

Greek Views of Desire, Gender, Nature, Nurture, Ethnicity

NOTE: Please understand that the following readings are meant to illustrate ancient constructions and attitudes, not to illustrate ancient realities as to persons and peoples regarded as “Other” by Greek writers. Thus Aristotle on barbarians, Herodotus and Hippocrates on Scythians and Egyptians (i.e., on barbarians), for us are shedding light on Greek attitudes, not on “barbarian realities.”

Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* book 7 sections 5–7. (translation edited by A. Scholtz)

5. As there are some things naturally pleasant, and of these two kinds; those, namely, which are pleasant generally, and those which are so relatively to particular kinds of animals and men; so there are others which are not naturally pleasant but which come to be so in consequence either of arrested development, or custom, or depraved natural tastes: and one may observe moral states similar to those we have been speaking of, having respectively these classes of things for their object-matter.

I mean the Bestial, as in the case of the female who, they say, would rip up women with child and eat the foetus; or the tastes which are found among the savage tribes bordering on the Black Sea, some liking raw flesh, and some being cannibals, and some lending one another their children to make feasts of; or what is said of Phalaris.¹ These are instances of Bestial states, caused in some by disease or madness; take, for instance, the man who sacrificed and ate his mother, or him who devoured the liver of his fellow-servant. Instances again of states caused by disease or by custom, would be, plucking out of hair, or eating one’s nails, or eating coals and earth, or diseased sexual states among men.² Such practices arise sometimes naturally (literally, by *phusis*), sometimes by habit (*ethos*), as in the case of children abused from childhood.

Now wherever nature is really the cause no one would think of labeling those afflicted as intemperate (*akrateis*) just as one would not describe women as intemperate just because in sex they play the passive, not the active role. So too in the case of those habituated to diseased behavior, the label “intemperate” does not apply.

[1149a] Obviously the having of any of these inclinations is something foreign to what is labeled as Vice, just as Bestiality³ is: and when a man has them his mastering them is not properly Self-Control, nor his being mastered by them Imperfection of Self-Control in the proper sense, but only in the way of resemblance; just as we may say a man of ungovernable wrath fails of Self-Control in respect of anger but not simply fails of Self-Control. For all excessive folly, cowardice, absence of Self-Control, or irritability, are either Bestial or morbid. The man, for instance, who is naturally afraid of all things, even if a mouse should stir, is cowardly after a Bestial sort; there was a man again who, by

¹ A Greek tyrant (i.e., dictator) proverbial for his inhuman cruelty.

² Aristotle is surely referring to a man’s desire to be sexually penetrated.

³ In Greek, *theriotes*, the quality of being like a wild animal, inhuman.

reason of disease, was afraid of a cat: and of the fools, they who are naturally destitute of Reason and live only by Sense are Bestial, like certain tribes of the far-off barbarians, while others who are so by reason of diseases, epileptic or frantic, are in morbid states.

So then, of these inclinations, a man may sometimes merely have one without yielding to it: I mean, suppose that Phalaris had restrained his unnatural desire to eat a child: or he may both have and yield to it. As then Vice when such as belongs to human nature is called Vice simply, while the other is so called with the addition of “bestial” or “morbid,” but not simply Vice, so manifestly there is Bestial and Morbid Imperfection of Self-Control, but that alone is entitled to the name without any qualification which is of the nature of utter absence of Self-Control, as it is found in Man.

It is plain then that the object-matter of Imperfect Self-Control and Self-Control is restricted to the same as that of utter absence of Self-Control and that of Perfected Self-Mastery, and that the rest is the object-matter of a different species so named metaphorically and not simply: [6.] we will now examine the position, “that Imperfect Self-Control in respect of Anger is less disgraceful than that in respect of Lusts.”⁴

In the first place, it seems that Anger does in a way listen to Reason but mishears it; as quick servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what is said and then mistake the order; dogs, again, bark at the slightest stir, before they have seen whether it be friend or foe; just so Anger, by reason of its natural heat and quickness, listening to Reason, but without having heard the command of Reason, rushes to its revenge. That is to say, Reason or some impression on the mind shows there is insolence or contempt in the offender, and then Anger, reasoning as it were that one ought to fight against what is such, fires up immediately: whereas Lust, if Reason or Sense, as the case may be, merely says a thing is sweet, rushes to the enjoyment of it: and so Anger follows Reason in a manner, but Lust does not and is therefore more disgraceful: because he that cannot control his anger yields in a manner to Reason, but the other to his Lust and not to Reason at all. [1149b]

Again, a man is more excusable for following such desires as are natural, just as he is for following such Lusts as are common to all and to that degree in which they are common. Now Anger and irritability are more natural than Lusts when in excess and for objects not necessary. (This was the ground of the defense the man made who beat his father, “My father,” he said, “used to beat his, and his father his again, and this little fellow here,” pointing to his child, “will beat me when he is grown a man: it runs in the family.” And the father, as he was being dragged along, bade his son leave off beating him at the door, because he had himself been used to drag his father so far and no farther.)

