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# Aristotle on Co-causes of One's Dispositions

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**Abstract:** In this paper I offer a close reading of Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5.1114a31–b25 and try to show that despite considerable interpretive difficulties, some clear structure can nevertheless be discerned. While Aristotle's main concern in this passage is to refute the so-called asymmetry thesis – the thesis that virtue is voluntary, but vice is not – there is much more in it than just a dialectical encounter. Aristotle wants to respond to a more general objection, which has as its target the voluntariness of both virtue and vice, and which is provoked by some of his ideas in *EN* 3.4 and 3.5. Further, I will try to show why Aristotle thinks that we are only co-causes (*sunaitioi*) of our dispositions. In my opinion, his reasons have nothing to do with compatibilist or incompatibilist considerations as they are commonly understood in modern philosophy. In particular, he does not want to argue that nature (as well as social environment, early educators, etc.) is *aitios* of our dispositions just as ourselves are. Rather, we are co-causes of our dispositions because we are (efficient) causal origins of actions without which a certain good, which is the final cause of our actions and of our dispositions, cannot be achieved. Finally, I will try to show that Aristotle's discussion implies that there is no more to the responsibility for dispositions than there is to the responsibility for actions.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, causes, dispositions, responsibility, virtue

## I Introduction

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5 Aristotle discusses our responsibility for actions done in accordance with our virtuous or vicious dispositions or states (ἔξεισις). He mounts several arguments to show that such actions are voluntary (ἑκούσιοι), that they are up to us (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and that we are their causes (αἴτιοι), i. e. that we are responsible for them.<sup>1</sup> In a nutshell, this is because we are their causal

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<sup>1</sup> There are actually eight arguments to this effect in *EN* 3.5: (1) 1113b3–7; (2) 1113b7–13; (3) 1113b14–21; (4) 1113b21–1114a3; (5) 1114a3–10; (6) 1114a11–21; (7) 1114a21–31; (8) 1114a31–b25. Even though there are differences in senses between, on the one hand, 'responsibility' and 'up-

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origins: “We cannot refer actions to origins other than those in ourselves” (*EN* 3.5.1113b19–20).<sup>2</sup>

If we are responsible for actions that issue from our character dispositions, are we also responsible for these character dispositions themselves? There are at least three groups of reasons why Aristotle thinks that the answer to this question must be affirmative.

First, we seem responsible for our character dispositions simply because we are responsible for their exercises, or corresponding actions: an agent is responsible for her being a generous kind of person simply because she is responsible for her generous actions (cf. 1113b7–21). To understand why this is so, bear in mind that, for Aristotle, the link between a settled – that is, fully developed – character disposition and a corresponding action is very strong, namely the one between potentiality and actuality: an action is corresponding disposition *qua* actualized, while a disposition is corresponding action potentially. This enables Aristotle to write as if a disposition and corresponding action are one and the same thing. For instance, in the opening argument of *EN* 3.5 (1113b3–7) he draws the conclusion that virtue and vice are up to us from premises which seem to entail only that virtuous and vicious *actions* are up to us, i. e. from the premises (1) that *actions* concerned with objects of deliberation and choice are voluntary and (2) that the *exercise* of the virtues is concerned with objects of deliberation and choice.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, at 1113b11–13 he says that being good is doing fine things and not doing shameful things, while being bad is not doing fine things and doing shameful things.

Second, we seem responsible for our character dispositions because they are *produced* by actions for which we are responsible: an agent becomes generous by performing generous actions. For instance, at 1114a9–10 Aristotle says that ‘not to know that it is from the exercise of activities on particular objects that states of character are produced is the mark of a thoroughly insensible person’ (cf. also 1114b3–10).

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to-usness’, and, on the other, ‘voluntariness’, Aristotle in *EN* 3.5 freely substitutes these notions for one another, and I will follow him in this. See on this Echeñique (2012) 19–20. I will use ‘responsibility’ in the sense of causal responsibility: an agent is responsible for her actions or dispositions if she is their efficient cause. As will be shown later (pp. 117–118), to be αἴτιος of one’s actions and dispositions is not tantamount to be responsible for them. Hence, I will argue that Aristotle’s interest in *EN* 3.5 is not just in responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from *EN* are by Ross in Barnes and Kenny (2014), with modifications.

<sup>3</sup> See Pakaluk (2005) 145; Cooper (2013) 307. For difficulties with the argument at 1113b3–7 see also Ackrill (1997); Donini (2010) 141–145; Ott (2000); Sauv  Meyer (2011) 129–132; Bobzien (2014) 97–101.

Third, we seem responsible for our character dispositions because we are praised and blamed for them, and the object of praise and blame can be only that for which we are responsible (cf. 1114a21–31).

Thus, it seems that we are responsible both for our character and for actions that issue from it. However, in a lengthy argument near the end of *EN* 3.5, which has rightly been called ‘one of the most obscure in the *Ethics*’ (Pakaluk 2005, 148 n. 18), Aristotle seems to suggest that our responsibility for our dispositions, as opposed to our responsibility for corresponding actions, is not absolute but must be qualified. He says that we are ‘somehow’ or ‘in a way’ (πως, 1114b2) causes of our dispositions, and even that we are only ‘somehow’ or ‘in a way’ co-causes (συναίτιοί πως, 1114b23). The argument runs as follows (1114a31–b25):

(A) Now someone may say that all men aim at the apparent good but do not control how things appear to them (τῆς δὲ φαντασίας οὐ κύριοι): rather, the goal (τέλος) appears to each man in a form answering to his character.

