Responsibility Reading

Comments on Aristotle, 1999

- Aristotle appears to tell us, at the beginning of III.1, that voluntariness is necessary and sufficient for responsibility. This is difficult to reconcile with Aristotle's thinking also that (1) children and animals act voluntarily and (2) that children and animals are not responsible for their actions.
- Another puzzle about Aristotle's account is that decision, deliberation, and wish appear to play a significant role, but we are responsible for our voluntary actions that are not actions on decision, for example, when we impulsively commit a crime.
- Irwin's interpretation appears to solve both puzzles. On this interpretation, Aristotle thinks (or should have thought) that we are responsible for our voluntary actions that we have the capacity to effectively deliberate about. Children and animals act voluntarily but do not have the capacity to effectively deliberate, and so are not responsible for their voluntary actions. We are responsible for our voluntary actions that are not actions on decision, but that we counterfactually could have effectively deliberated about.
    - This interpretation also makes some sense of Aristotle's discussion of agent regret, which suggests some sort of counterfactual reasoning is involved in evaluating responsibility.
    - The motivation for this view is perhaps that “how we exercise our agency” is broader than “how we exercise our agency when we do exercise it” but also involves “when we exercise our agency”. We are responsible not only for the actions that follow from the exercise of our agency, but also the actions that follow from our failure to exercise our agency, when this is required of us.
- A less plausible interpretation understands Aristotle as thinking that we are responsible for (all and only) voluntary action that we have decided on. This would make sense of what otherwise seems to be a puzzling detour in III.2-4 to discuss decision, deliberation, and wish. This account could be motivated by the thought that action on decision involves an exercise of agency, so action on decision attaches to us as agents, not merely as beings that act, and this sort of attachment is necessary for responsibility. We praise and blame only agents, so it seems reasonable to think that we are responsible only for those actions that belong to us qua agents.
    - The detour in III.2-4 is not entirely puzzling. Aristotle makes clear reference to decision (hence indirectly also to deliberation and wish which are closely related concepts) at the beginning of III.5, where Aristotle argues that virtue and vice are up to us. The first argument Aristotle offers there clearly relies on the account of decision, deliberation, and wish just given. So, possibly, this detour was necessary to prepare for exactly this argument.
    - This interpretation is less plausible because we think we are responsible for our voluntary but impulsive actions, both the praiseworthy and the blameworthy.

Force

- When Aristotle describes unforced actions as actions that have their origin in the agent, Aristotle is best interpreted as thinking that unforced actions are those that have their origin in the mind of the agent. Otherwise, Aristotle would have to consider a hiccup as voluntary.
- One may be blameworthy for failing a test, and the failure may be “up to us” in the sense that it could have been avoided, but it is peculiar to describe such a failure as “voluntary”.

Ignorance

- Bostock formalises knowledge of particulars as knowing or not knowing some proposition of the kind ‘what I am doing is such-and-such’.
- Later in III.5, Aristotle offers a more general account of culpable ignorance that appears to subsume both the account of action from ignorance and the account of action in ignorance of universals. There, Aristotle tells us that in some cases ignorance itself is culpable. And it is clear that culpable ignorance is voluntary ignorance, that has its origin in the ignorant person.
- A related question is whether one is doubly culpable when one acts wrongly from culpable ignorance. Aristotle appears to think so, but is not explicit about this, and it is not clear that there is more than one action here that is voluntary.
- Aristotle's comment that action from ignorance that is not later regretted is "nonvoluntary" is odd. Aristotle possibly was inclined to think this because he is interested in a person's character, and what a person regrets is informative here. Alternatively, Aristotle is led astray by the ambiguity in the Greek "akon" for "involuntary" which also means "reluctant" and

"unwilling" and suggests that involuntary action is necessarily painful. We would not think that involuntary action is necessarily painful because, for example, involuntary laughter induced by laughing gas is quite pleasant.

