

From Guilt to Responsibility: Ancient Theories of Action from Homer to Aristotle (plus Alexander of Aphrodisias)

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Abstract

In Greece, the problem of responsibility for choices was originally discussed by poets and legislators. Philosophical analysis developed in relation to these reflections, and Plato wanted to undermine the authority of poets with a new approach, inspired by Socrates. Aristotle tackled the question starting from Plato's position. His approach was not limited to the question of the responsibility of those who perform evil actions, but extends to a general evaluation of the entire sphere of human actions. The problem of responsibility in Aristotle is discussed on the basis of a precise ontology of events, and falls within the field of moral psychology and physics. Alexander of Aphrodisias even came to support the thesis that in two identical situations we always have the possibility of choosing one action or its opposite. This is based on the very complex Aristotelian idea of causation as a one-way dependence relationship, which does not always imply necessity.

Keywords: Aristotle, Poetry, Responsibility, Causality, Determinism.

1. Some Preliminary Notions

The philosophical discussion on guilt and responsibility in ancient Greece develops against a particular cultural background, which must be taken into account for the historical understanding of the terms of the debate and to avoid a too hasty identification of ancient positions with contemporary problems. In the beginning, the problem of responsibility for choices was not a philosophical issue, but was discussed by poets, legislators and tragedians; philosophical analysis developed in relation to these reflections, sometimes in continuity with them, more often in opposition to the opinion of poets and literati.

The great epic poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not seen as mere works of art and a source of aesthetic pleasure, in the manner of today, but were considered, from the Archaic age until the Christian age, a guide on how to live.

Plato, who disliked this aspect of the culture of his time, testifies that “the praisers of Homer [...] say that this poet educated Greece” (*Republic* X, 606e1-3).¹

The world of epics is peopled by men and gods, two races similar in appearance and character; the gods are immortal, infinitely more powerful than men, and are endowed with a peculiar clarity of vision, while a mist obscures human eyes. In spite of an asserted contempt for men, the gods love to intervene in their world, directing their actions, but the divine action on earth is discreet, almost subterranean, hardly ever evident or prodigious. In order to influence the actions of men, sometimes the gods present themselves in human form and give interested advice to those they address; sometimes, however, the gods operate within the individual, and in some way possess him. They can thus enhance the warrior’s fury (*menos*), or obscure his ability to decide (*atē*).

Thus one of the most important problems in the Homeric epics arises, that of the moral responsibility for evil actions. Some of the most important actions of kings and heroes, such as the kidnapping of Helen by Paris, were inspired by a god or a goddess, and one may wonder whether such actions fall under the responsibility of those who perform them. In fact the Homeric heroes sometimes do, with a full personal participation, what a god imposes them to do, and accept to pay the penalty of the faults committed by external impulse. Agamemnon and Helen, in famous passages, blame themselves for their actions, whatever the gods have done. For example Agamemnon says:

1. However I am not at fault (*aitios*), but Zeus and Moira and Eryns that walks in darkness [...] they cast upon my soul *atē* on that day [...] but what I could do? It is god that brings all things to their issue [...] seeing that I was blinded, and Zeus robbed me of my wits, fain I am to make amends and pay liberal gifts (*Iliad* XIX, 86-90 and 137-8; transl. Murray [Homer 1924] modified).

The *atē* reinforces the condition of blindness typical of the human condition, and according to these passages one can be guilty of an act without being its actual cause. Modern critics have debated these passages endlessly, and the prevailing opinion is that in the *Iliad* human will and divine influence are totally integrated, unreflectively, with a kind of double motivation. These words constituted a problem for philosophical reflection as early as the first century A.D., when Plutarch wrote that:

2. People despise Homer and say that with his impossible exploits and incredible tales he makes it impossible to believe in every man’s rational power to make a choice (*ton hekastou logismon tēs proaireseos apiston kathistanos*) (*Life of Coriolanus* 32; transl. Perrin [Plutarch 1916] modified).

Plutarch thus acknowledges that poetic reflection on causality and responsibility for actions was important in the debate in ancient Greece.

In poetry, however, we should not look for an iron coherence; in the *Odyssey* Zeus seems to answer to Agamemnon and polemicize with the idea that the gods make men commit faults:

¹ All translations from the works of Plato are taken from Plato 1997, with occasional modifications.

3. It is strange how ready mortals are to blame the gods and say we inflict the evils they bear, but they even by themselves, through they blind folly, bring sorrows on themselves beyond the will of fate (*Odyssey* I 32-34; transl. Murray [Homer 1919] modified).

The *Odyssey* departs from the archaic perspective of the *Iliad*, and in this poem another aspect of action comes to the fore, the idea that the agent acts of his own volition (*hekōn*), when he performs an action. For example Menelaus at one point says, “Not of my own will (*hekōn*) do I stand still” (*Odyssey* IV, 377 [Homer 1919]).

The Homeric poems thus already provide a good deal of the typical terms of the debate on determinism ancient thought: *aitia*, *aitios*, *hekōn* etc. One thing is missing: will. We cannot here investigate the question in all its aspects, but we would like to note that in Greek culture the idea of a psychic faculty such as the will, autonomous and independent both of reasoning and of emotions and desires, has not been present for a long time.

Another source of reflection on culpability was the legal lexicon, in which it was important to distinguish between crimes committed *ex pronoias*, premeditatedly, and those *akōn*, unintentionally, as the Law of Drakon of the fifth century BC puts it. An ancient inscription says:

4. If a man without premeditation kills (me ‘*k pronoias kteinei*) another, he will be brought to trial. The Basileis are to judge the accused person [...], the Ephetai are to decide the case [...] if he killed unintentionally (*akon*) and the fifty-one Ephetai recognise that he killed unintentionally (*akonta*), let ten phratry members readmit him to the homeland (*Inscriptiones Graecae* I3 104, lines 11 and 16-18; I follow the interpretation by Pepe 2012 and 2019).

