

Aristotle and Plato on Character

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Little about Aristotle's chapter on the voluntariness of character (*NE* iii 5) is uncontroversial.¹ Some arguments Aristotle deploys are on their face formally invalid; the position he appears to defend has seemed so absurd that commentators have felt obliged to rescue him from it. Thus we find Susan Sauvé Meyer, Randall Curren, and Jean Roberts, among others, arguing that despite appearances Aristotle does not believe that we are fully responsible for our characters.

I shall argue that Aristotle's position and arguments come into focus only when seen against the background of Plato's *Laws*. Aristotle's main target in *NE* iii 5 is Plato's claim that vicious character states, and hence the vicious actions flowing from them, are involuntary. Both Plato and Aristotle assume what I shall call the 'strong link thesis': an act that flows from a character state is voluntary if and only if that character itself is voluntary. Several of Aristotle's arguments, I shall argue, are enthymematic, and require us to supply the strong link thesis as a premise.² If Aristotle holds the strong link thesis, it will be impossible to defend the very popular reading that has Aristotle endorsing only 'qualified' responsibility for character. Although I think whether a given view strikes us as plausible or philosophically defensible is largely irrelevant to the question whether we are justified in attributing that view to a philosopher, I shall argue that the worries that have driven previous commentators to defend qualified responsibility are misplaced.

In taking Plato's doctrine of the involuntariness of vicious character states to be Aristotle's target, my view differs from some of the most prominent readings of the chapter. Thus Sarah Broadie takes Aristotle to be mainly concerned with arguing against the view that character is innate, while Meyer reads the chapter as focused on the voluntariness of vicious actions.³ Any such strategy will cast the claim that character states are voluntary, and hence states for which we are responsible, as a relatively minor point on which little turns, for Aristotle. The Platonic background, however, explains both the structure and content of many

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translations of Aristotle are taken from Barnes ed. 1984. For the Greek text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I have used Rackham's edition. Translations of Plato are taken from Cooper ed. 1997.

² When I call an argument 'enthymematic', I mean only that it has a missing premise. I do not mean to imply that this is the sense the term has when its Greek equivalent appears in Aristotle. It would not be worthwhile in this context to embark on a discussion of Aristotle's own treatment of enthymemes (see *Prior Analytics* ii 27.70a10 ff.)

³ See Broadie 1991, 167-173 and Meyer 1993, 132. I discuss their views in greater detail below.

of Aristotle's key arguments. For better or worse, Aristotle is indeed committed to the voluntariness of character.

I. Plato's asymmetry theses

Plato's corpus presents us with two claims about responsibility. I shall refer to these as the Platonic and Socratic asymmetry theses.⁴ The Socratic thesis is clearly stated in the *Protagoras*:

I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad. They know very well that anyone who does anything wrong or bad does so involuntarily. (345e1-4)

This claim is a familiar one. 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 performing an evil act must be acting in ignorance. Note that the text speaks exclusively of wrong or bad *actions* as opposed to character states.

In later texts, however, Plato goes on to endorse the asymmetry of good and bad character states. The voluntarily acquisition of a bad character is no more possible than the voluntary performance of a bad action. In discussing the punishment of criminals in the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger says that some are curable, others, incurable. He goes on to say that vicious character states are involuntary and that we thus should show mercy toward at least those criminals that are curable:

[T]he first thing to realize here is that every unjust man is unjust against his will. No man on earth would deliberately embrace any of the supreme evils, least of all in the most precious parts of himself—and as we said, the truth is that the most precious part of every man is his soul. So no one will ever voluntarily accept the supreme evil into the most valuable part of himself and live with it throughout his life. No: in general, the unjust man deserves just as much pity as any other sufferer. (731c-d)

It seems obvious that the Stranger is talking about character states rather than actions. He argues that we should pity rather than condemn those criminals who are curable. When faced with the incurably vicious and corrupt, 'you must let your anger off its leash' (731d). In such a case we must harden ourselves and deal with the criminal harshly for the good of the whole, 'fighting in self-defense' (731b). But we do this only for the sake of expediency: whether or not the crimi-

⁴ This terminology derives from Meyer 1993. For ease of reference, I refer to the thesis that evil or base acts are involuntary while good ones are voluntary as the 'Socratic asymmetry thesis' even though there is some evidence in Aristotle's corpus (at *Magna Moralia* 1187a6-8) that the historical Socrates held something more akin to the Platonic asymmetry thesis. With this caveat, I will go on using the phrase, attributing the thesis to the Platonic Socrates (who clearly does hold the doctrine)

nal is curable, he is vicious involuntarily, and it is only our practical interests that prevent us from treating the one with as much pity as the other. What is most important for our purposes, Plato recommends a different attitude toward the criminal than would be available to one who thought that wickedness is voluntary: such a person would blame the evil agent outright, in addition to meting out punishment.

