**The Relativity of Volition:**

**Aristotle’s Teleological Agent Causalism**

“Aristotle’s thought is decidedly bi-polar.” Kit Fine, “The Problem of Mixture”

“I regret having voted for the Council Constitution in whose name -- but in whale’st a way! -- this pseudo-reform was carried out. If it were possible, I would take back the vote I cast.”

Bishop Domenico Celada, following Vatican II

“Even Sin, once the Will is detached, and no longer nourishes it, withers and dies sterile. It is in the secret of intentions, like in decomposing humus, in the dark forest of future sins, unpardoned sins, half dead, half living, that new poisons are distilled.”

George Bernanos, *Joy*.

*Nicomachean Ethics*/*NE*, Book III, Chapters 1-5, provides Aristotle’s account of “Voluntary Movement.”[[1]](#footnote-2) It, thus, draws the Passion-Action distinction, only posited earlier in *Categories*, while also serving as the linchpin of *NE*’ discussion of Virtue, in explicitly connecting it to Right Reason. My explication of this text renders its terminology consistent with the Law of Excluded Middle and rebuts two criticisms of the Eudaimonistic Axiology on which it is based. These results are shown to be entailments of Aristotle’s doctrine that Voluntary is (a) Relative. This principle is then used to help treat a problematic case of Deliberation beyond his purview.

Voluntary Movement, according to Aristotle, stems from neither Violence nor Non-culpable Ignorance (as defined below). Its authorship comes from “within” its subject: he himself is its cooperative “moving principle,” rather than another human agent (*a la* a criminal suspect under arrest) or natural forces (as with a sailor’s ship in a storm).[[2]](#footnote-3) *De Anima* makes itclear that an apprehended, mind-independent Good is the ultimate source of volition- its unmoved mover. But volitional (“appetitive”) reception and responsiveness thereto is the subject of a Voluntary Movement’s necessary “contribution” thereto.[[3]](#footnote-4)Let us call this mental efficient cause Self-Control, in potency, andAttention, in act: Attention is perfected Self-Control. All and only Voluntary Movement issues therefrom. It is specifically a subject’s deliberative attention to or disregard of- “Culpable Ignorance”- Right Reason’s (as defined below) recommendation of a specific Basic Act, e.g., Look, Grasp, or Step, as the initial means of achieving some Purpose, that fosters its performance or avoidance. Such authoritative movement is made possible by a human agent’s absolute volitional control over the “instrumental parts of (the) body”: that is, his limbs, sensory faculties, and the vocal apparatus.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Our Soul, Aristotle maintains, is, indeed, endowed with “motive power.” E.g., voice results from the Soul “striking” air in the windpipe.[[5]](#footnote-6) In volition generally, Attention impels or avoids an intellectually prescribedinitiativemeans to securing Happiness, (as defined below) *via* the achievement of an end subordinate thereto (such as Knowledge, Livelihood, or Recreation).[[6]](#footnote-7) The need for positing Basic Acts emerges when we consider the role of Deliberation in volition: Counsel fails unless it informs its recipient how to *begin* striving towards a goal. Aristotle likens it to the first, simplest directive for constructing a type of figure. I prefer (for a reason that will become clear below) the analogical heuristic of Chess Strategy, which necessarily supplies a player with his first move towards Checkmate.

Since the same Act may be instantiated out of either Violence or Non-culpable Ignorance (as explained below) or Self-Control, such a universal suffers from what Gail Fine calls “narrow-compresence”:[[7]](#footnote-8) some instances being Voluntary, others Involuntary. After adducing just such a case- Throwing Goods Away- these terms, Aristotle concludes, must be predicated of an Act “by reference to a Circumstance,” consisting of: a Rational Agent, his Purpose in performing his Basic (and Intermediate) Act(s), along with the other attendant “particulars,” viz., the Patient upon whom he is performing it, whatever Instrument he is using in the process thereof, and his Manner of wielding said Instrument.[[8]](#footnote-9) As in: ‘Dispensing with Cargo was a Voluntary Act, as the seaman’s prudent, deliberative response to his perilous situation, that is, relative to his natural-*cum*-rational desire for Safety during a storm’. Voluntary is thus predicable of any Act, on the above self-control definition thereof, in case its Subject is deliberatively (rather than submissively or ignorantly) performing it, that is, for the sake of a Purpose (by properly employing instruments suitable to its realization). Such an epistemically qualified agent is himself the efficient, (substance) cause of the instantiation of his Basic Act: *his* concentration upon Right Reason initiating activity intended to lead to the realization of said Act’s circumstantially inspired and imposed Purpose.[[9]](#footnote-10) To, thus, modify and codify Aristotle’s own example[[10]](#footnote-11) of how such voluntaristic causation would work with an instrument, we obtain formulaically: ‘Robert**AGENT** Cleaned**PURPOSE** his Patio**PATIENT** by Gently**MANNER** Sweeping**MEANS/BASIC ACT** it with a Dust Broom**INSTRUMENT**’. Such a sentence is a Canonical Action Designator/CAD, an Action being the circumstantial instantiation of an Act universal.

Notice that two Act universals may be abstracted from a CAD: one pertaining to its Basic Act, the other to its agent’s reason for instantiating it. But the latter is definitive thereof. Robert’s sweeping is to be identified as a cleaning, for cleanliness being its Purpose. (In a case, where there is Non-culpable Ignorance of a Basic Act’s intended outcome, the action, as discussed below, must *not* be named derivatively thereby.) We may think of that universal as the Final Cause or Perfection that Robert is imposing upon the patient of his situation- his patio (with his broom, by exercising his ability to sweep). That circumstance is, thus, to the Act universal Clean what some designated wood is to a carpenter’s instantiation of (a) Table, *via* his wielding of tools which is, for the definitional principle just given, Table-making. (As in: ‘He made the best out of a difficult set of circumstances’. Aristotle’s *distinction* between Activity and Creation emerges as significant later in our analysis.) And since, we shall presume, the agent in question is free, given his attention to Right Reason, from Violence and Non-culpable Ignorance**,** (as defined presently) willing ‘on his own’ that his Patient turn out a certain way, viz., Clean, the action, of which he is the subject, also contains that universal as a Voluntary Movement. (Or, if you prefer, his instantiation of Clean is Voluntary.) Relative to Robert’s Circumstance, Sweep unto Clean is Voluntary(*a la*, per the US Constitution, Slavery is Illegal).