Pronoia implies forethought, *epiboulē kai proboulē*, as the orator Antiphon in a trial speech attests:

5. I will prove that my opponent’s mother murdered our father in a planned and premeditated way (*ex proboulēs kai proboulēs*) [...] he has been the involuntary (*akousiōs*) victim of a planned murder (*ex proboulēs*), she sent him to death deliberately and with premeditation (*hekousiōs ex pronoias*) (*Against the stepmother*, §§ 3 and 5).

This distinction raises the problem of how to evaluate actions performed neither out of premeditation nor involuntarily, but out of anger and immediate impulse (*thumōi, dia thumon*). In this period they were often considered *akōn*, not voluntary, in the sense of not premeditated (*ouk ethelōn, akōn, Iliad* XXIII, 87-8 [Homer 1924] and Euripides, *Herakles* 1363-4).

The specifically philosophical reflection at its beginning starts precisely from investigating the responsibility of the wicked for their actions. Socrates’ thesis, reported by Plato, says that:

6. I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly (*hekonta*) makes a mistake or willingly (*hekonta*) does anything wrong or bad (*Protagoras* 345e1-4).

In short, Socrates holds that everyone in their actions tends to their good but errs in identifying it, and that moral guilt consists in a mistaken identification of the good with the pleasure or profit of the moment. The question of responsibility for error is reduced to an inability to calculate correctly the human good in a given situation. His thesis is thus that ethical virtue is identified, at bottom, with a form of knowledge (*Protagoras* 355a3-b3). Socrates refers to divine intervention in a very limited way, and in him the question of responsibility arises on the human level only.

2. Plato

Plato's position is rather clear when viewed against this background. Broadly speaking, it can be said that one of the philosopher's intentions was to undermine the authority of Homer and ancient tragedy as the "masters of Hellas", because he is convinced that they convey to their audience bad conceptions of divinity, virtue, and responsibility for actions. This is a critique that is at once political, theological, and moral, and in fact is found in Plato's most political dialogues, such as the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In these dialogues Plato designs societies with a high degree of perfection, and refuses to allow both epic poetry and tragic plays within his ideal cities. Nevertheless, Plato used the vocabulary of poetry and tragedy to formulate his theses.

In a very brief summary, Plato on the one hand accepts the thesis that no one does evil voluntarily:

7. When men whose physical constitutions are bad have bad forms of government where bad civic speeches are given, both in public and in private [...] that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way, being the product of two causes completely involuntary (*dia duo akousiōtata*) (*Timaeus* 87a7-b4).

And:

8. All wicked men are, in all their mistakes, unwillingly (*akontes*) wicked (*Laws* IX, 860d1).

But at the same time Plato rejects the Homeric thesis that the god is responsible for the evils that the individual attracts to himself by his own evil actions. The god is good and therefore:

9. What is good isn't the cause of all things, but only of good ones; it isn't the cause of bad ones [...] Therefore, since the god is good, he is not—as most people claim—cause of everything that happens to human being but only of a few things [...] we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not the god (*Republic* II, 379b13-c7).

In the myth that concludes the *Republic*, everyone chooses the kind of life they want to live, and they are not forced by god:

10. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice: the god has none (*aitia helomenous: ho theos anaitios*) (*Republic* X, 617e4-5).

From our point of view, Plato's position can be characterized as a separation between voluntariness and responsibility: if one misidentifies his own good, he commits evil unwillingly (*akōn*); but he is equally responsible (*aitios*) for what he does, even if he is influenced by a corrupt environment or psychophysical defects. In a way, paradoxically, Plato recovers an archaic position, with the only difference, very important for him, that the gods are exonerated from any responsibility for the crimes committed by men.

As for actions performed by impulse, Plato considers them an intermediate case (*metaxu*, *Laws IX*, 867a1), and not a clear one: there are impulsive actions that are closer to the involuntary, those performed immediately, others closer to the voluntary, those performed after a certain lapse of time (*Laws IX*, 866d-867a). The problem seems evidently to consist in the fact that between 'premeditated' and 'against will' there is an intermediate space, which does not fit into either category.

Apparently, in Plato's school, the Academy, it was customary to discuss the master's theses with great freedom, and the disciples felt free to reject some of Plato's theses. Most likely there was also a debate about the question of responsibility. We have some traces of it in Plato himself and, after him, in Aristotle in particular.

In Plato's *Laws* the position is referred of someone who tried to distinguish between the character of the individual and his individual actions. This person argued that individual action is performed voluntarily, even though the individual character that determines it is involuntary:

11. To suppose that a voluntary act is performed involuntarily makes no sense. Therefore, in the eyes of someone who holds the view that injustice is involuntary, a man who acts unjustly would seem to be doing so against his will [...] If anyone with a disputatious disposition or a desire to attract favourable notice says that, although there are those are unjust against their will (*akontas*), even so many men do commit unjust acts voluntarily (*hekontas*), I reject their argument and stick to what I said (*Laws IX*, 860d9-e4).

Plato rejects this thesis:

12. Here and now, that is the position I have to accept: I allow that no one acts unjustly except against his will (*Laws IX*, 860d 8-9).

The most comprehensive discussion, however, is to be found in the ethical works of Aristotle, who devotes two large sections of the *Eudemian Ethics* (II, 6-10) and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (III, 1-5) to discussing this question, with some major innovations.

3. Aristotle

Aristotle's position is not only linked to the question of the responsibility of those who perform evil actions, but extends to a general evaluation of the entire sphere of human actions, good and bad, on the basis of a precise ontology of events. With this move, the discussion on determinism takes a decisive step, leaving a perspective originally limited to the juridical and moral field to invade also the sphere of physics and metaphysics. Aristotle introduced into the debate some key terms, which would be taken up by the following philosophical

schools for centuries after him. Aristotle does not approach the problem of determinism in terms of fate (*heimarmenē*), although this term had already made its appearance in Plato and in his successor as head of the Platonic school, Speusippus, who devoted a specific treatise to this subject (*Peri heimarmenēs*, fr. 43 Heinze). He prefers to discuss the status of contingent events and the statements concerning them.

