Aristotelian Responsibility*

by John M. Cooper

In two independent treatments—Eudemian Ethics II 6-9 and Nicomachean Ethics III 1—Aristotle discusses the responsibility and correlative lack of responsibility of agents for the things that they do—in a broad use of the term, for their actions. In both places' he works

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1 The Eudemian treatment is a self-contained presentation of a comprehensive theory of those of their actions for which specifically human agents are responsible. Chapter 6 begins, “Let us, then, make a new beginning for the ensuing investigation” (1222b15). (Translations from the
with the same basic understanding of what sort of responsibility that is: it is, as I will argue, causal responsibility. He also presents a single theory of what agents’ responsibility for what they do consists in, though the *Eudemian* treatment differs in two respects from the much better known *Nicomachean* one. First, it limits itself to discussing the responsibility specifically and only of adult human beings for some of their actions: it leaves aside, undiscussed, children and teenagers, and non-human animals, groups that do figure in the *Nicomachean* discussion as

*EE are my own, based on Walzer-Mingay’s OCT text, but with frequent departures, all duly noted; whenever possible, I stick to mss. readings and forego emendations.*) The last sentence of Chapter 9, running over into Chapter 10, marks the definitive conclusion of that investigation: “So then, as to the voluntary and the involuntary, let them be thoroughly marked off in the foregoing way; let us speak after this of decision, ...” (1225b17-18; at 7, 1223a21-22, Aristotle had indicated that “the ensuing investigation” marked at 1222b15 has two parts: the voluntary and involuntary, and decision). (In my main text I render Aristotle’s talk here and elsewhere of “voluntary” and “involuntary,” i.e. “not-voluntary,” in terms of what an agent is responsible, or not responsible, for in what they do; I comment on this implied equivalence below, n. 11, and see also nn. 5 and 10.) The *Nicomachean* treatment (III 1) is similarly followed up by the announcement at the beginning of III 2 that “Since the voluntary and the involuntary have been thoroughly marked off, it is next in order to go through decision” (1111b4-5). (Translations from the *NE* are my own, based on Bywater’s OCT text, though I often adopt Rowe’s renderings, in S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics, Translation, Introduction and Commentary [NE],* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.) But, as noted just below in my main text, in the *NE* Aristotle resumes the discussion of the voluntary in ch. 5, after completing his discussion of decision (and its related topics of deliberation and wishing). Nothing in the *EE* corresponds to this *Nicomachean* extension.
agents responsible for some of what they do. Second, it differs slightly, but momentously, in what it includes among the things an adult human agent might do for which they are responsible. Furthermore, Aristotle thinks, and argues in an extension of the *Nicomachean* treatment (*NE III 5*), that adult agents, in particular, are responsible not just for many of their actions, as other agents also are. Adults are responsible in addition for their own characters as morally good (or at least decent), or bad people of one stripe and degree or other. As a result, they are responsible also for their particular tendencies to feel non-rational desires, of appetite and spirit, and for the accompanying emotional feelings—as well as for the occurrent desires and feelings to which these tendencies give rise. In this way, Aristotle argues that adult human

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2 At *EE II 8*, 1225a19-34 Aristotle allows some actions done from strong emotional feelings to count as involuntary; he denies this in *NE*. See below, n. 30.

3 Even in *EE*: see 1223a10-13, 19-20.

4 The broad scope of the *Nicomachean* theory, in which one can be responsible both for things one does and for one’s feelings, is duly reflected, by anticipation of this later extension, in the opening lines of *NE III 1*: “So, since virtue concerns both feelings and actions, and praise and blame arise for voluntary ones, but for involuntary ones sympathetic allowance, [we need to discuss the voluntary and the involuntary].” Nonetheless (see sect. II), Aristotle’s theory of voluntariness, developed in III 1, as also in the *EE*, is presented as a theory of voluntary and not voluntary action only; the voluntariness of some feelings follows as a result of our responsibility, through our prior voluntary actions, for the states of character part of whose constitution is the tendency to experience specific sets of such feelings on specific sorts of occasions. They are voluntary, when voluntary at all, in a derivative, secondary way that does not require any adjustment in the definition of voluntariness as restricted to actions, provided in *NE III 1*. 
agents (but they alone among agents) are responsible not only for some of the things they
do—their actions—but for many of their occurrent desires, feelings, and emotions too.

What is Aristotle’s theory of responsibility a theory of? In modern philosophy and modern
life (and in most modern languages) we all recognize causal responsibility as one sort of re-
sponsibility. And agents can be causally responsible through their actions for some things that
happen. But for other things there are other causes: a drought, for example, caused by chang-
ing patterns of global meteorology, would most often be the cause of a crop’s failure, not some
human actions or inactions. We also all recognize legal responsibility as another; and that is
something, again, that individual agents can bear, though again, I suppose, not only they (cor-
porations, for example, have legal responsibilities). But in contemporary philosophy and in con-
temporary life, we hear a lot of talk of specifically “moral” responsibility, especially in contexts
of judging and blaming others for having behaved “immorally.” That is a sort of responsibility
attributed only to normal adult human beings, or at any rate it is normally thought to be legiti-
mately attributed only to them. But it has frequently been noticed that, as I mentioned above,
Aristotle is quite explicit (twice, in fact) in the Nicomachean treatment that, as he thinks, small
children and non-human animals too “do voluntary actions”—which implies, for him, that they
are responsible for some of what they do.5 This suggests that the responsibility he invest-
gates, at least in the NE, is not “moral responsibility,” even in the case of adult humans.

5 NE III 1, 1111a25-6, and III 2, 1111b8-9. Here he says only that animals and children do some
“voluntary” actions (he does not use of them instead or in addition a separate Greek word one
could translate as “responsible,” for example αἰτιοί). However (see next note, and EE II 6,
1223a16-18), for Aristotle voluntary actions simply are the ones that one is cause of in a cer-
tain specific way, and so is causally responsible for, as explained below. So in emphasizing that
Aristotle does not say animals and non-adult humans do voluntary actions in the Eudemian discussion. There from the outset, as noted just now, he speaks explicitly only of adult human beings as “voluntary,” responsible agents. But he limits his discussion in EE in that way because, as he thinks, only adults are either virtuous or vicious people, and in the EE Aristotle focuses his discussion of voluntary agency on showing that acts of virtue and vice are the agent’s own responsibility. (Even in NE, Aristotle’s focus in his theory of responsibility is on adult action; the parallel responsibility of children and animals is a tangential matter, aside from the main questions addressed.) However, with only a little bit of linguistic tweaking Aristotle’s theory as advanced in EE makes animals responsible for some of what they do: see II 8, 1224a20-30. Hence it is clear that Aristotle’s theory of responsibility, as presented in both children and animals do some things voluntarily, he is saying that they are responsible for some of what they do.

6 It is true that Aristotle begins his discussion (EE II 6, 1222b18-20) by limiting actions (πράξεις) to adults (see also 1223a1-9); so when subsequently he discusses responsibility for actions (πράξεις) he is limiting himself to adult responsibility. But notice that at II 8, 1224a20-30, where Aristotle reverts to the claim (1222b18-20) that neither children nor animals do actions, he recognizes that they do do things (not πράττειν, but ποιεῖν, a verb he has also used of humans when they “do” actions, 1223a8), and he says that, unlike when lifeless things “do” or bring things about, when animals do things they do them from appetite, a non-rational type of desire. On the theory of voluntariness (responsibility) Aristotle is building up to in EE and sets out in chap. IX, when an adult human acts, i.e. does something, solely from appetite—not all adult actions are done also from a decision, for Aristotle—then something that they do gets counted as something voluntary: Aristotle’s theory holds that voluntary acts are done from non-rational desire or from decision (see below). So when animals (and children) also act from non-
EE and NE, is not, anyhow taken as a whole and in its intentions, a theory of what philosophers and ordinary people mean nowadays when they speak of “moral responsibility.” His theory is intended to be a theory of something that he thinks children and non-human animals can have, as well as adult humans.

On the other hand, Aristotle does emphasize a connection between the responsibility that his theory offers an account of, and the legitimate praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of agents; and praise and blame are fundamental to what people understand by “moral responsibility.” What you are “morally” responsible for having done you are blameworthy for having done if it was bad, or praiseworthy if it was good. In fact, Aristotle introduces his treatment of voluntariness in the first lines of NE III by saying that one is praised or blamed (legitimately, he means) only for things that are voluntary, that is, one’s own responsibility; that is why, he says, in a close consideration of virtue, such as he is attempting in this part of the Ethics, it is neces-

rational desires alone, as of course for Aristotle they always do whenever they do anything at all, the EE theory implies that they likewise act voluntarily, that is, do something they are responsible for. (The addition implied, when Aristotle states his theory succinctly at II 9, 1225a37-b1, of “on thought,” κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν, when an act done from desire is counted as voluntary, is only a verbal obstacle to this conclusion: it is explicated, b1-10, as “not on account of ignorance.” In the Nicomachean treatment, as we will see, this last phrase replaces EE’s reference to “on thought” as any part of the definition of voluntariness. Nothing suggests that in the EE Aristotle would deny that children and non-human animals do some things thinking and indeed knowing, i.e. not in ignorance, that they are doing them. Hence, as implied by the EE theory, they do them voluntarily, and are responsible for what they do.)
sary to thoroughly mark off what one is responsible, or not responsible, for.⁷ (Here he is making the unstated, but obvious and generally shared assumption that virtue and virtuous actions are things that above all else we are legitimately praised for.) Philosophers who discuss “moral” responsibility match that with another concept. They conceive of a special sort of praise and, especially, blame: “moral praise” or “moral blame,” to which only adults are, it is generally thought, legitimately subject. If, then, Aristotle’s theory of responsibility concerns adult human agents’ responsibility for what they do, either wholly (as formally presented in the *EE*) or at any rate as its primary focus (in the *NE*), and if he regards it as important, as we have seen he does, to link responsibility to praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, should we conclude, despite the appearances given by his inclusion of other than adult human agents as in some way or to some degree responsible for some of what they do, that his theory really does concern, perhaps as a special case, specifically “moral” responsibility? Perhaps he sees an important difference between the responsibility for actions that children and animals have from adult agents’

⁷ Aristotle makes the same point at *EE* II 6, where again he is introducing his discussion of the voluntary and the involuntary (but this time it comes toward the end of the chapter, 1223a9-10). Chapter 6, crucially important as it is in providing the essential leading idea of Aristotle’s theory of the voluntary, speaks except in this final paragraph not at all of voluntary and involuntary but throughout only of origins or originating principles (ἀρχαί) or causes (αἰτία, αἴτιον). Before speaking of voluntary and involuntary, in this last paragraph, he is careful first to introduce the terminology of what is “up to” human beings (1223a2-3, 6, 8, 9), explicitly linking this to what human beings are themselves the origin and originating cause of. Voluntary and involuntary then become the main topic only of the further discussion, in chapters 7-8. First, in this last paragraph of chapter 6, they must be linked to what a human being is an originating cause of, i.e. what they do that is “up to” them. See further n. 12 below.
responsibility? Because of special features of adult agency, perhaps he holds that adults often satisfy not only the same criteria that these other agents do when they act responsibly, but additional ones too, making them “morally” responsible and subject to “moral” praise and blame, as well?

In what follows I will argue that we should answer these questions with a firm “no.” For now, let me point out simply that all that Aristotle actually says in *NE* III 1 about praising and blaming is that it is only if an agent does something they are responsible for, that they are legitimately to be praised or blamed for what they do. He does not say, and, as we will see upon closer consideration of his theory, he does not mean, that when an agent does something good or bad that they are responsible for doing, they are legitimately to be praised or blamed for doing it. Nor (see below) does he even suppose that there is a legitimate general but defeasible presumption, when someone is responsible for doing something good or bad, that they are to be praised or blamed for it. On his theory, being responsible for doing something is only a necessary condition for legitimate praise or blame; whether praise or blame (even “in one’s heart” and unspoken) is merited is to be determined on independent, further grounds. But, I take it, “moral” responsibility, as that is understood in our contemporary discourse, for something bad is understood to be a sufficient condition for “moral” blame (for those who employ that concept): anyone who is “morally” responsible for an action of stealing is thereby legitimately subject to negative moral evaluation as a person, insofar as they have done that action; having done it is a blot on their character, something they should feel bad about (and, if they are religious, seek forgiveness for from God, if not also from the victim). Thus, as I will try to

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show, on Aristotle’s theory, an adult person who does something in itself (by his lights) morally
good or bad that they are responsible for doing is, in general, not legitimately either praised or
blamed simply because they are responsible for having done such a thing.⁹ And when, on his

paragraph we read “… to be morally responsible for something, say an action, is to be worthy
of a particular kind of reaction—praise, blame, or something akin to these—for having per-
formed it.” See also Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” Proceedings of the British

⁹ I add the qualification “in general” here because Aristotle does seem to think that anyone who
is fully virtuous merits praise for every good thing that they do that they are responsible for
doing (see Rhet. I 9, 1366a36; EE II 1, 1220a6-7; II 6, 1223a9-10; II 11,12289-10; NE I 12,
1101a12-18), just as every fully vicious person merits blame for every bad thing that they simi-
larly do. This would apply as much to socially and personally inconsequential virtuous or vicious
actions (such as eating at the right time, in the right way, and the right amount—or the wrong
ways, times, amounts, and so on—under totally unremarkable circumstances of daily life) as it
does to the grandest and most consequential of virtuous or vicious acts: sacrificing one’s life for
a friend or one’s country, or venally betraying them, for example. In both sorts of case, the
marvelous beauty and intelligent grasp of the whole of human life and the human good (or vile
misunderstanding of it) shines into and through the action. Fully or completely virtuous and vi-
cious people are relatively rare, however, and many non-virtuous (but only decent) people do
good things and are responsible for doing them, or, also, bad things—they can even do them, on
some occasions, in very much the same ways, on the same temporary understandings, or lack of
it, that characterize the fully virtuous and vicious (see NE II 4, 1105a28-32). For Aristotle, as
we will see, the question of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness is completely open in such
cases; one needs to consider the circumstances before one can decide on that question.
theory, they are legitimately praised or blamed, they are not praised or blamed in any such
moralistic or morally judgmental way.

