

Chapter 8

Aristotle on Deliberation and Contingency



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Abstract The author discusses Aristotle's notion of deliberation and shows that it differs considerably from the model of deliberation as is common in contemporary discussions of free will and moral responsibility. As opposed to the contemporary model, Aristotle's account does not require that the deliberator has any belief (or lack thereof) concerning the availability of possible courses of action. However, the action that is chosen by deliberation, before it is performed, is still contingent—i.e. such that it can both be and not be done—and up to us. Moreover, the action's being up to us can be seen as grounded in our having rational capacities that are necessarily two-sided. This might suggest that the agent can do otherwise than she has decided by deliberation. The author argues that this is not the case: after deliberation, or after forming the relevant desire, the agent can actualize only one arm of her two-sided capacity, and hence, she cannot act differently than as decided by deliberation. If it makes sense to say that she can act differently, it is only because there may occur, in the interval between deliberation and action, some other desire which takes over a role of the decisive factor.

Keywords Aristotle · Compatibilism · Contingency · Deliberation · Incompatibilism · Up-to-usness

8.1 Deliberation as Inquiry

According to Aristotle, deliberation (*bouleusis*, *boulē*) is a kind of inquiry.¹ It consists in working back from some posited end (*telos*), which is its starting point, through various things that lead to the end (*ta pros to telos*), to the action that the agent can perform to attain the end. Aristotle strongly stresses the similarity between deliberation as a kind of practical reasoning and theoretical inquiry. Thus, he

¹ See *EE* 2.10.1227a12; *Nicomachean Ethics* [EN] 3.3.1112b17; 1112b20–24; 6.9.1142a31–32; 1142b3; 1142b17; *De memoria et reminiscencia* 2.453a15.

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compares the deliberator's procedure to the method of analysis used by geometers, who assume the object they are trying to produce and then reason backwards to see how it might have been produced, until they come to something that they actually can produce.² Besides, he compares the role of the end as the starting point in deliberation to the role of hypotheses in theoretical inquiries (*Eudemian Ethics* [EE] 2.10.1227a9–10). Finally, the terms he uses in describing deliberation as a kind of inquiry—*zētesis*, *skepsis*, *sullogismos*—standardly refer to a form of theoretical reasoning. This does not mean, however, that he wants to assimilate deliberation into a kind of theoretical inquiry. Theoretical inquiry is concerned with things that cannot be otherwise than they are, and its goal is knowledge. Deliberation, on the other hand, is about things that are contingent and up to us, and it leads to action. It culminates in *prohairesis*, deliberative desire (or, more precisely, a combination of desire and belief, see EE 2.10.1227a3–5), and in acting according to it.

The Aristotelian account of deliberation as a kind of backward inquiry differs considerably from the way in which deliberation is understood in later philosophy, especially in contemporary discussions of deliberation within the disputes about free will and moral responsibility. On both Aristotelian and contemporary account, deliberation is seen as a thought process through which a person hopes to resolve her uncertainty about what to do. However, the nature of uncertainty and the procedure for resolving it are understood differently. In contemporary model, the agent is uncertain as to what to do because she has several courses of action available to her, and deliberation is seen as the process of comparing or weighing these courses of action, or reasons for them, with a view to coming to a decision about what to do. In other words, deliberation is seen as a process of choosing, and it results in decision and intention to act on the chosen option. As opposed to this, on Aristotle's view, a person does not begin to deliberate because he is uncertain about which among several courses of action he should pursue, or which among several reasons for acting prevails. Rather, he engages in deliberation because he is uncertain about how to attain the end. Correspondingly, the question what to do also has a different meaning for the Aristotelian deliberator. In Aristotle's account, the object of the deliberator's inquiry is what can be done, that is, he asks what, among the things that lead to the end, is such that he can actually do it.³ Thus, in a sense, the object of his search is a particular course of action. His problem is not that he has as it were an abundance of actions that he can perform, among which he must choose one. Rather, his problem is that he has the end but does not have the appropriate action that leads to the end, and this is the source of his uncertainty.⁴

² See EN 3.3.1112b20–24 and Menn 2002, esp. p. 208.

³ "What the deliberator deliberates about, once he has considered the matter starting from the end, is how to bring what conduces to it into his own hands, or what he himself can do to realize it" (EE 2.10.1227a15–18; all translations from EE are by Inwood and Woolf 2013).