(B) If each man is somehow the cause (πως αἴτιος) of the disposition (ἕξις) he is in, he will also be himself somehow the cause of how things appear;

(C) but if not, no one is the cause of his own bad actions but everyone acts badly owing to ignorance of the goal, thinking that by these he will get what is best for him, and the aiming at the goal is not self-chosen – rather, one must be born with an eye, as it were, by which to assess things nobly and choose what is truly good, and he is well endowed by nature who is nobly endowed with this. For it is what is greatest and most noble, and what we cannot get or learn from another, but must have just such as it was at birth, and to be well and nobly endowed with this will be complete and true natural endowment. If this is true, then, how will virtue be more voluntary than vice? To both men alike, the good and the bad, the goal appears and is fixed by nature or however it may be, and it is by referring everything else to this that men do whatever they do.

(D) Whether, then, it is not by nature that the goal appears to each man such as it does appear but something also depends on him (τι καὶ παρ’ αὐτόν ἐστιν), or the goal is natural but because the virtuous man does the rest voluntarily virtue is voluntary, vice also will be nonetheless voluntary; for in the case of the bad man there is equally present that which is brought about by himself (τὸ δι’ αὐτόν) – in his actions even if not in his goal.

(E) If, then, as is asserted, the virtues are voluntary (for we are ourselves somehow co-causes (συναίτιοί πως) of our dispositions of character, and it is by being persons of a certain kind that we suppose the goal to be so and so), the vices also will be voluntary; for the same is true of them.

A little later, in a passage which looks like a summary of the discussion in *EN* 3.5,<sup>4</sup> Aristotle seems to qualify not only our responsibility for, but also the voluntariness of, virtues and vices *qua* dispositions:

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<sup>4</sup> It is possible that this passage is misplaced in the manuscripts and that it fits better somewhere between 1114a3 and b25. Donini (2010) 147 and n. 25a, who follows Gauthier and Jolif (1959) *ad loc.*, proposes to put it after 1114a31.

But actions and dispositions are not voluntary in the same way: we control our actions from the beginning to the end if we know the particular facts; but as for dispositions, though we control their origin, the particular way in which they develop is not known (καθ' ἕκαστα δὲ ἢ πρόσθεσις οὐ γνώριμος) (any more than it is in illnesses), and yet because it was in our power to act in this way or not in this way, the dispositions are voluntary. (1114b30–1115a4)

It seems, then, that even though we are fully responsible for virtue and vice *qua* virtuous and vicious actions, we are only partly responsible for them *qua* dispositions from which these actions flow. Moreover, it seems that even though virtue and vice are voluntary, *qua* dispositions they are voluntary to a lesser degree than they are *qua* corresponding actions.

There is nothing implausible in saying that there is a difference between degree of voluntariness of our dispositions, or of our responsibility for them, and of actions that issue from them. Our dispositions and our virtuous and vicious characters are to a certain extent results of factors beyond our control – nature, environment, early educators, etc. – and we are obviously not fully or absolutely responsible for them. However, as has long been stressed by members of the compatibilist camp in the free will discussions, this does not mean that we should deny our absolute or full responsibility for actions done in accordance with our character dispositions. Since Aristotle is, of course, well aware of the fact that our character dispositions are heavily shaped by external factors that causally influence their development, one may be inclined to think that this is the reason why, in the quoted passages, he wants to qualify our responsibility for, and the voluntariness of, our character.

However, things are more complicated. The argument in the first passage quoted is dialectical. Aristotle wants to rebut what is usually called the asymmetry thesis, i. e. the thesis that while virtue is voluntary, vice is not.<sup>5</sup> One reason to argue that vice is involuntary is suggested in part A of the passage: a wicked person is not responsible for her vice because she does not have control over her conception of the good. As a response, Aristotle presents his opponent with the dilemma: either we are somehow responsible for being the kind of persons we are or we are not. If we are responsible (B), then we do have control over our conception of the good, and consequently, vice is not involuntary. If we are not somehow responsible for being the kind of persons we are, then virtue too is involuntary – a conclusion which Aristotle's opponents cannot accept – since, as is shown in C, the same reasons that speak in favor of involuntariness of vice speak in favor of involuntariness of virtue as well.

If we assume that arguing against asymmetry thesis is *all* that Aristotle is interested in in this passage, we can take his qualifications of our responsibility

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<sup>5</sup> See, above all, Sauv  Meyer (2011) 141–145.

for our dispositions just as dialectical maneuvers, which do not have far-reaching implications. On this reading, Aristotle may be taken as saying that if you are in any way, which need not be specified here, responsible for the kind of person you are, then you are in some way responsible for your conception of the goal, which is sufficient to refute the idea that vice is involuntary.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, to refute the asymmetry thesis, it suffices to admit that we are *at least* co-responsible for the kind of persons we are, and the proponents of the asymmetry thesis cannot deny this. Hence, if we follow strictly dialectical approach, we can conclude that Aristotle is not concerned to specify the way in which our responsibility is mitigated simply because this is not the view that he endorses. To demonstrate that the asymmetry thesis is untenable, all he needs to do is to stress the evident fact that we are at least co-responsible for our character.

