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VOLUNTARY ACTION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN ARISTOTLE

ABSTRACT: In Book III of the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle develops his theory of responsibility. He claims we are responsible for our voluntary actions, but later he says that animals and children, like mature beings, perform voluntary actions. Some questions are raised for the reader of Aristotle: Are animals and children responsible for their actions in the same way mature persons are? Are we responsible for all of our voluntary actions? What is, finally, the relation between voluntary actions and responsibility? In this paper we examine the notion of the voluntary and its relation to the concept of responsibility, in order to understand the Aristotelian notion of moral responsibility, i.e., in order to understand when an agent is to be considered responsible for an action and why an agent under those circumstances must be held responsible for his actions. To do this, I will focus on the argumentation of *NE* III.1, *NE* III.5 and *NE* V.8.

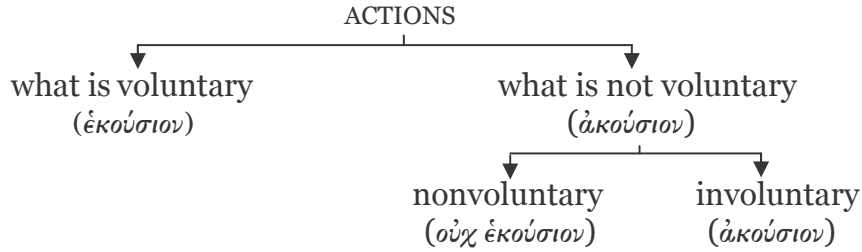
This paper's purpose is to understand the Aristotelian notion of responsibility, that is, to make clear (i) under what conditions it is right to hold an agent responsible for his action, and (ii) what it is that justifies the ascription of responsibility to an agent under those circumstances.

Aristotle says in *NE* III.1 that we ascribe responsibility to an agent when his action is performed voluntarily. For this reason it is appropriate, in the first place, to focus on the Aristotelian notion of the *voluntary*. In the first part of this paper we will study the notion of the voluntary presented by Aristotle in *NE* III.1. In the second part we will study *NE* V.8, where Aristotle introduces new elements, which will help us to distinguish two kinds of voluntary actions, which will subsequently lead us to speak of two different kinds of responsibility. The third part of this paper is concerned with showing the reasons with which Aristotle, in *NE* III.5, argues that we are responsible for our actions, in a strong sense of this notion.

I

In *NE* III.1, Aristotle develops his contrast between what is voluntary and what is not voluntary. So, in order to obtain a clear idea of the notion of the voluntary, let us begin by clearly distinguishing these two notions.

Following T. Means' sound suggestion, I am going to suppose that Aristotle uses the Greek term ἀκούσιον in two different senses: the general sense, which I translate using the expression «what is not voluntary», and the specific sense, which I translate with the word «involuntary» (cf. Means 1927, 76). Based on this distinction, we can say that Aristotle opposes voluntary actions to the group of things that are not voluntary, and in this group he locates both nonvoluntary and involuntary actions.



The group of things that are voluntary can be distinguished from the group of things that are not voluntary in the following way. For an action to be considered as voluntary we must say that its principle, i.e., its cause is within the agent that performed it *and* that it is not caused by ignorance. And if an action is not considered as voluntary, it is because its cause is external to the agent *or* because it is caused by ignorance. Let us clarify this.

When the principle of an action is external to the agent we say that the action comes about by force. Thus, Aristotle says, if a wind carried someone away, we could say that what happened was forced and, in consequence, it was not voluntary.

Nor do we consider an action as voluntary when, although the cause is internal, the action comes about by ignorance. Here we must point out an important distinction. Aristotle claims we can distinguish actions *caused by* ignorance (δι' ἄγνοϊαν) and actions *done in* ignorance (ἀγνοῶν). An action is caused by ignorance if it is performed because the agent ignores the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with. The agent does not really know, for example, what he is doing, toward whom his action is directed or what will be the consequences of the performance of the action. As an illustration, we can imagine somebody drinking a liquid because he thinks that it is wine when it actually is poison. In contrast, an action done in ignorance could be performed while perfectly knowing the particulars which define the action. In this case the ignorance is about universals, ignorance regarding what *kind* of action we must do or avoid. This ignorance —Aristotle says— is the cause of vice. As an illustration of this kind of ignorance, we can imagine a thief that robs a bank. In this case, the thief knows what he is doing, toward whom the action is performed and also what the consequences of his action are. What he does not know is that performing this kind of actions is not right, but that is not a reason for saying he acted unwillingly. (1110b25-1111a7)

