

Aristotle on Blaming Animals: Taking the Hardline Approach on Voluntary Action in the *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1–5

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers a reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of the voluntary in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, arguing that the voluntary grounds one notion of responsibility with two levels, and therefore both rational and non-rational animals are responsible for voluntary actions. Aristotle makes no distinction between causal and moral responsibility in the *NE*; rather, voluntariness and *prohairesis* form different bases for responsibility and make possible different levels of responsibility, but both levels of responsibility fall within the ethical sphere and are aptly appraised. However, there are important differences between the two levels. Animals and children are aptly appraised for direct voluntary actions. Conversely, only adults capable of *prohairesis* or rational choice are appraised for indirect voluntary actions—psychologically compelled actions that stem from character. Furthermore, this two-tiered account of the voluntary reveals an implicit distinction in Aristotle between *synchronic* and *diachronic* responsibility. Aristotle holds that only adults casually contribute to the formation of their characters. Children and animals lacking *prohairesis* cannot develop character traits and are therefore not diachronically responsible. However, Aristotle allows that children and non-human animals can be synchronically responsible: actions and emotions that they cause (*arché*) through their own conscious activity are aptly praised and blamed.

INTRODUCTION

In *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1,¹ Aristotle states that *hekousios* (the voluntary) must be defined, because “voluntary feelings and actions are praised and blamed” (καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς ἔκουσίοις ἐπαίνων καὶ ψόγων γινομένων).² In III.2 he goes on to define *prohairesis* (rational choice or decision), because it is “very closely tied to virtue, and a better guide to men’s characters (ἦθος) than

their actions (πράξεων).” He distinguishes the voluntary and rational choice, noting that the voluntary “is a broader notion” than rational choice (1111b.2). Children and animals—along with adult humans—share in the voluntary, but not in rational choice. An interpretive puzzle emerges: children and animals are capable of voluntariness, and voluntary actions are praised and blamed, but does Aristotle think that children and animals are apt candidates of the same *kind* of praise and blame as adults? Put differently, is the voluntary action of children and animals appraisable in the same way as the voluntary and prohairesis action of adults? Or are these sufficiently different kinds of actions such that they belong in different categories of praise and blame?

This essay offers a reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of the voluntary in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, arguing that it contains one notion of responsibility with two levels, and that rational and non-rational animals are both responsible for voluntary actions. Animals and children who are capable of voluntary (*hekousios*) actions are weak ethical agents—responsible agents who are sometimes the apt recipients of reactive attitudes such as praise and blame. Conversely, only adults capable of *prohairesis* or rational choice are strong or full ethical agents—responsible agents whose voluntary actions causally contributed to the formation of their characters and therefore are aptly praised and blamed for the actions and occurrent mental states that stem from character. Furthermore, this two-tiered account of the voluntary reveals an implicit distinction in Aristotle between *synchronic* and *diachronic* responsibility. Aristotle clearly holds that only adults are robust ethical agents who have casually contributed to the formation of their characters. Only adults are diachronically responsible, because only adults know that their repeated activities form their habitual dispositions (1114a12). Those dispositions will produce some actions that are not themselves voluntary; however, adults are responsible for those psychologically compelled actions because their own voluntary actions formed their action-generating traits. I call these psychologically compelled actions that stem from voluntary character traits *indirect* voluntary actions. Children and animals lacking *prohairesis* cannot develop character traits and are therefore not diachronically responsible. However, Aristotle allows that children and non-human animals can be synchronically responsible: actions and emotions that they cause (*arché*) through their own conscious activity are aptly praised and blamed. Therefore, children and non-rational animals can be responsible for their *direct* voluntary actions, but in the case of animals these actions will not contribute to character formation (as they normally will in children). Children and animals are capable of direct voluntary actions that are morally praised and blamed and are thus synchronically responsible. Due to the possession of *prohairesis*, adults are capable of both direct and indirect voluntary actions and are morally praised and blamed for their indirect voluntary actions

that stem from character that they causally contributed to. Therefore, only adults capable of prohairetic choice are diachronically responsible.

One point of clarification is needed before the main argument begins. This problem exists in part because many commentators assume that Aristotle is giving us an account of moral responsibility. If Aristotle is discussing *moral* praise and blame, then we must figure out how the voluntary actions of and children and animals fit into the discussion, because commentators tend to have in mind a very modern notion of moral responsibility (e.g., specific notions of causal determinism, alternative possibilities, and psychological development), and this modern notion almost always excludes children and animals.³ With this modern assumption in the background, some commentators solve the *hekousios/prohairesis* problem by drawing a distinction between causal and moral responsibility: causal responsibility is attributed to children and animals, but not moral responsibility.⁴ I avoid making this distinction, because *Aristotle himself makes no such distinction*. Furthermore, he never tells us that he is referring specifically to moral responsibility. Yet the section on voluntariness comes in the middle of the discussion of êthikê aretê and its associated actions and emotions, so it would be strange if Aristotle was discussing responsibility that does not fall within the ethical realm. Therefore, I avoid the causal and moral adjectives. I argue that although there are important differences between the kind of responsibility grounded by *hekousios* and *prohairesis*, both are types of responsibility that fall within the ethical sphere.