It is possible, however, to acknowledge that Aristotle's primary concern in the passage is to reject the asymmetry thesis and still insist that he also wants to stress his own views on responsibility for character.<sup>7</sup> How we will understand his views depends mainly on how we will interpret part C and its relation to part D. These parts of the text have received opposing interpretations. On the one hand, it can be argued that Aristotle first shows, in C, that nature is not the only cause of our character, and then, in D, elaborates on this by saying that both nature and us are causes. Hence his conclusion in E, that we are co-causes, the other partner in causing our character being nature.<sup>8</sup> On this reading, then, Aristotle's qualification of responsibility reveals his compatibilist inclinations. On the other hand, some have argued that Aristotle wants to maintain that nature has no influence in forming our character, but only the appropriate actions, which have their origin in agent.<sup>9</sup> Thus, on this reading, the passage reveals his incompatibilist inclinations.<sup>10</sup>

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6 That is to say, on this reading, the word *πως* (in *πως αἴτιος*, 1114b2) should not be taken in its technical sense – as opposed to *ἀπλῶς* ('unqualifiedly') – but simply in the sense of 'in any way', 'at all'.

7 This, in effect, is the position adopted by Sauvé Meyer (2011) 141–145, who argues that asymmetry thesis is Aristotle's main target throughout *EN* 3.5.

8 See, for instance, Hardie (1980) 179; Broadie (1991) 177 n. 43; Donini (2010) 114. Irwin (1980) 321 says that other partners are "nature and upbringing"; see also Destrée (2011) 301, who says that "the other cause is nature, and also early education (as our 'second nature')."

9 See, for instance, Furley (1967) 194: "However, although it is true that Aristotle is largely content to reply *ad hominem*, we can find in the text the outline of a more general reply. It lies of course in his insistence that a man's dispositions are established by nothing but his own actions, the source of which is certainly 'in himself' and cannot be tracked back any further."

10 For a different incompatibilist reading, see Destrée (2011).

Hence, it is not clear in what sense exactly Aristotle in 1114a31–b25 wants to qualify our responsibility for our character, not even whether he wants to advance any positive view on his own. As for the second passage quoted (1114b30–1115a4), he certainly does not want to say that our dispositions are voluntary to a lesser degree than our actions because the former are initially shaped by external circumstances like nature or social environment. For, he says that we are in control of the *beginning* of our dispositions (1114b32–1115a1), which he would not have said if he wanted to stress the obvious fact that our dispositions are not absolutely voluntary because they are at least in part the results of external circumstances. His reasons for restricting their voluntariness must lay elsewhere.

My aim in this paper is threefold. First, I will offer a close reading of Aristotle's argument at 1114a31–b25 and try to show that despite considerable interpretive difficulties, some clear structure can still be discerned. While Aristotle's main concern in this passage is to show the falsity of the asymmetry thesis, there is much more in it than just a dialectical encounter. Aristotle wants to respond to a more general objection, which has as its target the voluntariness of both virtue and vice, and which is provoked by some of his ideas in *EN* 3.4 and 3.5. Second, I will try to show why Aristotle thinks that we are only co-causes of our dispositions. In my opinion, his reasons have nothing to do with compatibilist or incompatibilist considerations as they are commonly understood in modern philosophy. In particular, he does not want to argue that nature (as well as social environment, early educators, etc.) is *αἴτιος* of our dispositions just as ourselves are. Rather, we are co-causes of our dispositions because we are (efficient) causal origins of actions without which a certain good, which is the final cause of our actions and of our dispositions, cannot be achieved. Finally, I will try to show that Aristotle's discussion implies that there is no more to the responsibility for dispositions than there is to the responsibility for actions. In other words, in our passages at least, Aristotle does not think that responsibility for action requires or presupposes responsibility for disposition.

## II The Structure of Aristotle's Argument

Let me first take a look at the structure of Aristotle's argument at 1114a31–b25. In part A he puts forward three propositions:

- A1 Everyone aims at the apparent good.
- A2 We are not in control of the appearance, but rather
- A3 The goal appears to each person corresponding to the sort of person he is.

Apparently, these three propositions are meant to constitute an objection. It is not immediately clear, however, what exactly the objection is, and how Aristotle proceeds in answering it.<sup>11</sup> His opponent may be taken to argue for the following conclusion:

A4 We are not in control of our conception of the goal.

If we do not have control over our conception of the goal, then we do not have control over our virtuous or vicious dispositions either. Hence, Aristotle's opponent can argue for a stronger conclusion, namely, either that

A5 Vice is not voluntary

or that

A6 Virtue and vice are not voluntary.

If Aristotle's sole concern in the passage is to refute the asymmetry thesis, then his target is A5. There are some reasons to think, however, that he wants to respond to some further worries that may be raised against his position, and that his real target is therefore A6.

As I said, Aristotle in *EN* 3.5 argues that virtue and vice are voluntary because their exercises are voluntary, because they are produced by actions which are voluntary, and because they are objects of praise and blame. It may be argued, however, that this is not sufficient to establish the voluntariness of virtue and vice. Exercises of virtue are, as Aristotle says, that which contributes to the goal (1113b4): a virtuous person acts by having a certain conception of the goal; indeed, she acts "by referring everything else to the goal" (1114b15–16). Hence, the fact that the agent is the causal origin of her actions according to virtue does not guarantee that the action itself is voluntary if she does not have control over the conception of the goal for the sake of which the action is done. The action in accordance with virtue is the outcome of the process of deliberation which is governed by the goal which is to be achieved, and if an agent has no control over the goal, she does not have control over her virtue either.

Aristotle's discussion in *EN* 3.5 thus far does not provide a clear answer to this problem. Take, for instance, his argument in 1114a3–10. If someone commits a crime out of carelessness, her action is (indirectly) voluntary because her being careless is (directly) voluntary.<sup>12</sup> But what if she is the kind of person not to take

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**11** In the *Timaeus* (70e–71a) Plato says that the appearance of the good depends on our natural constitution, and that this is the reason why *akrasia* is involuntary (see also Destrée 2011, 308–309). This does not mean, however, that Aristotle has in mind any specific objector, including Plato. As will be shown below, he restates the objection to raise a challenge to his own position in *EN*.

