**Intersectional Implications of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics**

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In this essay, I provide a feminist interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book III*,* wherein I argue Aristotle’s framework may be valuable to modern intersectional debates. I begin by introducing the various kinds of actions Aristotle believes we make, as well as his different conceptions of ignorance. I then explain the implications of these concepts in a modern setting, beginning with how Aristotle’s concepts can make intersectionality more accessible to those who are attempting to unlearn their prejudices. Next, I apply Aristotle’s definitions to a recent social issue, which will articulate the harm of willful ignorance and the importance of evaluating the beliefs we endorse to ensure they are productive to our character. I argue Aristotle’s ethics equip intersectional feminists with a clear framework to address concerns of socio-political ignorance and discrimination.

I will begin with an exploration of select topics in Book III, starting with Aristotle’s account of involuntary and voluntary actions. For Aristotle, an action is performed involuntarily when it comes about either through external force or through ignorance (*NE* 1110b1-30). To illustrate this distinction, consider an example where Adam grabs Ben’s hand and physically forces him to push a button. Contrast this with a scenario where Ben pushes the button on his own accord, but is ignorant to the fact that doing so will cause Adam to suffer an electric shock. The former pertains to situations where the actor contributes nothing to the outcome and is forced, and the latter pertains to instances where the actor lacks a necessary piece of information and is unable to make an informed choice. It follows that voluntary actions are internal to the agent, and the actor performs the action on their own accord with all the relevant information they need (*NE* 1110a14-18).

However, Aristotle acknowledges that not every action falls under one of these distinct categories, and there are actions which appear to have both voluntary and involuntary elements. Aristotle categorizes these actions as either mixed, or nonvoluntary. Mixed actions are those which would not typically be chosen, but under dire circumstances, are worthy of choice. Aristotle illustrates this by stating that no rational person would throw cargo off a ship without reason, but when on a sinking ship, it is the sensible choice to make (*NE* 1110a4-13). Aristotle believes these actions are more voluntary than involuntary, as an active choice has been made and the outcome of the situation was the result of said choice. But, due to the circumstances under which the choice was made, the actor should not be blamed for their action. Nonvoluntary differs from involuntary in an important way, as an action being classified nonvoluntary rather than involuntary depends on the actor's reaction to what they have done in their ignorance (*NE* 1110b20-25) Consider an example where Kate attempts to pass a glass of water to her bully Nick, and mistakenly believes he has a firm grasp on the cup. When Kate lets go, she realizes Nick had not yet properly gripped the glass. The water spills all over him, and Kate laughs in satisfaction. Because Kate does not exhibit pain or regret, her action is nonvoluntary rather than involuntary.

This leads to the topic of ignorance, where Aristotle discusses what ignorance is excusable, and what ignorance is worthy of blame. Actions performed on account of ignorance are excusable, as this classification refers to ignorance of particular details relevant to a situation, while actions performed in ignorance are blameworthy, as these actions are done in accordance with one’s ignorant universal beliefs (*NE* 1110b25-1111a3). The person who acts in ignorance does not know what is good for themself or others, and their clouded outlook degrades and corrupts their character. Aristotle states that this corruption is voluntary, blameworthy, and inexcusable, as the features of our character are a reflection of the activities and behaviours we engage in (*NE* 1114a5-15). Importantly for the purposes of this essay, Aristotle asserts that ignorance itself is not a reason to exonerate blame, especially in cases where the ignorance was a result of the actor's carelessness or insensibility; the careless person who feels no need to ensure they are not ignorant about important matters is insensible and becomes unjust, as continuously failing to evaluate one's own beliefs results in a voluntary degradation of character (NE 1114a1-15).