A Canonical Action Designator is false should the subject thereof suffer from “Non-culpable Ignorance,” that is, ignorance of one of the other particulars involved in the movement in question, not stemming from his own disregard of Right Reason. Here, there is an impediment thereto that is not self-imposed. It is instead a deliberative deficiency brought about by “outside”- subject-independent- forces: Chance or Manipulation by another agent. Any Act instantiated in such a case is Involuntary. To elaborate, using the above example, a bodily movement’s subject-mover is hampered by Non-culpable Ignorance if, despite his circumspection:

1. There are still unforeseeable consequences of his Basic Act. Purposive characterizations thereof must not be derived therefrom: Robert, in the above example is not waking his neighbor should he be unaware of him sleeping nearby. Or:
2. Deceit renders him unaware of his Basic Act’s ultimate Purpose: Robert’s sweeping is actually being surreptitiously filmed for a tutorial on patio maintenance (analogous to Elizabeth Anscombe’s much-discussed example of a duped groundskeeper pumping poison gas from a well into a house full of Nazis[[11]](#footnote-12)). Or:
3. The patient’s identity is concealed from the subject; he does not know on what/whom he is performing his Basic Act. Robert has not been taught the difference between the patio and the adjacent basketball court. He is actually sweeping the latter and is, thus, blameless for that mistake. Or:
4. His Instrument is not in proper working order. It is dark and someone has put honey all over Robert’s broom. The mess made therefrom is, thus, not his fault. Or:
5. Ineptitude hinders him from properly using his Instrument. No one has taught Robert how to sweep His brisk strokes are only raising a dust storm. Again, the mess thereby made is, thus, not his responsibility.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Self-control, according to Aristotle, is “perfected” in being motivated and guided by Right Reason. Proper use of our deliberative faculty, indeed, realizes our *teleos* as rational animals.[[13]](#footnote-14) Such agency is intellectually-*cum*-volitionally in conformity with Nature, in the form of our innate Purpose of comporting ourselves according to our highest faculty, and Natural Law: according to which, virtuous conduct promotes said Purpose, e.g., Study leads to Knowledge, a subordinate good thereof.[[14]](#footnote-15) Volition of this sort, Rational Self-Control, especially when it is habitual, perfects our entire being. It achieves said Purpose, for consistently taking the above sort of teleological affinity as probative. The “wicked” ignore the former, being animated by an unnatural purpose, viz., Pleasure (which is only incidentally related to our Well-Being).[[15]](#footnote-16) Hedonism is Aristotle’s explanation for such deliberative departures from Right Reason. But, his Agent Causalism precludes taking Pleasure to be any more coercive than intellectual counsel, which is why inordinate desire is subject to censure.[[16]](#footnote-17) Attention is not meant to abide in the former’s often misguided directives- our Liberty consists in being able to volitionally conform ourselves to our Nature- but it is certainly capable of doing so on its own. If, to use Aristotle’s example, grasping a bottle is the first step in seeking an illicit pleasure, it is simply a matter of one deliberately concentrating upon the hedonistic ‘reasoning’ in favor thereof. The “blameworthy” fail to know and/or abide by Natural Law, refusing to learn or even arrogantly rejecting the virtuous means their own Intelligence proposes for achieving their *teleos*.[[17]](#footnote-18) Thus, Virtuous Voluntary Movement =df. Rational Self-Control.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In the same way: the healthy man regularly exercises out of his understanding of the natural fact that Exercise promotes Health and his innate desire to be Fit. His Attention is properly focused upon his physical well-being. This power also seeks and is receptive to the Intellect’s knowledge of Health’s relation to various subordinate ends and the latter’s nomic nexus with salubrious activities. Virtuous character responds the same way to the rational Soul’s inherent concern for its Well-Being. In both cases, Attention is routinely deliberately concentrated upon a Practical Syllogism of the following sort, proffered by Right Reason:

1. If you desire Health/Happiness, then perform act A. (Natural Law)
2. You are (naturally) concerned with the Health/Well-being of your Body/Soul. (Teleological Self-Knowledge)
3. Thus, do A. (Self-Realization)

Having settled upon A, Deliberation becomes a matter of determining how to begin its performance, *a la* strategizing in Chess:

1. If Checkmate/Happiness is your objective, then make series of moves S/do A.
2. Checkmate/Happiness is my objective.
3. Thus, make S/do A.
4. S’s first move/A’s basic act is M.
5. Thus, make/perform M. [[19]](#footnote-20)

Choice, the terminus of Deliberation, is Self-Control heeding or (culpably) ignoring Right Reason in the form of such Practical Syllogisms.[[20]](#footnote-21) There is no further selection for Volition to make between behavioral alternatives. The conclusion of a syllogism formed by Right Reason *is* a Choice. It is only left up to the human agent attending to it, entirely by himself, to remain in that state of mind, willing the actualization of its circumstantially recommended Act universal: to humbly consent thereto. Thence, he performs (or, due to unsound hedonistic reasoning, fails to perform, as discussed below) its basic, initiative movement: the volitional direction of his limbs and/or senses, over which he exercises indomitable, Pauline, self-control: no desire or fear being powerful enough to efficiently cause their engagement in a Basic Act.[[21]](#footnote-22) Obvious cases of attending to Right Reason, in the face of strenuous appetitive opposition, are not that hard to find. No one could be said to want to undergo an arduous medical procedure, such as chemotherapy, without rendering the contrastive concept of desire meaningless. The end, Health, is sought, but not *via* the proposed highly unpleasant means thereto. Yet people routinely do submit to such difficulties (and, proving that Self-Control is not intellectually determined, some irrationally do not) because it is what Right Reason ‘tells’ them to do.