ARISTOTLE ON THE VOLUNTARY

First, a brief review Aristotle's understanding of the voluntary. In *NE* III.1, Aristotle articulates three necessary components of voluntary action (although he only explicitly mentions two). First, a voluntary action cannot be caused by external force (*bia*).⁵ The *archê*— source or first principle—must be within the agent (1110a1–2). If the action is forced (like a gust of wind forcing me off balance which results in my tumbling into you), then it cannot be the result of the agent's own impulse or will. Contemporary theorists refer to this as the *sourcehood* condition for responsibility ascriptions: the source of the action must come from within the agent and not be directly (and completely) traceable to some external cause (the agent must be at least be a co-cause).⁶ When unpacking this issue of force, Aristotle seems to draw a distinction between force (*bia*) and compulsion (*anagkê*).⁷ He brings up the example of “people throwing cargo overboard in storms at sea,” noting that “no one jettisons cargo voluntarily” (1110a5). This is an example of a mixed or composite (*miktos*) action because it was not something a person would voluntarily do under normal circumstances. But Aristotle concludes that these compelled actions are more voluntary than involuntary, “because at the

time they are done they are worthy of choice.”⁸ Broadie and Rowe’s translation is helpful: “for the actions in question are *desired* at the time of action” (1110a6).⁹ The point is that the person wanted to perform the action at that time, despite conflicting desires. But the conflicting desires make the action a *mixed* voluntary action. Bostock explains, “in one way I want to do it, and in another way I don’t. But there is nothing mixed about my decision, and that is what is relevant to our topic of praise and blame. The decision is simply to throw the cargo overboard, and clearly it is up to me whether to do that or not.”¹⁰ This type of action is voluntary because in the end, the agent does what the agent wants to do.

The reader might still wonder at this point what distinguishes this compelled (yet voluntary) action from a forced (and therefore involuntary) action. Aristotle states that the mixed voluntary agent—the agent who does what he wants despite the presence of external pressures—“has within him the principle (*arché*) ... (and) if the principle of the actions is in him, *it is also up to him to do them or not to do them*” (1110a16–18, my emphasis).¹¹ Irwin notes, “The fact that the principle is in the agent convinces Aristotle that the actions are really voluntary, and up to the agent.”¹² But this passage indicates more than mere agential sourcehood. Being the *arché* of the action means that the agent causally *controlled* the action. As Meyer puts it, “the ‘up to us’ locution used by Aristotle implies causal responsibility. Such agents are in *control* (*kurios*) of their actions (*NE* III.5.1114a2–3; *EE* II.6.1223a6–7); they are responsible (*aitioi*) for them: ‘A person is responsible [*aitios*] for those things that are up to him to do or not to do, and if he is responsible [*aitios*] for them, then they are up to him’ (*EE* II.6.1223a7–9; cf. 1223a15–18).”¹³ Aristotle explicitly states in the *Eudemian Ethics* that the “up to us” locution is a property of voluntary actions, not only prohairesis actions.¹⁴ And this is reinforced in the *NE* when Aristotle gives an example of a forced action: “people with power (*κύριος*) over him carry him somewhere” (1110a5). A forced and thus involuntary action is an action that happens *to* the agent, the agent being passive and lacking control. Conversely, a voluntary action is an action that the agent has the control to bring about, as Müller says, through the agent’s “own conscious effort.”¹⁵ To better understand the difference between *arché* (i.e., sourcehood) and *kurios* (i.e., control), note that a plant has the *arché* of its development within itself—it is a *psuché* insofar as its principle of development is internal—but there is no conscious effort involved in the plant taking in sunlight and nutrients. Both humans and non-rational animals, however, can consciously direct their actions due to their cognitive capacities. Thus *control*—the ability to consciously bring about and complete a change¹⁶—is the second, often overlooked, condition of voluntary action, and is especially important to keep in mind when discussing children and non-rational animals.

Aristotle’s second explicitly stated condition of the voluntary is that the action cannot be done out of ignorance (unless one is the cause of one’s own ignorance).

Aristotle explains the notion of ignorance by contrasting knowledge of particulars with knowledge of universals. Ignorance that compromises ascriptions of praise and blame occurs when the agent is ignorant of “the particulars—the circumstances of the action and what it is concerned with” and not “the universal” (1111a1–2). For instance, if the agent really believes (and has reason to believe) that she is shooting an intruder but is mistaken, the action is involuntary. She did not have sufficient understanding of the particulars of the situation to warrant blame, and her ignorance wasn’t her fault. If, however, she knows that the intruder is not a threat, but is angered by his intrusion and for that reason alone shoots him, then her action was voluntary and she is culpable. She was mistaken about the principle, not about the particulars, and her anger was the cause of this ignorance. To conclude with Bostock, “The contrast, then, appears to be that between general moral rules and facts concerning the particular situation.”¹⁷ Ignorance about the general moral rules will not get the agent off the hook, but ignorance about the particular circumstances can. This is the *epistemic* condition of responsibility ascriptions. This distinction between moral principles and particulars is crucial since Aristotle is discussing something that applies to children and animals. Both have awareness of particulars, but not of universals. Thus, children and animals can meet the epistemic requirement for voluntariness. These three conditions—control in addition to Aristotle’s explicitly stated sourcehood and epistemic—must be met for a singular action or emotion to be voluntary and thus aptly appraised. *Prohairesis*—described in more detail below—grounds approbation for actions stemming from character traits, something only adults can possess.

