand who prayed for a longer throat, not a longer tongue, so that he might take even more pleasure in his decadent lifestyle (1118a28–b1; cf. *Eth. Eud.* 3.2, 1231a15–16). Aristotle concludes,

κοινοτάτη δὴ τῶν αἰσθήσεων [*ἁφή*; sc. 1118a35] *καθ' ἣν ἡ ἀκολασία· καὶ δόξειεν ἂν δικαίως ἐπονείδιστος εἶναι, ὅτι οὐχ ᾗ ἄνψρωποί ἐσμεν ὑπάρχει, αλλ' ᾗ ζῶα.*
(*Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1118b1–3)

The vice of profligacy, together with the virtue of temperance, is limited in its scope to the pleasures of touch, for touch is the *most common* (*κοινοτάτη*, 1118b1) of the senses and it is the sense that belongs to us insofar as we are animals. In sum, Aristotle contends that temperance, profligacy, and insensibility directly concern only our dispositions toward certain tactile pleasures.[5]

According to the standard view, Aristotle's claim that touch is *κοινοτάτη* should be understood in light of a taxonomic distinction found in the psychological works.[6] In *De Anima*, Aristotle claims that all animals possess touch, while only some animals possess the other perceptual modalities (*De An.* 2.2, 413b2–8 and 3.11, 433b31–434a2). Touch, then, is taxonomically separate from the other perceptual modalities. Animals must possess touch in order to meet their basic need to discern food. Aristotle states,

ἔτι δὲ τῆς τροφῆς αἴσθησιν ἔχουσιν· ἡ γὰρ ἁφὴ τῆς τροφῆς αἴσθησις· ξηροῖς γὰρ καὶ ὑγροῖς καὶ θερμοῖς καὶ ψυχροῖς τρέφεται τὰ ζῶα πάντα, τούτων δ' αἴσθησις ἁφή·
(*De An.* 2.3, 414b6–9)

While plants have a capacity to draw their food without discernment from their immediate environment, animals must discern their food and, since food is essentially

common opinions (*ἔνδοξα*). The crucial premises in the argument come from what 'we say' (*λέγομεν*, 1118a1 and a11; *λέγονται*, 1117b32 and 1118a5; *λέγει*, 1118a8) and from what 'is believed' (*δόξειεν*, 1118a5) about temperance and profligacy.

[5] These include not only the pleasures of eating and drinking, but also the pleasures of sex (see *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1118b6–8 and 3.11, 1118b9–12).

[6] '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 *E.N.* as the "most common" of the senses' (Young [n. 1], 527).

tangible, animals must possess the perceptual modality of touch. So, according to the standard view, Aristotle's claim, in *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, that touch is the *most common* (κοινοτάτη, 1118b1) of the senses rests on the scientific thesis of the taxonomic separateness of touch.[7] If touch is the most animal, the most bestial, of the perceptual modalities, then it stands to reason that its pleasures are the most bestial pleasures, the pleasures which are the chief concern of the temperate person.

The difficulty with this view is that it treads on an important detail from the psychological theory. Aristotle does not think that taste is an independent perceptual modality. Rather, he thinks that taste is a kind of touch.[8] First, taste is not a distal sense. It, like (the other modes of) touch, works through contact with the perceptible object (*De An.* 2.10, 422a8–9 and 3.12, 434b18–19).[9] Second, and more importantly, taste is linked to nutrification. Aristotle describes flavour (the object of taste) as a kind of seasoning of nourishment (*De An.* 2.3, 414b13–14). Consequently, he argues that taste together with (other modes of) touch is necessary for animal life:

> ὥστε καὶ τὴν γεῦσιν ἀνάγκη ἁφὴν εἶναί τινα, διὰ τὸ τοῦ ἁπτοῦ καὶ θρεπτικοῦ αἴσθησιν εἶναι. αὗται μὲν οὖν ἀναγκαῖαι τῷ ζώω . . .
>
> (*De An.* 3.12, 434b21–3; cf. *Sens.* 1, 436b14–19 and 2, 455a7)