Condensed Notes on Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing

- III.1 Voluntary Action
  - Aristotle motivates the discussion of voluntary action and responsibility, offers an initial account of voluntary action as action that is not forced and is not because of ignorance. Aristotle then defends the account against potential objections from the "common beliefs", in particular against the definition and role of forced actions in Aristotle's account.
  - Aristotle then clarifies the role of ignorance in the above account. Aristotle will claim that action can be either from ignorance or in ignorance, and action can be from ignorance of particulars or ignorance of universals, and that actions from ignorance of particulars (that are regretted) are involuntary. Actions from ignorance of particulars that are not regretted are non-voluntary. The remaining actions are voluntary.
  - Aristotle considers and deploys a range of responses against the objection that action from non-rational desires is involuntary.
- III.2 Decision
  - Decision is relevant to virtue because we do better to distinguish between the virtuous and vicious person by their decisions rather than simply by their actions.
  - All action on decision is voluntary, but not all voluntary action is on decision. Action on decision is a narrower subcategory.
  - Decision is neither appetite, nor spirit, nor wish (though it is closely related to wish), nor belief.
  - Decision requires deliberation because it apparently involves reason and thought.
- III.3 Deliberation
  - Any sensible person does not deliberate about necessary things, or natural things, or matters of chance, but only about human affairs. Further, we deliberate not about all human affairs, but about those that are up to us. We deliberate only about things that raise a question about what to do.
  - We do not deliberate about ends, but about things that instrumentally or constitutively promote ends. For example, a doctor does not deliberate about whether to cure, but only about how best to cure. Deliberation is an inquiry into how best to achieve some ends.
  - Then, what we decide to do is what we have judged to be right as a result of deliberation. Decision is a desire to do this, that is in accord with a wish (rational desire) for the relevant end.
- III.4 Wish
  - The common beliefs are that a wish is for the good, or for what appears to one to be good. The former account is unsatisfying because we think people sometimes do wish for bad (or neutral) things. The latter account is unsatisfying because it is silent on what is naturally or unqualifiedly wished for.
  - On Aristotle's account, what is qualifiedly wished for (wished for by some person under some circumstances) is what appears good to that person under those circumstances. What is unqualifiedly, naturally wished for, is the good.
- III.5 Virtue and Vice are in Our Power
  - Aristotle begins with an unsatisfactory argument for virtue and vice being in our power. This argument is that virtue and vice are constituted by acting virtuously and viciously, and such actions are actions concerned with things that promote the relevant ends, so such actions are actions on decision, which are voluntary. This argument is unsatisfactory because it equivocates between acting virtuously and viciously, and virtuous and vicious action. The former involves being virtuously or viciously motivated, while the latter does not. It is virtuous and vicious actions that are actions concerned with things that promote the relevant ends, and are actions on decision, and are voluntary. But such actions are not sufficient for virtue and vice (i.e. being virtuous and vicious), because these are constituted by acting virtuously and viciously, not merely virtuous action and vicious action.
  - Aristotle's first positive argument is that the origin of virtue and vice is in the person who is virtuous or vicious, and cannot be traced further back to some external origin.
  - Aristotle's second positive argument is that legal practices presuppose that virtue and vice are voluntary (up to us), because when we reward and punish, we take ourselves to be encouraging virtue and discouraging vice, but it makes no sense to encourage or discourage something involuntary. Further, we punish persons for having certain mental states (ignorance of law, drunkenness), when the origins of these mental states are in them.

- The second positive argument is unsatisfactory because an objector will think that such legal practices are not justified, and that what we are encouraging or discouraging are actions not virtue and vice themselves. Further, the objector will reject that the origin of such mental states is in ourselves because the origin of such mental states is our characters and those are not up to us.
- Aristotle responds that our characters are up to us because they are knowingly formed by voluntary actions.
- The objector would reply that our characters are knowingly formed by our actions, but these are not voluntary because they are not really up to us, but are a function of which things appear to us as good, which in turn is a function of our antecedent characters, so there is a sort of vicious infinite regress.
- Aristotle responds that this account of character formation, which leaves no room for any voluntary effect is implausible because our characters then are entirely shaped by some natural, inborn sense or condition, but this is absurd. And even if how things appear to us is (entirely) a function of our antecedent characters, our voluntary actions involve deliberation, and this is still up to us.
- So Aristotle's real reason for thinking that virtue and vice are up to us is that the origin of our being virtuous or vicious is in us, because it is the product of habituation, and not (entirely) the product of some natural condition or some external force.

