

Reading Guide

Weakness of the Will and Procrastination

Readings for 15 February 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, chapters 1-4, 6-10 – detailed instructions below.

[B] Robert Nozick, “How to Do Things with Principles” from *The Nature of Rationality*, pp. 3, 9-26, 35-40. (V*2)

[C] Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch, “Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment” *Psychological Science* Vol. 13: 3 (2002), pp. 219-224. (V*2)

READINGS (RECOMMENDED)

[D] RE-READ: Dan Ariely, “The Problem of Procrastination and Self-Control.” Chapter 6 from *Predictably Irrational* (Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 109-126. (V*2)

[E] Walter Mischel, Yuichi Shoda and Monica Rodriguez, “Delay of Gratification in Children” (2003), pp.202-211 (V*2) (If you did not read this for 02/10/11)

[A] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII , chapters 1-4, 6-10 (pp. 99-114).

Background

[For general background information about Aristotle and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see the Reading Guide for January 25]

I realize that this text is difficult. Don't worry if you don't understand everything. Just try to read through the text carefully – helped by the notes (pp. 256ff) and glossary (pp. 315ff) – to get a sense of what questions Aristotle is concerned with, and what responses he offers to those questions.

Passages to focus on/passages to skip or skim

- Read quickly through Book VII, chapter 1, sections 1-5
- Read carefully Book VII, chapter 1, sections 6-7
- Read through Book VII, chapter 2, but don't worry about understanding the details
- Read carefully Book VII, chapter 3
- Read through Book VII, chapter 4, but don't worry about understanding the details
- Skip or skim Book VII, chapter 5

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- Read carefully Book VII, chapter 6
- Read Book VII, chapter 7, but don't worry about the details
- Read carefully Book VII, chapter 8
- Read Book VII, chapter 9 reasonably carefully
- Read carefully Book VII, chapter 10

- **For each of these passages, the Irwin edition has extensive notes, beginning on p. 256, that should be *extremely* helpful in enabling you to understand the material**

- **You may also find it helpful to make use of Irwin's glossary of terms, which begins on p. 315**

- *Terminological note:* At the beginning of Book VII, Aristotle contrasts three conditions of character that he says are to be avoided: vice, incontinence, and "bestiality." "Bestiality" in Aristotle's sense is not to be confused with the contemporary term "bestiality" (although it's an open question whether one must be "bestial" in Aristotle's sense to engage what we refer to as bestiality). Aristotle here defines bestiality with respect to its opposite, divine or god-like virtue, "virtue superior to us," or perhaps more accurately, a state "more honorable than virtue," usually only found in gods.[Aristotle gives some examples of persons he takes to be "bestial" in Book VII, Ch. 5, among them cannibals and persons with severe mental disorders. Because this section raises a complicated set of issues that lie beyond the scope of the course, the text is optional.]

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Make sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts:

Terms and Concepts: incontinence/continence, incontinence/intemperance, softness/resistance, impetuosity/weakness, prudence

Reading Questions

As you read, pay special attention to the following issues and questions:

- (1) What distinguishes the incontinent person (*akratic*) from the continent person (*enkratic*), according to Aristotle? What distinguishes the incontinent person from the intemperate one?
- (2) What is the difference between incontinence of spirit and incontinence of appetite? Why does Aristotle think the latter is more problematic than the former?
- (3) Why does Aristotle think that the intemperate person is worse than the incontinent one?
- (4) What is the difference, according to Aristotle, between the incontinent person and the base one? Between the impetuous type of incontinence and the weak type of incontinence?
- (5) How does the discussion in this chapter connect to the discussions of virtue and habit that we read in Books I, II and X?

[B] Robert Nozick, “How to Do Things with Principles” from *The Nature of Rationality*, pp. 3, 9-26, 35-40. (V*2)

Background

[For general background information about Nozick, see the Reading Guide for February 1.]

The chapter that we are reading for today comes from the opening pages of Nozick’s 1993 book *The Nature of Rationality*. As you will quickly see, this is a much denser text than *The Examined Life*, from which our selections on Love were drawn. Still, I think you will find this chapter engaging and largely readable. (Remember that if you find particular philosophical terms perplexing, you should consult your *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*.)

The endnotes for the selection can be found after page 40.

Passages to focus on/passages to skip or skim

- Read the first two paragraphs on page 3
- You may then skim or skip the opening section, “Intellectual Functions,” pp. 3-9
- Begin reading closely again on page 9 (“Interpersonal Functions”) and continue through page 26.
- You may skim or skip “Symbolic Utility” (pp. 26-35)
- Resume reading on page 35 (“Teleological Devices”) and continue to the end (p. 40) – don’t worry if you find this section a bit confusing

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Make sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts:

Terms and Concepts: hyperbolic discounting (Ainslie); sunk costs; drawing the line

Reading Questions

As you read, pay special attention to the following issues and questions:

- (1) What, according to Nozick, are some of the roles that principles can play in an interpersonal context?
- (2) What role does Nozick think principles might play defining one’s sense of personal identity?
- (3) What roles might principles play in overcoming temptation? (Make sure you understand the graph on p. 16.) How might sunk costs help one in this endeavor?
- (4) What does Nozick mean when he speaks of principles as “teleological devices”?

[C] Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch, “Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment” *Psychological Science* Vol. 13: 3 (2002), pp. 219-224.

[D] Dan Ariely, “The Problem of Procrastination and Self-Control.” Chapter 6 from *Predictably Irrational* (Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 109-126.

Background

[For background information about Ariely, see the Reading Guide for January 11.]

For the first session of the course, we read Ariely’s “The Problem of Procrastination and Self-Control” from his popular book *Predictably Irrational*. The piece we are reading for today is the scientific presentation (i.e. suitable for publication in a scientific journal) of the same hypotheses and data.

Passages to focus on/passages to skip or skim

Please read the article in full. You don’t need to worry about the details. We are reading this article so that you get a sense of how different scientific and popular presentations of the same ideas can be.

If you are not familiar with statistics, don’t worry about trying to understand the numbers: just try to get a sense of the general claims by looking at the graphs. (You may notice that there are little bars that look like railroad ties extending above and below the top part of each reported mean value. These are called “error bars,” and they can be used to visually determine, assuming other conditions hold, that the differences between two reported values are statistically significant. When (as in this case) the error-bars do not overlap one another, it is likely that the differences in results between conditions are not merely the result of chance.)

Reading Questions

As you read, pay special attention to the following issues and questions:

- (1) What notable differences are there between Ariely’s scientific and popular presentation of his procrastination studies?
- (2) How do the ideas in this reading connect to the issues raised by Aristotle and Nozick?

[Reading guide posted 02/11/11]