The Platonic thesis entails its Socratic predecessor: Plato will argue that, if a character state is involuntary, the actions which flow from it cannot be voluntary, either. This comes out later in the *Laws*, when Plato has the Athenian Stranger attempt to clarify his position:

Athenian. Now, Cleinias, we ought to examine our own position again. How far is it consistent in this business?

Cleinias. Consistent? What consistency do you mean?

Ath. Earlier in our discussion,⁵ I think I have said quite categorically—or if I haven't before, assume I'm saying it now—that...

Cl. What?

Ath. ...all wicked men are, in all respects, unwillingly wicked. This being so, my next argument necessarily follows.

Cl. What argument?

Ath. That the unjust man is doubtless wicked; but that the wicked man is in that state only against his will. However, to suppose that a voluntary act is performed involuntarily makes no sense. Therefore, in the eyes of someone who holds the view that injustice is involuntary, a man who acts unjustly would seem to be doing so against his will. Here and now, that is the position I have to accept: I allow that no one acts unjustly except against his will. (If anyone with a disputatious disposition or a desire to attract favorable notice says that although there are those who are unjust against their will, even so many men do commit unjust acts voluntarily, I would reject his argument and stick to what I said). (860d-861b)

In this dense passage, Plato is clearly distinguishing between unjust actions and unjust character states. The Athenian Stranger holds that the wicked are involuntarily so, and goes on to say that it 'necessarily follows' from this view that the unjust actions they perform must also be involuntary. So the claim is that the Platonic asymmetry thesis entails the Socratic one. But why? How does the conclusion 'necessarily follow'? Plato's argument requires the strong link thesis: An action that flows from a character state is voluntary if and only if that character state is voluntary. On this view, the relation between character states and actions is such that if the character state is involuntary, then the actions flowing from it will also be involuntary. Wickedness is involuntary 'in every respect'; the

⁵ The reference is probably to the discussion at 731c ff.

Stranger says that it does not even make sense to say that a character state is involuntary while the actions flowing from it are voluntary. The Stranger *has to accept* the Socratic thesis because he has endorsed the Platonic thesis; he would only be compelled to accept this if the strong link between character states and actions obtained. Otherwise, he could perfectly well say that unjust actions are, and unjust character states are not, voluntary. Indeed, this is precisely the position the Stranger rejects in the parenthetical sentence.

Plato, then, is concerned to argue for the involuntariness of wickedness in terms of both character states and actions. Moreover, character states and the actions flowing from them must be both voluntary or both involuntary. Thus, in Plato's later work we find a significant extension of the earlier asymmetry thesis that invokes the strong link thesis.⁶

II. Aristotle and the Strong Link Thesis

In *NE* iii, Aristotle gives two conditions any action must meet in order to be considered voluntary: (1) the moving principle of the action must be in the agent and not external to him (1110a1, 1110a17); and (2) the action must not be done in ignorance of particulars (1110b27-1111a3). For our purposes, condition 2 is most significant. To the Socratic claim that ignorance exculpates, Aristotle replies by first distinguishing between ignorance of particulars (presumably, the relevant circumstances surrounding the action), which usually merits pardon and pity, and ignorance of universals, which does not: 'Now every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought to abstain from, and it is by reason of error of this kind that men become unjust and in general bad...for this [ignorance of universals], men are blamed' (1110b27-33). It is striking how much Aristotle concedes to Plato. He too thinks that the wicked are ignorant; the only point in dispute is whether or not they are to be blamed for this ignorance. In arguing against the Socratic asymmetry thesis, Aristotle claims that it is absurd to call base acts involuntary and virtuous ones voluntary (cf. 1111a25 ff.), since the moving principle is equally in the agent in both cases. Now, simply saying this will not do, since condition 1 above is not sufficient for voluntariness. The Socratic will object that ignorance of universals exculpates. Aristotle denies this in *NE* iii 1, but this is *all* that he does in that chapter. This is a key point, since the Socratic cannot be soundly defeated unless this denial is in some way supported. And I submit that this support is precisely what Aristotle intends to supply in chapter 5.

