

**Aristotle on Agency and Responsibility in the *Eudemian Ethics***  
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**1. Introduction**

In this paper, I develop an interpretation of Aristotle's theory of voluntary<sup>1</sup> action, focusing on his account in the *Eudemian Ethics*.<sup>2</sup> I defend two main theses. First, I argue that Aristotle's account of voluntary action focuses on the conditions under which one is the cause of one's actions *qua* the individual one is.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Aristotle contrasts voluntary action not only with involuntary action but also with cases in which one acts (or does something) due to human nature (i.e., *qua* member of one's species) rather than due to one's own desires (i.e., *qua* individual). Furthermore, an action can be attributed to one *qua* individual in two distinct ways depending on whether one is a rational or a non-rational animal.<sup>4</sup> One is responsible for one's action in both cases, but only in the former case one is also responsible for being the sort of individual that performs it.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle also distinguishes two ways in which an action can be compelled while still be an action of the agent.<sup>6</sup> In the first case, one is compelled by (physically) external forces or circumstances to act against one's internal impulse. In the second case, one is compelled to act on (internal) impulses that are fixed by one's nature against one's own individual impulse. This latter kind of compelled action is only possible in the case of rational agents.

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<sup>1</sup> I translate the pair *hekousion/akousion* as 'voluntary/involuntary' mainly because it is the standard translation to which there are no obviously better alternatives. Some scholars have suggested that 'intentional/unintentional' is the better translation, but this suggestion has not met with a general approval. For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see S. Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility* (Oxford, 1993), 9-14.

<sup>2</sup> Since I concentrate on the *EE*, I put aside the vexed question about the relative dating and relationship between the two accounts of voluntary action in the *EE* and the *NE*. In what follows I try to rely solely on the *EE* text, although occasional references to *NE* are sometimes inevitable in order to elucidate certain issues. However, I do not rely, in my argument, on any specifically *Nicomachean* views or claims.

<sup>3</sup> My analysis is, in this particular respect, in agreement with that of S. Everson, 'Aristotle's Compatibilism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*', *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990), 81-103.

<sup>4</sup> As I will argue, Aristotle's analysis of non-rational action is thus more fine-grained than the one offered, for example, by Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, Integrity* (Oxford, 2009), 90-108.

<sup>5</sup> In the *EE*, Aristotle restricts the term *praxis* (action) to human beings. This restriction has sometimes been taken to imply that, in the *EE*, he also restricts the notion of voluntariness to human beings (e.g., David Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"', in F. Leigh, *The Eudemian Ethics on the Voluntary, Friendship, and Luck* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 1-29 at 8). As I will argue, however, this is not the case and we should distinguish between actions in the broad sense (in which even non-rational animals can act – see, for example, Aristotle's usage of *praxis* in *PA* 1.5) from actions in the strict sense (in which they are available only to rational beings).

<sup>6</sup> On a certain understanding of Aristotle's account of compelled action, the agent is not in fact contributing anything to what she does – the typical Aristotle-inspired example is that of a man thrown by a wind through a window – and so what she does does not even qualify as *her* action. For a formulation of this problem see S. Everson, 'Aristotle's Compatibilism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*'.

Second, I argue that Aristotle's conception of what it is to be a *cause* of an action inevitably brings in certain (normative) features which support evaluative judgments and the practice of praise and blame.<sup>7</sup> This is a surprising claim since one might think that one can be normatively (morally, politically, legally, etc.) responsible for things for which one is not causally responsible, such as negligent omissions or even actions of other people. Hence, one might think that causal responsibility is quite distinct from any normative notion of responsibility. On Aristotle's view, however, any goal-directed behavior that is properly attributable to an individual is (normally) subject to standards that pertain to behavior of that sort. At the most basic level these standards establish what counts as a successful realization of the goal that one aims at. Thus even in the case of non-rational animals (or children), one can judge the success of what they are doing and encourage (or discourage) similar behavior by praise or blame. It is a crucial part of Aristotle's view that these standards are applicable to one's conduct simply insofar as one is the controlling origin (or efficient cause) of one's action *qua* individual.

In the case of rational agents the practice of praise and blame can involve a further normative layer since they can be praised or blamed not only for acting in a certain way so as to encourage or discourage them with a view to the future, but also for being – and having become – individuals of a certain sort. Still, the applicability of such evaluative judgments and of praise and blame is still warranted by one's being the controlling origin of one's actions *qua* the individual one is (in this case, *qua* rational individual). Thus despite offering a causal account of responsibility, Aristotle is not insensitive to the kind of attitudes we have when we assign responsibility to adult human beings rather than to animals or children. As I argue, Aristotle's discussion of actions done on decision is, among other things, aimed at singling out the very special significance these actions have insofar as they are manifestations of the agent's care of herself. It is only through reasoning and through being able to act on the basis of reasoning that one's own life and character can become the goal of one's own actions and so it is only in that way that one can become responsible for one's own character and way of life.

Much of the scholarly debate about the nature of Aristotle's theory of voluntary action has concentrated on the question of whether or not Aristotle is giving an account of moral responsibility. Thus Susan Sauvé Meyer writes that 'Aristotle's concerns and aims in his various discussions of voluntariness are precisely those of a theorist of moral responsibility'.<sup>8</sup> In her view, Aristotle is giving an account of moral responsibility because, among other things, he 'insists, unequivocally, that voluntary actions are up to the agent to do or not to do (*NE* 1113b4-14, 19-21) and that such an agent is an origin of action in the

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<sup>7</sup> Thus I agree with those who maintain that Aristotle's theory of responsibility is a theory of causal responsibility (see below, note 10), but I depart from them insofar as I maintain that Aristotelian causal theory has built-in normative features.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 3. See also Terence Irwin, 'Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle', in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 117-55.

sense that there is no cause (*aition*) of his causation of his action (*EE* 1222b29-41). He therefore attributes to the voluntary agent precisely the causal status that ascriptions of moral responsibility presuppose'.<sup>9</sup> Others see Aristotle as giving an account of responsibility that is quite distinct from an account of moral responsibility. Thus Jean Roberts writes that Aristotle's 'notion of voluntariness, which isolates one particular kind of cause or explanation, does not coincide, as far as I can see, with any later notion of moral responsibility'.<sup>10</sup> In general, these latter interpreters see Aristotle as giving an account of causal, as opposed to moral, responsibility for actions.

A notable feature of this debate is that in attributing or denying a theory of moral responsibility to Aristotle, commentators have mostly focused on the kind of theories according to which moral responsibility requires that the agent is autonomous or self-determined and that her action is free.<sup>11</sup> One can express this particular outlook about moral responsibility in the following way.<sup>12</sup> A morally responsible agent has the ability to reflect on her desires and to decide (and act) on the basis of such reflection. Such an agent is then morally responsible for those actions that she was free to do or not to do in the sense that she could have done otherwise than she did.<sup>13</sup> The disagreement about Aristotle's theory of responsibility arises since some scholars think that his account of voluntary action includes or entails one or both of the aforementioned features, while others deny it.

The focus on moral responsibility so construed has focused our attention in the wrong direction. On the one hand, it has led some scholars to misunderstand some crucial features of Aristotle's theory by importing ideas that are foreign to his way of thinking. For example, they have read the requirement that the action must be up to the agent to do or not to do as meaning that the agent has to be free to act. Some have then interpreted this requirement as meaning that the agent could have acted otherwise than she did given the same facts about her motivation and situation,<sup>14</sup> while others as meaning the agent could have

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<sup>9</sup> Sauv  Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Roberts, 'Aristotle on Responsibility for character and action', *Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1989), 234-51 at 237. See also D. Charles, *Aristotle's Theory of Action*, 57-62 and 256-61; J. M. Cooper, 'Aristotelian Responsibility', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 45 (2014), 265-312 at 266.

<sup>11</sup> For the autonomous nature of the agent, see T. Irwin, 'Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle', 128-39, who includes the capacity for deliberation among the conditions for his account of Aristotelian responsibility. Concerning the freedom condition, see, for example, the quotes by S. Sauv  Meyer cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Although most interpreters see Aristotle as offering one of these two views, some interpreters see the *EE* account as being closer to the Kantian view than the *NE* account (e.g., D. Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"', 21).

<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, the principle of alternate possibilities, as it was dubbed by Harry Frankfurt. There are at least two basic versions of this principle (libertarian and compatibilist) and one might wonder which of them Aristotle does or would subscribe to. As I will argue, however, Aristotle is not concerned with the principle in either version.

<sup>14</sup> See, R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Chicago, 1980), 234-5; R. Heineman, 'Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*', *No s*, 22/2 (1988), 253-81 at 254; and S. Sauv  Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 5.

done otherwise *if* she wanted to (i.e., is the fact about her motivation were different).<sup>15</sup> But Aristotle's requirement is rather (as I will argue) that if one were not motivated as one was, the action would not have happened. Aristotle's point is not about freedom and determinism, but about explanation and causation – the issue is whether the agent did or did not play the right role in the production of the action.

On the other hand, some scholars have correctly seen Aristotle's account of responsibility as causal but have missed, in their effort to distance Aristotle from the kind of theories of moral responsibility just described, the normative features that are embedded in Aristotle's causal account. For example, John Cooper writes:

Aristotle's purely causal theory is decisively and sharply separated from questions about values. For Aristotle, to be responsible for an action is a clear-cut, factual matter of the action's origins: if it was originated by any of an agent's desires, or a decision, taken together with its thought, then it is voluntary and the agent is responsible for it. ... Questions of praise and blame do legitimately arise once the action is rightly judged to be voluntary (but only then), provided that it was a good or bad thing to do. But the standards and basis on which such questions are appropriately answered are further ones, of a normative sort.<sup>16</sup>

As I argue, it is true that Aristotle's theory is a causal one, but it is not true that it is completely separated from questions of values. In a way, then, my interpretation attempts to mediate between scholars who see Aristotle's theory as a theory of moral responsibility and those who see it as a theory of causal responsibility by shifting the focus of the debate on a different kind of theory of responsibility.

The plan of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I discuss the details of Aristotle's discussion of the controlling origins (*archai*) and causes (*aitiai*) of actions in *EE* 2.6. This chapter, which has no parallel in the *NE*, is crucial for understanding Aristotle's subsequent discussion in *EE* 2.7-11. Although it introduces and connects several concepts central to that discussion (origin, cause, control, being up to one), it has not been sufficiently explored in the literature for at least two reasons. First, Aristotle's line of argument in the chapter is not entirely clear and it is sometimes difficult to see the relevance of certain passages to the discussion of voluntariness. Second, the absence of a parallel discussion in the *NE* may suggest that Aristotle's theory of voluntary action can be understood and in fact might well be independent of the sort of issues discussed in *EE* 2.6. This view is well expressed by A. Kenny who writes that the chapter appears unnecessary since

...many of its details are obscure. ...It is unclear why the classification of ἀρχαί is undertaken at all. In order to motivate the discussion of voluntariness within a treatise on virtue would it not be

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, S. Everson, 'Aristotle's Compatibilism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*', *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990): 81–103.

<sup>16</sup> John. M. Cooper, 'Aristotelian Responsibility', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 45 (2014), 265-312 at 296.

enough to introduce the final considerations of the chapter? ‘We are praised for virtue, we are praised for what we are responsible for or cause (αἴτιος), we cause voluntary action, so let us investigate voluntariness.’ Why is anything more necessary?<sup>17</sup>

Most interpreters thus see *EE* 2.6 as simply establishing the focus of the subsequent chapters: conditions for voluntary actions.<sup>18</sup> This view is, of course, correct. But it passes over at least two important points that the discussion in *EE* 2.6 brings or should bring to the reader’s attention: (1) Aristotle is looking to establish the conditions under which we are the efficient causes of actions *qua* individuals; (2) being an efficient cause of something, in the Aristotelian sense, always involves normative features and, hence, insofar as one is an efficient cause of something one does, one is subject to normative evaluation (i.e., praise and blame). I explore point (1) in section 3, and point (2) in section 4. In section 5, I turn to some features of Aristotle’s discussion of actions on decisions in *EE* 2.10-11.