Each of the two kinds of ignorance is related to two different stages of the practical syllogism: the moment when the general premise is established and the stage when the particular premise is established. Someone could know very well what kind of action he must do in certain circumstances, but, as a consequence of his ignorance of the particulars, not be able to perform the right action. This person will be pardoned, for the action he is performing does not indicate to us that the person is vicious, but that he was under unfavourable circumstances which did not allow him to know the particulars. But a person who, knowing the particulars in which the actions consists, does not know what kind of action he must do, is blamed, since his action is an indicator of a vice in the agent. Thus, when the action is done in ignorance, it is voluntary, but when it is done by ignorance, it is not considered voluntary.

We have distinguished between the actions we consider voluntary and the actions we do not consider voluntary. We can now try to distinguish, within the group of things we do not consider voluntary, the nonvoluntary and the involuntary actions. Both kinds of

actions are done by ignorance, but there is a special feature, that the agent manifests when he becomes aware of the previously ignored particulars, which can help us to distinguish those kinds of action: Among them, those who feel pain and regret when they recognize the previously ignored particulars are said to act involuntarily. With these painful feelings the agent reveals that the vicious action did not accord with his character: if he had known what the action he performed consisted in, he would not have performed it. But, in contrast, those who have no objection to the action, after they have recognized the previously ignored particulars, are said to have acted neither involuntarily, since the action is not contrary to his character, nor voluntarily, since they ignored the particulars when they performed the action. Their actions are said to be nonvoluntary.

So, based upon the notion of actions done by ignorance, we have distinguished between voluntary actions and actions that we do not consider voluntary. Afterwards, based on the reaction of the agent after knowing the particulars, we have made a distinction between nonvoluntary and involuntary actions.

Based on the analysis developed in this section, we can determine the conditions an action must satisfy to be considered voluntary: (1) Its cause must be within the agent, i.e., it must depend on the agent whether the action is performed or not, and (2) the agent who performed it should know the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with. If one of these conditions is unsatisfied we will not consider his action as voluntary.

I want to conclude this section by drawing your attention to an important detail. To claim that an action is voluntary only when it depends on the agent to do it or not to do it is not a reason to claim that only the actions the agent has decided to do in accord with rational calculation are voluntary. Those actions caused by nonrational feelings, namely by impulse or appetite, are also voluntary. Otherwise —Aristotle says—, we should say that neither animals nor children do voluntary actions, given that the actions performed by them are caused by nonrational feelings. But this claim is absurd, so we should say that actions in accord with impulse and appetite are also voluntary. (1111a25-35)

II

The notion of the voluntary hitherto developed is not satisfactory enough for two reasons. In the first place, because if the only conditions we need to consider an action as voluntary are that the agent has knowledge of the particulars the action consists in and that the principle of his action is within him, there are no reasons to deny that the palpitation of a doctor's heart is voluntary and, in consequence, that he is responsible for his cardiac disease; but that is manifestly absurd. In the second place, because the fact that animals and children, like adult persons, perform voluntary actions, could lead us to think that they are responsible for their acts just like adults are. Nevertheless, this idea seems to go against our common sense and our penal practices, according to which children receive a special and softer treatment than adults, even when they have committed the same crime.

In this part of the paper we will focus on *NE* v.8, where Aristotle develops some other aspects of the notion of the voluntary. This will help us solve these problems, thus obtaining a better understanding of the link between the notion of the voluntary and the notion of responsibility¹.

In the beginning of the chapter, Aristotle summarizes the features needed for us to consider an action involuntary, making explicit an idea that was implicitly present in *NE* III.1, which opens the door to the first problem's solution.