Aristotle, 1999

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- III.1 Voluntary Action
  - §1 Aristotle begins by motivating the discussion of voluntariness. Feelings and actions are appropriately praised or blamed if they are voluntary, but are pardoned or pitied if they are involuntary. Virtue is about feelings and actions, and an adequate account of virtue will explain (or more strongly, justify) our responses to virtuous feelings and actions. So an adequate account of virtue requires an account of voluntariness. §2 An account of voluntariness is also relevant for the political elites who were in Aristotle's audience because (presumably) voluntary action is appropriately rewarded or punished.
  - §3 Aristotle's initial account of voluntary action is that forced action and action because of ignorance are not voluntary. This initial account is informed by the appearances (the "common beliefs").
  - §3 Aristotle begins a discussion of forced action. Action that is forced is action that has its origin outside the person (whose action it is), and this person contributes nothing to this origin. Such a person is better described as a victim acted upon, than as an agent. This seems to mean that the person does not feature in some explanation of the action.
  - §4 Aristotle responds to cases of "mixed" actions. These are actions that appear to be neither straightforwardly voluntary nor straightforwardly involuntary. Aristotle's examples are action demanded by a threatening tyrant and §5 jettisoning cargo in a storm to save the ship. Such actions seem to be involuntary in that we would not willingly so act, and we would describe such actions as "forced". §6 Aristotle appears to think that such actions are properly understood as voluntary, and thinks so because the origin of such actions is in the person whose action it is. But such actions are mixed in the sense that, for example, jettisoning cargo, without the qualification that this is necessary to save the ship, would not be (willingly) done. §7 Mixed actions are generally appropriately praised or blamed, except in cases where the conditions are sufficiently hostile such that to act rightly would "overstrain human nature", i.e. be incompatible with or in intense conflict with human nature. §8 Such cases are limited. In such cases, Aristotle describes a person as "compelled", presumably by the conjunction of human nature and hostile circumstances. §9-10 Aristotle repeats the above. Mixed actions are involuntary in the sense that the actions would not be done under ordinary circumstances, or when not appropriately qualified. But they are "properly" described as voluntary, because every action is a particular action under some particular circumstance, with some particular qualifications, so that some action is forced in some "unqualified" way is not really relevant.
  - §11 Aristotle considers one objection, that some thing's goodness or pleasantness is external to us, and so our pursuit of the good and the pleasant is forced, so it is involuntary, and not appropriately praised or blamed. Aristotle's first response is that this is absurd because every action aims at some good or pleasure, so the objector would have to think that every action is involuntary. Second, it is apparent that forced actions are painful but the pursuit of pleasure or goodness is pleasant. Third, the origin of the action is still in the agent in that the agent is easily snared by pleasure (or goodness). Fourth, the objector will maintain that we are responsible for virtuous actions, but this is not consistent with that objection. §12 Apparently satisfied with this account of forced action, Aristotle proceeds to discuss the role of ignorance in voluntariness.
  - §13 Actions done because of ignorance but without regret are neither voluntary nor involuntary. Aristotle describes these actions as non-voluntary. It is apparent that involuntary action because of ignorance is painful and regretted,

Aristotle's construction of the "non-voluntary" is motivated by this. §14 Action in ignorance and action from (because of) ignorance are relevantly (to voluntariness) different. For example, a drunk person acts in ignorance but from drunkenness rather than from ignorance. Similarly, a vicious person acts in ignorance of what is best (unlike the akratic who in some sense knows what is best), but acts from viciousness not from ignorance. §15 Ignorance of moral universals does not make an action involuntary, because such ignorance is caused by viciousness. Ignorance of particulars makes an action involuntary, because such ignorance is not so caused. §16-18 Aristotle discusses "particulars". §19 Apparently satisfied with this account of ignorance, Aristotle proceeds to summarise the above discussion of voluntary action.