## 2. *EE* 2.6: Controlling Origins and Efficient Causes

### *Controlling Origins*

Aristotle begins *EE* 2.6 by saying that although human beings are, just like any other living beings, origins (*archai*) of other beings of their own kind, they are also origins of actions (*praxeis*). No other animal is an origin of actions because, as we learn later, in order to act one must do things from reasoning (1224a29) and only human beings have that capacity.<sup>19</sup> But rather than on action, Aristotle’s immediate focus in the chapter is on the more basic notion of origin. He points out that certain origins, namely those from which changes first arise, are to be characterized as *kuriai* (controlling):

- (1) Among origins, those that are of the sort that from them changes first arise are called controlling (*kuriai*) origins, and most correctly those from which it cannot be otherwise,<sup>20</sup> the sort that god is. (1222b20-3)

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<sup>17</sup> A. Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will* (New Haven, 1979), 4.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., S. Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 39; J. M. Cooper, ‘Aristotelian Responsibility’, 275.

<sup>19</sup> It is notable that Aristotle does not say that living things other than (adult) human beings do not do things voluntarily (*hekōn*), but only that they do not act (*pratein*). It is sometimes thought that since non-rational animals do not act, they do not do anything voluntarily (see note 3 above). But although non-rational animals and children (and perhaps adult human beings in some cases - *EE* 2.10, 1226b21-9) do not or cannot act rationally, it is not true that they do not do things (or do not act in a broad sense of the term). The question is whether Aristotle’s notion of voluntariness in the *EE* applies only to actions in the strict sense, or also to actions in the broad sense (as it clearly does in the *NE* where both children and animals are said to engage in voluntary behavior – 1111a25-30). It is not obvious (at least not at the beginning of *EE* 2.6) that Aristotle is committed to the claim that non-rational animals and children do not do anything voluntarily. I will later – in my discussion of physically compelled actions in section 3 – provide some reasons for thinking that he is in fact not committed to that claim.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase ‘μάλιστα δὲ δικαίως ἀφ’ ὧν μὴ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως’ is usually translated as meaning that those origins are called controlling most correctly that produce results which are necessary. Thus Woods translates ‘from which results what cannot be otherwise’, Kenny ‘those whose effects cannot be otherwise than they are’, Inwood and Woolf ‘those things whose results cannot be otherwise’, Solomon ‘such as have necessary results’. But the phrase is

What is Aristotle's point in introducing the notion of controlling origin? There have been two suggestions advanced in the literature about the meaning of *kurios* in this passage. The first suggestion is that by *kurios* Aristotle means, as he often does, 'in the strict sense'. In that case, Aristotle's claim would be that only origins of changes (as opposed to origins of other things) are true origins. This view has not found many defenders.<sup>21</sup> The following two problems are among the most serious. First, in the *Metaphysics* 5.1 Aristotle counts hypotheses as genuine cases of origins, and he does not appear to deny this elsewhere (in fact, he goes on to talk of mathematical hypotheses as examples of the closely related notion of cause just a few lines later at 1222b29ff). Second, Aristotle's use of the term later at 1223a5 and 7 cannot be understood in this way since there the notion of 'control' is connected to having a decisive role in determining whether something (an action) comes to be or not rather than to being an origin of change. It seems unlikely that Aristotle would use the term in two unrelated ways in an otherwise tightly written passage.<sup>22</sup> The second suggestion is that there are many genuine kinds of origins but only origins of changes are controlling origins.<sup>23</sup> This is a more plausible suggestion, but unless one says more about what makes an origin controlling besides the fact that it is an origin of change, the qualification *kurios* becomes superfluous since it is just another label for origins of change.

The term occurs in two passages in the *NE*. In the first passage, Aristotle gives an example of someone who is acting involuntarily because he is being compelled to do so by some external cause. The sort of situation would occur, 'if, for example, a wind or people who have him in their control were to carry him away' (*NE* 3.1, 1110a4). The passage suggests that the agent who acts involuntarily is not in control (*kurios*) of what she is doing because the people who are carrying her away leave her with no choice but to follow them.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is those people and not the agent who determine what she is doing. In the second passage, Aristotle compares the voluntariness of actions and states:

When we know the particulars, we are in control (κύριοι ἐσμεν) of actions from the beginning to the end. In the case of states, however, we are in control of the beginning, but we do not know the cumulative effect of particular [actions], just like in the case of becoming sick. But because it was up to us to use [a capacity] either this or that way, states are voluntary. (*NE* 3.5, 1114b31-5a3)

According to this passage, we are not in control of our states or dispositions because we do not know or are not aware of the particular ways in which what we do shapes our capacities and makes us disposed in

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ambiguous. It can mean that the results produced by the origins do not admit of being otherwise or that the *producing* from those origins does not admit of being otherwise. I argue for the latter understanding below.

<sup>21</sup> The view is adopted, for example, by F. Dirlmeier in *Aristoteles: Eudemische Ethik*, übers. F. Dirlmeier, Berlin 1962, *ad loc.*

<sup>22</sup> See M. Woods (ed.), *Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics, books I, II and VIII*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, 1992), 191.

<sup>23</sup> This is Woods' suggestion, *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> I argue for this understanding of the example below, in section 3.

certain ways. For example, we know that training and exercise are what makes one an athlete, but even if we do train and exercise, we are not in a position to know what the actual result will be (i.e., whether we will succeed). Since we do not know this, we are not in position to determine the results either since, presumably, we do not know what we would need to do to determine them. We can merely promote them. We lack the power to ensure the results we aim for, even if we do control the ‘beginnings’. As Aristotle remarks, however, in the case of actions, our position is different – as long as we know all the relevant particulars, we can ensure that they are executed.

These passages strongly suggest that the concept of control in the context of Aristotle’s discussion of voluntariness refers to the ability to bring about and complete a change *on one’s own* – that is, through one’s own conscious effort.<sup>25</sup> This idea is supported by Aristotle’s usage of the term later at 1223a5 and 7 since there the notion of ‘control’ is connected to having decisive role in determining whether an action (a change) comes to be or not. But it also explains why in (1) Aristotle asserts that those origins are most correctly called *kurioi* ‘from which it cannot be otherwise’. Since Aristotle has at this point in mind origins of *changes*, he must mean that those origins are most correctly called ‘controlling’ that necessitate the changes to which they give rise rather than meaning that the changes *themselves* are what cannot be otherwise (which is the way the text is usually translated and interpreted). Any change is by definition something that can be otherwise – even the movements of celestial bodies admit of being otherwise with respect to place.<sup>26</sup> In the case of human beings, of course, even though we are in control of our actions, we are not in *full* control of those actions since our efforts can be thwarted by external circumstances or we can change our minds (say, because we succumb to contrary desires) even as we act.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This interpretation gets some support also from Aristotle’s discussion of the primary usage of the term capacity in its relation to change at *Met.* 9.1, 1046a5-15. According to the passage, capacity for change is, in its primary sense, an origin of change which is characterized by having the ability *to do* something to something else. This is to be contrasted with capacities for change which are not powers to do anything but, rather, capacities to have something done to one or to withstand something done to one. These latter capacities are also origins of changes (since they also play explanatory role in the changes of which they are origins) but, as the passage makes clear, they are not so because they *actively* or through themselves bring about those changes.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle says this explicitly at *Met.* 12.7, 1072b5-8: ‘if something is moved, it is capable of being otherwise (*ἐνδέχεται ... ἄλλως*), so that if the activity [of the heavens] is primary motion, then insofar as they are moved, in this respect they are capable of being otherwise, with respect to place, even if not in substance’.

<sup>27</sup> This interpretation of the meaning of *kurios* also sheds light on the immediately following passage in which Aristotle asserts that in the case of unchanging (*ἀκινήτοις*) origins, such as mathematical origins, there is no ‘control’ even if they are called ‘controlling origins’ by analogy (1222b23-7). The obvious point is that mathematical origins are not origins of any changes and so they do not bring about anything but, rather, stand in eternal and unchanging relations to their consequences. But the notion of control, as I just explained it, also presupposes that the identity as well as the existence of changes or things resulting from an origin (which is in control of those changes) depends on the origin. If the origin changes in some relevant aspects, the things resulting from it will change too. For example, when a builder changes his mind about the shape of the roof that he is building, the process of roof-building will change too. This relationship holds only if the origin retains (or would retain) its own identity while undergoing internal changes. Mathematical origins (say, axioms of geometry),

Aristotle is thus making clear that he is interested in changes which originate in us in a special way, namely in such a way that we are in control of the execution of those changes. In other words, he is interested in changes that originate in us through our own agency. This makes *EE* 2.6 take up a line of thought suggested already in the beginning of the *Eudemean Ethics*. The book begins by Aristotle wondering about how one becomes happy (*eudaimōn*) (1214a14-25). On the one hand, this means wondering about the correct account of happiness and Aristotle goes on to spend much of book 1 and 2 thinking about it. On the other hand, however, it means wondering about how happiness is achieved and Aristotle lists several options. Is it by nature, just as we naturally grow tall or short? Is it through learning, happiness being a form of knowledge, or through habituation, happiness being some sort of acquired skill? Or is it a matter of divine dispensation or even just mere luck? The answer that Aristotle eventually works out is complex and, unsurprisingly, a matter of scholarly controversy (in both its *Eudemean* and *Nicomachean* version). But one of Aristotle's most important underlying assumptions about happiness is that it is something that we can achieve through our own efforts: we can acquire qualities of both character and mind (i.e., virtues) in whose appropriate exercise happiness consists in.<sup>28</sup> It is an important part of what happiness is that it is a human achievement (1251a13-5; 1217a39-40). In fact, happiness is worthwhile because, among other things, it can come to us only through our own efforts (e.g., *NE* 1176b29-77a1). Given this assumption, it follows that happiness (and if happiness, so also the acquisition, maintenance, and exercise of virtues) presupposes that there is something we do, not simply by nature, divine interference, or luck, but by ourselves, that is, insofar as each of us is the individual that she is. Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* thus presupposes that we can engage in actions (or, in general, do things) in such a way that we (each one of us individually) are the causes, or origins of our actions rather than our (shared) human nature, gods, luck, or, in general, something or somebody other than us. It is this line of thought that Aristotle takes up in *EE* 2.6, when he says that he is taking a new starting point of his inquiry (1222b15).

In the next passage, Aristotle identifies the changes of which we are the controlling origins as the changes of which we are the causes. As he goes on to explain, these changes (i.e., actions) originate in us in such a way that their character (i.e., their being in a certain way) is explained by us rather than by something else:

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however, cannot change at all without losing their identity. It is, then, in some sense true that if a mathematical starting point changes, what follows from it changes too, but the notion of change when applied to such origins amounts to destruction. The passage contains a curious complication since Aristotle has just said that god is a controlling origin *par excellence*. God is an unmoved mover (i.e., an unchanging origin) and so, according to this passage, there would be no 'control' in god's case either. But perhaps when Aristotle says that 'such as are the ones in mathematics', he does not merely give an example of unchanging origins, but qualifies the kind of unchanging origins he has in mind, namely abstract principles.

<sup>28</sup> This is true on all, exclusive or inclusive, conceptions of *eudaimonia* since all of them include possession and exercise of some virtue or virtues.



