

## A Troublesome Passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* iii 5

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Aristotle begins his discussion of the voluntariness of character in *Nicomachean Ethics* iii with this passage:

(§1) While it is the end that is wished for, it is steps directed to the end that are deliberated about and chosen; and so actions to do with these are in accordance with choice and are voluntary (ἐκούσιοι). But the exercises of the virtues are to do with these. Therefore virtue too is in our power, and vice equally. (§2) For where acting is in our power (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), so is not acting; and where not acting is, so is acting. Thus, if acting, where that is fine, is in our power, not acting, which will be base, will also be in our power; and if not acting, where that is fine, is in our power, acting, which will be base, will also be in our power. But if it is in our power to do fine acts and base acts—and equally in our power not to do these—and this is what our being good and bad was, it follows that being virtuous and vicious is in our power.<sup>1</sup> (1113b3-14)

It is not immediately clear whether the passage contains two arguments or one. The first lines (§1) have the form of a syllogism, and so seem to contain a discrete argument. The second portion might be elucidatory of the inference Aristotle is making in the first. But it seems to have a slightly different emphasis (viz., on the voluntariness of vice, which seems tacked on to the conclusion of the opening argument). More important, unlike the conclusion of the first portion, that of the second involves a conditional. For these reasons, I shall treat the two sections separately.

On the face of it, the entire passage is problematic. Here is a reconstruction of the opening syllogism:

- (i) acts deliberately done to promote an end are voluntary;
- (ii) exercises of virtue are acts deliberately done to promote an end; therefore
- (iii) virtue and vice are voluntary.<sup>2</sup>

But the proper conclusion here is not the one Aristotle draws. Instead, (i) and

<sup>1</sup> This is J.L. Ackrill's translation of the passage (Ackrill 1978, 134). I have divided the passage into two sections.

<sup>2</sup> This is largely Ackrill's reconstruction (1978, 134). But Ackrill adds to (ii) a reference to vice not found in the text. Ackrill himself suggests that the second argument is partly intended 'to justify that final addition [to 1113b6] "and vice equally"' (1978, 134).

(ii) license only the claim that the *exercises* of virtue and vice are voluntary. Why should they be thought to entail that virtue and vice themselves are voluntary? Nothing in the argument rules out the possibility that although virtuous and vicious *actions* are up to us, the corresponding character states are not. On the face of it, Aristotle's inference is a gross non sequitur.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is §2 free of difficulty. The concluding sentence of the passage seems to identify having a good or bad character with performing good or bad actions. But this, it seems, cannot be what Aristotle means, for it is inconsistent with other things he says.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle is careful to distinguish states from activities (see, e.g., *NE* 1106a10-12; 1137a4-9); he also says that performing a virtuous action is not sufficient for having a virtuous character.<sup>5</sup> It is true that the remaining arguments of *NE* iii 5 also link performing actions of a certain kind with character states, but his point in those arguments is quite different. There, he says that performing good or bad actions engenders a corresponding character state, whereas §2 seems simply to identify performing such actions with having those states.

But perhaps the contradiction is illusory. The clause which seems to identify actions and states is in the imperfect ('this is what our being good and bad was'), indicating that Aristotle is alluding to some position with which he expects his readers to be familiar. Thus Aristotle may simply be adverting to a conclusion he has established or at least adumbrated earlier. There are two main candidates for this role: first, the view of character formation developed in book 2 (see esp. 1103a34-1103b2), and second, the position put forth in iii 2 that choices of a certain kind make us good or bad. According to the first view, there is no particular mystery about this passage, since Aristotle has in mind the whole picture of how character is acquired: it is our actions that produce corresponding character states, and if these actions are in our power, so too must be those character states.<sup>6</sup> One might read §1 similarly: if the actions that produce character states are in our power, then, given this picture of character acquisition, it follows that the character states themselves are ἐφ' ἡμῖν. But it is clearly *repeated* activities that engender character states; yet neither §1 nor §2 makes any mention of them. Furthermore, §2 identifies having a virtuous (vicious) character with performing virtuous (vicious) acts, and this is obviously distinct from linking them in the way ii 1 and the remainder of iii 5 attempt to do.<sup>7</sup>

Nor is the second view satisfactory. W.D. Ross refers us to 1112a1-3, where

<sup>3</sup> Ackrill 1978, 134 and Meyer 1993, 130 both make essentially this point.

<sup>4</sup> Again, Ackrill 1978, 135 and Meyer 1993, 130-131 both make this point.

