

Aristotle on voluntary action, choice and moral responsibility¹

The ideas of voluntary action, choice and responsibility are important in our moral lives. As Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we praise and blame what is voluntary, but not what is involuntary. But what is the difference between what is voluntary and what is not, and what is it to be responsible for one's choices and actions?

VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY ACTIONS

There are, says Aristotle, two things that render our actions involuntary - force and ignorance. When we act voluntarily, by contrast, we know what we are doing, and we bring it about ourselves. Contrast three cases of standing on a train and stepping on someone's foot:

1. The train lurches, you lose your balance, and accidentally step on someone's foot. Stepping on their foot is involuntary, caused by force.
2. You shuffle your feet to get comfortable, and put your foot down on someone's foot without looking. Although moving your feet is voluntary, stepping on someone's foot is involuntary, caused by ignorance (that their foot was there).
3. You deliberately and knowingly bring your foot down on top of someone else's. This is voluntary.

Force

We can be forced to do things not only by physical forces but also by psychological pressure (such as threat of pain). Where no one could withstand such pressure, we don't blame someone for what they do. This shows that what they do is involuntary. However, the psychological pressure must be negative not positive. We don't think of the prospect of something good or pleasant as 'forcing' us to act. Giving in to temptation is not acting involuntarily! When we act involuntarily, we do so with pain and regret.

Now, some actions that we do, we don't want to do. These might be called voluntary or involuntary. Aristotle gives the example of sailors throwing goods overboard in a storm. They want to save the boat, but they don't want to lose the goods. Such actions, he argues, should be called voluntary. First, actions which we do to avoid a greater evil or in order to secure some good end are the right actions to choose. Second, we praise people for such actions, and we noted above that praise and blame attaches to what is voluntary.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 301-7

So, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions relates to the moment of action in the particular circumstances one is in, not whether the action is generally desirable.

Ignorance

Some actions done as a result of ignorance are involuntary, some are simply 'not voluntary'. The difference lies in whether the action is one that causes us pain or regret. Suppose, again, you step on someone's foot while shuffling your feet. If you regret this, then stepping on their foot is involuntary. But if you don't care, then it is simply non-voluntary.

The kind of ignorance that makes an act involuntary relates to the particular circumstances of the action. You know what you are aiming at (you aren't ignorant of the end, e.g. 'to get comfortable'), and you can know relevant general truths (e.g. people have feet). But you don't know the particular circumstances of the action; e.g. what you are actually doing (stepping on someone's foot), or in other cases, what its consequences will be, what tools you are using to act with, or how (in what manner) you are acting (e.g. you might think you are gently helping, when you are actually annoyingly hindering).

We should also distinguish acting in ignorance from acting as a result of ignorance. When drunk or really angry, you may do something without fully understanding just what you are doing. Here we say that your action is a result of your drunkenness or rage, rather than your ignorance, and we may still blame you for your actions. But your drunkenness or rage puts you in a state of ignorance. So you act in ignorance, but not from ignorance.

Voluntary action

Voluntary action, then, is action that you bring about, in the knowledge of what you are doing.

Sometimes people say that actions done from desire or emotion aren't voluntary. But this is a mistake for four reasons.

1. If it were true, we would have to say that neither animals nor children ever act voluntarily.
2. There are many good actions that we can do from desire and emotion (such as being kind), and we ought to do them. It would be strange to say that what we ought to do is not voluntary.
3. Actions done from desire or emotion are pleasant, not painful. But we said involuntary actions are painful, while the prospect of what is pleasant does not force us.
4. Our desires and emotions are no less part of us than our reason. Acting on them is something we do.

CHOICE AND DELIBERATION

We need to distinguish what is voluntary from what we choose. Everything we choose to do is voluntary, but not everything voluntary is chosen. For instance,

spontaneous actions and the actions of young children and animals are voluntary, but not chosen in the sense intended here. So what is choice?

1. It isn't desire - someone who gives in to temptation acts with desire, but not from choice, while someone who resists temptation acts on choice, but against their desire.
2. It isn't 'wish', since you can wish for what is impossible and things you can do nothing about, but choice relates to what we can actually do. What we wish for is also an end, something we are aiming at. What we choose are not ends, but the means to achieve our ends.
3. It isn't a kind of opinion - opinions are true or false, but choices are good or bad.
4. Instead, choice relates to voluntary action, where this is done on the basis of deliberation.

So what is deliberation? We don't deliberate about what we can't change, such as the facts - we investigate these (theoretical reasoning). We only deliberate about things that we can change (practical reasoning). In fact, we only deliberate when we need to act differently on different occasions. You don't deliberate about how to make a cup of tea (once you've learned) - you just get on and do it! So deliberation is a kind of reasoned thought about what we can change by our efforts, and where we need to act differently on different occasions.