- (2) The human being is an origin of a certain sort of change, since an action (*praxis*) is a change (*kinēsis*). Since, just like in [any] other cases, the origin is a cause (*aitia*) of those things that are or come about because of it, we must understand [the role of human beings as origins] as we do in the case of demonstrative proofs. For if the triangle has two right angles, it is necessary for the quadrangle to have four right angles, it is apparent that the cause (*aition*) of this is that the triangle has two right angles. And so indeed, if the triangle should alter, it is necessary for the quadrangle to alter as well, for example if [the triangle should have] three [right angles], then [the quadrangle would have] six, and if four, then eight. And if it should not alter, but stay such as it is, it is necessary for the other to stay such as it is too. It is clear from the Analytics that what we are trying to show for is necessary; but presently we cannot say precisely either that it is not or that it is, except to this extent: for if nothing else is the cause of the triangle's being like that (*houiōs echein*), this would be a sort of origin and cause of the things that come after it. (1222b29-41)

According to the passage, the determination of whether something is a controlling origin of a change is made on the basis of whether the character of the change is explained by it being in a certain way rather than by something else. As Aristotle explains, if A is an origin of B, then B is or comes about because of A. This means that A is the *cause* of B since B's being in a certain way is *explained* by A's being a certain way. As Aristotle says, if the triangle is the cause of the quadrangle's properties and 'if nothing else is the cause of the triangle's being like that' (i.e., of it having properties that result in quadrangle's being as it is), then the triangle is the origin. If there was something else, say a line, that would be responsible for those properties of triangle that determine the properties of a quadrangle, then that would be the origin and cause (and so an explanation) of the quadrangle's properties.<sup>29</sup>

It is sometimes thought that the passage asserts that the cause (i.e., the controlling origin) of a change must itself be uncaused since if it were caused by something else, then it could not be the cause of the change but that something else would be.<sup>30</sup> But the claim that something is the cause of a thing's properties if and only if nothing else is the cause of those properties says nothing about the cause itself being caused or uncaused. Rather, it is a claim about the essential role that a cause must play in the explanation of a change. An example can help to illustrate the point. Bertrand decides to paint his gray roof in red. He does this because the old paint is not looking good anymore and because he saw red roofs on other houses and liked them. Bertrand's action (of painting the roof red) is caused by Bertrand's internal state: a decision to paint. His decision is not uncaused – it results from his observation of the state

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<sup>29</sup> A similar thought is expressed in the following passage in the *NE*: 'If this is not so, we must dispute what has been said, and we must deny that a human being is an origin, begetting actions as he begets children. But if what we have said appears true, and we cannot refer back to other origins apart from those that are up to us, those things that have their origin in us are themselves up to us and voluntary' (*NE* 1113b17-21).

<sup>30</sup> For example, R. Heineman, 'Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*', 254 and S. Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 5.

of his roof, his liking of the color red, his mastery of the craft of painting, and so on. But these things that caused him to form the decision are not the causes that explain his action. They explain his decision, but the decision explains the action. Simply enumerating those causes by themselves (without reference to the decision) would not tell us whether he decided to paint. His action cannot be explained without the reference to his decision (whether or not the decision is itself caused or not).

We can get more specific about the kind of explanation (i.e., cause) that Aristotle connects to controlling origins. As is well-known, Aristotle distinguishes four types of causes (*aitia* or *aition*). The content of passage (2), as well as the references to parents (or fathers) begetting children in both *EE* (1222b15-20) and *NE* (1113b17-21) make it clear that Aristotle has in mind what is traditionally called the efficient cause.<sup>31</sup> According to Aristotle, specifying the efficient cause of a change amounts to providing an explanation of the change in terms of some relevant set of principles. The idea is that the presence of those principles in a substance which is appropriately related to the change explains the particular form the change takes or, in other words, explains *how* the change occurs.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle's classic example of an efficient cause is a builder (a substance) who possesses the principles of house-building (e.g., *Phys.* 196a22-5). The builder imparts the principles on some chunk of matter by organizing it according to them. When he is successful, the matter becomes a house. Although Aristotle is often content to say that the efficient cause is the builder (or a father), when he wants to be precise he says that it is (the principles of the craft of house-building that are the efficient cause (*Phys.* 195b21-5)).

The example of the house-builder is useful because it makes clear that the principles at work do not amount to a mere blueprint or layout of the house (or a specification of what a house is). They are, rather, principles of house-*building* – they specify how a house is to be built or produced.<sup>33</sup> It is in this respect that efficient causes help one to understand why, for example, a builder is building a house in *this* rather than in some other way. Efficient causes do not explain why or for what reason something came to be (as do final causes) or what something is (as do formal causes); rather, explanations in terms of efficient causes explain *how* something came to be.<sup>34</sup> It is helpful to think of Aristotelian efficient causes as of sets of principles comprising a recipe or manual for realizing Aristotelian forms in matter.

Thus when Aristotle asserts that we are the efficient causes of our actions, he means that we are in possession of the principles that explain the character of those actions as directed at our goals. This

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle's standard doctrine of the efficient cause is laid out in *Met.* 1013a29-32 and *Phys.* 194b29-34.

<sup>32</sup> The appropriately related substance can be something external to the change (as when a father begets a child, or a builder builds a house), or it can be that the substance is internal to the change as well (as in the case of actions).

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., *Phys.* 194b1-7.

<sup>34</sup> For example: 'That the end is a cause of the things under it, is obvious from teaching: after they [i.e., teachers] define the end, they demonstrate that each of the things under it is good; for that-for-the-sake-of-which is a cause. For example, if being healthy is this thing (*ἐπειδὴ τὸ ὑγιαίνειν τοδί*), this other thing, beneficial for it, must exist. The healthy is a moving cause of health (*τὸ δ' ὑγιεινὸν τῆς ὑγείας αἴτιον ὡς κινῆσαν*), and then of health's existence, not of its being good (*καὶ τότε τοῦ εἶναι ἀλλ' οὐ τοῦ ἀγαθὸν εἶναι τὴν ὑγίειαν*)' (*EE* 1.8, 1218b16-21).

connects efficient cause to the idea of a controlling origin since to be in control of a change means to be in a position to ensure the execution and completion of a change on one's own. The concept of efficient cause clarifies what 'being in a position' to do so requires: the possession of the relevant sort of principles that specify how the change is to be executed.

Aristotle elaborates this point further by insisting that the changes of which *we* are the efficient causes must be such that they are attributable to us *as individuals*:

- (3) So that all the actions that the human being is an origin of and controls (*estin archē kai kurios*) evidently can both come to be and not come to be, and that it is up to him (*eph' hautō*) whether they come to be or—that is, the ones that he controls their being and their not being. And all the things that it is up to himself to do or not do, he himself is the cause of those; and all the things he is cause of are up to him. (1223a4-9)

In (2) Aristotle has already established that if A is a controlling origin of an action B, then A is something that is responsible for bringing about B in such a way that B has to be explained by reference to A. (3) takes this claim one step further by suggesting that in such cases it is up to A whether B comes about or not since *without A, there would be no B*. In other words, if an agent – as an individual – plays an *ineliminable* role in the explanation of the action as its cause, then it is up to that agent whether the action comes to be or not.<sup>35</sup> It is important to see that there are changes that originate in us but not through our agency. In *EE* 2.6, Aristotle lists three such ways: an action can happen due to necessity, luck, or nature (1223a11-2). Thus the process of digesting an apple is a change that originates in us (it is something we do in a very broad sense of the term) but of which we are not in control. It is a change that originates in us but not *qua* individuals but, in this case, *qua* having a certain nature. Similarly, if one happens to win a prize by being the one-hundredth customer of a new restaurant, one's winning the prize is something one did (in a very broad sense of the word) but it something one did not through one's own agency but due to luck.

However, Aristotle does not tell us at this point how the restriction to individual agency is to be understood. The notion of the efficient cause gives as a clue, but not an answer. The clue is that the agent *herself* must be, in her action, aiming at some goal and that she must be in possession of the principles that would explain her engaging in the action in the way she does. This obviously points to the two invalidating conditions of voluntary action (compulsion and ignorance) that Aristotle will go on to

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<sup>35</sup> This passage has been (along with the parallel passages in the *NE*, such as 1112a31-3) taken to imply the view according to which one acts voluntarily only if one could have done otherwise. A classic example of the view can be found in R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Chicago, 1980), 234-5. Similar claim is advanced by R. Heineman 'Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*', 255-7. If my interpretation is correct, this kind of suggestion misses Aristotle's actual point, which is about explanation and not the ability to do otherwise.

discuss. But before we move on to Aristotle's discussion of those conditions, it is worth noting the way in which Aristotle himself transitions to it (1223a9-21). He points out that the practice of praise and blame presupposes that things that are praised or blamed are already such that we *ourselves (autoi)* are their causes (1223a12) since praise and blame do not belong to things that occur 'of necessity or by luck or by nature' but (it is implied) to things that occur by individual agency. And since what is praised and blamed are actions, we need to figure out which actions we are the causes of in the appropriate sense, that is, as individuals.

It is noteworthy that, in these passages at the end of *EE* 2.6, Aristotle does not invoke any special features – such as autonomy, rationality, or freedom – to justify the applicability of praise or blame to actions.<sup>36</sup> All he says is that insofar as we are ourselves (i.e., as individuals) the efficient causes of what we do, we are subject to praise and blame.<sup>37</sup> The connection between individual agency and the applicability of praise and blame seems unproblematic to Aristotle and it will be worthwhile to pause to think about why that is so.

An important feature of Aristotle's conception of the efficient cause is that it allows for evaluation of the *success* of the change which it explains (or to which it gives rise). An example will illuminate the idea. The relevant explanatory principles in the case of the production of a Tarte Tatin are those constituting the craft of baking pastry, in this case the recipe for Tarte Tatin. These principles specify what it would take to produce a Tarte Tatin – but not just any Tarte Tatin. Rather, they specify what it would take to make a good Tarte Tatin, in the sense in which the finished product should fulfill some minimal (or perhaps typical) standards for such pastries.<sup>38</sup> If the result of the process of making the pastry fails to reach those standards, one can deem the process itself unsuccessful. If it fulfills or even exceeds them, one can deem it successful or excellent. Of course, this evaluation is available only if the Tarte Tatin was produced in such a way that those principles are in fact explaining how it was produced (i.e., it must have been produced by the application of those principles and not, for example, by chance).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Some might be worried that Aristotle's confinement of the term *praxis* in *EE* 2.6 to rational action undermines the point I am making since, praise and blame would be applicable to us not only in virtue of us being the causes of what we do, but also in virtue of us being rational agents. As I will argue in the next section, however, Aristotle is not constraining *praxis* in a broad sense, in terms of which he discusses voluntariness at the end of *EE* 2.6 and in 2.7-9, to human beings. The discussion in the *NE* certainly does not constrain action in this way and it makes praise and blame available for more than just adult human beings.

<sup>37</sup> On my view, then, being causally responsible (in Aristotle's sense) for an action is not just a necessary condition for being potentially subject of praise and blame (this is the view of Cooper, 'Aristotelian Responsibility', 270). It is in fact also a sufficient condition for being potentially subject of praise and blame (although, of course, not for specifically moral kind of praise and blame).

<sup>38</sup> For a similar point, see A. Falcon, "Aristotle on Causality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/aristotle-causality/>>.

<sup>39</sup> For these points, see Aristotle's discussion in *NE* 2.4, 1105a16-5b1.

In general, efficient causes allow one to evaluate the success of the changes that they explain since they link the final product with the process or change that leads to it.

The same point applies also to the substance that plays the role of the efficient cause (i.e., that carries out or initiates the change) – say, to the pastry chef that bakes. When one is the efficient cause of a pie, one is so in virtue of the possession of the principles of the craft of pie-making. A bad pie is an inferior instance of the exercise of that craft. When one deems the pie bad, one thereby implies that the person who produced it did a poor job in producing the pie and so that the person was, at least in this instance, a bad baker.<sup>40</sup>

There is, of course, an important and crucial difference between certain types of efficient causes. For example, one might think of parents as being the efficient cause of their child. Although it is up to them whether or not they attempt to start the process of pregnancy, the process itself (as well as its result) is not in their control: the child develops on its own. It might be that in some cases the process is unsuccessful or that the child is born with a genetic disorder. Although evaluation of this process is thus available (in terms of success and failure), it is not a process to which the practice of praise and blame applies at all since the bad outcomes are (usually) either due to nature (i.e., inherited), necessity (i.e., due to some material insufficiency), or bad luck (say, an accident). The practice of praise and blame presupposes that what is praised or blamed can be varied from case to case *and* that this variation is due to individual agency.

The upshot is that if one is (*qua* individual) the efficient cause of some action or production, one thereby not only ‘owns’ the change (i.e., is causally responsible for *it* – not just for its initiation), but one can be also be evaluated according to the standards for changes of that sort. If one fails to uphold them, one can be *blamed* and if one succeeds, one can be *praised* for one’s achievement. Praise and blame so conceived are not tied to *moral* consideration. This is evident by Aristotle’s claims that one can praise not only virtuous people for their virtues, but also people who are strong for their strength, and people who are fast runners for their speed (*NE* 1.12, 1101b12-8). Rather, praise and blame in this sense are tied to the success or failure in upholding or exceeding the standards that pertain to one’s conduct (or production).