It is noteworthy in this regard that Aristotle nowhere adduces a case in which the subject of an Action is forced to perform his Basic Act, against Right Reason, by an external force. In his examples of Involuntary Movement: a seafarer’s ship is blown off course; a man is overpowered by a cohort and carried away from his home.[[22]](#footnote-23) Both subjects are obviously Patients, their circumstances precluding Deliberation**.** But Aristotle discerns no exculpation at all in Euripides’ matricidal Alcmaeon’s appeal to filial piety. Common sense simply cannot accept that there is any good worth sacrificing one’s own mother for. Thus, Right Reason could not produce a syllogism with matricide as its deduced performative. And the humiliated victims of tyrants, according to him, suffer for a greater good than Pride.[[23]](#footnote-24) Alcmaeon ‘knew better’; the latter act voluntarily, despite their understandable dismay. Thus, neither party is driven, by a force beyond his control, to reject a deliverance of Right Reason.

In fact, Aristotle sets the standard for exoneration due to duress so high that, given his belief in ultimate moral responsibility entailing self-control, it appears impossible to attain, *via* appeals to intense Passion. For the power of initiation, which he imputes to the Will, entails that no Basic Act is unavoidable.[[24]](#footnote-25) St. Thomas’ historical example of volitional imperviousness- St. Lawrence enduring torture, to avoid apostasy- undeniably supports this contention. Volition, naturally shared by all human agents, appears capable of abiding by Right Reason under *all* circumstances.[[25]](#footnote-26) Thus, the pressure being exerted upon Volition by an external source must forestall Deliberation, by the standard to which Alcmaeon is held, not just make it extremely difficult to accept its outcome, to qualify as exculpation for any wrongdoing thus wrought.  His type of case must be distinguished from an *involuntary* one involving a subject overpowered by natural forces, in the custody of others, or the victim of “Non-culpable Ignorance”: failure of circumspection not due to negligence. Aristotle labels such blameworthy conduct “Culpable Ignorance.” The contrast here is between ignorance in the sense of unavoidable lack of situational awareness and willful disregard of legitimate authority: failing to see a hidden Stop sign versus ‘blowing’ one.

The subject of a movement stemming from Non-culpable Ignorance is as much a patient as a victim of Violence. He is devoid of responsibility for the action in which he is only unwittingly involved: one cannot do what one does not know, anymore than one can do what is being done to one. It must be attributed, if at all, to the agential source of his epistemic deficit *vis-à-vis* his circumstance. Not so the perpetrator of Culpable Ignorance, such as Alcmaeon. His will is engaged, albeit irrationally, in the production of (wrongful) action. Moreover, the Attention of such a subject is inflicting self-harm in refusing the perfection thereof: Right Reason.Self-induced misguidance is still a volitional exercise, not an impediment thereto. Culpable Ignorance is, thus, voluntary in initiative, not purpose, as volition is meant to submit to intellectual authority. (That Attention can recognize and submit to Right Reason is,in fact, the Soul’s creaturely glory.) The Will is the cause of wrongdoing in cases of Culpable Ignorance in the same sense as a Cross pen opens a lock it ‘picks’. Thus, Platonists, who insist that “no agent can voluntarily be wicked,” must be thinking of Volition in terms of its Final, not Efficient Cause.

We exercise “rational power” in conducting and assenting to Deliberation, becoming efficient causes, of the instantiation of Act universals, our volitional ownership of which makes us either virtuous or blameworthy, depending upon whether or not those actions conform to Right Reason. In the former case, the source of agency is co-operation between Volition and Intelligence, in the latter Obduracy. Either way, the Act instantiation results from Self-Control, as both initiatives are intrinsic to the subject of the movement: the agent and patient are volitionally one: violating or perfecting themselves unto concordant Habituation. That is**,** the former type of agent efficiently causes not only the action in question, but also, should it become habitual, his fixation upon the illicit good entailed by his constant refusal to submit to (his own, innate) intellectual authority.[[26]](#footnote-27) It is true, then, that Aristotle acknowledges cases of akratic, axiologically compromised human agency, e.g., Addiction. But the depraved have *voluntarily* forfeited their ability to withstand Vice. Thus, they cannot constitute a counterexample to the claim that volitional self-control entails the power to avoid becoming the slave of an unruly passion. No object of human desire could be inescapably irresistible: without vitiating Aristotle’s Agent-Patient distinction based upon inward rational initiative. Thus, should one become unmanageable, its volitional dominion must be the effect of (wayward) Self-Control itself, which, thus, at one time, *was* capable of forestalling its inordinate influence upon the subsequent misguided deliberations it (deplorably) brings about.

Aristotle’s rejection of Biological and Environmental Determinism is clearly manifest in his treatment of misconduct borne of Inebriation.[[27]](#footnote-28) There is no hint therein of exculpation based upon either heredity or upbringing. Instead, the hypothetical Drunkard in his example is taken as the ultimate source of both his intoxication and its untoward consequences. Drinking, being a Basic Act, is necessarily both performable and avoidable in any circumstance in which it is an option: there is intoxicant available. What a human being does with the instrumental parts of his body- here his hands and mouth- is entirely up to him. Thus, the Drunkard must be guilty of Culpable Ignorance either in violating the Natural Law (“Blameworthiness”) linking Temperance and Health or inordinately valuing Pleasure (“Wickedness”)- regardless of his Past.