<sup>5</sup> See *NE* 1144a14-15, where Aristotle writes, 'some people who do just acts are not necessarily just'.

<sup>6</sup> Burnet 1988, 134 glosses the passage by writing, 'If the activities which produce goodness are voluntary, then goodness is in our power.' Since our actions are voluntary, 'we have the formation of character in our own hands' (Burnet 1988, 110). Grant 1874, ii 26 argues that Aristotle uses the imperfect to refer 'to the preceding section'. Stewart 1973, 274 argues that Grant is mistaken in this; instead, Stewart reads the text as referring 'more generally to the doctrine already established that *deliberate choice of ta kala or ta aiskra* indicates a good or bad character'.

<sup>7</sup> Ackrill 1978, 135 makes both of these points.

Aristotle writes, ‘by choosing what is good or bad we are men of a certain character’ (1112a1-3). But §2 speaks not of προαίρεσις but of πράξις. Not all voluntary actions are chosen; Aristotle claims that ‘acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not as chosen’ (1111b9; see *Magna Moralia* 1189a31-35).<sup>8</sup>

Ackrill 1978, 137 suggests that Aristotle was aware of the difficulties with his arguments and that he was perhaps better off for dropping them ‘like a hot potato’. The fact that Aristotle offers other arguments for the voluntariness of character shows ‘that he does not suppose the argument [of 1113b3-14] to have been a clincher’ (1978, 137). But I suggest that had Aristotle thought that §1 contained a fallacious syllogism and that §2 was inconsistent with other positions he held, these passages would not have appeared in the *NE*. Ackrill’s view, while not to be rejected out of hand, is clearly a last resort.<sup>9</sup>

In a recent commentary, Meyer 1993, 131 claims that the only way to extricate Aristotle from his predicaments is to read Aristotle as ‘using “being good” and “being bad” to refer to the performance of good and bad actions’. Moreover, ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ are to be similarly analyzed. If true, this does seem to get Aristotle off the hook on both counts: if he is not arguing for the voluntariness of character in §1, then he is not offering a fallacious argument to this conclusion; and if the closing sentence of §2 makes no reference to character states, it cannot equate these with actions.<sup>10</sup>

But Meyer’s suggestion has the distinct disadvantage of rendering the closing sentence unintelligible. To see this, let us rewrite it, replacing the key terms and phrases as Meyer suggests:

Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise  
in our power not to do them, and this was what to do good acts  
and to do bad acts meant, then it is in our power to do good acts  
or to do bad acts.

Meyer’s reading turns this passage, indeed the entire opening paragraph, into either nonsense or empty tautology. Nor can she explain why the concluding sentence of §2 makes use of the imperfect, a fact that does not come out in her translation.<sup>11</sup> It is also hard to see why, contrary to his usual practice, Aristotle in this passage would use ἀρετή and κακία to stand for actions rather than character states, at best a very misleading practice. Meyer suggests that this is due to the language used by his opponents, as embodied in the saying, ‘no one is voluntarily

<sup>8</sup> For an additional argument against Ross’s suggestion, see Ackrill 1978, 135. Gauthier and Jolif 1970, t. 2, pt. 1, 213 also argue against Ross’s suggestion in a way similar to my own.

<sup>9</sup> As is Gauthier and Jolif’s (1970, 213) suggestion that the text is corrupt, and that Aristotle is in fact alluding to the position of 1113b8-10. Ackrill 1978, 137n4 dismisses their view.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer 1993, 132 claims that 1113b3-21 ‘does not even introduce’ the thesis that we are responsible for our character states, and that ‘the main point of the chapter is not even to establish that we are responsible for our states of character’ (1993, 128).

<sup>11</sup> Meyer 1993, 130 renders it thus: ‘And if it is up to us to do fine actions and shameful ones, and in the same way not to do them, and this is what it is to be good and bad, then it is up to us to be decent or base’ (emphasis added).

wicked (πονηρός) or involuntarily blessed' (Ross trans. of 1113b14-15). But surely this begs the question by assuming that the saying itself is using the language of character states to refer to actions. Meyer presents no independent evidence for this conclusion, and the saying seems clearly to concern states rather than acts.<sup>12</sup>

We have good reason, then, to be dissatisfied with the available interpretations. We cannot read away Aristotle's references to character states, as Meyer attempts to do; but neither can we remain content with taking the passage at face value. It is natural to suppose that careful attention to the context in which Aristotle was writing can help to illuminate his own arguments. It is to this context that I propose now to turn.