4. A Thought Experiment

Let us begin with a logical work, *De interpretatione*, Chpt. 9. This is a celebrated text, in which Aristotle, after stating the general dialectical principle that for every contradiction one of the members of the contradictory pair is true and the other false (*De int.* 6), lists a number of exceptions to this rule, including sentences concerning contingent future events such as “Tomorrow there will be a naval battle”. Aristotle affirms that, if every statement of this kind is true or false, then everything necessarily happens or does not happen (18a34-5). Obviously, as he notes in the treatise entitled *Categories*, it is not the truth of the proposition what the necessity of the event depends on, but, on the contrary, only if a future event happens necessarily, the sentence in the future tense describing would be true (*Categ.* 4a35-b2, cf. *De int.* 18b37-9). Because of that, the true Aristotelian thesis is that every sentence in the future tense would be true or false if and only if everything were necessary. Indeed, by admitting that every proposition about future contingents is true or false, something absurd derives:

13. If it is white now it was true to say earlier that it would be white; so that it was always true to say of anything that has happened that it would be so. But if it was always true to say that it was so, or would be so, it is not possible not to be so, or not to be going to be so. And if something cannot not happen it is impossible for it not to happen; and if it is impossible for something not to happen it is necessary for it to happen. Everything that will be, therefore, happens necessarily, and nothing will come about as chance has it or by chance; for if by chance, not of necessity (*De int.* 18b9-16).²

There is a kind of thought experiment in this piece, which in simplified form, might sound like this:

14. (1) If at time t (present), it is true to say, in a future tense sentence, that event x will occur at time $t+1$, then
 (2) at time $t-1$ it would have been true to say, in a future tense, that the event x' , (which actually occurred at time t), would have happened, and then it would have done so necessarily.

If things were so, it follows that nothing would happen by chance (*tuchēi*) or as it happens (*hopoter'etuchen*), for necessity and chance are opposed (18b5-7). But if nothing happens contingently, then:

² All translations from the works of Aristotle are taken from Aristotle 1984, with occasional modifications.

15. Everything is and happens of necessity. So there would be no need to deliberate or to take trouble (oute bouleuesthai oute pragmateuestai), thinking that if we do this, this will happen, but if we do not, it will not (*De int.* 18b30-3).

A counterpart of this passage is found in the *Metaphysics*, book VI (E), in a section devoted to the study of accidental events. Aristotle argues that, if of every event there is a non-accidental cause, then everything turns out to be necessary, and he confirms this with the same thought experiment. Compared to the previous passage, here there is no longer any reference to logic and language, but the idea is expressed in terms of the causal connection of events:

16. Will this be or not?—Yes if this happens; and if not, not. And this will happen if something else does. And thus if time is constantly subtracted from a limited extent of time, one will obviously come to the present [follows an example constituted by a human action] .. And similarly if one jumps over to the past, the same account will hold good; for this—I mean the past condition—is already present in something. Everything, therefore, that is to be, will be of necessity, e.g. it is necessary that he who lives shall one day die; for already something has happened (*Metaph.* 1027a32-b10).

In my opinion this passage illustrates the case that Aristotle wants to deny: it shows a chain of successive events, each of which is the cause of the other, a chain that is run backwards from the future to the present, when a certain event either happens or it does not. And from the present to the past, at the cause of such an event. But if every cause and principle is generated by a previous event, then everything is necessary. Here Aristotle repeats the same thought experiment as in *De interpretatione*:

17. (1) If at time t (present) we have an event x that causes in a proper sense an outcome r at time $t+1$.
 (2) then at time $t-1$ an event x' had occurred which was a cause in the proper sense of the occurrence of event x at time t , which in fact did occur, and did so necessarily.

Aristotle wants to deny this consequence. In *De interpretatione* he affirms:

18. But this is impossible, for we see (1) that what will be has an origin both in our deliberation and in our acting (horōmen hoti estin archē tōn esomenōn apo tou bouleuesthai kai apo tou praxai ti), and that, (2) in general, in things that are not always actual there is the possibility of being and of not being; here both possibilities are open, both being and not being, and consequently, both coming to be and not coming to be. Many things are obviously like this. [...] Clearly, therefore, not everything is or happens of necessity: (2.1) some things happen as chance has it (hopoter'etuche), and of the affirmation and the negation neither is true rather than the other; (2.2) with other things it is one condition rather than the other and for the most part (mallon [...] kai hōs epi to polu), but still it is possible for the other condition to happen instead (*De int.* 19a7-22).

This passage is usually understood as a polemic against so-called logical determinism, but in fact Aristotle starts from ontological considerations, and the distinction of three kinds of entities and events:

- (1) human actions that are the result of deliberation and whose principle (archē) is in us,
- (2) contingent events, divided into two sub-categories,
 - (2.1) things that happen indifferently one way and the other, and
 - (2.2) things that preferably happen a certain way, and rarely the opposite.

This second division could also apply to the category of human actions, but Aristotle does not seem to want to do so. He does not seem committed to demonstrating the existence of the contingent, but on the contrary starts from the existence of the contingent, given as evident, to illustrate the conditions of its occurrence, that is, that there must be a first cause such that it does not go back to anything else. For not everything to be necessary, one must arrive at a cause which is not generated by anything else. In *Metaphysics* this is an accidental cause:

19. Clearly then the process goes back to a certain principle (archē), but this no longer points to something further (ouketi eis allo). This then will be the principle of the fortuitous (tou hopoter' etuchen), and will have nothing else as cause/responsible (aitios) of its coming to be (*Metaph.* 1027b10-6).

This cause is called the “principle of what happens by chance” (1027b12-13).

Now, in *De interpretatione* and the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle mentions two kinds of causes or events not generated by anything else, (1) human choice and (2) the accident, but he never clarifies what relationship there is between these two kinds of cause. Critics have struggled for centuries to identify a relationship between the two spheres. It seems clear that an accidental event is not identical with an event that is the result of a single individual's choice, and that it does not exhaust the whole sphere of the contingent; in my opinion the most promising perspective is the one that makes the presence of contingent events a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of human choice.

