

*Aristotle's Early Account of Agency and Responsibility*

*Dissertation Synopsis*

Are human beings responsible for their actions? The philosophical task of answering this question historically emerges as a response to some challenge to human responsibility. In the modern era the challenge is often posed in terms of determinism, the thesis that every event, including all human actions, is determined by past events and the laws of nature. If determinism is true, how is free will possible? Likewise, starting with St. Augustine philosophers have also wondered how free will is possible if God knows all our actions. But the theses of determinism and of an omniscient God were articulated long after Aristotle, on account of which many philosophers believe that Aristotle was unaware of the so-called problem of free will (Frede 2012). I show in my dissertation that the origin of the problem is much more complex. I argue that (1) Aristotle offers an account of the voluntary in response to a different challenge to human responsibility, originally proposed by Plato, and (2) the resulting account is a pioneering account of free will. To that end, I examine Aristotle's account of the voluntary in his early work, the *Eudemian Ethics*, which reveals Aristotle's formative stages of thinking more clearly than his later and better-known treatise, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Plato famously argued that badness is involuntary because no one truly desires to be bad. He also argued that being good is not up to human beings, because if human beings could be good, they would. A startling consequence of Plato's view is that people are not responsible for being bad. In arguing that badness is involuntary, Plato assumes, along with most ancient Greeks of the classical period, that whether an agent acts *voluntarily* is purely a matter of whether the agent *wants to act in this way*, i.e., whether the agent acts *willingly*. Aristotle disputes this central assumption and argues that even an unwilling action can be voluntary provided that the action is up to the agent not to do. For instance, an incontinent agent can *unwillingly* engage in a wrongdoing even though it is up to them not to do so. I argue that Aristotle's locution 'the action is up to the agent not to do' is the ancient equivalent of the modern locution 'the agent has free will'.

My work also challenges a dominant interpretation of Aristotle's account of responsibility. Consider the following troubling line of thought: (1) our actions are manifestations of our characters and (2) we are not responsible for our characters; therefore, (3) we are not responsible for our actions. According to the dominant interpretation, Aristotle holds that we are responsible for our actions, but he does not hold that we are responsible for our characters (Meyer 1993, 2006;

Bobzien 2014). Contesting this interpretation, I argue that Aristotle's aim in meeting the Platonic challenge was precisely to show that our characters are voluntary and up to us. In Aristotle's view, we are responsible not only for our actions but also for our characters, because our characters are formed knowingly based on actions that they are up to us.

My dissertation has six chapters. Chapter One provides the context for the account of the voluntary Aristotle develops in the *Eudemian Ethics*, by examining Plato's view on the voluntary on the basis of Plato's late dialogue, the *Laws*.

Chapter Two to Five explicate Aristotle's extended argument for an original account of the voluntary as presented in EE II.6-9. Chapter Two reconstructs the argument in EE II.6, where Aristotle argues that human beings are the origins of their actions and their character, such that it is up to them to be good or bad. Chapter Three argues that in EE II.7-9, Aristotle's aim is to show that we should understand the voluntary not in terms of acting willingly but in terms of acting knowingly. Chapter Four focusses on Aristotle's analysis of force and compulsion in EE II.8. There, I argue, Aristotle seeks to establish that compulsion is a matter of whether it is up to the agent to not do the action, and not a matter of whether the agent acts unwillingly. Chapter Five examines Aristotle's conclusion in EE II.9 that voluntary action is both (a) up to the agent not to do, and (b) performed knowingly.

Chapter Six explores Aristotle's conception of deliberative choice based on EE II.10-11. I argue that, in Aristotle's view, habit formation not only embodies our deliberative choice but also enhances our ability to acquire insights into acting well.