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ARISTOTLE'S *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Aristotle on the Voluntary

Susan Sauvé Meyer

The Significance of Voluntariness

Aristotle devotes a significant portion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* to the topic of virtue of character (*ēthikē aretē*). In each work he precedes his detailed treatment of the particular virtues of character (courage, temperance, liberality, and so on) with a general account of ethical virtue (*NE* II–III.5; *EE* II; cf. *MM* I.5–19). The general account concludes, in both cases, with an extended discussion of voluntariness (*to hekousion*) and related notions (*NE* III.1–5; *EE* II.6–11; cf. *MM* I.9–19). In order to understand Aristotle's views on voluntariness, we must first understand why he thinks that an account of the voluntary belongs in a treatise on virtue of character.

In the *NE*, Aristotle gives two reasons for introducing the topic of voluntariness: "Since virtue concerns feelings and actions, and since praise and blame are for what is voluntary, while forgiveness and sometimes even pity are for what is involuntary, those who inquire into virtue should define the voluntary and the involuntary. This is also useful for those who legislate about fines and punishments" (*NE* III.1.1109b30–35). The second reason given here is the less important. It is elaborated on in *NE* III.5: legal sanctions are aimed at influencing behavior, and hence they are pointless if they are directed at actions that are not voluntary (1113b21–30). More important is the first reason Aristotle articulates: that voluntariness is a necessary condition of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. The *EE* concurs in invoking praise and blame in order to explain why a discussion of voluntariness is in order in the account of character:

> Since virtue and vice and their products are praiseworthy and blameworthy, (for one is blamed and praised . . . because of those things for which we are ourselves responsible) it is clear that virtue and vice concern those actions for which one is oneself responsible [*aitios*] and the origin [*archē*]. So we must identify the sorts of actions for which a person is himself responsible and the origin. Now we all agree that he is

> responsible for his voluntary actions . . . and that he is not responsible for his involuntary ones. (*EE* II.6.1223a9–18; cf. II.11.1228a9–17; *MM* I.9.1186b34–1187a4, 1187a19–21)

These and other passages indicate that Aristotle investigates voluntariness because he is interested in the causal conditions of praise and blame. It is important to understand just what kind of causal relation Aristotle takes voluntariness to be. A voluntary action, he assumes, is one whose origin (*archē*) is in the agent (*NE* III.1.1110a15–17, 1110b4, 1111a23, III.5.1113b20–21; *EE* II.8.1224b15; cf. *MM* I.11.1187b14–16), or of which the agent is the origin (*EE* II.6.1222b15–20, 1222b28–9, 1223a15; *NE* III.3.1112b31–2, III.5.1113b17–19). The *NE* favors the former locution and the *EE* the latter, but Aristotle clearly takes the two to be equivalent (*NE* III.3.1112b28–32, III.5.1113b17–21, VI.2.1139a31–b5). Such actions are according to (*kata*) the internal impulse (*hormē*) of the person (*EE* II.7.1223a23–8; cf. II.8.1224a18–25, 1224b7–15).

Aristotle regularly indicates that actions that "originate" in the agent are "up to him to do or not to do" (*NE* III.1.1110a15–18, III.5.1113b20–21, 1114a18–19; *EE* II.6.1223a2–9; cf. *MM* I.9.1187a7–24). It is important not to misinterpret this expression as attributing to agents a kind of "freedom to do otherwise." To be sure, Aristotle thinks that our actions, like much of what happens in the world, are contingent rather than necessary: they "admit of being otherwise" (*EE* II.6.1222b41–2, 1223a5–6; cf. *NE* VI.1.1139a6–14, III.3.1112a18–26). Their contingent status, however, is not a result of their being "up to us to do or not to do." On the contrary, Aristotle takes the former to be a precondition of the latter. It is because such occurrences (a) admit of being otherwise, and (b) can come about "through us," that (c) they are "up to us to do or not to do" (*NE* III.3.1112a18–26; *EE* II.6.1223a1–9, II.10.1226a26–33). Rather than attributing freedom to agents, the "up to us" locution used by Aristotle implies causal responsibility. Such agents are in control (*kurios*) of their actions (*NE* III.5.1114a2–3; *EE* II.6.1223a6–7); they are responsible (*aitioi*) for them: "A person is responsible [*aitios*] for those things that are up to him to do or not to do, and if he is responsible [*aitios*] for them, then they are up to him" (*EE* II.6.1223a7–9; cf. 1223a15–18).

Aristotle thinks such responsibility is necessary for praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (*NE* III.1.1109b30–32), and he investigates voluntariness in order to capture this causal relation (*EE* II.6.1223a9–18). But now our original question re-emerges. Why does Aristotle think that a full treatment of virtue and vice of character requires a discussion of responsibility?

A very popular answer to this question, more often assumed than stated explicitly, takes note of the fact that Aristotle thinks that our states of character, and not just our actions, are "up to us and voluntary" (*NE* III.5.1114b28–9; cf. 1114a4–31), and infers that Aristotle's main point in discussing voluntariness is to establish just this. A major difficulty for this hypothesis, however, is that the

argument that character formation is voluntary occurs only in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (III.5.1114a4–13). Thus Aristotle's reasons for discussing voluntariness in his account of character cannot be exhausted by his view that we form our states of character voluntarily.

Moreover, even though Aristotle repeatedly claims that virtue is praiseworthy and vice blameworthy, he never explains this by saying that we are responsible for these states of character. Rather, his general claim is that virtue is praiseworthy because it hits the mean, and vice blameworthy because it exceeds or falls short of the mean (*NE* II.6.1106b25–8, II.7.1108a14–16). In explaining why particular states of character are praiseworthy or blameworthy, he never mentions the voluntariness of their acquisition. Rather, he points to the sorts of activities the states of character produce. For example, "mildness" is praiseworthy because it disposes us to have angry feelings and to act in anger only when we should; courage is praiseworthy because it disposes us to feel fear or confidence and to stand our ground only when it is appropriate (*NE* IV.5.1126b5–7; *EE* III.1.1228b30–31; cf. III.5.1233a4–8). Aristotle's general discussion of praiseworthiness in *NE* I.12 confirms this general pattern. The praiseworthiness of a disposition depends on the sort of activity it produces: "We praise the good person, as well as virtue, because of the actions and products . . ." (1101b14–16; cf. *EE* II.1.1219b8–9).

