



# palaver

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Fall | 2013

## palaver

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/pə'ləvər/

n.

A talk, a discussion, a dialogue; (spec. in early use) a conference between African tribes-people and traders or travellers.

v.

To praise over-highly, flatter; to cajole.

To persuade (a person) to do something; to talk (a person) out of or into something; to win (a person) over with palaver.

To hold a colloquy or conference; to parley or converse with.

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# Masthead |

Fall 2013

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# What Would Aristotle Say About Bill Clinton? Or Why We

Excuse Moral Weakness | Rob Wells

A politician winds up in bed with his secretary or a prostitute. Another wraps his sports car around a light pole after a night of boozing. We learn of U.S. politicians engaging in bad behavior time and again, and the U.S. public invariably winds up excusing them. One vivid example would be former President Bill Clinton: his sexual adventures with a White House intern, and his return to popularity and prominence. Why do we give these people another chance? Look to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for some clues.

Aristotle provides an extensive discussion of moral weakness, its origins and characteristics, and spells out instances where moral weakness can be excused. For example, Aristotle says moral weakness, in most cases, isn't a vice. A casual reader may conflate the two terms. Webster's dictionary defines "vice" as "a serious fault of character...evil or wicked conduct; corruption, depravity" ("Vice"). The definition of moral weakness, as we will see below, is a bit more fluid. In Aristotle's view, moral weakness is somehow less severe than a vice. But what is it? *Nicomachean Ethics* shows us moral weakness from multiple perspectives, such as its relationship to our appetites, emotions, habits, self-indulgences, vices and wickedness (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald.). Aristotle also spells out how we can understand and excuse the morally weak person. The resulting examination allows the reader to appreciate the deep sense of humanity in Aristotle's masterpiece, one that can offer important insights in our contemporary culture.

## 1. Definitions

Aristotle offers a few affirmative definitions of moral weakness. A morally weak man, acting on emotion, performs a base action, he writes, usually caving to some bodily pleasures (Aristotle 1151a23). This sounds a lot like President Clinton, who is famous for all kinds of appetites, from blondes and brunettes to Big Macs. Aristotle argues that the morally weak person also tends to abandon a calculation or decision (Aristotle 1145b10). Moral weakness also tends to surface when someone is angry or is chasing honor or profit. Aristotle also notes moral weakness is expressed through softness and effeminacy, or someone who indulges in bodily pleasures; these qualities are "base and deserve blame" (Aristotle 1145b9). On the scale of virtues, the morally weak person is not bad "in the unqualified sense of the word" (Aristotle 1151a25); he is better than a self-indulgent person because he retains a sense of right and wrong, or reason. Furthermore, nature doesn't cause moral weakness. If we could blame nature, a person wouldn't be morally weak.

Let's pause for a moment and examine the bigger picture. Moral weakness is not good, but one can imagine something much worse: wickedness, or those people who voluntarily engage in bad behavior; Aristotle uses the example of people who eat the flesh of children. Wicked people don't even like their own company, since they are haunted by their "many shocking crimes" (Aristotle 1166b12).

Turning to vice, Aristotle writes of a key distinction between moral weakness and vice: emotion. Moral weakness arises out of emotion; one translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* says "passion" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross). Vice does not.

Humans are neither praised nor blamed for their emotions, he argues, but we are praised

or blamed for virtues and vices (Aristotle 1105b29). "Now the virtues and vices cannot be emotions, because we are not called good or bad on the basis of our emotions, but on the basis of our virtues and vices" (Aristotle 1105b29). This describes the deliberate, affirmative and rational activity behind virtues and vices.

A morally weak man, acting out of emotion, will engage in base behavior (Aristotle 1145b10). Aristotle blames appetites: "Moral strength and weakness operate in the sphere of bodily appetites and pleasures" (Aristotle 1149b25).

This suggests personal responsibility for the behavior; we blame someone for engaging in vice because he intended to do it, but excuse moral weakness as a concession to emotion.