THREE VIEWS OF THE VOLUNTARY

I am making the case that voluntariness and *prohairesis* both ground approbation, albeit different levels of approbation. This view is quite different from the common interpretations. The most common interpretation of the relationship between voluntariness and *prohairesis* is the dismissal view. Dismissal accounts dismiss Aristotle’s claim that the voluntary actions that children and animals perform are morally praised and blamed. There are two main strategies for argument. One strategy is arguing that the discussion of the voluntary in *NE* is an example of Aristotle’s *endoxic* method, and Aristotle both moves “from common-sense-based and common-opinion-based discussion of the voluntary as a requirement for praise or blame in *NE iii 1* to his explanation of the underlying psychological apparatus in *NE iii 2–5*.”¹⁸ In other words, Aristotle doesn’t think children and animals are aptly appraised; rather, he is citing common opinion. A second common dismissal strategy is to admit that the voluntary and *prohairesis* are two different accounts of causation or responsibility, but to dismiss that voluntariness is an account of *moral* responsibility. Perhaps the most well-known dismissal strategy

belongs to Irwin. Irwin argues that moral responsibility requires *prohairesis*, or the ability to decide effectively about a course of action.¹⁹ Note that these views assume that Aristotle is articulating a theory of *moral* responsibility, a point never made explicit by Aristotle.

The next approach is the compromise approach; it is a compromise in two respects. First, it presents a compromise between *hekousios* and *prohairesis* based actions: both are rightly praised and blamed, despite the important differences between the two accounts. Second, it offers a compromise between Irwin's claim that only creatures capable of *prohairesis*—i.e., mature humans—are apt candidates of praise and blame, and the hardline view that many intelligent non-human animals are morally appraisable. In other words, the compromise view interprets the voluntary as appraisability grounding for young children, but not animals. Nussbaum exemplifies the compromise view, arguing that proper praise and blame of the child's voluntary—but not deliberate—actions will play a vital role in shaping the child's cognitive, desiderative, and deliberative capacities.²⁰ Therefore, she thinks that children, but not animals, are aptly praised and blamed. Note again, the distinction between children and animals is not in the text.

The third approach is the hardline approach, which takes the "hardline" on Aristotle's claims that voluntary actions are praised and blamed, and children and animals are capable of the voluntary.²¹ A question remains, however, as to what *kind* of praise and blame Aristotle is referring to. Is it the praise we give a toddler for walking for the first time, or to an athlete for winning a race? Praise conferred because the agent accomplished the action on their own and the action was commendable? Or does he mean the praise we give a soldier who ran into battle to save his comrade, or the praise we give a mother who skips dinner so that her child gets enough to eat? Aristotle does not sharply distinguish between these kinds of appraisal in the text, but the context of the discussion—the general description and examples of character excellence—indicate that Aristotle is discussing responsibility for actions and emotions that fall within the ethical sphere. So, despite the important differences between voluntary and prohairesis-based responsibility, the hardline approach asserts that both voluntary and prohairesis action fall within this ethical sphere.²²

Advocates of the hardline approach include Richard Sorabji, who claims that there is nothing in Aristotle's account that bars children and animals from the same fundamental kind of responsibility as adults: "non-rational animals can sometimes be held responsible."²³ Sorabji thinks that so long as creatures can satisfy Aristotle's three criteria for voluntary action, then they are apt candidates for praise and blame. However, Sorabji does not consider the important distinction between voluntary action and prohairesis choice. While Aristotle does allow that children and animals are aptly appraised for particular actions, only adults are aptly praised for actions that stem from character traits.

Another advocate of the hardline approach is Jozef Müller, who argues that voluntariness and *prohairesis* ground the same basic kind of responsibility for Aristotle, but only agents capable of *prohairesis* are “responsible for being the sort of individual that performs it (the action)” (2015, p. 207). My view goes beyond Müller’s in two important ways. First, it is rooted in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (the more widely read text) rather than the *Eudemian Ethics*. Second, I demonstrate that the context of the discussion of the voluntary in *NE* suggests that Aristotle is primarily interested in the appraisability of actions, not character, and he assumes a principle of the transitive property of moral responsibility. Since adults causally contributed to the formation of their characters through direct voluntary actions (actions that meet the criteria for voluntariness) and prohairesic actions, they are also responsible for actions that stem from character (what I call indirect voluntary actions). One important upshot of this interpretation is that *non- or not-yet-fully rational beings* are capable of direct voluntary actions, the same kind of actions that contribute to character in rational beings. Since Aristotle is mainly concerned to demonstrate the appraisability of voluntary actions, the most logical conclusion is that he thinks that non-rational animals are appraisable and responsible for their direct voluntary actions.

CHARACTER AND THE VOLUNTARY

An objection lurks in the background: what textual justification is there for claiming that voluntary actions and emotions are praised and blamed in the same fundamental way as *prohairesis*-based actions and emotions? I propose that the claim that *voluntary actions yield responsibility and are thus appraisable* is justified by its context: the primary focus of the entire section on responsibility is on actions, not character, and therefore on outlining the necessary conditions for the responsibility for actions and emotions. Furthermore, the discussion takes place in the middle of the exposition of character excellence, so the actions and emotions in question are all within the ethical realm. Finally, Aristotle notes in several passages that voluntary but not prohairesic actions are rightly appraised. The important difference is that while only the agent capable of *prohairesis* is aptly appraised for having the right *dispositions* (insofar as these dispositions cause actions), the merely voluntary agent is aptly appraised for performing the right *actions* (1105b28–1106a7; 1135a20–25; 1135a4–5; *EE* 1234a24–5). So, there is an important difference in the praise and blame afforded to voluntary and prohairesic agents, but it is not that one is given ethical or moral praise while the other is not. Both are responsible and thus appraised for their actions, but only the prohairesic agent is additionally appraised based on character traits. *Prohairesis* deepens—but does not fundamentally change—the notion of responsibility.