These remarks show that Aristotle thinks character is praiseworthy in virtue of the actions it causes, not because of anything about the process by which it comes into being. Thus the causal relation he finds essential to praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, which is what he seeks to capture in his account of voluntariness, is the one in which character produces actions. The actions that Aristotle is concerned to classify as voluntary are those produced by character.

In fact, all the topics that Aristotle discusses along with voluntariness in *NE* III.1–5 (as well as in *EE* II.6–11) concern the exercise of character. After giving his account of voluntariness and involuntariness in *NE* III.1, he proceeds to define *prohairesis* (decision, choice, intention) in III.2, deliberation in III.3, and wish (*boulēsis*) in III.4. *Prohairesis* is a feature of the exercise of character on Aristotle's view; indeed, he defines character as a "disposition that issues in *prohairesis*" (*NE* II.6.1106b36, VI.2.1139a22–3; *EE* II.10.1227b8; cf. *NE* II.4.1105a31–2, II.5.1106a3–4). A *prohairesis*, as he explains it in *NE* III.2 and VI.2, is a desire informed by deliberation (cf. *EE* II.10.1226b5–20). Deliberation, in turn, is reasoning in the light of a goal (*telos*) (*NE* III.3.1112b11–20; *EE* II.10.1226b9–13), and the goal is the object of wish (*boulēsis*), something that seems good to the deliberator (*NE* III.4.1113a22–b2). Thus all of *prohairesis*, deliberation, and wish are features of the expression of character. When Aristotle concludes his discussion of these phenomena (*NE* III.2–4) and returns to the topic of voluntariness at the beginning of *NE* III.5, he marks the transition by noting that "actions concerning these things" (presumably those involving *prohairesis*, deliberation, and wish) are "according to *prohairesis* and voluntary" (*NE* III.5.1113b3–5;

cf. *EE* II.6.1223a16–20). The actions issuing from character, Aristotle here indicates, are voluntary.

Given Aristotle's interest in actions expressive of character, one might wonder why he focuses on voluntariness rather than *prohairesis* as the relevant notion. After all, he thinks children and other animals perform voluntary actions but lack *prohairesis* (*NE* III.2.1111b8–9; *Phys.* II.6.197b6–8). Since character involves *prohairesis*, the category of voluntary activity extends more widely than that of actions produced by character. Furthermore, he regularly insists, *prohairesis* better indicates character than actions do (*NE* III.2.1111b4–6; *EE* II.11.1228a2–3). In order to see why Aristotle focuses on voluntariness, let us first identify the special significance of *prohairesis*.

A person's *prohairesis* is a better indication of his character than his actions because the same action can result from very different *prohaireseis* (plural). For example, George might give money to needy Sam in order to gain a reputation for largesse, while Sandra might do so in order to make sure that Sam does not go hungry. Or James might return what he borrowed because he has been told to do so by his parents, whom he wants to please, while John might do so because he thinks it is the right thing to do. While the first agent in each example performs the action that he should, he does not do so "*as* the virtuous person would" (*NE* II.4.1105b7–9; cf. III.7.1116a11–15). The deficiency is in his *prohairesis*, rather than in his action. Thus it is important for Aristotle, whose concern is with actions expressive of character, to have a special interest in actions done on *prohairesis*.

However, even if *prohairesis* discriminates character better than actions do, actions too discriminate character. As Aristotle says in the *EE*, one's voluntary actions as well as one's *prohairesis* "define" virtue and vice (II.7.1223a21–3). This is because it is actions, not motivations, that hit (or miss) the mean. A virtuous state of character will dispose one, for instance, to give money when, to whom, to the extent, and so on, that one should, or to stand one's ground when, against whom, in what cause, and so on, one should (*NE* II.6.1106b21–4, II.9.1109a24–30; cf. II.3.1104b22–4). Thus whether a person gives money in the circumstances in which she should (regardless of her motivation) indicates whether her character "hits the mean." If she fails to do what she should (or if she does something that she should not), then this in itself indicates a flaw in her character. Knowing her *prohairesis* would provide more detail about the flaw (this is why *prohairesis* discriminates character *better* than actions do), but the action too reflects and indicates the flaw. In extreme cases, such as those of weakness of will, the flaw will not even show up in the *prohairesis*, for the weak-willed agent is one who acts contrary to his *prohairesis* (*NE* VII.3.1146b22–3). Thus a person's actions, in addition to her motivation, express her character. This is why an account of actions expressing character will not be restricted to actions done on *prohairesis*, but will concern the wider category of voluntary actions.

Voluntariness is the relevant notion in this context because not everything someone "does" in the widest sense counts as her action in the sense relevant to

praise and blame. For example, I might carry off your car keys in the mistaken belief that they are mine, or I might knock you over as a result of being pushed forcibly from behind. While taking your keys and knocking you over are arguably things that I "do," it is implausible to claim (absent additional information) that they indicate any deficiency in my character, or that I am blameworthy for them. One way of articulating this observation is to say that these actions are not voluntary (*hekousia*). Thus Aristotle, in his quest to identify the actions that are indications of character, quite reasonably resorts to the notion of voluntariness (*to hekousion*).

Ordinary and Philosophical Notions of Voluntariness

In the ordinary Greek of Plato and Aristotle's day, the distinction between voluntary (*hekousion*) and involuntary (*akousion*) serves to demarcate those actions that issue from a person from those that do not. Depending on the context, however, the implicit criteria for drawing the distinction vary greatly. According to one paradigm, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary draws the line between what we would call witting and unwitting behavior. Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, acted *akōn* (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 964ff.), as does the unwary passerby who disturbs a wasps' nest (Homer, *Iliad* 16.263–4). According to the other paradigm, the distinction is between willing and unwilling behavior. For example, a reluctant messenger delivers bad news to his king *akōn* (Sophocles, *Antigone* 274–7). When Zeus threatens Inachus with the destruction of his entire progeny unless he expels Io, Inachus complies, but *akōn* (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 663–72).

The English terms "voluntary" and "involuntary" also straddle these two distinctions. The first paradigm underlies the notion of "involuntary manslaughter," while the second applies to the case of a person committed involuntarily to a psychiatric institution, or to a soldier who volunteers (rather than is drafted) to enlist in the army. Thus "voluntary" and "involuntary" are very apt translations of the Greek terms.