Aristotle also claims that we don't deliberate about ends. But is this right? For instance, I might study in order to get a good grade (my end). But I might well deliberate about whether to get good grades; for example whether it is worth the effort. Or again, I may have two ends that conflict - being a good friend and telling the truth - and I deliberate about which end to pursue.

However, what Aristotle probably means is that we don't deliberate about ends as ends. When we deliberate, we always have some end in view, and whatever we are considering is as a means to that end. If I deliberate about whether to get good grades, I am considering this in light of some further end, such as going to university. If I deliberate about being a good friend or telling the truth, I do so in light of my final end - leading a good life.

We can now say what choice is. Choice is what we decide upon as a result of deliberation. So it is a deliberate desire regarding something that is in one's power.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

When are we morally responsible for what we do? This question is important to ethics. We are generally happy to say that people who do good actions are morally responsible for what they do, and we praise them accordingly. But do people who are bad do bad things voluntarily and by choice? Before Aristotle, Socrates had argued that they do not. Everyone aims at what they believe is good. All bad action is acting from ignorance of what is truly good, so it is not voluntary. Aristotle accepts that bad people are ignorant of the good, but maintains that they still act voluntarily.

To know fully what the right act is involves understanding why it is right. Someone who is bad might know, as a child does, that action x shouldn't be done. But if they don't understand why, they don't really know what they ought to do. Put another way: given that we all aim at eudaimonia, what is good is the 'proper' object of wish - what is truly desirable (§4). This is, in fact, what the good person desires. Bad people desire what is not truly desirable, but they don't realise this. Most errors of this kind are caused by pleasure. What is bad can seem desirable if we think it is pleasant. And different states of character find different things pleasant; e.g. the just person finds justice pleasant, but the unjust man does not.

However, the fact that bad people are ignorant of what is good does not entail that bad people act involuntarily. Aristotle offers four arguments for this claim.

1. We noted that choice relates to the means, the actions that we take. What it is in our power to do, it is also in our power not to do. So we can choose to do either good or bad actions. So bad people do bad actions voluntarily.
2. We encourage people not to do bad actions, yet we don't encourage people not to do things that are out of their power. That would be pointless. So bad actions are done voluntarily.

To these arguments, we might respond that there is a sense in which bad people choose to do bad actions. But still they are not morally responsible for them, because they are pursuing what seems good to them. They do not know what is truly desirable, and it is this ignorance that influences their choices.

Aristotle's third argument responds to this objection.

3. Bad people became bad as a result of their choices. Therefore, they are responsible for becoming bad, and thus becoming ignorant of what is good.

Why believe this? Because we acquire a particular state of character by acting in a corresponding way. For example, we become just by acting in accordance with justice. Thus, we are partly responsible for our character traits. We can choose how to act, knowing that how we act will make us good or bad people. A person, through choosing to act badly, becomes a bad person, and at that point, they have become ignorant of what is good.

Rather like becoming drunk and then not knowing what you are doing; or becoming ill through ignoring medical advice; or becoming ugly through lack of care and exercise; we are responsible for becoming bad through the choices we made. We can't, when drunk, choose to be sober; or when ill, choose to be healthy; or when ugly, choose to be beautiful; so when bad, we can't simply choose to become good. Yet despite this, our condition is voluntary and we are morally responsible for it. What appears good or pleasant depends on one's character traits. If the bad person is mistaken about what is good, this is as a result of their character traits. But as they are responsible for their character traits, they are responsible for their lack of knowledge of what is truly good. So the fact that they are doing something bad, thinking that it is good, does not count as the kind of ignorance involved in

involuntary action (acting from ignorance), but as the kind of blameworthy ignorance (acting in ignorance) involved in drunkenness.

4. If we reject this argument, and claim that the bad person is not responsible for what they think is good, then we must apply the claim generally - no one is responsible for what seems good or bad to them.
- P1. If the bad person is not responsible for their bad actions, and these are not done voluntarily, then the good person is not responsible for their good actions, and these are not done voluntarily.
- P2. But we said earlier that what is good cannot force us to act, and that what is involuntary is painful and causes regret.
- C1. So good actions are done voluntarily.
- C2. Therefore, so are bad actions.

Of course, actions and character traits are not voluntary in the same way. Voluntary actions are under our control from start to finish. But with the development of character traits, it is only at the beginning - in choosing the actions that lead to certain character traits - that they are fully voluntary. After this, we gradually become a certain sort of person, and then we cannot simply choose to be a different sort of person.