Actions are not considered voluntary (*ἀκούσιον*), then, if (1) they are done in ignorance; (2) or they are not done in ignorance, but they are not up to the agent; (3) or they are done by force. For we also do or undergo many of our natural actions and processes, such as growing old and dying, in knowledge, but none of them is either voluntary or involuntary (*ἀκούσιον*). (1135a31-b2)²

This passage shows three reasons for which an action is not considered voluntary. We have recognized in the first part of this paper two of them: an action is not voluntary, we said, (1) if it has been done by ignorance or (3) if it is the result of force. This passage shows another reason for not considering an action voluntary: (2) if it is not by ignorance, but it is not up to the agent. But what does Aristotle mean when he says 'not up to the agent'? Surely he does not mean that the cause of the action is external to the agent, for in that case category 2 would be identical to category 3. This is clear when we examine Aristotle's example: The cause of growing old is not up to him, although it is not external to the agent. So, what does the expression 'up to the agent' mean? The following passage could help us understand it.

[...] when acting is up to us, so is not acting, and when no is up to us, so is yes. And so if acting, when it is fine, is up to us, not acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us; and if not acting, when it is fine, is up to us, then acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us. (1113b7-11)

¹ Certainly some of the ideas developed in *NE* v.8 are present in *NE* III.1. It is not my intention to claim that the elements present in *NE* III.1 are not enough to solve these problems, but only that the elements that help us to solve them are more clearly expressed in *NE* v.8 and other passages of *NE*.

² I use Means' suggestions in my interpretation of this passage (cf. Means 1927, 76). The classification made here is not properly of involuntary actions, but of actions we do not consider voluntary, among which we locate the involuntary and the nonvoluntary actions. Events such as growing old are classified in the group of things we do not consider voluntary and located, more specifically, in the subgroup of nonvoluntary things. For this reason, at the end of this passage Aristotle claims that this kind of action is neither voluntary nor involuntary. There is another problem with this passage: Aristotle claims that actions are not considered voluntary if they are done in ignorance, but, as we already saw, actions done in ignorance are said to be voluntary. So we must suppose that Aristotle was thinking in actions done by ignorance when he wrote this passage. Means suggests in his article that the Greek term *ἀγνοῶν* has a general and a specific sense (cf. Means 1927, 87). The specific sense, used in the previous section, refers to ignorance of universals. The general sense, used in this passage, refers to ignorance of both universals and particulars.

According to this passage, when an action is up to us, we are able both to perform it and to not perform it. The palpitation of the heart, growing old, and dying are not up to us because, although their principle is in us, we are not able to not grow old or not die. These events could be altered neither by our desires, nor by our decisions, nor by our beliefs. That is why Aristotle claims that things that are up to us are not caused by nature, necessity or fortune, but by our own minds (cf. 1112a31).

We could say that nature is the cause of phenomena such as palpitation of the heart, growing old, and dying, thereby showing that those things do not depend on us. And, given that those things that are not up to us are not voluntary, we should say that none of them is voluntary.

To set much stricter limits to our notion of the voluntary, based on the previous considerations, we can say that an action is voluntary if (1) it is performed with knowledge of the particulars, (2) the cause is internal to the agent and (3) it is up to the agent to do it or not to do it, i.e., the internal principle of the action is not the biological nature of the agent, but, we might say, his mental state. This mental state is constituted by things such as the agent's impulse, appetites, beliefs, decisions and character.

With the previous development we solve the first problem mentioned at the beginning of this part. However, we have another problem to solve: Are animals and children responsible in the same sense as adult men are responsible? To solve this problem we could base our reflection on a distinction made by Aristotle between the different ways to willingly harm a community. (cf. 1135 b13-27)

(1) By nonrational feelings: We can perform an action willingly but without previous deliberation and decision. In these cases the cause of the actions is impulse or appetite. Actions of this kind are voluntary because they are performed in knowledge, the cause is internal and it is a mental cause. In these cases we could say that the agent acted unjustly, but not that he is an unjust person. He did not decide to perform an unjust action, but the circumstances led him to act unjustly³. An example of this kind of action is when somebody harms another because he has anger and intense pain.

(2) By vice: This kind of action is also voluntary. It is also performed with knowledge of particulars and its cause is internal and mental. However, in this case the cause is not a nonrational feeling but a previous deliberation and decision. The fact that the cause of the action is a decision gives to this type of actions an important role: they reveal the existence of a vice in the agent. If he deliberated and decided to do this unjust action, it is because he is unjust. Thus, these actions are indicators of the moral state of the agent.