We should, then, definitely not take Aristotle’s theory of responsibility to be a theory,
specifically, of “moral responsibility.” We should not, I will argue, even take it to include,
whether implicitly or explicitly, a theory of some special further sort of responsibility—“moral”
responsibility—beyond the sort he intends to analyze in his theory, that adult human agents
(but not children and animals) have for some of their responsible actions (the morally good or
bad ones). At any rate, we must first consider Aristotle’s theory as a theory applicable to all
agents—children, non-rational animals in general, as well as adult human beings (sections II-VII
below). That is the core of his theory of responsibility. I mentioned above that Aristotle does
consider adult humans responsible also for their settled characters and as we will see he does
not include non-rational animals in the group of agents so responsible (children don’t have set-
tled characters in the first place). We will need, then, to go beyond a study of the core theory
to see what Aristotle has to say about the responsibility for their characters that only adult
human agents have (see section IX below). I will argue that even at that point, no concern for
what people nowadays speak of as “moral” responsibility and “moral” praise or blame enters Ar-
istotle’s theory.

As noted above, another sort of responsibility that agents can have for what they do is
legal responsibility. But it is even clearer that Aristotle’s is not a theory merely and specifically
of legal responsibility. Some of the examples Aristotle discusses, in attempting to clarify what
an agent is responsible for and what not, are indeed of a sort discussed by rhetoricians (such
as the sophist Antiphon in his Tetralogies) as issues for law courts to decide (a javelin-thrower
kills someone who, maybe, shouldn’t have wandered onto the javelin-field). But Aristotle’s the-
ory is a general, indeed all-encompassing one that concerns all sorts of things that agents do,
and it is not limited to, or at any point focused upon, actions that raise questions of legal responsibility. Aristotle does address issues specifically to do with what is or isn’t, or ought or ought not to be, counted for or against responsibility specifically in the context of the law, elsewhere in the Ethics, in the jointly Nicomachean and Eudemian book on justice (see e.g. 1135b25 ff.); but these are secondary and ancillary discussions, in which his core theory is drawn upon for illumination of legal cases. His core theory, as expounded in NE III 1 and 5 and in EE II 6-9—my subject in this paper—is not and does not include a theory of legal responsibility, or of the proper principles for a legal system to follow in assigning it.

What remains then, from my rough classification of notions of responsibility, is causal responsibility. In fact, as I will argue, leaving aside for the moment the extension of his theory to cover responsibility for character and so for feelings, Aristotle’s theory is a theory of one special sort of causal responsibility for things that happen, namely the causal responsibility of agents for some of the things that they do, that is, things that they cause in one particular way, namely by doing them. He very clearly introduces and marks his theory in EE II 6 as a theory of causal responsibility (I will say more about this just below, section II), and he indicates the special status in his theory of, specifically, agents as causes of, specifically, what they do, by presenting his theory in both EE and NE as a theory of “the voluntary and the involuntary” (τὸ ἐκούσιον καὶ τὸ ἀκούσιον).10 When the wind blows a tree over, the wind is the cause (the

10 See EE II 7, 1223a21; NE III 1, 1109b32-33. I translate ἀκούσιον throughout as “involuntary,” i.e. not voluntary (the contradictory opposite, on Aristotle’s usage). It is true that in one brief passage, well into his NE treatment (at 1110b18-24), Aristotle draws a distinction between something’s being “not voluntary” (οὐχ ἐκούσιον) and something’s being ἀκούσιον (“countervoluntary,” in the attractive neologism adopted by Rowe in and S. Broadie and C. Rowe, NE, 122-26): the “countervoluntary” is what, being not voluntary, is also regretted. This
principal and originating cause, Aristotle holds) of the tree’s falling—and so, we could perfectly naturally say, responsible for that event. But that is not a case of something that happens, or is done by the wind, voluntarily (or involuntarily either). Only when we consider an agent causing something where causing that is an action it does, do we find anything voluntary or involuntary. So, Aristotle’s theory is a theory of one specific case of causal responsibility—the causal responsibility of agents for the actions that they do, and therefore cause, namely the voluntary ones—and of their lack of responsibility for the involuntary (and, as a special case of the latter, the “countervoluntary”) ones. Aristotle’s theory is a theory of a certain sort of causal responsibility, not of either legal or “moral” responsibility.

distinction is not drawn in the Eudemian discussion (though the basis for it, that in ordinary usage something isn’t called ἀκούσιον unless it is distressful, is remarked on at 1223a30). In fact, Aristotle’s core theory marks off voluntary actions from ones that are not voluntary, and he introduces and concludes his discussions in both EE (1223a21, 1225b17) and NE (1109b32-3, 1111b4) by contrasting these two notions using the standard pair of τὸ ἑκούσιον καὶ τὸ ἀκούσιον. It would be an error to translate ἀκούσιον as “countervoluntary” in any of those passages, or in almost all the other occurrences of the word in Aristotle. The right translation is “involuntary” (meaning by that “not voluntary”).

Here and elsewhere I may seem to be using “voluntary” and “responsible” virtually interchangeably. But though Aristotle’s theory certainly does explain the voluntariness of actions in terms of their agents’ causal responsibility for them, both in English and in the Greek equivalent an agent can be responsible, through what their voluntary actions cause, for a good deal more than just their actions themselves. Thus (to draw on an example from below, sect. VIII) my dog can be responsible for the mess on my kitchen floor, by voluntarily (and maybe defiantly) peeing on it; but, on Aristotle’s theory, it is only his action of peeing that was voluntary. We need to
Let us turn, then, to Aristotle’s texts, to see how he develops and explains his theory of agents’ responsibility.

II

The *Eudemian* treatment begins with the statement that human beings are the only substances that are originating sources (*archai*) of one specific and important sort of thing. All substances (that is, plants and animals) are, he says, originating sources of some things (e.g., they generate specific sorts of offspring), and there are other sorts of originating sources as well, for example in mathematical sciences, where the basic truths are originating sources for the theorems. Humans, though, besides generating other humans, are what Aristotle calls here “controlling” (*κύριαι*) sources, in that they are also originating sources of changes (movements—things that happen); furthermore, unlike all other animals, which also originate changes, among the changes that human beings originate are actions (*praxeis*). Moreover, Aristotle adds, originating sources are causes (*aitiai*) of whatever has being or comes to be from them. So humans, in being originating sources of some of their actions, are the originating causes of them. These actions, Aristotle explains, in being caused by humans, are “up to them” (*eph’hautois*): “all the ones that are up to them they are the cause of, and all the ones they are the cause of are up to them (1223a7-9).” Thus, an action’s being “up to us” and our being the cause of it are equivalent notions. So, Aristotle concludes *EE* II 6 by saying, we need to find bear that distinction in mind as we proceed in the coming sections to the details of Aristotle’s theory.

An action’s being up to me or caused by me may differ in the meanings or connotations of these distinct terms, of course, but with this equivalence Aristotle makes it clear that the notion of what is “up to us” as he employs it in his discussions of the voluntary, both here and in the *NE*, is a strictly causal one. If we are the (originating) cause of an action of ours, it is up to us
out which of our actions we are ourselves the cause and origin of: namely, he says, as all agree, those are our voluntary ones. He then begins the inquiry into the voluntary in II 7 (1223a23-

to do; and if something is up to us to do, or not do, that means merely that if we (should) do it we are (would be) the cause, and if we don’t do it we are the cause of that, as well. Wherever in either the *EE* or *NE* treatment Aristotle speaks of something being up to us to do or not do, he says nothing about any “free choice” between the alternatives, especially if that is taken to imply a “liberty of indifference.” He speaks only of our causal role in doing whatever we do, including our omissions. (See further n. 47 below, and its main text.)

13 1223a16-17: in fact what Aristotle literally says is that all agree that the actions a human being is cause of are all and only those that are both voluntary and done on his own decision, when what he means instead is that humans are causes of their voluntary actions, including those that are done on a decision. Adults are held, under his theory not only in *NE* but in *EE* as well, to be responsible for akratic actions, which are definitely not done, according to Aristotle, on decisions to do them: see for example 1223b1-2, 8, 33. The slip, if there is one, no doubt results from his focus, noted above, on showing the voluntariness of acts of virtue and vice: actions of virtue or vice are always done on decisions to do them. In any event, the *EE*’s introduction here (at 1223a7-9 together with 16-17) of its discussion of voluntary and involuntary actions establishes the following terminological relationships: actions that are “up to” an agent are all and only the ones that that agent causes through its own agency (or would cause, if it did them), and all and only the voluntary actions are actions that an agent is cause of in that way. Thus “up to oneself” and “voluntary” are co-extensive terms (in the case of things “up to oneself” that one actually does), but “up to oneself” is an overtly causal notion, while “voluntary” is not. One should note that this co-extensiveness applies in Aristotle’s conception of agency to all agents, animals and small children as well as adults. Whenever an agent does something vol-
27) by indicating that the causes of human actions are desire (orexis), decision (prohairesis), and thought (dianoia), and that there are three subdivisions of desire: wish, spirited desire, and appetite (boulēsis, thumos, epithumia).\footnote{14}

This introductory discussion in the \textit{EE} is important for two main reasons. First, it establishes that the theory of what it is to be voluntary, and of which things are voluntary, is going to be a theory concerning certain actions. The \textit{Nicomachean} treatment has no such introductory discussion, but leaps in \textit{medias res} by remarking (1109b30-31) that virtue concerns passions \textit{and} actions and that for “voluntary ones” people are praised or blamed.\footnote{15} This obscures voluntary it does something “up to it” to do. For the application of the terminology of “up to” it to all animals see \textit{Phys.} 8.4, at 255a5-10.

\footnote{14} He then proceeds, Il 7-9, by considering each of these in turn as what is the cause of actions that are voluntary, before deciding (1225a36-b1) that the right answer is: the voluntary is what is done “on thought” (τὸ κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν). Thus the \textit{EE} verbal formula for what the voluntary \textit{is} does differ markedly from the \textit{NE}’s summary statement defining the voluntary, discussed in the next paragraph but one below. But in fact, as we will see, when one takes into account the qualifications provided in the discussion in \textit{EE} leading up to its formula, the two theories do not differ at all in substance.

\footnote{15} It is sometimes thought that Aristotle means here to mark off the voluntary, as if by definition, as whatever is blameworthy (if it is bad, i.e. vicious) or praiseworthy (if it is good, i.e. virtuous). On such a view, voluntary actions would be subject to an initial, though defeasible, presumption of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness: if it was something completely trivial, in no way a good or a bad thing to do, that would count as a “defeater.” However, we will see as we proceed that in fact Aristotle applies to at least two classes of what he counts as voluntary actions a three-fold set of options: praise, blame, or sympathetic allowance (see sect. V below).
the focus of the theory of the voluntary, as it is going to be formally presented in III 1, on actions (alone), on things that people do, while the *Eudemian* treatment makes that focus explicit and clear. Secondly, it is crystal clear from the *EE*’s introduction that the theory to be proposed is a theory of causal responsibility—that is, causal responsibility specifically of agents, specifically for actions; it is also made clear that this responsibility must rest in the agent’s desires, decisions, and thoughts (these, the *EE* explicitly announces, are the causes of actions).\(^{16}\)

Moreover, many of what Aristotle counts as virtuous actions, all of which are voluntary, are too simple and universally expected of us to be even presumptively worth praising anyone for (or blaming anyone for not doing): ones of eating with normal decorum, as against mild overindulgence, behaving with normal friendliness as against abruptly (but not actually rudely) to shopkeepers or people passing by in the street, for example. It would seem, then, that Aristotle didn’t mean at 1109b30 to imply a presumption of praise or blame (even a defeasible one) for voluntary actions. (I thank Lesley Brown and Anna Marmodoro for questions that led me to add this footnote.)