The opening claim of chapter one is “voluntary actions are praised and blamed” (1109b31). In chapter two Aristotle notes that we must now consider *prohairesis*, because it is “a better guide to men’s characters than their actions” (1111b6–7). We might assume from this statement that we have moved away from actions to deeper psychological elements. And in one way, that is correct. Chapters two through four deal with *prohairesis*, deliberation, and wish, all rational capacities. But everything comes to a head in chapter five, and Aristotle sums up the discussion thus far: “Since, then, an object of wish is the end, and the object of wish and of rational choice is what conduces to the end, *actions concerning what conduces to the end will be in accordance with rational choice and voluntary*” (1113b 2–3, my emphasis). The focus on actions should not surprise the reader since throughout the *Ethics* Aristotle focuses on the appraisability of actions.²⁴ Every virtue is appraised for the mean actions and emotions it produces. A temperate person is praised because they only desire and eat as much as needed for good health (1119a11–16).²⁵ The mild person is praised for only having brief moments of anger aimed at the proper objects (1125b31–33). When inquiring about the appraisability of happiness at the end of book one, Aristotle notes that “the just person, the brave person, and the good person and *virtue in general we praise for their actions and what they bring about*” (1101b4–16, my emphasis). Aristotle assumes throughout the first half of the *Ethics* that we appraise actions and emotions, and so his primary goal in book three is to articulate the criteria for responsibility for actions and emotions, not character traits.

Still, it is often assumed that the aim of this section is to articulate responsibility for character.²⁶ The confusion is caused by Aristotle’s discussion of character states in III.5. However, a close look at chapter five reveals that this section is primarily concerned with articulating the conditions of voluntary action. Aristotle is trying to solve a puzzle: if an agent commits actions that are caused by his character traits, and it is no longer in the agent’s power to affect those traits (thus not meeting the control condition), then is the agent responsible for these actions that stem from character?²⁷ After all, the actions *themselves* are not voluntary since they do not meet the control condition.²⁸ These are in fact a form of *compelled* action, but the compulsion stems from the agent’s own freely formed character. This conundrum is most clearly expressed at 1114a19–20: “So too from the start it was open to the unjust person and the intemperate person not to become such, *so that they are what they are voluntarily*; but now that they have become what they are, *it is no longer possible for them to be otherwise*” (my emphasis). Agents start off able to become virtuous or vicious through their own conscious effort—“virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature” (1103a19–20)—and because both options are open to them. If the actions that formed their character meet the criteria of voluntariness, then their character was acquired voluntarily. But now that one possesses a solidified character—a deeply

entrenched disposition to actions and emotions—one will tend to act from that character and may find it difficult, if not impossible, to intentionally act against one's character.²⁹ And since Aristotle is clear that actions reveal character, the agent is the *arché* of actions that stem from a character that the agent no longer maintains control over.

Aristotle answers this conundrum along the following lines: an agent is responsible for particular actions that do not meet all the requirements for voluntary action so long as two conditions are met: first, the agent's voluntary actions causally contributed to the formation of the character that in turn generates those compelled actions, and second, the agent must be capable of *prohairesis*, since Aristotle thinks that *prohairesis* is necessary for the formation of character (virtue is defined as a *hexis prohairesikè* at 1106b36–1107a2). The agent's actions that contributed to character are what I call *direct* voluntary actions—they meet the requirements of the voluntary. The actions that stem from character but do not meet the requirements of the voluntary—because the agent no longer has control over those actions—are still responsible actions, but they only *indirectly* meet the requirements of voluntariness, because they are psychologically compelled actions.³⁰ As Meyer notes, Aristotle is assuming “the transitivity of responsibility.”³¹ If an agent's voluntary actions causally contributed to the formation of his character, then the agent is responsible for actions that stem from character, even if those character-driven actions do not *themselves* meet the criteria of the voluntary. Those are indirect voluntary actions, and the agent is responsible for them.

The reader might grant that voluntary actions belong to the agent is an important respect, but still object to the claim that direct voluntary actions can contribute to the formation of character, countering that only prohairesic voluntary actions contribute to character formation. Aristotle emphasizes that one cannot have a character trait without *prohairesis*: “virtues are rational choices or at any rate involve rational choices” (1106a4–5). Furthermore, Aristotle states in the same passage that “we are neither praised nor blamed on the basis of our feelings” (1105b29–30). Some might argue based on this passage that *only* virtues (or actions stemming from virtues) are aptly appraised. But this cannot be the right conclusion based on numerous other claims that Aristotle makes. Consider his discussion of just actions and just agents in V.8: “Whether something is an unjust or just act is determined by what is voluntary and what is involuntary. *For when it is voluntary, it is blamed*, and is thereby also an unjust act” (1135a20–23, my emphasis). After discussing the relationship between voluntariness and *prohairesis*, he concludes, “a person is just when he acts justly by rational choice, but acts justly if he merely acts voluntarily” (1135a4–5). A person does not have to act on rational choice to commit an appraisable (e.g., unjust) action; if the agent committed the action voluntarily, the agent is responsible. A similar distinction is drawn in the *Eudemian Ethics*, where Aristotle explicitly states that there are mean

emotional states that are not virtues or vices but yet are praiseworthy: “Though all these mean points are praiseworthy, they are not virtues, nor are their opposites vices, since they do not involve decision (*prohairesis*)” (EE 1234a24–5).³² Aristotle notes that these emotions and actions stem from natural dispositions that, when combined with thought in the proper way, can become virtues. This is crucial: natural dispositions that are praiseworthy can develop into virtues.