The distinction Aristotle makes between vice and moral weakness provides a deeper appreciation for the subtly and humanity of Aristotle's work. His argument is that humans are fallible and should be allowed a "get out of jail" card for some poor choices involving, for example, emotional outbursts.

## 2. Habit

As we continue, the question arises: is moral weakness inherent? Aristotle suggests the answer is no. Moral virtues are formed by habit.

"None of the moral virtues is implanted in us by nature, for nothing which exists by nature can be changed by habit" (Aristotle 1103a18). Aristotle explains the direction of a nature-given tendency can't be changed by habit: fire cannot be trained to move downward nor can a rock be trained to move upward, no matter how many times someone throws it up in the air (Aristotle 1103a23).

Pleasure and pain play a pivotal role in moral excellence. Aristotle says, "It is pleasure that makes us do base actions and pain that prevents us from doing noble actions" (1104b10). Turning this to education, Aristotle cites Plato's view of correct schooling, which involves bringing up people "from childhood to feel pleasure and pain at proper things" (Aristotle 1104b11).

The pleasures are powerful things in Aristotle's book and can supersede reason and knowledge. He offers the viewpoint of Plato's followers: "A morally weak person does not have knowledge but opinion when he is overpowered by pleasures" (Aristotle 1145b35). He offers another viewpoint: "The common run of people are misled by pleasure" (Aristotle 1113a34). Aristotle makes the following argument: if a person acts on opinions instead of knowledge, and his basic convictions are weak, "we can sympathize with a man for not sticking to his opinions in the face of strong appetites" (Aristotle 1146a2).

## 3. Reason

Reason plays a central role in Aristotle's definition of the morally weak person. The morally weak person possesses reason but does the dirty deed anyway. Afterwards, he feels bad about it.

"A morally weak man acts under the influence of some kind of reasoning and opinion, an opinion which is not intrinsically but only incidentally opposed to right reason; for it is not opinion but appetite that is opposed to right reason," he argues (Aristotle 1147a37).

This distinction becomes more clear when we compare the morally weak to the self-indulgent person. "Both pursue things pleasant to the body," Aristotle writes, "But they are different in that a self-indulgent man thinks he ought to pursue them, while the morally weak thinks he should not" (Aristotle 1152a5). "A morally weak man, on the other hand, does not think he should, but pursues it nonetheless" (Aristotle 1146b23). Later he observes that "a

self-indulgent man “is one who feels no regret” whereas a morally weak man feels regret (Aristotle 1150b29). In other words, a morally weak person knows the dirty deed is wrong and can be persuaded to change his mind. The self-indulgent person charges ahead and satisfies his appetite, without a guilty thought, because he is that kind of guy.

A morally strong man knows he has base appetites, refuses to follow them “and accepts the guidance of reason” (Aristotle 1151b26). And this is why animals cannot be morally weak because they lack reason.

#### 4. Cutting them some slack

Why do we excuse the morally weak person? One answer is the person suffers from faulty reasoning: his appetites or emotions overwhelm him. Aristotle writes, “It is clear that we must attribute to the morally weak a condition similar to that of men who are asleep, mad or drunk” (1147a17).

We also excuse them when they give in to desires we all face, such as for sex. “It is more excusable to follow one’s natural desires, inasmuch as we are also more inclined to pardon such appetites as are common to all men and to the extent that they are common to all” (Aristotle 1149b3).

The morally weak person’s state of knowledge can help us decide whether or not we excuse their behavior. Was the morally weak person acting on knowledge or opinion? To address this, Aristotle cites Socrates, who argues that moral weakness doesn’t exist. Socrates believes someone wouldn’t act contrary to what is best, and therefore argues they act out of ignorance (Aristotle 1145b25).

Extending this thought, Aristotle said Plato’s followers believe people wouldn’t act contrary to the better course of action. And so, a morally weak person is acting on opinion when he is overpowered by pleasures.

