

Studies in Ancient Moral and Political Philosophy

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Volume 1

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Aristotle's appraisability compatibilism and accountability incompatibilism

Javier Echeñique

Introduction

The opening lines of *EN* III explain Aristotle's reasons for pausing over the concept of voluntariness (*to hekousion*):

Since virtue is concerned with (*peri*) affections and actions, and on the voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, whereas on involuntary ones sympathy, and sometimes even pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those inquiring into the subject of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to both rewards and punishments. (*EN* 1109b30-5)

Here Aristotle offers two explanations of why an enquiry into the conditions of voluntary, ethically significant responses may be of relevance to a work devoted to Ethics. One of them makes reference to our ordinary practice of praising and blaming people for these responses, while the other makes reference to the legal practice of assigning rewards and punishments. I will argue that each of these two explanations captures a significantly different aspect of our conception of moral responsibility, and as a result, each of them imposes *different conditions* on what is to count as the appropriate target of the practices involved. In most of his discussions on voluntariness (*EE* II 6-10; *NE* III 1) Aristotle focuses primarily on the aspect relevant to praise and blame – what I shall call ‘ethical appraisability’; but he also focuses, particularly in *EN* III 5, on the aspect relevant to rewards and punishments – what I shall call ‘accountability’. I will later argue that this distinction between appraisability and accountability is crucial, because the pressure to recognise the incompatibility between *Moral Responsibility* and *Determinism* comes from accountability, not from ethical appraisability.

Voluntariness and ethical appraisals

In both the *EE* and the *EN* Aristotle is primarily interested in voluntariness because he is interested in the conditions of praise and blame, and the latter is the case because the responses with which both virtue and vice are ‘concerned’ are by definition open to praise and blame (*EE* 1223a9-17; *EN* 1109b30-5). Needless to say, it is in *this* connection between voluntariness and praise and blame that readers of Aristotle's *Ethics* have found reason to believe that he is concerned with moral responsibility.

Nevertheless, to a great number of scholars it has been tempting to jump from this reasonable belief, to the conclusion that Aristotle is primarily concerned with one particularly salient aspect of moral responsibility, namely, *moral accountability* or *answerability*. According to this view, Aristotle would be concerned with offering an account of our practice of holding people responsible for their actions, that is to say, an account of our practice of reacting favourably or unfavourably (e.g. with resentment or indignation, gratitude or admiration) towards another 'moral agent' for his having met or indeed breached certain standards regulating inter-personal relations. A decent theoretical account of this sort of practice is in turn expected to explain why an agent and their actions are the sort of agent and the sort of actions for which these moral attitudes would be *justified* or *merited*.¹

Nonetheless, that Aristotle is not primarily concerned with this aspect of moral responsibility, to me seems conspicuous. As we shall see, this has important consequences for the question regarding the compatibility or incompatibility between moral responsibility and determinism.

Firstly, Aristotle does not conceive of praise (*epainos*) and blame (*psogos*) as favourable and unfavourable 'reactive attitudes' or feelings respectively – attitudes that participants in a moral community hold towards one another on the occasion of their morally significant behaviour, and that constitute *further responses* to their merely judging or evaluating such behaviour. For Aristotle, praise and blame are just *logoi* (*Rhet.* 1367b27-8; *EE* 1219b16) or *lexeis* (*Rhet.* 1367b36-1368a9), that is, *judgements in words* of people's or actions' goodness or badness, and verbally expressing such judgements is for him the same as praising or blaming people or their actions. Nowhere in Aristotle's writings do we find a connection between praise and blame on the one hand, and typically moral reactive attitudes such as indignation, resentment, gratitude or admiration on the other.

Secondly, and closely connected to the previous point, Aristotle does not conceive of praise and blame as 'reactions' that are *deserved* by someone, or that it would be *fair* or *just* to manifest to someone, in virtue of his morally significant conduct. Aristotle never says that praise or blame is bestowed upon someone *dikaiôs* (justly), or *kat' axian* (deservedly) – but he does say this in connection with honour and chastisement, as we shall see. The reason for this is that there are faulty dispositions that do not attract people's *reproaches* (*oneidê*) because they do not *per se* manifest themselves in behaviour that harms other people (*EN* 1123a32, 1125a17-9) – that is, they do not give rise to *further* unfavourable reactions, because they do not issue in the sort of behaviour that is answerable to standards governing interpersonal relations. Now, the recognition of such dispositions implies that the question of whether or not it is *fair* or *just* to respond unfavourably to the agent so disposed cannot even be posed – and Aristotle's recognition of virtues that do not *per se* attract honour or esteem (*timê*) have parallel implications. Since such self-regarding vices and virtues are still *blameable* and *praisable* respectively, and presumably *all* vices and virtues are blameable and praisable respectively *in the same sense*, we are back to the initial point I made about Aristotelian

¹ This view is chiefly exemplified by Irwin 1980 and Meyer 2011.

praise and blame not being unfavourable and favourable responses to people's morally significant actions.