\(^{16}\) As noted above (p. 10-11), besides the two formal expositions of voluntariness, *EE* II 6-9 and *NE* III 1-5, Aristotle develops and applies ideas about voluntariness in *NE* V=*EE* IV, chaps. 8-9. At one place there (1135b1) Aristotle speaks of getting old and dying and similar things that “belong to us by nature” as things “that we both do (πράττομεν) and undergo” none of which is either voluntary or involuntary. He is no doubt led to speak of (some) of these as things we do (i.e. actions of ours) because of the naturalness, both in Greek and English, of saying that we “do” these things. But his theory of voluntariness in the formal expositions in both treatises does not treat these as actions at all: that is why, on the official theory, they are neither voluntary nor involuntary.
Despite not having a clarifying introduction, when the *Nicomachean* treatment finally gives its summary statement of what the voluntary is, almost at the end of his discussion (1111a22-24), Aristotle echoes the *Eudemian* emphasis on human beings as *archai*, originating sources, and originating sources specifically of actions (he has already mentioned internal sources of action in 1110a15 ff.): the voluntary, he says, is “that of which the originating source (*archê*) is in [the agent] itself, when it knows the particulars of the action’s (*praxis*) situation.”17 So in the *NE* too Aristotle defines the voluntary in purely causal terms: to be voluntary an action has to have a certain kind of “originating source,” viz. a cause internal to the agent. Nonetheless, if one did not have the *Eudemian* introduction in mind (as most scholars reading *NE* III 1 do not), it might take quite a bit of reflection for a reader to realize that the sort of originating source being referred to in this summary is an origin of actions (not for example of other movements, such as those belonging to the digestive system, or the ones that go on in the mother’s womb, or the father’s scrotum, in the process of generation)—despite the explicit mention of actions in its second clause. Hence one might miss the fact, made explicit in the *EE* at 1223a23-25, that the origin being sought is to be located either in desires, rational and non-rational, or in decision, or/and in thought. Nonetheless, it is clear upon reading and thinking through the whole chapter that the following is what Aristotle means to be saying not only in *EE* but also in *NE*:

17 Though grammatically awkward, this wording makes it clear that on Aristotle’s definition the only things that are directly voluntary are actions (as noted above, n. 4, feelings and character are voluntary only derivatively). So certain actions, the voluntary ones, are what on this definition an agent is responsible for. So for Aristotle, when someone causes an explosion what is voluntary for the agent, and what they are responsible for, is not the explosion, but doing the action of causing one. See further below, sect. III.
the voluntary is whatever action has its originating source within an agent, i.e. in some or other of its desires, or in a decision that it makes, and in its thoughts (i.e., in those of its thoughts in which it knows the particulars of the action’s situation).

On his view, in both treatments, what it is to be voluntary is to be an action that has that sort of source, viz., a causal one internal to the agent.

III

Aristotle sets his task in investigating the voluntary in the *EE* (II 6, 1223a15-16) as “to get a grasp on which of one’s actions one is oneself cause and origin of”—and, correlative, of which ones one is not the cause and origin of. Before we proceed to examine his theory we need to pay heed to the particular way that Aristotle has of, so to speak, individuating actions.\(^{18}\) This differs markedly from recent and contemporary philosophical theories, which

\(^{18}\) In contemporary philosophy the standard view, or treatment, of actions involves considering a single action at any time, which then is susceptible of multiple true descriptions. On such a view the bodily movements or ensemble of movements in which the agent immediately exercises their agency could be regarded as the “basic action” to which these further descriptions apply: flipping a light switch, turning on a light. In Aristotle’s *NE* definition for voluntary actions (111a22-24) quoted just above, one can see at once that he approaches this topic with an alternative, multiple-actions-at-a-time view, illustrated below in my main text. He speaks of “the particulars in which the action [i.e., the one that the definition means to identify as a voluntary one] is situated.” The basic action, on the standard view, takes place in all the particulars that help to distinguish the different descriptions that apply to that basic action; so, in fact, do each of the “other” actions-under-a-description, such as flipping a switch or turning on a light. When Aristotle speaks of the voluntary action in any case of voluntary action, he is plainly considering a large number of distinct actions done at the same time with the same movements, each ac-
speak of an action (on an occasion) as having many true descriptions, under some of which it might be voluntary, but involuntary under others. Aristotle, less artificially and with less burden of theory, speaks instead of many actions done on each single occasion. Consider a single occasion when someone acts. As the summary definition in NE III 1 I just quoted implies, when Aristotle asks which actions are voluntary and what makes an action voluntary, his question is, which of the many things the person does on an occasion, if any, count as voluntary? Which, if any, count instead as involuntary? What makes the difference? Consider Oedipus at the crossroads. On his way to Thebes, Oedipus confronts an older man coming in the other direction who offensively orders him to step aside and let him pass. So (in a single, unified movement) Oedipus raises his club and smashes the man on the head, reducing him to a heap on the roadside and in fact killing him; moreover, the man, unbeknownst to Oedipus, was all along his own father. In Aristotle’s way of thinking about actions, Oedipus does a huge number, in fact a virtually unlimited one, of different actions in that first movement. He raises the club and hits the

Aristotle never countenances talk of a single action being voluntary under one description, but perhaps not voluntary under some other one that equally applies to it. I point out this difference between Aristotle’s approach to the individuation of actions and the contemporary one simply out of faithfulness to Aristotle’s view. Though I think Aristotle’s approach is more intuitive and natural, I don’t mean to claim for it any theoretical superiority. For an alternative similar to Aristotle’s, see Alvin I. Goldman, “The Individuation of Action,” The Journal of Philosophy 68 (1971), 761-774.

19 Aristotle may be thinking of Oedipus when he mentions a person that bashed a man, not knowing it was his father, at NE V=EE IV, 1135a28-30.
man; he raises the club and hits his own father; he collapses the man into a heap; he collapses his father into a heap; he kills the man; he kills his father; he fulfills the prophecy that he would kill his father; he gives an obnoxious old geezer what he had coming to him, namely a beating; maybe he gave an old geezer what he had coming to him, his death. And on and on. Aristotle’s question, then, is which, if any, of all these vastly numerous things that Oedipus did—that is, that were his actions—were voluntary, and which if any were involuntary, and what makes the difference between the two sets?

In *NE* III 1, having first announced the need for a theory of the voluntary and the involuntary, Aristotle immediately proposes a summary statement covering all (and, it seems, only) the involuntary actions. He then goes on in the rest of the chapter to elucidate this statement and, in fact, to adopt it, as elucidated, as part of his own theory: “it is thought that things that happen (*ta gignomena*) by compulsion (*bia*) or through ignorance (*di’ agnoian*) are involuntary” (1109b35-1110a1). Notice that the “things that happen” referred to here include only actions.21 The “voluntary” and “involuntary” things referred to 3-4 lines before, in the first sentence, are actions.

20 On single occasions of action there will be many, many things relevant to his agency that are true of the agent, his circumstances, and the consequences of his action. A given observer might or might not take note of most of these, or take an interest in them if they did. Nonetheless an agent always does an open-endedly numerous number of things, ready for any observer or theorist to take note of and raise questions about. That open-endedness is not a reasonable ground of objection to Aristotle’s way of counting actions; at any rate, it does not give the observer the power to bring an action into being just by paying attention to it.

21 As noted above, Aristotle’s core theory of voluntariness, which he is about to develop for us in the remainder of this chapter, is a theory of voluntary actions, as such. See nn. 4, 16, 17 and sect. IX below. In III 1 (and *EE* II 6-9) Aristotle reasonably works out first a theory of the
It is important to bear this in mind if we are properly to understand the next sentence and its examples: “What is compelled has its originating source from outside, the sort of source in which the one acting, or the one being affected [by the source], contributes nothing—for example if a wind or people having him under their control took him off (komisai) somewhere.” Aristotle voluntariness specifically and only of actions (doings), before considering other things besides actions that also count as voluntary.

It is true, as noted above, that Aristotle writes in the same sentence referred to here that virtues concern “passions and actions,” but passions are silently set aside from the outset, beginning with the mention of praise and blame in 1109b31—lawgivers (b34-5) don’t punish people for how they feel. In this chapter only actions are considered as either voluntary or involuntary (this is duly registered, as we saw above, in Aristotle’s summary statement, 1111a22-24, of what the voluntary is, with its second clause specifying knowledge of the particulars of “the action” as required for voluntariness). So no other sorts of phenomena, other things that happen (e.g. the wind blowing a tree over), are included within the intended scope of the phrase “things that happen” at 1110a1.

I translate ὁ πράττων ἢ ὁ πάσχων at 1110a2-3 by “the one acting, or the one being affected [by the source],” rather than by e.g. “the agent, or [rather] the victim” (Irwin, Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics (ed. 2) [NE], Cambridge and Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), because (even if, as I explain below, this agent is a victim) we must not take being a victim in the way indicated here to preclude being also an agent, as Irwin’s translation (intentionally, it seems) suggests it does. Notice, in any event, that πάσχων here refers to undergoing effects imposed by the outside source. It is not to be related to the πάθη (passions) that Aristotle begins the chapter by specifying that, alongside actions, virtues and vices concern. Also,
is not envisaging here (as he is often mistakenly thought to be) something like a tornado picking someone up and dropping them down somewhere intact, or people binding someone up, locking them in the trunk of a car, driving off and depositing them somewhere. No more is he thinking of someone’s being knocked unconscious and carried off. In none of these cases does the person engage their agency—they do not do anything, they do not act at all. Aristotle discusses cases of this kind in the EE: someone grabs someone else’s arm and uses it to strike a third person.\footnote{At EE 1224a15-20 Aristotle talks about “lifeless” things, such as a stone, and how they have two sorts of motion, their own natural one (downwards, for example), caused by an inner impulse of their own, and another “compulsory” one, by necessitation, when something outside moves them contrary to that natural impulse. So far, he says, that is like the human case: movement is voluntary when deriving from the inner impulse, involuntary when from the outer cause. However, Aristotle insists that in the case of the stone its natural motion is not voluntary, nor, by implication, is its necessitated one involuntary. Later, at 1224b13-15 he alludes to the case where someone takes someone else’s hand and strikes some third party with it. Aristotle compares that with just the sort of necessitation that a stone undergoes. So in this human case, as with that of the stone, the person is not involuntarily struck. (Aristotle irrelevantly makes the person struck resist the striker’s force; but that does not affect the lack of involuntariness in what happens to him.)} Aristotle makes it clear there that he thinks there is nothing involuntary going on. One should note that the verb Aristotle uses for “taking him off” extremely often, when a person is the object of the verb, means “conduct, escort” and does not at all connote physical carrying of the person; see H. G. Liddell, R. Scott and H.S. Jones, \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon} (Oxford University Press, 1940) s.v. II. So here. (I thank Christopher Taylor for raising questions that led me to add the clarifications in this note, and the preceding one.)
on in any such case—even if, in the *NE* cases, the victim didn’t want to be where they ended up and didn’t want to be blown around or bound up and carried in that way. In cases like that, where someone undergoes something but does not act at all, nothing involuntary occurs, according to Aristotle’s conception, and his theory, of the involuntary. In Aristotle’s core theory, involuntary things are necessarily involuntary actions.

IV

Hence, we need to fill out Aristotle’s examples so that they concern actions of the person who is affected by the force from outside, but actions that are nonetheless not voluntary. In the case of the wind, Aristotle must be considering an action of the compelled person to go where they are blown, but an involuntary one. In the case of people who have them under their control, it is the action of going where they are made to go by those people—again, one they do involuntarily. In the first case we could think of a sailor in a boat who is blown by the wind to a landing in some harbor they were not sailing to; they were acting all the while they were being blown, keeping the boat erect and pointing it as best they could in the direction they wanted to go, but being blown nonetheless where the wind was taking them. Since they were acting in the ways indicated all that while, arriving at that harbor was something they did; it is what all those actions added up to. This too was an action of theirs, but (unlike the steering and pointing) it was involuntary because they had no choice in the matter: the wind dictated where they would arrive, i.e. would go; they (their desires and knowledge, the requisite causes of voluntary action) did not. They went to that place compelled by the wind, not voluntarily. Likewise, the people with the person under their control determined where that person would end up (that is, where they would go, that specific action of theirs) because, as the person walked along under their own power, being pushed by them and restrained from going off in other directions, they made sure that the victim only walked where they wanted them to. The
victim went to the place the people in control intended and where they made sure he went, and this was an action of his. But it was not the result of any desire of his to go there (he had no such desire, and presumably also desired not to go there), nor did it result in any way from his knowing where he was going (he may or may not have known where he was going—that did not matter): so it was an involuntary action. It was involuntary because physically compelled.

As Aristotle says, in all cases of compelled action the victimized agent does not contribute anything to the doing of that particular action, the involuntary one—in these cases, the action of going to the specified place. He does go there, that is an action of his; but he contributed nothing to his doing that. That he did that was determined by—it had its complete originating cause in—the wind or the people who had control of him. Many other actions he did at the same time and with the same movements, he did voluntarily, that is, from his own desires and knowledge as the originating causes of them. The sailor tended the tiller and reefed the sails, struggling to stay afloat: all of those actions of his were voluntary. Still, all the while that he was doing all those things he was also, inevitably, doing the action of going to where the wind was taking him. As for the kidnap victim, he walked along, perhaps looking all the while for some way of escape, and certainly reluctantly, until he found himself where the kidnappers were making him go. He contributed nothing whatsoever to his doing that action, the action of going where he nonetheless went, even though it was his desires, his own control over his bodily movements, and his knowledge, that were originating causes of all the particular steps he knowingly took as he walked along—therefore, voluntarily.