It seems clear that Aristotle is arguing primarily against Plato in *NE* iii 5.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis falls squarely on the voluntariness of vice and the absurdity of the opposite opinion. It is the *asymmetry* of virtue and vice in terms of voluntariness that Aristotle consistently attacks, an asymmetry Plato defends in terms of both actions and character states.<sup>14</sup> We would do well, then, to examine Plato's position more closely.

There are to be found in Plato's corpus two distinct, though not mutually exclusive, views on the question of responsibility, one concerned with actions, the other with character states. There is a clear statement of the former at *Protagoras* 345e1-4: 'For myself, I am fairly certain that no wise man believes anyone sins willingly or willingly perpetrates any evil or base act. They know very well that all evil or base action is involuntary' (Guthrie trans.). The claim is familiar enough. Socrates contends that, since to do an act voluntarily or willingly demands that one desire or choose the act, and since no one knowingly desires what is bad, the agent perpetrating an evil act must be acting in ignorance. What is crucial for our purposes is that the text speaks exclusively of evil or base *actions* as opposed to character states.

<sup>12</sup> This is substantiated by the fact that the argument Aristotle offers to support his rejection of the quoted saying (1113b15-23) has as its conclusion that wickedness (μοχθηρία) is voluntarily. If Meyer were right, one would expect Aristotle to be using πονηρός and μοχθηρία both to refer to actions. But this is especially unlikely in light of the fact that nowhere else in the *NE* does Aristotle use μοχθηρία to refer to actions rather than character states. Meyer does suggest that the proponents of the doctrine that vicious action is involuntary often used the language of character states to refer to action. The only example she offers of this is Plato's discussion at *Laws* 860d (see Meyer 1993, 55n17). But her reading of that passage is equally dubious. See below, n17.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, e.g., Grant 1874, 25: 'The discussion here [in iii 5] is evidently suggested by, and directed against, the doctrine of the Platonists, that "vice is involuntary," since it consists in ignorance.'

<sup>14</sup> The earlier chapters of *NE* iii also contain hints that it is Plato's position Aristotle has in his sights. For example, Aristotle argues against the position that acts done out of anger are involuntary (1111a25-30), and this position is clearly stated by Plato in *Laws* 863e. There, Plato writes, '[t]he tyranny in the soul of spiritedness, fear, pleasure, pain, feelings of envy, and desires, whether it does some injury or not, I proclaim to be in every way injustice' (Pangle trans.). When combined with his pronouncement that 'everyone does injustice involuntarily' (860d, examined below), this entails that acts done out of spiritedness (i.e., anger) are involuntary.

This claim is distinct from a later one found in the *Laws* and the *Timaeus*. In discussing the treatment of criminals in the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger says that some criminals are curable; others, incurable. He then states clearly that vicious character states are involuntary. This should temper our indignation towards at least the curably criminal:

one must first understand that no unjust man is ever voluntarily unjust. For no one anywhere would ever voluntarily acquire any of the greatest evils—least of all when the evil afflicts his most honored possessions. Now the soul, as we asserted, is truly the most honorable thing for everyone; therefore no one would ever voluntarily take the greatest evil into his most honorable possession and keep it for the rest of his life. So the unjust man, like the man who possesses bad things, is pitiable in every way (731c-d, Pangle trans.)

Clearly, the Athenian is talking about states of the soul, character states, as opposed to actions. The Athenian argues that criminals should be looked upon with pity rather than with righteous anger, but that this applies only to those criminals who are curable: in dealing with the incurably vicious and corrupt, ‘one must let one’s anger have free rein’ (731d). In such a case we must set aside our feelings of pity and deal with the criminal harshly for the good of the whole, fighting in self-defense. But the sole reason for doing this is expediency: whether the criminal is curable or not, he is vicious involuntarily, and only our own practical interests prevent us from treating the one with as much pity as the other.<sup>15</sup>

In the *Laws*, then, Plato’s view is that virtuous character states are, and vicious ones are not, voluntary.<sup>16</sup> Plato goes on to argue that this position entails the position about actions stated above, in the case of actions that flow from character states: if a character state is involuntary, the actions that flow from it cannot be voluntary, either. This comes out later in the *Laws*, when Plato has the Athenian attempt to clarify his position:

Athenian. Let us look again, Kleinias, to see how we may have a harmony about these matters.

Kleinias. What harmony, and in what respect?

Ath. In the earlier discussions I believe I said expressly somehow, or if I didn’t, set me down now as saying...

Kl. What?

Ath. That the bad are all bad involuntarily in every respect. Since this is so, it is presumably necessary that the next argument follows upon this.