And finally, ask yourself whether Aristotle is concerned with delimiting the nature of the *morally accountable agent*, that is, the sort of agent to whom favourable or unfavourable reactions are justified – for instance, because he is capable of recognising the grounds of such responses towards his own conduct, and because he is himself capable of responding in such ways towards others. It is a standard move of the accountability interpretation to identify such an agent with the prohairetic agent, the mature agent capable of rational choice (*prohairesis*) and practical deliberation. Nonetheless, given the purely verbal, non-reactive nature of Aristotelian praise and blame, it is much more reasonable to suppose that the 'appropriate target' of praise and blame is, in Aristotle's view, the agent who can somehow absorb the message conveyed by praising and blaming *logoi*. And all that is required for absorbing this message is the sort of psychic structure Aristotle describes in *EN* I 13, that is, the possession of a conative faculty that is responsive to reason in various degrees, even if not itself intrinsically rational. If there is something remotely similar to the notion of the 'morally responsible agent' in Aristotle's *Ethics*, this is the notion of the agent exhibiting this sort of psychic structure – a structure exhibited in different degrees by children, incontinent, continent, and fully prohairetic agents alike.

It is reasonable to conclude from these considerations that, when Aristotle adduces the praiseability and blameability of our voluntary ethically significant responses as a reason to study voluntariness, he is not concerned with accountability. Rather, I should like to suggest, he is primarily concerned with the conditions under which *appraising* a suitably responsive agent in virtue- or vice-terms is warranted – as distinct from 'fair'.² From the perspective of ethical appraisability, that is, of *merely* appraising the agent in virtue- or vice-terms, the focus is upon his behaviour in so far as it is expressive of his conception of the good life (even one that is not fully endorsed) and of his ability to make such conception effective through his conduct.³

Now, returning to our initial question, one particularly salient reason why ethical appraisals are by their very nature compatible with determinism, has to do with the significance of *fairness* and *desert* to our accountability-related practices, and its insignificance to ethical appraisals.⁴ Questions relating to the fairness of our reactions to people's behaviour arise most naturally in contexts where such 'reactions' are appropriately characterised as dispositions to treat others in 'unwelcome' or 'favourable' ways, or alternatively as 'punitive' or 'rewarding' reactions. Because of this, the question of whether it is *fair* to react in these ways to an agent in response to his conduct – of whether he deserves such treatment – is an appropriate question to ask in such contexts. Nonetheless, such questions do not necessarily arise in connection with the 'appropriateness' of ethical appraisals – and this is the

² The points I have made thus far are developed in more detail in Echeñique 2012.

³ See Watson 1996.

⁴ See Slote 1990, Smilansky 1994, and Watson 1996.

reason, I submit, why Aristotle never characterises the appropriateness of ethical appraisals in terms of *fairness* or *desert*.

Now, consider Michael Slote's claim that a person who acts angrily and aggressively towards people without provocation "can be regarded as vicious (as having vicious temper or disposition) and may be avoided as such independently of any commitment to blame the person for being vicious and acting/interacting badly with others in certain ways"⁵. That is to say, this person can be *ethically appraised*. But now let us further assume that the circumstances in which our irascible fellow was raised – imagine all the ones Seneca describes in *De Ira* III together with a wretched genetic background – made it virtually impossible for him to develop a disposition to treat others differently. It now becomes clear not only that we can still appraise him in virtue- or vice-terms independently of our commitment to holding him accountable, but also that holding him accountable for treating others in such ways would be *unfair*, that he would not *deserve* an unfavourable reaction from our part, for if we had been raised in similar circumstances, we would now be acting likewise. On the other hand, these deterministic considerations about his background do not impugn the fact that we still appraise such a person as *vicious* for behaving in ways that are expressive of a vicious disposition.

This example shows that there is implicit in our common-sense conception of accountability some sort of fairness principle, such as the one suggested by Gary Watson: 'we should not be made to suffer from sanctions which we had no reasonable opportunity to avoid'.⁶ I shall assume that a parallel principle applies to the assignment of positive rewards or honours. I believe that this principle is the primary reason why the threat of determinism exerts so much pressure on the viability of our accountability-related practices. The example also shows why no such pressure is exerted by the assumption of determinism on the viability of ethical appraisals.

Compatibility conditions of ethical appraisals

The question then is whether Aristotle's conditions for voluntariness reflect these considerations regarding the compatibility between purely ethical appraisals and determinism. I think they do. In order to show this, it is very useful to bear in mind the standard strategy of a classic compatibilist such as David Hume: the relevant difference between those actions that are open to praise and blame and those that are not, does *not* lie in the fact that the first ones cannot be traced to causes beyond the agent's relevant powers – or if they can, to their non-necessitating nature, because of some genuine alternative possibilities open to the agent – whereas the second ones can. Rather, the relevant difference lies in the *type of causality* (even if such causality necessitates). For instance, whereas actions open to praise and blame are caused by the agent's desires in full knowledge of the factual circumstances, those that are not, are not so caused. As we know, for Aristotle, only

⁵ Slote 1990: 375-6.

⁶ Watson 1996.

voluntary actions are open to praise and blame (*EN* 1109b31-2; cf. 1135a20-21), and at least apparently, such actions are distinguished from involuntary ones in accordance with this basic compatibilist strategy. According to Aristotle (to quote the best known passage):

Given that the involuntary is what comes about through violence and through ignorance, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the source (*hê arche*) is in oneself, when one knows the particular circumstances in which the action takes place. (*EN* 1111a22-4)

The picture we get from this and other similar passages fits well, at least initially, with the basic compatibilist strategy: a piece of behaviour that is not open to praise and blame is simply a piece of behaviour that occurs because of *special type of causes*, for instance, because of a cause that is external to the agent (violence) or because of a cause that, despite being internal to the agent in the sense of being caused by some of his motivational states, is not appropriately caused by his true beliefs (factual ignorance). A piece of behaviour that is open to praise and blame is in turn *internally caused* by the agent's motivational states and true beliefs. Of course, these definitions must be adequately complemented by (or the central concepts more widely understood in terms of) other excuses that Aristotle discusses, such as internal compulsion (*EN* 1110a23-9; *EE* 1225a19-33), coercion (*EN* 1110a4-23; *EE* 1225a2-10), and culpable ignorance (*EN* 1113b24-6, b30-4; *EE* 1225b10-16), but whatever definitions we reach as a result, they will still fit the basic compatibilist strategy.

