Aristotle, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility

Jennifer Daigle

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ARISTOTLE, DETERMINISM, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

by

JENNIFER DAIGLE

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, PhD and Tim O’Keefe, PhD

ABSTRACT

Aristotle says that we are responsible (αἴτιοι) for our voluntary actions and character. But there’s a question about whether he thinks we are morally responsible and, if so, what he thinks makes it such that we are. Interpretations of Aristotle on this question range from libertarian, according to which Aristotle considers us morally responsible in part because we have undetermined choices, to deflationary, according to which Aristotle has no theory of moral responsibility. Despite putative evidence to the contrary, neither interpretation captures Aristotle’s view on the matter, and their rejection paves the way for a compatibilist proposal, one that works both as an interpretation of Aristotle and as an independently attractive view. I detail this view and defend it against one prominent objection.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, Character, Compatibilism, Incompatibilism, Moral responsibility, Voluntary action
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Dedication

For Gram
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1 Introduction and Preliminary Remarks

Aristotle says that we are responsible (αἴτιοι) for our voluntary actions and character.¹ But there’s a question about whether he thinks we are morally responsible and, if so, what he thinks makes it such that we are. Some say that Aristotle thinks we are morally responsible, and that he thinks we are so in part because we have undetermined choices. This is the libertarian interpretation. Still others argue that Aristotle cannot be said to have a theory of moral responsibility at all, since his purpose in articulating the conditions of voluntariness is merely to pick out actions that are subject to change through strictly forward-looking praise and blame. This is the deflationary interpretation. Despite putative evidence to the contrary, neither interpretation captures Aristotle’s view, and their rejection paves the way for a compatibilist proposal, one that works both as an interpretation of Aristotle and as an independently attractive view.

I begin by responding to the libertarian interpretation, which I divide into two defenses, one having to do with Aristotle’s conception of voluntary action, and the other with his argument for responsibility for character in EN 3.5. Both defenses involve leeway and source incompatibilist assumptions that I take it as my task in sections 2 and 3 of this paper to show that Aristotle himself neither endorses nor assumes when articulating and defending his conception of the voluntariness of action and character. In this way, I will have shown that, appearances aside, Aristotle is not a libertarian.

After having rejected the libertarian interpretation, in section 4 I turn to the deflationary interpretation. I argue that this interpretation cannot be sustained in light of Aristotle’s

conception of moral desert (one’s being worthy of, τὸ ἄξιος εἶναι, something in virtue of past actions) and the place of indignation (νέμεσις), anger (ὀργή), and vengeance (τιμωρία) in the overall good life and city.

In section 5, I detail the compatibilist view that emerges from these considerations and defend it against one prominent objection.

Before I begin, however, five remarks about terminology will be necessary. First, I take moral responsibility for action to involve a relationship between the agent and her action such that, when it obtains, it is in principle appropriate to respond to the agent with praise, blame, or other related actions or attitudes, setting aside any prospective reason for doing so. For example, a person is morally responsible for some bad action (e.g., tripping a pedestrian), just in case it’s in principle appropriate to blame him, even if you (as another pedestrian tripper) shouldn’t do so and doing so wouldn’t, say, enhance public safety, contribute to his rehabilitation, or aid in particular or general deterrence.

Second, I understand libertarianism to be the view that moral responsibility is incompatible with causal determinism, and that we are, generally, morally responsible. Thus, because the falsity of causal determinism functions as one of the libertarian’s constraints on moral responsibility, a comprehensive defense of libertarianism must target causal determinism.

Third, I understand compatibilism as the view that there’s one possible world at which causal determinism is true and there is at least one person who’s morally responsible for

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2 To be clear, when certain prudential or propriety conditions don’t obtain within a particular context, such responses might still be in principle though not in fact appropriate, as when blame would be hypocritical (e.g., Rhet. 2.6 1384b19). This notion of moral responsibility coincides with the basic-desert sense of moral responsibility used by Pereboom 2001, p. xx.