Aristotle's position on human responsibility in *De interpretatione*, Chpt. 9, as we have seen, is based on this idea: man is archē of his own actions. Let's examine this idea in detail.

5. From Fault to Responsibility: *Eudemian Ethics*

In passages 16 and 18 Aristotle uses human actions as examples of non-necessary events: from every action of ours other events depend, and if our actions were necessary, all the events that depend on them would be necessary. Human action is seen by him as the first element of a chain: if we do x , y will happen, and he seems to be especially interested in stating that given a chain of events arranged in series, the beginning of the chain must not be determined by anything else on pain of determinism (*De int.* 18b14-5). In *Eudemian Ethics*, II 6, Aristotle reiterates his point, insisting forcefully on the idea that human action is part of the contingent and that he who is archē of an action (as text 18 says) is aitios of it, and vice versa. In this chapter a new term is introduced, ‘what depends on us’, indicating what we are the first cause of:

20. So that it is clear that all the acts of which man is the principle and master (archē kai kurios) may either happen or not happen, and that their happening or not happening—those at least of whose existence or non-existence he is master

(kurios)—depends on him (eph'autōi). So he is the cause/responsible (aitios) of what it depends on him (eph'autōi) to do or not to do, and what he is the cause/responsible (aitios) of depends on him (eph'autōi) (*Eudemian Ethics* II,1223a1-9).

The final sentence indicates a biunivocal correspondence between what we are the cause of x and “what depends on us” y : $x \leftrightarrow y$. The term *archē* must not be interpreted neutrally, as a simple “starting point”; here it designates the “principle” of a thing, in the sense of that which has “authority, power” over it, in fact it is associated with the term *kurios*, “master”.

In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle explains that when man is the principle, *archē*, of the actions he performs (1222b19-20) this principle is to be understood in the sense of “that from which” movement derives. In this sense *archē* means an efficient cause (1222b30). Being the efficient cause of contingent events, this *archē* too is contingent:

21. Since some realities may have the opposite to their actual qualities (enia tōn ontōn enentioōs echein), so of necessity must be their principles (*archai*). For what results from the necessary is necessary; but the things said before can be different and many of them depend from men themselves, and men are the principles (*archai*) of such things (*Eudemian Ethics* 1222b41-1223a4).

The interpretation of this passage is controversial, but it seems to me to say that since human actions are among the contingent events, also the cause of human actions is contingent, in the sense that man can head once towards one choice and once towards the opposite one.

To express the idea that it depends on us whether our actions occur or not, Aristotle chooses a phrase taken from everyday language, especially military language. In passage 20 the expression *eph'hēmin* (in the form *eph'autōi*), which was almost completely absent from the previous theoretical debate, makes its appearance. It can have two main meanings.

- (1) In a local, proper, or figurative sense, it indicates that which is on our side, comes towards us, or against us, or in general affects us. We have examples of this usage in many authors of the fifth and fourth centuries, such as Thucydides, Euripides, Isocrates, Sophocles, Iseus, Demosthenes.
- (2) In the “potestative” sense, however, it indicates what depends on us, as opposed to what depends on others, that is, what is in our power, especially in the case of war: e.g. victory, a prisoner, the enemy, booty. In this second sense it expresses the fact that if an action x depends on someone, non- x also depends on him. Examples of this sense are found in Sophocles, Xenophon, Hippocrates, Demosthenes, Alcidas, and in the so-called Rhetoric to Alexander.

In this second sense the phrase implies something more than the simple concept of ‘spontaneous’, as an act performed without coercion, or the simple idea that the agent has various options to choose from. It indicates that the choice is up to him alone: examples of this strong usage are given in literature as well, e.g. in Euripides: ‘the outcome depends on me (telos d'eph'hēmin)’ (*Helen*, v. 878-893) and in an oration of Iseus: “when it depended on us (ot' eph'hēmin) to avenge ourselves [...] we did not want to (ouk eboulēthēmen)” (*De Dikaiogenes*, § 30, 5).

Aristotle with this lexical choice he seems to introduce a very strong condition for establishing what is voluntary, the fact that we are masters of our choices and we are the efficient cause of them. This condition overturns the legal distinctions of his time, for on the basis of it impulsive actions are transferred from the realm of the *akōn* to that of the *ekousion*, of what is done voluntarily, since the efficient cause is in us (1111a20-25 + 1111b1-3). It solves in this way Plato's hesitations about how to categorise acts by *thumos* we saw before.

Aristotle in the *Ethics* nominalizes the expression with the neuter plural article: *ta eph'hēmin*, the things that depend on us. They are everything whose *archē*, the efficient cause, is in us, such as the objects of choices, deliberations, wills, relationships with friends, actions, moral qualities such as virtue and vice and in general habitual states, certain diseases of the body resulting from our disordered life, the value of money etc., while the rest, such as natural qualities, does not depend on us. The *ep'hēmin* being of these things is to be understood distributively, in the sense that each of them individually depends on us.

Some have argued that for Aristotle we are not masters of the *choices* we make, but only of the *actions* we take, because he does not list choices among the things that depend on us. According to these critics, choices depend on character, and once a certain character is acquired, the choice becomes necessary, even if the action has us as its efficient cause. Some then argue that according to Aristotle what depends on us does so only at the generic level, as a *type of action*, but not at the specific level: even if the *type z* of actions depends on us, e.g. tying our shoes, it does not follow from this that doing so depends on individual *Y* at time *t*. Given his character *c* and situation *s*, his choice is already determined, and, according to them, *Y* does not have a dual path to take in front of him, but will necessarily tie his shoes.