In light of this, let us consider the first argument Aristotle offers for the voluntariness of character:⁷

⁶ 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.).

⁷ Even this claim about Aristotle's aims in iii 5 is controversial, as Meyer 1993, 132 argues that...

(1) The end, then, being what we wish for, the things contributing to the end what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning the latter must be according to choice and voluntary (ἐκούσιοι). Now the exercise of the virtues is concerned with these [i.e., means]. Therefore virtue is in our power (ἐφ' ἡμῶν), and so too vice. (*NE* 1113b3-6)⁸

Here is the argument as Meyer 1993, 130 reconstructs this passage:

1. Actions concerning deliberation, decision, and wish are voluntary.
2. The activities of the virtues (and presumably also of the vices) concern deliberation and decision.
3. Therefore, both virtue and in the same way vice are up to us.

The syllogism is invalid. The proper conclusion is, not that virtue and vice are up to us, but rather that the activities of the virtues are up to us. Meyer and J.L. Ackrill both make this point; Ackrill 1978, 133 asks why, even granting 1 and 2, it 'should...be thought to follow that the virtues themselves are voluntary'. Nothing in the text seems to rule out the possibility that while *actions* according to virtue and vice are up to us, the corresponding character states are not.⁹

Aristotle's reasoning becomes clear, however, once we see that the argument is enthymematic.¹⁰ The missing premise, as in Plato's argument from the *Laws*, is the strong link thesis. If Aristotle is assuming that an action is voluntary just in case the character state from which it flows is similarly voluntary, he can argue that, since some actions (e.g., 'the exercise of the virtues') are voluntary, the character states from which they flow must also be voluntary. Note that Aristotle begins the chapter by first securing the conclusion that virtue and its activities or exercises are both voluntary, and only then goes on to argue that vice must also be voluntary. Indeed, this is the structure of the entire chapter: again and again we see Aristotle moving from the premise that virtue is voluntary to the conclusion that vice is voluntary as well. This argumentative strategy finds a point only when deployed against someone like Plato, who endorses the voluntariness of virtue but not vice. Aristotle's tacit assumption of the strong link thesis is part and parcel of this strategy: since Plato also endorses it, he need not argue for it; it is common ground. But Aristotle exploits it to reach his own conclusion: since it is a biconditional, it licenses the claim that if an act is voluntary, then the character state that gave rise to it (if such there be; not all voluntary acts arise from character states) must also be voluntary. It is only the strong link thesis which can license the move from 2 to 3 in the argument as sketched above.

states']. I argue against this view below.

⁸ I have departed slightly from the Ross/Urmson translation in Barnes 1984 by rendering ἀρετή as 'virtue' rather than 'excellence'. I have done this to maintain consistency with Ackrill and Meyer.

⁹ Ott 2000 is devoted to discussing the entire passage (1113b3-14) in greater detail. I also offer objections to the readings provided by Ackrill, Burnet, Meyer and Ross, among others.

¹⁰ Again, I am not using 'enthymematic' in any particular technical sense; I take it to describe an argument that has a missing premise.

III. Further evidence

Aristotle goes on to argue against the Platonic claim in a slightly different way:

The saying that 'no one is voluntarily wicked (*πονηρός*) nor involuntarily happy' seems to be partly false and partly true; for no one is involuntarily happy, but wickedness (*μοχθηρία*) is voluntary. Or else we shall have to dispute what has just been said, at any rate, and deny that man is a moving principle or begetter of his actions as of his children. But if these facts are evident and we cannot refer actions to moving principles other than those in ourselves, the acts whose moving principles are in us must themselves be also in our power and voluntary. (1113b14-22)