In both cases, of course, the agent did have options: the sailor could have abandoned the boat by jumping overboard, or let it capsize, and could have not kept steering and managing the sails. In that case he would not have sailed and so not have done an action of going where the wind took him (viz., to the unwanted harbor). Or else he might just have drowned,
and arrived there dead (again, without going there). The kidnap victim could have resisted more vigorously than he did; he could have refused to walk and gone limp, thus forcing the kidnappers to bundle him up and physically carry him, or else beat him unconscious so as to make carrying him easier. In either case, they would insist on his coming to be there, even though in either case he would not go there. To take those options (the only ones available, given the force of these external powers) is, effectively, to cease to act at all; being physically carried or blown somewhere, as I noted above, is not doing anything. Being inertly so carried would not be counted on Aristotle's theory as anything involuntary, because for Aristotle only actions are either voluntary or not. That seems to me entirely reasonable, even if it goes against our way of speaking about involuntariness. For Aristotle, the characterizations of voluntary or involuntary reasonably do not apply to anything that just happens to people or things; on his core theory, it only applies to actions, to things that agents do. These agents had only the option of ceasing to act altogether.

In these cases, then, the agent does not have the option of doing some other action than to go where he does go; if he acts at all,25 that is where he is going to do the action of going. He goes there under compulsion (biâ), and therefore involuntarily. His only option is

25 I.e., in any relevant way: if the sailor decided to just sit in the boat reading a book without doing any sailor’s work, or the kidnap victim, after going limp, pulled out a book and sat on the ground reading it, then in being forcibly transported to the destination they would function in being so transported no differently than a couple of corpses. Likewise, if all action was completely futile, for example if the wind were simply too strong for steering to have any effect, then even if the sailor pulled and tugged against the wind all the while his boat was being borne in out his control onto the shore he would not have been an agent going where he ended up. No more would the kidnapped person if carried while futilely kicking and screaming.
simply to do the action of stopping acting altogether, and let his body be subject to whatever manipulation human or natural forces impose.

Aristotle next discusses two further cases, and this time the agent does have an option of which of two actions to take (beyond the action of stopping acting). These are cases of—what I will call, in contradistinction from compulsion—coercion, again one by a physical force, the other by human agents. High seas coerce a ship captain to order the cargo ditched in order to save the ship and the lives of the people on it; a tyrant coerces a man to do something seriously shameful (betray his country, say) by threatening to harm his wife and children, whom the tyrant has under his control, if he doesn’t—not to protect them from injury is seriously shameful too. The question Aristotle considers is whether these too should be counted as actions done under compulsion, and therefore as involuntary—ones that the agent is not responsible for, because the originating source of them lies not in his own desires or decision, and knowledge, but in the outside force. Aristotle’s answer is firm and decisive: all cases of coerced action are not involuntary, but, in fact, voluntary. They differ fundamentally from ac-

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See 1110a18, “So such actions are voluntary.” To clarify Aristotle’s distinction between compulsion and what I am calling coercion, and to see why he insists that coerced actions are voluntary, consider this variation on the compelled action of my kidnap victim. So far in my main text we have considered two cases, one where the victim does the action of going where he is forced to go, and the other where he refuses and is simply carried off, altogether inactive. But there is a third possibility. Suppose, as before, that the victim realizes it is hopeless to resist, and thinks the best chance they have of breaking free is to cooperate. So, while still looking around furtively for openings for escape, he plays along, so that his captors don’t need to keep on exercising their control (pushing him ahead, keeping the ropes tight, etc.). They just
tions that are compelled. The agent’s desires or decision, and their thoughts, are the originat-
tell him which direction to walk, and how fast, and so on, and he follows their instructions. This
person decides to go wherever it is they are taking him (maybe they even tell him where, so he
knows the destination as one of the particulars in which this action of his of going somewhere is
situated). He acts under coercion, because of their implicit or explicit serious and believable
threat of harm to him if he doesn’t cooperate. But he goes voluntarily. His action of going
there is not compelled (as we saw it would be if he were bound and pushed or pulled along) but
voluntary. (Of course, there is more to be said about this action than merely that: see the next
two paragraphs of my main text.) The fact that, as noted above, the compelled agent had the
option of ceasing to act, with the result that he would be physically carried to the same place,
does not, as I explained, make his action of walking a case of coerced, but voluntary action.
However, if instead he should take that option, the action that he then does (of going limp,
etc.), he does voluntarily, as I have also said. So if he knows that by going limp he will just
make the kidnappers beat him over the head and carry him, he may be responsible for doing the
further action of allowing himself to be carried there. Still, getting there by being carried is nei-
ther voluntary nor involuntary—it just happens to him. So the distinction between compulsion
and coercion remains. The coerced agent does an action of going to the place he ends up in
(and does it voluntarily); the compelled agent ends up there, and goes there, involuntarily. In
assessing responsibility and considering praise or blame in all three cases—the compelled agent,
the coerced one, and the one that goes limp—we limit ourselves to what they did do voluntarily.
Voluntarily walking under coercion, voluntarily opting to go limp, and voluntarily allowing your-
self to be carried somewhere, are importantly different actions. Praise and blame for these dif-
ferent voluntary actions involve different considerations. (I thank Ursula Coope and Terence
Irwin for raising questions that led to these clarifications.)
ing cause of these, and all, coerced actions; the outside force (though present and operating) is not their origin.

When the captain threw the cargo overboard he knew what he was doing and did it for a reason (presumably, a sufficient one: but that does not matter, so far as voluntariness goes); he desired and decided to do it. So it was voluntary, however much unwished for and regretted. The situation he was in was unlucky; he is the victim of misfortune. But his action of throwing the cargo overboard was voluntary. He is responsible for that thing that he did: throwing the cargo overboard (under these conditions of duress, of course: those are among the relevant particulars of that action).

Likewise for the man who betrayed the state secret (if that is what he did). He decided, or maybe he only just felt, that it was more shameful not to protect his family from harm than to betray the secret. (He may or may not have been wrong about that.) He too is the victim of bad luck: the misfortune of falling, with his family, into the clutches of the tyrant. But when he betrayed the secret he did that action voluntarily: the originating source of it lay within his desires or decision, and knowledge, not in the force applied by the tyrant with his threat. So he is responsible for this specific thing that he did: telling that secret (under these conditions of threat, it has to be emphasized, since that is a relevant particular of the specific action of secret-betrayal that he did). Or, alternatively, if the man refused to tell the secret and thereby caused the harms to his family that the tyrant threatened, which was a seriously shameful thing to do, then he voluntarily harmed his family and voluntarily did something shameful. His desires and decision were the (anyhow, an important) originating cause of that harm. Like Oedipus who killed the old geezer voluntarily, this man harmed his family voluntarily. (The fact that the tyrant also harmed them voluntarily is irrelevant, so far as this question is concerned.) So this man is responsible for harming his family shamefully (whether or not he was right about what
the total situation called for). But, again, we must bear in mind that this harmful and shameful thing he did was done under those conditions of threat: those conditions are part of the particulars of the specific harmful and shameful thing that he did.

Of course that is not the whole story, and Aristotle adds two sorts of qualifications to that judgment of voluntariness. First, he allows that cases of coercion are in a way mixed, as he puts it; there is something in them in some way that is involuntary. Secondly, he emphasizes that it does not in any way follow from the fact that someone voluntarily did something bad that he is blameworthy for having done what he did; nor is someone who has voluntarily done something good necessarily praiseworthy. Hence there is plenty of room to make relevant distinctions among voluntary, coerced actions, where something good or bad is done: some of these may be praiseworthy, others blameworthy, others to be met with sympathetic allowance, as Aristotle puts it (syngnômê), and not in any way held against the person who did them voluntarily (see 1110a19-26).

First then for what is involuntary about coerced actions. Aristotle points out that when these agents acted, the bad thing they did—that is, telling the secret, or causing the harm to their family, or throwing the cargo overboard—was done (as I have made clear in my recital of the events) not “without qualification” (haplôs) or “in its own right” (kath’ hauto).\(^{27}\) That is,

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\(^{27}\) 1110a9, 18-19; 1110b3, 5. Aristotle understandably focuses on bad actions done under coercion: these, he argues, are not to be blamed, but given sympathetic allowance because of the exigent circumstances. However, though he takes no explicit notice of this, his analysis opens up parallel cases where, because of the exigent circumstances, the agent does the right thing, but because of the exigency does not deserve praise for doing so: these would involve a parallel to sympathetic allowance, which one might call “sympathetic reservation.” For example, suppose the ship captain, in the excitement caused by the storm, keeps thinking of the ship owner...
shamefully betraying their country, or harming their own family, or throwing the cargo over-
board, is not the whole of what they did in doing the bad thing. So though they did do that
bad thing, they did not do it like that, that is, for no other reason than for it, for harming or be-
traying or throwing things away. So far as such unqualified or in-its-own-right doing of any of
these things goes, they not only did not, they surely would never, do such an act voluntarily.
So if they ever do do such an act of unqualified whatever it may be, that action will certainly
have to be involuntary (even “countervoluntary”). This is the “admixture” of the involuntary in
what they did. It is not that there actually was anything relevantly involuntary that they in fact
did: they did not betray, harm, or throw things away without qualification, but with certain
qualifications. Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish the case of voluntary coerced actions
from ones where coercion is absent by pointing out that there is this possible involuntary ac-
tion lurking in the background (in this negated way) in (at least typical) cases of coercion. So,
Aristotle implies, this lurking merely possible action is in a way in the action that was actually
and his distress at the loss of the cargo, and so can’t bring himself to throw it overboard: he
doesn’t hold back from doing that because in fact, in a cool moment, that would have been the
right decision, but just because of his sympathy for his friend, the owner. Or suppose the man
subject to the tyrant’s threats does the right thing (e.g., refuses to tell the secret) but not on
the grounds that make that the right thing to do (in which case, his action would merit praise,
because it would show laudatory resolve not to be distracted by threats from doing the right
thing): he does it because all he can think of when subjected to the tyrant’s pressure is the pun-
ishment he will receive when his government learns of his betrayal. We should bear in mind, in
assessing Aristotle’s theory, both of these alternatives to praise and blame for bad and good
actions under exigent circumstances: sympathetic allowance and what I have called sympathetic
reservation.
done. These agents were forced by exigent circumstances to do something voluntarily that they did not want to do and would never have done voluntarily except in those or similar exigent circumstances.²⁸

And that is why, secondly, Aristotle makes a point of mentioning that, even if in some such cases the agent is legitimately praised for doing what they did (if, say, they refused to betray the secret and that was in fact the right thing, because it is a really importantly fine thing to keep state secrets), or legitimately blamed (if, say, they told the secret and it was in fact more shameful to do that than to allow the threatened harm to their family), in other cases the legitimate response is neither of those, but to make sympathetic allowance for them (syngnômê). Some threats or dangers can strain our human nature too much for us to expect anyone (short of a great hero) to not do the wrong thing (ha mê dei)—in our tyrant-threatened person’s case, the wrong bad and shameful thing. We make allowances and do not blame or even hold it against someone when such horrible pressure is put on them that they are having to consider either betraying a state secret or doing their family serious harm. We understand

²⁸ One might note here that many actions undertaken despite their unwanted consequences (say, having a 20-year mortgage debt to pay off, after signing loan documents as the best available way of obtaining a house one wants) also have something involuntary about them: no one takes on such a debt “without qualification” or “in its own right.” But having such an involuntary element does not make an act a coerced one, on Aristotle’s theory of coerced or “mixed” actions. For him, coercion requires truly exigent circumstances: believable threat to life, serious harm to oneself or someone one has responsibilities for or cares greatly about, and the like. That it is not always easy or generally agreed whether some circumstance is an exigent one does not undermine Aristotle’s account: whether one was coerced is often, and reasonably, hard to determine. (I thank Terence Irwin for discussion leading to this clarification.)
that that kind of pressure makes it very hard to think out or decide, or even feel like doing, what might in fact be the right thing. If they make a mistake under circumstances like these, well, that is completely understandable. Likewise, if in fact the storm wasn’t so terrible after all, or in a cooler moment the captain might have devised some other remedy than to throw the cargo overboard, it may very well be that it would be legitimate and humanly only properly considerate of him to make allowances, and (even if we were the cargo-owner) not hold it at all against him. Still, there is no warrant, in light of these facts, to change the analysis and de-

29 One should take note also of what Aristotle says (1110a26-29) about Alcmaeon’s action of murdering his mother, and his claim, in Euripides’ play, that he was “necessitated” to do it. Perhaps in the play (which is lost) Alcmaeon meant to say he acted under compulsion (βίᾳ); but Aristotle mentions him here as someone who claimed to have acted under coercion (his father’s curse, if he didn’t kill her, was, Aristotle says he said, among the ἀναγκάσαντα—this being the term Aristotle uses for coercion as opposed to compulsion). That is, Aristotle counts him as claiming to have done a “mixed” action—voluntary, but excusable. Aristotle says it was ridiculous to claim the curse imposed coercive pressure, of the sort the tyrant or the high seas certainly did on the people in his other examples. So Alcmaeon is not in the least entitled to sympathetic allowance for the murder. But why was it ridiculous to claim coercion in this case? Presumably because it is ridiculous to think any god could be brought, even by a murdered father’s curse, to visit anything bad on Almaeon for not murdering his mother! (Broadie and Rowe’s account of the absurdity here, NE, 312, is ineffective: if both alternatives, doing the murder and accepting the alleged consequences of the curse, were “humanly unbearable,” i.e. such as to “overstrain human nature,” then Alcmaeon was acting under coercion, whichever of the alternatives he chose.) Aristotle’s point is that, even if Alcmaeon trembled in fear of his father’s curse and that fear was among the emotions and desires that caused his action (idioti-
clare that what they actually did (the specific qualified shameful, or destructive, thing that they did) was done involuntarily. When our nature undergoes such strains, it remains we who act, we the agent, since the origin of the thing in question that we do lies squarely in our desires and decisions, and our knowledge, not in any outside force or power.30