<sup>15</sup> Note that in neither case does the involuntariness of his character state get the criminal off the hook legally: this fact is to carry no legal exculpatory weight in the society of the *Laws*.

<sup>16</sup> For further evidence, see *Timaeus* 86d-87c: ‘For no man is voluntarily bad, but the bad become bad by reason of an ill disposition of the body and bad education—things which are hateful to every man and happen to him against his will... In such cases the planters are to blame rather than the plants, the educators rather than the educated’ (Jowett trans.).

Kl. What do you mean?

Ath. That the unjust man is presumably bad, but the bad man is involuntarily so. Now it never makes sense that the voluntary is done involuntarily. Hence the man who does injustice appears involuntarily unjust to the one who sets down injustice as something involuntary. This is what I must agree to now. For I agree that everyone does injustice involuntarily. And if someone, out of love of victory or love of honor, asserts that the unjust are indeed involuntarily so, but that many voluntarily do injustice, my argument, at any rate, remains the former and not the latter.<sup>17</sup> (860c-e)

The Athenian holds that the wicked are involuntarily so<sup>18</sup> and goes on to say that it necessarily follows from this view that the unjust actions they perform must also be involuntary. I propose to call this the 'strong link' thesis: An act flowing from a character state is voluntary if and only if the character state in question is itself voluntary. The Athenian *must agree* that wicked actions are involuntary because he also holds that wicked character states are involuntary; he would only be compelled to do so if the strong link between character states and actions obtained. Otherwise, he could perfectly well say that unjust actions are voluntary and unjust character states are involuntary, and this is the precisely the position he denies in the closing sentence of the quoted passage.

I submit that the strong link thesis functions as an assumed premise in the syllogism in §1. The conclusion that follows from the two explicitly stated premises, as we noted above, is merely that the activities of the virtues are voluntary. Aristotle's conclusion, that virtue itself is voluntary, follows straightforwardly from this preliminary conclusion, so long as the strong link thesis is assumed: If an act flowing from a character state is voluntary, that state itself must be voluntary.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle attempts to prove the antecedent to this conditional with regard to the exercise of the virtues in his first two premises, and then relies on the strong link thesis to license the inference to his conclusion.<sup>20</sup> If, as I have

<sup>17</sup> Meyer 1993, 55n17 suggests that there is no difference between the position that vicious action is involuntary and the position found here in the *Laws*. She is aware of the passage I have cited, and admits that the thesis is there stated first in terms of character states; but she goes on to say that 'on elaboration, the thesis is stated as a thesis about actions: *akontos adikein pantas* (d9) (everyone does wrong involuntarily)'. This is partly true: d9 does not say that the bad are bad involuntarily; it is instead the thesis about action. But it is not intended as a restatement of the early thesis about character states. Instead, Plato's point is that *since* the Athenian accepts the involuntariness of unjust character states, he must accept the involuntariness of acts flowing from them.

<sup>18</sup> The 'earlier discussion' the Athenian refers to is very likely 731c-d, quoted above.

<sup>19</sup> This, of course, is to take the biconditional claim of the strong link thesis in only one direction.

<sup>20</sup> A similarly quick argument is to be found in the *MM*. There, Aristotle writes, '[n]ow the principles of an act, whether good or bad, is choice and wish, and all that accords with reason. It is evident, then, that these also change. But we change in our actions voluntarily. So the principle also, choice, changes voluntarily. So that it is plain that it will be in our power to be either good or bad' (cf. *EE* 1228a4-12).

argued above, the Plato of the *Laws* is his prime target, we can see why Aristotle would argue in this way. Since the strong link thesis is asserted by Plato, Aristotle can make use of it without having to give it independent support. Aristotle's argument is enthymematic rather than invalid.

The Platonic context can also help explain the puzzling closing line of the argument in §2.<sup>21</sup> Two facts are crucial: first, that Aristotle makes use of the imperfect tense ('this [i.e., performing good or bad actions] is what our being good or bad was');<sup>22</sup> second, that the sentence is a conditional,<sup>23</sup> which means that Aristotle can assert it without committing himself to the truth of the antecedent. I shall now argue that the clause of the antecedent involving the imperfect in fact alludes to a key aspect of Plato's position in the *Laws*, a position Aristotle does not himself endorse.