In Aristotle’s mind, then, individual agency and the applicability of praise and blame come together. He has no problem seeing the things of which we are the efficient causes as at the same time things that are praised or blamed. In section 4, I will take up this connection and discuss how Aristotle’s

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<sup>40</sup> One can think of the principles of a given craft in two ways. On the one hand, there are the principles of the craft *as they are present* in the mind of a particular craftsman. On the other hand, there are the principles of the craft that can be represented as an ideal body of knowledge. Thus a shoe that is not up to the standards of shoemaking as such can still be a ‘perfect’ product of a craftsman insofar as her knowledge (or lack thereof) of the craft of shoemaking is concerned. But the extent of the craftsman’s knowledge of a craft is always measured against the ideal body of knowledge that constitutes the craft. If what she does qualifies as an exercise of the craft at all, she is subject to the standards of the craft.

account of causal responsibility naturally gives rise to a normative account of responsibility. But there is still work to be done before we get there. Aristotle has yet to tell us the conditions for being efficient causes of actions in the way he has just specified. At the end of *EE* 2.6, he asserts that there is a universal agreement that actions that are voluntary (*hekousia*) and those that are decided on (*kata prohairesin*) are of such nature. In the next section (3), I turn to Aristotle's discussion of voluntary action insofar as it is concerned with establishing the conditions under which we (as individuals) are the efficient causes of action.

### 3. *EE* 2.7-9: Efficient Causes and Voluntary Actions

Aristotle considers three candidates for what makes actions voluntary: the actions have to be done according to desire (*orexis*), or decision (*prohairesis*), or thought (*dianoia*). *EE* 2.7 is devoted to the discussion of the first option. Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of desire: appetite, spirit, and wish. He then argues that for any one of them, there are always cases of voluntary actions that are not done according to it. He concludes that voluntary actions are not those that are done in accordance with desire. A similar argument is then applied to the second option (decision) at the beginning of *EE* 2.8. This is understandable in view of Aristotle's claim that decision is a certain kind of desire (e.g., 1226b19-20). The voluntary cannot be that which is in accordance with decision (1224a1-4) since there are things we do voluntarily but not in accordance with decision (for example, things we do 'in a flash').

The argument of this whole section (*EE* 2.7 and 2.8 up 1224a4) is curious. Even if no particular type of desire is required for voluntary action, could it not be the case that some desire must always be involved, whether it would be an appetite, spirit, wish, or decision? This possibility is not missed by Aristotle but it is one he must reject in its unqualified form. Aristotle has already indicated that he is interested in actions that we do as individuals and so only in actions that are explained by reference to us as individuals. As Aristotle will soon explain in more detail, not all desires we have are our own desires since some desires we have belong to something (e.g., human nature) or someone (e.g., gods) other than to us even if they are in us. Aristotle's rather abrupt transition in the *EE* 2.8 (at 1224a5) to the discussion of compelled actions is best understood in precisely this light – as an inquiry into the conditions under which we are not the efficient causes of actions that we, nevertheless, perform since we are not acting for the sake of our own goals (and so not on our own desires).

Aristotle's discussion of compulsion is divided into three parts. In the first part, he focuses on actions done from physical compulsion (1224a13-30). The section clarifies two important features of compelled actions: their origin must be external to the agent and they must go against the agent's internal impulse. The section is also crucial for understanding what, on Aristotle's account, constitutes individual

agency as opposed to instinctual action. As Aristotle further notices, some non-compelled actions bear resemblance to compelled actions because they appear to fulfill one or both of these conditions. On the one hand, there are actions in which the efficient cause is in the agent but she nevertheless does something which goes against her internal impulse. These are uncontrolled and self-controlled actions, discussed in the second section (1224a30-1225a2). On the other hand, there are actions in which one appears to be compelled to act by something external but the compulsion is psychological rather than physical.<sup>41</sup> These actions are discussed in the third section (1225a2-b36).

#### *Physically Compelled Actions (1224a13-30)*

I start with a translation of the relevant passage:

- (4) It seems, then, that, in the case of actions, the compelled and the necessitated, and compulsion and necessitation, are opposed to the voluntary and to persuasion. But, in general, we speak of the compelled and necessitation also in the case of inanimate things – as when we say that a stone is moved upwards and fire downwards by compulsion and by being necessitated. But when they are moved according to their nature, that is according to the impulse that they have on their own right, [they are not moved] by compulsion—but they are also not said to be [engaging in] voluntary [movements]: but the opposed states have no name. We say that it is by compulsion only when they are moved contrary to that [impulse that they have in their own right]. Similarly also, in the case of animate things and the case of animals, we see that they undergo and do many things by compulsion, when something external sets them in motion against the impulse that is inside them. In inanimate things there is [only] one originating source [of movement], but in animate things there is more than one. For desire and reason are not always in harmony. So, in the case of animals other [than human beings] compulsion is of one kind, as it is in inanimate things (for they do not have reason and desire opposed, but live [only] by desire). But in the human being they are both present, at a certain time of life, at which time we also assign actions [to the human being]. For we do not say that a child acts, or an animal either, but only someone who can already act through reasoning. (*EE* 1224a13-30)

In the passage, Aristotle introduces two different cases of doing something when compelled. In both cases one is compelled to move or do something against one's impulse. In the first case, the impulse against which one moves is what we might call a *fixed* or *natural* impulse. This case corresponds to the example of the stone which is compelled to move upwards (by being thrown). In the second case, one moves against an impulse that we might call an *acquired* impulse. This happens only in the case of animate beings. As Aristotle claims, only actions done on an acquired impulse are voluntary. Although all cases in which one moves, or does something against either of these two kinds of impulses are cases of compulsion, it does not follow that when one moves or does something according to either of them, one does it voluntarily (1224a18-20). This happens only when one acts on an acquired, but not on a fixed

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<sup>41</sup> Pace D. Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"', 8-9 who thinks that in the *EE* all such actions are classified as involuntary.

impulse. Aristotle does not offer a name for the movement or action of the latter sort, but we might call them natural (for inanimate objects) and instinctual (for animate things) movements or actions.

A fixed or natural impulse is, generally, an impulse that one has because one is a thing of a certain natural kind. This impulse is fixed for one in such a way that if one did not have it, one would not be of the same kind. Even inanimate things, in Aristotle's universe, have a natural impulse, namely an impulse to go to their natural place. For example, rocks naturally move downwards towards the center of the universe (e.g., *Phys.* 208b9-10).<sup>42</sup> They do so because it is part of what it is to be a rock to move in this way (and so, according to Aristotle, to have a sort of natural impulse). There is no rock which does not have it. Although rocks can be *compelled* to move against this impulse (for example, when thrown upwards), the opposite case, when they move according to it, is not a voluntary movement. This is because their impulse (to move downwards) is fixed by their nature as rocks. In order to explain why a rock moved downwards, all one needs are facts about rocks as a certain kind of things. There is nothing distinct about any particular rock that would contribute to its moving downwards. In fact, any rock of the same shape and size would behave the same way. In the terminology of introduced in (4), the natural movement of a particular rock is not up to the rock but, rather, due to its nature.

Aristotle extends this analysis to animate things, including non-rational animals, children, and adult human beings (1224a20-30). As opposed to inanimate things, non-rational animals, children and adult human beings have not only fixed but also acquired impulses. This is because some of their impulses are acquired and their acquisition depends on particular circumstances in which they were acquired. They thus exhibit individual variations within the same species. Animate beings can therefore engage not only in compelled or natural movements, but also in voluntary movements. They do so when they do something according to their individual or acquired impulses. Still, when they act or do something on an impulse which is natural for them (say, invariable across the species), what they do is merely instinctual.

In (4), Aristotle simultaneously introduces the idea that what compels is always something external to what is being compelled. He first asserts this about inanimate objects, but then goes on to maintain that *every* case of moving or doing something under compulsion is of that sort. As he says, when non-rational animals and children are compelled to move or to do something, they are always compelled in the way in which inanimate things are (1224a25-7) – namely, as the context makes clear, by something external. However, one might interpret Aristotle as maintaining instead that, just like inanimate things,

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<sup>42</sup> Although Aristotle appears to attribute 'impulse' to inanimate things in *EE* 2.8, he denies that they have any such impulses in *Phys.* 7.4. But perhaps he uses the word 'impulse' in relation to inanimate things in *EE* only in order to make his discussion of movements of inanimate things continuous with that of animate things since compelled action will be one against impulse. Instead of moving according to a natural impulse, in *Phys.* 7.4 he talks of moving according to nature so that, say, the stone's nature is to be down and coming to be down is the actualization of that nature (or potentiality). This way of talking avoids attributing impulses to inanimate things.



non-rational animals and children also do not do anything voluntarily when they move on their own. One could think this because the connection between being compelled in the same way as inanimate things and being compelled by something external is not explicitly asserted. One's inclination in this regard might be strengthened by Aristotle's claim that 'we do not say that a child acts, nor yet an animal' (1224a28-9).<sup>43</sup>

This interpretation would require that Aristotle thinks that the impulses of non-rational animals and children are just like the natural impulses of inanimate things. But there is little or no reason to think this either on the basis of the passage in the *EE* or on general Aristotelian grounds.<sup>44</sup> In the passage, he says that non-rational animals and children only have one kind of impulse, namely, as we know from elsewhere, an impulse to pursue pleasure and avoid pain whereas (as he adds) adult human beings have two, namely, reason and non-rational desire (1224a24-28). Since the two impulses he attributes to adults are rational and non-rational desire, the contrasting case in which there is only one impulse must be having just non-rational desire. Accordingly, when non-rational animals and children are compelled to do something, they are always compelled to do it against this one sort of impulse (1224a25) whereas with adult human beings they can be compelled against two kinds of impulse (1224a27). But, in either case, what compels them is something external. It is thus open for Aristotle to maintain that non-rational animals and children can do things voluntarily – provided that the impulse according to which they move or do something is one that they have acquired in the way just described – even if, they do not act (1224a29).

According to Aristotle's analysis so far, an action or change is compelled when (1) its origin is external to what acts or performs the change and (2) when the action or change goes against an internal impulse (either fixed or acquired) of what acts or performs the change. In view of these two conditions, one might be tempted to adopt the view that compelled involuntary actions are not actions at all.<sup>45</sup> This at least appears to be Aristotle's view in the *NE*, where he asserts that in the case of compelled actions the

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<sup>43</sup> See, recently, for example D. Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"'.  
<sup>44</sup> It seems clear that only some (and in some case only few) impulses of non-rational animals and children are fixed in the way required by Aristotle to make their actions purely instinctual. For example, all human babies have suckling and grasping instincts and all cats instinctively mark their territory by rubbing themselves against objects within the territory. But many things that both non-rational animals and children do are not fixed in this way. Many or even most non-rational animals learn things as they go through their lives. They acquire habits to do things in ways that make them distinct from other animals of the same species (*Met.* 1.1, 980a27-980b27). When they do things in such ways, the impulse according to which they act is not fixed by their nature but, rather, acquired or developed. There are, of course, some animals that do not have any such developed or acquired impulses, such as grubs or maggots (e.g., *DA* 428a5-14 and 433b31-34a10) and many in which the extent to which they can develop their impulses is very small (for example, alligators). However, there are many animals that possess substantial capacities to acquire and develop habits and impulses over and above the impulses that they have fixed by their natures, such as apes, dolphins, dogs or elephants.

<sup>45</sup> It is important to see that any view that claims that voluntariness is restricted, on Aristotle's view, to rational actions (such as that of David Charles) is committed to the view that involuntary actions are not actions at all (since they need not be results of any rational agency at all).

one who acts or rather suffers (1110a1-5) ‘contributes nothing’ (1110b1-2). Aristotle’s example is someone who is being carried away by wind or people (*NE* 3.1, 1110a4). It is tempting to interpret this and other such examples in such a way that the person who is compelled to act is completely passive. However, there is no such explicit statement in the *EE* and Aristotle’s examples in the *EE* are not conclusive. For example, his description of the case in which one’s hand is used by someone else to strike one (or someone else) (1224b13-5) is introduced not as an example of an involuntary action but as an example of what it is for an external origin to necessitate by moving or impeding movement against internal impulse. This is compatible with the view that if the result is an involuntary action, the agent cannot be completely passive.