30 Here we touch upon what I think is the sole significant difference between the EE’s and the NE’s treatments of voluntariness. In a somewhat cryptic final section of EE II 8 (1225a19-34) Aristotle seems to allow that some emotions (anger, lust) or unspecified and puzzling “natural conditions” can sometimes arise in a human person which are “strong and beyond nature” (i.e., I take it, too strong for our nature to withstand, ἰσχυρὰ καὶ υπὲρ τὴν φύσιν)—a strange thing for a “natural condition” to be! In those cases, he says, we should make allowances, not, as in the NE, by retaining our judgment that they have acted voluntarily (while holding that they are not subject to legitimate criticism), but by holding that these emotions and conditions are “naturally such as to exercise compulsion on our nature,” thus rendering those acts not voluntary at all, but involuntary, because compelled. Aristotle goes on to compare people in such situations with those who speak prophecies when possessed by the god, like at the Pythian oracle: some god is acting on them, causing what they say, rather than themselves being the originating source of their actions through their own desires and state of mind. This is a very injudicious concession on Aristotle’s part (it invites the claim in all sorts of emotional situations that what one did was involuntary because compelled), and I take the explicit use of the same term for
So far, then, we have discussed actions that are compelled (*biaia*, done *biai*), and those that are coerced (the so-called “mixed” actions). The former, on Aristotle’s theory, are without exception involuntary, the latter, again without exception, voluntary. The former have their origin outside the person; the latter have their originating source inside him or her, specifically in the agent’s desires, or decision-power, and in their thought. Aristotle’s definition of the voluntary in *NE* III 1 (1111a22-24, cited above) specifies that it is only actions, having their origin in this specific way within the agent, of which he knows the particulars in which the actions are situated, that are voluntary. Only for those is the agent responsible. When Oedipus killed his father, he did simultaneously many other actions, for example the action of giving the geezer who was blocking his way what was coming to him. This second action of his had its originating source in his anger and his consequent desire knowingly to beat the geezer over the head—that being what Oedipus thought he had coming to him. But since he did not know the particular fact about the action that he also did of bashing and killing his father that the geezer he was bashing was his father, he did not do the action of bashing and killing his father voluntarily. Aristotle adds at once that the ignorance that makes an action that one does involuntary does not include ignorance for which one is oneself responsible, through one’s prior actions, such as the ignorance of particulars that being drunk or violently angry may cause,31 nor in general i-

31 I take it, though Aristotle is not explicit here or elsewhere about this, that among the particulars one could be ignorant of are various “moral” features of the situation, for example, that pawing this particular female is shameful and bad (something that you do when drunk, due to drink), or that slugging this offensive man in the face (something that you do in, and because of, violent anger) is shameful. It is not just factual ignorance, due to drink, for example that
norance of things everyone is reasonably expected to take the trouble to know and to bear in mind. So we need to add to Aristotle’s account of involuntary actions a second class, besides what you are doing in reaching out to paw someone is knocking over a prized vase, or ignorance due to anger that you are shoving someone hard enough to break his arm, that prevents an act from being involuntary; drink or violent anger can make you ignorant of relevant moral facts too, and acting in ignorance of them on such an occasion also counts not as acting from ignorance of a “particular,” but only in ignorance.

32 This latter qualification is made explicit in EE II 9, 1225b11-16, and echoed at NE III 5, 1113b-1114a3. See also 1113b24-5 and 31-33, where Aristotle repeats the point that ignorance that one has oneself caused voluntarily, i.e. through one’s own desires and knowledge at some earlier time (for example by getting drunk), does not render involuntary relevant actions that one does later. Notice also that Aristotle’s recognition, in discussing coerced actions, that, not all coerced bad actions, even though voluntary, merit blame, but sympathetic allowance instead, applies here too. Yes, your anger (one of your own states of motivation) caused you, for example, to lose control and slug some offensive guy in the face, a shameful thing to do: but some sudden face-to-face insults can be such that, as Aristotle puts it at 1110a25-26 in discussing coerced actions, they “overstrain human nature, and no one could endure them.” On Aristotle’s theory, even if he does not take explicit notice of the parallel in this respect between coerced actions and some actions done “in” but not “due to” ignorance, some bad actions that are not due to ignorance, and so count as voluntary on his theory, are nonetheless, on his view, properly subject not to blame, but are to be given sympathetic allowance. It is not merely with coerced actions that one has the options, depending on the circumstances, of praising, blaming or neither of those, but showing sympathetic allowance; one has the same three options also in the case of voluntary actions done in ignorance but not due to ignorance.
compelled ones: actions due to ignorance of significant particulars of those actions’ circumstances.  

About the actions that are involuntary due to ignorance, it is important to emphasize that the agent does not desire or decide to do those actions at all, just as with compelled actions. So those actions do not have their origin in the agent’s desires or decision-power. Nonetheless the origin of them lies within the agent in a way that makes them his or her actions: the agent’s thoughts, specifically their ignorant thinking that did not include the information that (in Oedipus’ case) the geezer was his father, cause this action. The originating cause in these cases, as Aristotle says, is ignorance: and of course, the ignorance in question is a feature of the agent’s own thoughts in and as they do the action. Contrast the case of compelled action, where the cause lies outside. However, in both cases of involuntary action—agents doing something from ignorance and ones compelled to do something—they voluntarily do lots of other actions in the same movements as those in which they do the involuntary one. With the compelled agent, however, it is the outside force that sets and brings about the end result of the compelled action; whereas, with the ignorant agent it is their own ignorance that sets and brings about the end result of the action. So an agent acting from ignorance remains the originating cause of their ignorant action; nothing outside causes it instead. Hence, this is

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33 I take it, however, that ignorance of some trivial and insignificant feature of an action would not make it, for Aristotle, an involuntary one. If for example I don’t know that the club I beat someone over the head with once belonged to my second cousin, it should not follow, on Aristotle’s theory, that I involuntarily beat the person with my second cousin’s former club. Aristotle speaks briefly and summarily here.

34 As we have seen, other actions that he does in the same movements do, of course, have their origins in his desires or decision-power, and in his knowledge.
a case not only of an action that an agent does involuntarily, but one of which the originating source lies within them. Not all involuntary actions have their origin in anything outside, “the agent contributing nothing.”

When Aristotle’s NE formula defines the voluntary as “that of which the originating source is in [the agent] itself, when [my italics] it knows the particulars of the action’s situation,” note that he apparently implies that not positively grasping the particulars of an action that one nonetheless does renders it involuntary. Thus if I happen not to know that Princeton water comes from the Delaware and Raritan canal, then, it seems to be implied, I involuntarily let some D&R water into my sink when I turn on the tap in Princeton. And that may seem a strange thing to say: even if I don’t know that fact, surely I still do let some D&R water into my sink voluntarily, just because I voluntarily turn the tap on. But in fact, as we have seen, in applying his formula to his second sort of involuntary action (ones done in ignorance), Aristotle speaks always of acts done not just in ignorance (as with letting D&R water into my sink) but from ignorance. Presumably when I let the D&R water in I do not do that from ignorance (as Oedipus did when he killed his father). Now, a person in Oedipus’s situation might or might not have gone ahead and bashed the geezer even if he had known it was his father; but, for sure, he would have stopped and thought a bit before continuing. So the action that he did, in the way he did it (i.e., without pausing to think), was caused by that ignorance. But in my case, my not knowing did not play any sort of causal role in my letting the D&R water in. What do I care where my water comes from? Not knowing where it comes from had no effect on my letting in the D&R water, in the way that I did that. It seems, then, that in the Nicomachean definition of the voluntary, the requirement that the agent know the particulars of any voluntary action he does is more successful if we interpret that to mean that the agent must act not from ignorance in doing it. More precisely then, the voluntary, for Aristotle, is: that of which the origi-
VI

So far we have been speaking only of adult human agents. Aristotle’s theory is presented as a theory concerning them and that is where his interest in the topic of responsibility lies. As noted previously, he recognizes only in passing his theory’s applicability to animal and immature human agents; but in doing so, he shows clearly that he recognizes and accepts that application, even if he has little interest in examining it closely. And in fact only a little reflection shows that on Aristotle’s theory children, and in fact animals of many, many species (if not all), do do quite a lot of things voluntarily, and some things involuntarily. His definitions of voluntariness in terms of an originating source in an agent’s desires (but not decisions: for Aristotle, only adult agents have the capacity for that), and of knowing (in the sense of not being ignorant of) significant particulars in which actions are situated, apply to these other agents, too. Automatic processes, of course, cause some of the things animals and children do, as with human adults. But some of what they do is caused by their desires, guided by what they know about their situation (that is, about the particulars in which what is caused by them in that way will take place). Domestic animals, but wild ones too, often know when and where there is food to be found at times when they are hungry, and they act voluntarily, on Aristotle’s theory, nating source is in [the agent] itself, when it acts not from ignorance of the particulars of the action’s situation. (I thank Hendrik Lorenz for raising questions that led to this clarification.) Alternatively, to meet this potential difficulty, one might say simply that the particulars referred to in the definition, ignorance of which renders an action involuntary, are to be understood exclusively as significant ones. (See n. 33 above.) Perhaps Aristotle means his definition to allow that ignorance of some trivial and insignificant feature of an action (such as, in my example, where the water comes from) does not make it involuntary.
when they then pursue and consume it. They scratch their itches, move under cover when it is time to go to sleep, and do many other humdrum actions, knowing what they are doing, and out of naturally arising desires of theirs. Corresponding things are true also of children from an early age. So all those behaviors are voluntary actions (in a broad usage of the word “action” that Aristotle does in fact often employ):\footnote{See for example the extended treatment in \textit{Parts of Animals} of differences among animals in regard to their “activities” (πράξεις), announced at I 1, 487a10-11. Notably, we find this broad usage when Aristotle speaks of animals and children as “acting” (πράττειν) in \textit{NE} III 1, at 1111a26, one of the two passages where he indicates his acceptance of such agents as capable of voluntary action.} if one wishes to restrict the use of the term “action,” as Aristotle does in the \textit{Eudemian} treatment, so that it applies only to human adults, then one can say that children and these other animals at any rate do some of what they do voluntarily, on Aristotle’s theory of voluntariness, and therefore that they are responsible for those things.

They do some acts involuntarily, too, for which they are not responsible—nothing inside them, in their desires and thoughts, causes those acts. They can be compelled to act, by being dragged or pushed along, just as we adults can be, acting all the while. As with us, some of what they do in such circumstances may be voluntary, but the compelled action of going where we drag or push them is involuntary. Likewise, a cat can involuntarily drench itself (and the carpet) if it knocks over a fishbowl while trying to get at the fish inside. It didn’t know it risked getting itself and the carpet drenched. So in both these sorts of case—compelled and ignorant action—animals do things that, on Aristotle’s theory, they are not responsible for doing. Perhaps non-human animals cannot be coerced into anything; I don’t know about that. Children, however, clearly can be, just as they can be bribed into doing things. So among these addi-
tional agents we find cases of both voluntary action (including coerced action) and each of the
two classes of involuntary action that Aristotle’s theory exposes: the compelled and the igno-
rant. Adult humans have no monopoly on voluntary and involuntary action. These other
agents are just as much responsible for some of what they do, and not responsible for some of
the rest.

These results of Aristotle’s theory jibe perfectly with ordinary and accepted views, indeed evident facts, about animals and children. That gives considerable support to Aristotle’s
theory of responsibility. His purely causal account when applied to small children and animals
yields a result that common sense fully endorses. We see and cannot reasonably deny that
other animals, as well as children, definitely do do voluntarily some of the things they do, and
others involuntarily. So they are, as agents, responsible, just as we adults are, for some of the
things they do and not responsible for other things that they do.