Nonetheless, incompatibilist interpretations have offered two lines of argument that challenge the compatibilist reading of the definition of voluntariness above. Let me put these arguments in perspective. Thus far, I have been assuming that there are two conceptually distinguishable intuitions in favour of incompatibilism. One is that moral responsibility requires that human beings should be *ultimate sources* of some of their actions in a way that is incompatible with causal determinism, or that there be something about a human being in virtue of which some of his actions have causal histories that cannot be traced back 'beyond him'. A conceptually different intuition, however, is that moral responsibility requires alternative possibilities for action, again, in a way that is incompatible with determinism.⁷ It is plausible to regard the first intuition as imposing a stronger incompatibilist requirement, some sort of break in *causation*, and to regard the second intuition as imposing a weaker requirement, some sort of break in *necessitation*. I believe both intuitions have guided, in different ways, incompatibilist interpretations of Aristotle. Let us begin with the second intuition, and then move to the first.

'What depends on us'

In various passages Aristotle associates voluntary action with an action that 'depends on us to do or not to do' (*eph' hêmin to prattein kai mê prattein*), and this

⁷ See Kane 1996 on how these are two conceptually distinguishable intuitions that can lead to different sorts of incompatibilism.

connection has been taken (by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Richard Sorabji, for example⁸) as evidence that voluntary action (i.e. blameable and praiseable action) must involve a genuine openness of alternatives, and thus a failure in necessitation. Nonetheless, the ways in which Aristotle understands this dual possibility and the ways he relates it to voluntary action, are by no means unequivocal. My argument in the final section will be that the *only* place where such a notion implies a failure in necessitation is in the second half of *EN* III 5, 1113b14 f., where Aristotle is particularly concerned with the voluntary acquisition of moral character. Voluntary acquisition of character traits, however, is irrelevant to ethical appraisability; but in these sections of III 5 Aristotle is primarily concerned with accountability and the assignment of punishments and rewards, and the voluntary acquisition of character traits is *very* relevant from this perspective, as I shall explain. Let us now examine Aristotle's use of the phrase 'what depends on us' outside *EN* 1113b14 f.

'*What depends on us*' as '*the sort of thing that can be voluntary or involuntary*'. The most conspicuous way in which the notion of 'what depends on us' is related to voluntariness, is as part of its definition. The notion can be found in the following definitions:

- (1) I call voluntary whatever, *from among the things that exist that depend on him*, someone does knowingly [...] and not under force. (*EN* 1135a24)
- (2) All those things that it depends on one not to do, and that one does without ignoring them and through one's own agency, these are voluntary by necessity. (*EE* 1225b8-9)
- (3) What it depends on one to do or not to do, if someone does it or refrains from doing it through his own agency and not through ignorance, he does it or refrains from doing it voluntarily. (*EE* 1225b8-9)

In all these definitions, we find a notion of 'what depends on us' that is used to delimit the sort of entities to which the terms 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' can apply in the first place. All these definitions state a *general condition* for voluntary action, but also for involuntary action: that the action in question be among the sort of things that it depends on human beings to bring about or not. Only *then* the definitions proceed to state two further conditions, this time specific to voluntariness, namely, that the action be carried out knowingly and through the agent himself (that is, not under force). It is thus conspicuous that this first general condition has a different status from the other two, in the sense that it can be satisfied without the other two conditions being satisfied.

So the role of the phrase 'what depends on us' in the definitions above, is merely to define the domain of things that are in principle *doable* by human beings in general, and of which it makes sense, accordingly, to predicate voluntariness or involuntariness: Aristotle, for instance, often contrasts this class of things with natural processes such as growing or dying (*EN* 1135a34-b3) which cannot even be said to be involuntary (they are not that sort of thing). When Aristotle says in the closely related context of *EE* II 6 that "of all the things that it depends on the hu-

⁸ See Sorabji 1980: 233-8, and Aphrodisias' *De Fato* XIV (although his interpretation applies only to a subset of voluntary actions).

man being to do or not to do, the human being is himself the *cause* (*aitios*), and what he is the cause of depends on him" (1223a7-9), I take this to be a quite general claim about the domain of events that depend on *the human being* (*ho anthrōpos*, *EE* 12223a4; cf. 1226a27): such domain is coextensive with the domain of events of which the human being, *in general*, is causally responsible. Therefore, for all Aristotle has said thus far, *x* can be said to depend on us, human beings, and in *this* sense we, human beings, can be said to be *the cause* of *x*, and *x* still be *involuntary*.⁹ To say that *x* depends on us in this sense, is just to say that *x* is the sort of thing that can be voluntary and involuntary, something doable by human beings, the sort of thing that we human beings bring about.

'*What depends on us*' as '*what our nature can bear*'. There is however a narrower use of the expression 'what depends on us', which is to be found in *EE* II 8:

- (4) For what depends on oneself – the whole question depends on this – is that which one's own nature is capable of bearing; and what it is not capable of bearing and what is not within the nature of his desire or reasoning, does not depend on himself. (*EE* 1225a25-7)

Admittedly, this use of 'what depends on us' is somehow different from the previous one. To begin with, it directly applies to passions (*pathê*), such as pain, fear, or love (*EE* 1225a19-32); it applies to actions only indirectly. Aristotle thinks that actions that do not (indirectly) depend on us in this narrower sense, are involuntary (they call for sympathy, *EE* 1225a22-3), but not all actions that *do* depend on us in this sense are *voluntary*: the cognitive requirement that the action be appropriately caused by one's true beliefs may still fail.