The question cannot be easily settled by appealing to any explicit statements by Aristotle. Even if Aristotle sometimes says that one *acts* involuntarily, such statements need not reflect the proper, theoretical notion of action (whether in the strict or in the broad sense). On the other hand, even when he says that the agent ‘contributes nothing’ his claim might still be interpreted in various ways (including ways in which he would still be acting).<sup>46</sup> But it may be possible to settle the issue by thinking about the kind of actions that would be involuntary according to the conditions introduced so far. The following example can illustrate the point. Balder is being pushed to walk down the street by a slowly moving, impenetrable crowd of people. Although he does not want to walk down the street at all, he is always compelled to make one further step as the crowd pushes him. Balder is doing something – he is walking. At the same time, however, he has no control over where he is going. He cannot, for example, change the direction in which he is going: he has *no choice* but to walk down the street. He tries to resist, of course, but to successfully resist the crowd is not something he can actually accomplish, no matter how much he tries. The push of the crowd exceeds Balder’s ability to resist – it ‘knocks out’ (ἐκκρούει) (1224b24) his ability to translate his own desire to actions. Instead, he is forced to move in a way that makes him accomplish an action he does not want to do. Since Balder has no desire to perform this action, he cannot be the efficient cause of his own action: it is he who walks, but it is not his own internal psychological states that explain his walking. In this sense, then, Balder is acting involuntarily.

The point of the example – as well as of the condition that the action must be against an internal impulse – is that the agent has *no choice* but to act and to act as she does.<sup>47</sup> If she did have a choice, the impulse (against which she acts) would lead her to act that way rather than in the way that she actually

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<sup>46</sup> For example, one might claim that he means that the agent does not contribute anything insofar as his individual desires and beliefs are concerned. This is compatible with the agent still contributing something, say, by moving her limbs.

<sup>47</sup> The example of the wind thus needs to be understood in such a way that the person is pushed to walk in the direction of the wind, having no control over where he is walking. In my account of this example, I have been anticipated by J. M. Cooper, ‘Aristotelian Responsibility’, 280-2.

(and involuntarily) does.<sup>48</sup> The important point is that the agent's action is not explainable in terms of the agent's desires and, in fact, goes against them. Balder's walking down the street is not something that makes sense from the point of view of any of his goals or ends. This means that rather than being explained by any of his desires, Balder's walking is explained by the presence and activity of the crowd. We can explain what he does without referring to any desire he would have for *that* action. This conception of physically compelled action allows that the agent *herself* engages in the movements that constitute the action. This is because what she does is done *by her* as a reaction to some external circumstances. In this sense, Balder's walking is still his action (in the broad sense) – even while he is forced to walk – since in walking he is reacting to the push of the crowd rather than being merely passive.<sup>49</sup>

If what I have just argued is true, we have a good reason to think that the notion of voluntariness applies more widely than just to actions in the strict sense which require reasoning as Aristotle introduced them at the beginning of *EE* 2.6 (1224a29). What made Balder's action involuntary was that its origin was external to Balder and that it was against his internal impulse. Consequently, removing these conditions should render what he does either voluntary or instinctual. If his internal impulse was acquired (say he would be feeling like walking up rather than down the street), then removing them should render the action voluntary. Thus, if Balder were to walk down the street on his own, say, simply because he felt like doing it, his action would be voluntary. The notion of action employed here is however not that of the action in the strict sense since a desire to walk up or down the street need not have resulted or even be supported by any reasoning – even a child or an animal can desire to do so. This, then, constitutes at least one reason to think that Aristotle does not deny, in the *EE*, that animals and children can do things voluntarily (i.e., act in the broad sense of the word and do so voluntarily).<sup>50</sup>

The account of compelled action in this section gives us a first insight into Aristotle's classification of different levels of agency. On the one hand, there are things we do that do not result from our individual agency but are due to our natural or fixed impulses. It is, of course, an empirical question, which things we (and non-rational animals) do in this way, but it is plausible that we do at least some things in such instinctual way. On the other hand, there are actions that result from individual agency

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<sup>48</sup> Unlike in the *NE*, in the *EE* Aristotle does not address the issue of actions in which the efficient cause of the action is external to the agent but the agent is not opposed to the action. These non-voluntary actions are discussed at *NE* 3.1, 1110b19-24.

<sup>49</sup> For this point, see Pierre-Marie Morel, 'Volontaire, involontaire et non-volontaire dans le chapitre 11 du DMA d'Aristote' in A. Laks and M. Rashed, *Aristote et le mouvement des animaux* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004), 167-84 at 169 who discusses it in connection with Aristotle's discussion of movements in *MA* 11.

<sup>50</sup> For a similar view, see Cooper, 'Aristotelian Responsibility', 286n6. An opposite view is held by D. Charles, 'The Eudemian Ethics on the "Voluntary"', 8.

since they are the results of acquired impulses. These actions are (or can be) voluntary and thus subject to evaluation and praise and blame.

On Aristotle's account, then, non-rational animals and children have individual agency in addition to acting on their instincts. This distinguishes Aristotle's view from the kind of view proposed for example by Christine Korsgaard who thinks that the 'principles that govern an animal's movements as he guides himself through his environment – the principles that govern his reactions to his perceptions – are what we may call his instincts'.<sup>51</sup> Although Korsgaard sees, correctly, that on Aristotle's view animals are subjects to the standards of success and failure,<sup>52</sup> she does not appreciate the full extent to which animals are thought of as agents by Aristotle. This is partly due to her thinking of animal action as being attributable to the animal's form.<sup>53</sup> On Aristotle's view, however, things that are attributable to the animal's form (i.e., to its nature) are not things for which the animal – *qua* individual – is responsible in a way that would make the evaluation of *the animal's* success (and the applicability of praise and blame) meaningful. It is only when the animal acts from acquired impulses, through its own agency, that what it does is attributable to *it* in the right way.

But Aristotle distinguishes two types of individual agency – rational and non-rational one. As he notes, in the case of human beings there are two types of internal impulse (reason and desire) and this complexity of human psychology gives rise to a more complex kind of agency than that of non-rational animals. The first complication arises when one thinks of compelled actions. Since these two impulses can oppose each other, one can end up acting on one but against another internal impulse. The second complication concerns the presence of rational cognition which allows for a distinct mode of compulsion, one not available in non-rational animals: namely, what one might, broadly, call psychological compulsion. I now turn to each of these cases.

#### *Lack of Control and Self-control (1224a30-1225a2)*

Aristotle's main motivation for discussing uncontrolled (*akratic*) and self-controlled actions (*enkratic*) lies in their peculiar character – they are actions which are in accordance with one but not with the other of the two kinds of impulses (rational and non-rational) that human beings, according to Aristotle, have. On the face of it, this raises the possibility that the action is in some sense compelled since it seems that one impulse is compelling the other. As Aristotle points out, if it is indeed the case that uncontrolled and self-controlled actions involve genuine compulsion (1224b12), it would follow that

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<sup>51</sup> C. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, Integrity* (Oxford, 2009), 104.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

either uncontrolled and self-controlled actions are not voluntary, or that when they are performed the one who performs them acts voluntarily and involuntarily at the same time (1224b37-1225a2).

Aristotle's answer to this problem is twofold. First, he reiterates that compulsion happens only when one is forced to do something by somebody or something external to oneself (1224b11-15). What leads people to think of uncontrolled and self-controlled actions as compelled is the mistake of thinking of the two impulses that human beings possess as being akin to two independent agents. In this, they are misled by the way they can speak – one can say that one's reason was compelled to go along with one's appetites, or vice versa. Since one can speak of impulses as if they were agents, one can make the mistake of transferring some of the agent-like properties one attributed to those impulses (such as being compelled) to the agent who has them. But this move is unwarranted since the attribution of any agent-like properties to impulses is only metaphorical. Impulses do not act – human beings do and so it is also only human beings that can be compelled. When a human being acts (or is compelled to act) it is her whole soul that moves her to act even if one can distinguish various elements in the soul that are not always in agreement with each other (1224b22-8).

In both uncontrolled and self-controlled actions, then, the relevant efficient cause is located in the agent's internal psychic states. The fact that the agent has also other states that are not in agreement with those states is irrelevant to the question of voluntariness. What matters is whether the states that cause the action belong or do not belong to the agent. From this point of view, Aristotle's well-known argument that if we accept as voluntary an action in which one does something that one thinks is good while finding it unpleasant, then we should also accept as voluntary an action in which one does something that one thinks is bad while finding it pleasant, is valid (*NE* 3.1, 1111a27-9). In both cases, it is the agent's own psychic states that caused the action.

#### *Psychologically Compelled Actions (1225a2-b36)*

In the last section of *EE* 2.8, Aristotle considers actions in which one is faced with a prospect of some unwanted evil (Aristotle's examples include flogging, imprisonment, and death) and in order to avoid this evil one has to do something that one would otherwise not want to do. As opposed to the cases of lack of control and self-control, one's impulses are in agreement about the undesirability of the proposed action. Since one engages in an action that one finds undesirable and since the unwanted prospect which the action helps one to avoid is imposed from outside, it might be argued that one is *compelled* to perform the action: given the prospect, one has no choice but to do whatever is required to

avoid it. As Aristotle points out, people in these situations ‘certainly say that they are compelled to do these things’ (1225a5-6).<sup>54</sup>

Aristotle begins by distinguishing between two different cases. In the first case, one is faced with an unwanted but bearable prospect. Aristotle is very clear that in this case one’s action (to avoid the prospect) is voluntary.<sup>55</sup> In the second case, one is faced with an unwanted and *unbearable* prospect. In this latter case, one acts ‘in a way under compulsion’ (1225a12) since one ‘does not decide on this very thing that one does, but on the goal for the sake of which’ (1225a13-4). Aristotle does not further explain this enigmatic claim. Instead, he says that the prospect that one is threatened with needs to be significantly evil and painful since otherwise any bad action that one would do in order to do something good or in order to avoid some evil would be done under compulsion (1225a14-9). This raises the question about what would count as such a sufficiently evil prospect. Aristotle answers that the prospect must be such that one’s nature is not able to bear it (1225a26), which in turn is explained as being such that to withstand it is not ‘within one’s natural desire and reasoning’ (1225a26). He also points out that in addition to certain cases of being threatened with evil prospects, as he discusses so far, this would include among compelled actions also some cases of emotions so strong that they ‘compel nature’ (1225a22) as well as people who utter prophecies due to divine inspiration (1225a28-33).<sup>56</sup>

It is not difficult to make sense of the first case of actions. The idea is that one chooses an action only because one finds oneself in unfavorable circumstances (such as being faced with unwanted prospects that one wants to avoid but the way to avoid them involves doing something undesirable). In other words, one does not wish to do the action except in those unfavorable circumstances. The other case – namely of actions that one also does only because one finds oneself in unfavorable circumstance yet

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<sup>54</sup> The discussion of the psychologically compelled actions is clearly related to the discussion of ‘mixed actions’ in *NE* 3.1, 1110a12-1110b18.

<sup>55</sup> ‘All the things of this sort [i.e., actions that one does not wish to do but one does them anyways because one is threatened with floggings, imprisonment, or death] that are up to a person himself that they be the case or not—even if he does what he does not have a wish to do—he does while acting voluntarily, and not under compulsion’ (1225a9-11).