We are Happy, *per* our *teleos*, Aristotle maintains to the extent to which we are receptive and responsive to naturally grounded intellectual counsel.[[28]](#footnote-29) (Moreover, we also realize that it is our unique ability to recognize and assent to innate deliberative Authority, rather than act instinctively, that makes us fit stewards of the rest of Nature.) Nilling recommendations of Right Reason, as just noted, is also volitionally possible. In concluding Deliberation, an agent subsequently begins to exert himself, an effort he could have also refused to produce or discontinue short of realizing Right Reason’s suggested purpose therein. His concentration upon the conclusion of a particular Syllogism cannot be secured thereby- no matter its validity. But, again, *pace* Scotus, ignoring Right Reason, because it is rejecting/proposing a/an pleasant/unpleasant course of action,[[29]](#footnote-30) must not treated as anything other than an abuse of Volition, which is meant to be free from Ignorance, including not only circumstantially based deception, as in the case of Non-culpable Ignorance, but also hedonistically inspired-*cum*-misguided deliberate disengagement from Human Nature. The misconduct resulting from volitional intransigence must, thus, be deemed “wicked,” for meeting Aristotle’s established criterion for Voluntary Movement: sincethe “moving principle” is in the agent thereof (rather than being “external” to him, as in cases of Compulsion and Non-Culpable Ignorance).[[30]](#footnote-31) He alone efficiently causes the irrational occupation of his Attention, conveniently overlooking easily discernible differences between a sought after Pleasure, but only *apparent* Good, and his genuine Well-Being: e.g., the Drunkard’s preference of Revelry to Health. Such a hedonist is, thus, guilty of Culpable Ignorance, in the form of a self-inflicted false priority, which is the illicit, internal/mental source of his debauchery. The Will is naturally attuned to the latter. Happiness/Rational Appetite is the innate destination of volitional ‘Google Map’. Thus, to attend to a lesser value in decision-making is to pervert volition, not liberate human agency

Aristotle’s positing of a natural *teleos*- Eudaimonism- has occasioned both putative counterexamples, along with the charge of Axiological Determinism. Some critics, such as David Wiggins, contend that we are volitionally capable not only of willing or nilling Right Reason’s recommended means to Happiness, but of establishing axiological preferences on our own to fit our talents, interests, and current and anticipated station in Life.[[31]](#footnote-32) Cogent examples of such choices would, of course, be eagerly embraced by opponents of Eudaimonism, who maintain that, were we naturally limited to pursuing a single ultimate objective, in the various circumstantially dependent ways our Intellect devises, none of our movements could be voluntary. They would be no less determined by forces beyond our control than those initiated by irresistible Violence.

But Wiggin’s “constituents-to-ends” cases all turn out to involve planning: they actually fit quite neatly into Aristotle’s *NE* III Figure-construction/Chess-strategyModel of Deliberation- provided that we contextualize them as being pertinent to a situation at hand, that is, set the decision-making in question within a specific set of circumstances in which the actual opportunity to instantiate an Act universal has presented itself for an agent’s consideration. Divorced from pressing concerns, extant opportunities, treated as counterfactuals, these cases are best understood, as we shall see below, as axiological speculation, akin to personal mnemonic Retrospection unto character formation, not deliberative: making, not acting. If the constituent in question is not available and instrumentally required to satisfy a pressing demand,, then it is being compared to a paradigm of Happiness, so as to determine whether or not it *should* figure as the objective of a circumstantially dictated, directed, and limited means-to-ends decision: the above Ship Captain’s mandatory ‘quick-thinking’ vs. an Undergraduate leisurely pondering his major.

Wiggin’s proffered lifestyle choices, given available opportunities for their realization, are nothing but long-range plans oriented to achieving Happiness: rather like deciding upon Sicilian Defense, instead of Ruy Lopez, to defeat a particular opponent. Determining which course of action, in a certain context, best conforms to one’s personal Ideals also is a matter of attempting to secure Happiness, since the former is a conception of well-being. It is the same type of tactical deliberation engaged in by a Grand Master’s student. Asking himself: ‘What move would my teacher make here?’

Questions about specifications of Happiness are also tactical: Would possession of that object enable me to advance further towards my ultimate objective, Happiness?’ *A la*: ‘Which piece should I now capture to facilitate my overall mating strategy?’ Eudaimonism allows for decisions regarding merely instrumental goods. It only insists that they be made in light of their tendency to promote Happiness. Preliminary goals may also be treated as subordinate ends. “Is this situation (arrangement of pieces on the board) favorable to the next step in my plan to achieve Happiness (Checkmate)?’ Or: ‘Would having these goods enable the next step I must take in the means to Happiness my intelligence has provided?’ (*A la*: ‘Would I be closer to the ultimate move in my mating strategy were I to now capture his Queen or his Bishop?’) Thus, to the extent that decisions must be made regarding competing ends, they must occur in the context of executing a plan that Right Reason has already revealed to conduce to another, naturally fixed, goal, viz., Happiness. More on Wiggin’s objection below.

As for the Scotistic charge of teleological determinism, the Will can, as already noted, in effect, secede from Happiness: reject any means thereto Right Reason proposes. Attention is self-directed. Thus, it is not necessary that deliberation terminate correctly. Instead, an agent may act like a motorist ‘running’ a Stop sign, disregarding Law and Safety. ‘Making a habit of such disobedience, would amount to the same thing as nilling Happiness permanently as one’s Final End: License masquerading as Freedom. The sovereignty of the Will entails that, though deliberation is capable of discerning the clear-cut (but context-sensitive) distinction between unnatural Acts and what conduces to our well-being, there is nothing, as noted above, compelling Attention to hew thereto. Thus, though the voluntarist’s concern is misguided on the face of it- a creature’s own Well-being cannot register in his Will as an imposition- to the extent that one finds perversity agreeable, he *is* volitionally equipped to violate his Nature.