Based on these passages, it cannot be the case the Aristotle thinks that only prohairetic states and/or actions are aptly appraised. But that does not mean that there are no differences between voluntary and prohairetic actions. In the previously cited passage from II.5, Aristotle notes that we are not appraised for our feelings, we are appraised for our characteristics, because “in respect of the virtues and vices we are said not to be affected but rather disposed in a certain way” (1106a7).³³ The focus in this passage is on the genus of virtue, and distinguishing virtue from feelings. There is proper appraisal for the person with virtuous or vicious dispositions. But this does not rule out the possibility of a broader notion or appraisal. After all, a person can be appraised for performing an unjust action so long as it is voluntary: “When the agent acts knowingly, but without previous deliberation, it is an injustice: for example, actions done from spirit and the other feelings that are necessary for human beings” (1135b20–263). Here the connection is explicit: voluntary actions motivated by spirit or emotion are aptly blamed, but the person cannot *be* just (have the character trait of justice) without *prohairesis*. There is a spectrum of appraisability that spans the range of voluntary and prohairetic actions: a person is aptly appraised for voluntary ethical actions and emotions, but only a person with *prohairesis* can be appraised for their ethical character and the actions that stem from character.

Prohairesis is necessary for character traits, but not for appraisal or responsibility. However, *Prohairesis* plays a crucial role in character formation that illuminates a further distinction between simple direct voluntary actions and *chosen* DVAs. The agent who has developed the intellectual capacity of *prohairesis* still performs DVAs, that is, actions that meet all the criteria of the voluntary including control. But the rational agent can also perform DVAs that are based on *prohairesis*. These *chosen* DVAs allow the agent to develop character traits and thus be responsible for indirect voluntary actions and for psychologically compelled actions—involuntary actions that stem from a voluntary, chosen character. Once one has developed character through voluntary chosen actions, then one has diachronic responsibility because one’s character extends across time and will generate actions in the future that may be compelled but that one is still responsible for due to the causal role the agent played in developing that character. *Prohairesis* is necessary for diachronic responsibility, responsibility for actions that stem from character.

Another objection lurks in the background. The reader might grant that Aristotle’s overall focus is on actions, but still argue that one of his objectives is

to articulate the necessary conditions for the responsibility for character. Several passages suggest this aim. Yet the primary goal of these passages remains to show that the agent is responsible for indirect voluntary actions. Consider the following passage: “wickedness is voluntary; otherwise we shall have to disagree with what we have just said (that both virtue and vice are in our power), and deny that a human being is a first principle or the begetter of his actions as he is of his children” (1113b15). Wickedness (and goodness) are voluntary because the agent is the *arché* of his actions and thus responsible. And repeated actions make one what one is, a principle Aristotle emphasizes numerous times: e.g., “like states arise from like activities (ἐκ τῶν ὁμοίων ἐνεργειῶν αἱ ἕξεις γίνονται)” (1103b16). The point of the passage is to show that the state of wickedness is voluntary because the actions that causally contributed to the formation of the agent’s wicked disposition were voluntary. Certainly, a secondary assertion is that voluntary and prohairetic agents are responsible for their character, but the primary aim is to show that they are responsible even for actions that are no longer fully voluntary. Consider one other passage, when Aristotle asks whether legislators are justified in punishing someone for ignorance due to negligence: “people are themselves responsible for turning out like this, through the slackness of their lives – responsible for being unjust by doing wrong, or intemperate by spending their time in drinking and the like; in each sphere, *people’s activities give them the corresponding character* (ἐνεργεῖν περὶ ἕκαστα αἱ ἕξεις γίνονται)” (1114a10–11). Again, Aristotle is arguing that someone who commits a crime due to ignorance is still responsible so long as the actions in question stem from a character that was acquired through chosen DVAs. The actions in question do not meet the criteria of voluntary—in this case they fail to meet the epistemic requirement because the agent was ignorant at the time of action—but they are still responsible actions because they are indirect voluntary actions, that is, involuntary actions that directly stem from character that was acquired voluntarily.

