

AUDREY L. ANTON (Bowling Green, KY)

## Sculpting Character: Aristotle's Voluntary as Affectability<sup>1</sup>

---

### Abstract

*I argue that the two criteria traditionally identified as jointly sufficient for voluntary behavior according to Aristotle require qualification. Without such qualification, they admit troubling exceptions (i.e., they are not sufficient). Through minding these difficult examples, I conclude that a third condition mentioned by Aristotle – the eph' hēmin – is key to qualifying the original two criteria. What is eph' hēmin is that which is efficiently caused by appetite and teleologically caused by reason such that the agent could have, in theory, acted differently. I propose that praise and blame are justified only when 1: the behavior is voluntary and 2: the agent is susceptible (at least in principle) to the positive influences of appropriate praise and blame to help form, improve, or strengthen a good character. Through concentrating on the agent's affectability in morally salient situations, we may better understand the qualified criteria's role in voluntary human behavior in general.*

**Keywords:** voluntary, involuntary, character, eph' hēmin, praise, blame

---

### 1. Introduction

At *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) III.i, Aristotle declares that an inquiry into the voluntary (*to hekousion*) is necessary:

Since excellence is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary forgiveness, and sometimes also pity... (NE III.i.1109b30-33).<sup>2</sup>

Here Aristotle suggests we consider virtue, feelings, and action in light of what we praise and blame. Virtue is a character type, and all other character types are classified according to dispositions to feel and act as well. In addition, Aristotle indicates that what-

---

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Alan Silverman, Paula Gottlieb, and Larry Jost for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The translations used in this paper come from W. D. Ross's translations (revised by J. O. Urmson), from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

ever is an appropriate object of praise and blame is voluntary, and when behavior is involuntary, it is an appropriate object of pardon or forgiveness. Therefore, we must take care to understand the voluntary so that we may praise and blame people well and fairly for their relevant voluntary behavior.

Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order. First, the class of what is voluntary extends beyond the behaviors Aristotle focuses on immediately after this passage. For example, animals and very young children behave voluntarily. However, we do not praise or blame animals and young children as we do adult humans. We might do so in efforts to encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior, but we do not necessarily praise and blame them because we believe the animal or child deserves it. For instance, when we praise and blame small children we take their development into account, and we may praise and blame them *so that* they develop reason and become the kinds of beings worthy of praise and blame later on in life (*NE* X.i 1172a21).

Second, while we are considering actions and passions that we praise or blame, we should acknowledge that some actions and passions are voluntary and deserving of neither praise nor blame. Some simple behaviors might also satisfy this description. For example, stretching one's arms to relieve muscle aches, under normal circumstances, is hardly the type of behavior calling for third-party evaluation. While Aristotle would likely agree, he eschews discussion of such behaviors, as he seems to be primarily concerned with the kinds of behavior eligible for moral assessment.

Third, as Aristotle discusses the virtuous person (or, rather, how to become one), we may presume that the actions and passions we are to praise or blame are truly *worthy* of praise or blame.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we are trying to avoid praising and blaming people incorrectly, as such responses can be detrimental to becoming (and helping others become) virtuous.<sup>4</sup>

Let us be clear that the universe of discourse up for discussion satisfies the following proposition where P stands for "The agent's behavior is praiseworthy," B stands for "The agent's behavior is blameworthy," and V stands for "The agent's behavior is voluntary":

$$((P \vee B) \rightarrow V)$$

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle states clearly that what is morally correct is what the virtuous person would do (*NE* III.iv 1113a30-35). Therefore, we are entitled to infer from this text that we investigate the voluntary *so that* we will be good judges of how to act, which should make us good judges of how to respond to the behavior of others. For a compelling account of what it means to be so good at judging the behavior of others that one can recognize mitigating circumstances and even exceptions to rules, see Phillips-Garrett 2016.

<sup>4</sup> We might imagine that blaming the innocent could inspire resentment and even steer them towards the wrong behavior, since they will be blamed for such behavior regardless of whether or not they exhibit it.

At the very least, whenever human behavior is deserving of praise or blame, that behavior must be voluntary.

This description alone does not fully satisfy Aristotle's inquiry. After all, we might need assistance in conceptualizing when such behavior is deserving of praise or blame. We aim to praise and blame others aptly, and a study of the voluntary should shed light on what it means to deserve praise or blame. Indeed, the antecedent of the conditional above may be unknown to us. After all, Aristotle's audience consists of people interested in becoming virtuous; as such people have yet to achieve a virtuous state, they may not have sufficiently keen moral perception to detect the praiseworthy and the blameworthy in every scenario.<sup>5</sup> Further inquiry into the voluntary may be necessary to avoid begging the question given Aristotle's audience.

Describing the voluntary to Aristotle's audience will prove difficult. Instead, Aristotle offers a description of *involuntary* behavior that is intuitive and suggests two conditions for voluntary behavior by negating the ways in which behavior qualifies as involuntary:

Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action (*NE* III.i 1111a 22-24).

First, the agent must be the source (*archē*) of the behavior in question. Second, the agent must have sufficient awareness and understanding of relevant particular details and facts concerning the situation in which she acts.

In this paper, I explore the possibility that these two criteria are suggestions for how to evaluate an agent's behavior based on a more-fundamental feature of the voluntary *for a human*. While nonhuman animals act voluntarily, just as the good of a cow is distinct from the good of a human, the structure of voluntary behavior for a cow will be distinct from that of an adult human. I argue that there is a third consideration Aristotle had in mind concerning the behavior of human agents that is both more fundamental and less identifiable than the two conditions noted above. Human voluntary behavior stems from the aspects of the soul that are *most* human: 1. Reason and 2. Appetite (insofar as it may listen to reason). I

---

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle tells us that the purpose of reading *Nicomachean Ethics* is not merely to know the good in a theoretical and detached sense, but also (and more importantly) to *become good* (II.ii1103b26-30; X.ix 1179a33-79b4). Therefore, since Aristotle's audience wants to become good, we may surmise: 1. That the audience may not yet be good and 2. That the audience must at least be interested in becoming good (which seems to exclude vicious people). For interesting discussions of Aristotle's audience in *Nicomachean Ethics* and how taking that audience into account affects our reading of Aristotle, see Tessitore 1996 and Burnyeat 1980.

suggest that whenever human behavior is up to us (*eph' hēmin*), it is efficiently and teleologically caused by the aspects of the soul that constitute dispositions to feel and act (reason and appetite, respectively). For convenience's sake, I shall refer to the complex of reason and appetite as the *character center* of the human soul. The character center precedes any character a person develops<sup>6</sup> (as no one is born with a character, but rather a capacity to develop character), and it is that upon which an acquired character supervenes.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle distinguishes one's character (what we commonly refer to as *second nature*) from one's human nature.<sup>8</sup> One significant difference between our human nature and our second nature is that only the latter can be changed (*NE* II.i 1103a17-26). The fact that the nature of the character center can change (it can develop into something else, change course, or become stronger) is very important to understanding the voluntary whenever voluntary behavior has a moral context.

As previously noted, Aristotle's discussions of the voluntary are predominantly concerned with voluntary behaviors that have moral import. Of course, there are voluntary behaviors of no moral consequence. However, the behaviors worth distinguishing from involuntary behaviors are of some moral concern. For this reason, I suggest a litmus test for discerning whether a behavior of moral import is voluntary. Such behavior is voluntary when the agent's character may be *in principle* positively affected by justified praise or blame. That is, human voluntary behavior of moral consequence is that which, if praised or blamed appropriately, could positively contribute to the development, improvement, or strengthening of character.

The two criteria – sourcehood and knowledge – considered outside of the context I suggest, admit exceptions or counterintuitive evaluations. For example, it is difficult to comprehend how we might deal with nutritive actions of which we are conscious, merely

---

<sup>6</sup> Since infants lack choice, we might conclude that they also lack reason. Indeed, Aristotle tells us that reason develops as we grow. Therefore, the *character center* for young children either includes a bud of reason or it is distinct from that of animals at least insofar as it has potential to be joined by reason.

<sup>7</sup> I believe Aristotle maintained that we are responsible for actions that lead to and issue from character, and one of the reasons why we are responsible for our character is that it is a product of prior behavior that was voluntary. After all, we can perform the same action with the same or similar motive prior to developing virtue as well as through our virtue once it is attained. For an interesting account to the contrary, see Meyer 2006. Meyer argues that, 'Aristotle thinks character is praiseworthy in virtue of the actions it causes, not because of anything about the process by which it comes into being' (2006, 139).