These two ways of drawing the distinction yield the two generally recognized categories of involuntary actions in Aristotle's day: those due to ignorance, and those due to compulsion (*bia* or *anagkē*). But the two paradigms fail to yield a clear set of criteria for distinguishing voluntary from involuntary actions. The first paradigm assumes a weaker criterion for voluntariness: as long as the agent knows what she is doing, her action counts as voluntary. The second paradigm requires that the agent be whole-hearted in her action, with no reluctance or resistance or feeling of constraint. Thus some of the actions that will count as voluntary according to the first paradigm will count as involuntary according to the second. For example, handing over your wallet at gunpoint counts as voluntary according to

the first paradigm, and involuntary according to the second. This is why, as Aristotle tells us, there are "disputes" about whether such actions are voluntary or involuntary (*NE* III.1.1110a7–8; *EE* II.8.1225a2–9).

Settling these disputes is a philosophical task rather than a linguistic one, and it is the former sort of task that Aristotle sets out to accomplish in his discussions of voluntariness. In providing an account of voluntariness and involuntariness that gives precise and univocal criteria for classifying actions, Aristotle is inevitably revising the "ordinary" notion of voluntariness. He is engaged in philosophical theorizing, and we will see that his discussion is a textbook case of the "dialectical" method he identifies as his general philosophical method (*NE* VII.1.1145b2–7).

A dialectical inquiry, according to Aristotle, begins with the reputable views (*endoxa*) on a subject (VII.1.1145b3–5). In the case at hand, such views include the ordinary paradigms and criteria for voluntary and involuntary action, as well as uncontroversial assumptions about the topic – for example, that praise and blame are for voluntary actions, forgiveness and pity for involuntary ones (*NE* III.1.1109b31–2; *EE* II.6.1223a9–13). Aristotle also appeals to uncontroversial examples of praiseworthy and blameworthy action, and considers rival philosophical accounts of voluntariness. To proceed dialectically is to raise the puzzles or disputes that emerge from these initial assumptions, and find a way of resolving the difficulties while preserving as much as possible of the most plausible of the original views (*NE* VII.1.1145b4–6).

While the dialectical nature of Aristotle's discussion of voluntariness is not immediately evident in the *NE*, it is readily apparent in the Eudemian account, whose notorious obscurity is due to the fact that Aristotle is there working through the reasoning that yields the account, not just presenting the results of his theorizing. Let us therefore begin with the *EE*. Once we appreciate the nature of the dialectical reasoning in that work, we will be in a position to understand some of the more puzzling aspects of the account of voluntariness that Aristotle offers in the *NE*. (See Meyer 1993: ch. 3 for a detailed analysis of the Eudemian discussion.)

The Eudemian Ethics

The governing assumption in the admittedly tortuous sequence of reasoning in *EE* II.7–8, which yields the definitions of voluntariness and involuntariness in *EE* II.9, is that voluntary and involuntary are contraries (*enantia*, II.9.1225b1–2; cf. II.8.1224a13–14). Specifically, the assumption is that voluntary action is according to (*kata*) impulse, while involuntary action is contrary to (*para*) impulse (II.7.1223a24–6; cf. II.8.1224a4–5). On this assumption, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary action is analogous to that between natural motion and "forced" or "violent" (*biaion*) motion, Aristotle tells us in *EE* II.8 (1224a15–20). Something's natural motion is according to its internal impulse, while violent

motion is contrary to that impulse. Thus earth's natural motion is to go down. If it is thrown up into the air (that is, contrary to its natural impulse), its motion is forced (*biaion*). According to this governing assumption, Aristotle assumes that forced motion is the paradigm for all involuntary action – hence his repeated claim that all involuntary action is forced (*biaion*; II.7.1223a29–30, II.8.1224a10–11).

In making this assumption, Aristotle is not dismissing the other ordinary paradigm of involuntariness (unwitting behavior). Indeed, we will see that he concludes the Eudemian account by making this paradigm central to his account of involuntariness (II.9.1225b6–10). Rather, Aristotle is proceeding dialectically, with the goal of incorporating the two paradigms into a unified account that preserves the salient features of both. In the case of the second paradigm (unwillingness), the salient feature is contrariety to the agent's "impulse." Actions performed unwillingly or reluctantly are contrary to what the agent desires, wants, or values. They "go against the grain" of the person who performs them. This is why Aristotle invokes pain as a sign that an action is forced (*EE* II.7.1223a30–35, 1223b20–24, II.8.1224a30–b1). Given his goal of integrating the two paradigms of involuntariness, it is reasonable for him to begin his inquiry by considering the proposal that voluntary action is according to, and involuntary action contrary to, a person's internal impulse.

EE II.7–8 tests the plausibility of this proposal by considering it in the context of the various sorts of impulse that can move a person. These are types of desire (*orexis*): appetite (*epithumia*, 1223a29–b17), spirit (*thumos* 1223b17–29), wish (*boulēsis*, 1223b29–36), and *prohairesis* (1223b37–1224a4). Aristotle's examination shows that the proposal implies a contradiction in the case of *akrasia* (weakness of will) and *enkrateia* (self–control). In such actions, a person's rational desire conflicts with his appetite or spirit (1223a37–8, 1223b12–14). Such actions are contrary to one of these impulses, but according to the other. Thus, according to the proposal, they are both voluntary and involuntary (1223b16–17), which is impossible (1223b25–6).

The problem arises, Aristotle explains in *EE* II.8, from the fact that human agents have multiple internal impulses, and as a result, an action can be contrary to one internal impulse, but according to another (1224a27–8). He solves the problem by making explicit an additional criterion for force that he takes to be implicit in the original paradigm of forced motion. In the case of simple natural bodies, motion that is contrary to internal impulse is also externally caused – as in the case of the stone thrown upwards. So too in the case of living things and non-human animals: "we see them undergoing and doing many things by force – whenever *something from the outside* moves them against their internal impulse" (II.7.1223a22–3). In these cases, the body in question has only a single internal impulse, and thus any motion contrary to that impulse must be externally caused. So it is unnecessary, in these cases, to state the requirement of external causation in addition to that of contrariety to impulse. But once we clarify the notion of

force to make external causation an explicit criterion, Aristotle claims, the paradox about weak-willed and self-controlled action disappears. In being contrary to impulse, they are only "similar" to forced actions. Since they are internally caused, they are voluntary (II.8.1224b3–10).