Thus far, I have argued that there are two levels of responsibility, voluntary-based responsibility (DVAs) and prohairesis-based responsibility (chosen DVAs and IDAs). Voluntariness grounds responsibility for particular actions—synchronic responsibility—while *prohairesis* grounds responsibility for actions that stem from character—diachronic responsibility. To counter the objection that the primary aim of *NE* III.1–5 is provide the necessary conditions for the responsibility of character, I have argued that Aristotle’s goal is to provide the necessary conditions for the responsibility of actions and emotions, not character. But at this point the reader might wonder, what relevance does this argument have to the moral appraisability of children and animals? Consider the nature of voluntary actions that contribute to the formation of character and thus diachronic responsibility. Recall that Aristotle thinks character is largely formed during one’s upbringing. Aristotle states in II.1 that “it is not unimportant how

we are habituated from our early days; indeed, it makes a huge difference – or rather, all the difference” (1103b22–25). Early habituation contributes heavily to character. This is reinforced in X.9: “the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kinds of likes and dislikes” for that person to listen to arguments (1179b24). “To change by argument what has long been ingrained in a character is impossible or, at least, not easy” (1179b18). Aristotle assumes that actions performed before the agent’s deliberative and prohairetic capacities were developed form that agent’s (habituated) character traits; however, that agent is now responsible for the actions that stem from that character.³⁴ Both voluntary and prohairetic-based actions form character, and the agent is directly responsible for these voluntary actions despite the lack of developed rational capacities. But once the agent’s character is formed, the agent is responsible for actions that stem from character that do not themselves meet the criteria of the voluntary (IDAs) due to the transitive properties of responsibility. Voluntary actions are sometimes performed by *non- or not-yet-fully rational beings*, and those appraisable actions contribute to the formation of character which then issues in psychologically compelled actions, also appraisable.³⁵ A child performs actions that build character, and those actions are voluntary and thus responsible, but not based on *prohairesis*. Surely Nussbaum is right that the child is aptly praised and blamed. What about an animal? The animal (like the child qua child) cannot be responsible for indirect voluntary actions (because an animal does not have a rational capacity and thus cannot form character traits), but why can’t an animal be responsible for direct voluntary actions just like the child is? The animal performs activities (actions and emotions) that are within the ethical sphere (Aristotle notes that animals are angry, jealous, compassionate, etc.³⁶), and many non-rational animals (per Aristotle’s explicit admission and based on descriptions in other texts) have the capacities necessary for voluntary action.³⁷ Therefore, we should take Aristotle seriously when he says that children and animals perform voluntary actions, and these actions are appraisable.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Aristotle holds a two-tiered account of responsibility ascriptions. Agents are aptly praised and blamed for voluntary actions and emotions and are also praised and blamed for prohairetic actions and emotions. Agents only capable of voluntary actions, such as children and non-rational animals, can be aptly appraised for ethical actions and emotions, but cannot be appraised for psychologically compelled actions and emotions that stem from character traits, since without *prohairesis* they cannot develop character. As stated earlier, this interpretation goes against the common view. For instance, Irwin thinks that Aristotle’s “ascription of voluntary action to animals and children is reasonable,

but dangerous . . . (since) he insists that an action is a candidate for praise and blame if and only if it is voluntary.³⁸ Why is this dangerous? Animals and young children as well as adults can be responsible while still maintaining important differences between the responsibility of rational and non-rational animals. In fact, recognizing the rich cognitive capacities of animals can be beneficial to humans and animals alike. As Nussbaum states, “It is our nature to be animal, the sort of animal that is rational. If we do not give a debased account of the animal or a puffed-up account of the rational, we will be in a position to see how well suited the one is to contribute to the flourishing of the other.”³⁹ Despite Aristotle’s denial of rationality to animals, this reconstruction of the voluntary helps us appreciate Aristotle’s own view of the deeply intertwined natures of the human and the animal.⁴⁰ Aristotle recognized the profound cognitive capacities of animals which ground their ability to act voluntarily, and he placed them within the ethical sphere, broadly conceived. Perhaps we should follow his lead.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, Aristotle citations are from Roger Crisp’s translation: *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
2. I follow most translators here and take τοῖς ἔκουσίοις as modifying the entire clause πάθη τε καὶ πράξεις. Rackham is in the minority, as he takes τοῖς ἔκουσίοις to be modifying only πράξεις. If Rackham is correct and voluntary only modifies actions, then one could make the case based on the *Eudemian Ethics* that since only humans are capable of action, Aristotle is providing a philosophical account of the voluntary which only applies to adult humans. But this does not follow from the most reasonable reading of the sentence.
3. There are philosophers that are challenging the denial of moral appraisal and agency to animals. See, for instance, Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Mark Rowlands, *Can Animals Be Moral?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Bekoff and Pierce argue that animals are full moral agents, but that the notion of moral agency is culturally relative, so the form of moral agency will depend on the animals social-cultural life. Rowlands argues that animals are moral in the same way as humans. He expands on Regan’s distinction between moral agents and patients, and argues that animals occupy a middle category, which he calls moral *subjects*: “X is a moral *subject* if and only if X is, at least sometimes, motivated to act for moral reasons” (89). Animals do not have to have a conception of morality to be motivated by *de re* moral reasons. Needless to say, these arguments reside outside of the mainstream.
4. John Cooper makes this distinction, but he takes it even further and argues “that the responsibility he (Aristotle) investigates, at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is not