- §20 Aristotle offers an apparently clarified account of voluntary action as action that has its origin in the agent who knows the relevant particulars.
- §21 One objection to this account is that action that has its principle in the agent who knows the relevant particulars could still be involuntary if caused by some non-rational desire (spirit or appetite) §22 Aristotle's response is that some thing's being caused by non-rational desire does not make it involuntary. Children and animals (according to Aristotle here) act voluntarily, but do not act from rational desires. §23 Further, the objector will be tempted to say that fine actions from non-rational desires are voluntary and praiseworthy, but this is inconsistent with the objection. §24 There are also clear counterexamples. Some things ought to anger us, and on some occasions we ought to be moved by anger, but it would be odd to think that we ought to act involuntarily. §25 What is involuntary is painful, but what accords with appetite is pleasant. §26-27 Aristotle offers some further, not obviously important, responses.

- III.2 Decision
  - §1 Decision is important because it is "proper" (perhaps all that is meant here is "relevant") to virtue. We do better to distinguish between the virtuous person and the vicious person by their decisions, rather than simply their actions.
  - §2 Action on decision is not simply voluntary action, the former is narrower than the latter, because children and animals act voluntarily but not on decision, and impulsive action is voluntary but not on decision.
  - §3 Decision is not appetite. Animals have appetite but do not decide. §4 The akratic person acts on appetite but not on decision and the enkrateic person acts on decision but not on appetite. §5 Appetite is in conflict with decision (at least in such cases). Additionally, appetite is (a desire) for pleasure (and the absence of pain), but decision is not simply about these, i.e. what we decide on is not simply what is pleasant and painless.
  - §6 Decision is not spirit. Spirit is in conflict with decision (at least in some cases, and in more cases than where appetite is in conflict with decision).
  - §7 Decision is not wish (although the elimination of appetite and spirit would seem suggest so, because appetite, spirit, and wish are the three sorts of desires associated with the three parts of the soul, on Plato's tripartition that Aristotle borrows) though it is closely related to wish. We wish for impossible things like immortality, but make no such decision. §8 Within the possible things, we wish for things that are not achievable by our own agency, like victory for an athlete or an actor, but again we make no such decision. A wish is always for something that is achievable by our own agency. §9 We wish for ends but decide on things that promote the ends. For example, we wish to be healthy and decide to eat better (presumably, Aristotle must think that when we purportedly decide to be healthy, what we mean is that we have decided to do a number of things that promote health or to treat our health as important to us, and we have not literally decided to be healthy).
  - §10 Decision is not belief because we have beliefs about things that are not achievable by our agency. Additionally, beliefs are either true or false, but not good or bad, whereas decisions are either good or bad, but not true or false. §11 Neither is decision any specific type of belief, because our decisions and not our beliefs form (it is not clear whether Aristotle means that decisions constitute our character, cause our character to become a certain way, or simply reveal our character) our character. §12 Decision is about action, but belief is not, for example, we decide to eat well, but we do not believe to eat well. §13 The conditions for praiseworthy decision do not coincide with those for praiseworthy beliefs. We decide on what we know to be good, but believe things that we do not quite know. Aristotle here seems to already have in mind a conception of decision as the product of deliberation and wish. When we wish for some good, we have a rational desire for it as an end in itself, and when we deliberate, we consider and evaluate ways to achieve this end. So when we have decided on something, it is (known) to us, the best way to achieve some worthwhile end. §14 The conditions for being a good decision maker do not coincide with those for having good beliefs. Vicious people with excellent beliefs make terrible decisions. §15 The specific relationship between decision and belief is not particularly relevant here. Aristotle's point is that decision is not simply belief.
  - §16-17 Decision requires deliberation because it quite obviously involves reason and thought.
- III.3 Deliberation
  - §1-2 What sorts of things do sensible persons deliberate about? §3-5 We do not deliberate about metaphysical necessities, physical necessities, natural necessities, or about chance events, (apparently) because these could not be achieved by our agency. §6-7 All that remains are human affairs, but we also do not deliberate about the affairs of other societies, so what we deliberate about are the things that are up to us. §8-10 We deliberate only about cases

that raise a question about what to do. So, for example, we do not deliberate about spelling, which there can be no doubt about, but we do deliberate about business, which there is more doubt about how best to act.