There are, consequently, voluntary actions whose cause is a previous deliberation and decision, and that reveal the moral state of the agent, i.e., the vicious or virtuous dispositions of his character. Other voluntary actions are caused by our impulse and appetite, without a previous decision and deliberation. These actions do not reveal the dispositions of our character; they only reveal the presence of nonrational feelings in the agent.

Based upon that, Aristotle says: «That is why it is right to judge that actions caused by impulse do not result from forethought, since the principle is not the agent who acted on

³ An unjust action —Aristotle claims in *NE* II.4— can be the actualization of a vice, case in which the agent is vicious and *decides* to perform the action. An unjust action can also be the action of somebody that has not yet become vicious, case in which the agent's previous decision is not necessary. Children and animals are only able to perform this second kind of action.

impulse, but the person who provoked him to anger» (1135b27-29). This affirmation is too strong, for to say without qualification that the principle is outside the agent is to remove from these actions their voluntary nature and, as we have said above, these actions are considered voluntary by Aristotle. Then, how can we state without contradiction that the principle of these actions is both internal and external?

We could state it in the Aristotelian way: 'principle' is said in different senses and in relation to different things. In one sense, we say that the principle is external, given that the person who caused my anger is outside of me. In other sense we say it is internal, because the principle of moving the limbs that are the instruments of the action is internal and depends on me (cf. 1110a15-18). Although the other is the cause of my getting angry, I am the cause of injuring him. Now, given that the fact of injuring him is not, by hypothesis, a consequence of a decision but of my feeling of anger, it will be said that this action does not reveal the presence of a vice in me. But if I had decided deliberately to injure him, my action would reveal the presence of a vice.

Having established the bases for the solution of the second problem, now we can try to solve it. We can identify the actions of children and animals with the kind of actions that are consequences of nonrational feelings, since children and animals lack the capacity for decision. We could, in contrast, identify the actions proper to adult men with the actions caused by decision and deliberation. Both kinds of actions are voluntary and the agent is responsible for both of them, in the sense that he is the cause of moving the limbs that are the instruments of the action⁴.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which only the mature person is responsible for his actions. Actions of animals and children come about as a consequence of a nonrational desire, for which they are not responsible, i.e. of which they are not the cause or, in other words, a desire that was not up to them to have or not to have. Thus, although they are responsible for the action they performed inasmuch as they were the cause of the movement of their limbs, they are not responsible for performing the *kind* of action they performed, for they did not decide whether they wanted or not to be moved by the kind of feeling that moved them. In contrast, the mature person who acted based upon his previous decision is responsible not only for having performed the action, but also for having performed the kind of action performed, because the mature person decided, based on his virtues and vices, what kind of action he was going to perform, and he is, at the same time, responsible for having the vices and virtues he has. What vices or virtues a person has depends on the person himself, and hence the kind of actions he performs depends on him too.

Thus we will say that the kind of action a mature person performs indicates his character and is his full responsibility, whereas actions of children and animals indicate their circumstances and, at the best, their natural constitution, for which they are not responsible.

We could call 'moral responsibility' the kind of responsibility that applies to a mature person, because men are responsible for the kind of action they perform (just or unjust, coward or brave, etc.) and his actions indicate a feature of the agent's moral disposition

⁴ The expression «the agent is responsible for an action» is the translation of the Greek expression «the agent is the cause (*αἰτία*) of an action». So, if we show that the agent is in some sense the cause of an action, we should say that he is in some sense responsible for it.

(he is vicious, virtuous...). We could call the other kind of responsibility 'causal responsibility', since the agent contributes causally to the performance of the action.