Once again, we find Aristotle, like Plato, assuming the strong link thesis. By contrast, Meyer contends that no Aristotelian text implies that responsibility for action rests on responsibility for character. According to her, nothing in 1113b3-21 indicates 'that Aristotle attaches any particular significance to the thesis of responsibility for character' (Meyer 1993, 132). But Aristotle tells us here that we can deny the voluntariness of wickedness (*μοχθηρία*) only on pain of denying 'that man is a moving principle or the begetter of his acts as of his children'. That is, unjust acts cannot be voluntary if the character state of injustice from which the acts flow is not itself voluntary. As in the case of the *Laws* passage, this argument is missing a premise: the entailment holds *only* if a strong link obtains between a character state and the actions flowing from it. Otherwise, we could of course hold both that man is the moving principle of his actions *and* that no one is responsible for his character.

The third paragraph of the chapter (1113b23-1114a3) supports the argument against the Platonic view by appeal to common practice and legislation. It too requires the strong link thesis. Aristotle writes,

Witness seems to be borne to this [the doctrine that wickedness is voluntary: see 1113b16] both by individuals in their private capacity and by legislators themselves; for these punish and take vengeance on those who do wicked acts...while they honor those who do noble acts, as though they meant to encourage the latter and deter the former. (1113b23-27)

Both individuals and legislators assume that those who perform wicked acts do so voluntarily, for only on this assumption would punishment make sense: '[i]t is assumed that there is no gain in being persuaded not be hot or in pain or hungry or the like, since we shall experience these feelings none the less' (1113b29-31). But why should this support the denial of the Platonic thesis that wickedness is involuntary? At best, it supports the claim that wicked *acts* are voluntary. Again, we must have recourse to the strong link thesis if we are to make sense of Aristotle's inference. Evil acts can be voluntary, and hence the testimony of both individuals and governments true, only if the corresponding character state is

likewise voluntary. This argument simply would not work if a strong link between actions and the character states from which they flow did not obtain.

IV. The voluntariness of character

Recall that on the Platonic view, ignorance of 'universals' is exculpatory. In iii 1, Aristotle has denied this without offering argument. In iii 5 he supports this denial by weaving together his claim that ignorance can be blameworthy with his claim that character states are voluntary:

Indeed, we punish a man for his very ignorance, if he is thought responsible for the ignorance, as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; for the moving principle is in the man himself, since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance. (1113b30-34)

Aristotle's treatment of the drunk provides the pattern for his treatment of responsibility for character. Aristotle locates the moving principle of the drunk's actions in him, even though, once drunk, he is not capable of becoming sober at will. The justification for this is that the moving principle of his getting drunk was in him when he decided to imbibe.

The consequent transition to the discussion of character is rather difficult to follow:

And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the law that they ought to know and that is not difficult, and so too in the case of anything else that they are thought to be ignorant of through carelessness; we assume that it is in their power not to be ignorant, since they have the power of taking care.

But perhaps a man is of the kind not to take care. Still they are themselves by their slack lives responsible (αἴτιοι) for becoming men of that kind, and men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, in the one case by cheating and in the other by spending their time in drinking bouts and the like; for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character. (1113b34-1114a7)

In the first paragraph, Aristotle is careful to note that holding someone responsible for his ignorance is to be done only against a background of reasonable expectations: it is crucial that what such a person is ignorant of is not obscure or difficult and is something that he ought to know. Aristotle next entertains an objection to his doctrine: perhaps it is not in the power of a person who is ignorant through carelessness to take care because the person in question is of a disposition that does not permit him to do so: his carelessness is an ingrained disposition and so he cannot be held responsible for acts done from that disposition. This objection embodies precisely the sort of reasoning Aristotle thinks lies behind the Platonic asymmetry thesis.

What is important here is that Aristotle does not reply that *even if* this man has such a disposition, it is nevertheless in his power *at that time*, that is, after the disposition has become firmly entrenched, to take care. But this reply is what one would expect if Aristotle did not hold the strong link thesis. For if Aristotle held that voluntariness of action does not require voluntariness of character state, he could straightforwardly reply that dispositions do not make the acts flowing from them involuntary. On my reading, it is the voluntariness of the dispositions that makes the acts flowing from them voluntary; the latter cannot be so unless the former are.