In making external causation an explicit criterion for force, Aristotle revises the second ordinary paradigm of involuntariness (unwillingness) in order to solve the "puzzle" (*aporia*, II.8.1225a1) about continent and incontinent action. This is not, however, the only way to solve the problem. He could, for example, have followed Plato in taking only one type of desire (*boulēsis*, wish) to be the impulse relevant to voluntariness and involuntariness (cf. *Gorgias* 467s–468c). Aristotle considers this proposal in the course of the dialectical discussion in *EE* II.7. He introduces it at 1223b5–6, and finds it problematic at 1223b6–10 and 1223b30–36 (cf. II.8.1223b39–1224a3) because it implies that incontinent action is involuntary. This is an unacceptable result, he indicates, because such actions are clear cases of wrongdoing (*adikein*), and wrongdoing, he insists, is voluntary (1223b1, 1223b15, 1223b33).

Aristotle is here appealing to his reason in discussing voluntariness in the first place: the assumption that voluntary actions are praiseworthy and blameworthy (*NE* III.1.1109b31–2; *EE* II.6.1223a9–13). This assumption functions as another governing constraint in his attempt to formulate a definition of voluntariness and involuntariness. If the point in defining voluntariness is to have a set of criteria for praiseworthy and blameworthy action, and wrongdoing (*adikein*) is a clear instance of the latter, then contrariety to wish (or any other impulse) cannot be sufficient for involuntariness. Adding the explicit requirement of external causation allows Aristotle to honor this constraint.

While modern thinkers might be inclined to solve the problem by rejecting the requirement of contrariety, this is very far from Aristotle's view. His project, we have seen, is governed by the assumption that contrariety to impulse is essential to involuntariness. Thus, even if Aristotle's conception of voluntariness is intended to capture conditions of responsibility for action, involuntariness as he conceives it is not simply lack of causal responsibility. Involuntary action must, in addition, go against the grain of the agent.

In *EE* II.8, we have seen, Aristotle clarifies the conception of involuntariness to require that, in addition to being contrary to impulse, an involuntary action must also be externally caused (1224a13–30). This solves the puzzle (and dispute) about weak-willed and self-controlled action. On the clarified account of force, they both turn out to be voluntary, since it is uncontroversial that they are "according to" the agent's own impulse (1224a30–1225a2). After concluding this clarification by discussing cases where it is controversial whether the action originates in the agent or in something external – cases of compulsion or forced choice (1225a2–36), which we will discuss below – Aristotle returns, in II.9, to his project of integrating the two paradigms for voluntariness and involuntariness. That is, he

seeks to combine the requirement that involuntariness involves contrariety to impulse with the view that unwitting actions are involuntary.

His remarks in *EE* II.9 are brief and careless. He concludes by proposing that the contraries constitutive of voluntariness and involuntariness are, respectively, acting with knowledge and acting in ignorance of what one is doing (1225b1–8). These are offered as glosses for "acting according to thought" and "acting contrary to thought" respectively (1225b1). This conclusion, however, invites many objections internal to Aristotle's project. First of all, thought (*dianoia*) is not, for Aristotle, an impulse (*NE* VI.2.1139a35–6). Being according to thought is not, as he here implies, an alternative to being according to desire; thought and desire together cause action (VI.2.1139a31–5). Second, and more important for our present purposes, the account of involuntariness given here fails to preserve the contrariety to impulse that Aristotle has been at pains to preserve in the preceding discussion. Indeed, it does not even allow for a category of involuntary actions that are due to force rather than to ignorance.

Thus there is a gap, in the Eudemian account of voluntariness and involuntariness, between Aristotle's goals and what he actually achieves. It is nonetheless clear, however, that his aim there is to integrate the two ordinary paradigms for involuntariness. We are now in a position to see that the Nicomachean discussion continues and advances the dialectic of the Eudemian account, and better satisfies its goal.

The Nicomachean Ethics

The *NE* account begins by correcting the fumble at the end of the Eudemian discussion. There are, Aristotle insists, two general types of involuntary action, those due to force and those due to ignorance (III.1.1109b35–1110a1). After clarifying the criteria for these two types of involuntariness, Aristotle infers a general account of voluntariness: "Since forced actions and those due to ignorance are involuntary, the voluntary would appear to be that whose origin is in the agent who knows the particular facts about the action" (III.1.1111a22–4). These opening remarks, and the definition of voluntariness that Aristotle develops from them, often leave readers underwhelmed. Is Aristotle not simply collecting and organizing ordinary criteria for voluntariness and involuntariness, rather than engaging in a distinctively philosophical investigation of his own? However, if we read these remarks in the light of the Eudemian discussion that we have just examined, we can see that this impression is mistaken. To be sure, Aristotle here in the *NE* is insisting on the two ordinary paradigms for involuntariness, but his discussion in the *EE* concluded with a definition that inadvertently rules out one of them. From this perspective, Aristotle's insistence in the *NE* on the two ordinary categories of involuntariness is a correction to the Eudemian definition.

Furthermore, the Nicomachean definition of the voluntary as "that whose origin is in the agent who knows the particular facts" (III.1.1111a23) actually succeeds in doing what the Eudemian discussion tried but failed to do. It provides a unified conception of voluntariness that incorporates insights from both of the ordinary paradigms. From the paradigm according to which contrariety to impulse is central to involuntariness comes the requirement that voluntary action has its origin (*archē*) in the agent. In the idiom of the *EE*, it is "according to his impulse." From the paradigm according to which involuntary action is unwitting comes the requirement that the voluntary agent know what he is doing.

In any case, Aristotle in the *NE* does not simply infer this definition of the voluntary from the ordinary assumption that involuntary acts are either forced or due to ignorance. His inference depends crucially on his clarification of the criteria for these two types of involuntariness. If we turn to examine his explanation, first of force (III.1.1110a1–b17) and then of involuntariness involving ignorance (III.1.1110b18–1111a21), we will be able to recognize that he is here building upon and extending the dialectical discussion of the *EE*.

Constraint and Compulsion

Aristotle devotes most of his discussion of force in the *NE* (III.1.1110a1–b17) to a clarification of the question of what it is for the origin of the action to be external to the agent. He opts there for an extremely restrictive criterion. The agent must contribute nothing to the action (1110a1–4); that is, he must not be the one moving the parts of his body (1110a15–17). It might seem odd, in the light of this restriction, that Aristotle should even recognize a category of involuntariness due to force. Voluntariness and involuntariness are properties of actions (*EE* II.6.1222b29, 1223a15–20; *NE* III.5.1113b4), but the only "actions" that can satisfy this criterion of external causation are arguably not actions at all: for example, being driven off course by the winds, or physically abducted (III.1.1110a3–4). It is not odd at all, however, if we understand Aristotle's claim in the context of his dialectical project, for there are plenty of genuine actions that would be classified as forced and involuntary according to the ordinary paradigm of involuntariness due to force.