**12** In this I follow Bobzien (2014) 105: an action done out of carelessness is indirectly voluntary because the agent, being e. g. drunk, lacks relevant circumstantial information; but her decision to drink is directly voluntary.

care? What if a drunkard, whom we deem responsible for his actions done when he is drunk, is such a kind of person that he cannot help drinking? The origin of his actions is still within him, but how can his action be called voluntary if his disposition – his being a kind of person who is prone to drink – is not? Aristotle's answer is straightforward: a careless person became such because she acted carelessly, and a drunkard became such because he “spend his time in drinking bouts and the like” (1114a6). One might object, however, that such a response is not fully satisfactory. It is true that a careless person is responsible insofar as she brought herself into that disposition, by performing careless actions. In general, it is true that a person is responsible for her being *F*-qualified because she has become *F*-qualified by performing *F*-qualified actions. But she was performing *F*-qualified actions because she had a certain goal, and it is precisely because her goal was *F* that her actions can be described as *F*-qualified. She has become careless because she acted carelessly, and her actions can be described as careless because she wanted to promote a certain goal, a sort of careless life. Provided that she knowingly acted in such a way, it is absurd to suppose that she did not want to become such a person (1114a11–12). Yet if she has no control over the goal she wanted to achieve, then it makes no sense to say that she is voluntarily careless *just because* she performed such actions. To give an appropriate answer to the question ‘What if she is the kind of person not to take care?’ it is not sufficient to say ‘Well, she made herself careless because she acted carelessly, and therefore, she is herself responsible for being the kind of person not to take care.’ For, then a further question can be posed, namely, how she can be held responsible for acting carelessly in the first place, that is, does she have control over her considering a careless life a worthwhile goal. Hence, Aristotle cannot conclude his discussion of the voluntariness of character dispositions without taking into consideration the teleological structure of our actions. He has to defend our responsibility for our character dispositions, and their voluntariness, not only in causal terms, by showing that we are efficient causes of their actualizations in actions, but in teleological terms as well, by showing that we have control over the goal which governs our performing corresponding actions.

A further reason to think that Aristotle's concern in our passage is more general than is suggested by a strictly dialectical reading is the fact that he actually endorses A1 and A3. He holds that the object of wish is the good or what appears good.<sup>13</sup> In *EN* 3.4 he presents this as a sort of a puzzle. On the one hand, the view that the object of wish is the good entails an absurd consequence that what is wished for by the person who chooses incorrectly

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<sup>13</sup> See also *EE* 7.2.1235b25–27; *DA* 3.10.433a27–29; *MA* 6.700b23–29.



is not an object of wish. For, if it were an object of wish, it would also be good. On the other hand, the view that the object of wish is what appears good entails relativism about the good. Aristotle's solution is that the good person is as it were the standard and measure (ὡςπερ κανὼν καὶ μέτρον, 1113a33), and that in each case "what is true is apparent to him" (τᾶληθές αὐτῷ φαίνεται, 1113a30). For, to say of something that it appears good can mean both that it *only* appears good but really is not and that it appears good and really is good. Thus, the good person aims at what appears to him good and what really is good, while the bad person aims at what appears to him good, whatever it happens to be (τὸ τυχόν, 1113a26). Likewise, there are various things that people call healthful, but really healthful are only those that appear so to people in good bodily condition, while diseased people call healthful things those that appear so depending on their specific condition. Thus, it can be said that from Aristotle's discussion in *EN* 3.4 it follows both that every one of us aims at what appears good to him (A1), and that a person's disposition determines how something appears to him (A3). Hence, in a sense, Aristotle's opponent can be taken to suggest that from what Aristotle himself says about the way in which the good is the object of appearance it follows that we do not have any control over appearances and that we are therefore not responsible for virtue and vice. Hence, Aristotle's concern in our passage extends beyond the refutation of the asymmetry thesis, and his main target is A6, the thesis that virtue and vice are not voluntary.

If so, Aristotle's opponent in A1–A3 may be taken to argue that, since both the virtuous and the vicious person's actions are goal-directed (A1) and since they do not have control over their goals (A2 & A3), virtue and vice are not voluntary.<sup>14</sup> However, this conclusion follows only if we assume that we are not responsible for the sort of persons we are, or for our dispositions. For, if we are responsible for the sort of persons we are, then, given A3, we are responsible for our goals, as is stated in part B (with the qualification 'somehow', which needs an explanation). Hence, Aristotle's opponent needs an auxiliary premise, and the first auxiliary premise may be

A3(a) We are not the cause of our dispositions.

For, if the goal appears to each person according to the sort of person he is (A3), and if we are not the cause of our dispositions [A3(a)], it follows immediately that we do not have control over our conception of the goal (A4). This auxiliary

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<sup>14</sup> To say that we are κύριοι of something is, as far as *EN* 3.5 is concerned, basically the same as to say that it is ἐφ' ἡμῖν: if we have control over something, then it is up to us whether it will occur or not, or whether it is such and such or not. See 1113b32–33 (κύριος γὰρ τοῦ μὴ μεθυσθῆναι); 1114a3 (τοῦ γὰρ ἐπιμελεσθῆναι κύριοι).

premise A3(a) is discussed in part C. As I will try to show, Aristotle's idea is that A3 and A3(a) cannot be held together, that is, that the only way in which one can hold A3 is to deny A3(a) and assume instead that we are somehow the cause of our dispositions; and to suppose that we are somehow the cause of our dispositions is to deny both A2, that we are not in control of appearances, and A4, that we are not in control of our conception of the goal.