If the morally weak person is acting on opinion, “we can forgive a man for not sticking to his opinions in the face of strong appetites” (Aristotle 1146a1). The word “forgive,” used in the Ostwald translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, means a person giving up resentment or a desire to punish for another’s flaw, according to Webster’s dictionary (“Forgive”). In contemporary usage, it carries Christian moral overtones, as in a priest forgiving someone’s sins or dismissal of a debt obligation, such as between a creditor and debtor. Forgiveness and its implications of an obligation may not be what Aristotle intended. Another translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* offers another shading: “sympathize.” “We sympathize with their failure to stand by such convictions against strong appetites.” I choose to use “excuse”—to try to free a person from blame—as a more neutral term better suited for moral weakness because it doesn’t suggest punishment or obligation. In using this term, I considered Aristotle’s emphasis on a person’s emotions and appetites as causes of morally weak behavior.

Again, the contrast of the morally weak person to the wicked person is useful. We don’t excuse wickedness. Why? There is nothing redeeming about bad or wicked people—they don’t even like themselves. “A bad man’s disposition is not friendly even toward himself, because there is nothing lovable about him” (Aristotle 1166b25).

And there’s a surprising turn in Aristotle’s argument: in some instances, moral weakness can be good. This arises when moral weakness results in a person abandoning his prior opinions and making a just decision. He cites the example of Sophocles *Philoctetes*, where Neoptolemus refuses to tell a lie (Aristotle 1146a20).


Let’s return briefly to the example of President Clinton and his sexual relationship with a young White House intern. The public condemned Clinton for his infidelity and the House of Representatives impeached him for lying to investigators. In the end, however, many vot-

ers forgave him, public opinion polls show.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. voters at the time cut Bill Clinton some slack. Of course, it’s worth noting the morality, or lack thereof, of the people who chose to highlight Clinton’s infidelity, and the general public. Aristotle makes the distinction between people of high moral character making such the moral judgments and the “common run of people...misled by pleasure” (1113a34). In this light, the polls suggest the general public saw past Clinton’s personal problem and gave him credit for his achievements in office, such as his successful economic stewardship.

Political analysts<sup>2</sup> described Clinton as morally weak, but is that the case? Aristotle urges us to take a holistic approach: “Human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. For one swallow does not make a summer, not does one day” (McKeon, Aristotle 1098a16).

We can examine how Clinton’s conduct may fit Aristotle’s definition of moral weakness. Clinton described his conduct as a moral failure, expressed repentance and asked for forgiveness. “I don’t think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned,” Clinton said at a White House prayer breakfast. “It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine” (Clinton).

Clinton pursued the satisfaction of his sexual appetite and said he knew it was wrong, which fits Aristotle’s definition of moral weakness. Clinton would argue his appetites overwhelmed his reason; we would assume Clinton knows the difference between right or wrong based on the prayer breakfast comments.

Was Clinton self-indulgent instead? Was he *that kind of guy*, someone who inherently fulfills his pleasures without regret? We can’t read his mind, of course. One consideration involves whether Clinton’s contrition was genuine. In Aristotle’s definition, the self-indulgent person pursues his appetite deliberately and feels no regret. Those who viewed Clinton as a liar perhaps would not accept his prayer breakfast remorse. Whether Clinton actually curbed his sexual appetite is one thing, but he famously embarked on another mission for self-improvement after this incident: he went on a diet and lost weight. No more blondes and brunettes? Maybe. Definitely no more Big Macs. 

<sup>1</sup> According to the Gallup Poll, President Bill Clinton left office in 2000 with a 66% approval rating (up from the mid-50s ratings during the Lewinsky affair) with just 29% disapproving. “Presidential Approval Ratings—Bill Clinton.”

<sup>2</sup> Two examples of press reports describing Clinton’s conduct as a moral weakness include “Social Conservatives Fall from Moral High Ground,” *The Washington Times* and “For Democrats, A Defining Moment,” *Washington Post*.

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