⁴ See, for instance, EN 3.3.1112b9, where Aristotle says that we deliberate in situations of unclarity and indefiniteness.

The model of deliberation as choosing is laden with a metaphysical difficulty. It presumes that the necessary condition for deliberation is the agent's belief that she is able to take every course of action she is considering. That is to say, it presumes that if the agent deliberates about whether to do A or B, then she believes that she is able to do A and also that she is able to do B. She believes, in other words, in openness of more than one option. It is not clear, however, how to understand this openness.⁵

According to one view, the agent's options are open in a strict sense, that is, they are metaphysically real options. On this understanding, if the agent deliberates about whether to do A or B, then she believes that there are no preceding conditions that render impossible either A or B. (Or, alternatively, that there are no preceding conditions that render inevitable either A or B.) Hence, deliberation is incompatible with belief in the truth of determinism, according to which only one option is really open and thus inevitable. A clear illustration of such a view is found in the example by Peter van Inwagen:

... all philosophers who have thought about deliberation agree on one point: one cannot deliberate about whether to perform a certain act unless one believes it is possible for one to perform it. (Anyone who doubts that this is indeed the case may find it instructive to imagine that he is in a room with two doors and that he believes one of the doors to be unlocked and the other to be locked and impassable, though he has no idea which is which; let him then attempt to imagine himself deliberating about which door to leave by.) (van Inwagen 1983, p. 154)

According to van Inwagen, the person in the example cannot deliberate because one of the two options is literally closed. Those who believe in the truth of determinism must believe that every deliberative situation is like this one. Hence, those who believe in the truth of determinism, according to van Inwagen, cannot deliberate. If they claim that they deliberate, they thereby admit that they hold inconsistent beliefs.

This is not the only way to understand deliberative openness. Alternatively, one might say that if the agent deliberates about whether to do A or B, then she believes that, *as far as she knows*, she can do A and she can do B, where "can" is taken as epistemic: consistent with what she knows (or believes), she can do both A and B, even if determinism is true and one option is inevitable, simply because she doesn't know which one is inevitable. On this understanding, deliberation is compatible with belief in the truth of determinism. Yet, as has been shown in recent years, it is not easy to give a precise formulation of epistemic understanding of openness.⁶

⁵On what follows, see Pereboom 2014, pp. 105–115; Nelkin 2011, ch. 6.

⁶See on this Pereboom 2014, pp. 110–115; Nelkin 2011, pp. 126–132.

8.2 Presumption of Openness

Now, to return to Aristotle, his model of deliberation is not burdened with the problem of the precise understanding of openness, since his model does not require it as a necessary condition for deliberation.⁷ The Aristotelian deliberator does not have to believe that he has available more than one course of action that will lead to the attainment of the end. It is just as in theoretical inquiries: before inquiry, I do not have to believe that there is more than one method of solving the problem. I can believe this, of course; but I can also believe that there is only one method available, and then search for this method and investigate how it leads to the solution. It is not necessary that I have any belief about the number of possible methods. I even do not have to believe that the problem can be solved. I can engage in inquiry to see whether it can be solved, and if I conclude that it cannot, I learn something and abandon further inquiry. What I have done up to this point can also be called inquiry. Equally, in Aristotelian deliberation, the agent need not have any belief either about the number of options available or about whether the deliberation will turn out successful. Aristotle makes it clear that deliberation can include considering more than one option, but that it can also consist of considering just one option:

And if it appears that [the end] can come about in several ways, they consider by which it will be best and most easily achieved, and if it can be achieved by only one, how it will come about by means of that and by what means that in turn will come about, until they reach the first cause, which is the last thing to be discovered. (*EN* 3.3.1112b16–20; all translations from *EN* are by Taylor 2006)

Depending on the specification of the end and relevant circumstances, the agent may begin to deliberate by holding some belief about the number of options available, but this belief is not the necessary condition for deliberation. As in the case of theoretical inquiry, the deliberator need not even believe that the end is attainable and that deliberation can be successfully completed: “if they come on something which is impossible, they give up; for instance, if one needs money, but none is to be had” (1112b24–26). As in the case of theoretical inquiry, it makes perfect sense to say that what they have done up to the point of abandonment can be called deliberation: the aborted deliberation is still deliberation (see also Nielsen 2011, p. 409).