III

Aristotle faces a not easy task. He should be able to prove that we are responsible for our virtues or vices, that it is up to us to have the dispositions of character we have, and that such dispositions are not mere consequences of external causes (our parents, our culture, etc.). If he does not accomplish this, there would be no difference between acting from a decision and acting from a nonrational feeling, for in both cases the agent would perform the kind of action that external causes led him to perform. "I acted that way because an external cause upset me", or "I acted that way because external causes determined me to decide to act that way always, and it is not up to me to change it"; these expressions imply that I am not responsible for the kind of action that I perform. To demonstrate that we are indeed responsible for our virtues or vices, that we cannot refer to previous principles of our vices or virtues, was the goal Aristotle aimed for in *NE* III.5 (1113b17). Let us try to reconstruct the argument Aristotle presents at the beginning of the chapter (1113b8-14), for the rest of the arguments are based upon it:

1. It is up to us to do or not to do vicious or virtuous actions.
2. To be vicious or virtuous consists in doing or not doing vicious or virtuous actions.
- ∴ It is up to us to be vicious or virtuous. (1,2)

Aristotle introduces premise 2 of this argument as the definition of the vicious and the virtuous. Thus he would only have to demonstrate premise 1 to make the argument work. That is what he does by means of a practical argument. We, private citizens and legislators as well, impose corrective treatments and punishments to those who perform vicious actions, and praise those who perform virtuous actions, in order to stimulate virtuous people to continue doing virtuous actions and inhibit vicious people from performing vicious actions. But nobody would try to motivate others to pursue or avoid things that are not up to them. E.g., nobody motivates us not to feel cold or hungry, for it is not up to us to control such feelings. Consequently, daily practices indicate that it is up to us to do virtuous or vicious actions.

Premise 1 is also defended by a theoretical argument at the beginning of the chapter:

- a. We wish for the end, and deliberate and decide about the things that promote it.
- b. Those things about which we deliberate and decide are up to us.
- c. Actions that promote the end are up to us. (a, b)
- d. Virtuous actions promote the end.
- e. Virtuous actions are up to us. (c, d)
- f. If virtuous actions are up to us, vicious actions are up to us too.⁵
- ∴ Virtuous and vicious actions are up to us. (e, f)

⁵ Premise based upon 1113b7-11, quoted above.

Aristotle introduces an objection to the argumentation hitherto developed, objection that attacks the very premise he is trying to defend (namely premise 1): What happens if actions we perform depend on the kind of person we are? Would that deny that the realization of such actions is up to us? Aristotle replies to the objection claiming that we are also responsible for the kind of person we are, because the kind of person we are is a consequence of the kind of actions we have performed. If we acquire the habit of acting unjustly, we will acquire the disposition to act unjustly; If we acquire the habit of acting justly, we will acquire the disposition to act justly.

How is it that this answer solves the previous objection? Let us see two different interpretations.

[1] One way to comprehend how this answer allows us to escape from the objection is to interpret it like this: We are responsible for our character (and for the actions that follow from it) because it is a consequence of the habit of performing certain actions that we, in the first stage of our moral development, were able to act or refrain from acting. Although now, after the first stage has ended, our actions are a necessary consequence of our character —and thus it is not up to us anymore to do them or not—, at the beginning it *did* depend on us to do them or not. Based on this interpretation, we can read Aristotle's simile of the throwing of the stone as follows: Just as throwing or not throwing a stone is up to someone who holds it in his hand, but once it has been thrown he cannot make it return, in the same way someone who has acquired a vice had, at the beginning, the possibility of doing or not doing the actions that led him to acquire his vicious character, but once he has acquired it, it is no longer possible for him to stop *acting* viciously.

There are, however, two problems regarding this interpretation. In the first stage of our moral development, when we were children, the cause of our actions was not our own decisions —for we did not have the capacity to decide yet—, but our impulse and our appetite. However, as we have pointed out, when our actions are caused by nonrational desires, we cannot be considered responsible for the *kind* of action we perform, and thus we cannot be responsible for the *kind* of disposition we acquire; in other words, we could not be responsible for the kind of person we come to be.

The second problem is that, according to this view, once we acquire the vices, it is no longer possible for us to stop *acting* viciously. According to this, our actions as adults would no longer be up to us. But Aristotle claims: «Actions and dispositions, however, are not voluntary in the same way. For we are in control of actions from the beginning to the end, when we know the particulars. With dispositions, however, we are in control of the beginning, but do not know, any more than with sicknesses, what the cumulative effect of particular actions will be» (1114b30-1115a3). This passage points out that we are always in control of our actions, not only at the beginning, when we still had not acquired the virtuous or vicious dispositions, but even when we had already acquired them. A person is always in control of his actions, hence it will always be possible for him to do them or refrain from doing them. Thus, this reading of Aristotle's view contradicts Aristotle's own position.