It is worth noticing that, even granting the cognitive condition *is* met, this narrow sense of 'what depends on us' is fully compatible with causal necessitation. A passion or desire that an agent's nature cannot bear – a consideration that calls for sympathy – is otherwise described by Aristotle as a *natural* passion or desire, because it is *common to all human beings* or part of our basic human nature (*EN* 1149b3-6). Surely Aristotle's point is that actions that do not depend on one in this narrow sense are motivated by passions that are common to our basic nature, and that because of this *any* good human being would recognise that, had he been motivated by such a passion, he would have acted in the same way: this is why they call for sympathy. As a result, there may be passions, such as phobias, that are in fact psychologically irresistible for an individual agent and that *causally necessitate* his behaviour, that due to their eccentricity can still be said to depend on him – they are not part of our basic human nature.

'*What depends on us*' as '*that the source of which is in us*'. The previous two uses of 'what depends on us' are the ones we find in the *Ethica Eudemia*, and they are compatible with determinism. In the *Ethica Nicomachea* III 1, we find what

⁹ Admittedly, in *EE* 1223a13-18 Aristotle says that "of all those things that are voluntary and according to the choice of each particular person (*hekastou*), he is the cause, but of the involuntary he is not the cause" (1223a16-18). That is, *voluntary actions* are coextensive with actions of which each particular person is the cause. I take this claim to be precisely about *each particular person* on a given occasion, not about the human being in general. For an interpretation along these lines, see Loening 1967: Ch. 18; and Zanuzzi 2007.

seems to be another use of 'what depends on us'. Here Aristotle argues that 'mixed' actions, such as the one of the captain of the ship who jettisons the cargo in a storm in order to save the crew and the ship, are in a sense voluntary:

(5) When the source (*hê archê*) of the movement of the instrumental parts of the body is in the agent (*en autô[i]*), it depends on him to act or not. (*EN* 1110a15-16)

The argument seems to be this:

- (i) If the source of *x* is in *S* himself, it depends on *S* to do or not to do *x*
- (ii) (In the cases under discussion) the source of *S*'s moving the instrumental parts of his body is in *S* himself (*en autô[i]*)
- (iii) (In the cases under discussion) it depends on *S* to move or not to move the instrumental parts of his body.

It is plain that with this argument Aristotle intended to support a much stronger conclusion than (iii), namely, that (iii*) it depends on *S* to jettison the cargo or not to jettison the cargo – and not only to set in motion the instrumental parts of his own body by means of which he jettisoned the cargo. That (iii) does not entail this stronger conclusion can be seen from the fact that I can jettison the cargo in the mistaken belief that I am getting rid of rubbish, in which case, although I am in control of my bodily motions, I am not jettisoning the cargo voluntarily.

Therefore, this third 'use' of the phrase 'it depends on us' clearly indicates that a necessary and sufficient condition for applying it to a movement *M*, is that *M* not be forced – as *EN* V 8 says, if *A* hits *C* using *B*'s hand, *B* does not hit *C* voluntarily, "because it does not depend on him" (1135b27-8). Accordingly, it may well depend on *S* to do *M* or not to do *M*, but still be the case that *M* is involuntary under some description, because the cognitive requirement fails to apply under that description.

The symmetrical use of 'what depends on us'. In *EN* III 5 Aristotle is concerned with showing that virtue and vice are voluntary and depend on us. Nevertheless, it turns out that this claim is ambiguous between (i) 'the activity of a virtuous or vicious disposition is voluntary and depends on us', and (ii) 'virtuous/vicious dispositions are voluntary and depend on us'. The first part of the chapter (1113b3-14) deals with (i), whereas the rest of the chapter (1113b14-1115a3) deals with (ii).

Now, after having stipulated that 'virtue' in the activity sense (cf. *EN* 1113b13) depends on us (1113b6), Aristotle devises a brilliant argument to show that, if virtue in the activity sense depends on us, then also vice (in the same sense) depends on us. The following passage is numbered for ease of reference:

(6) (i) For when acting depends on us, not acting also depends on us too, and when saying No does so, saying Yes does too; so that (ii) if acting, when it is a fine thing to act, depends on us, not acting also depends on us when it is shameful not to act, and if not acting when it is a fine thing not to act, depends on us, acting when it is a shameful thing to act also depends on us. But (iii) if it depends on us to do fine things and shameful things, and similarly not to do them too, and this, it is agreed, is what it is to be, respectively, a good person and a bad one, then being decent people, and being worthless ones, will depend on us. (*EN* 1113b7-14; Rowe's translation slightly modified)

As shown by the corresponding passage of the *Magna Moralia* (1187a5-8), Aristotle is here arguing against the Socratic Asymmetry Thesis (SAT), according to which 'no one does wrong voluntarily'.¹⁰ Does this famous passage support an incompatibilist interpretation?