Despite these important differences between the Aristotelian and the contemporary account, it seems that the Aristotelian agent cannot deliberate in van Inwagen’s two doors case, albeit for a different reason than van Inwagen’s. According to van Inwagen, the agent in the example cannot deliberate about which door to leave by: since she knows that one of the doors is locked, she lacks the belief that she is able to leave by the door on the left and that she is able to leave by the door on the right. Admittedly, she can deliberate about which door to decide to try to open or about which door handle to decide to jiggle, since she does believe that she is able to try

⁷For a thorough account, to which this paper is indebted, see Nielsen 2011. Nielsen convincingly shows that “Aristotle in fact presents a clear alternative to the standard model of deliberation that forms the point of departure for almost all discussion of deliberation today” (p. 389).

to open the door on the left or to jiggle the left door handle and that she is able to try to open the door on the right or to jiggle the right door handle (see Nelkin 2011, 130). However, to deliberate about which door to decide to try to open or which door handle to decide to jiggle is not the same as to deliberate about which door to leave by. Moreover, the deliberation about which door to decide to try to open or which door handle to decide to jiggle cannot be a part of the deliberation about which door to leave by. For, even if the former deliberation were successful, the final result would be a mere luck. As for the Aristotelian deliberator, if his end is specified as *leaving the room*, then perhaps we might say that he is able to make the first small step of the process of deliberation, namely, conclude that he can attain his end by opening the door. If we agree that aborted deliberation is still deliberation, then perhaps we might say that he did make some deliberation. However, just as for van Inwagen's deliberator, the success of the next step is entirely dependent on luck, and not on his own efforts. If the end is specified as *leaving the room by the door*, then he cannot make even the first step. His inability to deliberate, or to deliberate further, is not due to his lacking the belief in the openness of options, but to the fact that the efficacy of deliberation is entirely dependent on luck.⁸

Karen Nielsen (2011, 408–414) has argued that Aristotle's model of deliberation requires that the agent does not believe of any of the options under consideration that it is closed to him. (Such a negative epistemic requirement has been proposed by Philip Pettit [1989] as a response to van Inwagen's deliberation incompatibilism.) In her opinion, this requirement is implied in Aristotle's distinction between the objects of deliberation and the objects about which one cannot deliberate. The former are the things about which "we think can come about through our agency" (*EN* 3.2.1111b26–27), while the latter class includes things that cannot come about at all (because they are eternal or impossible) and those that cannot come about through our agency (but by necessity, nature, or luck) (3.3.1112a15–35). Nielsen argues that since a reasonable deliberator is confident that the latter class cannot come about through his agency, "we should take Aristotle's position to be that we can deliberate about an action provided we are *not confident* that it will or won't come about independently of our efforts" (2011, p. 411), which amounts to the Pettitian view that an action is an object of deliberation provided that we lack the belief that we cannot perform it. Aristotle, however, as far as I can see, does not say

⁸It has been suggested (see Nelkin 2011, pp. 130–131; Henden 2010, p. 319; Pereboom 2014, pp. 116–118) that what precludes deliberation in van Inwagen's two doors case, according to the contemporary model of deliberation, is not the agent's lack of belief in openness, but her lack of belief in the efficacy of deliberation: "rational deliberators must believe that for each of the options for action under consideration, deliberation about it would, under normal conditions, be efficacious in producing the choice for that action and the action itself" (Pereboom 2014, p. 116). While I have argued that the Aristotelian account does not require the presumption of openness, I would agree that it requires some version of the efficacy condition: the Aristotelian deliberator must believe that, under normal conditions (that is, without impediments, whether external or those due to *akrasia*), his deliberation will issue in action because of that deliberation, and not because of some factors beyond his control. For this reason, I do not agree with Nielsen (2011, p. 410 n. 41) that Aristotle would reject the intuition that deliberation is impossible in van Inwagen's example.

explicitly that the deliberator is confident that some things cannot be the objects of deliberation. Correspondingly, I don't see why we should require of him the lack of confidence that some of his deliberative options is closed to him because it is among things that happen independently of his efforts. Aristotle only implies that fools or madmen might try to deliberate about things that cannot come about through human agency (3.2.1111b21–22; 3.3.1112a20), while he bases his account on what reasonable agents deliberate about (1112a21). Even if we ascribe to reasonable deliberators the confidence that there are some things that cannot come about through their agency, their lack of confidence that the object of their deliberation will or won't come about independently of their efforts is more a mark of their reasonableness than a prerequisite for deliberation. In other words, the lack of belief that any of the options under consideration is closed is perhaps the requirement for the rationality of deliberation, but not for deliberation as such.