Again, characters are less unjust in proportion as they involve less insidiousness. Now the Angry man is not insidious, nor is Anger, but quite open: but Lust is: as they say of Aphrodite,

“Cyprus-born Goddess, *weaver of deceits*”⁵

Or Homer of the girdle called the *kestos*,

⁴ “Lust” here translates *epithumia*.

⁵ Aphrodite was the goddess of sexuality. “Weaver of deceits” is a name Sappho addresses Aphrodite by (Sappho poem 1).

“Persuasiveness *cheating* even the subtlest mind.”⁶

And so since this kind of Imperfect Self-Control is more unjust, it is also more disgraceful than that in respect of Anger, and is simply Imperfect Self-Control, and Vice in a certain sense. Again, no man feels pain in being insolent, but every one who acts through Anger does act with pain; and he who acts insolently does it with pleasure. If then those things are most unjust with which we have most right to be angry, then Imperfect Self-Control, arising from Lust, is more unjust than that arising from Anger: because in Anger there is no insolence.

Well then, it is clear that Imperfect Self-Control in respect of Lusts is more disgraceful than that in respect of Anger, and that the object-matter of Self-Control, and the Imperfection of it, are bodily Lusts and pleasures; but of these last we must take into account the differences; for, as was said at the commencement, some are proper to the human race and natural both in kind and degree, others Bestial, and others caused by maimings and diseases.

Now the first of these only are the object-matter of Perfected Self-Mastery and utter absence of Self-Control; and therefore we never attribute either of these states to Brutes (except metaphorically, and whenever any one kind of animal differs entirely from another in insolence, mischievousness, or voracity), because they have not moral choice or process of deliberation, but are quite different from that kind of creature just as are madmen from other men.

[1150a] Bestiality is not so evil Vice, yet it is more horrible: because it is not that the highest principle has been corrupted, as in the human creature, but the subject has it not at all.

It is much the same, therefore, as if one should compare an inanimate with an animate being, which were the worse: for the badness of that which has no principle of origination is always less harmful; now Intellect is a principle of origination. A similar case would be the comparing injustice and an unjust man together: for in different ways each is the worst: a bad man would produce ten thousand times as much harm as a bad brute.

7. Now with respect to the pleasures and pains which come to a man through Touch and Taste, and the desiring or avoiding such (which we determined before to constitute the object-matter of the states of utter absence of Self-Control and Perfected Self-Mastery⁷), one may be so disposed as to yield to temptations to which most men would be superior, or to be superior to those to which most men would yield: in respect of pleasures, these characters will be respectively the man of Imperfect Self-Control, and the man of Self-Control; and, in respect of pains, the man of Softness⁸ and the man of Endurance:⁹ but the moral state of most men is something between the two, even though they lean somewhat to the worse characters.

⁶ In the *Iliad*, Aphrodite lends Hera her *kestos* (a kind of erotic utility belt) so that Hera can seduce her husband, Zeus.

⁷ “Perfected Self-Mastery” translates *sophrosune*, temperance, self-control, the highest of virtues after courage, according to Plato’s Athenian (*Laws*). “Utter absence of Self-Control” translates *akrasia*.

⁸ In Greek, the *malakos*: the “soft,” “luxurious,” or “effeminate” man.

⁹ The *karteros*, the “hardy” or “tough” man.

Again, since of the pleasures indicated some are necessary and some are not, others are so to a certain degree but not the excess or defect of them, and similarly also of Lusts and pains, the man who pursues the excess of pleasant things, or such as are in themselves excess, or from moral choice, for their own sake, and not for anything else which is to result from them, is a man utterly void of Self-Control: for he must be incapable of remorse, and so incurable, because he that has not remorse is incurable. (He that has too little love of pleasure is the opposite character, and the man of Perfected Self-Mastery the mean character.¹⁰) He is of a similar character who avoids the bodily pains, not because he *cannot*, but because he *chooses not to*, withstand them.