<sup>56</sup> The discussion of the psychologically compelled actions is related to the discussion of ‘mixed actions’ in *NE* 3.1, 1110a12-1110b18. It is important to see that both discussions allow that some actions of this sort are involuntary, although the point is much clearer in the *EE* as is the explanation of why they are involuntary. In the *NE*, Aristotle says that ‘Concerning some [mixed actions] there is no praise, but there is pardon, whenever one does an action that one should not do on account of such things that overstrain human nature, and that no one would endure’ (1110a23-6). As he has already made clear at the beginning of *NE* 3.1, we award pardon to actions that are involuntary (1109b30-5). This is straightforward evidence against views which maintain that in the *NE* all cases of mixed actions are voluntary (e.g., K. Nielsen, “Dirtying Aristotle’s Hands? Aristotle’s Analysis of ‘Mixed Acts’ in the *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1,” in *Phronesis* 52 (2007), 270-300 at 277). Even when Aristotle goes on to say that there are things that we cannot be compelled to do (1110a26-9), he does not mean that human nature cannot be overstrained at all in this way or that even if it is overstrained we are still acting voluntarily. Rather, the claim is that there are actions that of such terrible nature that insofar as we are any (sane) agents at all, we cannot be compelled to do them by the kind of means (threats, etc.) he has just mentioned. That leaves it open that this is not true in other cases.

does them involuntarily – is much harder. On the face of it, it seems that these actions are structurally parallel to the first case. It might thus be best to start thinking about them in contrast to the first case. Since Aristotle describes the second (involuntary) kind of actions as done ‘in a way under compulsion’ because the agent does not decide ‘on the very thing’ she does, but does decide on the goal for the sake of which she does it, it seems reasonable to infer that in the first (voluntary case) the agent decides on the very thing that she does.

What makes Aristotle think that the agent who acts voluntarily (even while she is being threatened) decides on the action? The idea must be that since her prospects are assumed to be bearable their presence does not, by itself, explain why the agent acted in the way she did. An example will illustrate the point. Fiona is threatened with going to prison on false charges unless she betrays her friends. She can either go to prison and remain a faithful friend, or betray her friends and avoid prison. If Fiona refuses to betray her friends, we explain her action of going to prison by putting the action into the right relation with her desire to avoid harming his friends, namely as a means to an end, and by supposing that her action was operative as such, i.e., as the means, in her motivation. Although Fiona does not desire to go to prison in general, she does desire to do so in these circumstances and so decides to do just *that*. If, on the other hand, she should betray her friends, we explain her action in a similar way: by putting in into the right relation to her desire to avoid prison. Her acting on the desire to avoid prison does not just happen to constitute betraying her friends. Rather, betraying her friends is a means to avoiding it.<sup>57</sup>

The crucial point is that the explanation of Fiona’s action was given in terms of her own beliefs and desires. Although the unwanted prospect gave her a reason to act one way rather than another, that prospect did not, by itself, settle her action. The prospect made another course of action (i.e., not betraying her friends) less attractive to her, but it was still her own (individual) desire that led her to act as she did. Aristotle’s explanation of the voluntariness of the first sort of actions thus has nothing to do with, for example, the agent’s having more than one option to avoid the unwanted prospect, as it is sometimes suggested. Rather, as in the case of physically compelled actions, it has to do with the need to refer to the agent’s own beliefs and desires in explaining her action. It has to do with whether or not she acted on her own.

If the foregoing analysis is correct then we can expect that the other cases (those in which the agent acts involuntarily) are such that the agent’s action is not explained by reference to the agent’s own beliefs about and desires for the action, even if the goal of the action, as Aristotle says, is something the agent has herself adopted or agrees with. We may begin by noticing that in the first case, there was a means-end relationship between the agent’s goal and the action she took and that this relationship was

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<sup>57</sup> In contrast, Balder does not desire to walk down the street at all, not even in the circumstances in which he finds himself.

operative in the agent's motivation. Aristotle's description of the involuntary cases suggests that in them the relationship does not hold or, more precisely, it is not operative in the agent's motivation. The reason is the purported unbearability of the prospect that 'compels human nature' (11225a23) and so also compels the agent to act. Since Aristotle's definition of what it is to act under compulsion clearly stated that it is to act when the origin of the action is something external to the agent herself, it must be that, in these cases, the agent is made to act in such a way that the action is not explained by her *own* desire for the action despite the fact that the agent in some sense embraces the goal of the action.

It will be best to tackle this idea by modifying the previous example. Let's assume that Fiona is a highly-trained secret agent of a certain country who gets caught by terrorists bound on destroying her country. In order to make her reveal a secret code that would allow them to launch a nuclear missile, Fiona is being forced to watch her loved ones being tortured. The torture will stop only if she betrays her country and reveals the code. We can assume (along with Aristotle) that the psychological stress she undergoes is such that it 'compels human nature' (1225a23). So let us then imagine that Fiona breaks down and betrays her country and the torture stops. We have an action (betrayal) which resulted in avoidance of further pain to her loved ones and so in alleviating her own stress and pain. As Aristotle tells us, however, Fiona does not *decide* to betray her country, even if she embraces and so has a desire to avoid the pain to her children. But since she can only avoid it if she betrays her country, it seems that there is a means-end relationship between the two actions (betrayal and avoidance). The only way, then, to avoid the conclusion that she acted voluntarily is if this relationship was not operative in her motivation. In other words, it must be that her acting on the desire to avoid harm to her children only *incidentally* resulted in her betraying her friends. But since she knows that the relationship obtains, it also must be the case that she did not decide to act on the desire to avoid it. In other words, something else than *she* must have been the source of her action.

The idea is this. Although human nature can be conditioned to withstand various degrees of pain and stress, there are degrees of pain and stress which, when inflicted, will inevitably (instinctually) move one to avoid them. Some level of distress cannot be accommodated by habituation but is set by human nature as to be always avoided. When the distress that Fiona is inflicted with reaches this level, her individual ability to withstand pain becomes irrelevant and she moves to avoid it. So Fiona is acting on a desire she has (to avoid distress). However, that desire is not her individual desire but a fixed one. Her action is thus not explained by *any* desire she would have for doing so (i.e., for betraying her country). Rather, it is explained by the presence of the unbearable pain that makes her act to avoid it – just like



Balder who is being pushed and so has no choice but to walk, she has no choice but to betray her friends.<sup>58</sup>

Aristotle's point, then, in discussing the case of psychologically compelled actions, is that whether an action is voluntary depends on what it was that moved the agent to act and so, in turn, on what explains the action. If it were her own desires and beliefs, the action is voluntary, but if it was some external circumstance or, at any rate, something external to her individual agency, the action is involuntary.<sup>59</sup>

But there is a complication. In his account of physically compelled action at 1224a13-30, Aristotle thought of compelled actions as actions done against one's internal impulse, whether this impulse was acquired or natural (fixed). In the case of Fiona's action (or, in general, psychologically compelled action), it turns out that one acts on some fixed or natural impulse (or, as Aristotle says, for the sake of a goal that one embraces) yet one acts involuntarily. The action is however not merely instinctual because it goes against one's individual, acquired impulse and is something the agent wishes to resist.<sup>60</sup> The possibility of psychological compulsion of this sort tells us something important about the way in which human agency is unlike animal agency. Unlike non-rational animals, human beings can acquire impulses that can go, at least in particular circumstances, against their natural impulses or tendencies. This makes human predicament quite special and it is a crucial question to ask what enables human beings to acquire impulses of this sort.

Although we can distinguish, even in the case of non-rational animals, natural (fixed) and acquired impulses, these impulses do not come into conflict of the sort described in cases of psychological compulsion. This is because, ultimately, desires of non-rational animals, both fixed and acquired, are of one kind – they are all desires to pursue or avoid pleasure – and so the animal always acts according to its nature (even if not instinctually). Its desires might come into conflict but only insofar as it has not yet been determined which of them is more intense (or, to put it differently, which of the

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<sup>58</sup> Aristotle also considers cases in which one does or says something as a result of reasoning, but one is not the author of the reasoning (1225a25-35) since that reasoning is inspired or given to one by gods. Presumably, the idea is that, just like in other cases of compulsion, the action was not up to the agent in the sense just explained – the individual desires and beliefs of the agent played no role in the explanation of the action, the agent being a mere instrument of the gods. It is a pity that Aristotle either did not develop or we do not possess a text in which cases of this sort would be developed further.

<sup>59</sup> Since Aristotle makes his account of involuntariness dependent on what the nature of the one who acts can bear, one might wonder at which point it really becomes true that one has no more choice but is compelled to act by one's nature. If Aristotle means that it depends on a particular individual nature, he is in danger of diluting the notion of compelled action to the point that everything could be argued to be involuntary. However, if he means that it is in some sense an objective matter – that the nature in question is the shared human nature – he would only need to specify what the limits of human nature are. I want to suggest that Aristotle's is the latter idea but I will postpone the development of this thought to section 4.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Everson, 'Aristotle's Compatibilism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*', 98 who mistakenly identifies *all* compelled actions as actions explained by human nature.

conflicting goals is more pleasant or less painful). But a non-rational animal lacks the ability to evaluate whether or not having those desires is a good thing for it. All its desires are desires for bodily pleasures and, as such, cannot have as their objects anything else, certainly not other desires. It is important to see that on Aristotle's view, an animal could be extremely clever in finding out which desire it should act on. But it cannot evaluate the desirability of its own desires, whether instinctual or not.

Human beings, however, develop a kind of desire that is not attached to pleasure but, rather, to persuasion and goodness (even if the account of goodness is just pleasure). This desire has two features relevant for present purposes. First, it is not, as most ancient philosophers agree, given to us. Rather, it is developed or acquired by the process of acquiring rationality and although its object is *formally* given (goodness) it is not given materially – one needs to work out some conception of goodness (even if vague and temporary) in order to desire in this way. Second, since its object is conceptualized goodness it can take as its object anything that can be conceptualized as good – including having desires and instincts. And insofar as one can adopt various criteria for goodness – pleasure being just one such possibility – one's rational desires can come into conflict with one's natural tendencies in a way in which non-rational desires cannot. This kind of motivation is, however, more fragile than natural instincts or even non-rational desires and cases of psychological compulsion reveal one way in which it is such.

I will return to Aristotle's theory of rational action momentarily (section 4). At this time, however, it is time to turn to *EE* 2.9 and to Aristotle's definition of voluntary action which covers, as I will argue, both human and animal action.

#### *Definition of Voluntary Action in EE 2.9*

The analysis of the psychologically compelled actions makes clear that, in the case of human beings, Aristotle treats two kinds of origins (and so two kinds of efficient causes) as external (1225a2-b36). Some compelled involuntary actions have origins that are physically outside of the agent who acts. Other compelled involuntary actions have origins that are outside of the agent in the sense of being external to her as an individual or, to put the point more technically, that are external to her individual agency. Examples of such origins would be one's natural impulses or perhaps, in certain cases, physiological processes in one's body. In delineating the conditions under which the origin of an action is not in the agent in the relevant way (i.e., when the action is compelled), Aristotle has managed to isolate the conditions for voluntary actions. In order for one to perform an action voluntarily, one must:

- (1) act on a desire for the action;
- (2) the desire on which one acts must be one's own desire (i.e., an acquired desire);
- (3) the relationship between the goal at which one aims by the action and the action must be operative in one's motivation to perform the action.

As it turns out, when one satisfies these conditions, one also satisfies conditions for being the efficient cause of one's action. One is the efficient cause of an action if:

- (A) one's action can only be explained by reference to one's relevant desires;
- (B) and one is in possession of the principles in virtue of which one can engage in one's action as aimed at some goal.

A is true when the action is the result of one's own desire for the action (conditions 1 and 2) and B is true when the action is done as one aimed at a goal which one desires (condition 3). Aristotle's own formulation of these conditions in *EE* 2.9 is as follows:

- (5) So all the actions that one does when it is up to oneself not to do them (ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ ὄν μὴ πράττειν) one does while not in ignorance and on account of oneself (μὴ ἀγνοῶν καὶ δι' αὐτόν), these actions must be voluntary, and that is what voluntary is. But all the actions that one does while in ignorance or because of ignorance (ἀγνοῶν καὶ διὰ τὸ ἀγνοεῖν), one does involuntarily.

The definition can be summarized as follows:

- (D) An action is voluntary if the action is up to one (to do or not to do).<sup>61</sup>

In order for an action to be up to one (to do or not to do):

- (D1) one must perform the action while not in ignorance and
- (D2) one must perform it on account of oneself.