Touch, then, is not taxonomically separate from sight, hearing, smell, *and* taste. Rather, touch and taste together are taxonomically separate from sight, hearing, and smell, while they are not taxonomically separate from one another.[10] So, in those cases where Aristotle claims that all animals possess touch, he must be implicitly subsuming taste under touch. But, since the standard view is blind to this detail, it fails to provide an adequate account of the link between Aristotle's discussion of temperance and his theory of perception.[11] For this reason, it leaves Aristotle open to

[7] In support of this view, one might appeal to T. K. Johansen's recent analysis of Aristotle's discussion of the peculiar features of certain oviparous species in *Part. An.* 4.11 (see Johansen [n. 1], 221–2). According to Johansen, Aristotle maintains that the river crocodile lacks a tongue and experiences only a tactile enjoyment of its food. If Johansen is right, then Aristotle provides us with empirical evidence for the taxonomic separateness of touch.

[8] Passages in which Aristotle claims that taste is a kind of touch include: *De An.* 2.9, 421a18–19; *De An.* 2.10, 422a8–9; *De An.* 3.12, 434b18–19; *Sens.* 2, 439a1–2; *Sens.* 4, 441a3; *Part. An.* 2.10, 656b37–657a1; and *Part. An.* 2.17 660a20–2.

[9] Moreover, Aristotle argues that the cause of taste being more accurate than smell is that taste is a type of touch, while smell is not. Touch, he thinks, is the most accurate perceptual modality (*De An.* 2.9, 421a19–20; *Sens.* 4, 441a3; *Part. An.* 2.17, 660a1).

[10] In addition, *contra* Johansen, the example of the river crocodile in *Part. An.* 4.11 does not show that Aristotle considers this species to lack the perceptual modality of taste. Aristotle claims that his own discussion of the crocodile '. . . agrees with our previous statement that some fish appear to have no tongue, unless you pull the mouth very well open . . .' (*Part. An.* 4.11, 690b24–6). The previous discussion of the organ of taste in aquatic animals is found in *Part. An.* 2.17. In that chapter, it is made clear that our tongueless fish are not tongueless at all, but have rather poorly developed tongues. These fish have short spinous tongues that will go undetected, unless you pull the mouth open wide (660b23–4). But, if these fish are not strictly tongueless, then it would seem that the river crocodile is not strictly tongueless. And, in *Part. An.* 2.17, Aristotle says as much. He states that these fish '. . . have a paltry sort of tongue, very like what the river crocodiles have' (660b14–15). Thus, the example of the river crocodile fails to provide evidence that, for Aristotle, the perceptual modality of taste fails to be common to all animals. Further, the biological works provide us with a positive rationale for supposing that all animals have taste. Aristotle claims that anything with a mouth has taste (*Hist. An.* 4.4, 535a6–19) and he also claims that the mouth is common to all animals (*Part. An.* 3.1, 662a19–20). Together these claims entail that all animals have taste.

[11] J. Burnet takes Aristotle's claim that touch is the *most common* (κοινοτάτη, 1118b1) of the

the charge that his ethical theory is not wholly consistent with his psychological theory. What, then, does Aristotle mean when he claims that, while all animals share in (*κοινωνεῖ*, 1118a25) taste and touch, touch (now non-gustatory touch) is the *most common* (*κοινοτάτη*, 1118b1) of the senses?