A3(a) is not the only auxiliary premise available to Aristotle's opponent. He may argue that regardless of the way in which an agent became such and such a kind of person – that is, regardless of whether she is the cause of her disposition or not – she is not able to change the fact that she is such a kind of person, since her conception of the good is fixed and stable. Hence, Aristotle's opponent can also use another auxiliary premise,

A3(b) Whether or not we are the cause of our dispositions, once our dispositions have become fixed, we are no longer in a position to change our conception of the goal.

In my opinion, in part D, which is particularly obscure chunk of the argument, Aristotle discusses this auxiliary premise, and shows that even if A3(b) were true, this would not mean that we can conclude A6.

Hence, Aristotle's strategy is as follows. First, in parts B and C he considers two options concerning our dispositions or the sort of persons we are: we are either the cause of our dispositions or we are not. This discussion is meant to reject the conclusion that we do not have control over our conception of the goal based on the first auxiliary premise, that we are not the cause of our dispositions [A3(a)]. Aristotle shows that if we accept this premise, then it follows that virtue and vice are both involuntary, which is unacceptable for his opponent. His main move in part C is to argue that if we are not the cause of our dispositions, then it does not depend on us how the goal appears to us. Then, in part D, he considers two options concerning how our goals appear to us when we have fixed and stable character, regardless of the manner in which it has come about: either they appear by nature or they depend on us in some respect. This discussion is meant to reject the conclusion that we do not have control over our conception of the goal based on the second auxiliary premise, namely that, for the fixed and stable disposition, the conception of the goal is fixed and unchangeable, or natural [A3(b)]. Aristotle maintains that even if we accept this auxiliary premise, it follows that virtue and vice are both voluntary, which is also unacceptable for his opponent. Finally, in E, Aristotle briefly restates his main point, which I believe is this: since A3(a) and A3 cannot be held together, the opponent's argument fail. We must deny A3(a) and assume instead that we are co-causes of our dispositions.

### III Dispositions and Their Causes

So much about what I believe is the structure of Aristotle's argument. Let me now turn to its details. Aristotle says in B that if we are somehow the cause of our dispositions, then we are somehow the cause of our conception of the goal as well. We have to consider, first, in what sense exactly we are somehow the cause of our dispositions, and, second, how this entails that we are also the cause of our conception of the goal.

Disposition or state (ἕξις) is one kind of quality, i. e. that on the basis of which a person is said to be such and such (*Cat.* 8.8b25–27), or, alternatively, it is a διάθεσις according to which that which is disposed is either well or ill disposed (*Metaph.* Δ 20.1022b10–12) – both definitions apply equally well to our passage. ἕξεις include virtues, both character and intellectual ones, but also the less stable dispositions like health and disease. Now, on the one hand, there is a sense in which a healthy person can be held responsible for her disposition, or its cause. She is responsible insofar as she is the causal origin of actions through which her healthy disposition is acquired and maintained, like proper diet, regular exercise and medical checkups, etc. On the other hand, she is not fully responsible for her disposition, since her being healthy depends to a large extent on circumstances beyond her control, like nature, or any other external circumstance which is a matter of good or bad luck but which is not reducible to the operations of nature. In the same manner, a generous person is responsible for her being generous insofar as she has acquired the virtue of generosity by acting generously and insofar as she maintains her virtue by acting in accordance with it. Yet she is not fully responsible for her being generous, since her being in this disposition depends on circumstances beyond her control, like being raised in affluent family. These considerations can lead us to think that Aristotle wants to offer as it were a dual model of responsibility, according to which the two partners – ourselves and external circumstances – jointly causes our character. As I have suggested, I do not believe that this is the right way to understand Aristotle's position. Let me elaborate.

Strictly speaking, Aristotle does not have a term for responsibility. What we understand as responsibility in his texts is covered by the term αἴτιος, commonly translated as 'cause' or 'explanation'. Now, αἴτιος τοῦ x' can certainly mean 'responsible for x', and it makes sense to ask what kind of responsibility among those discussed in later philosophy – causal or moral – can be found in

Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> Yet the meaning of ‘αἴτιος τοῦ x’ extends beyond what is covered by the notion of responsibility for x. To ask what is αἴτιος of someone’s being the kind of person she is, or of her being in a certain disposition, is to ask, simply, ‘Why is she such and such a kind of person?’ and an intelligible answer to this question can be, ‘Because she herself, by acting in such and such a way, made herself such and such,’ or ‘Because she acts in such a way that she maintains her acquired disposition.’ These answers refer to the agent, or to something within her, as to the αἴτιος of her disposition, in the sense of efficient cause.

The reason why Aristotle may think that it is necessary to qualify the sense in which the agent is αἴτιος is the fact that the above answers do not provide the ultimate explanation, as there are further ‘Why?’-questions that may be asked, namely, ‘Why she acted in such and such a way, which results in her being such and such a kind of person?’ or ‘Why she acts in such and such a way that she maintains her acquired disposition?’ It seems that the answers to these further ‘Why?’-questions must introduce a different type of αἴτιος, i. e. a final cause. A healthy person is, in a sense, αἴτιος of her state – the efficient cause – because she performs actions which produce and maintain her health. But she performs these actions for the sake of a good, health, which explains both why her actions are characterized as healthful and not in some other way, and why she is in this particular disposition. That is to say, if an agent is *F*-qualified, then there is a goal, *F*-ness, because of which both her actions and herself can be characterized as being *F*.