I will now discuss how the framework Aristotle lays and the definitions he provides could be useful in intersectional debates and education. Covert sexism, racism, and Queerphobia may seem clear to those educated on intersectional feminism, but for others, the intricacies of these social issues can be intimidating and difficult to understand. This ambiguity often leads to feminists being characterized as overreactive for expressing their concerns over discrimination others might not notice. Simultaneously, those who fail to grasp the nuances of these situations may feel alienated and villainized when called out for comments or jokes that would have been acceptable in the past, but are now recognized as microaggressive and outdated. This fosters a further divide, as each side becomes more defensive of their perspective and more resentful of their opposers. I believe Aristotle's concepts could be used to explain the harm of certain actions to those who aren't educated in feminist terminology, but are open to learning and strive to be better. This group might consist of people who grew up in a conservative household or religion, but have since begun to question the harmful narratives about women, people of colour, and the Queer community that were pushed on them as young children. Aristotle’s framework can be used to support growth with constructive criticism for those unlearning prejudices, who may have slip-ups such as making a microaggressive comment or joke without realizing its harm. Instead of attacking those who are genuinely trying to change their perspective, we can first see if their action was voluntary, involuntary, or nonvoluntary. If they are regretful when educated on the harmful nature of their comment, they have caused involuntary harm, and should not be berated and discouraged from educating themselves on intersectional topics. Unfortunately, leftism has a tendency to alienate newcomers by criticizing their imperfect first attempts at unlearning their prejudices. Taking this approach instead may foster more interest in leftism by making feminism and intersectionality less intimidating.

However, if the actor feels no remorse for making hurtful comments, Aristotle provides a comprehensive framework for identifying those who are willfully ignorant, and holding them accountable. Rather than choose to learn about the struggles minorities face and push for equality and acceptance, many people with privilege choose to gain their information from sources which confirm their hateful biases. Just one example of this phenomena occurred in 2023, when influencer and transwoman Dylan Mulvaney was sponsored by Bud Light to post a promotional video on her social media platform. She was later gifted a commemorative beer can with her face on it, which would not be mass produced or sold to the public (Riedel, 2023). Seth Weathers, who started his own conservative beer brand in protest of the Bud Light sponsorship, quoted “Bud Light has hired a mentally deranged freak to market perversion to little children” (Morris, 2023), and US representative Marjorie Taylor Greene claimed Mulvaney was “one of the biggest pedophiles in America today” (Mendez, 2023). This conservative outrage was of course false and baseless, both quotes wrongfully accuse Mulvaney of pedophilia for no reason other than their transphobic prejudices.

Using Aristotle’s work to interpret this situation, it is clear in every way that this behaviour is immoral. These conservatives exhibit ignorance founded on carelessness. It was up to them to not be ignorant about social issues, but much like Aristotle’s example of the person who becomes licentious after spending their time in drinking bouts (*NE* 1114a5-10), they voluntarily became uninformed and unjust after spending their time in far right spaces. Similarly, those who grew up in far right conservative homes and failed to challenge their views as they matured are likely acting in universal ignorance. Because they operate under the assumption that conforming to conservative standards is what makes a good life, they believe discriminating against minorities is justified. Aristotle states “the actions taken by the bad person are similarly traceable to him himself, even if that is not so when it comes to the end [that guides him]” (NE 1114b20-25). A feminist interpretation of this quote is that it does not matter if the end that guides one’s discriminatory behavior is the result of their upbringing, it is every individual’s responsibility to assess their beliefs and ensure they are justified. This is additionally supported by Aristotle’s assertion that ignorance itself is not a reason to exonerate blame (NE 1114a1-15). Ignorant people who are shamelessly and unabashedly hateful to minorities should not be excused on account of their upbringing, their social circles, or the political climate of their hometown, as their actions ultimately originate internally. When an action is internal it is voluntary, and voluntary actions are a reflection of one’s character. By continuously engaging with hateful and unjust prejudices, one’s character is voluntarily corrupted. Thus, careless ignorance about social injustices and voluntary or nonvoluntary discrimination is blameworthy and inexcusable, and those who do not attempt to rid themselves of their prejudices are responsible for the corruption of their character.

In this essay, I provided an intersectional feminist interpretation of Book III of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. I first defined the kinds of actions Aristotle believes we make, including voluntary, involuntary, mixed, and nonvoluntary actions. I followed by explaining the difference between ignorance of the universal and ignorance of the particular. I then explored two feminist implications of these definitions, starting with a productive application which seeks to make intersectionality more approachable for those who have not been formally educated on the topic and wish to expel their prejudices. I then evaluated a recent social issue using Aristotle’s terms, where I found that conservative outrage over a company sponsoring a transwoman was the result of inexcusable and blameworthy ignorance. Reading Book III through a feminist lens provides valuable insights on how we can make intersectionality less intimidating, and gives us a comprehensive framework to deconstruct socio-political ignorance. I have found that the ignorance which results in continuous discriminatory behaviour is a result of blameworthy and inexcusable carelessness, which ultimately leads to a degradation of overall character.

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