Some note, in this connection, that Right Reason is “defeasible.”[[32]](#footnote-33) It does not produce sound arguments, *a la* its theoretical counterpart: the conditionals it employs are not entailments, but indicative of natural tendencies. But this limitation cannot form the basis of Volition’s self-control, as they contend. Right Reason cannot impose itself upon Volition, irresistibly demanding mindfulness thereof, without ceasing to be rational. And a fallible cognitive faculty would prove no less determinative of choice than omniscient counsel, were Attention unable to move on its own: arrestable by any of its intellectual objects.

This point needs to be re-stated in determining whether the object of the Will is real or merely apparent goods. If the latter, we are on the volitional equivalent of the Platonic-Cartesian slippery-slope, leading from Indirect Realism to Solipsism. Right Reason reduces to Private Assessment. If the former, culpable ignorance is precluded: Attention is fixated upon Happiness. The realist is right to the extent that there *is* a natural object of volition. The Will is innately fixed: upon Happiness itself (what Being *qua* being is to Intelligence- God, as the Object of the Beatific Vision). But that transcendent objective, being analogically found for our deliberative purposes in subordinate ends, will vary in likeness to those derivatives. Some of the latter will naturally conduce, in a given set of circumstances, more to Happiness than others. But, Attention is not required to reason from these higher goods. The inordinate desire for/aversion to Pleasure/Pain can lead a deliberative agent to inflate/diminish the value of their teleological inferiors, as is the case with the above drunkard.[[33]](#footnote-34) In exercising Self-Control, he/his Attention can overrule Right Reason: conducting a search for the means to achieve a simulacrum of our natural end: the virtues that enable an agent to avoid incurring the opprobrium and even self-censure that are warranted by such willful misuses of Deliberation.

In sum, Aristotle maintains that whether or not Deliberation has taken place, so that an Act is being voluntarily performed, depends upon its agent’s immediately preceding state of mind: his Intellect’s degree of circumspection. Volition would require that he not be under insurmountable duress, (which is, as noted, rare and difficult to determine). Non-culpable circumstantial ignorance on his part would also mean he is not its source. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on *NE*, states that violence precludes self-determination by altogether cancelling deliberation, ignorance by compromising an agent’s situational awareness: precluding Right Reason, which must be factually informed.[[34]](#footnote-35) That is, they render the subject of a movement incapable of volitionally participating therein, so as to be the (accountable) source of the Act he has (unwillingly/unwittingly) instantiated. It is either something that he is unwilling to attend to or does not know. He is, thus, a Patient, not an Agent; he is undergoing said motion, being moved, not moving himself, as if he were the captain of a ship being blown off course or outfitted with a faulty navigational system. Forces beyond his control originate his movement: whoever or whatever is inducing his fear-*cum*-cognitive paralysis or the false beliefs in his reasoning. Should the resulting action be deemed wrong, since it arose through no deliberative fault of his own, he personally is not blameworthy therefor, as it was done involuntarily.

Unless, Aristotle adds, said individual fails to find his involvement in said wrongdoing regrettable: if he is not at all “vexed,” at being the unwilling/unwitting perpetrator of the misdeed, then it becomes “non-voluntary.”[[35]](#footnote-36) It is at this point in his account of volition that Common Sense, which (*per* usual) he is tracking, appears conflicted. The agent’s lack of compunction implies (some sort of) willingness to instantiate the Act in question- precluding the designation involuntary. That is, reflective attitudes are revelatory in this regard: the unrepentant unwilling/unwitting wrongdoer has acted “in” but not “out of” ignorance. Since he subsequently approves of what he has done, we must downplay the importance of his former lack of wholeheartedness/‘situational awareness’. Nevertheless, his concurrent aversion to/ignorance of his performance of said Act means it was not deliberate: hence, it was not voluntary either. So, instead of drawing a neat, Excluded Middle type distinction between voluntary and involuntary movements, Aristotle (reluctantly, in my opinion) posits a third, overlapping category of agency involving volitional dissonance. That is, Aristotle’s logic commits him to: For any Attribute A and any Subject S, A is either attributable to S or it is not. Thus, Voluntary is either attributable to an (instantiated) Act universal U or it is not. But cases of Non-culpable Ignorance-*cum*-Error Endorsement give him pause in this regard.

Moreover, attaching volitional significance to a *post-hoc* attitude is hard to reconcile with his own dictum that, whether or not an agent is acting voluntarily, depends *solely* upon his current state of mind. One also wonders what there is to regret in the first place in such cases: where an agent is the victim of either violence or verisimilitude.

This classificatory problem also arises for Aristotle in regards to emergency measures- even without considering reflective attitudes thereto. An Act, appearing ‘in itself’ to be pointless, when performed under certain conditions, engenders praise - as if it were done willingly: The Ship Captain**AGENT** Savesthe Passengers**PURPOSE** by Hurriedly**MANNER** Discarding**MEANS** Valuables**PATIENT**. Yet his Act also appears to be involuntary, since what he is doing, if taken by the name of his Basic Act, is never done except reluctantly (unlike, say, Play or Learning which are directly conducive to Happiness). It can only be an expedient, a last-ditch attempt, made regrettably to insure safe passage. As we say, it is not something an agent would want to get in the habit of doing. Still, relative to such a dire circumstance, it is Prudent: since its purpose therein- Saving Lives- is definitive of the entire action of which it is only an instrumental part. Such acts he, thus, also terms “mixed”: involuntary for engendering misfortune; **y**et voluntary for being done for the sake of a greater good**.**[[36]](#footnote-37) But, again, it is unclear why Aristotle, after (correctly) insisting that an agent’s degree of volitional involvement in what he is doing cannot be determined apart from considering his epistemic relation to its circumstances, would find it necessary to assay abstract Acts at all. For *whom*, one might ask, would Disposing Valuables *per se* be voluntary/involuntary? Better to see the above mentioned mixture as stemming from the fact that this Universal, instantiated wherein it is *not* done in the service of Safety- a Prank or a Lark, would be Wicked, since born of Culpable Ignorance: Voluntary, but a misuse of Volition.