But of the characters who go wrong without *choosing* so to do, the one is led on by reason of pleasure, the other because he avoids the pain it would cost him to deny his lust; and so they are different the one from the other. Now every one would pronounce a man worse for doing something base without any impulse of desire, or with a very slight one, than for doing the same from the impulse of a very strong desire; for striking a man when not angry than if he did so in wrath: because one naturally says, “What would he have done had he been under the influence of passion?” (and on this ground, as it happens, the man utterly void of Self-Control is worse than he who has it imperfectly). However, of the two characters which have been mentioned (as included in that of utter absence of Self-Control), the one is rather Softness, the other properly the man of no Self-Control.

Furthermore, to the character of Imperfect Self-Control is opposed that of Self-Control, and to that of Softness that of Endurance: because Endurance consists in continued resistance but Self-Control in actual mastery, and continued resistance and actual mastery are as different as not being conquered is from conquering; and so Self-Control is more choiceworthy than Endurance.

[1150b] Again, he who fails when exposed to those temptations against which the common run of men hold out, and are well able to do so, is Soft and Luxurious (Luxury being a kind of Softness):¹¹ the kind of man, I mean, to let his robe drag in the dirt to avoid the trouble of lifting it, and who, aping the sick man, does not however suppose himself wretched though he is like a wretched man. So it is too with respect to Self-Control and the Imperfection of it: if a man yields to pleasures or pains which are violent and excessive it is no matter for wonder, but rather for allowance if he made what resistance he could (instances are, Philoctetes in Theodectes’ drama when wounded by the viper; or Cercyon in the Alope of Carcinus, or men who in trying to suppress laughter burst into a loud continuous fit of it, as happened, you remember, to Xenophantus), but it is a matter for wonder when a man yields to and cannot contend against those pleasures or pains which the common herd are able to resist; always supposing his failure not to be owing to natural constitution or disease, I mean, as the Scythian kings are constitutionally Soft, or the natural difference between the sexes.¹²

¹⁰ By “mean” is meant the in between, and in a good way: the virtuous mean lying between the extremes of pleasure addiction and insensitivity to pleasure.

¹¹ “Softness” translates *malakia* (cf. *malakos*, above); “luxury” translates *truphe*.

¹² The Scythians were a barbarian people living around the northern shores of the Black Sea and on the Russian steppe. For Scythian men and sexuality, see further below: Herodotus and Hippocrates.

Again, the man who is a slave to amusement is commonly thought to be destitute of Self-Control, but he really is Soft; because amusement is an act of relaxing, being an act of resting, and the character in question is one of those who exceed due bounds in respect of this.

Moreover of Imperfect Self-Control there are two forms, Precipitancy and Weakness: those who have it in the latter form though they have made resolutions do not abide by them by reason of passion; the others are led by passion because they have never formed any resolutions at all: while there are some who, like those who by tickling themselves beforehand get rid of ticklishness, having felt and seen beforehand the approach of temptation, and roused up themselves and their resolution, yield not to passion; whether the temptation be somewhat pleasant or somewhat painful. The Precipitate form of Imperfect Self-Control they are most liable to who are constitutionally of a sharp or melancholy temperament: because the one by reason of the swiftness, the other by reason of the violence, of their passions, do not wait for Reason, because they are disposed to follow whatever notion is impressed upon their minds.

Herodotus *History of the Persian Wars* book 1 section 105.

From there, the Scythians went on to invade Egypt; and when they were in Syria which is called Palestine, Psammetichos king of Egypt met them; and by gifts and entreaties he turned them from their purpose, so that they should not advance any further: and as they retreated, when they came to the city of Ascalon in Syria, most of the Scythians passed through without doing any damage, but a few of them who had stayed behind plundered the temple of Aphrodite Urania.¹³ Now this temple, as I find by inquiry, is the most ancient of all the temples which belong to this goddess; for the temple in Cyprus was founded from this, as the people of Cyprus themselves report, and it was the Phoenicians who founded the temple in Kythera, coming from this land of Syria. So these Scythians who had plundered the temple at Ascalon, and their descendants for ever, were smitten by the divinity with a disease which made them women instead of men: and the Scythians say that it was for this reason that they were diseased, and that for this reason travelers who visit Scythia now, see among them the affection of those who by the Scythians are called *enarees*.¹⁴

Herodotus *History of the Persian Wars* book 2 section 35 (translated Macaulay, with changes).¹⁵

The Egyptians in agreement with their climate, which is unlike any other, and with the river,¹⁶ which shows a nature different from all other rivers, established for themselves

¹³ Probably a temple of Astarte or Atargatis. Herodotus identifies Greek Aphrodite Urania (“Heavenly Aphrodite”) with Near Eastern goddesses.