Aristotle's meaning becomes clear, once we consider a pair of passages from the biological works in which he uses a superlative of *κοινός*:

τῶν δ' ὁμοιομερῶν κοινότατον μέν ἐστι τὸ αἷμα πᾶσι τοῖς ἐναίμοις ζώοις καὶ τὸ μόριον ἐν ᾧ πέφυκεν ἐγγίγωεσθαι (τοῦτο δὲ καλεῖται φλέψ) . . . (*Hist. An.* 3.2, 511b1–3)

περὶ δ' αἵματος ὧδε ἔχει· τοῦτο γὰρ πᾶσιν ἀναγκαιότατον καὶ κοινότατον τοῖς ἐναίμοις . . . (*Hist. An.* 3.19, 520b10–11)

According to Aristotle, blood is the *most common* (*κοινότατον*, 511b1 and 520b11) part among the homoiomerous parts of sanguineous species. But, crucially, blood is not the only homoiomerous part that is found in all sanguineous species. Among the parts that are common to all such animals are vascular networks, skin, membrane, and sinew.[12] Among the parts that are not common to all such animals, are hair (as opposed to feather or scale) and fat (as opposed to suet).[13] Since blood is not the only part that is common to all sanguineous species,[14] Aristotle's use of *κοινότατον* (at 511b1 and 520b11) cannot be taken to mark a taxonomic distinction. Instead, it should be taken to mark a functional distinction. As Aristotle's discussion in *Hist. An.* 3 and *Part. An.* 2–3 clearly shows, blood is functionally more basic than the other parts of sanguineous species. Blood is the ultimate nutriment (or food) of the body: it is the material out of which the rest of the body is both formed and maintained (*Part. An.* 2.4, 651a14 and 2.6, 652a7). So, while other parts of the body are constituted out of blood, blood is not constituted out of other parts. Further, certain parts that are common to all sanguineous species are present only for the sake of the functioning of blood. Take, for example, the vascular networks. These networks are hypothetically necessary. They must be present, if blood is to be present, since blood is a fluid and, as such, must have its own receptacle (*Part. An.* 3.4, 665b11–14 and 3.5, 667b18–21). So, while blood is for the sake of the growth and maintenance of the body, vascular networks are for the sake of the flow of blood. The evidence from the biological works shows that blood is not taxonomically separate from certain other homoiomerous parts of sanguineous species. However, the evidence also shows that blood plays the most fundamental functional role within the nutritive systems of sanguineous species. It is this functional role which Aristotle has in mind when he

senses to be equivalent to his earlier claim that all animals share in (*κοινωνεῖ*, 1118a25) taste and touch (see his *The Ethics of Aristotle* [London, 1900], 157). But this interpretation is not satisfactory, since it requires that we ignore the implication of Aristotle's appeal to cooks and wine-tasters, at 1118a28–9.

[12] See *Hist. An.* 4.1, 523a31–3. Regarding vascular networks, see *Hist. An.* 3.4a15–19, *Part. An.* 3.4, 665b12–15, and 3.5, 667b17–20. Regarding skin, see *Hist. An.* 3.11, 518a5; membrane, see *Hist. An.* 3.13, 519a30; and sinew, see *Hist. An.* 3.5, 515b23–24. Neither flesh nor bone is included within this group, since some sanguineous species possess parts that are merely analogous to these. See *Hist. An.* 3.7 and 3.16.

[13] Regarding hair, see *Hist. An.* 3.11, 518a5–6. Regarding fat, see *Hist. An.* 3.17 (in this chapter, Aristotle treats fat and suet as differing in kind, but at *Part. An.* 2.5, 651a20–1 he seems to treat them as differing in degree and not in kind).

[14] Among the non-homoiomerous parts, the heart, the liver and the omentum are common to all sanguineous species. Regarding the heart, see *Part. An.* 3.4, 665b10–11 and 666a20–4; regarding the liver, see *Part. An.* 3.4, 666a24–5; and regarding the omentum, see *Part. An.* 4.3 and *Hist. An.* 3.14, 519b7–8.

claims that blood is the *most common* (κοινότατον, 511b1 and 520b11) of the homoiomerous parts.