Aristotle’s assessment of compulsion would become further complicated in considering an agent untroubled by the sacrifice necessitated in an emergency: a ship captain, gleeful over having dispensed with his passengers’ valuables during a storm, is no hero. His ‘mixed’ motive renders him unworthy of praise. But he may not be blamed for his deed itself. Aristotle would again have to regard his action as “Non-voluntary”: neither Voluntary- because of the abstract undesirability of its Act- nor Involuntary, for its recognized prudence and his subsequent malicious embrace thereof. He *is*, in some sense (in need of specification) a doubly-willing participant in the instantiation of an Act universal that is intrinsically pointless. Nevertheless, the question remains: why should his *post-hoc* enthusiasm for his action itself entail a different evaluation than other cases of prudent sacrifice? Does Aristotle’s concern with Retrospection conclusively establish the category of Non-voluntary Movement? After all, the agent here does meet his litmus test for volition: his Deliberation does “contribute” to what ends up being (rightly) done under the circumstances.

Let us see how this conflict arises when it comes to Ignorance. Consider the following Tin vs. Silver Case/TS (from St. Thomas):[[37]](#footnote-38) A shopper unknowingly purchases a box of silver mismarked as tin. Since you cannot voluntarily purchase something whose identity is beyond your ken, he is not voluntarily purchasing underpriced silver. Hence, he is not doing so for illicit personal gain. His instantiation of Purchase is not Theft- that is, if we heed Aristotle’s admonition to focus exclusively upon an agent’s epistemic relations to his circumstances to determine his action therein. He is, according to that standard, involuntarily purchasing silver (marked as tin) for material improvements, which cannot constitute Theft. Now he gets home and realizes the store has sold him silver for the price of tin. His saving is ill-gotten- and he knows it. Nevertheless, the thought of returning it, he summarily dismisses as foolish. Should he now be thought of, in light of his lack of compunction, as having voluntarily instantiated Theft? He is a thief, no doubt. But did he act as one- Steal- on the occasion in question? That is, does his reflective insouciance lessen the volitional significance of the Non-culpable Ignorance that initially rendered him innocent, in our judgment, of wrongdoing? And, if it does not, towards exactly what should he be displaying remorse? Either his sanguine Retrospection is revelatory of hitherto unsuspected volitional involvement in fraudulently purchasing a good or our original assessment of him as having done so involuntarily stands or such determinations depend upon something other than an agent’s understanding of his immediate circumstances.

My contention, then, is that abstract Acts are the objective focus of reflective character development, the overriding concern of Aristotle’s ethics. That is, I maintain that Aristotle’s axiological interest in an Act universal, such as Honesty/Theft, is not just with its praiseworthiness/blameworthiness as the instantiated outcome of a ‘real-time’ deliberation, but its value as a *habitual* means to Happiness. These separate judgments, 1st-order and 2nd-order volitions- choosing one’s activities versus developing one’s character traits- explain his ambivalence in TS**,** and other cases of volitional assessment. They also delimit the role of Retrospection in agency: to distinguish between those 1st-order volitions/choices worth repeating and the ones that should be eschewed

Let us see how this works in the simple case of a motorist failing to observe a Stop sign. He is ticketed, but successfully pleads in court that the sign was obscured. Remorse seems out of place at this point, he did not fail to stop out of disrespect for the law. That is, he is not like the subject of the following voluntary movement: The Reckless Driver**AGENT** Saved Time**PURPOSE** (instead of Obeying the Law) by Brazenly**MANNER** Ignoring**MEANS/BASIC ACT** a Stop Sign**PATIENT**, who does have something- a wrongful, deliberate Action- to regret. On the occasion in question, he lacked the opportunity to become such an agent: a lawbreaker. But suppose he is untroubled by the incident- the disturbing *fact* that a Stop was concealed and pedestrians in the area, thus, endangered. Then, he is not choosing to break a (specific) Law, as he would have done (counterfactually) had the Stop not been hidden. He is choosing, instead to *be* a Lawbreaker: to be ‘in the habit’ of breaking laws (which he may already be). He is forming a certain type of (bad) character. But this type of mentation, Aristotle would treat as Making, not Acting: Character Formation.[[38]](#footnote-39) However, unlike the action on which it is based,there is nothing involuntary about his meta-deliberative sanction of Lawlessness. He knows exactly what he is doing reflectively, impressing upon himself the habit of Disregarding Stops. Instead of violating the Law, he is willfully corrupting himself: besmirching his own Character. But this retrospective act of self-affirmation or self-creation (depending upon his extant Character) leaves him with a higher-order will, in addition to his former circumstantial will upon which it is based, that *is* willing to engage in a type of misconduct that his said circumstantial will lacked the opportunity to manifest. It is his subsequent acknowledgement of an affinity between himself and Lawlessness, from which his Non-culpable Ignorance of his circumstances initially excused him, that makes it difficult to sustain pardon of his dangerous action. Thus, Aristotle’s terming of his initial unwitting wrongdoing “Non-voluntary” may be parsed as it being circumstantially involuntary while characteristically voluntarily. In general, an agent non-voluntarily does A (where A is an Action) just in case he involuntarily As, but is in the habit of (or would like to be in the habit of) A-ing.