First, let us examine in detail Aristotle's argument against SAT. Take 'Φ' to stand for a positive morally significant action (e.g. 'doing something just') and 'Ψ' for a positive morally significant action that is contrary to Φ (e.g. 'doing something unjust'). Aristotle begins with the following premise in (i):

P1. It depends on *S* to Φ ↔ It depends on *S* not to Φ

P1 corresponds to the standard formulation of the phrase 'what depends on us'. Of course, the problem is whether P1 entails: (P1a) given *S*'s character, desire or choice, and all other causal antecedents right before doing Φ, *S* could have not done Φ; or (P1b) if at least one of these causal antecedents (e.g. *S*'s desire of choice) had been different (e.g. a desire not to do Φ), *S* would not have done Φ. Needless to say, (P1a) is the incompatibilist reading, and (P1b) the compatibilist.

Notice first that P1 is the first premise of an argument to prove that SAT is false. In order to achieve *this*, however, the question of whether P1 means (P1a) or (P1b) is clearly irrelevant. Aristotle second premise in (ii) is this: suppose we are in a situation with no *tertium quid*, so to say, where not doing a fine action under such and such circumstances entails doing a bad action – for instance, *not doing* something just by not returning a deposit when it is due and nothing prevents me from returning it, entails *doing* something unjust. In such a situation, the following premise is evidently true:

P2. It depends on *S* not to Φ → It depends on *S* to Ψ

From P1 and P2, it follows that

C. It depends on *S* to Φ → It depends on *S* to Ψ

In other words, SAT is false (under the 'activity' interpretation). The important point is that Aristotle can derive C from P2 and either of the two interpretations of P1. Therefore, passage (6) cannot be used as independent evidence to support an incompatibilist interpretation – neither, for that matter, a compatibilist one.

Independent evidence, however, is provided by the other uses of 'what depends on us' discussed thus far: (1) - (5). In (1), (2) and (3) Aristotle's point is that the phrase 'what depends on us' defines the class of events that *the human being* in general brings about or is causally responsible of. For these purposes, it is enough for Aristotle to assume that a necessary and sufficient condition for the application of the phrase to a motion *M*, is that *M* be *the sort of thing that is caused by the human being*, even if *M* turns out to be involuntary. In (5), the use of the phrase is restricted to motions that, as a matter of fact, are caused by an element within the motivational set of the agent (actual actions). In (4) Aristotle has in mind motions that, as a matter of fact, are caused by an element within the agent's motivational set, but restricts the application of the phrase even further: the element in question must not be 'forced upon us by our basic nature'. What all these uses of the phrase

¹⁰ See Plato's *Protagoras* 345d-e; *Timaeus* 87b; *Laws* 860d. An excellent discussion of Aristotle's response to the Asymmetry Thesis is Meyer 2011: 131-2.

have in common is that an actual motion *M* that 'depends on us' in any of these uses may still be involuntary – either because the phrase simply defines the abstract class of things doable in principle, or because the cognitive requirement is not met, as in (5), or because *M* is caused by an overwhelming impulse, as in (4). Notice, however, that the incompatibilist interpretation requires that the phrase stand for an exclusive property of *voluntary* actions, for only *these* are praisable or blameable. Therefore, the phrase fails to support an incompatibilist interpretation.

Needless to say, Aristotle's use of the phrase also fails to support a compatibilist interpretation, for the very same reasons. But this is not a problem for *my* interpretation. As far as I can see, determinism is not a *challenge* from the perspective of ethical appraisability (it is rather indifferent from this perspective), and Aristotle is, in the contexts discussed in this section (indeed, in most contexts outside *EN* III 5, 1113b14 ff.) concerned with ethical appraisability.

'Fresh starts'

Other scholars such as David Furley and Carlo Natali have been tempted to see in Aristotle's theory of voluntariness, not (or not only) a failure in causal necessitation, but a break in causality – and some philosophers such as R. M. Chisholm, have in fact drawn from this interpretation their inspiration for their liberatian theories.¹¹ Furley and Natali, however, are primarily interested in Aristotle's position concerning the psychological relationship between *human* or *animal action* and causal determinism – indeed, they both draw their conclusions from some key passages in *De Anima*, not the *Ethics*. In a nutshell, their view is that actions have a fresh start, a first source (*archê*), in the human or animal soul because the intellect (Natali) or imagination (Furley) introduces a new element of *interpretation* of the external object of desire. As Furley puts it, only animals are self-movers because "only animals require external things perceived (or otherwise apprehended) as having significance *for them*"¹², and the external cause of their motions "is a cause of motion only because it is 'seen' as such by the faculty of the soul".¹³ Natali's view is similar: "chez Aristote, la chaîne nécessaire des événements physiques s'interrompt à cause de l'interprétation donnée par l'intellect, laquelle détermine l'orientation du désir"¹⁴.

Now, this view may well be correct as an interpretation of what Aristotle says in *De Anima* (433a14-b30), but the question I am interested in at present is not whether Aristotle had the resources for regarding human beings, or animals more generally, as self-movers who can initiate a causal chain anew. My question is whether he thought this was a *requirement for moral responsibility*. Moreover, one cannot argue, as Furley seems to do,¹⁵ that when Aristotle defines the voluntary as

¹¹ Chisholm 1967.

¹² Furley 1978: 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Natali 2007: 216.

¹⁵ Furley 1978: 59.

"that of which the source (*hê archê*) is in oneself, when one knows the particular circumstances in which the action takes place" (*EN* 1111a23-4), 'source' (*archê*) means something like 'a first principle of motion' or 'the agent as an unmoved mover'. To begin with, the term '*archê*' is replaced by the phrase '*di hauton*' in the Eudemian definitions of voluntariness (see (2) and (3) *supra*), and the latter phrase does not mean 'first principle' or 'first source' of the action: it rather means that the action is carried out 'through the agent himself',¹⁶ which is to say that it is not the product of force (*bia*) – see (1) *supra*. In as far as force is a (broadly external) cause, its mere absence is fully compatible with the assumption that the agent internal sources of action are in turn determined by other internal factors.