<sup>8</sup> I use the phrase 'human nature' here to refer to the universal, which is predicated of all human beings. I reserve the term *first nature* for those natural characteristics individuals are born displaying (e.g., proclivities, innate talents and strengths, etc.), which, though native, can be altered by practice. For instance, one child might be naturally more spirited than others. However, it is not impossible for the child to grow up to be a coward, just as it is possible for a naturally skittish child to someday become courageous.

non-voluntary behavior of moral consequence, and bad actions performed as a result of pressures that overstrain human nature. Given my suggestions, we shall have reasons to exclude behaviors issuing from the nutritive aspect of our souls from the class of the voluntary, we can better handle the perplexing instances of the merely non-voluntary actions of moral consequence, and we can better understand justified mercy in instances where humans behave poorly but understandably.

In order to illustrate these claims, we shall first re-acquaint ourselves with the nature of character in Aristotle's virtue ethics. I shall focus on the acquisition, efficacy, and evaluation of character states, foreshadowing my reasons for considering the voluntary that which is caused by the character center and identifying the affectability of character as the main focal point of the category of human voluntary behavior of moral consequence.

## 2. Character

Character is a quality of a human being's soul (*Categories*, Ch. 8). The human soul has three parts or aspects: nutritive, appetite, and reason. All living beings have a nutritive soul, which is responsible for digestion, growth, and other such bodily functions. All animals have appetite, which is responsible for desires, feelings, mobility, etc. Only the rational animals (humans) have reason. Reason behaves theoretically (when contemplating first principles, or learning something new) as well as practically (identifying ends and calculating how to achieve them). Reason rules over appetite. Though appetite is itself irrational, it can behave rationally vicariously by listening to and obeying reason (*NE* I.xiii and VI.ii; *De Anima (DA)* II.ii and III.ix). All human characters are explained in virtue of the behavior of this rational-appetitive team, the *character center*.

Character states are relatively fixed dispositions to feel and act in certain ways. There are six types of character according to Aristotle – four of which are human. Human characters one may develop include: virtue (*aretē*), continence (*enkrasia*), incontinence (*akrasia*), and vice (*kakia*). The person of virtuous character knows the good, behaves in accordance with the good, and feels appropriately about the good. The continent person both knows and behaves in accordance with the good; however, she may not feel appropriately about the good. The incontinent person knows the good, but fails to act in accordance with the good. Therefore, the incontinent person cannot feel appropriately towards the good, or else she would be sufficiently motivated by the good to behave appropriately. The vicious person does not know the good. In fact, this is the root of her blameworthy existence. She fails to have basic universal knowledge of moral truths. Because of her moral ignorance, what she believes is good is unlikely to be good. As every person aims at the

apparent good in action (*NE* I.i), the vicious is unlikely to behave in accordance with what is in fact good (or, if ever she does, it is purely by coincidence (*NE* II.iv 1105a23)). Since the vicious person fails to know the good, she neither acts in accordance with it voluntarily nor does she feel appropriately towards the good.

Aristotle designates two character types, which, while beyond those of the four human types, are sometimes (though rarely (*NE* VII.i 1145a25-27)) found among humans. The first is the sub-human type. The bestial character (*thēreotēs*) is found in mentally underdeveloped, emotionally stunted humans. We imagine such a character to resemble the legendary "wild child," and Aristotle surmises that either extreme abuse at an early age or some sort of disease cause this condition (*NE* VII.i 1145a30-32). The person displaying such a character may resemble humans in physique, but she resembles animals more in her behavior. As reason is the human's distinguishing mark and the root of human function and flourishing, such people are deprived of both that which makes them human and that which makes happiness possible. Therefore, we do not hold such people accountable for their behaviors any more than we might hold a pig responsible for its behavior (*NE* VII.i 1145a25-26). We pity the bestial character. While it may behave voluntarily, the lack of sophistication in their voluntary behavior renders such behavior beneath moral assessment.

The second kind of non-human character rarely found amongst humans is above human nature. The godlike character (*tēn huper hēmas aretēn* (virtue above that of ours (human)); *hēroikēn tina kai theían* ([goodness] on a heroic or divine scale)) is that which is beyond even the goodness of the virtuous character. While the two are likely to behave similarly, the godlike character transcends the greatness of the virtuous human. Aristotle's example is taken from Homer, where Priam described Hector as having had such a character on account of his surpassing valor (*NE* VII.i 1145a20-22). I imagine that one who is godlike surpasses the virtuous in wisdom, courage, and strength (*qua* fortitude<sup>9</sup>). This is not to say that the virtuous may lack wisdom, courage, or even strength. The virtuous merely have these capacities developed insofar as it is reasonable to expect a human to develop them. However, on occasion, individuals manage to transcend even human greatness, and for this reason, they are beyond human nature.

According to Aristotle, characters are acquired by doing the kinds of acts characteristic of a particular character state repeatedly until a habit for doing such acts is formed (*NE* 1103a33; 1105b9-10). For example, one becomes virtuous by doing the types of actions

---

<sup>9</sup> I separate courage and fortitude here with the special qualification that fortitude might involve an endurance to withstand pressure and suffering. This specific characteristic will be very important in discussing actions performed in response to pressures that typically overstrain human nature (e.g., divulging or keeping a secret under extreme torture).

that virtuous people do repeatedly and over time. Oftentimes, we do certain types of acts repeatedly because we experience pleasure in doing them; others we avoid because of previous experiences of painful consequences. As a disposition to act in a particular way develops, the individual acquiring the character begins to take pleasure in doing the acts that accord with this habit (*NE* 1099a19-20). By taking pleasure in the good, for instance, an agent identifies something that is actually good as good. On the other hand, when a person does the types of acts repeatedly that a vicious person might do, that person will eventually take pleasure in those acts. The more we behave a certain way, the more comfortable we are with such behavior. We are pleased by the comfortable and familiar. Without any pain associated with such acts (i.e., let us pretend our imaginary agent is not punished for her behaviors and finds no reason to be discouraged in repeating them), the agent easily behaves similarly in the future. As vicious acts become familiar and easy, the agent performing them takes delight in so doing. Therefore, just as was the case with the agent performing good acts consistently, she who behaves badly consistently begins to identify her own ends as good and choiceworthy. However, unlike the agent who behaves well, the agent who behaves badly is *not* correct in her identification of the good. When others blame her, they communicate their disapproval of the behavior, and the agent might reconsider her previous judgment of choiceworthy ends. However, this may depend on how entrenched her character already is.

Once acquired, a character state perpetuates itself.<sup>10</sup> That is, the agent's moral perception is informed by the character that she has. Vicious people view bad ends as good ones, while virtuous people have keen moral perception (*NE* 1113a 31-34, 1114b 2, 1114b 21-24). Since, ultimately, every human acts towards some apparent good (*NE* 1110b11), what is viewed as the good by a given individual is what she pursues as well as that in

---

<sup>10</sup> I use the term 'perpetuate' here loosely. As I argue in Anton 2014, if given sufficient time and consistent expression, both the continent and the incontinent character states may undo themselves. Hopefully, one who acts continentally consistently over time will eventually become virtuous. Unfortunately, one who behaves incontinentally consistently and over time may slide into viciousness. Still, as it is rare that anyone behave incontinentally across the board and without qualification, we can imagine one who is mostly incontinent remaining that way throughout a lifetime so long as she behaves sufficiently occasionally continent that it prevents vice. Indeed, we might imagine that a basically continent person 'slips up' and behaves more as an incontinent person would often enough to protract her moral development sufficiently that she never reaches full virtue. Therefore, there is a sense in which both the continent and the incontinent perpetuate themselves; each perpetuates itself for a time and, when a person waffles between the two, neither takes full hold. However, I maintain my position that continence and incontinence do, *in principle* and eventually, undo themselves. Vice and Virtue are distinctly more self-perpetuating in this regard.

which she delights when she achieves it. Therefore, a character state moves an agent towards doing the kinds of acts that led to the formation of that character<sup>11</sup> in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

Since, characters are dispositions to feel and act certain ways, characters can be identified and assessed by analyzing their effects: types of actions done and accompanying feelings. The ends a person selects and what a person enjoys are determined by the type of character that she has (*NE* 1099a19-20, 1115b21-22). Therefore, if we witness someone intentionally harming an innocent with great amusement, we might conclude that she is vicious. Likewise, if it is evident that it pains an agent to do the right thing, though she brings herself to do it nevertheless, we believe that she is continent, though not yet virtuous.