- ‘moral responsibility’, even in the case of adult humans” (267). This is only correct in the sense that Aristotle does not have a modern notion of moral responsibility. Aristotle does—as Cooper admits—believe that only adults “are responsible in addition for their own characters as morally good (or at least decent) or bad people of one stripe and degree or other” (266). But even the use of moral in this claim only obfuscates Aristotle. The correct claim is that only adults are responsible for their character traits and the actions and emotions that stem from character. It is best to simply avoid the term “moral” in this context. John Cooper, “Aristotelian Responsibility,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 45 (2013): 265–312.
5. Perhaps certain kinds of compulsion also undermine voluntary action. Aristotle notes that some things “strain human nature to the breaking point” and therefore are things that no one could endure (1110a7). This would seem to be mixed voluntary actions that are pardonable due to the degree of the compulsion, but surely we could include under this description of compulsion examples that undermine voluntary action, like torture to a person’s breaking point causing them to divulge secrets *against* their will. But Aristotle gives us no specific example of this kind of compulsion, so we are left to speculate.
 6. Aristotle appears to classify the action as voluntary as long as the agent is at least a co-cause, as in the case of mixed actions discussed below.
 7. Terence Irwin argues that Aristotle sharply distinguishes between these two concepts. However, the distinction is not clear in the text (as Irwin acknowledges), and Aristotle only uses ἀναγκάζονται in line 8 at the end of the discussion. Meyer lumps them together, noting that one category of involuntary actions includes “those due to compulsion (*bia* or *anagkē*)” (Terence H. Irwin, “Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980], 141).
 8. αἰρεταὶ γὰρ εἰσι τότε ὅτε πράττονται.
 9. Aristotle, C. J. Rowe, and Sarah Broadie, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); my emphasis.
 10. David Bostock, *Aristotle’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106.
 11. ὧν δ’ ἐν αὐτῷ ἡ ἀρχή, ἐπ’ αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ πράττειν καὶ μὴ. Rackham renders it as “when the origin of the action is in oneself, it is in one’s own power to do it or not.”
 12. Terence H. Irwin, “Notes,” in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), 202.
 13. Susan Sauvé Meyer, “Aristotle on the Voluntary,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 138; my emphasis.
 14. There are significant differences between the accounts of the voluntary in the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and I do not mean to downplay these differences. One is tempted to combine Aristotle’s claim in the *EE* that the agent is responsible (a term with clear moral implications) for the actions that are up to him, with his statement in the *NE* that young children and animals are capable of this kind of action. But the differences between the texts renders this speculation misleading.
 15. Jozef Müller, “Agency and Responsibility in Aristotle’s Eudemian Ethics,” *Phronesis* 60(2) (2015): 214.

16. Ibid.
17. Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics*, 108.
18. Susanne Bobzien, "Choice and Moral Responsibility (NE iii 1–5)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Ronald M. Polansky (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 85.
19. Irwin, "Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle," 132.
20. Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285–6.
21. Of course, some proponents of the dismissal and compromise views think that children and animals are aptly appraised, but they would argue that this is a fundamentally different kind of appraisal, e.g., causal instead of moral.
22. I use the word "ethical" instead of "moral" to both follow Aristotle's parlance, and to avoid the distinction commentators like Cooper draw between causal and moral responsibility. For an example of what it means for an action or emotion to fall within the ethical sphere, consider the case of injustice discussed later in this essay. Aristotle explicitly notes that if an agent *voluntarily* harms someone because of spirit or feelings, then the action was unjust even if it did not follow deliberation. Furthermore, this unjust action is blameworthy. If a person commits an injustice after deliberation, then we know that they are an unjust person—they possess the character trait of injustice—and can be praised and blamed not only for the action but for being the kind of individual that characteristically performs such actions. So, when an agent performs an action that is related to characteristics like anger, injustice, or courage, then the action falls within the ethical sphere even if the agent performed the action without deliberating.
23. Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 112. Sorabji uses the modifier "moral" in the paragraph, but this is because Irwin is his main opponent and so he is adopting Irwin's terms. For my purposes, the point is that Sorabji thinks that animals, children, and adults can all be responsible in the same fundamental way, and that reason or prohairesis does not indicate a qualitative difference.
24. Meyer emphasizes that the goal of the entire account is "to classify as voluntary . . . those (actions) produced by character." "Aristotle on the Voluntary," 139.
25. Or for at least not feeling too much pain when refraining from sweets.
26. As Meyer notes, "A very popular answer to this question, more often assumed than stated explicitly, takes note of the fact that Aristotle thinks that our states of character, and not just our actions, are 'up to us and voluntary' (NE III.5.114b28–9; cf. III.4a4–31), and infers that Aristotle's main point in discussing voluntariness is to establish just this." Meyer, "Aristotle on the Voluntary," 138.
27. Relatedly, Aristotle is also rejecting what has come to be known as Plato's asymmetry thesis: "An additional consequence of the Platonic view of voluntariness is that there is an asymmetry between good and bad actions: our good actions are voluntary, but our bad ones are not. The asymmetry thesis is a view Aristotle is clearly concerned to reject (NE III.1.1111a27–9; EE II.7.1223b14–16; cf. MM I.9.1187a21–3), and this is exactly what he is doing when he opens NE III.5." Meyer, "Aristotle on the Voluntary," 151.