There is, nonetheless, a different shape that the interpretation based on fresh starts can take, which is suggested in some comments made by Furley and Sorabji, and presupposed by a great number of scholars. Assume the following three assertions: (i) people with settled characters are *praised* or *blamed* for their ethically significant actions *E*; (ii) one cannot be praised or blamed for doing something *E* if one cannot (in a relevant sense) do otherwise; (iii) a person with settled character cannot do otherwise than *E* while being in possession of such a character. So it seems that the only way to assert that a person with settled character can *now* be praised or blamed for doing something *E* is to show that (iv) he was able to do otherwise than *E* at some point previous to acquiring that character, in such a way that the assumption in (ii) cannot *now* be applied. According to this interpretation, Aristotle's purpose in *EN* III 5, 1113b14 f. is to argue for (iv). Before turning to the relevant sections of *EN* III 5, let us first scrutinise the argument.

Premise (ii) is extremely popular among commentators, because of the temptation to focus exclusively on *accountability*. So for instance, Richard Sorabji asks, assuming determinism to be the case, "could we still be *responsible*, that is, *deserving of praise and blame*? I believe we could not, if it had *all along* been necessary that we should act as we did."¹⁷ It is then argued that, according to Aristotle, it was not all along necessary, because there was a time where we had it in our power to become someone else. More recently, Michael Pakaluk says that unless we assume responsibility for character, "we cannot *hold a coward responsible* for his cowardly action"¹⁸. When Sorabji mentions the notion of *desert*, it is clear that he has in mind accountability and the condition of alternative possibilities naturally associated with it. Accountability is also, I think, what Pakaluk has in mind in the phrase 'holding a coward responsible'. Aristotle, however, is not concerned with accountability when he manifests a concern with the conditions of praise and blame; he is concerned with ethical appraisability, as I have argued. Furthermore, given that, from the point of view of ethical appraisability, *possession* of a character trait is not a necessary condition – *contra* (i) – *a fortiori* it cannot be a condition for ethical appraisability that its target be someone who voluntarily acquired his character trait.

¹⁶ For similar comments, see also Sorabji 1980: 228.

¹⁷ Sorabji 1980: 251. Italics are mine.

¹⁸ Pakaluk 2005: 122 (italics are mine). See also Destrie 2011: 297.

As I will argue in what follows, *EN* III 5, 1113b14 f. is not concerned with ethical appraisability, as he is in the rest of his discussions on voluntariness; it is rather with accountability, and Aristotle does seem to believe that the voluntary and non-deterministic acquisition of character traits is a requirement for this practice.

EN III 5 and accountability

As mentioned before, in the second part of *EN* III 5, 1113b14 f. Aristotle is concerned with showing that virtuous or vicious *dispositions* are voluntary and depend on us. Now, a careful reading of the chapter reveals that the words 'praise' (*epainos*) and 'blame' (*psogos*) and the corresponding verbs, that is, the canonical terms of ethical appraisability, do not appear even *once*. What we find instead is a relatively large argument (1113b21-1114a3) based on the practices of 'legislators' – *tôn nomothetôn*, the same term that appears in the nominative in the opening paragraph of *EN* III, 1109b30-5. Such practices involve chastising (*kolazô*) and punishing (*timôreô*) – the verbal forms of the terms used in *EN* 1109b30-5 – that is, the sort of retributive practices that we have characterised as belonging to accountability. Furthermore, another rather large argument (1114a22-31) is based on the vices of the body, which are said to be 'censured' and 'reproached' when they are voluntary – the verbs here are *epitimaô* and *oneidizô*. Once more, the terms 'praise' (*epainos*) and 'blame' (*psogos*) and their corresponding verbs (*epainô* and *psogô*), the canonical terms for ethical appraisability, have been replaced by terms standing for further sanctioning and rewarding practices typical of accountability, and in a context where, had Aristotle been concerned with ethical appraisability, it would have been fully appropriate to use the canonical terms.

Why then is Aristotle particularly concerned with showing so emphatically and in so much detail as he does in *EN* 1113b14 f., that ethical dispositions are voluntarily acquired? As we have seen, this is not because he believes the voluntariness of ethical dispositions is a requirement for ethical appraisability (i.e. *epainos* and *psogos*). The most plausible answer, I submit, is that the voluntariness of ethical dispositions is a requirement from the point of view of accountability-related practices, such as institutional punishments or rewards, or public censure and the bestowal of honours. The argument for this can be formulated in the following four steps (which should by now be familiar).

(i) Only with regard to *these* accountability-related practices, it makes sense to demand that they should be 'deserved' or 'justified'. Aristotle recognises this, for while he never uses the language of desert or fairness in connection with praise and blame, he does use it in connection with punishment. For example, he recognises in the *Politics* that punishments and chastisements are the sort of things that can be just (cf. *hai dikaiâi timôriai kai kolaseis*, 1332a13-14), and in the *Rhetorics* he says that the person who committed a wrong (by definition, a voluntarily action) "is justly punished (*dikaïos kolasthênai*)" (1374b3). Moreover, honour (*timê*) is an external good (*EN* IV 3), and external goods are distributed according to desert (*EN* 1123b17; *Rhet.* 1387a8-16), so it would make perfect sense for Aristotle to use

the language of desert in relation to honour – notice, by the way, that praise (*epainos*) is not an external good.