Hence, on this understanding, there are two different explanatory factors that account for our dispositions, or for the sort of persons we are: beside ourselves as efficient causes, there are goals for the sake of which our actions are done and towards which our dispositions are oriented and thus defined. It is in this sense, then, that we are ‘somehow’ or ‘in a way’ causes of our dispositions. Consequently, it is somewhat misleading to describe Aristotle’s position in terms of responsibility, let alone in terms of co-responsibility, for our dispositions. Aristotle does not want to say that our responsibility for our dispositions is only partial because there are some other partners in responsibility that act as efficient causes, like nature or other people. His point is rather that there are different types of explanatory factors at work that provide the complete answer to the question ‘Why are we the sort of persons we are?’ To be sure, we are (causally) responsible for our dispositions insofar as we are causal origins of our actions that produce and maintain them. However, it is not responsibility that

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<sup>15</sup> For a defense of the idea that Aristotle offers an account of moral responsibility, see Irwin (1980); Sauvé Meyer (2011) esp. 1–5; Echeñique (2012) esp. Part 1. For an opposing view, see Cooper (2013).

which is qualified by *πως*, but the manner in which we are causes or explanatory factors.

One way to put this is to say that we are only *συναίτιοι*, co-causes, of our dispositions, and there is a passage in Aristotle which can be taken to support this. *συναίτιον* is one of the senses of 'necessary' listed in *Metaphysics* Δ 5, namely, necessary condition (τὸ οὐ ἄνευ οὐκ). Something can be *συναίτιον* or necessary condition in two ways. First, there are *συναίτιοι* of life: for instance, food is necessary for an animal as *συναίτιον* of its life, and fire is *συναίτιον πως* of its growth (*DA* 2.4.416a4), the *αἴτιον ἀπλῶς* being, of course, the soul. Second, something is called *συναίτιον* if without it 'it is not possible for good to exist or come to be, or for bad to be discarded or got rid of, as for instance drinking medicine is necessary so as not to be ill, and sailing to Aegina so as to get money' (1015a22–26, transl. Kirwan 1993). Thus, *συναίτιοι* of the good are actions that are necessary in order to achieve or preserve the good (cf. also 1015b3–6). In the same manner, we are *συναίτιοι* of our dispositions because we, or our actions, are necessary conditions of the good towards which our dispositions are oriented and hence defined.

This is, I believe, the sense in which we are only co-causes of our dispositions. A healthy person is the cause of her healthy disposition because an intelligible answer to the question 'Why is she healthy?' is 'Because she performs certain actions which produce and maintain health.' Yet she is only the co-cause, because the full answer to that question must include the good or the goal, health, on account of which she can be characterized as healthy and for the sake of which her actions are done. Moreover, now it is clear why Aristotle says, in B, that if we are somehow the cause of our dispositions, then we are somehow the cause of our conception of the goal as well. For, as I have already stressed, he endorses A3: our conception of the goal depends on our disposition. We are the cause of our dispositions insofar as we perform actions which produce and maintain our dispositions, and since our actions are goal-oriented, by performing them we also produce and maintain our conception of the goal. Now it should also be clear why Aristotle cannot accept A2, or, more precisely, why he must reject the idea that we are not in control of our conception of the good. We are in control of our conception of the good by the very fact that it is up to us whether we will perform the actions oriented to that goal or not.<sup>16</sup>

One might object to such an account of Aristotle's position in *EN* 3.5 by saying that there is more to our dispositions than corresponding actions and the goals for the sake of which they are done, and that it is these further ingredients

<sup>16</sup> See above, n. 14.

of dispositions which are among the co-causes.<sup>17</sup> This, of course, is true, but we must keep in mind Aristotle's specific interest in *EN* 3.5. His main concern in this chapter is not in dispositions and actions as such, but in dispositions and actions insofar as they are, or can be, the objects of praise and blame. Thus, while being healthy certainly includes much more than performing certain actions for the sake of producing or maintaining health, actions and their goals are all that is relevant when we consider someone's health or illness as the ground of praise and blame, for instance when someone voluntarily becomes ill (cf. 1114a15–16).

When Aristotle says (1114a9–10) that “not to know that it is from the exercise of activities on particular objects that states of character are produced is the mark of a thoroughly insensible person,” his point is not simply that our dispositions develop from practice. For, then he would be vulnerable to the familiar objection that actions from which our dispositions develop must themselves have issued from some earlier dispositions, which in turn must have developed from still earlier actions, etc.<sup>18</sup> His point is rather that *blameworthy and praiseworthy* dispositions develop from actions which are characterized in the same way in which dispositions are characterized (cf. 2.1.1103b21–23), just as praiseworthy and blameworthy dispositions bring about equally characterized praiseworthy or blameworthy actions (3.5.1114b27–28). Hence, even though there are perhaps many factors that contribute to someone's becoming careless, the only factor that is relevant as far as carelessness *as a blameworthy disposition* is concerned is her careless actions. For, it is precisely these actions that are the ground of considering her blameworthy.

The same holds for Aristotle's insistence that we are the ultimate origins of our actions: “We cannot refer actions to origins other than those in ourselves” (1113b19–20). This statement may suggest that Aristotle endorses a position similar to what is today called agent-causal libertarianism and conceives of an agent as an uncaused cause who can act independently of the causal structure

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<sup>17</sup> Destrée (2011) 310 says, referring to the same passages from *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, that “a ‘co-cause’ is one of two co-causes, where one may be primary and the other secondary” and that “[h]ere it seems beyond reasonable doubt that the other cause is nature, as also early education.” But, first, the two causes may be just different *types* of causes, and, second, the *Metaphysics* passage, which is more relevant here because it speaks of *συνάιτιοι* of the good, does not imply that nature may be among the causes of the good.