These are cases in which a person claims to be compelled or forced to do something bad – for example, if he has been threatened with beating, imprisonment, or torture if he fails to do it (*EE* II.8.1225a4–6), or if he acts to avoid a greater evil (*NE* III.1.1110a4–7). Such cases are described in the *MM* as ones in which external things are thought to "compel" (*anagkazein*) the person to act (*MM* I.15.1188b15–20). Aristotle discusses these cases in the *EE* and *NE* when he clarifies the conditions in which the origin of the action is external to the agent. In both cases he resists the ordinary view that such actions are involuntary.

In the *EE*, he claims that as long as the person is capable of enduring the threatened sanction, the action is "up to him" to do and not to do, and hence it is voluntary (II.8.1225a8–14). Only in cases in which the alternative to his action is so painful as to be literally unbearable is his action "not up to him," and for that reason forced – for example, if the pain of torture is so severe that it is impossible to keep from divulging the secret. This is an extremely restrictive criterion, for in most of the alleged cases of compulsion, the agent acts to avoid an alternative that, however undesirable, is still endurable.

Such are the cases on which Aristotle focuses in the parallel passage in the *NE*. A man does something shameful under orders from a tyrant – who will kill the man's family if he fails to comply (*NE* III.1.1110a4–7). A captain throws his precious cargo overboard in a storm in order to save the lives of those aboard ship (1110a10–11). The agent in such cases acts voluntarily, Aristotle insists at some length (1110a11–b9) because "the origin of moving his bodily parts is in him, and if something's origin is in him, it is up to him to do or not to do it" (1110a15–18).

Those who think that such actions are involuntary are motivated in part by the view that the agents are not blameworthy for what they do (cf. III.1.1110a19–21). They depend on the assumption that they share with Aristotle that blame is for voluntary actions. Aristotle's response is to point out that denying voluntariness is too blunt an instrument to secure this result. After all, he indicates, agents in such situations can be praised for making the right judgment about which alternative to take, or for sticking to that judgment. This is because such judgment and resolution are marks of good character. It is a mark of bad or at any rate deficient character to fail on either of these two points, Aristotle points out (1110a19–b1). Such failures are blameworthy. (The limiting type of case is one in which the person makes the right judgment about what to do, but it is beyond human nature [hence not within the scope of virtue of character] to abide by that correct judgment [1110a31]. This is the type of case that Aristotle in the *EE* has already classified as involuntary; *sungnōmē* [forgiveness] is appropriate for such agents [*NE* 1110a24], and hence the verdict "involuntary" is required.)

The actions that Aristotle in these contexts classifies as voluntary are paradigm cases of *in*voluntariness on the "unwillingness" paradigm. We have seen that it is perfectly natural Greek to describe such agents as acting *akōn*. It is Aristotle's theoretical innovation that results in the verdict that virtually no real actions are due to force. His concession that such actions are involuntary "when considered without qualification" (III.1.1110a18; cf. 1110a9) or "in themselves" (1110b3) – however we are to understand what these qualifications mean (cf. *EE* II.8.1225a11–14) – is an attempt to accommodate (or at any rate acknowledge) that ordinary, pre-philosophical view in his philosophical account.

Force and Contrariety in the *NE*

Although Aristotle's discussion of force (*bia*) in the *NE* focuses on the criterion of external causation, this is not because he has forgotten about or abandoned the Eudemian constraint that involuntary action be contrary to impulse. Indeed, it is precisely because the disputed cases in *NE* III.1 satisfy this constraint that they appear to be compelling candidates for involuntariness. Adding the requirement of external causation for force was, after all, Aristotle's own theoretical clarification in the *EE*. It is thus natural that he should be emphasizing and clarifying it here in the *NE*.

In any case, Aristotle here in the *NE* clearly still assumes, as something so obvious that it goes without saying, that forced actions are contrary to impulse. He mentions in passing, when rejecting another set of cases alleged to be forced, that of course forced actions must be painful (III.1.1110b12). As the *EE* makes clear, pain is essential to involuntariness because it is a sign of contrariety to impulse (*EE* II.7.1223a30–35, 1223b20–24, II.8.1224a30–b1).

That Aristotle has not abandoned the criterion of contrariety, and that he continues in the *NE* to pursue the homogenizing project of the *EE*, is vividly clear when he discusses involuntariness due to ignorance (III.1.1110b18–1111a21). While he has not thought it worth emphasizing, in his account of force, that forced actions must be painful, he thinks it is important to insist on this in the case of acts due to ignorance. Indeed, this is the first point he makes when he embarks on the discussion of involuntariness involving ignorance: "While everything due to ignorance is not-voluntary [*ouk hekousion*], what is involuntary [*akousion*] must also be painful or regretted" (III.1.1111a19–22). He repeats this requirement at the close of his discussion of ignorance (1111a19–21; cf. 1111a32). Once again, pain (and hence contrariety to impulse) is necessary for involuntariness.

Here we see that Aristotle has accomplished the harmonizing project begun in the *EE*, whose goal is to take the two ordinary paradigms of involuntariness and incorporate them into a single set of criteria for involuntariness and voluntariness. Contrariety, which is part of one ordinary paradigm for involuntariness, is here integrated into Aristotle's account of the other. The contrariety preserved in the resulting account of involuntariness leads some scholars to translate *akousion* as "counter-voluntary" rather than "involuntary" (for example, Broadie and Rowe 2002: 38). While this is clearly an accurate reflection of Aristotle's integrated theory of the *akousion*, it is still not a better translation than "involuntary." After all, "involuntary" in English (no less than *akousion* in Greek) is used perfectly idiomatically of actions that go against a person's will (for example: "involuntary servitude"). Furthermore, Aristotle's claim that actions due to ignorance but not regretted fail to be voluntary is a theoretical revision of ordinary usage, and makes what his audience would view as an extremely surprising claim. That such actions

are not "counter-voluntary" goes without saying. The best translation of a controversial claim should not make it look like a truism.

Knowledge and Ignorance

In contrast to his very brief remarks in *EE* II.9, Aristotle devotes considerable attention in *NE* III.1 to clarifying the sort of knowledge that is required for voluntariness (1110b28–1111a19). The dialectical considerations he is engaging with here are forcefully articulated in Plato's dialogues.