Aristotle's view entails that the question whether or not the moving principle of a character-determined act is in the agent is to be settled by whether or not it was once open for the agent to have become a different kind of person than he is. It is not now open to him to do this, just as it is not now open to the profligate suffering from crapulence instantly to become healthy again ('he has thrown away his chance...', 1114a16). As we have seen, Aristotle is committed to the strong link thesis, and this is consistent with his saying that the moving principles both of a character state and the actions which flow from it are in the agent only because the claim 'the moving principle is in the agent' applied to character-driven actions just amounts to the claim that 'the moving principle of the acts which led to the person's acquiring such a character in the first place were in the agent'. So the kind of voluntariness Aristotle purchases for character-determined acts does not entail that in the given situation the agent could have done otherwise. Instead, the relevant counterfactual claim is historical: the agent could have performed actions which would have led to acquiring a different character than the one from which the present actions flow.

We may suppose a case in which he is ill voluntarily, through living incontinently and disobeying his doctors. In that case, it was *then* open to him not to be ill, but not now, when he has thrown away his chance, just as when you have let a stone go it is too late to recover it; but yet it was in your power to throw it, since the moving principle was in you. So, too, to the unjust and to the self-indulgent man it was open at the beginning not to become men of this kind, and so they are unjust and self-indulgent voluntarily; but now that they have become so it is not possible for them not to be so. (1114a15-23)

But Plato might object that no agent would have participated in the activities which lead to a vicious character had he known the consequences, and this means that he is vicious involuntarily.¹¹ Aristotle does not buy this for a second. '[N]ot 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 senseless person' (1114a10-

¹¹ It is also important to recall the *Timaeus* claim that intemperance and other vicious states may be due to biological malfunction (86d ff.) As far as I can tell, Aristotle does not reply to this contention in *NE* iii.5, and to that extent his argument against Plato is flawed. But my thesis is that Aristotle is reacting primarily to the Plato of the *Laws*.

11). Aristotle recognizes that a context of reasonable expectations is needed if we are to hold someone responsible; this background is provided by his assertion that only the *κομιδῆ ἀναισθήτου* is ignorant of the fact that activities engender like character states. William Bondeson suggests that, in Aristotle's view, 'the men who are ignorant of this are beyond the bounds of sense and are probably so deficient that they cannot be counted as moral agents'.¹²

Next, Aristotle zeroes in on Plato's view: 'Now someone may say (1) that all men desire the apparent good, but (2) have no control over the appearance, but (3) the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character' (1114a33-35). Aristotle will affirm (1) and (3) (the latter as the result of *NE* iii 4), but go on to deny (2):

We reply that if each person is somehow responsible for his state of mind, he will also be himself somehow responsible for the appearance; but if not, no one is responsible for his own evil-doing, but everyone does evil acts through ignorance of the end, thinking that by these he will get at what is best. (1114b1-6; cf. 1114b23)

This passage supports my view that the strong link thesis functions in iii 5 as an assumed premise. Aristotle's reply to the objector includes the claim that if each person is not somehow responsible for his or her character, no one will be responsible for his or her evil acts. This follows *only* on assumption of the strong link thesis. But Aristotle seems to deny this in the following awkward and difficult sentence:

Whether, then, it is not by nature that the end appears to each person as it does, but something else also depends on him, or the end is natural but because the good man adopts the means voluntarily virtue is voluntary, vice also will be none the less voluntary; for in the case of the bad man there is equally present that which depends upon himself in his actions if not in his end. (1114b17-23)

At first sight, the last clause seems to suggest that, whatever comes of Aristotle's inquiry into the voluntariness of character, the wicked will be blameworthy for their actions.¹³ But once we see that 'his actions' is meant to refer to 'the means' of becoming good or bad, we see that the strong link thesis is maintained. The bad man could have acted differently and thus could have had a good character.

¹² Bondeson 1974, 64. Broadie 1991, 169 suggests a plausible way to defend Aristotle's bold claim.

¹³ This is how Meyer reads the passage. In a footnote, she says that Aristotle here 'comes dangerously close to affirming outright that even if one is not responsible for the goals under which one acts, one's actions in pursuit of those goals can still be voluntary' (1993, 148n2). She concludes that whether or not this is in fact Aristotle's position turns on whether he is here giving voice to his opponent's reasoning or articulating his own view.