To be sure, in *EN* III 5 Aristotle emphasises the *prospective* function of assigning punishments and rewards. Lawgivers, he says, impose penalties on wrongdoers and honour those who perform fine actions, "in order to encourage the latter and put a stop to the former. By contrast no one encourages us to do the things that neither depend on us nor are voluntary, on the assumption that nothing is gained by getting someone *persuaded* not to become hot, or feel pain, or hunger, or anything of this sort; we shall be affected all the same" (1113b25-30; Rowe's translation). However, Aristotle is not saying that *the only thing that justifies* the assignment of punishments and rewards is their efficiency in modifying future behaviour. Such efficiency is perfectly compatible, in principle, while with the retrospective thought that it would be unfair to punish or reward someone who has had no reasonable chance in the past to avoid being the sort of person he is now at present. In fact, if it were not so compatible, I submit, it would be hard to account for Aristotle's insistence in *EN* III 5 on the idea that we usually do have had such a chance. What makes it unfair to punish or reward someone who has had no reasonable chance in the past to avoid being the sort of person he is now, is that punishments and rewards are *ways of assigning goods and evils*, quite independently of the particular function given by such assignment by the lawgiver.

(ii) Now, it is natural to ask with regard to these accountability-related practices – as it is not with regard to praise (*epainos*) and blame (*psogos*): 'When does an agent deserve to be treated in these ways?' And here is where alternative possibilities come in: as we have seen, part of the answer to the aforementioned question involves an alternative possibilities condition. If we restrict ourselves to punishment, censure, and sanctioning responses in general – which are the main focus of Aristotle in *EN* III 5 – the underlying assumption is that "we should not be made to suffer from sanctions which we had no reasonable opportunity to avoid", as Gary Watson says.

(iii) Aristotle, however, believes that a person with a settled character 'cannot act otherwise', because he is psychologically determined to respond to the ethically salient features of his practical situation in ways that are expressive of his settled character, whether good or bad. According to Aristotle, once the unjust and self-indulgent person have become like that, "it is no longer possible for them not to be (*ouketi esti mê einai*)" (1114a21-2). As many scholars have noted, this statement does not imply that moral reform is absolutely closed to the fully vicious agent. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it does imply that the self-indulgent person, *while* being self-indulgent and acting self-indulgently, has no 'reasonable opportunity' to avoid acting in this way, and this is all Aristotle needs. Of course, alternative possibilities may still exist for a perfectly self-indulgent person: for instance, it may well be open for him to choose the particular ways of carrying out his conception of the good life as the systematic pursuit of pleasure. Still, these particular possibilities do not involve 'a reasonable opportunity to avoid being made to suffer from sanctions'.

(iv) Accordingly, alternative possibilities to act in one *ethically significant* way or another, e.g. justly *or* unjustly, courageously *or* cowardly, self-indulgently *or* moderately, are open to the reason-responsive agent only at a time where he had not yet acquired a settled disposition to act in one of these ways rather than the other.

Now, the first point worthy of notice is that Aristotle's use of the notion of 'what depends on us' (*to eph' hēmin*) in this context, is not open to the objection of being irrelevant to the question regarding the compatibility between determinism and *moral responsibility* (i.e. accountability), on the ground that it serves to define actions that may be voluntary as well as *involuntary* – for instance, because the cognitive requirement is not met. Aristotle's use of this notion, in this context, now *includes* a cognitive requirement: "if someone does, not in ignorance (*mê agnoôn*) the things that will result in his being unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily" (1114a12-13; Rowe's translation) – that is, at some point he had *the option not to become like that, or it was possible for him not to become like that* (1114a20-2; cf. 1115a2). Aristotle believes that failing to know that a settled moral disposition comes about as a result of systematically acting in ways characteristic of that disposition, is the mark of a thoroughly senseless person (1114a10). This seems to be an inadequate requirement to impose on pupils in the process of moral development, but perhaps Aristotle is thinking primarily of moral educators (parents, teachers, etc.): in the ideal context where perceptive moral educators possess this knowledge, this knowledge will inevitably be transmitted onto their pupils.

Accordingly, we have now in our hands a notion of 'what depends on us' that can in principle be given the relevant compatibilist or incompatibilist interpretation, because it applies only to voluntary actions – in particular, to that subset of them upon which the process of moral habituation ultimately depends.

Now, in 1114a14-15 Aristotle says that someone "will not stop being unjust, and be just, merely if he wishes it". This strongly suggests a compatibilist reading of 'it is not possible for them not to be': Taking S's character as something fixed, it is not the case that if S had wished to do something other than Φ , S would not have done Φ . This in turn suggests that all that is required for Φ to depend on him is that, if he had wished not to have done Φ , he would not have done Φ (e.g. because no one or nothing would have forced him to do Φ anyway). We may then proceed to interpret the rest of Aristotle's relevant statements in this conditional way: for instance, when Aristotle says about the drunkard that "it depended on him not to get drunk, which was the cause of his ignorance" (1113b32-3), we may think that he merely means that if he had wished it not to get drunk, he would not have gotten drunk (e.g. nothing would have forced him to get drunk anyway).