I shall return to this question when speaking of character and habit, but I may say at once that the argument that our choices do not depend on us at first sight seems strange. In the current usage of poets and orators we saw that choices could be qualified as things that depend on us. In Aristotle, in particular, given that our actions result from our choices, if the choices we make are not dependent on us it is not clear how, within Aristotle's philosophy, our actions could be dependent on us.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he explicitly says that choice "is a voluntary thing (*hekousion*)" (1112a14). Sometimes Aristotle does not simply say that man is *archē* of his action, but more precisely that man's choice is the *archē* of actions. In Book VI he analyses choice by means of a distinction between efficient cause ("that from which") and final cause ("that in view of which"), saying:

22. Choice is the principle (*archē*) of action—"choice" in the sense of "that from which the movement derives" and not "that in view of which"—and desire and reasoning with a view to an end are the principles of choice (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI,1139a30-3).

In the *Metaphysics*, then, he confirms that "what is done and what is chosen are the same thing" (1025b24).

In passage 20 we saw that what depends on man, *ta eph'autōi*, is what he is responsible for, *aitios*. We have already seen that in Plato the individual is *aitios*, responsible for what he does, even if he performs it *akōn*, involuntarily. In

Aristotle, on the contrary, it is not possible for one to be aitos of a thing accomplished akōn, involuntarily:

23. We all admit that of acts that are voluntary and done from the choice (ekousia kai kata proairesin) of each man he is the cause/responsible (aitios), but of involuntary acts (akousia) he is not himself the cause/responsible (aitios); and all that he does from choice (proelomenos) he clearly does voluntarily (hekōn) (*Eudemian Ethics* II,1223a16-9).

Thus choice is hekousion, we are aitioi of it and, if we are aitioi, it is eph'hemin, it depends on us: we cannot be responsible for acts, even mental acts, that do not depend on us.

6. The Discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is probably a treatise addressed to a fairly large audience, and is more discursive in tone than the *Eudemian Ethics*. In the section on “what depends on us” on book III, we see traces of Academic discussions (cf. § 2), to which Aristotle makes various references, though without naming specific opponents.

In this work to define what is voluntary, hekousion, he starts from the involuntary, akousion, which he divides into two parts: that which is done by force and that which is done through ignorance of the concrete conditions of action (1110a1); from which it follows that there are two necessary conditions for voluntary action:

24. The voluntary (hekousion) would seem to be (1) that of which the principle (archē) is in the agent himself, (2) he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action (1111a22-4).

The first condition is already known to us from passage 22: it is the fact that the first efficient cause must be internal to the agent; but the second condition is added only in this work. We are now mainly interested in the first condition. In the first chapter of *NE* III Aristotle establishes three important points. First of all, condition (1) states that actions performed by force (biāi), meaning those whose efficient cause is *totally* external, are not voluntary:

25. Those things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place under compulsion (biāi) or owing to ignorance; and that is compulsory of which the principle is outside (hē archē exōthen), being a principle in which nothing is contributed (mēden sumballetai) 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 (1110a1-4).

Further on he specifies better that by the term archē he means the efficient cause: the “principle (archē) that moves the organic parts of the body” (1110a15-6).

The problem of action in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is set up through a strong insistence on the notion of causality. It is therefore important to clarify the characteristics of the Aristotelian notion of cause. For Aristotle “cause (aitia)” is a term that has various meanings, and generally indicates a one-way dependence of one entity or event on another ($a \rightarrow b$), which can take various forms: efficient, formal, final or material dependence. All of them can be organised in

form of a chain. Each type of causal chain indicates a single kind of dependence, and each one is finite, meaning that it depends on a first cause of the same type. Moreover, it is not possible to conceive of composite causal chains, which mix together different forms of dependence (*Metaphysics* II 2). And the relations between different causal chains are complex: not always a causal chain necessitates another. Indeed, for example, the sum of an efficient causation and a final causation does not give a necessary causal chain.

Since the notion of cause is multiple, it is possible to say at the same time that no event is without cause, but not all events are necessary. Even if it is true that a certain agent performs an action for a certain end, the final cause is not itself necessitating:

26. But if some one were to say (phaiē) that pleasant and noble objects (ta hēdea kai ta kala) have a compelling power, because they force us and are from without (anankazein gar exō onta), all acts would be for him compulsory; for it is for these objects that all men do everything they do (1110b9-11).

Here the contrast is between the case of text 25, in which the action is considered involuntary because there is an efficient external cause, to which the responsibility for the action must be attributed (the wind, the enforcers), while in this text 26 the presence of a cause which is external indeed, but is a final one, makes the action not necessary and does not make it involuntary.

Passage 26, usually overlooked by critics, is important in various respects. First, Aristotle does not conceive of the perception of a good as an *input*, a physical movement of a perceptual kind, which enters the mind of the agent from outside, causing a necessary chain of reactions. The perception of the end is an activity and not a movement. Second, the conclusion that “all actions would come to be forced” (b10-11) is evidently given as absurd by Aristotle: it is clear that not all actions are forced, and the social practice of rewards, punishments, and forgiveness suffices to attest this (1109b30-2). Aristotle seems to refer to the opinion of some anonymous interlocutor of deterministic tendencies, who might advance such an objection to his theory. This confirms that the argumentation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* takes place against the background of the discussions of the Platonic Academy.

Aristotle’s analysis from chapter III 2 onwards focuses on the particular case of deliberate action and not on the voluntary in general. How so? Normally in his explanations Aristotle does not tend to give Fregean-type definitions, which determine exactly the scope of a set, and serve to establish clearly whether an entity x falls within a certain set y or does not: his are paradigmatic definitions, which illustrate the perfect case of an entity or event. This is a practice of Platonic origin, which has the advantage of clearly illustrating the defined object, but which leaves the boundaries of the defined set undetermined. Consistent with this approach in *NE* III 3-4, Aristotle illustrates the psychological mechanism related to choices about “what depends on us” by referring to deliberation, since deliberation is clearly, for him, the strongest sign that our actions depend on us; in fact, he says that “we deliberate about things that depend on us and are realizable” (1112a30-1).

Here lie the greatest difficulties for Aristotle himself. They relate to the relation between character and action, a theme we have seen discussed already in

the Academy (text 11), and which, as we already saw, calls into question the thesis that our choices depend on us.