<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, he would be vulnerable to the famous Basic Argument by Galen Strawson, according to which we cannot be truly responsible for our actions regardless of the truth of determinism. See Strawson (1994).

of the environment and the rest of the universe.<sup>19</sup> While it may be an open question whether any such idea can be found in Aristotle, it certainly cannot be at stake here in *EN* 3.5, where his concern is in praiseworthy and blameworthy actions. Aristotle's point is not that just any action, or action as such, is ultimately traceable to the agent, and agent alone. All that he is entitled to say in the context of ethical discussion is that the agent is the ultimate origin of actions characterized in such a way that they can be the ground for praise or blame. If we want to explain why an action is shameful and hence blameworthy, then we cannot and need not trace it back to any other origins than those in us. There may be some origins beyond us that explain some other features of the action, but they cannot contribute to the explanation of why the action is shameful and not characterized in some other way. This is not to say that Aristotle is not interested in these other explanations, only that they are not under discussion in *EN* 3.5. The only explanation that is relevant here is the fact that the agent is such and such – shameful – sort of person, and that her actions are done with a view to a certain shameful goal. Hence, there is no more to the responsibility for dispositions than there is to the responsibility for actions: insofar as they are praiseworthy or blameworthy, dispositions are defined by the corresponding actions and by the goals for the sake of which they are done.

On this basis we can also understand Aristotle's claim in the second passage quoted at the beginning (1114b30–1115a4), that dispositions are not voluntary in the same sense as actions, since we only control the beginning of our dispositions. Now, it is certainly not true that we are responsible for the beginning of every kind of disease – its occurrence may be due to many circumstances which are beyond our control. Yet it makes sense to say that we are in control of the beginning of a disease insofar as it is a blameworthy disposition. The development of liver disease caused by excessive drinking is due, among other things, to physiological factors over which a patient has no control. Yet the drunkard is responsible for the blameworthiness of this disposition, since he could have refrained from starting to drink. He is the only factor responsible for the evaluative aspect of his disposition.

## IV The Role of Nature

Let us now turn to what follows if we do not assume that we are the causes of our dispositions. The proponent of the asymmetry thesis thinks that a bad

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Furley (1967) 194 and (1980) 65. For a compatibilist reading of this statement, see Everson (1990) 96; Sorabji (1980) 233.

person is not the cause of his actions because he does not have control over his conception of the good, but rather acts from ignorance of the goal and falsely believes that his actions will achieve the good. Aristotle's response, developed in C, is based on the idea that what applies to vice applies to virtue as well, to the effect that, if a bad person is not the cause of his actions, neither is the good person. As before, however, his argument does not amount to such a simple dialectical maneuver, and he does not argue by simply putting symmetry in place of asymmetry. Rather, his strategy consists in showing that his opponent cannot endorse both A3, that the goal appears to each person corresponding to the sort of person he is, and A3(a), that we are not the cause of our dispositions.

Aristotle's opponent thinks that A1 and A3 – which, as we have seen, can be ascribed to Aristotle as well – entail, via A3(a), that a bad person does not have control over his conception of the good and, consequently, over his bad actions.<sup>20</sup> Now, while Aristotle would agree that a careless person has goals corresponding to her careless character (A3), he would insist that she can be characterized as careless in the first place precisely because she knowingly performs actions for the sake of a certain goal, i. e., promoting a careless way of life. As we have also seen, by virtue of performing such actions for the sake of such a goal an agent is the co-cause of the sort of person she is. That is to say, by characterizing an agent as such and such – or, more precisely, by characterizing her as a possible subject of praise and blame – we are taking her as the cause of her character. Hence, the only way to make sense of A3 is to assume that we are somehow the causes, or co-causes, of our dispositions: to a careless person a goal appears such and such because she has voluntarily made herself careless and voluntarily maintains her disposition. Consequently, we should deny A4, that we are not in control of our conception of goals, and, with it, A5 and A6. The only way to affirm A4 is to deny A3 and assume that the goal does not appear to each person corresponding to the sort of person he is, but corresponding to something else, e. g. nature. In that case, however, Aristotle's opponent must concede that virtue turns out involuntary just as vice.

For, if a bad person is not somehow the cause of his disposition, then his actions are ultimately the result of his natural deficiency, that is, of the fact that he is not naturally endowed with cognitive capacities necessary for the recognition of goals. This is why he acts through ignorance of the goal. A good person,

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<sup>20</sup> Some manuscripts offer an alternative reading in 1114b3: instead of *εἰ δὲ μή, οὐθεις* (which is found in Bywater and which Ross translates), they have *εἰ δὲ μηδεὶς*, “if no one is the cause of his own bad actions ...” This reading is adopted by Sauvé Meyer (2011) 147–148, who argues that Aristotle does not endorse the principle that responsibility for action requires responsibility for character. In my opinion, the dialectic of the passage requires that we leave Bywater's text as it is.



on the other hand, on this assumption, does possess the relevant knowledge or, as we might say, hits the target and acts according to virtue.<sup>21</sup> But his hitting the target has nothing to do with *him*, or with his capacities developed in the process of education, but is just a fact about his *natural* capacities. Thus, his knowledge of the goal is the result of something outside of his control, of something with which he is naturally endowed, like sight. He is born with the capacity to recognize his goals, and any other factor besides nature is irrelevant. Hence, if we assume that we are not the cause of our dispositions, we must admit that possessing virtue is a matter of sheer luck.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to bear in mind what exactly Aristotle wants to say about the role of nature in C. He does not want to argue that if we are not somehow the cause of our disposition, then it is nature which is the cause, either because the goals we aim to achieve are given by nature or because we are born as certain kind of persons. His point is rather that if we are not somehow the cause of our dispositions, then our *conception* of the goal is not acquired by education, neither we have played any part in its development, but we are or are not born with the capacity to recognize our goals, regardless of their origin. That is to say, while Aristotle in C does posit a contrast 'us or nature', this contrast is not metaphysical – it does not concern the origin of goals – but epistemological – it concerns the manner of their recognition.