Nonetheless, that this conditional (compatibilist) interpretation would not do, is shown by Aristotle's discussion of the view that virtue and vice are ultimately determined by natural endowment (1114a31 f.). What if it was *not possible* for the agent *to have wanted* not to get drunk in the first place? What if it *never* depended upon the now unjust agent to have wanted not to act unjustly? This would be the case, for example, if "one's aiming at the end is not self-chosen (*ouk authairetos*),

but one must be born having a sort of natural sight by means of which one judges well and chooses what is truly good" (1114b5-8). If we were biologically or genetically determined to have the right or wrong conception of the good, *at no point* in the development of an agent's moral (and, on this view, also natural) disposition was it the case that *he could have wanted* to do something other than to act in ways characteristic of that disposition.

Now, the conditional, compatibilist interpretation blatantly ignores this problem, but Aristotle does not. Aristotle's first reply (1114b16-21) is clearly addressed to the previous, action-version of SAT. Whether the way the end appears to both the good and the bad person is naturally determined or whether some of that appearance depends on them, it is still the case that "the good person does the rest voluntarily", and in this 'active' sense of 'excellence', excellence (i.e. excellent action) is voluntary. Since it is assumed that in either of these alternatives the conditions of good and bad actions are exactly the same, badness (bad actions) "will be no less voluntary, for 'through him' (*to di' auton*) applies to the bad person too, *in respect of his actions* even if not of his end" (b20-1; Rowe's translation).

But clearly, Aristotle is not satisfied with this answer. This is not because he believes it is false. On the contrary, my argument in the previous sections shows why, according to him, actions can be *ethically appraised* whether or not the agent is genetically determined to have the particular conception of the good that so drastically restricts his ethically significant conduct. Most scholars fail to observe, however, that the accountability-related practices are different in this regard, and that Aristotle is also concerned with them within this very same chapter. The conditions for assigning positive sanctions and rewards (whether institutional or not) are much more stringent: they require us to be causes, or at least partly causes, of our dispositions and thus, of our conception of the good:

If then, as it is said, the excellences are voluntary (for we ourselves are partly causes, in a way, of our dispositions, and it is by virtue of being people of a certain sort that we suppose the end to be of a certain sort), bad states too will be voluntary; for they come about in a similar way. (*EN* 1114b21-5; Rowe's translation)

The implications of Aristotle's claim are quite evident: *before* we have become people of a certain sort, we do not suppose the end to be of a certain sort. The answer might seem somewhat disappointing: Aristotle is just reiterating what he has already said (against SAT). But the point is that he does not merely believe that we mechanically acquire a settled moral disposition by repeatedly acting in ways characteristic of that disposition; he also believes that our very conception of the good, at some point during this process of moral development, is 'self-chosen' (*authairetos*). True, Aristotle does not fill in this part of the story. Perhaps what he needed, as Michael Frede points out, is a proper notion of a *will* as a third element *beyond*, and not conditioned by, our rational aiming at the end and our irrational desires.¹⁹

But the point I wish to make here is that we cannot have recourse to the compatibilist, conditional strategy at this juncture of his argument. There seems to be,

¹⁹ See Frede 2011: Chapter 2.

for Aristotle, *no further causal condition* beyond this aiming at the end such that, if it had been different, the agent would have acted otherwise in an ethically significant way. Ethically significant actions are genuinely open to the agent only at that particular time at which there is *no further causal background* that determines his engaging in these self-forming actions. Nevertheless, since we have been offered no account, neither psychological nor metaphysical, of how this is *possible*, Aristotle is at most a proto-incompatibilist and proto-libertarian. To this I should also add: a proto-incompatibilist and proto-libertarian with regard to our accountability-related practices.

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I shall do what I did: Stoic views on action

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1. A Stoic example

The Cautious Umbrella Carrier is a little obsessed when it comes to her appearance and health.¹ She is worried about arriving at work with her hair soaked from rain, worried about catching a cold, and so on. At the same time, she is prone to lose umbrellas. On a given morning, she glances out of the window, having already checked a couple of weather forecasts. The chance of precipitation is 30% according to one and 20% according to another. A website that says "30% chance of precipitation" displays a little umbrella symbol. The sky is greyish. While she is getting ready to leave for work, she ponders whether she should take her umbrella. Among other things, she has perceptual impressions of the weather outside. She recalls how upset she gets when she loses an umbrella. The little umbrella symbol from the website lingers in her mind. This annoys her, because she is aware of the disproportionate pull it exerts on her. And she expects that, given how overly cautious she is, she shall end up taking her umbrella anyway, even if she thinks that it is rather unlikely that she will get caught in the rain.

Add to this that her overall state of mind is not simply one of being a cautious umbrella carrier. She has attitudes and affective reactions to all kinds of matters, holds various things to be true and false, perceives the world around her, has studied certain subjects, and so on. As long as she does not have a perfect state of mind, that is, as long as she is not someone who possesses systematic knowledge and the attitudes corresponding to that knowledge, the Stoics call her a 'fool'. Though almost everyone is going to be placed in this category, everyone's mind is in a particular condition, unique to herself. Accordingly, one might think that if one person is in a given situation – with given perceptions, given input by others, etc. – she will inevitably do just one particular thing. In Stoic terms, assent (the central mental act in agency) is caused by the present mental state of an agent as acted upon by her occurrent thoughts.

Accordingly, the thought *I shall do what I shall do* may cross the mind of the Cautious Umbrella Carrier. Also, being a somewhat reflective person, she is aware of her patterns of action. At times she engages in empirical predictions of her own behavior: she's been through this before. And thus, she thinks *I shall do what I did*, recalling the numerous days when she carried an umbrella without really needing it. The moment when she is opening the apartment door, she shall grab the um-

¹ I am grateful to Jens Haas for discussion of my example.