Plato's Socrates famously declares that all wrongdoing is involuntary because it is due to ignorance of the good. We all want the good, he claims (*Meno* 77b–78b), and whenever we do something, we do it for the sake of the good (*Gorgias* 467c–468c). Thus, all wrongdoing is due to ignorance of what is good. Wrongdoing comes in two varieties. The first is incontinence, which in the *Protagoras* (354e–357e), Socrates argues, is due to ignorance of the good. The other is ordinary wrongdoing. Here, although one does what one wants to do (what appears to be good), it is, in fact, bad. Hence, although the wrongdoer gets what she aims at in one sense (the apparent good), she is mistaken in believing this objective to be good (*Gorgias* 468d). Her rational desire (*boulēsis*), which aims at the good, is frustrated by such actions. Thus, on this view, wrongdoing is both contrary to desire and due to ignorance. This constellation of views persists through Plato's latest work. In the *Laws*, the Athenian reaffirms that "all wrongdoing is involuntary" (860c–e; cf. 731c).

Like some of Aristotle's conclusions about voluntariness, Plato's claim that all wrongdoing is involuntary constitutes an affront to, and revision of, ordinary notions. His point, unlike Aristotle's, is not to capture conditions in which praise and blame are appropriate. Quite the contrary, Plato's dominant speakers clearly think such ignorance is reprehensible and worthy of censure. Persons ignorant in this way are in need of punishment (*Gorgias* 478a–479b), sometimes even death (*Gorgias* 480d; *Laws* 854c–e, 862e–863a). The assertion that wrongdoing is involuntary is never invoked in Plato as a defense of wrongdoers, or an attempt to escape sanctions or punishment (with the possible exception of *Apology* 26a).

Plato in his revisionist theorizing is quite happy to abandon the ordinary assumption that responsibility, praise, and blame go along with voluntariness. Rather, his aim is to underscore the importance of attaining knowledge of the good. If we lack such knowledge, he preaches, we fail to achieve what we want most dearly in life. We are frustrating our deepest desires. We are like madmen in the example from the *Gorgias*: cunningly plotting to achieve ends that frustrate our deepest and dearest purposes in life (*Gorgias* 469d–470a; cf. *Laws* 731c). Plato's goal in calling wrongdoing involuntary is protreptic: to exhort us to seek and cultivate moral knowledge.

Aristotle's theoretical interest in voluntariness, we have seen, is quite different from Plato's. His motivation for seeking a theoretical definition of voluntariness is to capture the conditions of praiseworthy and blameworthy action. We have already seen how, in the *EE*, he criticizes and rejects the Platonic view that actions contrary to wish (*boulēsis*) are involuntary (*EE* II.7.1223b5–10, 1223b30–36, II.8.1223b39–1224a3). He rejects it because it conflicts with the constraint that wrongdoing is voluntary. Here in *NE* III.1, Aristotle engages more directly with the motivation for the Platonic view.

When Plato declares that wrongdoing is involuntary because it is due to ignorance, he is relying on a perfectly ordinary criterion for voluntariness, implicit in the paradigm of unwitting behavior for involuntary action. It is uncontroversial that if you do not know what you are doing, then you act involuntarily. But Plato's inference from this, that wicked actions are involuntary, is surprising and controversial because it runs up against another well-entrenched assumption about voluntariness – that blameworthy action is voluntary. Unlike Plato, Aristotle is not prepared to sacrifice this aspect of the ordinary view in his own theoretical account. But the Platonic view does present a puzzle to be solved. If wicked behavior involves ignorance of the good (a premise with which Aristotle agrees), then how can it be voluntary?

Solving this puzzle is Aristotle's main focus in the Nicomachean discussion of involuntariness due to ignorance (III.1.1110b18–21). He sets out here to clarify the sort of knowledge that is necessary for voluntariness. Unlike Plato, Aristotle has a fairly detailed account of the structure of rational motivation. He distinguishes what an agent does (the action) from the goal for the sake of which he does it (the good) – hence the distinction between the action and the *prohairesis* on which it is done. That for the sake of which one acts is part of one's *prohairesis*, not of one's action. But voluntariness is a property of actions, not motivations. Given this distinction between an action and its motivation, Aristotle is able to distinguish two sorts of knowledge. On the one hand, there is knowledge about the action itself – knowledge of what one is doing. On the other hand, there is knowledge expressed in one's reasons for acting – knowledge that what one is doing is good.

Thus an action can involve two different types of ignorance: ethical ignorance (ignorance of what is good and bad, of what is right and wrong to pursue), and non-ethical ignorance: ignorance of what one is, in fact, doing. Examples of the latter include: whether one is drinking water as opposed to poison; whether one is fighting with an enemy or a parent, with a blunted spear rather than a sharp one; whether pushing the lever will release the catapult or just display it (*NE* III.1.1111a3–15; cf. *EE* II.9.1225b3–5). Aristotle refers to the latter as ignorance of the particulars (III.1.1110b33, 1111a23–4): who, what, where, and so on – all the factors relevant to the doctrine of the mean (*NE* II.6.1106b21–4). The former he sometimes characterizes as ignorance of the universal (III.1.1110b32; cf. VII.3.1147a3) – meaning the premise in practical reasoning that has to do with

what is good: for example, "it is good to help those in need; here is a needy person; so I should help him" (cf. *NE* VII.3.1147a25–31; *Mot. An.* 7.701a10–20). He also calls it ignorance "in the *prohairesis*" (III.1.1110b31). This is ignorance manifested in the goals one pursues in acting, not in one's grasp of the action one is doing.

When Plato claims that all wrongdoing is involuntary, he collapses the distinction, central to Aristotle's account of *prohairesis*, between what one does (the action) and one's reason for doing it. Thus it is not surprising that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, immediately after rejecting the Platonic interpretation of the knowledge requirement for voluntariness, the next topic Aristotle takes up is *prohairesis* (III.2), and its constituent parts: deliberation (III.3) and wish (III.4).