There are some passages in Aristotle that may seem to suggest that deliberation is, or at least consists of, comparing or weighing alternative courses of action. He says in the *Eudemian Ethics* 2.10 that one deliberates about whether this or that contributes to the attainment of the end (1226b11–12), about whether it is better or worse to act in a certain way (1226b15), or about whether to go to war or not (1227a13). Likewise, in *De anima* 3.11, when discussing the difference between sensitive (*aisthētikē*) and deliberative (*bouleutikē*) *phantasia*, he suggests that deliberation concerns the question whether to do this or that (434a7–8). A particularly clear suggestion of the choosing model of deliberation is found in *De interpretatione* 9, where Aristotle argues that the view that everything is and happens of necessity is incompatible with deliberation, which includes thinking that if we do this, this will happen, but if we do not, it will not (18b32–33). Thus, it seems as if the deliberator has before himself several options and considers the consequences of each.

However, in these passages Aristotle does not subscribe to the forward-looking explanation of deliberation as is common in contemporary discussions. The more plausible reading of these passages is that at some point in the standard Aristotelian backward-looking procedure, the deliberator detects that there are several options that may lead to the end, and then he “considers by which [of them] [the end] is most easily and best produced” (*EN* 3.3.1112b16–17). This consideration can take the form of comparing and weighing, so that these procedures can also be the parts of the process of deliberation. This applies not only to the intermediate steps of the process, but to the final step, the action that is about to be done, as well. For, Aristotle insists that we do not deliberate about ends, but about the things that lead to the end,⁹ and the action that has been chosen in deliberation is also among the things that lead to the end, so that it is also, before it is done, the object of deliberation.¹⁰

⁹ See *EN* 3.3.1112b12–20; 1112b32; *EE* 2.10.1226b10–13; 1227a7–12; 1227b28.

¹⁰ See *EN* 3.3.1113a2–5, where Aristotle says that “the object of deliberation and the object of *prohairesis* [that is, the action that has been chosen in deliberation] are the same, except that the object of *prohairesis* has already been determined; for it is what has been judged as the result of deliberation.”

Now, it is possible that the process of deliberation has as its result several actions by which the end can be attained. In such a case, the deliberator will compare these actions to see by which he can achieve the end in the easiest and best way. He may compare these actions by considering, as is stated in the *De interpretatione* passage (9.18b32–33), the consequences of each of them. Yet this will still be a part of a single backward-looking procedure.

8.3 Contingency and Up-to-usness

On Aristotle's view, then, deliberation does not require the presumption of openness: before engaging in the process of deliberation, the agent need not believe that he is able to do several things to attain the end. It is true that he can compare the options that have emerged during deliberation, but the availability of more than one option, as well as the belief that there is more than one option available, are not necessary conditions for deliberation.

The awareness of openness perhaps should be sought elsewhere in the Aristotelian account. Aristotle says that we deliberate about contingent things, that is, about things that can both be and not be, or that can both be done and not done.¹¹ Hence, the deliberator at every step faces contingency or openness, even when there is only one way to attain the end. The action that has been chosen by deliberation, before it is done, is also contingent. Consequently, it seems that until it is done it is such that it can both be and not be done, even though the agent has decided to perform it and not to restrain from performing it or to perform a different action instead.

In some circumstances the agent does not perform the action that he has decided to perform by deliberation. This is the case, for instance, with one type of akratic person, the so-called weak person, who, even though he deliberates properly, does not abide by the result of his deliberation (*EN* 7.7.1150b19–21). On the other hand, a virtuous person cannot but act on his deliberation, if acting contrary to deliberation would be a blameworthy act. Yet nothing prevents him from acting contrary to his deliberation, or to restrain from acting, if the alternative action or omission to act are not contrary to his virtuous disposition or if circumstances has changed after he began deliberating. Hence, even though it seems that a virtuous person cannot act contrary to his deliberation, there is a clear sense in which he can. Aristotle, however, does not restrict deliberation to such cases, which are heavily dependent on the character of the agent. People deliberate about the wide range of things, including financial, political, medical, military, navigational, etc. issues. Every situation in which the agent is uncertain about how to achieve the end calls for deliberation, and every action chosen as the result of deliberation, given that it is contingent, seems to be such that the agent can restrain from performing it or perform a different action

