Philosophers do not agree whether a man can voluntarily do what he believes to be wrong. This disagreement has coloured their opinions of Aristotle’s treatment of incontinence in the seventh book of the Nicomachean Ethics. Some, believing that one cannot – unless prevented – fail to do what one believes to be the best thing to do at the moment of action, have praised Aristotle for sharing the same belief. Others, holding a different opinion, have regretted that Aristotle in this passage misrepresents the moral struggle. They have consoled themselves by alleging other texts in a contrary sense. Thus, Sir David Ross: “Aristotle elsewhere shows himself alive to the existence of a moral struggle, a conflict between rational wish and appetite, in which the agent has actual knowledge of the wrongness of the particular act that he does. We must suppose that interest in his favourite distinctions of potential and actual, of major and minor premise, has betrayed him into a formal theory which is inadequate to his own real view of the problem. What is missing in his formal theory is the recognition that incontinence is due not to failure of knowledge, but to weakness of will.” (Aristotle, 224).

I wish to argue that both the praise and the blame thus accorded to Aristotle are unwarranted. I shall try to show that in the central passage of Chapter Three (1147a24ff.), Aristotle expressly provides for the case “in which the agent has actual knowledge of the wrongness of the particular act that he does.” Failure to recognise this, I shall contend, is due to misunderstanding of the structure of the practical syllogism.

Aristotle’s starting-point is the popular notion of incontinence set out in the first two chapters. The incontinent man (ἀνομολόχος) properly so called, the one who merits the title without qualification, is a man who pursues pleasure (1146a32, b24), pleasures of touch and taste in food and drink and sex (1118a26ff). He is overcome by pleasure; yet he acts, it seems, willingly: for it is argued that a man cannot be

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wise (φρόνιμος) and incontinent at the same time, on the grounds that no-one would say that it was characteristic of the wise man to do evil willingly (1145b35, 1146a7). He does not, however, act on principle or out of considered choice: he does not believe that the thing to do is always to pursue the present pleasure (1146b23). He is contrasted with the intemperate man (ἀχώλακτος), who acts out of conviction and considered choice (1146a32). The incontinent man does not stick to his reasoning (1145b12): through passion he does what he knows to be wrong (εἰδὼς δὲν φαίνει πράττει διὰ πάθος 1145b12). Incontinence is something evil and blameworthy (1145b10).

We cannot assume that Aristotle himself would necessarily endorse every detail of the popular concept of incontinence: but that is where he starts from. Moreover, most of the details are reaffirmed after Aristotle's own analysis of the concept. The incontinent sans phrase pursues the excessive and unreasonable bodily pleasures of the intemperate, not by considered choice but against his better judgement (1148a7,17; 1151a7,11). He is conquered by desire (1149b2), pleasures (1150a13, b7,25), passion (1151a2); but he acts willingly for in a way he knows what he is doing and why (1152a15; cf. E. E. 1224a8ff). He is overcome by passion to the extent that he acts against the ὑβρικὸς λόγος, but not to the extent that he believes that he ought to pursue such pleasures without reserve; his principles are uncorrupted (1151a21). One form of incontinence consists in failing to stick to one's reasoning (1150b20). The incontinent man is conscious of his incontinence (1150b31). Incontinence is not only undesirable but blameworthy (1148b6); not just as a fault but as a kind of vice (ὡς κακία τις) (1148a3); not precisely κακία (1150b35, 1151a5), πονηρία rather than μοιχηθρία (1150b30-35), indeed the incontinent is not strictly even πονηρός, but just ἠμπορόψους (1152a17).

Aristotle's first and principal problem is this: how can a man be incontinent in action while making a correct judgement? (1145b22). If an agent has knowledge, must not his knowledge dominate his action? Socrates said that incontinence as popularly conceived was impossible. If someone judges that it is best to act thus and so, he cannot act otherwise; if he acts otherwise it must be that he does not know what is best. Socrates' theory is in clear contradiction to common sense: so the state of the incontinent needs investigation. If he acts through ignorance, then it must be a special kind of ignorance. δὴ γὰρ οὐκ οἴεται, he says, ὃ ἀξιαπειθομένος πρὶν ἐν τῷ πάθει γινέσθαι, φανερόν.