V. Full or qualified responsibility?

Despite the fact that Aristotle insists on the role of others, especially educators, in forming character, nothing in *NE* iii 5 suggests that he wishes to hold us less than fully responsible for our character states. Note that in the case of actions, Aristotle grants that some are only partly voluntary, as when a captain throws his cargo overboard to avoid the sinking of his ship (1110a9 ff.). Such actions are 'mixed'; but I can find no text in Aristotle's corpus where he makes a corresponding distinction with regard to character. Its being voluntary is an all-or-nothing affair; Aristotle never speaks of character as 'partly' voluntary. This is what one would expect, given the strong link thesis: if acts flowing from character states are voluntary, as Aristotle clearly holds, then, given the strong link thesis, the character states themselves must be voluntary, full stop. Any qualification on the voluntariness of character will entail a similar qualification on the voluntariness of, and hence responsibility for, the acts that flow from that character.

But can this really be Aristotle's considered view? Once the unjust man has become what he is, in what sense can we say that the actions that flow from his character state are voluntary? Jean Roberts has argued against attributing to the strong link thesis to Aristotle, since '[t]his reading makes the actions of moral adolescents more directly voluntary than those of the morally mature' (Roberts 1989, 28; see Meyer 1993, 126). Since moral adolescents have no settled character from which their actions might flow, their actions are more directly voluntary, Roberts thinks, than those of the morally mature in the sense that the latter's actions are voluntary only if they voluntarily acquired the character state from which their actions flow. How, then, are we to avoid a contradiction, given the strong link thesis? It looks as if Aristotle is here retracting the position he took in opposition to the Socratic, and saying that it is no longer in the power of the unjust man to act otherwise; and what else could we mean by calling an action 'involuntary'?

But this formulation brings out the problem with the objection: acts and character states are not voluntary in the same way (1114b31). The moving principle of an act flowing from a character state is in the agent, not because the character state does not play a role in generating the action, but because it was open at the beginning for the agent to have acquired a different character (Broadie 1991, 167).

If I am correct so far, Aristotle appears to hold both that we are fully responsible for the character we develop and that our character is largely the result of habituation, which in turn depends in part on our background, education, and so on. The apparent tension between these claims has driven many commentators to hold that Aristotle does not think we are fully responsible for our character states after all. As Broadie 1991, 167 puts it: '[h]ow can a person's character depend on *him*, given that we are started off along the right or wrong track by the persuasion of others or else by their neglect?'

Aristotle clearly emphasizes the role of habituation and education in determin-

ing character; at one point he even says that the habits we form in youth 'make a very great difference or rather *all* the difference' in determining character (1103b24-25). But he also claims that we control the beginning of our character states, and so are responsible for them (1114a20). How can these texts be reconciled?

I shall argue that there is in fact no tension between these claims. But before doing so, I must set out the typical response to the problem. Since Meyer's treatment of this issue is both clear and on the whole in line with those of a number of other commentators, I shall focus on her account.

Meyer claims that Aristotle is not arguing for what she calls 'full responsibility' for character, which would entail that regardless of the circumstances in which we are raised, or our good or bad fortune, we are responsible for the character we end up with; rather, Aristotle's conclusion, properly construed, is that we are qualifiedly responsible for it.

The earliest stages of development involve habituation through praise and blame, applied by parents, teachers, and perhaps others. In book 10, Aristotle tells us that it is not enough to be brought up rightly and habituated in the proper manner: the man who is to be good must 'spend his time in worthy occupations' (1180a17; cf. 1103b24-25, examined below). Aristotle claims in iii 5 that 'it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character' (1114a7). So a good upbringing and the right education are still not sufficient to produce a good character: one must participate in the proper kinds of activities. Meyer notes this, and goes on to argue that, since the wrong sort of upbringing and education could outweigh and overwhelm any efforts undertaken by the agent to become good, it seems that at least sometimes and perhaps often a person's moral character will be largely due to forces beyond his control. If so, she thinks, Aristotle must be arguing for a qualified responsibility for character which will vary in proportion to the level of influence the agent was able to exercise on the development of his character. As Roberts 1989, 28 puts it, 'Aristotle ought to say, if he is to be consistent, that other people had at least a great deal to do with it' (Curren 1989 has a similar view).