Voluntary, thus, turns out to obey Excluded-Middle, like all other Attributes**.** But only if we hew to Aristotle’s dictum that this predicate is context sensitive: (a) Relative. Moreover, cases of reflective behavioral assessment entail the relativity of Voluntary not only to an agent (as well as the rest of his circumstance) but his level of volition as well: e.g., ‘The Janitor**AGENT** Characteristically-*cum*-Circumstantially**VOLITIONAL-LEVEL** Carefully**MANNER** Mopped**MEANS** Floors**PATIENT** for a Living**PURPOSE**.’ For Character can manifest itself in voluntary action, becoming circumstantial will, or fail to. Volition, in turn, is the source of Habit, its residue being mnemonic objects for its agent to later imitate or denigrate. Retrospection is, thus, the sort of Meta-deliberation unto axiological Choice Wiggins posits as beyond the scope of Aristotle’s *NE* III means-to-ends definition of Deliberation: practical reasoning occurring detached from the question of how to proceed in a pressing set of circumstances. Under those leisurely conditions it comprises, as noted, a species of Making- to wit, Character Formation- not Action: the determination of the comparative value of subordinate goods and the varying degrees of conduciveness thereto of alternative Action *abstracta*, taken as habits. To stick with our analogy, evaluating one’s own matches and those of others is to playing Chesswhat Retrospection is to Deliberation. (Aristotle’s figure-construction analogy cannot be extended in this manner, since such exercises are typically not subjected to performance review.)Or, *Crito* is deliberative, *NE* retrospective.[[39]](#footnote-40)

Still, pace Wiggins, Meta-deliberation does *not* show that it is possible to assess subordinate ends *sans* an ultimate objective. Right Reason ranks such goods in terms of how much they resemble Happiness: what they share in as derivatives thereof.[[40]](#footnote-41) Especially at the level of retrospective Choice, where a lifestyle, not just the outcome of a particular situation is at issue, the Wise Man distinguishes himself by his exceptional ability to discern Happiness in unpleasant actions and Misery attendant upon enjoyments, and willingness to form his habits accordingly. Retrospection, too, would have to be sensitive to an agent’s circumstances, albeit constants in his life, rather than localized impositions. His meta-deliberative choice of habits should be based upon a solid understanding of his talents, interests, extended obligations, and material wherewithal. To once more rely on our Chess analogy, it is one thing to mount a certain type of defense within the context of a given match. It would be a far more momentous strategic commitment, requiring much wider consideration, to decide upon it, following its successful employment therein, as a characteristic feature of one’s playing style. Finally, to the extent that retrospective choices are made free of Ignorance and Violence, they will be voluntary, *a la* their temporalized counterparts. Wiggins, as noted, appreciates the relativity of such determinations. He errs in thinking that they can be made *sans* a fixed objective. An agent can no more deliberate about pursuing a subordinate good, such as Education or Family, without considering its conduciveness to Happiness, than a chess player can rationally adopt a particular playing style minus an assessment of its odds of achieving Checkmate.

The importance of Retrospection becomes even more evident when we consider a case of Culpable Ignorance, in which there *is* an action to regret- or ‘own’, thus a Memory to which axiological significance, that is, motivational authority may be attached, strengthening or attenuating Concupiscence.

Dismas, The Penitent Thief, in St. Luke’s Passion Narrative, repents of his Thievery, embracing Jesus’ offer of Friendship. His partner in crime, Gesmas, disdainful of the same entreaty, ‘doubles-down’ thereupon. Showing himself to be a thief at heart, he prefers to demand from Jesus the reprieve to which he has no right.[[41]](#footnote-42) We can say, then, because of the sharp contrast between their reflective attitudes, that Thievery was characteristically voluntary only for Gesmas. His whole-hearted criminal activity was a manifestation of his self-made Identity, likely the product of many years worth of mnemonic enjoyment of circumstantially voluntary Theft. Dismas’ eleventh-hour Compunction, on the other hand, reveals that some part of him was always opposed to that sordid way of life. His heart, as we say, was not really into his criminal Acts, circumstantially voluntary though they were. This is the type of volitional dissonance Aristotle saw as productive of Non-voluntary Movement. His own understanding of the distinction between Choice and Character, however, yields a more nuanced analysis of the mental circumstance in which it occurs. Dismas’ conversion is a dramatic case in point. He circumstantially willed that which, in the end (by the grace of God) he had also characteristically nilled. ‘Non-voluntary’ may be taken to indicate that these volitions attenuated, if not fully cancelled, each other, leaving Dismas’ receptive to Jesus’ promise of Salvation: humble, knowing he’d sinned, yet also realizing that he was not meant to be a sinner. Gesmas’ prideful, pitiful doubling-down renders it impossible for that same Grace to find a volitional ‘niche’, between his Character and immoral Choices, in which to reside.

Let us conclude by applying our exposition to the bizarre case of ‘pregret’: an agent attempting to foreclose a specific volition, ruing it in advance. E.g., a terminally ill, staunch atheist tells an interviewer: “A death-bed conversion on my part would only be motivated by desperation and drugs. Such a pathetic act, devoid of lucidity, would not represent my true, free-spirited self.” We have just seen how Retrospection allows agents to override prior choices, revealing deeper, contradictory preferences. Does Anticipation enable one to preclude attaching moral significance to such re-evaluations: to ‘stand pat’ with one’s current Character? What is claimed by the protagonist in our example is foreknowledge of his motives: what would be moving him when the anticipated situation ensues. And, even if we grant his subjective epistemic claim, it could still be maintained that he has no way of knowing in advance, since the dire circumstance he will find himself in is *sui generis*, that those foreseen motives would not be productive of authentic volition. Retrospection provides a personal Memory, to either find irksome or treat as a source of pride. Anticipation has no such axiologically significant object to assay, only an abstract endeavor, which, as we have seen, will become voluntary or not, when and only when, it is circumstantially instantiated. Thus, even an agent contemplating its performance may only speculate whether or not his heart will truly be in it on such an occasion.

*NE 3*, thus, provides the following account of human agency: Voluntary movements are efficiently caused by Volition attending to Right Reason. All of our other Basic Acts stem from either Fear or Ignorance of some sort. Retrospection enables us to characteristically emulate in Choice the former, while eschewing the latter, as Habit and Compunction, respectively. To the same end, Aristotle also recommends, as Wiggins rightly insists, studying the biographies of virtuous persons, that is, those who have avoided the chief hindrance of Right Reason: deliberative conflation of Pleasure and Happiness. Non-voluntary agency is a function of a volitional hierarchy-Character- thusly engendered.