What however about praise and blame? As we do too in our common-sense speech and
thought about responsibility, Aristotle connects the voluntary with praise- and blameworthi-
ness. Aristotle, however, as I noted above (sect. I), claims about voluntariness only that it is a
necessary condition for legitimate praise and blame; for him there is no implication at all from
voluntariness to praise- or blameworthiness, even when the voluntary action was something
good or bad to do. For him, not every good action voluntarily done is praiseworthy, and not

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37 So it would be open to him to say that there is something special about children and animals
that makes it always inappropriate to praise or blame them: something in their natures as
agents, perhaps, precludes this. He might point to their lack of the power for decision-making,
and argue that since animal and child agency is diminished to that extent, in comparison with
that of adults, it is never legitimate to praise or blame them for anything they do. So, he could
say, they meet the necessary condition for legitimate praise and blame of some of their actions
every bad action voluntarily done is blameworthy. To say that an agent is responsible for a
good or a bad action is not yet to praise or blame them, even “in one’s heart.” In any case, it is
another evident fact of common life that people do praise and blame both their children and
their domestic animals for some things they do voluntarily (though certainly not all even of the
good or bad things they voluntarily do). So I take it that Aristotle would not think that, be-

38 The fact that domestic animals are normally trained by their owners to behave or not behave
in certain ways is clearly part of the background that makes praise and blame seem sometimes
appropriate in their case. Humans don’t normally live in that kind of close relationship with wild
species (and they live with insects and vermin like mice on a different basis than with dogs and
cats, or even sheep and cows, in their houses and on their farms). So (except with captured
ones in zoos or circuses) any praise or blame that might be accorded wild animals’ voluntary
actions would have to come, if at all, from other animals of their own species, with whom they
live or anyhow interact, and it might be doubtful that even wild apes have the capacity to praise
or blame one another (though some recent observations of ape communities both in captivity
and in the wild might give one pause over this assumption). I have read about a rogue lion in an
African wild-life preserve that is known periodically to attempt to have sex with females of other
prides than his own, and then, when they refuse him, he and his younger brother attack and, if
possible, kill them. Such very abnormal and leoninely vicious behavior does seem voluntary, and
presumably all lions must know that this is not the right way for a lion to behave: no other lions
cause of the link that he recognizes between voluntariness and praise and blame, his causal
theory of responsibility, covering animals and children, too, is inadequate: he would have no
problem in accepting the idea that because children and animals do voluntary actions they are
legitimately subject, exactly as normal adults are, too, to praise or blame for some of them.\(^{39}\)
(I will return below to say more about the praise or blame that Aristotle has in mind here.)

VII

But should we object? Should we insist that we want and, morally speaking, need, as a
replacement, or as a supplement to Aristotle’s theory, a further kind of responsibility, specifi-
do this. So maybe even with wild animals praise or blame might be legitimate. Even if the fel-
lows of their own species with which they live might be incapable of doing either of those
things, we can do it for them. However, I limit my discussion in the main text to domestic ani-
mals.

\(^{39}\) One should emphasize here that Aristotle does not in any way mark off adult human voluntary
acts as a special class of voluntary ones from those of non-adult agents. He neither says that
only the adult ones are open to praise or blame (see n. 37), nor does he say that only the
adults’ are “up to them” (see n. 12 above). Alexander of Aphrodisias, writing in the 2\(^{nd}\) c. CE,
500 years after Aristotle’s death, develops an anti-Stoic “Aristotelian” analysis (which he happi-
ly attributes to Aristotle himself, as an honored authority), according to which only adults do
voluntary actions that are “up to them.” See Alexander De fato ch. 13, 180.4-6 and 14,
183.26-32 Bruns. In effect, then, for Alexander, only adult humans are “responsible” agents.
Alexander’s distinction between what is voluntary and what is “up to” the agent does violence
to Aristotle’s texts, though it is easily understood and explicable as a move in 2\(^{nd}\) c. Peripatetic
attacks on Stoic theories of action and determinism.
cally “moral” responsibility—something that belongs only to human adults? \(^{40}\) Thick, evaluatively rich, responsibility, so to speak, as opposed to a thin sort of child-and-animal, mere causal responsibility? As I mentioned at the outset, this thickly evaluative concept is an active presence nowadays in our ordinary discourse and daily life. People use it all the time. It is also, as a result, the subject of a great deal of attention by moral philosophers and action theorists: there are numerous general theories of “moral responsibility,” attempting to explain in careful normative detail what it is, or how best to develop an adequate theoretical conception of it, even if an adequate conception would require regimentation of some ordinary ways of speaking and thinking about responsibility. My question, then, is this: is Aristotle’s theory of agents’ responsibility adequate?

\(^{40}\) On the first suggested option, we would say that Aristotle’s theory is mistaken: it omits a crucial condition, beyond the causal ones he isolates and explains so well in his analysis of (mere) voluntariness, as something necessary for responsibility, namely (as I go on to explain in my main text) the capacity for making reasoned decisions. The second option seems to have been T.H. Irwin’s, when he wrote his “Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle” [Responsibility], in A. Rorty, ed., Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 117-55. Irwin argues there that we can construct from Aristotelian materials (and that Aristotle and we need) an Aristotelian “complex” theory of responsibility limited to adult humans, whose capacity for making and acting on “decisions” (προαιρέσεις) makes them free in a way that animals and human children are not, and so makes them legitimately subject to real praise and blame (praise and blame of the “moral” sort). The brunt of my remarks in what follows is to argue against either rejecting Aristotle’s own “simple” theory, as Irwin calls it, as an inadequate theory of responsibility, or supplementing it with a second, Aristotelian “complex” theory. In my view, Aristotle did not think we needed any theory of responsibility beyond his “simple” one, and I think he was right.
sibility for what they do, as I have explained it so far, adequate for our own needs in thinking about agents’ responsibility (including the responsibility of adult human agents for what they do)? Do we need, in thinking about agents and responsibility, a special concept of “moral” responsibility? Should we even restrict agent responsibility to “moral” responsibility—so that only normal human adults are really responsible for any of their actions, and in being responsible are always, specifically, “morally” responsible?

For this, Aristotle’s purely causal responsibility of agents would be too little; some additional factor concerning the specific character of the agency of adult humans, in contrast to that of children and animals, would need to be added. Perhaps what is required for this would be a moral conscience, or the capacity to tell what is morally good or right from what is morally bad or wrong. Certainly animals do not possess that capacity, and in children it is not fully developed. Or, in more specifically philosophical terms, adults are, but children and animals are not, “autonomous” agents—agents with the power not just to figure out, after thinking about the matter, what to do, but also to critically reflect upon and set their own ends for action. My question, then, is whether that difference in adult human vs. animal agency requires a different conception of adult humans’ responsibility for actions than for children’s and animals’. If so, one might then question whether perhaps one ought to deny altogether anything like true responsibility (true agent-responsibility) to children and animals—perhaps we should consider their “actions” as no different in causal background from what the wind does when it blows

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41 You can be legally responsible (for example under statutes imposing strict liability) for things that happen that you do not count as “morally” responsible for (and don’t do voluntarily, either, by Aristotle’s definition). Legal responsibility, as I mentioned in sect. 1, needs to be set aside as a special further topic.
over a tree. Do we need a concept of adult agents’ responsibility for their actions that goes beyond the one that Aristotle presents?

I know that many people nowadays are convinced that we do: autonomous agency or action by agents with a conscience, seems to them so importantly different from the agency of non-rational animals and children. However, one may grant this difference, but still, following Aristotle, resist the idea that it requires a separate conception of responsibility for actions in the case of agents possessing these capacities. One could also doubt, with him, that in case an action of a normal adult agent deserved praise or blame, the praise or blame in question would, because of this difference in sources of agency, properly be of a different type—“moral” praise or blame—from that due to an animal or child; on this, see below.

Let me first point out some of the special attractions of Aristotle’s theory, as it stands. The crucial advantage as I see it is that, unlike “moral” responsibility, responsibility on Aristotle’s purely causal theory is decisively and sharply separated from questions about values. For Aristotle, to be responsible for an action is a clear-cut, factual matter of the action’s origins: if it was originated by any of an agent’s desires, or a decision, taken together with its thought, then it is voluntary and the agent is responsible for it. One might argue over whether an action really was compelled, or really was done from ignorance, so that (on Aristotle’s theory) the agent would not be responsible for it. But in principle this is a settleable matter of fact. If neither of these conditions is fulfilled, the action is voluntary, that is, it is rightly judged to have had its origin within the agent and specifically in their desires or decisions, and their thought. So the agent is responsible for having done it. Questions of praise and blame do legitimately arise once the action is rightly judged to be voluntary (but only then), provided that it was a good or bad thing to do. But the standards and basis on which such questions are appropriately answered are further ones, of a normative sort. There, serious disagreement might open
up—and Aristotle, in my opinion, shows good philosophical judgment in firmly placing serious
disagreement there, and keeping it out of assessments of responsibility itself. In the case of
coerced actions, especially, some people will think it is reasonable to be sympathetic and not
blame people, and maybe not even to punish them, for some bad things they do, if one sees
extenuating circumstances. Others will not. And so on. They can then, if they are open-
minded people, discuss the matter and attempt to come to some agreement, or narrow their
disagreement. Meanwhile responsibility is established and not disputed. This clarifies and limits
any disputes or disagreements; they become wholly normative, and hard as normative issues
are to argue about, at least the argument will be on the proper ground.

By contrast, “moral responsibility,” as its very name implies, carries with it heavily evalu-
ative implications. It suggests that if you are morally responsible for doing something, or for
something that happens as a result of some action of yours, then some moral issue was in-
volved. To accept moral responsibility, or allow some one else to say you were responsible,
for some bad thing you did or that resulted from your action, can sound like you think you are
morally to blame. We frequently hear people deny responsibility for doing something, or even

42 Hence there is a tendency in ordinary speech and thought to withhold terminology of respon-
sibility in speaking of trivial actions—tying your left shoe first, or walking faster than usual for
some reason having nothing to do with your own or other people’s moral interests. (Philosophi-
cal theories of responsibility might, of course, regiment such restrictions away, on the ground
that they reflect confusion about the implications of responsibility, i.e. “moral” responsibility.)
On Aristotle’s theory, of course, all such actions, trivial though they may be, count as ones the
agents are responsible for on precisely the same ground as they are for any other action, how-
ever momentous: their desires and knowledge are the originating cause. This is clarifyingly
straightforward.
deny they did it at all, when it is plain to common sense that they did do it. Someone unwittingly and non-culpably lets the cat out the back door: they say “I'm not responsible!” or even “I didn’t let the cat out.” Yet they are the one that opened the door when the cat was lurking for its opportunity. They say this because they think, reasonably in the case I have in mind, that they are not to be blamed at all, or even (in other similar cases) that they did absolutely the right thing, despite the bad but unsuspected consequences. And because they are thinking of responsibility in terms of “moral” responsibility, they think that, in order to assert their innocence, they have to deny responsibility and even deny having done the action. Of course, this is a mistake, presumably even as judged by the standards imposed by “moral responsibility,” when that is properly understood: on those standards you can be causally responsible for an action or its consequences, even if no issue of morality is involved, and even if, though one was involved, you were not “morally” responsible for anything in the circumstances. But how much better it is not to confuse the question of responsibility by binding it up conceptually with questions of praise or blame—let alone “moral” praise or blame. Aristotle’s theory helpfully keeps these questions clearly apart from one another.

Or consider the doctrine of the “double effect” in Catholic moral theology and in just war theory. On this doctrine, you might be inclined to claim you were not responsible for killing civilians when you ordered the bombing of a military-industrial site and you knew that many civilian deaths would result in nearby housing, because you didn’t “intend” it: in the thought that informed your action you didn’t “direct” it to that end. You were not “morally” responsible for

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43 For the conceptual implications of “moral responsibility,” see Eshleman, “Moral Responsibility.” Note that if one restricts agent-responsibility to adults (separating that from mere causal responsibility, open to children, animals and mere natural processes) then the agents in my examples, and other similar ones, really have done nothing they are responsible for.
the deaths, you could say; so you might think you needed to disclaim all responsibility. By contrast, on Aristotle’s theory, if you knew what you were doing, it matters not a whit to your responsibility whether you “intended” only some of what you were doing, while seeing some of the rest of it as only an “unintended” consequence. For Aristotle, you have no ground at all to say you were not responsible for killing the civilians. It doesn’t follow at all, of course, that you were necessarily to blame for your decision, and its predictable result. On Aristotle’s theory it is a further question, once your responsibility is acknowledged, whether, or how much, you are legitimately to be blamed—and whether “morally” so or not. We need to know in all such cases what your full circumstances were, and what humanly speaking we can expect or require people to withstand, before we can speak of legitimate praise or blame (whether “moral” or not). On his theory, though fully responsible for doing them, you are to be excused for doing some of the bad things you voluntarily do—or anyhow you are to be sympathetically responded to, with the result that any blame you get is diminished and qualified. The circumstances matter, for praise and blame. Meanwhile, for Aristotle (and for anyone who restricts their discourse about responsibility so as to conform it to his theory of responsibility) the agent is straightforwardly to be judged responsible for their bad actions, and those actions’ bad consequences. Aristotle, by keeping questions of responsibility separate from moral evaluation, disallows obfuscating attempts to distance oneself from the foreseen consequences of one’s voluntary actions.