### 3. The Notion of the Voluntary from Sourcehood and Knowledge

Recall the two ways Aristotle distinguishes the voluntary from the involuntary: the agent has knowledge of the relevant particular facts of the behavior, and she is the origin or source of the action. It is common to consider these two criteria for the voluntary jointly sufficient. Let us call this position **2C** (for *two criteria*) and let 'K' stand for "The agent has the relevant particular knowledge" and 'S' stand for "The agent is the source of the behavior." **2C** maintains:

$$((K \ \& \ S) \rightarrow V)$$

There is a natural way to read the passage cited above from *NE* III.i 1111a 22-24 as stating the joint sufficiency of the two criteria (**2C**). After all, Aristotle does conclude "...the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent him-

---

<sup>11</sup> There is a wealth of literature on this consequence of Aristotelian character concerning the possibility of character change. Brickhouse suggests that one cannot alter one's character because once sufficiently fixed, it would be impossible to act contrary to that character (which is what is required to develop a contrary state). Bondeson suggests that Aristotle did believe in character change, but that it was difficult given the proclivities of the agent and the types of ends towards which she acts. Ott discusses the argument Aristotle develops for our being responsible for our character, arguing that Aristotle jumps to his conclusion. While we might be responsible for individual acts, it does not follow, says Ott, that we are responsible for our character. Di Muzio argues that character can be altered only if a vicious person were to happen to imitate a virtuous person's actions by chance in pursuit of some other goal (e.g., avoiding misery). In another paper (Anton 2006), I argue that fixed characters can be altered, but only if the change is initiated from without (i.e. external). If a person is influenced by others to act contrary to character (that is, others select her ends for her and manipulate her into pursuing them), the fixed habit can be weakened.

<sup>12</sup> This is, in part, due to the fact that, for Aristotle, reason alone does not act (1112b13). Therefore, while an incontinent person might know what is better, she might not be able to do what is better based on this knowledge. Her character is attracted to the worse, and for this reason it selects worse ends for action. Also, see Tuozzo (1991) for a convincing discussion of why, for Aristotle, we do not deliberate about our ends.



self, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action." Nevertheless, we might not be entitled to draw this conclusion, as the "definition" describes what *seems to be* (*dox-eien an enai*) voluntary. For this and other reasons that will soon become apparent, I believe this description is a description *for the most part*. We might describe birds as feathered winged bipedal animals. Usually, they are. But we can imagine a man in a bird costume meeting this description, and we can imagine a bird that's lost a wing or its feathers is still a bird. In a similar vein, I think that it is reasonable to consider these two criteria a *sign* of voluntary behavior. However, as I shall now argue, they are hardly sufficient.

I believe **2C** is false; it is not the case that the two criteria alone are sufficient for voluntary action in humans. Surprisingly, it should require little imagination to find a counterexample to this view. Simply consider any nutritive action of which the agent is aware. For instance, my heart is beating right now. I can concentrate on the pulses if I apply pressure to a specific place on my wrist or neck. I know why the pulse is happening. I am familiar with the relevant particulars. It also originates from within me. I am the source of my nutritive behaviors.

One might object that such action is not really *mine*; it is *my body's*. Such an objection would work for just about anyone else's account (Plato's, for instance). Yet, Aristotle's view of the human *psyche* obviates this concern. As was described earlier, for Aristotle, a human soul has three parts: reason, appetite, and a "life force" often referred to as the nutritive part. The nutritive part tends to all autonomic behaviors such as blood flow, breathing (when we're not doing it intentionally), nervous reactions, growth, digestion, etc. Therefore, *my soul* is the source of the behavior and, as Aristotle aptly notes, a human is most its form, which is its soul.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, we cannot consider such behaviors acceptable "exceptions," as they are abundant. Any rule that admits such a plethora of exceptions ought not be considered a rule.

In no way do I wish to suggest that Aristotle foolishly considered digestion and blood flow voluntary actions. On the contrary, I am certain that he would not, and for this reason, we ought to abandon **2C** as a conclusive description of the voluntary.

Perhaps some may prefer to consider the two criteria negatively; perhaps the lack of either criterion is sufficient to consider a behavior *involuntary*. Let us call this position **2I**, where *I* stands for "The agent's behavior is involuntary":

---

<sup>13</sup> In *Categories*, Aristotle introduces secondary substance (Ch. IV, V), which is the kind of thing a substance is (in the example of a person, this is *human*. Cf *Physics* (*Phys.*) 194a-195b 30 (secondary substance as a cause); *Metaphysics* (*Meta.*) IV 1029b14-15 (being one's essence). For humans, the mind is the form of the hylomorphic compound, which is its actuality (*De Anima* (*DA*) ii 1, 412b5-6).

$$(I \rightarrow (\sim K \vee \sim S))$$

Alas, proposition **2I** is also false. If it were true, then behaviors caused by ignorance of the particular facts of the situation would always be involuntary. Aristotle explicitly denies this possibility when he introduces the class of behaviors I shall call *merely non-voluntary* (*ouk hekousion*). Aristotle tells us that behaviors caused by the innocent ignorance of particulars are non-voluntary, but only those that one regrets are involuntary (*NE* III.i 1110b19-21). This exception renders moral assessment mysterious. Any such non-voluntary act must be neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy (by definition and as stipulated above). However, as it is not involuntary either, this act ought not be pardoned. Still, there are instances whereby some reactive attitude seems appropriate.

In order to illustrate this problem, consider the following example. Terry dislikes children. One day, while out for a drive, Terry hits a child with his car, and the child dies. Terry did not see the child running through the parked cars. Let us presume that he had no reason to suspect that a child would pop out from between the cars (so Terry is not guilty of any negligence that might have caused his ignorance of the child's presence). However, when Terry realizes what he has done, he is slightly amused: "One less brat in the world! I did the world a favor!" he thinks to himself.

Terry feels no regret. From what we can tell about the two criteria and the nature of praise, blame, and pardon, we have no idea how to handle Terry. There seems to be no appropriate response given Aristotle's account if we rely on *NE* III.i exclusively. And yet, I want to blame Terry. Of course, I do not want to blame Terry for the act of running over the child. I concur with Aristotle that under no interpretation did Terry commit that act voluntarily. But his amusement suggests some kind of psychological consent to the state of affairs that is morally troubling (to say the least). We shall return to the terrible case of Terry in our analysis of the proposed interpretation.

Why might Aristotle have introduced this class of behaviors? I contend that his reasons are related to the fact that **2C** and **2I** are false. I believe that the merely non-voluntary will help to illustrate a proposition concerning the voluntary that is true.

Instead of conceptualizing the voluntary as that which is the opposite of the involuntary (as Aristotle seems to at *NE* III.i 1111a21-22) perhaps we ought to broaden **2I** to encompass all non-voluntary behavior. Once we arrive at such a proposition, perhaps we need only to negate that proposition to identify the voluntary (as nothing is both voluntary and non-voluntary). For argument's sake, let us see where this takes us. Let 'N' stand for "The behavior is non-voluntary." Let us call this proposition **NV** (*non-voluntary*):

$$(N \rightarrow (\sim K \vee \sim S))$$

Let us now consider what happens when we assume the negation of **NV**:

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. $\sim(N \rightarrow (\sim K \vee \sim S))$ | premise                       |
| 2. $N \ \& \ \sim(\sim K \vee \sim S)$        | conditional equivalence, 1    |
| 3. $\sim(\sim K \vee \sim S)$                 | & elimination 2               |
| 4. $(\sim\sim K \ \& \ \sim\sim S)$           | DeMorgan's                    |
| 5. $K \ \& \ \sim\sim S$                      | double negation elimination 8 |
| 6. $K \ \& \ S$                               | double negation elimination 9 |

The result is the converse of **2C** (let us call it '**CV**' (for consequent of **V**)):  $V \rightarrow (K \ \& \ S)$

This proposition is likely true; however, it only tells us two necessary conditions for the voluntary. It does not give us a complete account. We already saw how **2C** is false *because* it claimed  $K \ \& \ S$  were jointly sufficient conditions for voluntary behavior. Therefore, we must continue our search for a more complete understanding of the voluntary according to Aristotle than the description offered at *NE III.i*.

It seems that, at the very least, we need to add a third criterion or, at most, we need to supplant these two entirely. Readers should decide for themselves, which I have done.<sup>14</sup> I maintain that, with a loose understanding of the requisite "knowledge" of the particulars, a limited scope of *sourcehood*, and an adequacy condition of remaining firmly in the realm of what is most human about the agents in question, our understanding of the voluntary will be complete. Introducing the *eph' hēmin* helps make these qualifications.