Having denied that any act or state of injustice can be voluntary, the Athenian is next faced with the problem of how to accommodate commonsense distinctions between voluntary and involuntary harm. Would not a case in which someone involuntarily harms another (here, causes harm without intending to do so) have to be accounted an involuntary act of injustice, thus implying a distinction between such acts and voluntary acts of injustice, defeating the Athenian's claim that *all* injustice is involuntary? His answer is that an involuntary harm is not an instance of injustice at all:

But consider whether I'm saying anything in saying what I'm about to say, or whether I'm saying nothing at all: for I at least do not assert, Kleinias and Megillus, that if someone injures somebody in some way, not intending to do so, but involuntarily, that he does injustice involuntarily. And I won't legislate in this fashion, legislating to the effect that this is an involuntary injustice; I'll set such an injury down as being not an injustice at all, whether it be greater or smaller. Indeed, in my view, at least, is victorious, we'll often assert that when a benefit comes to pass that is not correct, the one responsible for the benefit is committing an injustice. Generally speaking, friends, if someone gives something to somebody, or, on the contrary, takes something away, such a thing shouldn't thus be called simply just or unjust, but what the lawgiver should observe is whether

<sup>21</sup> This was first suggested to me by Daniel Devereux.

<sup>22</sup> Gauthier and Jolif 1970, 213 are right to insist that '[s]i l'on garde le texte reçu, il faut traduire: "Mais s'il est en notre pouvoir de faire les belles actions et aussi les laides, et au même titre aussi de ne pas faire, et si, *comme il a été dit*, c'est là être bons et mauvais." Mais, premièrement, cela n'a jamais été dit' (emphasis added). But why must we assume that the doctrine Aristotle refers to has been set forth in the *NE*?

<sup>23</sup> Ackrill is the only commentator I have found who addresses this fact. But he downplays its importance: '[a]lthough this last sentence is conditional in form, it is clear that Aristotle is asserting, and takes himself to have established, that virtue and vice are indeed in our power' (1978, 134). While true enough, the fact that Aristotle endorses the conclusion about the voluntariness of virtue and vice in no way entails that he endorses the antecedent of the conditional he employs.

someone employs a just disposition and character in doing some benefit or injury to somebody. (862a-b)

The question, then, of the justice or injustice of an act is to be settled by the character from which it flows. Plato is willing to count as 'just' or 'unjust' only those acts that flow from the corresponding character state. Aristotle, of course, would never agree with this. He argues that 'we must become just by doing just acts' (1105a19; see 1105b9), and this would hardly be possible if doing just acts required having a just character. And in a passage that seems directed at precisely this aspect of Plato's position, Aristotle argues that one may perform a virtuous or vicious act without therefore having a virtuous or vicious character (1137a5-25; see also 1144a14-15).

We are now in a position to return to the *NE* passage. The conclusion of §2 contains a conditional whose antecedent is a conjunction: if (a) it is in our power to do or to refrain from doing noble or base acts *and* (b) doing noble or base acts is what being good or bad meant, then (c) it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious. Aristotle exploits (b) without endorsing it: his claim is simply that *if* doing a noble or base act entails that one has the corresponding character state, as Plato clearly holds, then it follows from this, together with (a), that virtue and vice are in our power and up to us. Plato's position is that one performs a virtuous (vicious) action only if one has a virtuous (vicious) character. It is to this view, and not to one adumbrated earlier in the *NE*, that Aristotle refers when he uses the imperfect. Nor does he commit himself to the view: it is merely part of the antecedent of a conditional, and it is the conditional that he is asserting.

Thus, careful attention to the Platonic context reveals that Aristotle's arguments are neither invalid nor inconsistent with his other views. The opening syllogism is an enthymeme, whose missing premise is to be found in the *Laws*, while the second argument has been misconstrued by commentators who have paid insufficient attention to its logical form and to the position against which it is directed. Both §1 and §2 make use of theses to which Plato commits himself. But if these arguments were sufficient to establish the voluntariness of character states, why is the rest of iii 5 necessary? My reading suggests an obvious answer: Aristotle opens the chapter with a passage that is directed at Plato, but does not rest content with these *ad hominem* arguments, and devotes the remainder of the chapter to establishing, from the ground up, the thesis that character is voluntary.

Although it would be imprudent to assert that the reading I have offered is the sole defensible one, I believe it is clearly superior to the other interpretations we have examined. My view, if true, raises a number of questions: does Aristotle endorse the strong link thesis? If so, what does that mean for those interpretations that seek to attribute to him belief only in qualified, rather than absolute, respon-



sibility for character?<sup>24</sup> These are questions I cannot address here.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The proponents of qualified responsibility include Meyer 1993, Curren 1989, and Roberts 1989.

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