These seem to me good reasons for being satisfied with Aristotle’s theory as it stands. There is no reason to think it clearly inadequate as a theory of normal adult responsibility, including the role of praise and blame in connection to responsibility. We can do everything we clearly need to do in assigning responsibility for adult actions and responding evaluatively to them without thinking of normal adult human beings, when it comes to responsibility for actions, in any other way than the causal one that Aristotle analyzes so brilliantly. We do not
need to invoke instead a different—and potentially confusing—conception of “moral” responsibility as applying to adult humans’ actions. When any agent, adult human or other, is responsible, according to Aristotle’s theory, for any action of theirs, then they are the one that is answerable, if anything needs to be answered for, and in whatever way one might judge them to be answerable, whether with our modern notion of “moral responsibility” or not. In recognizing an agent’s Aristotelian responsibility, I willingly grant, anyone who wishes to do so may apply the concepts of “moral” praise and blame in the case of some responsible agents (normal adults) but not others. They may invoke special conditions that any responsible agent must meet if they are to be given this special sort of praise, and so withhold such praise from other agents than normal adult humans. They may hold normal adult human agents not merely causally but also “morally” responsible for some of what they do. Others may, if they prefer, set aside and refuse to employ the concepts of “moral” responsibility, “moral” praise and “moral” blame, finding the non-judgmental, unloaded, ordinary praise and blame that we employ for non-adult agents adequate, and indeed more congenial, even for adults. So, as for the basic notion itself of responsibility for actions, I would vote to stick with Aristotle’s purely causal concept. It closes no doors anyone should want to keep open, and it clarifyingly keeps questions of responsibility separate from issues about appropriate evaluative response.

VIII

It is a further question whether, nonetheless, in order to do full justice to adult human responsibility and its special features, we may need the idea of specifically “moral” responsibility. I do not think we do—even if there is such a concept, and even if many people think it important to apply it in judging other people and their actions. In addressing this question now, let me begin by explaining the contrast I have just drawn between “moral” praise and blame (not, I have claimed, recognized by Aristotle at all) and what I have referred to as “ordinary”
praise and blame—the praise and blame that Aristotle considers legitimate for both animal and adult human agents, under certain circumstances, when they voluntarily do good or bad things. It is certainly true, as I have already noted, that animal and child agency are limited in highly significant ways, in comparison with that of normal adults. For one thing, there are many fewer things that an animal or a child can do voluntarily than a normal adult can. Normal adults’ increased knowledge of the particulars of their actions as well as their possession of a moral conscience and the autonomy of adult agency certainly give adults a much wider range of possible voluntary actions than children or animals are capable of. But, for Aristotle, any praise or blame they may legitimately incur for their actions is not structurally different from praise or blame animals or children may incur for the vastly more limited ranges of action they can perform. At any rate, he never notes, or makes part of his theory of responsibility, differences either of degree or kind between the praise and blame adult human beings may be subject to and the praise and blame of children and animals, which of course he was, like all of us, quite familiar with, even though he never discusses it specifically.

I mentioned above that people certainly do sometimes praise and blame their children and domestic animals for things they do or don’t do. But, it might be said, against Aristotle, that when we praise or blame a child or animal we think of ourselves as, and indeed are, addressing them, and attempting to affect their behavior in the future, in significantly different ways from when we praise or blame a normal adult. How so? Well, some might say, animals and children, when praised or blamed, are simply being psychologically manipulated, through their affectionate dependence on the praiser or blamer, or their fear of being made to suffer at their hands: such praise and blame is just a means of causing or preventing repetitions of such actions in future. The praising (“reinforcing”) and the blaming or shaming (“inhibiting”) of animal and child behavior works, to the extent it works at all, they think, only through psyc


cal mechanisms over which the child or animal has no control. Praise and blame in this case
does not presuppose any capacity at all of the recipients to be responsible as agents—conceiv-
ing themselves as agents, with choices to make—for what they did that you are praising or
blaming, or responsible as agents for what they may do in the future as a result of your inter-
vention if it has its intended effect.

But that seems to me certainly too limited a view of praise and blame for children, and of
their capacities. I think it is also too dismissive of animals. It is true, of course, of all praise and
blame (including that of adults, and whether “moral” or not) that they have their effects in part
through involuntary psychological mechanisms that the praiser or blamer may well be aiming to
use so as to manipulate the recipient. So, there is no doubt that our praise and blame of chil-
dren does to a large extent have this function of inculcating social norms in them. But in the
case of children (and animals, too, though this is less marked and may apply only to the praise
and blame of some pet-owners) it has another dimension as well, just as it does for normal
adults. When I praise my 6-year-old child, or blamingly admonish her, I am speaking to her di-
rectly as already an agent on her own, with choices to make, partly of course so as to help her
gradually develop her powers as an agent to the point where she will become the sort of full
moral agent that we think normal adults are. I do not want her in future not to do again the
thing I force her attention negatively upon by blaming her for it, or to repeat what I praisingly
encourage, merely (or even, really, at all, if I am a responsible parent) so as to gain or retain my
affection, or so as not to suffer the pain of my disapproval. I want my praise or blame, accom-
panied by the explanations I give her, tailored to her level of possible understanding, to help her
to find and see her own reasons, independent of the effects of the reinforcements, for behav-
ing in the way I want her to. At the same time, I am hoping to encourage her now, when I
blame her, to reflect on her current blamed behavior as something she has done, as an agent making choices, and, perhaps, to berate or praise herself for having done it.

It seems to me that with domestic animals too we are addressing them as agents in both these ways when we praise and blame them—as well, of course, as trying to affect their involuntary psychological mechanisms so that they will behave in future as we wish. (That seems true anyhow of those who understand their animals, and are not brutes themselves in dealing with them.) I want my dog not to pee on the floor not merely, and indeed not at all (at best), from fear of my disapproval or to retain my affection. I am not out to create a neurotic dog. I want him to learn not to do it from a conception of himself, as a dog, that knows how to live properly in a house; this requires a lot of other inhibitions and learned behaviors, all of which I want him to find internalized ideas of his own for undertaking. Dogs and other domestic animals certainly have a much more limited capacity for such agency (and such a self-conception) than human children have, not to speak of teen-agers. But they do, very obviously, have it. Many pet-owners, at any rate, certainly do think they know this about their dogs and cats; they praise and blame them on that basis.

Hence I am strongly inclined not to make too much of the common practice nowadays of distinguishing “moral” praise and blame from the ordinary sort that applies to children and animals. I think Aristotle is on solid ground in ignoring the distinction within his own theory of agents’ responsibility for their actions. When we praise or blame a cat or dog, or a child, for something good they have done (when it required their inhibiting some strong contrary natural impulse), or bad (when they followed some natural impulse they have been trained not to give in to), I think we mean (unless we are simply manipulative and heartless brutes ourselves) to be communicating with them directly as agents (not just as pleasure-and-pain machines to be cunningly manipulated by us). As I have said, we are encouraging them to find in those very
behaviors something to be attracted to, or averted from, something to feel good or bad about, in a personal way—as something they can, in their thoughts about themselves, identify themselves as agents with. There is much more in this praise and blame than mere pulling on psychological cords and getting the recipients, willy-nilly, to behave in future as you wish them to. When one takes that into account, there seems to me little to justify insisting on a sharp line between praise of these limited agents—dogs and cats much more limited ones than children—and praise of more complete, normal adult agents.

It is true, of course, that when we praise or blame adults we often do so as persons who can engage in full reasoning about good and bad, and in deciding in the light of that reasoning how it is best for them to behave (as animals certainly cannot, and children only at a certain age, and to only a limited degree). This capacity does indeed involve a deepened persona and self, beyond what a child or animal is capable of. Moreover, adults, when they do good or bad things, can in many cases find what we nowadays call "moral" reasons for or against doing them (reasons connected to respect and disrespect for other persons, for example), as at least animals cannot do. Also, given the vastly wider range (mentioned above) of things they may do voluntarily, because of their vaster knowledge of the circumstances of their actions, adult humans do much more of what they do voluntarily, than animals or children can possibly do, with their limited knowledge of what they are doing whenever they act.

It is at this point that the conception of specifically “moral” responsibility, and liability to “moral” praise and blame, may enter. But I do not see good reason to regard the enriched sort of agency possessed by adult humans as having to bring with it any such new sort of praise and blame—specifically “moral” praise/blame: praise, or especially blame, of a moralistic, morally judgmental sort, in which a person is only responsible at all if they merit moral condemnation or moral praise. This enriched agency only expands the range and number of actions (and even
types of action: “moral” and “immoral” actions, too) that adult humans can voluntarily do, for which questions of praise or blame might arise. One may prefer, as a matter of general policy in one’s relations with other people, not to indulge in “moral” condemnation (or “moral” praise) at all—blame in which one expresses the feeling that someone’s action has shown, for example, such disregard for someone else’s rights, or such disrespect, that their membership in the moral community has been compromised, so that they not only ought to feel bad about themselves as persons, but owe the offended party (and the community) an apology and a sincere promise not to behave that way in future—if not also to seek God’s forgiveness. One can restrict one’s praise and blame, when one does feel it right to blame or praise another person,⁴⁴ to nothing more than a more complex application to the adult human case of exactly what praise and blame mean, or can and should mean, as I have explained, for small children and domestic animals. When a vicious person, for example, does some vicious act (behaves badly in seeking

⁴⁴ Here we must bear in mind that on Aristotle’s view, and on the view of the persons whose attitudes I am describing here, there is always an option, when reacting to someone’s voluntary bad or good action not to praise or blame at all, but, if it was a bad action, to respond with sympathetic allowance—in case it was either coerced or due to “voluntary” ignorance, under circumstances where you think normal human beings shouldn’t be expected to see the right thing to do: they “overstrain human nature” (1110a25; see n. 32 above). And, for trivial voluntary actions such as tying one’s right shoe first instead of the left, no reactive response at all is merited. So, on Aristotle’s view and the view of those whose attitudes I am describing, to recognize responsibility does not, as “moral” responsibility does, involve thinking that the agent has done anything worthy of praise or blame or other such reactive attitudes, or even any reactive attitude at all.
pleasures of table or bed, or cheats a business partner, say), one may well reasonably think it not worth the psychological trouble to blame them at all: they’re hopeless, you might think, so what’s the point? (Which doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t report the cheater or get them punished.) But when it is reasonable to assume the psychological burden of blaming them (reacting to them, and to what they have done, with feelings of blame), Aristotelian blame, if displayed to them, will be aimed primarily at influencing them, as self-conscious agents, to think again about what they have done, in case they might on reflection see for themselves good reasons why they should not act in those ways. This need not involve wanting them to feel bad, and certainly won’t involve judging them “morally” (as we now understand that term) and wanting them to feel excluded from the moral community until they pray to God for forgiveness or make sincere promises not to behave that way in future. Ordinary praise and blame, of the same sort that we assign to children and domestic household animals, is good enough—or, indeed, as I think, better.

So far, then, in this section I have been arguing that Aristotle’s theories of voluntariness and agent-responsibility are adequate as they stand. We don’t need any notion of specifically “moral” responsibility as a special sort of responsibility that goes beyond the responsibility that Aristotle’s theory analyzes. The question remains whether, for those who do value “moral” responsibility and think it important for us to be ready to react with attitudes of “moral” praise and blame to what we nowadays think of as morally good and bad actions, Aristotle’s theory might, by simple supplementation, allow recognition of this further kind of responsibility (see above, n. 39). In fact, there are good reasons for holding that any such accommodation would require much more than a simple supplementation, and indeed that to attempt to “supplement” Aristotle’s theory by interpreting it in such a way as to allow such recognition would in fact thoroughly undermine it.
We need to bear in mind that for Aristotle the “moral” virtues and vices encompass vastly more than justice and other virtues concerning what we owe to one another as a matter of moral right and wrong—a characteristically modern, limited conception of morality and its requirements. The notion of “moral responsibility” is centered on this limited conception of moral right and wrong. For Aristotle, there are virtues (and vices) in relation to all aspects of human life, most of them of purely personal concern and not “other-related”: how to think and feel about the value of money, bodily pleasure, political and social power, personal luxuries, games and other pastimes, harmonious relations with one's neighbors, and indeed the value of everything that is naturally of any positive or negative value in human life. For Aristotle, there is a virtuous way of doing almost any daily action, in one’s particular circumstances, and many vicious ones. And, for him, whenever anyone does a virtuous action, whether they are virtuous people or not, they do it on a “decision” (prohairesis)—the power for which marks off adult human agents from animals and children, and forms the basis for attempting to supplement Aristotle’s theory of responsibility so as to allow recognition of “moral” responsibility. But most of Aristotle’s virtuous and vicious actions seem obviously not fit subjects of that kind of responsibility (or the corresponding sort of praise or blame): moderation in pursuit of the pleasures of the table, or overrating and overindulging in them, for example. And to force on Aristotle recognition of the special and indeed prior moral importance of what we owe to one another as a matter of modern-day “moral” right and wrong (so as to limit moral responsibility, for him, so that it applied only to those virtuous and vicious acts) would require an intolerable updating in his own moral attitudes that, if it did not directly undermine his simple theory of voluntariness and agent-responsibility, would certainly be no simple supplementation.

More damagingly, any such attempted “supplementation” would deprive Aristotle’s theory of agent responsibility of what I have argued is its chief excellence: its salutary separation of
questions of responsibility from evaluative issues. In recognizing “moral” responsibility of normal adults for some of the things they do he would be admitting a form of responsibility that fused these issues. To interpret him that way would certainly violate, and seriously too, the very spirit of his theory of agent responsibility.