1. All references to the Aristotelian *corpus* are taken from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon. NY: Random House, 1941. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *NE* III**,** 1 1110a15-20, *NE* III**,** 1 1110b1-15, *NE* III**,** 1 1111a20-25, *NE* III**,** 1 1113b5-20. Richard Sorabji also has Aristotle positing an etiology involving “fresh starts”: that is, effects of axiologically moved, human movers. See*Aristotle on Necessity, Cause, and Blame* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 227-242.Thomas Reid is most closely associated with Agent Causalism (AC). in modernity. See his Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), IV, 1. The two best known contemporary advocates of it are Taylor, *Action and Purpose*, 120 *ff*. and Roderick Chisholm: *Person and Object* (IL: Open Court, 1976), 69-72. Randolph Clark surveys other recent versions of AC in *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also John Bishop, “Agent-Causation,” *Mind* 92 (January 1983): 61-79, William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), and E.J. Lowe, *Personal Agency*, 6-7, 151-4, 162-3, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *De Anima*, III, 10, 433a10-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *NE III,* 1, 1110b25-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *De Anima*, II, 8, 420b30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *NE* III**,** 1, 1110a1-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *On Ideas: Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Theory of Forms*, London: Oxford University Press.1993, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *NE* III**,** 1, 1111a1-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. There is also the case, discussed below, of Culpable Ignorance: eschewing Right Reason for Pleasure. Thus, in addition to irresistible “outside forces,” in the case of Compulsion, there are two “internal”/mental “moving principles” of human actions: Volitional-Intellectual Co-operation and Volitional Intransigence: Rational vs. Ignorant Self-Control. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See *Physics* VIII**,** 5 256a5-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Intention*, Elizabeth Anscombe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957, # 23, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Aristotle holds that an action’s subject must at least know himself. Cf. *Self-Knowledge*, edited by Quassim Cassam, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *NE* I 7, 1098a10-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *NE* III**,** 3, 1112a20-1113a10 and *NE* VI**,** 5 1140a25-1140b30. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *NE* III, 1, 1110b25-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *NE* III, 1, 1111b1-5; *NE* III, 5, 1114a20-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid.. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *NE* III, 1, 1110b25-35. Children and Beasts exercise Self-Control to the extent to which their movements stem from their own appetitive mental states (rather than forces independent thereof). Such Voluntary Movements are non-rational, though, for not being directed by Right Reason, which they naturally fail to appreciate. Spontaneity also manifests Self-Control in its inspiration is not an imposition, but desirious, albeit arational. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Aristotle’s own analogy is of Geometrical Construction, *NE* III**,** 3 1112b15-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *NE* III**,** 3 1113a5-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. “Let no temptation take hold on you, but such as is human. And God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it.” 1Corinthians, 10:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. *NE* III**,** 1 1110a1-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *NE* III**,** 1, 1110a4-8; *NE* III**,** 1, 1110a25-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. In contemporary parlance, the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP) follows from AC. Michael Frede, Will and Free Will in Antiquity, lists Alexander of Aphrodisias as the first ancient proponent of PAP.He insists that no such principle is to be found anywhere in the Aristotelian corpus. That claim is just wrong. Aristotle certainly accepts it in regarding the agents of compulsory actions as beyond reproach. ‘He had no choice but to A’ is considered by him to be the form of a valid excuse. *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1. *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 5 also clearly endorses such a requirement for responsible agency: those with the power to voluntarily perform an action *ipso facto* are capable of refraining therefrom. Harry Frankfurt (“Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”,*Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 829-839) has occasioned a now 50 year old debate on PAP. **My contributions to it are: ...** [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Thomas Aquinas**,** *Commentary On The Nicomachean Ethics***,** translated by C. I. Litzinger, O.P. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964, 2 volumes, § 395 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *NE* III**,** 5 1114a10-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *NE* III, 1 110a25-30, *NE* III, 5 1113b25-35 and 1114a1-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. *NE* III**,** 3 1113a25-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Blessed John Duns Scotus, *On The Will and Morality*, selected and translated by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. and William A. Frank, Catholic University of America Press, 1997, § 7. *NE* III**,** 4 1113b 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. See footnote 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. David Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reason, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series, Vol. 76 (1975 - 1976), pp. 29-51+viii (24 pages) . [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Tobias Hoffmann and Cyrille Michon, “Aquinas on Free Will and Intellectual Determinism,” *Philosopher’s Imprint*, volume 17, no. 10, May 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. *NE* III**,** 3 1113a 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Thomas Aquinas**,** *op. cit.*, § 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. *NE* III**,** 3 1111a 1-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. *NE* III**,** 1 1110a15-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Saint Thomas Aquinas**,** *op. cit.***,** § 408. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. *NE* VI**,** 4 1140a1-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Thus my understanding of the distinction Aristotle drew between Deliberation and Retrospection is congenial to the view of the matter put forth by Daniela Cammack: “Deliberation is not the whole of reasoning: it is a subcategory concerning only practical matters within our power. Not deliberating about something thus does not preclude other forms of reflection on it, such as that involved in specification.” “Aristotle’s Denial of Deliberation about Ends,” *Polis*. Vol. 30. No. 2, 2013, pp. 228-50. Others opposed to Wiggins’ contention that ends are within the scope of Deliberation include:Anthony Crifasi,, "Are Ends Subject to Deliberation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*? A Reply to David Wiggins" (1998).*The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. *Categories* Ch. 1 introduces the notion of an axiological being found in/shared by numerous entities, ontologically dependent thereupon, approximating it in value t to various degrees: e.g., Grammar to grammarians. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Gospel of Saint Luke, Chapter 23, verses 39-43. “And one of those robbers who were hanged, blasphemed him, saying: If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.  But the other answering, rebuked him, saying: Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art condemned under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done no evil.  And he said to Jesus: Lord, remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom. And Jesus said to him: Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise.” [↑](#footnote-ref-42)