D1 captures the idea that the relationship between the goal at which one aims by the action and the action must be operative in one's motivation to perform the action. In the *EE* 2.9, Aristotle states this condition as including three elements: whom, with what, and for the sake of what (1225b1). The idea is that one can fail to know either what one is doing (for example, one is drinking poison but one thinks that it is wine), or with what one is doing (for example, one is putting out fire with gasoline but one thinks it is water), or even what the goal of one's action is (for example, when one is killing one's father but thinks that one is saving him instead). In all these cases, the action that one performs is an incidental result of one's acting on a desire for a quite different action. When one starts putting out fire with what one thinks is water the action of lighting it up further is not something one wants to do but it *happens* (given the unknown circumstance of not having water but gasoline in the container) that one's action constitutes a quite different action. D2 captures the idea that the desire must be one's own. It would not be satisfied

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<sup>61</sup> I have already explained the meaning of the phrase 'up to one' above. It might appear that in (6), Aristotle formulates the condition that an action is 'up to one' only negatively: 'all the actions that one does when it is up to oneself not to do them' and one might wonder whether this has any special significance. However, note that the action is presumed to have been already done. Hence, one could reformulate the sentence as follows: 'all the actions that it is up to one to do or not to do'.

when the desire (or reasoning) on which one acts, would not belong to one as the individual one is, but to one's shared human nature or to somebody else, say, gods. In other words, this condition states that the action cannot be compelled and must be done as a result of an acquired (rather, than a fixed) impulse. These are then, Aristotle's conditions for voluntary actions which he understands, as I have argued, as expressions of successful individual agency.

Before I move on, I need to address the issue about the kind of knowledge required for voluntary action. It is sometimes thought that in requiring that the agent knows the particulars of her action, Aristotle excludes non-rational animals and children from doing things voluntarily. Thus David Charles claims that

...the type of reasoning or thought required is something that animals and children lack (1224a29). It involves searching and reasoning about what is best to do (1142b15) and is used to address the question: shall I do this or that? Hence children and animals do not act \*voluntarily\* (in the *EE*) not simply because they do not 'act' (in some narrow or specialized sense of act) but because they do not possess the type of reasoning required for \*voluntary\* agents.<sup>62</sup>

It is certainly true that deliberation is one type of thought and that engaging in it would satisfy Aristotle's conditions. But the examples that Aristotle gives of the required particulars (at whom one's action is directed, or what one is aiming at) are all pieces of information which can be derived from other sources than deliberation, in particular from perception, memory, and/or self-awareness. In other words, the kind of knowledge that Aristotle requires can very well be knowledge accessible to children or non-rational animals – *phantasia* and experience can play the role of thought in action, as Aristotle emphasizes (*Met.* 980a12-13; *DA* 3.10, 433a9-15). There is no reason to suppose that a child does not know that she is drawing a picture of Cinderella so that she can show to her parents how well she can paint, or that a cat does not know that she is about to catch a meal when she's is stalking a mouse.

In fact, it would be a mistake to insist that when Aristotle says that the agent knows the relevant particular, he uses the term 'knowledge' in a technical sense. If that was the case, a vast number of actions that Aristotle considers voluntary would turn out to be involuntary since we rarely act with the kind of understanding that Aristotelian *epistemē* requires. In fact, in that case, Aristotle should have restricted voluntary actions to those done on deliberation and decision – an option which he explicitly and repeatedly rejects (1226b30-1227a1). The point of the knowledge requirement is quite different. It is supposed to specify the features of the internal impulse that the impulse must have if acting on it is to make the agent who does so the efficient cause of her action. In particular, the impulse must be informed or contain 'the recipe' for realizing the action. And this involves, quite precisely, knowledge of what one

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<sup>62</sup> D. Charles, "The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"", 11.

is doing, with what and for what result. This is true whether the agent in question is an adult human being or a cat. Even the cat must know how to catch a mouse if she is to be the efficient cause of her catching it. Of course, she does not know it in the technical sense of the term, but she certainly has the relevant experience and information in her cognitive system that informs her impulses. In other words, if one's desire is to count as the efficient cause, it must not only be aimed at some goal (say, eating a nice meal), but also tied with or informed by knowledge of how to achieve it. Notice that Aristotle does not require that the agent knows the why (*dia ti*), that is, that she grasps what she is doing in light of her knowledge or rationally grounded beliefs.<sup>63</sup> As Aristotle says, 'nothing prevents that the many have an opinion that something should be done or should not be done, though not through reasoning' (*EE* 2.11, 1226b23-5). One can know that in order to get X, one should do Y, without at the same time grasping (or being capable of grasping), the reason why Y is suitable for X.

On this view, then, voluntary action requires that the internal impulse in the agent that causes what she does contains the relevant information enabling the agent to realize her goal by some appropriate means. But it is not required that one has deliberated about how to achieve the goal – one could have just as well relied on experience and memory. The important point is, however, that those principles were in the agent making the agent, rather than something else, the efficient cause of what she was doing.

#### 4. Normative Responsibility

I have suggested (section 1) that if one is, *qua* individual, the efficient cause of some action or production, one thereby not only owns it (i.e., is causally responsible for it), but one can be also held accountable for upholding (or for failing to uphold) the standards for changes of that sort. This normative feature of Aristotle's account is rooted in his conception of efficient cause as a certain kind of explanation in terms of principles for realizing Aristotelian forms in matter. The degree to which a form is successfully actualized provides an immediate criterion by which to judge the success of the process of realizing the form. Aristotle thus has no problem seeing the things of which we are the efficient causes as at the same time things that are praised or blamed.

But what are these standards and what grounds their validity? In the case of non-rational animals, Aristotle can appeal to an animal's formal nature as to its final cause which constitutes the goal and good of their organic development and functioning. The animal's form determines the kind of life that is good for the animal (i.e., its needs) and the standards for its activities are just the standards of efficacy and

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<sup>63</sup> This is also true of *NE*: 'Perhaps, then, it is not a bad idea to define them [i.e., the particulars], what they are and how many: who is doing it; what he is doing; about what or to what he is doing it; and sometimes also with what he is doing it (with what instrument, for example); and for what result (for example, safety); and in what way (for example, gently or hard)' (1111a2-6).

efficiency in producing that kind of life. If leopard A can stalk more efficiently than leopard B, then A is more successful in realizing the kind of life that it, as leopard, is supposed to realize. When a leopard mother teaches its cubs to stalk she will, accordingly, encourage the kind behavior in stalking that is, in her experience, the most effective way of stalking prey. Notice that although animal natures determine the standards for actions that are good for the animal, the actions themselves are not results of mere instincts that would be somehow hard-wired in the animal's nature. A kitten might have an instinct to chase and hunt, but she does not know *what* to chase and hunt or how to do so *effectively* unless she is taught by her mother. The range of instinctual versus voluntary actions can vary from one species to another, but Aristotle is correct in distinguishing them.<sup>64</sup>

In the case of human beings, one can also appeal to human formal nature in order to determine the good of human development and functioning and then tie the standards for human action to it. Even though rationality considerably widens the scope of human action and behavior, one can still determine what things are naturally good for human beings and then determine the extent to which they are to be pursued by an appeal to the human good. In the *EE*, Aristotle employs a procedure along these lines in order to determine the standards for human actions (*praxeis*) and choices (*haireseis*) concerning things that are naturally (*phusei*) good:

Surely then there is a standard (τις ὁρος) also for the physician, by reference to which he judges what is healthy for a body and what is not, and towards which each thing is to be done up to a certain extent and [one is] healthy when [it is done] well, but not if more or less [is done]. So it is also for the excellent person concerning his actions and choices (αἰρέσεις) of things naturally good but not praised. There must be a standard (δεῖ τινα εἶναι ὄρον) and both for the possession and the choice and also for avoidance and for the abundance and scarcity of money and success (1248a21-1248b2).

The best standards for our actions and choices are ultimately those that will best promote or produce the contemplation of god (*theōria tou theou*) (1249b17). Insofar as our use of external goods (1218b30-7) is concerned (i.e., of things such as money, wealth, or health), the standard for them is provided by something which is, on Aristotle's view at least, the highest of all things good (i.e., by that which fully satisfy our most human need).

But although a procedure of this sort can determine what one overall goal – insofar as one's own good (happiness) is concerned – should be and so what the standard for judging one's life overall should be, it does not establish the normative standards for any particular actions. It might well be that, for example, the pursuit of health should be subordinated to or embedded in the pursuit of the highest human

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, Integrity* (102-4) who sees formal natures of animals as constituting the standards of the success and failure of their non-rational actions (102-4), but identifies all such actions as instinctual (102-4).

good (rather than, say, being itself the focus of one's life), but that does not mean that the standards for health are established by the highest good itself. Similarly, it might be that one's pursuit of a craft, say that of shoemaking or medicine, should be subordinated to or embedded in the pursuit of the highest human good, but that does not mean that the standards for shoemaking or medical care are established by the highest good itself. Moreover, human actions and exercise of various crafts occur in the context of human society and culture and so involve and have consequences for other people. In addition to normativity which is grounded in natural needs, we thus also see, in the case of human beings, normativity which is established by and in a societal context.

As Aristotle sees it, acting in a certain capacity is always governed by certain norms or standards pertaining to that capacity: we come to expect people to act in certain ways depending on the personal, societal, or human roles that they have. For example, if one is acting as a physician, then there are certain standards that one is expected to fulfill. If one does not fulfill them, one can be justly held responsible for the failure (unless one fails because of some recognized problem, such as disease). The difference between the doctor who did not know what she was supposed to know and a good one is not that one was acting involuntarily or was not the origin of her action, but rather that the bad one did not take care to know as she was supposed to. In a similar way, being an adult human being living in a society implies certain expectations or norms and failure to fulfill them may be blameworthy.

We can see the norms or expectations that pertain to human conduct at work in Aristotle's explanation of the voluntariness of uncontrolled actions. Although an uncontrolled agent might find it (subjectively) impossible to resist her desire, this subjective experience is not, according to Aristotle, relevant to being held responsible for one's actions. As he sees it, unless the agent's nature makes her stand outside of the expected norms, it was her responsibility to take care to not become the kind of person that acts that way. After all, the uncontrolled agent's condition in which she gives in to certain pleasures is not the result of any particular external (overstraining) circumstances. If that was the case, everybody would be uncontrolled in those circumstances. Rather, it is the result of a life in which the agent did not apply herself enough to the proper habituation of her appetites. Since habituation is realized not just during childhood, but also (and especially) during adulthood through the conditioning of one's soul through reasoned decisions, it was up to her to take care. The uncontrolled agent's failure to resist is, in a way, equal to a failure to live up to reasonable expectations for a human being: 'perhaps he is the kind of person who does not care. But he is responsible for becoming that kind of person, because he has lived not caring' (*NE* 3.5, 1114<sup>a</sup>3-5). A similar thought is expressed in *EE* 2.9 itself:<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See also the following passage: 'For it is not astonishing if someone is overcome by strong and excessive pleasures or pains, but it is pardonable if he struggles against them... But it is [astonishing] if someone is overcome by what most people can resist and cannot withstand it, not because of some hereditary nature or because of disease

But since having knowledge and understanding has two senses, one [of them being] being having, the other using knowledge, a person who has but is not using [knowledge] could in one way justifiably be said to be ignorant (while acting), but in another way not, for example, if he failed to use it due negligence (δι' ἀμέλειαν μὴ ἐχρήτη). Similarly, someone could also be blamed even if he did not have it, if it was easy or essential [knowledge] that he did not have and the lack was due to negligence or pleasure or pain. (1225b10-6)

This theory sheds light on why Aristotle thinks that one is not acting voluntarily if one's nature is being compelled to act. The limits of what human nature can withstand are constituted by the societal or other norms which express the agreed upon expectations concerning what a human being should endure. One might go even further (as Aristotle well might) and think, rather optimistically, that human beings have, on the basis of long-term experience, more or less correctly figured out what those limits are and constructed the norms according to those findings. When Aristotle says that 'many classify even love as involuntary, and certain cases of anger and certain natural states as being too strong for <human> nature (ὕπερ τὴν φύσιν)' (1225a21-23), he does not mean that all cases done under emotional stress are involuntary.<sup>66</sup> Rather, he means that in certain cases, cases in which human nature is being compelled since the stress exceeds the generally agreed upon abilities of human beings to withstand emotional hardship, we can pardon human beings' actions since they are not voluntary.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Actions on Decisions

I have argued that Aristotle's interest in his discussion of voluntary action is in individual agency and, accordingly, in individual causal responsibility. I have also argued that Aristotle's theory of causal responsibility is not separable from certain normative features that give rise to responsibility in a normative sense. Since in *EE* 2.9 Aristotle has officially finished his discussion of voluntary action (he announces this at the start of 2.10), he now proceeds to discuss the other case of things of which one is cause as an individual (as announced at *EE* 2.6, 1223a15-6), namely actions on decisions. Before I discuss the significance of these actions within the context of the discussion of voluntariness, it will be useful to

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(as, for instance, the Scythian kings' softness is hereditary, and as the female is distinguished from the male)' (*NE* 7.7, 1150b6-15).