#### 4. *Eph' Hēmin*

At this point, some might interject that Aristotle already gave us a third criterion – that which is voluntary is *eph' hēmin*, or "up to us." Aristotle tells us that whenever behavior is voluntary, we may do it or not do it: "For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*" (*NE III.i* 1113b9-13; *Cf NE III.i* 1110a17-18, *III.iv* 1113b6-13). This statement reminds contemporary scholars of a common incompatibilist notion of free will and moral responsibility: the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which holds that in order to be morally responsible for  $\phi$ -ing, it must have been possible to refrain from  $\phi$ -ing. Let us call this position **3C**, which maintains that a behavior is voluntary

---

<sup>14</sup> If my qualifications of knowledge, sourcehood, and human nature strike the reader as too revisionary to resemble the standard interpretation of  $K$  and  $S$ , then perhaps the reader would prefer to consider my proposal a complete overhaul of the standard account. As long as I have argued convincingly that what follows is supported by Aristotle's texts and compatible with his overall anthropology and ethics, the reader and I shall be in agreement regarding what matters most.

if the agent has sufficient knowledge of the particulars, she is the source of her behavior, and she has free will (F):

$$((K \& S) \& F) \rightarrow V$$

When *freedom* is understood as *eph' hēmin*, the above proposition is likely true. However, freedom in the metaphysical sense of the term (the one implied in discussions of PAP) is not the missing criteria.<sup>15</sup> While it may be sufficient, this kind of freedom is not necessary. The relevant sense of freedom involves a kind of control that can only be explained in reference to the character center.

I say that what is *eph' hēmin* is in reference to the character center for the following reasons. First, nutritive behavior is not *eph' hēmin*; even if we are aware of the nutritive acts we perform, it is not possible (nor was it ever possible) that we perform them differently (*NE* III.v 1113b25-30).

Another reason why behavior that is *eph' hēmin* must issue from the character center is that the character center (insofar as appetite is part of it) is responsible for the efficient causation of voluntary acts, and what it means to be the origin of such behaviors is (among other things) to be the efficient cause (*Phys.* 194b29-30, 195a11), which includes omissions (*Phys.* 195a11-14). Therefore, in being the efficient cause, the character center is able to perform an act or refrain from performing the act.

Third, what is *eph' hēmin* is sensitive to what reason knows insofar as its options are concerned, as reason is the efficient cause of behavior through choice (*NE* VI.ii 1139a31-32). Barring reason's ignorance of general moral truths (which is more often than not a flaw voluntarily acquired), when reason is ignorant of the particular facts of the case, reason is also ignorant of all of the options that are truly available to it. Reason cannot choose what it does not know is available. Therefore, when reason "refrains" from choosing an unknown option that is unknown due to ignorance of particulars, reason could not have chosen otherwise. For this reason, it is not *eph' hēmin* for reason to neglect such options.

## 5. Human Nature and Natural Impulse

The voluntary is also discussed in *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*). While this account is often deemed the earlier account and the account of *NE* the refined version, an examination into this account may provide insight into any additional requirements of voluntary behavior.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> For convincing explanations of why this is the case, see Everson 1990, Klimchuk 2002, and Meyer 2006, 138.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer 2006 argues that the *Eudemian* account is the beginning of a dialectical exercise in describing the voluntary that is taken up again in *Nicomachean Ethics* (i.e., as such, it is consistent with that in

Aristotle proposes that the voluntary is that which accords with impulse and the involuntary is that which is contrary to impulse (*EE* 1225b 1-2). It would seem that Aristotle is considering action exclusively here; for every emotion that an agent has is in accordance with impulse at least insofar as it is in accordance with itself.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, insofar as action is concerned, this proposal will not work. Aristotle recognizes that he will have strange results in the cases of the incontinent and the continent persons, who have multiple opposing impulses. They would seem to act both voluntarily and involuntarily (which Aristotle explicitly declares impossible (*EE* 1223b9-10)). In order to reconcile these problems, Aristotle discusses the voluntary as that which is a "natural motion" and the involuntary as that which is a "forced" or "violent motion" (*EE* 1223a 24-26 and 1224a 4-5). The conclusion of this section is that contrariety to impulse is always external to the agent (*EE* 1224a 19-22). That is, for an agent's action to be involuntary, the action must go against the agent's impulse and also be external to the agent.<sup>18</sup> This sounds similar to the description of the first criterion offered at the beginning of *NE* III.i – that the agent be the source of that which is voluntary. Indeed, in *NE*, Aristotle distinguishes voluntary behavior from the involuntary thusly:

Those things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place under compulsion or owing to ignorance; and that is compulsory of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts or is acted upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power (*NE* III.i 1110 a 1-4).

Like in *EE*, here it is suggested that the involuntary involves an external principle. More clearly, the act is involuntary if the agent or victim contributes nothing. This would seem to suggest that if the agent contributes anything at all to the act, the act is not involuntary. However, I contend that the account in *EE* is not merely an earlier version of the source condition. By focusing on impulse, the *EE* account excludes the nutritive aspect of

---

*Nicomachean Ethics*). I follow Meyer in this regard. What this account provides that is useful is a notion of something being in accordance with the internal and natural impulse of the agent. While this notion requires some refining to explain blameworthy incontinent behavior, it has its intuitive value in understanding how an agent must be the source of her voluntary behavior.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, if Aristotle is not limiting the discussion to actions, then this passage would suggest Aristotle considers all emotions voluntary. I do not think this a trivial point. It is hard to imagine how emotion might be contrary to impulse. The only way that it could is to be contrary to another impulse. But then the person would behave both voluntarily and involuntarily at the same time, which is not possible according to Aristotle. I suggest that we keep an open mind at this point as to what constitutes an impulse. In addition, there is groundwork laid for a discussion of praising and blaming emotion in *EE* (1223 b 18-29) and this issue is echoed in *NE* III.i.

<sup>18</sup> See Heinaman 1988.

the soul, limiting our attention to the character center. In addition, it appears to suggest that some motions exhibited by humans are *natural*, while others are *violent* as if they are happening more to the person than being done by the person. An agent's body might move in ways that feel foreign to the agent (as when swept away by a violent wind), and for this reason, the agent is not considered to voluntarily act on such occasions.

At this juncture, it is clear that the semantics of K, S, and F matter a great deal. Let us consider how we may refine these notions so that we may better see what links them all together as features of voluntary behavior.

## 6. Knowledge Qualified

Here would be the standard place to remind readers how Aristotle qualifies *knowledge* to mean knowledge of the particulars only, and not general knowledge of moral truths. While this qualification will matter a great deal for my account, it is not the qualification I wish to illuminate in this section. Instead, I shall explain how the scope of this criterion may require more or less qualification.

Recall how at the outset of our inquiry, we reminded ourselves that the voluntary is broader than that of the kind of actions Aristotle proceeds to describe. Indeed, Aristotle tells us that animals and small children have a share in the voluntary (*NE* 1111b 6-9). While I do believe that the voluntary manifests differently in a cow than it does in an adult human, it might not be the case that I can dismiss the knowledge requirement for the former.

In addition to including animals and small children in the voluntary, Aristotle makes reference to them when considering the types of actions adult humans undertake that may be considered voluntary. Aristotle considers whether human voluntary behavior is in accordance with desire (*orexis*) choice (*prohairesis*) or thought (*daionoia*) (*EE* II.vii 1223a24-27).

Desire is further divided into three types: wish (*boulesis*), spirit (*thumos*), and sensual appetite (*epithumos*). Wish is too specific to be present in all voluntary behavior, for the incontinent person acts against her wish (and, on some occasions, her choice (*prohairesis*) as well). But these are the kinds of behaviors for which she regularly deserves blame. And as we already noted at the beginning of our inquiry, if a behavior deserves blame, it is voluntary. Therefore, if we are correct in blaming incontinent behavior (and I believe that we are), it cannot be the case that all voluntary behavior issues from wish.

However, it cannot be the case that all voluntary behavior issues from choice either. First, we often act quickly with little thought and even from habit (*NE* III.ii-v). Such behaviors can be blameworthy. Imagine a parent leaves an infant in a bathtub as it fills up to

answer the phone. Imagine that same parent becomes engaged in a conversation about trivial matters, and she completely forgets she had left the infant in the tub. Imagine that the infant sadly drowns. Clearly the parent did not *intentionally* drown the child. Therefore, the parent did not choose to drown the child, as choice, for Aristotle, involves deliberation. As the parent's behavior was not deliberate, it is difficult to see how she may have deliberated. Still, such negligent behavior would seem to be the kind for which one deserves blame.

We also behave voluntarily under time-constraints. Imagine a parent arrives home to find her babysitter alone and outside her home ablaze. Imagine she rushes into the home, finds her child, and rescues it from the fire. Imagine she does so without deliberation or choice.<sup>19</sup> After all, there wasn't time for such things. This parent behaved from habit and love – not choice. Still, I consider her praiseworthy.