¹¹ See *EN* 3.3.1112a24; 1112b3; 6.1.1139a13–14; 6.2.1139b8; 6.5.1140a32; 1140b1; 6.7.1141b11–12; *EE* 2.10.1226a16–17; 1226a21–23; 1226a27–28; *Rhetorics* 1.2.1357a4–5; 1357a23–24; see also *De interpretatione* 9.19a7–11.

instead. What is the relevant sense of “can” here? Before trying to answer this question, let me first give some more details about the condition of the agent before acting according to his deliberation.

Aristotle says that we deliberate about things that are contingent and up to us (*eph' hēmīn*). More precisely, he says that we deliberate about those among contingent things that are up to us: “One deliberates about what is up to us among those means to the end that can either be or not be” (*EE* 2.10.1226b16–17). The class of contingent things is not coextensive with the class of things that are up to us, since there are contingent things that are outside the scope of human action, but are the outcomes of natural processes. However, the class of contingent things with which human action and deliberation are concerned is coextensive with the class of things that are up to us: “The things that can not only be or not be but that people can also deliberate about are those that it is up to us to do or not do” (1226a27–28).

The property of being contingent applies to action before it is done. After it is done, the action is necessary, since everything past is necessary (*EN* 6.2.1139b7–9). On the other hand, the property of being up to us can apply to action both retrospectively, after it is done, and prospectively, before it is done. In the retrospective sense, to say of an action that it is up to the agent is to say that its starting point or principle (*archē*) is in the agent, or that he is its cause.¹² The retrospective sense is intended, I believe, in *EN* 3.5.1113b7–14, the passage that is often taken as providing a different, i.e. prospective, reading of “up to us”:

Where acting is up to us, not acting is up to us too, and where one can say No, one can also say Yes; so that if doing something fine by acting is up to us, then equally, doing something disgraceful by not acting will be up to us, and if doing something fine by not acting is up to us, so is doing something disgraceful by acting. And if doing fine and disgraceful things is up to us, the same is true of not doing them, and since that is what being good and bad is, being worthy or unworthy people is therefore up to us.

This passage has invited much debate, as neither its precise argument nor its main point is immediately clear.¹³ It seems obvious, however, that being up to us is here taken as a property of actually performed actions, and not of actions as contingent, i.e. before they are performed.¹⁴ For, otherwise Aristotle could not have stated the premises as he did, but should have written “where acting or not acting is up to us...” instead. Rather, his point is only that if an actually performed action is up to us—if we are its causal origin—then, symmetrically, the omission to act is also up to us. That is to say, both the action and the omission to act are retrospectively up to us. Then he shows that the same holds for instances of fine and disgraceful actions and omissions. Note, however, that the conclusion concerns our worthy and unworthy *character*, not our actions. In addition, it does not refer to the fact that, retrospectively, there is a symmetry between our worthy character being up to us and our

¹² See *EN* 3.1.1110a17–18; 3.5.1113b20–22; 1114a18–20.

¹³ See Ackrill 1997; Donini 2010, pp. 141–145; Ott 2000; Meyer 2011, pp. 129–132; Bobzien 2014.

¹⁴ This has been forcefully argued for by Meyer 2014, pp. 79–80. For a different interpretation, see Destrée 2011, pp. 292–293.

unworthy character being up to us (for, in that case, Aristotle should have said, as in the premises, “if being worthy people is up to us, then being unworthy people is up to us too”). So, I presume that in the conclusion, “up to us” is used prospectively, as applying to our not yet formed character: our worthy or unworthy character is prospectively up to us, since it develops from our performing, or omitting to perform, fine and disgraceful actions, which are retrospectively up to us.¹⁵

Retrospective “up to us” is not relevant for our present purpose, since the objects of deliberation are actions that have not yet been done.¹⁶ Relevant is the prospective sense, which is prominent in the *Eudemian Ethics*, where Aristotle regularly uses it as two-sided, just as in the conclusion of the above *Nicomachean* passage, according to which “it is up to me to A” means “it is up to me to A or not-A.”¹⁷ The prospective sense is intended, I believe, in *EE* 2.6.1222b41–1223a9:

[1] Hence if it is possible for some things to be opposite to the way they are, this would also be true of their starting points, [2] since what follows from things that are of necessity is also necessary, but what follows from that which is not necessary may surely turn out in opposite ways. And those things that are up to human beings are mostly of this sort, and humans are themselves starting points of these. [3] Hence it is clear that all the actions for which a human is a starting point and is authoritative can come about or not come about, [4] and that the ones whose coming about or not is up to oneself are exactly those over whose existence or non-existence one is authoritative. [5] Everything whose doing or not doing is up to oneself is that of which one is oneself a cause. And everything that one is a cause of is up to oneself.

Aristotle’s point in [1] is not, as it is sometimes assumed, that contingent things must have contingent starting points, which would entail that, since human actions, whose starting points are human beings, are contingent, human beings are also contingent.¹⁸ For, if this were his point, then we would expect Aristotle to go on explaining what is the relevant sense of human contingency. His point is rather that contingent things must have starting points of the same kind. Since contingency of human actions is manifested in the possibility that they can be done or not done, their starting points must correspond to this, more precisely, they must account for two-sidedness of human actions. This has nothing to do with contingency of the starting points, but only with their appropriateness to bring about both acting and not acting. The most plausible assumption is that human beings are appropriate starting points for contingent actions, not because human beings are contingent, but because their capacities (*dunameis*) are necessarily two-sided, i.e. that they can bring about both A and not-A (see *Metaphysics* Θ2; Θ5). Aristotle says in [2] that many contingent things are up to human beings, who are their starting points. “Up to us” is used prospectively here: just as human beings are the starting points of contingent things because human beings, due to their two-sided capacities, can

¹⁵ See, for instance, *EN* 3.5.1114a9–10; 1114b3–10.

¹⁶ This is not to say that we cannot reflect, after taking an action, about alternative courses of action, and though this would also be an inquiry of a sort, it would not constitute deliberation.

¹⁷ See, for instance, *EE* 2.8.1225a9–10; 2.10.1225b36; 1226a28; 1226b30–31; 5.11.1144a10; but see also *EN* 3.5.1115a2; 6.12.1144a10–11. For references, see also Meyer 2014, 77 n. 6.

¹⁸ See Meyer 2014, 85, who argues against this assumption.

bring about both A and its opposite, so contingent things whose principles are human beings are up to them, in the sense that it is up to human beings whether these contingent things will be brought about or not. Then, in [3]–[5], it is stated that, just as the action’s property of being up to human beings is necessarily two-sided, so the human being’s property of being authoritative for (*kurios*), or being the cause of, his actions is also two-sided: to say of an agent that he is authoritative for, or the cause of, an action, is to say that it is up to him whether the action will come about or not. Thus, throughout the passage, the property of being up to us is used prospectively, as applying to not yet performed, or contingent, actions. It is actions as such contingent things that are the objects of deliberation.¹⁹

8.4 Aristotelian Capacities

Now that I’ve filled in some details, let me return to the main problem. The action that has been chosen by deliberation, before it is done, is up to the agent in the sense that it is up to him whether it will be done or not. This does not mean that the agent will now have to choose between performing and not performing it, since the process of deliberation has run backwards, and the agent has already decided to perform a particular action. What sense does it make to say, then, that the action he is about to perform is contingent and that it is up to him whether it will be done *or not*? The action’s being contingent and (prospectively) up to us suggest that the agent can do otherwise than he has decided by deliberation, and the question is, what is the relevant sense of “can”?

While Aristotle does not provide the analysis of the relevant sense of “can,” what he does provide is the analysis of “capacity” (*dunamis*). As I said, the fact that human agents can be the relevant starting points of contingent things, or that they are such that human actions can be actualized one way or another, is grounded in their having two-sided capacities. Human agents have capacity both for A and not-A, as opposed to capacities of non-rational creatures, which are essentially one-sided. It is important to bear in mind that a two-sided capacity of a human agent is a single capacity for opposites: it is not that a human agent has a capacity for A and that that capacity is always accompanied by the capacity for not-A. Rather, it is one and the same capacity that is capacity for opposites.