We have seen that (1) for Plato both character and action are *akousia*; that, (2) for one of his opponents, character is *akousion* but action is *hekousia*. Aristotle also takes a stand on this problem: according to him, character is formed through the repetition of action, and

27. Is by choosing what is good or bad that we are men of a certain character, and not by simply holding some opinion (1112a1-2).

But since actions are voluntary, the character of each person, which is derived from the actions performed, is also a voluntary thing, even if it becomes at some point something necessary:

28. Actions and states of character (*hexeis*) are not voluntary (*hekousioi*) in the same way; for we are masters (*kurioi*) of our actions from the beginning until the end, if we know the particular facts, but though we control the beginning of our states the gradual progress is not obvious, any more than it is in illnesses. All the same, because it was in our power (*eph'hēmin*) to act in this way or not in this way, therefore the states are voluntary (*hekousioi*) (1114b30-1115a3).

In a sense, then, Aristotle stands somewhere between Plato and his opponent. However, some critics are convinced that, depending on character, all actions as well are necessary, although passage 28 seems to say the opposite, in fact it says “we are masters of our actions from the beginning until the end”. Let us see how this is possible.

According to Aristotle, character determines the perception of the end, which serves as the final cause:

29. Absolutely and in truth the good is the object of wish, but for each person the apparent good; that that which is in truth an object of wish is an object of wish to the good man, while any chance thing may be so to the bad man, as in the case of bodies also the things that are in truth wholesome are wholesome for bodies which are in good condition, while for those that are diseased other things are wholesome—or bitter or sweet or hot or heavy, and so on; since the good man judges each class of things rightly, and in each the truth appears to him (1113a23-31).

The issue is further debated in NE III 5. In this passage Aristotle sets up a kind of dialogue, with questions, answers, and objections. It is divided into three parts of unequal extent: a brief demonstration in the positive that virtue and vice depend on us (1113b 8-13); a discussion of some possible objections to this thesis, a discussion that takes up most of the chapter (1113b1-1114b 21); and a general conclusion (1114b 21-1115a 3), which I have already quoted, passage 28.

Let us see the first two parts in succession. The argument has a very simple form, and is based on what has been established in the preceding chapters; Aristotle argues that:

30.
– Good deeds and bad deeds are up to us.
– Being good and bad consists (*touto [...] einai*) in doing the good deeds and the bad ones, therefore

– Whether we are good or bad is up to us (1113b 8-13).

In this demonstration there appears, as an explication of the first premise, a much discussed passage, in fact some consider it the passage in which Aristotle most clearly expounds an indeterministic view of human action, and others deny this:

31. Where it depends on us (eph'hēmin) to act it depends on us (eph'hēmin) also not to act, and in what [depends on us] the “no”, the “yes” also [does it]; so that, if to act, where this is noble, depends on us (eph'hēmin), not to act, which will be base, will also depend on us (eph'hēmin), and if not to act, where this is noble, depends on us (eph'hēmin), to act, which will be base, will also depend on us (eph'hēmin) (1113b7-11).

I don't have time to explore all the problems of this disputed passage (see for a wider discussion, Natali 2023), but here Aristotle seems to me to confirm what he said in text 20.

In the discussion that follows Aristotle examines various objections, and the most important is the third, which takes up the argument of text 29, according to which we all follow what appears good to us. Aristotle repeats the thesis that the way in which the end is presented derives from one's character, and he refers back to the previous answer, for if one is the cause and responsible (aitios) for one's character one is also responsible for the way in which one perceives something as apparent good (1114a 31-b3).

On this answer the objections of the critics have concentrated. Aristotle seems to argue that it is true that character, once acquired, makes necessary, in a sense, the responses to be made to the stimuli of experience. Although character depends on actions, once acquired it no longer depends on us:

32. It is irrational to suppose that a man who does unjust acts does not wish to be unjust, or a man who does self-indulgent acts to be self-indulgent. But if without being ignorant a man does the things which will make him unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily (ekōn). Yet he cannot, if he wishes, to cease to be unjust and become just. For neither does the man who is ill can become well—although he had had the possibility to become ill voluntarily, through living incontinently and disobeying his doctors. In that case it was then open to him not to be ill, but not now, when he has neglected his health, just as when someone has let a stone go it is too late to recover it; but yet it depended on him (ep'autōi) to throw it, since the principle (archē) was in him. So, too, to the unjust and to the self-indulgent man it was open at the beginning not to become men of this kind, and so they are such voluntarily (hekontes); but now that they have become so it is not possible for them not to be so (1114a 11-21).

Modern critics have found in these passages arguments to object against an indeterministic interpretation of Aristotle's position. The critics argue, in a vaguely Platonic way, that since Aristotle also places a great deal of importance on education and the formation of character, one might think that only in youth, before the formation of a stable character, is man really capable of acting in opposite ways, but when character is formed this is no longer possible for him. A man with a particular character, e.g. a just man, they say, can only make

corresponding actions, the just ones. Actions depend on character and character depends on education, so basically actions would not depend on us.

To this several objections may be made. First, that it is doubtful whether education is really an efficient cause external to the agent. Because of that, the principle of passage 25 is in any case observed. Moreover, even if we admit that education is an efficient cause, it does not constitute a completely external cause, because we are a contributing cause to the development of our character, as Aristotle observes:

33. for we are ourselves somehow co-responsible (*sunaitioi pōs*) of our states of character (1114b23).

But the the criterion established in the passage 25 requires that we do not contribute *at all* to the character formation, if this has to be considered involuntary, so our character depends on us.