There is something right about the qualified responsibility thesis, if this means only that, as Meyer 1993, 127 formulates it, 'assuming that one's upbringing and social context provide one with the information about which sorts of activities are good and bad, it is up to us whether we develop a disposition to perform the good ones rather than the bad ones'. The fault lies with the inference from this claim to diminished responsibility for character. To see this, we need to distinguish between being a cause of something and being responsible for something. I suggest that this distinction is clearly present in Aristotle's text, even though a single Greek word, αἴτιος, does duty for both notions. Meyer and others cite 1114b23, where Aristotle writes, 'we are somehow partly responsible (συναιτίοι) for our states of character'. But there is an issue of translation: συναιτίοι admits of being translated either as 'partly responsible' or, as I prefer, as 'co-cause' (this is also how Broadie 1991, 172 translates the passage). My

preference can be defended by looking at the context of this key text. Suppose Aristotle meant to say that we are only partly responsible for our states of character. It would then be mysterious why this claim appears alongside the claim that 'the virtues are voluntary' (1114b2). For Aristotle, there can be no gap between that which is voluntary and that for which we are responsible. Voluntary actions, after all, are those that merit praise and blame (see 1113b3-14). Any condition that would be exculpatory would undermine the voluntariness of the act or state. How could a state be voluntary *tout court* and yet its possessor not be fully responsible for it? Recall that although Aristotle makes room for *actions* that are partly voluntary and partly involuntary, there is no corresponding category for character states. So we cannot say that Aristotle holds us partly responsible for our character states; but we can say that he thinks us at best part causes of them. This is my main argument for refusing to grant the claims of qualified responsibility.

I suggest that Aristotle can indeed say that 'other people have a great deal to do' with determining a person's character and still insist that that person is fully responsible for it. This turns on the very simple point that being the cause of a state or event is neither necessary nor sufficient for responsibility. It is not sufficient, because, as Aristotle points out, responsibility requires that a knowledge condition be met. It is not necessary, because, if it were, we would be responsible for nothing. Everyday causal explanations are typically incomplete; when filled out, they appeal to a host of contributing conditions.

A simple example will bring this out. Suppose someone, call him Lucius, is watching a display of marksmanship when, for whatever reason, he runs out in front of the targets, is shot in the head, and dies. Obviously Lucius was not the sole cause of his death in the sense Meyer and the others seem to require for full responsibility. He did not fire the rifle, and this makes him at best a co-cause of his death. Nevertheless, playing this limited causal role is enough for us to say that Lucius is fully responsible for his own death. Note that Lucius also meets the knowledge condition: he knew that marksmen were firing at the targets. (The case would be quite different had Lucius been on his morning jog and run unknowingly onto the field.)

Even after we acknowledge the role of habituation and education in moral development, we must see ourselves as co-causes of our characters (1114b23). Recall that, for an *act* to be voluntary, the agent undertaking it must satisfy two conditions: first, a knowledge condition (in the case of action, knowledge of particulars), and the moving principle condition. There is a parallel with character states: if it was open to us to become good or bad at the beginning, and if we satisfy the knowledge condition (that is, we must know that activities generate corresponding character states), our current state is voluntary (1114a20). Aristotle requires only that we be co-causes of our characters in order to hold us responsible for them, since they will then be entirely voluntary.

The person with a good upbringing and all the advantages the world has to offer is still capable of throwing it all away. Likewise, in the majority of cases,

the vicious person will have had some opportunity to become virtuous. Aristotle can admit the possibility of the congenitally depraved, who are 'brutish' and who can never become good (see *NE* 1145a30-33). And perhaps there will be cases in which the relevant knowledge condition does not obtain for reasons other than the 'utter senselessness' of the agent. None of this means that he has to settle for qualified responsibility for character and the correspondingly qualified responsibility for action which would, on his principles, follow straightaway.

As I have argued, since Aristotle accepts the strong link thesis, he must hold on to full responsibility: if he gives this up, then he cannot, according to his own arguments, hold us fully responsible for the actions which flow from our character states, since such actions will be voluntary only to a greater or lesser degree in proportion to the voluntariness of the character from which they flow. But nothing in his text indicates that he wishes to qualify the voluntariness of actions in this way.