At first glance, things get more complicated in D. Here we find a disjunction: either the goal does not appear to agent by nature, but something also depends on him, or the goal does appear by nature, but virtue is nevertheless voluntary, since 'the virtuous man does the rest voluntarily,' and the same holds for vice. It is not immediately clear what exactly is Aristotle's point here. It might seem that he is restating, or elaborating, some ideas found in B and C. Thus, it has been argued that in the first disjunct, Aristotle just repeats what he has said in B, that we are in a way the cause of our dispositions. On this reading, in the second disjunct he stresses that even if we accept the hypothesis from C, that our dispositions are naturally fixed, virtue and vice are nevertheless voluntary, since virtuous and vicious actions are voluntary. (Thus Irwin 1990, 320.)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *EN* 2.6.1106b32–33; 6.1.1138b21–25; 6.12.1144a24–26.

<sup>22</sup> With Aristotle's reasoning in C compare *Eudemian Ethics* 8.2.1247b21–28: "If, then, some have a natural endowment (like singers who have not learned how to sing), and if they do well by nature and move without the aid of reason in the direction given them by nature, and crave for what they ought and when they ought and how they ought – such men will be successful, even if they are foolish and irrational, just as the others will sing well though not able to teach singing. And those men are fortunate who for the most part succeed without the aid of reason. Men, then, who are fortunate will be so by nature." (Transl. Solomon in Barnes and Kenny 2014.)

Alternatively, it has been proposed that the two disjuncts are just two possible modifications of the hypothesis from C. According to the first disjunct, even though our dispositions are naturally fixed, we are still able to make some contribution to how the good appears to us. Thus, the words ‘but something also depends on him’ do not refer to the fact that the agent is the co-cause of his disposition, but to his ability to modify his conception of the good. According to the second disjunct, even though our dispositions are naturally fixed, our actions are not. (Thus Taylor 2006, 171.)

The main problem with these readings is that both imply that Aristotle may accept the idea that if the agent is by nature (or by luck, or due to divine providence) provided with the capacity to recognize e. g. justice as good, and if he acts for the sake of it, we can still say that he is voluntarily just *just because* his actions are voluntary. However, as we have seen in part C, he rejects such an idea: if the goal does not appear according to the sort of person *you* are, but according to something else, then, given that you act by ‘referring everything else to the goal,’ both virtue and vice are involuntary. Hence, to make sense of what Aristotle says in D, we should assume that he envisages a situation in which, even though a disposition is voluntarily acquired, there are some reasons to think that it is not voluntary. Suppose, then, that an agent is responsible for his disposition, but, due to the fact that the disposition in question is something stable and inflexible, things always appear to him one way rather than another, to the effect that he is no longer in a position to change their appearance. In other words, we may agree with Aristotle that an unjust person made himself unjust voluntarily, but that it may become impossible for him to change his character because it has become as it were natural for him to see things in a certain way, so that there is no longer anything that depends on him as far as his conception of his goal is concerned. This, in fact, is what I have labeled auxiliary premise A3(b), according to which once our dispositions have become fixed, we are no longer in a position to change our conception of goals even if we are responsible for our dispositions. Consequently, an unjust person’s character, being unchangeable, is, or has become, involuntary, even though it was acquired voluntarily. This is, I believe, the problem Aristotle has in mind in part D.

Aristotle has already in *EN* 3.5 (see 1114a16–21) briefly discussed the question whether character dispositions can change, with the conclusion that “to the unjust and to the self-indulgent man it was open at the beginning not to become men of this kind (that is why they are such voluntarily); but now that they have become so it is not possible for them not to be so” (1114a19–21). While his position on the changeability of our character is not very clear, I think that the alternatives exposed in D can best be seen as providing a further insight into this

problem.<sup>23</sup> In the first disjunct, he challenges the idea that to a fixed and stable character, the goal appears as its, as it were, second nature, and insists that there still is a room for change: 'something also depends on him,' that is, it is still within an agent's power to change his conception of the goal. The second disjunct says that a fixed and stable character, which is defined by a fixed and stable conception of the goal and which hence seems to have become involuntary (because it seems unchangeable), is nevertheless voluntary simply because the actions that issue from it are voluntary. Aristotle could not claim this if the character in question had not been voluntarily acquired. Hence, the auxiliary premise A3(b) does not threaten the voluntariness of virtue and vice. Still, nothing that Aristotle says in D helps to clarify his position on the changeability of character.

While the preceding considerations may have not solved all the puzzles concerning Aristotle's argument, I hope that they have shed some light on some of his central ideas on responsibility and voluntariness. Among other things, I hope to have pointed to the way in which his specific views on the teleological structure of human agency raise both difficulties and opportunities unfamiliar in modern philosophy. In particular, the ideas developed in *EN* 3.5 will remain incomprehensible if we approach this text from the vantage point of our recent philosophical interests and try to discern in it Aristotle's compatibilist or incompatibilist tendencies as they are understood in recent discussions.

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed account, see Di Muzio (2000), who argues that according to Aristotle, character change is possible, but difficult.

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