28. In a sense the agent does meet the control condition as long as she performs the action through her own conscious effort. But a close read of III.5 shows that the control condition goes back to the voluntary nature of virtue and vice: we are equipped by nature to become virtuous, but we can also be habituated to become vicious. In other words, we can through our own conscious effort become either virtuous or vicious. But once a certain character state has been cultivated, the agent can no longer through conscious effort perform, e.g., virtuous actions if she is vicious.
29. Aristotle is clear that one cannot *prohairesically* perform actions that go against their character. The rational agent decides and then either acts on the basis on that decision or on the basis of *pathé*, and if he acts on the basis of feelings then he is akratic. In VII.3 Aristotle goes so far as to say that the vicious (intemperate) person is led on by *prohairesis*. Despite these claims, Aristotle may leave open the possibility for character reform, but this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.
30. Müller draws a similar distinction between internally and externally compelled actions, placing the former in the category of psychological compulsion. “Aristotle’s point, then, in discussing the case of psychologically compelled actions, is that whether an action is voluntary depends on what it was that moved the agent to act and so, in turn, on what explains the action. If it were her own desires and beliefs, the action is voluntary, but if it was some external circumstance or, at any rate, something external to her individual agency, the action is involuntary” (Müller, “Agency and Responsibility,” 236).
31. Meyer, “Aristotle on the Voluntary”: 154.
32. This passage is quoted in K. M. Nielsen, “Vice in the Nicomachean Ethics,” *Phronesis* 62(1) (2017): 14.
33. This is Taylor’s translation. C. C. W. Taylor, *Nicomachean Ethics, Books II–IV*. Clarendon Aristotle Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 8.
34. It is important to keep in mind the implicit distinction Aristotle makes between habituated virtue and full virtue or “virtue in the strict sense” (1144b30, Irwin’s translation). Bostock notes that while Aristotle draws a clear distinction ‘natural virtue’ and ‘full virtue’ (*aretè kuria*), a third level is necessary to reconcile Aristotle’s claims concerning moral virtue in book II (2000: 86). Bostock calls the third, intermediary level “trained virtue,” while Jessica Moss calls it “habituated virtue.” I argue—following Moss—that habituated virtue does not require the intellectual capacities of *prohairesis* or *phronesis*, but strict virtue does. See my forthcoming “Virtue Habituation and the Skill of Emotion Regulation,” in *Skill in Ancient Western and Chinese Ethics*, ed. Tom Angier and Richard Hamilton (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press). Also see Jessica Moss, “‘Virtue Makes the Goal Right’: Virtue and *Phronesis* in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Phronesis* 56(3) (2011): 204–61.
35. The agent with a formed character has also performed chosen DVAs. So, one might object that what makes them responsible for psychologically compelled actions is that their character has been formed in part through prohairesic choice. I grant the point that one cannot have full virtue without *prohairesis*. But I contend that non-prohairesic DVAs still directly contribute to the formation of character. If this is not the case, I do not know what to make about Aristotle’s emphasis on upbringing and early habitua-

tion, and his repeated claims that “virtue makes the goal right” (*NE* 1144a7–9; see also *NE* 1145a5–7 and *EE* 1227b23–25). Virtue is acquired through the habituation of the non-rational part of the soul. The repeated performance of voluntary actions—actions for which the agent is responsible—habituates the soul and contributes to character. If habituation happens during upbringing, and the deliberative faculty is undeveloped/developing, and one is responsible for one’s habituated states, it does not appear that ALL the actions that lead to the formation of character must be prohairesis.

36. For instance, when discussing friendship in the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle says, “for love is present even in wild animals—at any rate, they choose to die on behalf of their offspring” (*EE* 1235a34–35). Birds also share each other’s sorrow (*EE* 1240a36), eagles show jealousy (*HA* 619b29), and cuckoos are conscious of their own cowardice (*HA* 618a26–27). Wild animals attack out of anger when “driven on by pain and spirit” (*NE* 1116b33), and a dog’s “anger ceases towards those who humble themselves” (*Rhet* 1380a6). In perhaps one of his most powerful examples of animal emotions, Aristotle recounts a story he has heard about two small dolphins who “appeared swimming in underneath a little dead dolphin when it was sinking, and supporting it on their backs, trying out of compassion to prevent its being devoured by some other beast” (*HA*, 631a18–20). Of course, whether Aristotle thinks that these emotions are merely analogous to human emotions or of the same kind is a point of contention.
37. The *De Motu Animalium* provides perhaps the strongest articulation of animal cognitive capacities, which is highlighted by Moss’s translation: “We see that the things which move the animal are thought and *phantasia* and decision and wish and appetite. And all these can be reduced to intellect (*nous*) and desire (*orexis*). For both *phantasia* and perception (*aisthesis*) hold the same place as intellect, for they are all cognitive (*kritika*)” (*MA* 700b17–21). Note that *phantasia* and *aisthesis*—both capacities that animals possess—are discriminating capacities that hold the same place, motivation wise, as *nous*. Animals are also capable of a variety of *pathé*. The capacities *aisthesis*, *phantasia*, and *pathé* provide the basis for voluntary action. For a defense of animal *pathé*, see Juha Sihvola, “Emotional Animals: Do Aristotelian Emotions Require Beliefs?” *Apeiron* 29 (1996): 105–44. For a broader discussion of the cognitive capacities of non-rational animals, see Jessica Dawn Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception, Phantasia, Thought, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. chaps. 1–2. For a discussion of the cognitive nature of perception, see Theodor Ebert, “Aristotle on What Is Done in Perceiving,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 37 (1983): 181–98.
38. Irwin, “Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle,” 124–25.
39. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 287.
40. Richard Sorabji makes a strong case that the moral debasing of animals in the Western tradition began with Aristotle’s explicitly denying them reason and belief (see *Animal Minds and Human Morals*, chap. 1). I am not challenging that claim. But I do think that there are resources in Aristotle—some of which Sorabji discusses—that give reason to think that Aristotle himself did not see such a stark divide between humans and animals.