These two examples of parenting illustrate that choice is too specific to qualify as the standard and universal cause of all voluntary behavior. In addition, Aristotle reminds us that animals and children have a share in the voluntary, but neither has the capacity of choice (*prohairesis*). Aristotle's use of animals and small children as counterexamples to the claim that all that is voluntary is chosen is puzzling. By pointing to animals and small children's lack of reason as an indicator that *choice* may not be necessary for the voluntary behavior we praise and blame, Aristotle seems to suggest that the relevant voluntary behavior of adult humans also need not require reason. However, Aristotle concludes that voluntary behavior *is* in accordance with thought (*daionoia*) (*EE* II.viii 1223b39-1224a8). For this reason we might need to qualify the knowledge requirement. It is apparent that in his discussion of the voluntary in *NE* Aristotle is considering behaviors of adult humans. After all, his examples are all human adults. And yet, Aristotle's descriptions of *knowledge* throughout his corpus seem to consider knowledge to rest firmly with the rational part of the soul (*NE* VI.iii-xi). The rational part of the soul *just is* reason. However, as we just saw, animals lack reason entirely, and young children have yet to develop it; still, both have a share in the voluntary where the scope of *the voluntary* in play is one where discussions of particular knowledge are relevant.

Animals *never* have knowledge in the sense that Aristotle frequently discusses. Children have reason the way they have reproductive capacities – as potentialities. Children's reason is dormant and underdeveloped, and it is not clear at what age a child's reason is fully developed (modern science might put it somewhere in the mid-twenties, which seems far too late to justify praising and blaming them). Therefore, the *knowledge* they employ when behaving voluntarily would seem to be quite weak. Animals and children

---

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle states clearly that such behavior is possible at *NE* III.ii 1112a14-16.

must have something *like* knowledge. For example, animals might respond to appearances (*phantasma*). But the "knowledge" employed in each instance must be more like *awareness*.

Indeed, I believe the same must be true for adult humans when they are acting quickly under pressure. Consider the example of the parent returning home to find it ablaze. The parent didn't have to confirm with the babysitter that the child was inside. Noticing the child was absent was sufficient to motivate her heroism. Naturally, if the child had been at the neighbor's house, her behavior would be quite unfortunate (especially if any harm came to the parent). What this example shows us is that the knowledge may be minimal (and minimally justified) provided it is accurate.

Aristotle lists six kinds of ignorance of the particulars that might excuse behavior. First, the agent might not be aware of who she is. This ignorance is likely rare and probably applies to people with mental illness or head trauma. Second, the agent might be ignorant of what he or she is doing. The agent might not realize she is leaning on a button that, if pushed, executes a damaging command. Third, one might be ignorant of who or what is affected. For instance, imagine that I turn the knob of a door and push it open. I have no reason to suspect anyone would be affected by my action. However, unbeknownst to me, a maintenance person is working on the knob of the door at the other side. I inadvertently shove the doorknob into her nose, thus breaking it. I was ignorant that anyone would be affected by my behavior. Fourth, one might be ignorant of the means one is using. For instance, a hostess might serve a guest food containing an ingredient neither of them is aware will aggravate the guest's allergy. The hostess (and her guest) believes she is nourishing the guest. She does not realize that the means she uses is also a means to making the guest ill. Fifth, one might be ignorant of the result intended by one's action. For instance, imagine a waitress serves a customer a drink that was poisoned by the customer's worst enemy just before it was placed on the service counter. The waitress did poison the customer. But the waitress did not realize that she was a pawn in the enemy's dastardly plot. She thought she was merely fulfilling the customer's order. Sixth, one might be ignorant of the manner in which they act. For instance, imagine a friend embraces another friend tightly upon a joyful reunion. Imagine the embracer did not know that the friend just recently injured her back. Under normal circumstances, such an embrace would be suitable. Under the current circumstances, the embrace is not sufficiently gentle. Therefore, the first friend is unaware that she embraces her friend too harshly, since such embraces have never caused the friend pain before and she has no reason to question the strength she exerts at the present moment (*NE III.i 1110b 33-1111a 1-15*).



None of these instances of ignorance of the facts resemble the kind of situation typically requiring considered investigation, cognitive calculation, or even deliberation between options. Indeed, we might imagine that we are often merely *aware* of such facts on a day-to-day basis. When such awareness is accurate, we perform the behaviors we mean to perform. The fact that we may be merely mildly justified in our thoughts on the situation is irrelevant. We cannot possibly investigate every behavior thoroughly prior to exhibiting it. For this reason, I suggest that the kind of knowledge that is required is more like a perceptive awareness of the conditions in which we act. For the most part, such awareness is easily justified by past experience and even subconscious inductive "reasoning." It is only when the particulars are not as one would expect that excuses are warranted.

There are many instances that might defy such excuses. These include instances when the agent should expect to take such matters into consideration as well as instances when the agent has personal special obligations to be certain about the particulars. Let's consider an example of each kind in turn. An instance of the first type might involve driving a vehicle behind a school bus. When the bus halts, a "Stop" sign protrudes from the street side of the vehicle. Imagine that Terry (from the previous example) decides to pass the bus anyway, since he cannot see anyone crossing the street. Once again, Terry runs over a child, thus killing the child. Terry may have been ignorant of the fact that a child was about to cross the street. Terry may have been ignorant of the fact that the child might cross his path so quickly that he'd have no time to apply his break. But Terry's ignorance is not an excuse. Terry should know that the "Stop" signs on the sides of buses are there to prevent accidents just like this one, which just occurred. Terry might exclaim defensively, "But I thought that child lived on the other side of the street!" However, this explanation gets Terry nowhere. Terry should know of the possibility that a child will dart across the road. His ignorance of the particulars was no excuse.

Imagine the scenario were slightly different. Imagine the child did live on that side of the street, the child did not cross the street, and Terry did not hit any children. A nearby police car sees Terry's traffic violation, pulls Terry over, and issues him a citation. Imagine Terry offers the officer the same excuse as above concerning where the child lives. The officer is not persuaded. Terry deserves blame (and a ticket) because Terry should know not to risk harming any child. It is true that Terry is not to blame for hitting any children simply because Terry did not hit any children. However, Terry got lucky. Therefore, it is not sufficient that Terry is correct in his awareness and anticipation of the particular circumstances. It appears that the knowledge requirement concerns reasonable guesses. The agent need not *know* in the strongest sense of the term all of the relevant particulars. But the agent must be

aware of particulars insofar as the agent can be expected to imagine them, and that perception must be sufficiently accurate (according to the conditions listed by Aristotle).

Finally, certain special obligations raise the threshold for the degree of justifiable certainty required for an agent to be excused when ignorance of the particulars causes the agent to behave badly. Physicians are expected to take and consider a patient's vital signs prior to administering any treatment. Imagine Dr. Smith neglects to take a patient's blood pressure prior to administering to that patient a blood thinner. When the patient's blood pressure drops drastically to a medically dangerous level, Dr. Smith is not excused for being ignorant of the patient's already low blood pressure. It is Dr. Smith's job to investigate the patient's condition thoroughly prior to administering any medication.

Now, we are in a position to reconsider the knowledge of particulars required for the voluntary. In most instances, this knowledge need only be an accurate general awareness of the facts as anyone in that position could be reasonably expected to imagine them. That is why we might not fault a watchdog that barks aggressively at a noise in the backyard in the middle of the night, not realizing its owner slipped outside to reset the sprinklers. There's no reason the dog would suspect the owner would be prowling about her own property after dark. The dog imagined it was alerting its owner of a prowler, not that it was barking aggressively *at* its owner. However, had the dog been alerting its owner to an actual threat, the owner would not be wrong to praise the animal. Similarly, a child who steals a friend's toy because it is identical to one the child has at home (so, she mistakes it for her own) might be forgiven because the child may not have developed any understanding of object permanence. Perhaps the child cannot yet reason that if the toy was left behind at home, it could not have miraculously appeared at the friend's house. The child is aware of which toys it has and whether it has permission to play with those toys. But the child cannot rationalize the degree of awareness it would take to recognize that the toy is more likely a duplicate than that it travelled through a wormhole independently. Such a scenario is very different from an older child who steals a toy from her friend simply because she likes it. Imagine that child was rational enough to hide the toy in her backpack and stealthily remove it when her parents weren't looking, storing it safely in her closet. That child is blameworthy for stealing her friend's toy. The first child is not. The first child cannot be expected to have the degree of awareness required to know of the unique likeness of the particular toys. The second child most certainly knew exactly what she was doing. She believed the toy was not hers, she was correct in that belief, and yet she stole it anyway.

