

**Phil 104, Wednesday, September 8, 2010**  
**Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III: 1–5**

**The voluntary:**

Why do we care about the difference between voluntary and nonvoluntary?

Because it makes sense to praise and blame, honor and punish, only what is voluntary.

But why should (e.g.) blame depend on what is voluntary?

1. *Desert*: We only *deserve* blame for what is voluntary. *Unfair* to blame us for what isn't voluntary.
2. *Education*: Only blame for what is voluntary can be *expected to influence* our behavior, e.g., by *detering* or—probably more important for Aristotle—*educating us*.

An action is *nonvoluntary* iff it happens:

- i. either under force,
- ii. or by reason of ignorance.

Some (but not all) *nonvoluntary* actions are also *involuntary*. An action is *involuntary* iff the agent does it:

- i. either under force,
- ii. or by reason of ignorance *and later regrets it*.

The rough idea seems to be that:

An action is *involuntary* iff it is *nonvoluntary and the agent did not want to do it*.

If he had to be *forced* to do it, then presumably (although not necessarily) he didn't want it. And if he was ignorant, but after learning of his mistake *regrets* it, then he didn't want it.

Why this second distinction? Suppose someone does something vicious (in the sense that it is something that only a vicious person would knowingly do). Insofar as we are judging whether that *person* is vicious, it is not enough to be told that he acted nonvoluntarily. He might have been perfectly willing to do it (in which case he is vicious), or completely unwilling (in which case he is not).

**Force:**

The moving principle is outside and the person contributes nothing, e.g., being carried off by the wind, or by the tyrant's henchmen.

Why should *force* make it inappropriate to blame or praise someone?

1. *Desert*: Doesn't deserve it, somehow unfair.
2. *Education*: Pointless, since a better character won't overcome compulsion.

**The threat of determinism:**

But wait: Isn't *all* action forced? As we will see, Hobbes will say, in effect, that when the agent "acts," this is because tiny bits of matter, including those of which the agent's body are composed, are moving and colliding in various ways. But this is just what is going on when the agent is carried off by a wind. At bottom, there's no real difference.

This sort of worry simply doesn't get off the ground for Aristotle. For him, there is a perfectly metaphysically respectable sense in which the person is the origin of his own action: namely, that there is a principle that behaves independently of the principles governing the matter left to itself. This is true of every nature, such as that of a plant. If voluntary action is simply the expression of our human nature, then there's nothing mysterious or supernatural about it, anymore than the growth of a plant is mysterious or supernatural. The case of the wind is different: there, this principle isn't in play; the matter of the agent's body is just acted on by external forces.

### **Force: hard cases**

1. Are actions done out of *fear of the greater evil* forced? After all, we *don't* blame people for them. E.g., a tyrant threatens to kill your children unless you do something base.
  - *No*: In the relevant sense—namely, at the time of action, or taking into account the conditions the agent faced—these actions are voluntary. The moving principle is in the agent himself.
  - *Question*: If these actions are voluntary, then why don't we blame them?
  - *Reply*: Because, at the time of action, they were the *right* thing to do. Indeed, we might *praise* them.
2. Are *wrong* actions that are *beyond human nature to resist* forced?
  - *No*: If they issue from *human nature*, then the moving principle is certainly in the agent!
  - *Question*: If these actions are voluntary, then why don't we blame them? The answer here can't be that they are right, because they are *wrong*.
  - *Reply*:
    1. *Desert*: People don't deserve to be blamed, somehow unfair.
    2. *Education*: Pointless: there is no way to *educate* human nature to do things that are *beyond* human nature.
3. Are actions done from the attraction of pleasure or noble objects forced?
  - *No*: then *all* actions would be compelled.
  - *Question*: Doesn't this just beg the question against determinists, who hold that all actions are forced?
  - *Reply*: Again, determinism isn't on Aristotle's radar. From his perspective, to claim that all actions are forced is patently absurd; it's equivalent to saying that there are no possible circumstances under which human nature expresses itself.

### **By reason of ignorance:**

Meant to contrast with:

1. Actions done because of ignorance of *general principles* ("ends"), e.g., "Don't kill people for money." Instead, the ignorance is of *particular facts* of the situation ("means").
2. Actions done "*in* ignorance" of *particular facts*. Aristotle gives the examples of drunkenness and rage, but does not explain the difference between "by reason of" and "in." *Conjecture*: The "in ignorance" cases are cases in which the agent is *responsible* for his own ignorance. In "by reason of" cases, by contrast, the agent is not responsible for the ignorance. Thus, it is accurate to claim that the *reason for* the action really was *ignorance*, not the agent's earlier missteps.