¹⁹Hence, my reading of the passage supports what Meyer (2014, 82) calls the Implication Thesis: If X is up to us to do and not to do, then X admits of being otherwise. While I agree with her that it does not support the Contingency Thesis (to affirm that X is up to us to do and not to do is to affirm that X admits of being otherwise), I do not agree that the passage confirms the Control Thesis (to affirm that X is up to us to do and not to do is to affirm that we are in control of whether X occurs), if this Thesis is understood retrospectively. For, throughout the passage, Aristotle is concerned with actions *qua* contingent, and our causal control over them can only be a matter of our controlling whether they will come about or not, and not a matter of our being their causal origins once they have come about.

Thus, human rational capacities are two-sided just as “up to us” when used prospectively. It might seem, then, that a (not yet performed) action is up to the agent because his capacity to do it is necessarily two-sided. Moreover, it might seem that the agent can act differently than as is decided by deliberation simply because of his possessing such two-sided capacity. Things are more complicated, however. The possession of two-sided capacities is not sufficient for the agent to be able to act contrary to what is decided by deliberation, for two reasons.

First, Aristotle argues (*Metaphysics* Θ.5.1048a10–16) that what is decisive (*to kurion*) in actualizing a two-sided rational capacity is not a mere possession of capacity, but desire (*orexis*) or *prohairesis*. For, if a mere possession of a rational capacity, plus the presence of the relevant object that is to be acted upon, were sufficient for its actualization—as is the case with non-rational one-sided capacities—then both arms of a two-sided capacity should be actualized at the same time. There would be nothing that would tip the scales one way or another. Hence, there must be something that is decisive, and this is *prohairesis* or desire. Once the agent has formed them, he *cannot* act differently: “For whichever it desires decisively (*orēgetai kuriōs*), in this way it will act when it is in the condition to be capable, and approaches the patient” (1048a11–13, trans. Makin 2006).

Second, and related to this, two-sided capacity is not a general capacity, or capacity *simpliciter*, or such that its two arms can be actualized at the same time. If it were, then it would be possible that its two arms be actualized at the same time even in the presence of a decisive factor, since the agent could have multiple desires, including desires for opposite things. Two-sided capacity is rather a highly specified capacity: “What is capable is capable of something and at some time and in some way and with however many factors it is necessary to add to the specification” (1047b35–1048a2).²⁰ Thus, before deliberation, the agent has the capacity to A at *t* and in circumstance *C* and to not-A at *t'* and in circumstance *C'*. A’s being up to him (prospectively) amounts to his having this capacity. It is in this sense that the action *qua* contingent and up to the agent is the object of deliberation. After deliberation, or after forming the relevant desire (which need not be deliberative desire, as is the case in *akrasia*), the agent can actualize only one arm of this capacity. He cannot act differently than as decided by deliberation (or by some other decisive desire). If it makes sense to say that he can act differently, it is only because there may occur, in the interval between deliberation and action, some other desire which would take over a role of the decisive factor.

8.5 Conclusion

Hence, contingency that the Aristotelian agent faces in deliberation is not openness as it is understood in later accounts. It is neither metaphysical nor epistemic openness: it has nothing to do either with indeterminacy or with what the agent believes.

²⁰For complications with this specification, see Makin 2006, 103–107.

In view of this, Aristotle's account of deliberation cannot be classified either as compatibilist or as incompatibilist, if these terms are taken as referring to the views that deliberation is, or is not, compatible with belief that our actions are causally determined by events beyond our control. To be sure, Aristotle argues (*EN* 3.3.1112a18–33) that we do not deliberate about things that are beyond our control, that is, about eternal things, those that happen always in the same way, natural or chance events, or about human affairs that we cannot influence, as Spartans cannot influence the political processes in Scythia. "We deliberate about things that are up to us and can be done: that is, the remainder when those are excluded" (1112a30–31). However, when discussing deliberation, he does not contemplate the possibility that this remainder, when we reflect on the place of human actions in a broader perspective of the universe at large, can appear as dependent upon some of the things on the excluded list. In particular, he does not contemplate the possibility that the action's being up to us (whether prospectively or retrospectively) and its contingency may be precluded by causal determinism. To account for the possibility and structure of deliberation, it is not necessary to trace the origin of the contingency of human actions beyond the agents themselves, or so Aristotle thought.²¹

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²¹This work has been fully supported by Croatian Science Foundation under the project 5343. I am grateful to Pavel Gregorić for his helpful suggestions.

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