- §11 We deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes (either instrumentally or constitutively) ends. For example, a doctor does not deliberate about whether he will cure, but only about how best to cure. In deliberating, we evaluate the different ways to achieve our ends, and the ways to achieve those ways. §12 All deliberation is a sort of inquiry. §12-13 The last step in this inquiry is the first step in the causal chain of achieving the relevant end, and once the inquiry is complete, and if we find that the means are possible, we immediately act. §16 We do not deliberate about particulars because these are questions of perception.
- §17 **What we decide to do is what we have judged to be right as a result of deliberation.** While we deliberate, we do not consider any of the means that we are evaluating to be definitely right or best, but once we have decided, we consider the means that we have decided upon to be definitely right or best. §19 Decision is a deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us. Once we have deliberated and come to judge some action (a way to promote some end) as right or best, we form a desire to so act, that is in accord with our wish (rational desire) for that end. So decision requires deliberation and wish.

- III.4 Wish
  - Aristotle is not explicit about this here, but according to Irwin's notes, a wish, to Aristotle, is a rational desire for some good as an end in itself. According to these notes, a wish is a rational desire (one of the three sorts of desire, the other two are appetite and spirit, which correspond to Plato's tripartition of the soul). §1 Some believe a wish to be a desire for the good, and others believe a wish to be a desire for what appears to be good.
  - §2 What is unsatisfying about the former view is that then, a person could not wish for what is in fact bad, but we think people do in fact wish for what is bad. §3 What is unsatisfying about the latter view is that it implies that nothing is naturally or unqualifiedly wished (for) because what appears good necessarily so appears to some person, so it only makes sense to think of something as wished for by some person, but not naturally or unqualifiedly wished for.
  - §4 Aristotle's solution here is the characteristic and familiar appeal to the excellent person as a standard. What is naturally and unqualifiedly wished for is the good, but what is wished for by each person is the apparent good. These coincide for the excellent person in the same way that things that are naturally or unqualifiedly sweet appear so to the healthy person but not to the ill. §5 The many, on the other hand, wish for pleasure, because this appears good to them.
- III.5 Virtue and Vice are in Our Power
  - §1 When we act virtuously, our actions promote (instrumentally or constitutively) ends. These are the actions that we deliberate about, and consequently decide to do. Actions that we decide to do are voluntary, so our actions when we act virtuously are voluntary. §2 The same is true for our action when we act viciously. §3 That such action is voluntary implies, Aristotle asserts (or argues) here, that being virtuous or vicious is up to us, because being virtuous or vicious consists in acting virtuously or viciously. The remainder of this chapter defends the claim that acting virtuously (which requires not only that the action is virtuous, but that it is done virtuously, which in turn requires that it is done from virtuous motives) is voluntary
    - Aristotle's argument here does not settle the matter because all that has been argued in the earlier chapters is that virtuous action (distinct from acting virtuously, for example, a just action that an unjust person might do) is an action concerned with promoting some ends, and so is an action that we deliberate about, decide on, and desire to do in accord with a wish for the relevant end. But such action is not constitutive of being virtuous, instead, only acting virtuously (which includes, for example, acting from virtuous motivations) is constitutive of being virtuous. So this argument equivocates between virtuous action and acting virtuously. Aristotle seems to be partially aware of this, hence proceeds to offer further arguments for virtue and vice being up to us.
  - §4 Vice is voluntary. §5 This is because the origin of vice is in the vicious person. §6 If this, in turn, cannot be traced back to some external origin, then the origin of vice (not vicious action) is in the vicious person. On one interpretation, Aristotle here is denying determinism. This reading is supported by Aristotle's apparently thinking that the "first cause" of voluntary action is in us, and is the last thing discovered by deliberation. On another interpretation, Aristotle understands "principle" as "explanatory principle" rather than as "causal principle". Only a person's character explains his being vicious, even if there is some external cause of a person's character.
    - This is an initial positive argument for vice (and virtue) being up to us that rests on Aristotle's conception of voluntary action as action that has its origin in the person (whose action it is).
  - §7 Our practices of reward and punishment presuppose that virtue and vice are up to us. Vicious actions that are not forced or caused by (non-culpable) ignorance are punished, but we think that in so punishing and rewarding, we are encouraging virtue and discouraging vice, and it makes no sense to encourage something that is not up to us, such encouragement is futile. §8 We punish certain sorts of ignorance. §9 Such punishment presupposes that being ignorant is up to us. We also think that such ignorance is up to us because the origin of such ignorance is a failure to pay attention, and that is up to us. This implies that certain mental states like ignorance are up to us, presumably, the