As long as we are comfortable qualifying the type of knowledge of the particulars necessary, I am happy to continue to endorse the knowledge requirement. This knowledge can be a mere perceptual awareness or an animalistic "judgment" based on such awareness.

There are conditions that could raise the threshold of cognition and certainty required to consider any cognitive excuses. The threshold and kind of cognition should be sensitive to the kind of cognition of which the agent is both capable and morally obligated to employ. For this reason, the ignorance of the particulars of our watchdog's situation excuse the animal's unfriendly treatment of its owner, whereas the ignorance of Dr. Smith's patient's blood pressure hardly excuses Dr. Smith's endangering that patient's health.

### **7. Qualifying Sourcehood**

Aristotle takes care to distinguish agency from influence in *NE III.i*, and he concludes that influence is rarely exculpatory. For Aristotle, the agent is the source of her behavior unless the agent contributes nothing to the behavior (*NE III.i* 1110a2, 1110b17). In other words, compulsion (an excusing condition) must be external to the agent. Agents are not compelled from within. Aristotle makes this clear in a discussion of several specific scenarios. Perhaps the most informative is that of the so-called "mixed actions."

A mixed action is one that, in the abstract, is undesirable, but in the particular circumstance, is desirable. Aristotle gives two compelling examples. First, he imagines we do something undesirable because a tyrant has control over our family and will harm them if we do not perform the ordered task. We might imagine instances like the following: a bank teller assists dangerous robbers in robbing a bank because they have taken her family hostage and they threatened to harm her family if she does not comply. Second, he describes a scenario where a ship is in a dangerous storm. It is essential to saving the lives of those on board to throw cargo overboard to lighten the weight of the ship. Normally, no one would voluntarily discard the cargo whose transport was the entire point of the journey. However, under these unusually bad circumstances, such an act is desirable (*NE III.i* 1110a9-12).

Aristotle describes how the *endoxa* would have it that there are some actions that are involuntary because the action considered by itself is fundamentally undesirable, and no one would naturally want to perform such an action. Therefore, the conditions that impose the necessity of such behavior must disqualify that behavior from moral assessment. After all, we do not want to blame people on such occasions. If one does such an act, one does it from fear of greater evils or for some noble object (*NE III.i* 1110a 5). However, Aristotle distinguishes the situation from the act in order to determine whether it is voluntary, and then reconsiders the act in light of the situation to determine praise or blame. First, he notes that if we ignore the situation and the type of act that is done (i.e. that it is a discarding of property), it is undeniable that the agent is the source of motion and knows the particulars, suggesting that his action is voluntary. Reconsidered in light of the situation, we can see

that discarding property was *the best action available*, and therefore desirable at the time of acting (*NE* III.i 1110a 14-18). The *endoxa* is correct that we ought not to blame such an agent. However, the reason our agent is exempt from blame is not because the behavior was sufficiently coerced to render it *involuntary*. On the contrary, the agent performs the act because it is the morally best course of action. Therefore, the agent ought to be praised for doing the right thing and saving lives. Blame is out of the question because the unusual particular circumstances render a typically bad act a good one. Since we only ever act in particular situations and under specific circumstances, and since we never act *in general*, so-called mixed actions are voluntary. The only reason to be tempted to call them involuntary is their inherently general undesirability. But no one ever acts *in general*. Instead, we act at specific times and places and with limited options (and even fewer if we are innocently unaware of some of those options).

We act voluntarily under sub-optimal conditions often. The fact that we may not like our options is not enough to make our choosing one involuntary. We could imagine any action with foreseeable unpleasant consequences satisfying this description. We do not say that we purchase milk "involuntarily" because we paid for it, and we would prefer to take it for free. We do not say that we exercise "involuntarily" because we are "compelled" to do so by the knowledge that a failure to exercise makes one unhealthy, which is more painful than exercise (as if any painful predictable outcome renders an action undesirable, "mixed," or a matter of fear from "great" evils).

Likewise, claims Aristotle, no one is "compelled" (in the sense that renders behavior involuntary) to behave well. While there is a sense in which the virtuous are psychologically incapable of voluntarily performing base acts, the reason for their apparent compulsion is their good nature. The fact that the virtuous *will not* behave otherwise voluntarily does not mean their behavior fails to be *eph' hēmin*. Their behavior remains contingent; they are the kinds of creatures that could have behaved differently (despite the fact that they will not). The virtuous (as well as the vicious) are responsible for their characters (*NE* III.v). Aristotle is a proponent of *tracing*, the notion that we can be responsible for behaviors we cannot help but to exhibit when this inflexibility is a consequence of earlier behaviors for which we were responsible. Virtue and vice are like this. It would be ridiculous to claim the virtuous person does not act voluntarily (and therefore deserves no praise) for her good acts because she no longer can voluntarily behave differently. She is so good as a result of performing the kinds of acts that made her virtuous repeatedly. When performing *those* acts, the agent could have failed to do so. In this sense, her actions were *eph' hēmin* (up to her) in that she could have done them or refrained from doing them. Just as it would be ridiculous to disclaim responsibility for the death of a person one intentionally shoots on the basis that

the shooter did not kill the person, the bullet did, it is ridiculous to claim that a virtuous person does not voluntarily perform her good actions, her character does.

Interestingly, there is a way in which Aristotle speaks of non-voluntary behavior that mirrors such distancing tactics. For instance, recall that Aristotle distinguishes acting *due to* ignorance (*agnoian prattein*) and acting *in* ignorance (*agnoounta poiein*). Indeed, even in English the distinct agencies are implied. When one acts unwittingly involuntarily, the behavior (described as a bad act) is more a result of her ignorance than her character center. Much like how only eyes can be blind (and not hands or feet), our ignorance is only a deficiency *of ours* if we, by nature, are supposed to have knowledge in its place according to our function. A perfectly well functioning human being can be said to be "ignorant" of the precise moment the sun will rise in a city in China, and such "ignorance" is like the "blindness" of one's hand. It is no more the work of a human to know exhaustive bits of trivia of no particular significance than it is the work of a hand to see. When our ignorance is not our fault, *it* causes our behavior. When our ignorance is blameworthy, we are said to act *in* that ignorance much like one might act *in* a fit of rage. Our anger (and its consequences) is as much ours as our culpable ignorance (and its consequences) are. While our merely non-voluntary actions do, in a way, issue from the character center (as we often intend to do *something* when we act), the causal connection between the character center and the *telos* achieved by the action is sufficiently interrupted to disconnect the agent from the effects of her action.

Today's reader might lament Aristotle's language concerning the causes of involuntary behavior done by force as well. In his example of one being carried away by a strong wind, readers complain that the "action" isn't really one of the agent's at all. Instead, it is something done *to* the agent. Modern speakers would prefer to say, "I was blown away by a gust of wind" to "I blew away by a gust of wind." The latter invokes images of one riding a gust of wind as a surfer rides a wave. But Aristotle is not suggesting anything intentional. Indeed, the point of the example is that the agent did not cause the event. Aristotle tells us that involuntary actions done by force are those whereby the agent *contributes nothing*. But if the agent contributes nothing, how can the event be one of the agent's behaviors?

The answer is made clear by attention to the character center's role in voluntary behavior. When we are blown away by a gust of wind, our appetite is not the efficient cause. Similarly, when we act due to ignorance, our reason is not the cause of our behavior, its misfortune is. Aristotle not only distinguishes forced acts as having *external* causes, he distinguishes unwitting acts as having a *foreign* cause (ignorance) in a way that disassociates the agent from responsibility for the act.

Limiting the scope of *sourcehood* on Aristotle's account of the voluntary to the character center separates *foreign* causes according to our considered intuitions. First, nutritive acts of which we are aware would be disqualified outright. They do not issue from the character center. This is convenient because we intuitively view such behaviors as non-voluntary. More importantly nutritive behaviors are not *eph' hēmin*. Even if I am aware of my tummy rumbling, and even if I understand the digestion process well, I cannot voluntarily refrain from making the noise. Therefore, while I do understand the particulars of the situation in which I exhibit such behavior, and while it is true that the behavior emanates from within me, I am not its *source* in the relevant sense because I am not *causing* my behavior via the efficient-teleological powers of my character center. We saw how the two criteria alone could not get us this result, since nutritive acts issue from the nutritive soul. Since only the behaviors for which our character center is the source can be *eph' hēmin*, we may take the mental shortcut in limiting the scope of sourcehood in this way.