Again, it is not sure that character necessarily determines our actions. Sometimes Aristotle says that a just person can only act justly (*NE* 1129a14-17), but sometimes he admits the opposite possibility, possibly following an Academic theory (*Topics* IV, 126a36-b1: even god and the sage can do evil), and says that that one can perform unjust actions without being unjust (1137a20-26). On closer inspection, the passage 32 says the same. When saying: “If [...] a man does the things which will make him unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily”, Aristotle pictures a just man who does unjust acts, and *successively* becomes unjust. Since Aristotle admits that we can change our character over time, it is not a necessary determinant of our actions. In the *Categories* he describes with particulars the process by which a character change can happen:

34. For it is possible for the healthy to fall sick and for the white to become black and the hot cold; and it is possible to become bad instead of good or good instead of bad. For the bad man, if led into better ways of living and talking, would progress, if only a little, towards being better. And if he once made even a little progress it is clear that he might either change completely or make really great progress. For however slight the progress he made to begin with, he becomes ever more easily changed towards virtue, so that he is likely to make still more progress; and when this keeps happening it brings him over completely into the contrary state, provided time permits (13a20-31).

One could argue that the virtuous or the vicious for the most part performs virtuous or vicious actions, with at most a conditional necessity, in the sense that as long as an individual has a given character, he acts consistently with it most of the time, but that does not preclude the character from changing (*Politics* 1332b3-8; *Rhetoric* 1359a30-b5).

This whole discussion should not be seen in the light of contemporary discussion, in which compatibilism is seen as the *standard* philosophical position. As De Caro notes:

35. Per decenni [...] il compatibilismo ha solcato trionfalmente le acque della filosofia angloamericana, rappresentando senz'altro il punto di vista maggioritario, se non egemone, rispetto alla questione della libertà (De Caro 2004: 69).

So one can see in today's critics a strong tendency to treat Aristotle as a proto-compatibilist.

In reality Aristotle's discussion starts from the Academic theses, which we have seen in passages 11 and 12. The Academic discussion seems to have focused on the relation between character (ethos) and action (praxis), on the relation between voluntariness (hekōn) and responsibility (aitios), with a great variety of solutions, and Aristotle's stance must be seen against that background. He wants to make both character and actions depend on us.

Another objection to the Aristotelian position, to which Aristotle replies in chapter III 5, takes up the Socratic idea that doing evil is the fruit of a miscalculation, and connects it with the question of the character. Aristotle seems to say that this position brings to admit an aristocratic conception of human nature:

36. If on the contrary no one is responsible for his own evildoing, but everyone does evil acts through ignorance of the end, thinking that by these he will get what is best—then the aiming at the end is not the result of a choice, but one must be born with an eye, as it were, by which to judge rightly and choose what is truly good, and he will be well endowed by nature who is well endowed with this (1114b3-8).

Aristotle's answers are important, because in him the question of responsibility is transformed: he no longer asks only whether the wicked are to blame for what they do, as in archaic poetry, but says that the same criterion must apply to all actions, both good and wicked. From the problem of guilt we thus pass to the problem of responsibility in general:

37. If this is true, then, how will virtue be more voluntary than vice? To both men alike, the good and the bad, things are the same: the end appears and is fixed by nature or however it may be, and it is by referring everything else to this that men do whatever they do. Whether, then, it is not by nature that the end appears to each man such as it does appear, but something also depends on him, or the end is fixed by nature but virtue is still voluntary because the good man does the rest voluntarily [if all this is true] vice also will be none the less voluntary as virtue (1114b12-20).

This thesis is consistent with the position expressed in text 26: the final cause does not necessitate the action of the moving cause, because if it were so all actions would be forced. In other words, whatever the origin of the conception of the end, the actions we perform in order to reach it are ours, because the first efficient cause of the movements of our body is us.

7. Alexander of Aphrodisias

Aristotle's school continued to discuss these matters for a long time. The most complete example are the works of Titus Aurelius Alexander, called Alexander of Aphrodisias, who lived between the second and third centuries A.D., i.e., more than five hundred years after Aristotle. He was the holder of a chair of Aristotelian philosophy in Athens, established by Marcus Aurelius at the expense of the imperial treasury, along with other chairs of Platonic, Stoic, and Epicurean philosophy. From his works we see that Alexander intended his task as a defence and actualization of Aristotle's doctrines: defence of Aristotle's

superiority over other philosophical schools, and actualization in the sense that in Aristotle one can find the tools to solve the philosophical problems of the present time, even if the master did not formulate them explicitly. His strategy resembles that of the Marxists or Thomists of the twentieth century, intent on actualizing the master's doctrines from within an institution dedicated to that end, and convinced that the best strategy consists in a return to the origins, to the text of the school's founder.

For this reason Alexander, in a writing *On destiny*, addressed to emperors Caracalla and Geta, proposes an Aristotelian theory of destiny (*heimarmenē*), even if in Aristotle the word is almost completely absent. It is true that it was a traditional theme, and was part of the philosophical debate from IV century B.C. onwards (cf. § 3). But from a philosophical point of view, the most important debate on destiny developed in Hellenistic age, with the Stoic and Epicurean schools. Alexander, in reference to those Hellenistic debates, set out to demonstrate that destiny exists, but it does not necessarily determine human actions, and that it must be understood on the basis of the Aristotelian theory of causes. Fate corresponds to the individual nature of each individual, in particular to his character, but character does not necessarily make us to act in a particular way. It influences our actions only for the most part, and there is always the possibility for the individual to react to his character, i.e. to act against his tendencies, on the basis of a rational deliberation.

It is possible that in his treatise Alexander repeats many of the arguments of a lost commentary by him on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, Chpt. 9, a chapter which has a very polemical attitude towards determinism (cf. § 4). Alexander takes up such an attitude, and polemicizes against some determinists, who are never named but in whom it is easy to recognize the Stoic philosophers. The core of his anti-deterministic polemic is that man is the first cause of his own actions, and that there is nothing absurd about a frankly indeterministic perspective. Hence he goes so far as to assert that in two identical situations we always have the possibility of choosing one action or its opposite. It is sometimes said that in Alexander choice is not causally determined, but this does not appear to be true. What Alexander is saying is that choice is caused by us, because we are the first cause of our choices and actions:

38. The things that come to be in accordance with a cause do not always and in every case have the cause of their coming to be outside themselves. For it is on account of a freedom of this sort that something depends on us, because we ourselves are in control of the things that come about in this way and not some cause from outside. And for this reason the things that come about in this way do not come about without a cause having the cause from us. For man is the beginning and cause of the actions that come about through him and this is what being it is for a man, to have the principle of his acting in himself (*De fato* 15, 185, 11-17, transl. Sharples modified).