[2] To avoid these two criticisms, we can attempt a different reading of the Aristotelian solution to the objection introduced by himself, namely 'what if our actions depend upon the kind of person we are?'

The fact that the dispositions of character we have acquired are a consequence of the kind of activities we have performed does not imply (1) that we acquired such

dispositions merely due to the actions we have performed in the first stage of our lives. Hence it does not imply (2) that once we have acquired those dispositions they become stable and unalterable. Nor does it imply (3) that our actions are no longer up to us. To prove that Aristotle would not accept any of these three consequences, we can examine a passage that is located at the very core of this discussion:

Only a totally insensible person would not know that a given type of activity is the source of the corresponding disposition; hence if someone does what he knows will make him unjust, he is willingly unjust.

Further, it is unreasonable for someone doing injustice not to wish to be unjust, or for someone doing intemperate action not to wish to be intemperate. This does not mean, however, that if he is unjust and wishes to stop, he will thereby stop and be just. (1114 a10-13)

In this passage Aristotle points out that we know that the kind of person we are is a consequence of the kind of actions we do, and, thus, that when we act unjustly our will to have an unjust character is evidenced. It is not possible for us to decide to act unjustly while we desire to have a just character, and this, in our opinion, applies both to children and adults. It is not possible for you to decide to rob a bank while wishing to be a just person; if you actually wish to be a just person —one might add—, you have to decide to act in a just fashion. There is no reason why an adult person cannot change a disposition to act viciously. But, according to Aristotle, all this does not imply that if someone is vicious and wishes not to continue being vicious, it will follow from his wish that he will stop from being vicious. This might be read as a statement that goes against what we have defended so far, but that is a mistaken interpretation. What Aristotle asserts here is that if someone has a disposition to act viciously and wishes not to have such a disposition anymore, he won't be able to abandon it just because of his will to change; but this assertion does not imply that the vicious person cannot act virtuously in that moment, even if it costs him a huge effort and dissatisfaction. The person cannot abandon a vicious disposition out of his mere will; for this change to be possible, he must overcome his disposition by performing virtuous actions so that he can modify his old disposition by habituating himself to performing different actions.⁶

If we admit this reading, we will be able to see that moral dispositions are not inalterable, and we will be able to make sense out of the Aristotelian assertion that our actions are always up to us. Human beings are always capable of overcoming their vices —although not effortlessly— and for this reason they are always able to modify their moral dispositions by habituation. That is why our legal practices impose corrective treatments, punishments, praises and rewards, for it is always up to us to act virtuously or viciously. This reading unifies the whole of the fifth chapter of book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Furthermore, this interpretation shows why we are justified when we hold people responsible for their actions. The vices and virtues of each person are not just a consequence of actions performed during childhood, about which they did not deliberate or decide. These dispositions are a consequence of actions performed by each person throughout their whole lives, and are thus modifiable according to the actions they

⁶ Remember that not every virtuous action that we perform is an actualization of a virtue; one can act virtuously without having a virtuous character (cf. *NE* III. 4).

decide to do everyday. In consequence, the kind of person we are is the kind of person we want to be, for it is the kind of person we have been building through the actions we decide to perform. It makes no sense for us to say that what has happened to us until this moment of our lives determines entirely the kind of actions we perform and, consequently, the kind of disposition we will generate, strengthening or weakening the dispositions we already have, because our actions are always up to us and, if we believe now that it is not worth to act unjustly anymore, we will start to act justly to acquire, through habituation, a new disposition to act justly.

It is right, then to say that a person comes to be just from doing just actions and temperate from doing temperate actions; for no one has the least prospect of becoming good from failing to do them. The many, however, do not do these actions. They take refuge in arguments, thinking that they are doing philosophy, and that this is the way to become excellent people. They are like a sick person who listens attentively to the doctor, but acts on none of his instructions. Such a course of treatment will not improve the state of the sick person's body; nor will the many improve the state of their souls by this attitude to philosophy. (1105 b10-19)

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