At this stage of the dialectic, one might begin to suspect that the disagreement between me and Meyer *et al.* is purely verbal. After all, I have said that the thesis of qualified responsibility, *stated as Meyer does*, is perfectly acceptable. But this appearance is deceiving, for Meyer holds that Aristotle's acknowledgment of the forces that contribute to character formation would be problematic if Aristotle shared the 'characteristic modern assumption' that 'responsibility for character is the ultimate basis for responsibility'.¹⁴ Her resistance to attributing the strong link thesis to Aristotle rests on the qualified nature of our causal role in the production of our character states. Meyer evidently thinks that full responsibility for character would require that one be the total and sole cause of one's character. But, as I have argued, this is to conflate causation and responsibility.

Let me round out this discussion by considering in more detail the famous passage where Aristotle declares that habituation 'makes *all* the difference':

[S]tates arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather, *all* the difference. (1103b21-5)

Note that Aristotle says it is the activities *we* engage in, not the brute habituation of the lash or the praise and blame of others, which makes all the difference. This does not refute the interpretation I offer; it supports it.

VI. A final objection

Sarah Broadie has offered an extremely subtle reading of iii 5, and my discussion would not be complete if I did not take account of her view.¹⁵ As I have

¹⁴ Meyer 1993, 128. I find her claim that this assumption is a 'modern' one puzzling; Kant, for example, would surely disagree with it.

¹⁵ Indeed, her discussion is so subtle I am not sure I understand it.

noted above, there are many points on which we agree. It is worth taking account of those on which we do not.

Broadie suggests that Aristotle's main purpose in iii 5 is to challenge the hypothesis that character is innate. Although this might be one of his aims, the Platonic background and the interpretation I have built upon it suggest that his main goal is just what it appears to be: to argue that character is voluntary. But towards the end of her discussion, she argues against a view somewhat similar to mine.

The view she has in mind has Aristotle responding to a deterministic challenge: if a person with a settled character is not free to act otherwise, she can only be held responsible for that act if there was an earlier time at which she was free (here, not necessitated or caused) to form the character she did. It should be clear that I have not read Aristotle as responding to such deterministic worries; Aristotle's concern is with the voluntary, and this can be discussed, as Aristotle does in fact discuss it, without joining in the determinism debate. Everything I have said so far is, I think, consistent with determinism, but I do not see how I can be accused of presupposing determinism.¹⁶ Aristotle's worry, I suggest, is something like this: we often explain a person's actions by reference to her character; this, plus the strong link thesis, raises the worry that those acts are not voluntary.

Nevertheless, Broadie's objections to the deterministic line of argument might be thought to apply to my own view. She writes, '[T]he argument of *NE* iii 5 is inept if read (which it often has been) as an attempt to uphold ascriptions of responsibility by tracing the antecedents of action back to a point where the agent is not necessitated to operate in one way rather than another by anything beyond that point. For even on the same page, as well as the place throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle will not let us forget the importance of upbringing and moral persuasion' (1991, 171).

As I have already indicated, I see no real tension between acknowledging the cooperative role of upbringing and moral persuasion and holding the agent responsible for her character. What Aristotle requires is that the agent meet the knowledge condition and that she be a co-cause of the actions that give rise to her character state. This role as part of a causal explanation is enough to make the resulting character one that was voluntarily acquired, on Aristotle's view.¹⁷ If

¹⁶ I confess I am not sure precisely where Broadie would stand on my reading of Aristotle. I agree with her that Aristotle is not primarily motivated by issues of determinism or necessitation. We clearly disagree, however, on the main focus and point of iii 5.

¹⁷ Sorabji 1980, 267 makes some pertinent remarks on this point. Like me, he reads Aristotle as holding that if a character state is involuntary, it must have been acquired in virtue of an external force and without the agent contributing *anything*. Even in the case where the parents and other moral influences all tend toward the good, the child must contribute something: 'At a minimum, he contributes the will to comply or refuse. This can be important; if we recall the case of a child attracted by a toy which he knows he is forbidden to take, it may be up to him which course he follows. And by taking one course rather than another, he will strengthen the corresponding tendencies in himself, and so he will share responsibility for the firm character which he does not yet have, but which he will one day have as a result of these earlier incidents'.

this is 'inept' so be it.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I owe a debt of gratitude to Dan Devereux. The article has also benefited from comments by an anonymous referee and the editor of this journal.