My suggestion of limiting our scope of sourcehood to the character center also helps us make sense of our intuitions concerning certain merely non-voluntary behavior. Whenever one accidentally performs a bad act and does not respond appropriately, that agent is demonstrating something important about her character (or characteristics of her character center in instances prior to character acquisition). The aspect demonstrated is a character flaw. Since good people do not want to behave badly, it pains them to learn that they have done something wrong. This is true even if they recognize that they weren't at fault, since someone who wants to be good doesn't want to be even associated with the bad. One who is already good simply doesn't want unwarranted harm to come to anyone. Strangely, it might be morally appropriate to feel pain and regret for behavior for which one deserves no pain or reproach. The good person who acts badly non-voluntarily does not deserve to feel regret, but she will if she is a decent person.

Aristotle makes it clear that all involuntary actions are painful. If Terry is not pained by accidentally killing a child, something in Terry's character center has failed to appreciate the moral import of the situation. As Aristotle aptly notes, ignorance of moral truths is never an excuse – it is, in fact, something blameworthy itself. What's worse in Terry's case, delighting in the misfortune almost suggests a retroactive consent to the behavior and outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Reactions can be separate bits of behavior to evaluate (See Kosman 1980). There-

---

<sup>20</sup> Meyer (1989 and 2006 143-4) argues that regret is a sign that the action is one that goes 'against the grain of the agent.' I prefer Meyer's characterization to the common impulse to consider pain and regret signs that the agent would not have done the act had she knowledge of the particulars. I prefer Meyer's use of *going against the grain of the agent* because we can imagine an akratic agent acting due to ignorance of the particulars in a way she regrets even though her weak will may have led her to behave

fore, while it is absolutely true that Terry did not voluntarily kill the child (since the voluntary requires knowledge of relevant particulars), it is not clear that Terry does not voluntarily assess the outcome as favorable.

Merely non-voluntary actions give us an opportunity to delineate actions and their effects separately. Indeed, Terry acted non-voluntarily. We should not blame him for his action. His action was not *eph' hēmin* because he was not even aware of the action he was performing. He may have been the efficient cause of the tragedy, but his lack of cognitive grasp of the particulars that rendered the act of driving also an act of manslaughter precludes Terry from being the teleological cause. In driving, Terry was not pursuing any child-ridding goals; Terry could not have been aware of the fact that ridding the world of a child was a possibility.

Nevertheless, Aristotle did not have to stop here. Aristotle could have given us an example like Terry's to show that we can blame a reaction to a non-voluntary action. Since Terry's reaction is a true expression of his character and assessment of the event as it happened, we are justified in blaming Terry for that reaction.

One might argue that it is not up to Terry how he reacts to such situations, but this objection is misguided. Perhaps Terry cannot resist being gleeful about the result the same way that a virtuous person cannot resist spreading joy intentionally. But such behaviors are impulsive – *not compulsive*. As we learned from the account in *EE*, only involuntary behaviors go against the agent's impulse in the sense relevant to our inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

## 8. Human Nature and the Character Center

Qualifying the knowledge and sourcehood conditions through the lens of the *eph' hēmin* allows us to exclude nutritive behavior and merely non-voluntary actions from the voluntary while making better sense of our distaste for and reluctance to pity and forgive merely non-voluntary acts with morally unfavorable outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Behavior for which the

---

similarly with the relevant knowledge. There remains an important difference between acting due to ignorance and acting due to weak will that Meyer's phrasing captures well.

<sup>21</sup> One might also argue that we would not be justified in blaming Terry at all had he not shared with us his delight in the outcome, and this would be correct. However, the lack of justification in this scenario stems from our ignorance of Terry's internal reaction and not Terry's blameworthiness. *We* are not justified in blaming others when we do not know whether they deserve blame. But Terry does, in fact, deserve blame.

<sup>22</sup> We may eschew discussions of merely non-voluntary behaviors that are innocuous or even good. For instance, imagine I go outside to fetch the mail just in time to startle a cat that was terrorizing a nest of baby birds atop my porch. I did not harm the cat by startling it, but I did cause it to abandon its plan to snatch the birds just in time for the mama bird to return. The neighbor calls the cat, and it obediently runs

knowledge and sourcehood requirements are qualified by the *'eph hēmin* considered in light of human nature also allows us to make sense of occasions when mercy is appropriate.

Aristotle exempts agents from blame when they fail to meet superhuman standards. He writes:

On some actions praise indeed is not bestowed, but forgiveness (*sungnōmē*) is, when one does what he ought not under pressure which overstrains human nature and which no one could withstand. (*NE* III.1 1110a 23-25)

A possible example might be if one were to divulge a secret under extreme torture, or make a false confession under torturous circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Given Aristotle's suggestion here of forgiveness, might he consider such acts involuntary?<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the so-called "mixed actions," Aristotle does not say whether these acts are voluntary. On the one hand, they satisfy the sourcehood and the knowledge requirements – even the qualified versions we have created. For this reason, we might be tempted to consider them voluntary. However, they do not pass the *'eph' hēmin* test. A typical human under torture who is trying her best not to reveal a secret will eventually divulge the information. A typical human lacks the strength necessary to hold out indefinitely. Therefore, the agent did a bad thing and it was *not* true that she could both divulge the secret and refrain from divulging it. Therefore, in the instance of a typical human who tries to resist the temptation to perform the bad act but fails, the agent does not act voluntarily.

Interestingly, if a superhuman agent were to succeed in keeping the secret, we might want to praise her. After all, this feat is difficult. This may be appropriate provided the *godlike* character is similar enough to us to be an object of our praise. However, Aristotle makes it clear that we do not praise gods. We do not do so (presumably) because 1. Gods are above us (and virtue *NE* VII.i) and praise suggests we are in a position to judge she whom we praise as though we were equals and 2. The gods are happy and have an

---

home. I non-voluntarily saved the birds. I imagine I also non-voluntarily spared the cat a bird attack from the parent birds. I do not regret this. In fact, I am pleased by the outcome. I do not deserve praise for having done anything. But as my reaction is appropriate, I do not deserve blame either.

<sup>23</sup> While it is not impossible to keep a secret or tell the truth under such conditions, contemporary psychology and sociological research suggests that the vast majority of people are susceptible to such pressure. People who are able to withstand the torment and maintain their moral commitments might be considered exceptional human beings who exhibit the *godlike* character that Aristotle mentions, which is more aptly considered superhuman (i.e., beyond human nature).

<sup>24</sup> I grant that in saying we bestow pardon or pity on involuntary behavior, Aristotle is not committed to the idea that *we only* bestow pardon or pity on involuntary behavior. However, I believe we have more reason to consider behavior like that mentioned in the above passage involuntary than voluntary.



achievement in this regard (*NE* I.xii). We may congratulate others on achievements; yet praise seems inappropriate.

While the superhuman who withstands torture probably does so voluntarily, she does so as a superhuman. Just as the voluntary for a cow is different from that of a human, it is likely that superhuman or godlike voluntary behavior is in a class of its own. Furthermore, it is possible that superhumans are not as susceptible to praise and blame. First, being praised by an inferior is likely to matter little to them. Second, we might imagine that in *being* superhuman, the agent won't backslide and needs no external encouragement to develop, alter, or strengthen her character. If a godlike person performs a superhuman act, it is likely that she acts *eph' hēmin* and satisfies the human conditions of the voluntary. However, she is practically no longer human; she is *superhuman*. Therefore, the voluntary nature of her behavior is beyond the scope of our inquiry.

On the other hand, such instances help us to understand justified mercy when some humans perform bad acts under extreme pressure. Any human who resists the bad act initially will eventually give in. Perhaps it is better to consider divulging a secret under such circumstances a failure to sustain keeping it (and not a separate act). As noted above, since this human is not able to refrain from the bad act, the bad behavior is not *eph' hēmin*. Certainly, the human can *try* to keep the secret or *refrain from* even trying to keep the secret. What the human cannot do (successfully) is *keep the secret*. For this reason I consider her behavior involuntary. Her behavior only meets the original two requirements before we qualified them. Understood in light of the *eph' hēmin* requirement, such bad acts cannot be voluntary.

Even if the sourcehood and knowledge requirements were sufficient in themselves, the fact that human nature and not the character center causes the behavior is also excusing. The first thesis of this paper was that voluntary behavior is efficiently and teleologically caused by the character center, and our qualifications of the first two criteria are indicative of this adequacy condition. However, a failure to resist doing a bad act due to pressures overstraining human nature is a failure of human nature and not a failure of the individual in the situation. Just as ignorance of the particulars intercepts legitimate teleological causation, human nature can usurp efficient causation from the character center. Furthermore, as such behavior is caused by human nature and not the character center, no amount of blame could motivate a typical human to behave more heroically in the future.