¹⁴ Evidently, Scythian for “unmanly.”

¹⁵ This passage need not be taken as illustrative of what Egyptian life was really like.

¹⁶ The River Nile, which flows north, and which floods annually, in both respects being unlike most other rivers known to the Greeks.

manners and customs in a way opposite to other men in almost all matters: for among them the women frequent the market and carry on trade, while the men remain at home and weave;¹⁷ and whereas others weave pushing the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards: the men carry their burdens upon their heads and the women upon their shoulders: the women urinate standing up and the men crouching down: the Egyptians take their leisure in their houses and eat outside in the streets, alleging as reason for this that it is right to do secretly the things that are unseemly though necessary, but those which are not unseemly, in public: no woman is a priest either of male or female divinity, but men of all, both male and female:¹⁸ to support their parents the sons are in no way compelled, if they do not desire to do so, but the daughters are forced to do so, be they never so unwilling.

Hippocrates *Airs Waters Places*. Section 22 (on effeminacy among the Scythian male aristocracy)¹⁹

And, in addition to these, there are many eunuchs²⁰ among the Scythians, who perform female work, and speak like women. Such persons are called effeminates.²¹ The inhabitants of the country attribute the cause of their impotence to a god, and venerate and worship such persons, every one dreading that the like might befall himself; but to me it appears that such affections are just as much divine as all others are, and that no one disease is either more divine or more human than another, but that all are alike divine, for that each has its own nature, and that no one arises without a natural cause. But I will explain how I think that the affection takes its rise. From continued exercise on horseback they are seized with chronic swellings in their joints owing to their legs always hanging down below their horses; they afterwards become lame and stiff at the hip-joint, such of them, at least, as are severely attacked with it. They treat themselves in this way: when the disease is commencing, they open the vein behind either ear, and when the blood flows, sleep, from feebleness, seizes them, and afterwards they awaken, some in good health and others not. To me it appears that the semen is altered by this treatment, for there are veins behind the ears which, if cut, induce impotence;²² now, these veins would appear to me to be cut. Such persons afterwards, when they go in to women and cannot have sex with them, at first do not think much about it, but remain quiet; but when, after making the attempt two, three, or more times, they succeed no better, fancying they have committed some offence against the god whom they blame for the affection, they put on female attire, reproach themselves for effeminacy, play the part of women, and perform the same work as women do. This the rich among the Scythians endure, not the basest, but the most noble and powerful, owing to their riding on horseback; for the poor are less affected, as they do not ride on horses. And yet, if this disease had been more divine than

¹⁷ In Greece, the women wove; the men typically went to the marketplace.

¹⁸ In Greece, women typically served as priestesses of female deities; men, of male.

¹⁹ Compare the following passage with Herodotus. Herodotus recounts a mythological explanation for the supposed effeminacy of certain Scythians; Hippocrates, a “scientific” one. Translation: Loeb Hippocrates.

²⁰ Castrated men.

²¹ In Greek, *anandreis*, literally, “un-masculine.”

²² It is Hippocrates’ belief that the man’s seed (the semen) originated from the brain. This incision behind the ear therefore causes impotence.

the others, it ought not to have befallen the most noble and the richest of the Scythians alone, but all alike, or rather those who have little, as not being able to pay honors to the gods, if, indeed, they delight in being thus rewarded by men, and grant favors in return; for it is likely that the rich sacrifice more to the gods, and dedicate more votive offerings, inasmuch as they have wealth, and worship the gods; whereas the poor, from want, do less in this way, and, moreover, upbraid the gods for not giving them wealth, so that those who have few possessions were more likely to bear the punishments of these offences than the rich. But, as I formerly said, these affections are divine just as much as others, for each springs from a natural cause, and this disease arises among the Scythians from such a cause as I have stated. But it attacks other men in like manner, for whenever men ride much and very frequently on horseback, then many are affected with swellings in the joints, sciatica, and gout, and they are inept at venery. But these complaints befall the Scythians, and they are the most impotent of men for the aforesaid causes, and because they always wear trousers, and spend the most of their time on horseback, so as not to touch their privy parts with the hands, and from the cold and fatigue they forget the sexual desire, and do not make the attempt until after they have lost their virility. Thus it is with the race of the Scythians.