In fact, destiny corresponds to the individual's character and nature, and does not necessarily influence choices:

39. The things that come to be in accordance with nature do not do so of necessity but the coming to be of the things that come to be in this way can be sometimes hindered; for which reason the things that come to be in accordance with nature come to be for the most part but not of necessity [...] it is from this, for the

most part, that the lives of men and their deaths derive their patterns. At any rate we see that the body—through being like this or like in nature—is affected both in disease and in death in accordance with its natural constitution but not by necessity: for treatments and changes of climate and doctor’s orders and advice from the gods are sufficient to break such a pattern. And in the same way in the case of the soul too one would find the choices and actions and ways of life of each individual differing from, and contrary to his natural constitution. For “men’s character is their guardian spirit” according to Heraclitus, that is, their nature. For man’s actions and life and endings can be seen to be for the most part in accordance with their natural constitutions and dispositions (*De fato* 11, 169, 28-170, 21, transl. Sharples modified).

8. Aristotle’s Historical Position

Those who look at Aristotle from modern philosophical positions, such as contemporary ethical compatibilism, have frequently judged his position to be either confused or naive.

On the contrary, from the perspective of the ancient debate, it seems to me that Aristotle was a very sensible interlocutor in the philosophical discussion of his time. That discussion, which originated in the Academy, was an important moment in the ancient world’s centuries-long discussion about guilt and responsibility, a conversation that began in the eighth century BC and lasted at least until the sixth century A.D., a span of more than 1,400 years.

In Aristotle, as already in Socrates, the debate on the responsibility and independence of the agent is detached from the sphere of the relationship with the gods and becomes an ontological problem, to be studied in moral psychology and in physics. This modification will characterize all ancient discussions on destiny for centuries, until the rise of Christianity, when the questions of divine grace and human salvation will again place the problem of determinism in a theological perspective, with new coordinates but, often, using ancient formulations.

From Aristotle onwards, the question of responsibility and causation is no longer merely that of the culpability of the wicked, but becomes the problem of human responsibility in general, for every action whether good or bad. The notion of “what depends on us”, introduced by Aristotle became the central theme of the debate in the Hellenistic and imperial ages. The philosophers focused on how to understand this phrase, and on establishing under what conditions an act could be said to depend on us.

In that long debate in antiquity, questions were asked, distinctions formulated and concepts elaborated that have remained at the basis of European debate from the Middle Ages to the contemporary age. A survey of the ancient debate on responsibility can therefore be useful, both to show the origins and hidden implications of the terms of the modern debate, and to indicate possible alternatives to the unconscious assumptions of contemporary thought.

From the contemporary point of view, Aristotle seems to me particularly interesting because he proposes an original relationship between causality and determinism. In fact, for centuries the problem of determinism was presented in the following form: either to accept that everything is necessary, or to admit that there is a movement without a cause, that is, that there can be something that suddenly appears from nothing. Aristotle on the contrary formulated a very complex notion of causation, which does not always imply necessity. So every-

thing has a cause, but not everything is necessary, and archē taken in a strong sense is the key term of the Peripatetic position.

That such a move should be repeated even today was advocated a few years ago by P. Ricoeur, according to whom only by revising our current notion of cause can we find a way of thinking about human free will without falling into unresolvable puzzles. In fact sometime Aristotle's critics seem to use an antiquated conception of causality to criticize him. This happens at a time in which the epistemological debate tends to revalue conceptions of cause as dependence, and not only as production, in a way similar to Aristotle's ones. There is, on my opinion, the possibility to study the Aristotelian theory of causality and of "what depends on us" not only as a historical curiosity, but as a source of possible new contemporary perspectives.³

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³ This article touches on many questions, on each of which entire libraries have been written, so I have preferred not to burden the text with long notes, whose information would inevitably appear lacking. I will limit myself here to giving some basic references, of general works on the subject indispensable for a first information on these questions.

For an overview of theories of fate and guilt in poetry and tragedy, see Mondolfo 1958 and Magris's 2008, a volume which has a theoretical perspective of its own. On the legal context see Merker 2016, Pepe 2012 and 2019. On Greek intellectualism one can see Monteils-Laeng 2014. The essays collected in De Luise and Zavattero 2019 discuss determinism from Homer to William of Ockam. The volume edited by De Caro, Mori and Spinelli 2014 gives a general information about the philosophical debate of the ancient and modern philosophical schools. In English on these issues see now Frede 2011, who replaced Dihle 1982. For a very different reconstruction from the one presented here see the works of Bobzien 1998, 1998a, 2014. On *De interpretatione* see Gaskin 1995 and Whitaker 1996. On the expression "what depends on us" a good general overview is in Eliasson 2008, see also Labarrière 2009, the volume edited by Destrée, Salles and Zingano 2014, and Natali 2023. On EE II 6, cf. Kenny 1979 and Natali 2004, Chpt. 9. On issues of character and choice see Furley 1967, Donini 1986, Di Muzio 2000 and Meyer 2011. A typical compatibilist reading of Aristotle is Everson 1990. A rather indeterminist reading instead has been proposed, with different arguments, by Sorabji 1980, Broadie 1991, Di Muzio 2008 and Destrée 2011. On the contingent and the accidental in *Metaphysics* and *Physics* see Rossi 2011 and Masi 2015. Historians of Stoicism generally tend to defend the Stoics against Alexander's criticism, see Long 1970 and Sharples 1975, as well as Bobzien cited above. On Alexander see now Harari 2023. On modern compatibilism see De Caro 2004; Ricoeur's view is in Ricoeur 1990; the early twenty-first century debate on causality is well presented in the volume edited by Beebe, Hitchcock & Menzies 2009. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Alexander's *De fato* have been translated into Italian and commented, among others, by Natali 1999 and 2009; Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* by Donini 1999.

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