It appears that Aristotle has a similar functional distinction in mind, when he claims that touch is the *most common* (κοινοτάτη, *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1118b1) of the senses.[15] While both taste and touch serve the needs of the nutritive soul in the process of feeding, touch plays the more fundamental functional role in this process. Consider this: if the pleasures of taste were pleasurable καθ' αὑτό, then animals would do no more than simply taste their food. They would not consume it. But, of course, they do consume their food and, as Aristotle explains it, they do so out of a desire for a tactile pleasure that is itself pleasurable καθ' αὑτό. All animals, he thinks, are especially keen on the tactile pleasure that is caused when food passes down the gullet and distends the oesophagus. First, this is suggested by Aristotle's appeal to the story about the gourmand (*Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1118a28-b1). This man prayed for a longer throat, not a longer tongue, because he was above all keen on the more primitive and bestial pleasures of consumption. His passion was for the pleasures of touch in the gullet and the oesophagus (*Eth. Eud.* 3.2, 1231a12–15).[16] Second, in the biological works, Aristotle maintains that the enjoyment of consumption comes primarily from the experience of having food pass down through the gullet and distend the oesophagus. In *Part. An.* 4.1, he states,

> καὶ σχεδὸν τῶν πλείστων ὄψων καὶ ἐδεστῶν ἐν τῇ καταπόσει τῇ τάσει τοῦ οἰσοφάγου γίνεται ἡ χάρις· (690b35–691a2)

Touch, then, in comparison to taste, plays the more basic functional role in the process of feeding.[17] So, when Aristotle claims that touch is the *most common* (κοινοτάτη, 1118b1) of the senses, he is offering a functional distinction. While all animals possess both taste and touch, it is touch (in the gullet and the oesophagus) that plays the fundamental perceptual role in the bestial activity of feeding. Thus, its

[15] After all, we should not expect the distinction regarding κοινοτάτη (1118b1) to be a taxonomic distinction, when the distinction regarding κοινωνεῖ (1118a25) marks only a functional distinction and not a taxonomic one. In excluding the pleasures of the distal senses from the scope of temperance, Aristotle assesses the functional role of such pleasures in the behavioural economies of non-rudimentary animals. The hound and the lion possess the full slate of perceptual modalities. If the distinction regarding κοινωνεῖ were meant to mark a taxonomic distinction, it would be appropriate for Aristotle to appeal to the behavioural economies of particular rudimentary animals (like the barnacle and the oyster) and not to the behavioural economies of the hound and the lion.

[16] The river crocodile proves to be akin to our gourmand. It is greedy for food and its chief pleasure is experienced, not in tasting its food, but in swallowing it (*Part. An.* 4.11, 690b27–9).

[17] It may also be the case that, for Aristotle, food is nutritious because of its tactile qualities and not because of its gustatory qualities. Among foods, that which is sweet is especially nutritious, while that which is bitter is not (*Sens.* 4, 442a1–2). Concoction, in the stomach, causes the sweet to rise up in the form of an evaporation, which is passed upwards through the veins to nourish the rest of the body. Concoction also causes the bitter to sink down in the form of a residue, which is ultimately excreted from the body (*Sens.* 3, 456b3–6, *Sens.* 4, 442a5–8, and *Mete.* 2.2, 355b4–12). Aristotle's account of digestion suggests that gustatory qualities are themselves indexed to certain tactile qualities—the light and the heavy—and it is these tactile qualities that play a direct causal role in the nutritive process. So, Aristotle may think that, while the sweet is nutritious, it is not nutritious because it is sweet. Rather, it is nutritious because it is light. If this is correct, then Aristotle takes taste to discern what is, in effect, only a precondition of food's acting as nourishment, while he takes touch (in the gullet and the oesophagus) to directly discern the nutritive value of food.

pleasures are the most bestial pleasures and these are the pleasures which are the chief concern of the temperate person.

This interpretation, from functional priority, shows that Aristotle's claims regarding taste and touch in *Eth. Nic.* 3.10 are in harmony with his treatment of perception in the psychological and biological works. Further, it does not jeopardize Aristotle's contention that the truths of ethics cohere with the truths of psychology. Thus, this interpretation succeeds where the standard contemporary view has failed.

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