## 9. Affectability

Praise and blame must be fitting and must have the potential to make their target better. Aristotle's view is not purely consequentialist. He does not suggest spreading false

praise or blaming the innocent to steer them in the right direction. Indeed, I am confident that Aristotle doubted the potential success of such methods. Falsely praising others who do not deserve it leads to an inflated ego; falsely blaming others makes them either resentful or psychologically powerless. Either way, falsely blaming someone pushes them to the extremes of rage and meekness (coupled with a sense of hopelessness and lack of ambition).

Whether a character center *is in fact* improved is not essential to whether the assessed behavior is voluntary. We should expect to have to praise good behaviors frequently to yield any results, and we must be prepared for these results to be delayed. We must also expect that moral encouragement is never sufficient; agents must follow the suggestions of accurate praise and blame to improve morally.

*Affectability*, or the human capacity to be positively affected by apt praise and blame, is often indicated in human voluntary behavior. When behavior is morally significant, whether one can be affected is a sign of whether or not the behavior issued from the character center, as the character center should be susceptible to praise and blame. The parts of the soul that constitute the character center are, in principle, subject to moral growth and improvement: reason and appetite. That is to say, if the behavior issues from an agent's rational and appetitive aspects of soul, the behavior is voluntary. However, a lack of factual knowledge disqualifies behavior from having issued from these two aspects of the soul, as reason cannot choose what it does not grasp.

Similarly, praise and blame are otiose when applied to unwitting behavior. Imagine that Kyle accidentally knocks a vase from Kim's grasp because neither person was aware that the other was standing so closely behind them. Imagine they came from different directions, passed each other, and without realizing that the other would behave similarly, they both paused for a few seconds. Kim stopped to grasp the vase with the opposite hand; Kyle stopped to read the sign that indicated his destination was in the opposite direction. The collision occurs when Kyle turns around inadvertently bumping Kim. If Kim were to exclaim, "Watch where you're going!" Kyle wouldn't be wrong to respond sarcastically, "Yeah, I'll try to remember that the next time someone hides directly behind me." What could Kyle have done differently? Even if Kyle were to turn to look and see whether someone happened to suddenly materialize behind him, given Kim's proximity, *that* movement alone (the movement that constituted watching where Kyle was about to go) might have been sufficient to launch the vase. Neither person knew that the other was directly behind them. Blaming either one will not improve their character, because that requires making efforts towards goals contrary to their character. The innocent ignorance of what is immediately behind one (an ignorance that is, quite literally, often impossible to avoid) is not the kind of thing that could be encouraged or discouraged. It is not as though one's reason

could "take it into account" in the future (or ever). Therefore, it is not possible that Kyle's collision (in the described instance) could have come from Kyle's rational part.

As I suggested earlier, we may be justified in blaming the reaction of morally significant merely non-voluntary behavior lacking regret. In addition to the attractiveness of distinguishing the status of an action (as non-voluntary) and the status of a separate behavior, the reaction (as voluntary), this solution supports my claim concerning affectability. It would do us no good to scold Terry (in the first scenario) for hitting the child. Like Kyle's example, no amount of blame could prevent future occurrences of unintentional acts. However, we do not want to *pardon* Terry. That seems to be going too far, and his callous reaction to the whole scenario seems wildly inappropriate. Even though we may not blame the non-voluntary act, in blaming the sincere reaction that belies Terry's underlying moral flaws, we may positively affect his character. Nothing will prevent Terry's future innocent accidental behavior. However, blame of his reaction might help Terry to reconsider his attitude towards children (and their right to live). If he can develop compassion for child victims, Terry's character will have improved.

Similarly, there is an important way in which affectability can explain Aristotle's distinction between the excusing power of ignorance of the particulars and the culpability of general moral ignorance. One's general moral knowledge is an aspect of one's moral character. If an agent fails to recognize that torturing others for amusement is wrong, that failure of knowledge is the very thing grounding her blameworthiness. After all, Aristotle is not concerned with merely knowing how to be good, but also actually becoming good. No one can become good with ignorance of moral knowledge. Therefore, general moral knowledge is something we should consider a duty of each person to develop. Furthermore, everyone believes his or her perspective is correct. Terry has no reason to doubt his judgment concerning children until others challenge it. It is difficult to see how someone like Terry could improve without some questioning of his general moral positions. Left unchecked, Terry may be aware of contrary positions, but he need not consider them superior to his own.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued two main points. First, I argued that human voluntary behavior issues from the character center whereby appetite is the efficient cause and reason is the teleological cause. This origin of voluntary behavior is unique to humans. In order to understand the causal role of the character center, we considered apparent exceptions to the original unqualified two criteria offered by Aristotle at *NE* III.i. These exceptions (coupled

with Aristotle's comments concerning the voluntary behavior of animals, children, and unreflective acts) illuminated why the scope of sourcehood had to be narrowed to exclude the nutritive aspect of the soul and why the scope of knowledge had to be broadened to include justified true thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions.

After considering the character center as the source of which Aristotle spoke, we saw that what justifies our qualification of the original two criteria is a specific understanding of what is *eph' hēmin*. When the character center is able to perform the behavior it does or refrain from so doing, the agent is the proper cause of her behavior. Otherwise, the behavior would be caused by something external to the agent (*qua* character center), and that would not constitute voluntary behavior.

Behaviors that are *eph' hēmin* are up to us because we are not necessitated to perform them. When acting in morally charged scenarios, we *ought to* exercise volition as the virtuous person would (thus refraining from behaving otherwise). However, we may not fully grasp the ends of the virtuous person. For this reason, humans benefit developmentally from appropriate praise and blame; we can and should  $\phi$ , it is possible that we not  $\phi$ , and we can become more prone to behave well with practice. Unfortunately, poor practice makes us prone to behave poorly when it is possible for us to behave well. The character center's susceptibility to change grounds both the contingency of voluntary behavior issuing from it and the importance of being held accountable when voluntarily behaving well or poorly. The self-perpetuating nature of character states renders external challenges to and affirmations of an agent's ends welcome vehicles for steering moral improvement. If fair moral assessment can, in theory, inspire good voluntary behavior in the future, then the agent may be affected for the better.

*Assist. Prof. Dr. Audrey Anton, Philosophy Faculty of  
Western Kentucky University, audrey.anton@wku.edu*

### References

- Anton, Audrey L. "Fixed and Flexible Characters: Aristotle on the permanence and mutability of distinct types of character." *Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* Vol. 15, Nr 1 (2014): 22-28.
- Anton, Audrey L. "Breaking the Habit: Aristotle on recidivism and how a thoroughly vicious person might begin to improve." *Dialogue with Ancient Philosophy*, a special issue of *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* Vol. 13, Nr. 2 (2006): 58-66.

- Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: the Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Bondeson, William. "Aristotle on Responsibility for One's Character and the Possibility of Character Change." *Phronesis*. Vol. 19 (1974): 59-65.
- Brickhouse, Thomas C. "A Contradiction in Aristotle's Doctrines Concerning the Alterability of "Hexeis" and the Role of "Hexeis" in the Explanation of Action." *Southern Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 14 (1976): 401-411.
- Burnyeat, Myles F. "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. In Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980: 69-92.
- Di Muzio, Gianluca. "Aristotle on Improving One's Character." *Phronesis*. Vol. 45, Nr. 3 (2000): 205-219.
- Everson, Stephen. "Aristotle's Compatibilism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*." *Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. 10, Nr. 1 (1990): 81-103.
- Heinaman, Robert. "Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the Eudemian Ethics." *Nous*. Vol. 22, Nr. 2 (1988): 253-281.
- Klimchuk, Dennis. "Aristotle on Necessity and Voluntariness." *History of Philosophy Quarterly*. Vol. 19, Nr. 1 (2002): 1-19.
- Kosman, L. A. "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press (1980): 103-116.
- Meyer, Susan Sauvé. "Aristotle on the Voluntary." in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Richard Kraut (ed.). London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006: 137-157.
- Meyer, Susan Sauvé. "Why Involuntary Actions are Painful," in *Spindel Conference 1988: Aristotle's Ethics*. T.D. Roche (ed.). *Southern Journal of Philosophy supplement*. London, Wiley-Blackwell, 1989.
- Ott, Walter. "A Troublesome Passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* iii 5." *Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. 20, Nr.1 (2000): 99-107.
- Phillips-Garrett, Carissa. "Sungnōmē in Aristotle." *Apeiron: Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science*. Vol. 49, Nr. 5. DOI 10.1515/apeiron-2016-0030.
- Tessitore, Aristide. *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Tuozzo, Thomas M. "Aristotelian Deliberation Is Not Of Ends," in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy IV: Aristotle's Ethics*. Anton, J.P. and A. Preus. (eds.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991.