mental states necessary for acting virtuously (which in turn is constitutive of hence necessary for being virtuous) are among these.

- §10 The objector could concede that one's being ignorant is a function of one's being inattentive, but reject that one's being inattentive is up to oneself, so one's being ignorant is also not up to oneself. Then, Aristotle's argument fails to establish that certain mental states are up to us, so it fails to establish that the mental states necessary for acting virtuously are up to us. Aristotle's response is that such states of character as being inattentive are a product of a person's actions, and these actions are up to us. Similarly, a person has an unjust character because he has done unjust actions. §11 This sort of habituation is perfectly ordinary, and common to, for example, athletic endeavours. §12 Any sensible person understands this sort of habituation. Any reasonable person, in doing a vicious act, (in part) wishes to be vicious. §13 So our characters are voluntary because our characters are formed by our actions, we know they are so formed, and our actions are voluntary. §14 Admittedly, a wish to be virtuous is not sufficient for a vicious person to be virtuous, i.e. a vicious person cannot escape being vicious simply by wishing it, so in some sense, becoming virtuous is no longer up to him. But because at some prior time, being virtuous or vicious was up to him, his being vicious is still voluntary.
    - This objector is unsatisfied with the evidence supplied or constituted by legal practices, because these are not necessarily justified. The thought here is simply that our characters are not up to us, so the earlier argument from legal practice is not persuasive. Aristotle's response is that our characters are up to us because they are knowingly formed by voluntary action.
- §15 Some vices (in the sense of falling short of excellence) of the body (and not only those of the soul) are voluntary (and so appropriate for praise and blame). So for example, ugliness, if caused by lack of training, is voluntary, but if caused by nature is not.
- §17 One difficulty with Aristotle's account of responsibility and wish is that, if a wish is for an apparent good, and what appears good to us is a function of our character, and the voluntary actions that form our character are a function of what appears good to us (because they are a function of our wish, i.e. rational desire), then the character that we form is a function of the character we antecedently have. So the characters that we form are not up to us. This objection imagines a sort of vicious infinite regress. Aristotle's first response is that there is no vicious infinite regress because the "loop" is not entirely closed, so the characters we have, and how things appear to us, and the characters that we form, are up to us. The objection that how things appear to us is beyond our control is implausible because then how things appear to us is entirely a function of some natural innate "sense" that cannot be acquired or learned, but that one is simply endowed with, and so virtuous action is not up to us either, but that is absurd. §19 Even if how ends appeared to us was not up to us, our deliberation (about the things that promote the ends) and the result of our deliberation are up to us. §20 The virtues are voluntary because we jointly (with external factors) construct our characters, and our characters determine what appears good to us, so there is no vicious infinite regress.
    - The thought here is that the actions that form our characters are not voluntary because they are a function of what things appear to us as good, which is a function of our antecedent characters (and presumably, at no point, is any of this up to us). Aristotle rejects that the formation of our characters is "automatic" in this way, ultimately because then our characters are entirely determined by some natural sense that we are born with.