To conclude my discussion of Aristotle’s theory of responsibility for actions, then. We should, with Aristotle, not think we need a concept of moral responsibility, a responsibility belonging explicitly and only to normal adult human beings. Recognizing and attaching due importance to the special character of adult agency—its autonomous character, its inclusion of moral judgment among the bases for deciding what to do—does not require, as I have argued, taking that further step. As I have emphasized, those who wish to use such a concept in judging people and their behavior as moral malefactors or saints remain free to do so. We can follow Aristotle and keep distinctions among degrees of agency separate from questions of responsibility. We can recognize that adult agents are responsible for much more in their actions than a dog or a child can possibly be, and in praising and blaming dogs, children, and normal

45 Perhaps some will resist, and insist there is an important difference in what responsibility is for adults, in all their actions and not only in the morally good or bad ones, because they bring to bear ideas about God as judge and human beings as sinners (something that animals and small children cannot be): our responsibility is ultimately to God. However, we do not need such ideas in order to make good sense of ourselves and our place in the natural and social worlds, or to live good human lives. Aristotle’s moral theory, in any event, is constructed on the assumption that we do not need such ideas in order to understand us humans as agents or to frame an adequate conception of our responsibility for what we do. It is certainly unwarranted, as I have argued, to seek to find room within his theory for a distinction between two sorts of praise, and a higher sort of responsibility corresponding to one of those.
adults, we can and should certainly hold that fact in mind in many circumstances. Again, as I have emphasized, those who wish to recognize and employ a special kind of moral praise and blame, are free to do so. But by thinking in terms of a special kind of responsibility, moral responsibility, and a special kind of praise, moral praise and blame, applicable only to normal adults, all we do is muddy waters that remain beautifully clear if we stick to Aristotle’s theory.  

IX

It remains to remind ourselves that both in EE and NE Aristotle’s concern is to define the voluntary specifically with a view to arguing that virtuous and vicious actions merit praise and blame respectively. His particular concern is to show that virtuous and vicious people, in particular, are to be praised and blamed, respectively, for their virtuous and vicious actions—which for him requires, as I have said, that those actions be voluntary. In the Nicomachean treatment, as I said at the beginning, Aristotle holds that human beings (but not other animals) are responsible for their settled characters, for example as just or unjust, temperate or self-indulgent persons; only if so can the actions they do in consequence of being the kind of people they are be voluntary, as Aristotle wishes to claim they are. Aristotle turns in III 5 to establish that responsibility. He begins the chapter by asserting that we are responsible for being virtuous or vicious people, as the case may be, and offering a brief argument in support of that

46 I do not mean to say that Aristotle’s theory is complete as it stands; I have myself noted, mostly in footnotes, numerous points at which his theory, as he himself states it, has gaps or is inexplicit; a complete theory would take explicit notice of these. It may need further significant elaboration, in order to take into account of subtleties concerning the effects of consent both when physically forced and when not, or cases of bribes, or special cases of duress when an agent has psychological addictions, and so on. I think it can be made to handle these complications quite well, but I do not go into them here.
claim (1113b4-14). Here he assumes (b13) that (in some way) what it is to be decent or virtuous, or base, is to engage regularly in virtuous or vicious actions and activities from a decision (προαίρεσις), occasion by occasion, to do so. Since a decision of ours causes each of these actions, they are all “up to us”: as he has just argued (in III 2-4), in explaining what a decision is, any action done on a decision to do it is voluntary. Hence, Aristotle infers, because we are responsible for each of the actions that we do as virtuous or vicious persons, once our characters are formed, and since having a character just is regularly doing corresponding actions on decisions to do them, we are responsible for our characters. Being responsible for the actions just is being responsible for the character.

47 At b8-11 he claims, more expansively, that when “acting is fine [i.e., virtuous] and up to us, not acting is shameful [i.e., vicious] and up to us,” and when “not acting is fine and up to us, acting is shameful and up to us.” This does not say, and Aristotle should not be taken to mean, that whenever a virtuous person does a virtuous act it was open to them (they were free) not to do it (i.e., free to do the vicious act of omission instead), and whenever a vicious person acts viciously it was open to them (they were free) to act virtuously. He only says that when, in some circumstance, a given act would be virtuous or vicious, then whichever of the two, if either, a person decides to do, they do voluntarily: that is, he only means that whatever you decide do in the given circumstances will be up to you, because it was caused by your decision. (See also above, n. 12.) Aristotle does not take a stand, one way or the other, on whether to act voluntarily requires being free at the time to act otherwise than one does. In fact, he presumably thinks a truly virtuous person’s character makes it the case that he or she cannot act otherwise than the virtuous ways they decide to act on each occasion, and likewise the vicious (cf. 1114a19-21).
In what follows in the chapter Aristotle does not withdraw or qualify this principal argument in any way; he thinks it is conclusive. In fact, given its assumptions, it plainly is conclusive. The major portion of the chapter, however, undertakes a very different argument, one intended to reinforce this principal one. Aristotle argues that we are responsible for our established moral characters, as also for all our other character traits, because we are responsible for coming to be, and for being, in those states in the first place. Aristotle begins by considering an objection someone might make to his own and, as he says, the law’s view, that when people are responsible for their ignorance of some particular of a bad action’s situation, then that ignorance does not make it involuntary when they do it: they themselves are responsible for such ignorant action when they do them. Suppose, however, a person does something bad because they failed to know the bad-making feature of the situation simply from inattention: what one notices or does not notice, they might say, varies freely from person to person and occasion to occasion, so they are not responsible for this bad thing. Aristotle and the law assume that it is nonetheless up to them to know (so they are responsible for not knowing, if they fail to know), “since they control whether they pay attention.”48 But what if the person is just the sort who doesn’t pay attention, but always blunders ahead without bothering to notice inconvenient facts (1114a2-3)? The objection claims that in that case they do not control whether they pay attention: that’s just how they are, what else could you expect? Aristotle makes this challenge, which concerns one particular state of developed character—inattentiveness—the occasion for arguing, with full generality, that we are responsible for all our developed character traits. So, in particular, we are responsible for our virtues or vices.

48 Hence, Aristotle approves the law’s imposing double penalties in the similar case of doing something harmful or shameful while ignorant of that fact, due to being drunk or in a fury: one for doing the bad thing, another for doing it in ignorance.
In his response (a very lengthy one—it runs from 1114a3-b25) Aristotle reinforces the initial argument summarized above, which speaks only of responsibility for our actions once we are virtuous or vicious, by arguing that we are ourselves the causes, or crucially important co-causes, through our earlier voluntary actions, of having become people with the characters that we have as mature adults. He has argued earlier in the treatise that we become good or bad people of the various different kinds by repeatedly doing, and deciding to do, the actions of virtuous people—the actions that a virtuous person in a similar situation would do, done in the same ways. Acting on such decisions gradually solidifies habits of feeling and action that one began to form early in life, and enables a progressively enriched understanding of human nature and the human good. These are the necessary preconditions for ever possessing the practical knowledge of the true natural end for human living that converts mere habituated states of soul into knowledge-based true and full virtues.49

It is important to notice that the earlier actions that Aristotle is referring to here are ones that we do as grown-up people, possessed of the full power of deliberation about what is good and bad for human beings, and so for oneself, and of decision-making on the basis of it. He is not speaking about our initial actions, under the direct guidance of our parents, as children, in which we begin to acquire habits of feeling and action—at a time when we do not yet possess the full power of practical reasoning. Aristotle makes this clear when he points out that, in doing the earlier actions he is referring to, ones for example that will make a person an

49 I summarize here a view, for which I argue in Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), chapter 3 sects. 3.4-3.8, about the relationship, for Aristotle, between habituation in right feeling and action, and full virtue. I argue there that Aristotle requires for full virtue complete practical knowledge of the human good.
unjust cheater and thief, the agent must have known that keeping on doing them, as they did for all that time, would make them unjust; and if someone does what he knows will make him unjust, he is voluntarily unjust once he has become that sort of person (a12-13). Neither small children nor any other type of animal besides grown-up adults (whether they are 18 years old or 60) would have to be, as Aristotle says, a total blockhead not to know that (a10). Other animals definitely do not have the capacity to know any such thing, and nor do children before the “age of reason.” They are not blockheads for not knowing it. Hence, if an animal comes to have a settled bad character, or a settled good and obedient one, and that character resulted from its doing a whole series of acts voluntarily while being trained at a young age, Aristotle’s theory does not hold them responsible for being a recalcitrant or a restrained and attentive kind of animal.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50} They do voluntarily do acts of self-restraint or service to their owners (or refuse to) when in training, since they know (not of course, in those, or any, words) that that is what they are doing. And those actions of theirs gave them, later, their character as restrained and attentive to some of their owner’s needs, or recalcitrant. But because they did not and could not know that in doing them they were making themselves turn out that way, they did not at the same times do voluntarily any actions of making themselves be like that as mature dogs or cats, as human adults are assumed to have done when forming their characters. It is true that, because mature animals are not responsible for their characters, one could attempt to run the objector’s argument concerning the inattentive human agent for the case of an adult cat or dog that, say, urinates on the floor, not in a box or not waiting to be taken outdoors, in irritation with its owner. You might argue that it “couldn’t help” doing that, because its character is such that that is just how it sees things under such circumstances. Plainly, this argument could not be rebutted in precisely the way Aristotle rebuts the corresponding one for the inattentive person (see below
However, any nearly grown-up person of 16 or 18 does know it, Aristotle insists—or can reasonably be expected to know it. Aristotle seems to think this is obvious and uncontroversial, but in fact it follows from his understanding of adults, even these young ones, as having acquired the power of deliberation and decision. To have those powers requires the ability to see and weigh long-term consequences, and partly consists in being able to reflect on overall ends and goals in life, and conform one’s behavior to such value-judgments. Hence, even if we should grant to the objector that a lax and inattentive person does not now control whether they pay attention (we might not want to grant that, of course), they are responsible for being lax and inattentive people. Therefore, they are also responsible for whatever bad things they do as a result of being people like that (even if they do not currently “control” being like that). And similarly for all other character traits. People’s earlier adult actions of justice or injustice were indisputably voluntary, and ones they were responsible for (the objection does not dispute that). At the same time, because of this knowledge about the consequences, each earlier act of injustice, on Aristotle’s analysis, since it was known by those who did them to be helping to cause them to be unjust people later, is accompanied by a voluntary act of making themselves be unjust people. Since they knew about the particular feature of their situation in doing them that this would be the likely result, they are now responsible for being the kinds of people in my main text). But that does not mean it is a good argument. It is reasonable to hold, as Aristotle does, that adult animals are responsible in just the same way as adult humans for the ranges of their behavior that count as actions of theirs. That it was the animal’s desires and knowledge that caused its action is enough to make it a voluntary one, for which it is responsible (and, presumably, blameworthy, in the ordinary, non-judgmental, way of blaming). It is irrelevant that it “couldn’t help” seeing things the way it did when it acted.
they are, whether good or bad, with the result that the actions they now decide to do as people of those kinds are voluntary too.

It is true, as Aristotle notes toward the end of the chapter (1114a31-b16), that part of what happens to a person as a result of being one or another kind of morally good or decent, or morally bad person, is that they come to conceive themselves and their good in ways characteristic of people of the given sort. “The end appears” to them in determinate ways, caused by their being particular kinds of person. To unjust people money and other goods of the sort that unjust people unjustly try to get appear of especially great value in life, a value that makes it seem to them justified to mistreat others in order to obtain them. It is from that appearance of the “end” that they do their deliberating and deciding, and their consequent actions of virtue or vice. No matter: they have knowingly caused themselves, in the way we have seen, to be that way, and so they have knowingly caused themselves to have the end “appear” to them as it does. So, being responsible for the way the end appears to them, they are also responsible for those deliberated and decided actions. Or, he adds, even if, merely for the sake of the argument, one granted that the way the end “appears” to people is not caused that way, but only comes about somehow “by nature” and birth, or even by some sort of divine dispensation (a ridiculous idea, as Aristotle reasonably thinks), his initial argument for the voluntariness of virtue (see the first paragraph of this section) would stand: the regular activities of virtue or vice, in which our being virtuous or vicious consists (in a way), being ones we decide on doing, case by case, would count still as voluntary. Regardless of the way the end appears, it is our deliberations and decisions, on the basis of that appearance, that cause our virtuous or vicious actions, and those deliberations and decisions are internal to us in the way required, and sufficient, for them to be voluntary—given Aristotle’s account of the voluntary.
Aristotle’s response in *NE* III 5 to these objections is of special interest in the present connection because of the way it reinforces my argument that Aristotle’s account of responsibility of agents for things that they do neither does, nor has any need to, make room for ideas of any special “moral” responsibility, reserved for adult human agents alone. In responding to these objections, he does indeed rely on the crucial fact that adult humans deliberate and make decisions. But it is the knowledge that actions are causes of states of character, which possessing that ability opens up to us, that, for Aristotle, makes the difference between us and other agents so far as responsibility for our characters goes. Possessing that knowledge in the relevant past, while we formed our characters, makes us responsible for them; lacking it makes animals not responsible for their characters. So when he recognizes the special importance of the capacity for deliberation and decision in adult voluntary actions, Aristotle does not alter, or open the door to any alteration in, his single and equal account of what it is for animals and us to be responsible for those things that we do that we are in fact responsible for. Both animals and children, and we adult humans too, are responsible simply and equally for whatever of the things we do that our desires, decisions, and knowledge or thought are the originating sources and causes of our doing. We do not have to recognize any special sort, or high grade, of responsibility (“moral responsibility”) that adults possess, but animals and children lack.

Bibliography