<sup>66</sup> As D. Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"', 8-9 takes him to mean.

<sup>67</sup> A theory of normative responsibility along these lines is not a theory of moral responsibility in the Kantian sense (i.e., one centered around the notions of autonomy or freedom). Rather, Aristotle's account shares affinities to some recent attempts to develop a theory of moral responsibility that would circumvent the rather recalcitrant issues of autonomy and freedom. For a philosopher who draws some inspiration for his account of uncontrolled agent's responsibility, see, G. Watson, 'Skepticism about Weakness of Will' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Jul., 1977), 316-39. For a useful overview of the recent discussion of responsibility as attributability, see D. Shomemaker, 'Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: Toward a Wider Theory of Moral Responsibility' in *Ethics*, Vol. 121, No. 3 (April 2011), 602-32.



remind ourselves of the three different cases of action (in a broad sense) that Aristotle has distinguished so far:

1. Voluntary Actions: actions resulting from acquired internal impulses
2. Involuntary Actions:
  - a) Compelled Actions: actions resulting from external agency or circumstances and done against internal impulses or, in the case of rational animals, also actions done on fixed or natural impulses and against acquired internal impulses.
  - b) Actions Done in Ignorance
3. Instinctual Actions: actions resulting from fixed or natural impulses

Notice that rationality has so far played an explicit role only in the account of involuntary actions since rationality is a precondition of certain forms of psychological compulsion. In fact, the account of normative responsibility offered in the previous section applies to adult human beings just as it does to non-rational animals and children. Although the ends that adult human beings try to realize are more complex than those of non-rational animals or children and although what counts as standard is often a matter of societal agreement, the evaluation of the action is still, at its core, an evaluation of the success (or failure) to realize the end. Praise and blame, when applicable, would then also seem to be of the same sort in all cases: they would be ways of encouraging or discouraging the desired or appropriate behavior. There would, then, in principle be no difference of substance, merely of degree, between praise and blame awarded to non-rational animals or children for their actions, and to adult human beings. This might lead one to wonder whether Aristotle is sensitive to the kind of attitudes that we have when we judge, praise or blame adults as opposed to children or animals. I now want to argue that he is.

We can begin by observing that Aristotle singles out a special kind of praise that is awarded for things that are fine, as opposed to merely good (1248b16-24).<sup>68</sup> This kind of praise and blame is available only to those from whom one can reasonably expect virtuous behavior, namely appropriately developed adult human beings or, as Aristotle would perhaps put it, from those who are capable of decision (*prohairesis*) (1224b12). It is important to see that, as Aristotle puts it, in praising virtuous behavior we do not merely praise the action itself but *also* the motivational state (i.e., the virtue) from which it issued. We praise not only the action but also the reasons for which the action was done (1228a13-20).

This kind of praise and blame cannot apply to non-rational animals since for them the goal or end – namely pleasure – is set by nature – it is not something that is acquired or up to them. Human beings, however, are capable of choosing (*hairesis*) their goals and of deciding to act and acting for the sake of

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<sup>68</sup> This is very frequent in the *NE*. See, for example, *NE* 1109a29, 1110a20-1, 1144a26, 1155a30-3.

the goals so chosen (*prohairesis*). Only a fool – an unreflective person, as Aristotle says, would not take care to carefully choose the goal (or goals) around which she can construct her life (1224b12). As opposed to animals, then, we have characters that are themselves subjects to praise and blame (not just to evaluations) and we judge the character from the goals rather than from actions (1227b39-28a1). Thus although it is true that for Aristotle, praise and blame applies to voluntary agents, whether they are non-rational animals or human beings, insofar as they individual agents (i.e., efficient causes of their actions), it is not true that he does not see a difference between the kind of praise and blame that applies to adult human beings and the kind that applies to non-rational animals. The distinction is not, however, in that one kind of praise and blame is moral, and the other one is not. Rather, the distinction is in that praise and blame in one case apply to actions, but in the other case apply both to action and to one's motivations (and character).<sup>69</sup>

This brings us all the way back to the beginning of *EE* 2.6 where Aristotle has said that it is only human beings that can, properly speaking, *act*. Although, as I have argued, Aristotle does not deny that non-rational animals and children do things voluntarily, he does deny that they *act* strictly speaking. He does so on the grounds that they are incapable of reasoning. But why should one think that this ability is so important? Above, I have sketched a general answer: only rational animals are responsible for their own character and motivations. But how does reason make this possible? Since the ability to reason is what makes us capable of making and acting on decisions, the answer must be that decisions enable us to do something which beings incapable of them cannot do.

Aristotle discusses actions on decisions in *EE* 2.10-11. For the present purposes, it is not necessary to recount the details of these highly interesting chapters on decision. It suffices to note that Aristotle comes to the view that decision involves a specific kind of rational desire which he calls wish. This is a desire by which one grasps the goal at which one aims in action. It also includes deliberation, which is the thought-process by which one figures out how to reach or promote the goal that one wishes for. In this way, decision is a specific kind of efficient cause of actions because it not only includes a recipe of how to achieve a goal (that is true of all impulses resulting in voluntary actions), but also a reasoned grasp (achieved through deliberation) of the 'recipe', that is of the means-end relation that obtains between one's actions and goals.

But this does not yet help us to answer the question about how decisions make us responsible for our own motivations and character. In order to find that out, we need to go back to Aristotle's claim that happiness is something we can hope to achieve through our own efforts. The way we can do that,

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Cooper, 'Aristotelian Responsibility', 300 who holds that Aristotle does not distinguish between the kind of praise and blame that we apply to adults and the kind we apply to children and animals. I agree with Cooper that Aristotle does not distinguish any specifically moral kind of praise and blame and responsibility. But I do not agree that he does not see any difference between the ways in which we hold animals and adult human beings responsible.

according to Aristotle, is by acquiring and exercising virtues. As he further explains, virtues are acquired through repeated performance of those sorts of actions for which they are the dispositions. Although initially one may need to engage only in simple performance of such actions (without necessarily performing them with appropriate knowledge or for the right reasons), in the final stage one has to perform them consciously *for the right end* – in particular, for their intrinsic worth. But that means that one has to decide on those actions for their own sake.

But this requirement has a consequence – namely, it means that one needs to be able to make oneself the goal of one's own actions. The thought is as follows. In order to engage in an action for its own sake, one has to recognize the value of the action independently of one's desire for the action since, otherwise, one could only perform the action because of something one wants to get out of it (e.g., pleasure, wealth, recognition, fame, etc.). The recognition of such intrinsic value of an *action*, then, requires that one grasps reasons for doing the action which are not one's needs and desires. But once one is capable of doing that, one is also capable of recognizing that since there are reasons for doing the actions, there are also reasons for desiring the action. But that means that one can form the view that one *should* desire to do the action, i.e., that one should have a desire for it. In this way, the goal of one's actions can be not just the acquisition of something external, but also the transformation and development of one's own dispositions. In other words, one becomes capable of wanting to make oneself into something one is not yet (say, become virtuous). The mere ability to do things voluntarily does not make any of this possible since it is possible to do things voluntarily without grasping any reasons for doing them but the ability to grasp reasons is required for making oneself the goal of one's own actions.

According to Aristotle, human beings alone among animals have this ability because they alone can reason about what their goal should be and what they should do in order to bring it about. We can figure out not only how to bring about some goal, but also whether it is a good idea to bring about that or rather some other goal. And so we can also figure out whether having the goals we have is a good idea, or whether we should, rather, have some other goals. In this sense, then, we are indeed quite different from animals and children. It is because we are not only efficient causes of some things we do, but because we are efficient causes of the things we do in a special way – on the basis of reasoning. This enables us to come to understand what we are and what, given what we are, would make us live well.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> As is well-known, Aristotle does not fully defend responsibility for character in the *EE*. Although he asserts that virtue and vice are voluntary (1228a3-13), he does not provide a detailed defense of that claim as he does in *NE* 3.5. Nevertheless, the essential ingredients of that account – his account of decision and deliberation and their connection to character are all present. Moreover, this account of the significance of actions on decisions helps to explain why Aristotle reserves a special kind of praise and blame to adult human beings. It is because our actions express not only our practical commitments but also because we are responsible (at least partly) for having those commitments.

There are two important features of this account. First, the way in which we are responsible in the normative sense for our practical commitments (values, etc.) is not different from the way in which we are normatively responsible for our actions. There are certain societal standards or expectations about what one should be like as a person and the failure to achieve those expectations is blameworthy as long as one's development into adulthood is thwarted by one's nature (*NE* 3.5, 1114a22-31; cf. *EE* 1224b29-33). This kind of responsibility also does not presuppose that one needs to be in total control of one's character development. A physician is not less responsible for his conduct as a physician if she has received inferior education. The standards of what constitutes good medical care apply to anyone who acts as a physician. In the same way, an adult human being is not less responsible for her conduct as an adult if she has received inferior upbringing. The standards of what constitutes appropriate adult behavior apply to all (appropriately developed) adult human beings.

Second, although it is in virtue of actions strictly speaking (i.e., actions done through reasoning) that we are responsible for our characters, praise and blame do not apply only to actions in that strict sense. This is because all our actions, even those flowing not from reasoning, but simply from non-rational desires, are expressions of our practical commitments for which we are responsible. Thus the uncontrolled agent who acts against her reasoning and on her appetite can be blamed for her actions even if her actions are not expressions of her reasoned evaluative commitments. They are still expressions of her character and she is responsible for her character because she is capable of reasoned decisions.

Actions on decisions are thus a special class of voluntary actions because they are voluntary actions which are done in such a way that the agent is not only responsible for the action itself but also for being the kind of person who does the action. Consequently, an adult human being can be praised or blamed for being that sort of person – in a way in which an animal (or a child) cannot be praised for being the kind of animal (or a child) it is.

## 6. Conclusion

I would like to finish with a few remarks on the relationship between the account in the *NE* and in the *EE*. If my account of Aristotle's theory of voluntary action in the *EE* is correct, the theory in the *EE* is not substantially different from the theory in the *NE*. This is perhaps surprising since it has been claimed that there are substantial difference between the two.<sup>71</sup> The differences are commonly thought to involve Aristotle's restriction of voluntariness to only adult human beings in the *EE* but not in the *NE* and his admission of psychological compulsion in the *EE* but not in the *NE*. But As I have argued, in the *EE*

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<sup>71</sup> See Charles, 'The *Eudemian Ethics* on the "Voluntary"', 8-9; Heineman, 'Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*', 274-7.

Aristotle does not say that non-rational animals and children do not do things voluntarily, but merely that they do not act. It is true that in the *NE* they are said to engage in voluntary action (1111a23), but this seems to be only a terminological difference since *NE* does not attribute reasoning to them (or the capacity to make decisions). Similarly, although it is only in the *EE* that Aristotle carefully distinguishes two types of psychological compulsion – actions according to one type are voluntary (when the prospects or pains are bearable), actions of the other type are involuntary (when they are unbearable), he still admits the existence of involuntary actions of this sort in the *NE* as well (1110a20-26). The only additional qualification in the *NE* is that it is clear that such actions are rare and that death is in fact not an unbearable prospect since it is something one is sometimes expected to endure.

There are, of course, some undeniable differences. For example, the *NE* discusses cases which do not occur in the *EE*, such as cases of non-voluntary actions which are actions done in ignorance but without regret. However, these cases are compatible with the *EE* account. In the *EE*, Aristotle explicitly requires that an involuntary action is done against one's internal impulse. Although this requirement is not asserted in the *NE*, it is present in his account of non-voluntary actions since these are actions done in ignorance but not against an internal impulse. They are thus not involuntary but form a class of their own. It seems to me, then, that in terms of substantive philosophical claims the two discussions present a single view in two different (insofar as certain details are concerned) versions.

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