Why should acting *by reason of ignorance* make it inappropriate to blame or praise someone?

1. *Desert*: Unfair? But why is it *fairer* to blame someone for ignorance of *general* principles than for ignorance of *particular* facts?
2. *Education*: Pointless. There is no way to educate someone so that it will never happen that he is ignorant of some particular facts, in a way in which he could not have helped.

### **Argument against the Socratic View:**

*The Socratic argument* (e.g., in the dialogue *Protagoras*)

1. Everyone does what he thinks is good.
2. Therefore, if one does something bad, it is only because one falsely believes that it is good: i.e., because one is ignorant of what is good.
3. If one acts because of ignorance, then one acts involuntarily.
4. Therefore, all bad actions are involuntary.

*Aristotle's replies:*

1. Wrongdoing involves ignorance of *ends*, but involuntariness requires ignorance of *means*.
2. Implies that right actions are voluntary, but wrong actions are involuntary. This is absurd, because if something is up to us to do, it must also be up to us not to do.

### **Aristotle's final definition:**

An action is voluntary iff:

- i. "that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself..."
- ii. he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action"

But:

- What about sweating? Moving principle is in the agent, and he may know he's doing it.
- This classifies actions "in ignorance" as nonvoluntary, since the agent is not aware of the particular circumstances.

### **Vice is voluntary:**

Aristotle argues that:

Vice is voluntary.

By this, he *doesn't* mean that the vicious person can *now* voluntarily change. Indeed, Aristotle thinks there isn't much the vicious person can now do about it. Instead, he means that:

one's present vice was the foreseeable effect of one's past voluntary actions.

This is more than saying that:

one becomes vicious through voluntary actions,

which Aristotle argued earlier. It *also* requires that:

one *knew* (or was negligently ignorant) that one would become vicious through those voluntary actions.

He seems to think that this condition is met:

"Not to know that it is from the exercise of activities on particular objects that states of character are produced is the mark of a thoroughly senseless person."

Is this plausible? (Indeed, later he concedes: "but though we control the beginning of our states of character the gradual progress is not obvious.")

Why does Aristotle *need* to argue that vice is voluntary? In order to show that:

It makes sense to blame people for their *vices*?  
But why defend *this* claim? That is, why isn't it *enough* to defend the claim that:  
It makes sense to blame people for their *vicious actions*?  
Perhaps Aristotle thinks that this claim is in danger *too*, on the grounds that:  
It makes sense to blame people for their vicious actions only if their *vice* is voluntary.  
But then why does Aristotle assume *that*?

First, it seems doubtful that Aristotle is assuming that:

If a factor contributes to a vicious action, then it makes sense to blame someone for that vicious action only if that factor was voluntary.

This assumption threatens to make *nothing* voluntary. Lots of nonvoluntary factors contribute to vicious actions.

Second, why doesn't Aristotle just say that one's vicious actions *here and now* are voluntary because *here and now* the principle is in one and one knows what one is doing? Isn't that what we ought to conclude from his own account of the voluntary?

1. Perhaps Aristotle is worried that someone might reply, on the vicious person's behalf, that he does *not* know what he is doing, as a drunk person does not know. Hence, Aristotle's reply: even if he does not know what he is doing, he is responsible for that ignorance.

*But:* Why doesn't Aristotle simply reply that, whether or not the vicious person is responsible for his ignorance about the *ends*, his vicious actions are still voluntary? After all, it's *only* ignorance of *the means* that makes actions nonvoluntary.

2. Perhaps Aristotle is worried that there is no point in *blaming* the mature for vice, unless it could help *someone avoid* vice. Of course, it cannot help the *mature* avoid vice. But can blaming the mature help the *young* avoid vice? Only if the young *can see a connection* between what they are doing now and the vices that they might acquire. But if they can see this, then vice *is* voluntary.

### **Review Questions:**

1. According to Aristotle, does the sailor act voluntarily when he throws cargo overboard in order to save himself from a storm? Why?
2. Did Oedipus act *involuntarily* when he killed a man that he later discovered (to his horror) to be his father? Why? How would the answer change if we substituted "(to his delight)"?
3. What's the difference between someone's *vicious action* being voluntary and his *vice* being voluntary?