The Platonic Asymmetry Thesis

After discussing *prohairesis*, deliberation, and wish in *NE* III.2–4, Aristotle returns to the topic of voluntariness and concludes his discussion of the topic in *NE* III.5. His engagement with Plato, however, is not yet over. An additional consequence of the Platonic view of voluntariness is that there is an asymmetry between good and bad actions: our good actions are voluntary, but our bad ones are not. The asymmetry thesis is a view Aristotle is clearly concerned to reject (*NE* III.1.1111a27–9; *EE* II.7.1223b14–16; cf. *MM* I.9.1187a21–3), and this is exactly what he is doing when he opens *NE* III.5. He opens the chapter by inferring, from the discussion of *prohairesis* and its components in III.2–4, that virtuous and vicious actions alike are voluntary:

> [1] Since the end is the object of wish, while the things that promote the end are objects of deliberation and *prohairesis*, actions that concern these would be according to *prohairesis* and voluntary. Now, [2] the activities of the virtues concern these. So [3] both virtue, and likewise vice, is up to us. (*NE* III.5.1113b3–7)

It might appear that the affirmation of symmetry in the argument's conclusion [3] concerns states of character – "virtue [*aretē*] and . . . vice [*kakia*]" (III.5.1113b6–7; cf. 1113b14–17) – rather than actions. But this cannot be what Aristotle means. First of all, it is perfectly natural Greek to use such expressions as "virtue," "vice," "injustice," and their cognates to refer to good and bad actions (cf. Sophocles, *Tyro* fr. 582). Plato sometimes articulates his claim that wrongdoing is involuntary using such terminology. "No one is involuntarily wicked [*kakos*]" the Athenian says at *Laws* IX.860d5, where he is clearly talking about wicked actions (860d9). Second, if Aristotle did understand [3] to concern states of character, his inference to it from [1] and [2] would be invalid, since these premises unambiguously concern virtuous and vicious actions. Similarly, in the *EE*, the arguments Aristotle offers against the asymmetry thesis establish only a

symmetry between virtuous and vicious actions, even though the thesis is there articulated using terms that might equally well refer to states of character (*EE* II.11.1228a7–11; cf. II.6.1223a15–20; *MM* I.9.1187a5–19, I.11.1187b20–21, I.12.1187b31).

In the remarks that follow immediately upon these opening lines of *NE* III.5, Aristotle makes it clear that the symmetry of concern to him is between virtuous and vicious actions. He explains, in support of [3]:

> For in those cases in which it is up to us to do something, it is also up to us not to do it, and in cases in which "No" is up to us, so is "Yes." So if doing it, which is fine, is up to us, then not doing it, which is bad, is also up to us. And if not doing it, which is fine, is up to us, then doing it, which is shameful, is also up to us. And if it is up to us to do fine actions and shameful ones, and in the same way not to do them, *and this is what it is to be good and bad*, then it is up to us to be decent and base. (III.5.1131b7–14)

Indeed, he here says explicitly that he is using "being good" and "being bad" as equivalent to "doing fine actions" and "doing shameful actions" (1113b12–13). That is, he describes actions using terms that might equally well refer to states of character. Aristotle is here responding to opponents who maintain that there is an asymmetry in voluntariness between good and bad actions.

Aristotle's motivation for rejecting the asymmetry thesis is clear. Since he inquires into voluntariness in order to capture the causal conditions of praise and blame, it is a constraint on this account that both good and bad actions turn out to be voluntary. Therefore, he must reject the asymmetry thesis. He does not, however, do so without argument. In *NE* III.5 he offers a number of independent objections to the thesis. As we have seen, he points to considerations of the psychology of action (1113b3–6, quoted above), and to the "two sidedness" involved in the notion of an action being "up to us" or its origin being in us (1113b6–14, quoted above; elaborated further at 1113b17–21). In addition, he points out that the symmetry is presupposed in normal practices of reward and punishment (1113b21–30).

After a long excursus on the voluntariness of character formation – where considerations of symmetry are notably absent (III.5.1113b30–1114a31) – Aristotle proceeds to consider an argument in favor of the asymmetry thesis: "Suppose someone says that everyone pursues the apparent good, but is not in control of the appearance. Rather, the end appears to each person according to the sort of person he is" (1114a31–b1). Aristotle's response is two-pronged. First of all, he notes that his immediately preceding argument, that we are responsible for our states of character (1113b30–1114a31), undermines the objector's premise that we are not in control of the way the good appears to us (1114b1–3). But in any case, Aristotle continues, even if the objector is right that we are not in control of the way the good appears to us (1114b3–12), this applies equally to good

actions and bad ones. Hence it does not show the former to be any more voluntary than the latter (1114b12–16). (In drawing this conclusion, Aristotle sometimes uses "virtue" and "vice" to articulate the asymmetry thesis [1114b13, 19–20], but it is clear in these contexts that he is talking about the voluntariness of actions, not of character: *prattousin*, 1114b16; *en tois praxesin*, 1114b21.)

After reiterating the dilemma – that the argument fails if we are responsible for our states of character, and it also fails if we are not (1114b17–21) – Aristotle reminds us that his own position is captured by the first lemma: our virtues (*aretai*) are up to us (1114b21–3), and the same thing goes for the vices (*kakiai*) (1114b23–5). (Note the use of the plural here, "virtues" and "vices," unlike the singular "virtue" and "vice" used to refer to actions.)

In offering this refutation of the argument for the asymmetry thesis, Aristotle concludes his engagement with and rejection of the Platonic account of involuntariness. We are also at the end of his discussion of voluntariness. The remaining lines of III.5 (1114b26–1115a6) are a connecting passage that concludes the general account of virtue of character, and introduces the discussions of the particular virtues of character.

Responsibility for Character

Once we recognize that *NE* III.5, the last chapter in the discussion of voluntariness, is organized around the asymmetry thesis, and that Aristotle's main project in the chapter is to reject that thesis, we are in a position to see that the chapter's main preoccupation is not, despite initial appearances, responsibility for character. The thesis that we are responsible for the states of character we develop is indeed introduced and defended in the course of the chapter in an extended discussion that we have yet to examine (III.5.1114a4–31). It is one of the conclusions that Aristotle recapitulates in the remarks that conclude the general discussion of virtue of character at the end of III.5 (1114b26–1115a3). So it is evidently an important one for Aristotle. Just what significance he attaches to the thesis, however, we have yet to determine.

As a first step toward this goal, let us consider the context in which he invokes and argues for the thesis. Aristotle is contending, against the asymmetry thesis, that ordinary practices of legal reward and sanction presuppose that our bad actions are up to us, as long as they are not done "by force or due to ignorance for which we are not responsible" (III.5.1113b24–5; cf. *EE* II.9.1225b14–16). He goes on to point out that people are also punished for being ignorant, if they are responsible for the ignorance (1113b30–1114a10). Such people were "in control of taking care" (1114a3) to acquire (or retain) the relevant knowledge. "But," an objector responds, "presumably he is the sort of person not to take care" (1114a3–40). It is to this objection that Aristotle offers his famous argument that we are responsible for becoming the sorts of people that we are.

Before considering this argument, it is important to be clear about the objection to which it responds. Modern readers often assume that both Aristotle and the objector agree on the principle that if a person acts as he is disposed to, then his action is not up to him (or does not originate in him) unless it can be shown that the disposition itself is up to him or originates in him (for example, Hardie 1980: 175). In a nutshell, the principle is that responsibility for action requires responsibility for character. This is a very common modern assumption about responsibility, and it seems to be what motivates the hypothesis we rejected at the beginning of this chapter: that establishing responsibility for character is the main goal of the account of voluntariness. But is there any evidence that Aristotle endorses such a principle?

Two passages in *NE* III.5 may give the misleading impression of articulating or implying the principle: (a) 1113b17–21 and (b) 1114b3–4. However, (a) concerns the asymmetry thesis about action, not the thesis of responsibility for character. On Burnet's (1990) reading of 1114b3 (*ei de mē outheis*), (b) does appear to articulate the principle. But the better reading is "if no one – *ei de mēdeis* – is responsible for his wrongdoing . . ." So nowhere in *NE* III.5 does Aristotle even articulate, let alone endorse, the principle. Furthermore, if he were to endorse the principle, the argument that we are responsible for our states of character would be the "linch-pin" of his account of voluntariness; yet, as noted above, the *EE* fails to argue for, or even articulate, this thesis. (Apparent instances to the contrary – *EE* II.6.1223a19–20 and II.11.1228a7–11 – address the asymmetry thesis rather than the thesis of responsibility for character; contra Broadie 1991: 162.)

The most we can infer from the fact that Aristotle responds to the objection by arguing that we are responsible for the dispositions we develop is that he takes such responsibility to be sufficient (not necessary) for responsibility for the action that issues from that disposition. That is, he is assuming the transitivity of responsibility: if you are responsible for a disposition, you are also responsible for what issues from that disposition. This principle of transitivity is much weaker than the principle that responsibility for an action requires responsibility for the disposition from which one acts. There is no evidence that the latter principle is assumed by either Aristotle or his opponent.

It is no accident that Aristotle raises the issue of responsibility for character in a context in which responsibility for ignorance is at issue. This is because the ignorance that in Plato's view makes wrongdoing involuntary is, in Aristotle's view, constitutive of character (*NE* III.1.1110b28–30). The principle of transitivity on which Aristotle relies in his response to the objection supplies one more argument in the battery of arguments he marshals against the asymmetry thesis. Even if bad character involves ignorance of the good, it is only ignorance for which one is not responsible that exempts one from praise and blame (III.5.1113b23–5). Since we are responsible for our characters, and hence for our ignorance of the good, then (via the principle of transitivity) our wrongdoing is still up to us.

Now that we have identified the role played by the thesis of responsibility for character in the only argument in which Aristotle invokes it, let us turn to consider his argument for the thesis. Of the person who is allegedly "of the sort not to take care," Aristotle says:

> People are themselves responsible for coming to be like this, by living without restraint. So too are they responsible for being unjust or intemperate – by doing bad things or by spending their time in drinking and the like. For the way they conduct themselves in these matters makes them be like that [sc. unjust and intemperate]. This is clear in the case of those who are in training for any kind of contest of action, for they continually practice the activity. So to be ignorant that it is from one's activities in these matters that one's dispositions develop is the mark of someone without perception . . . If someone does knowingly what will make him unjust, then he is unjust voluntarily. (*NE* III.5.1114a4–13)

Aristotle's argument here, which has no parallel in either the *EE* or the *MM*, is very simple. He first appeals to the general account of character formation that he outlines in *NE* II: we become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, and so on (III.5.1114a4–6). His second point is that we know this when we are performing the character-forming actions. We know that we are doing what will make us just (or unjust), temperate or intemperate (1114a7–10). Thus, he concludes, we voluntarily become the sorts of people we are: "If someone knowingly does the sorts of things that make him unjust, then he is unjust voluntarily" (1114a12–13).

A familiar objection to this argument from modern readers is to say: but what if someone has been raised in deprived conditions, and does not know, for example, that stealing is unjust? Surely, we are not responsible for knowing what is just and unjust, since – as Aristotle himself emphasizes – this is a product of our upbringing and social context. Thus, the objection concludes, Aristotle is wrong to deduce that people are responsible for their states of character.

The objection, however, makes the mistake of supposing that Aristotle's argument depends on the assumption that we are *responsible for knowing* what sorts of actions are unjust, intemperate, and so on, at the stage of development when we engage in the character-forming activities he refers to at III.5.1114a5–14: living without restraint, spending time in drinking and the like, performing unjust actions, and so on. Aristotle, however, starts from a much weaker assumption: that we do in fact know this. We should not be surprised that he assumes this, since all along he has made it clear that he is addressing an audience who have received a good ethical education (*NE* I.4.1095b4–6), and that he is addressing the practical question of such an audience: "what must we do to become good?" (II.2.1103b27–9). The fortunate young people in that audience are, in Aristotle's view, no more responsible for having a correct general outlook on right and wrong at this stage of their moral development than the person raised in a den of thieves is responsible for having a mistaken one.

Aristotle is keenly aware, as Plato was before him, that only someone who has been raised in optimal conditions will have correct views about what is fine and shameful (*NE* II.3.1104b11–13). That is why he insists, in the closing chapter of the *NE*, that one needs to have been raised under correct laws. Laws must dictate not only the adult activities that people are to engage in, but also the earliest stages of the upbringing they are to receive (*NE* II.1.1103b1–6, X.9.1179b31–1180a6). Someone who fails to receive such a correct *paideia* (early education) has virtually no chance of becoming good (*NE* I.4.1095b8–13). Even at the stage of habituation by adult activities, Aristotle notes, it is necessary to have good teachers (II.1.1103b10–13). One can no more learn on one's own and in unfavorable circumstances to be a navigator than to become good. Thus it is a mistake to suppose that Aristotle is attempting to argue in *NE* III.5 that, no matter what the circumstances in which a person is raised, he is still responsible for becoming virtuous or vicious.

Aristotle's intended audience in the *NE* is young people who have been blessed with a correct upbringing, good laws, and competent teachers. He is telling this audience that now it is up to them to complete the process that will make them the sort of people they aspire to be. It they fail, it will be their own fault. Here we can see that the significance Aristotle attaches to his thesis of responsibility for character relates to the ultimate practical question he addresses in the *NE*. We become good, he insists, not by taking refuge in purely intellectual studies (*NE* II.4.1105b11–18), but by engaging actively in the practical world, where it is up to us to act in accordance with the standards we have learned from our upbringing.

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