3 Although consequentialist moral responsibility theorists will likely reject this conception (e.g., Schlick 1939, ch. 7), it permits me to sidestep mere semantic squabbles with deflationary interpreters like Jean Roberts in her (1989).
something. A compatibilist, then, neither requires the falsity of causal determinism for moral responsibility, nor is burdened with the task of proving the truth of causal determinism. Unlike the libertarian, it is open to her to be agnostic about the truth or falsity of this thesis, while still maintaining her belief in moral responsibility.

Fourth, by causal determinism (henceforth determinism) I mean the thesis that every non-quantum-level event, including human choices and actions, is uniquely and sufficiently brought about by antecedent causes (I call these antecedent causes determining conditions). In this way, my conception differs importantly from others at work in the literature, including Sarah Broadie’s, who defines it as the “absolute claim that everything is necessary or necessitated,” and Richard Sorabji’s, who defines it as “the view that whatever happens has all along been necessary, that is, inevitable or fixed.” These regrettably make determinism indistinguishable from fatalism, so that given Aristotle’s emphatic rejection of fatalism in De Int. it’s unsurprising that both Broadie and Sorabji consider Aristotle an indeterminist. But uncovering Aristotle’s position with respect to determinism and situating him within today’s free will debate require that we define determinism in a way that’s mindful of this difference. I do this.

Finally, to describe a choice or action as undetermined is simply to say that it lacks determining conditions.

2 Aristotle on Voluntary Action and Why the Libertarian Reading of It Fails

The libertarian interpretation of Aristotle rests on two defenses, one having to do with Aristotle’s characterization of the voluntariness of action and the other with his argument for

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4 I borrow this definition from Mele 2013.
5 Broadie 1991, p. 158.
responsibility for character. The purpose of this section will be to respond to the first of these two defenses, which can be summarized in the following **Undetermined Action Argument**: 

1. On Aristotle’s view, if we are *morally* responsible for φ-ing, then φ-ing is voluntary.
2. Aristotle believes that φ-ing is voluntary only if (i) the source of φ-ing is (in) us or (ii) φ-ing is “up to us” to do or not do.
3. **If Aristotle accepts (i), then he rejects determinism.**
4. **If Aristotle accepts (ii), then he rejects determinism.**
5. Therefore, on Aristotle’s view, if we are morally responsible for φ-ing, then determinism is false.
6. Aristotle thinks that we are morally responsible for φ-ing.
7. Therefore, Aristotle is a libertarian.

Driving Premises 3 and 4 of this argument are source and leeway incompatibilist assumptions, respectively; whereas Premise 3 is supported by the source incompatibilist assumption that determinism undermines our being the source of our actions, Premise 4 is supported by the leeway incompatibilist assumption that determinism undermines possession of alternatives. If Aristotle is shown to share these assumptions, whether implicitly or explicitly, then it’s clear that he is committed to the rejection of determinism. In this section, I will show that these premises are false, beginning with Premise 3, since there’s no reason to think that Aristotle shares these assumptions.

### 2.1 Aristotle on the voluntary agent’s unique causal status

Aristotle defines voluntary action as action for which “the origin is in [the agent], when he knows the particular circumstances in which the action takes place” (ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ εἰδότι τὰ καθ’ ἐκαστὰ ἐν οἷς ἡ πραξίς).  

Aristotle’s characterization of the source of our voluntary actions here is by no means an isolated phenomenon: throughout both *EE* and *EN*, Aristotle repeatedly...
says that voluntary actions have their origin in the agent,\(^8\) or are ones whose origin is the agent.\(^9\) Thus, the question naturally arises as to whether Aristotle, in describing the origin of our voluntary actions in this way, rejects determinism. Indeed, Aristotle says not only that the origin of our voluntary actions is in us, but that such actions can be traced back to no other source than what’s in us.\(^10\) But the truth of determinism, it would seem, renders our actions such that they do not have their source in us, but rather in sufficient, antecedent causes outside of us. It would seem, then, that Aristotle is committed to the rejection of determinism when he identifies the agent as occupying this unique causal status in relation to her voluntary actions. If so, then Premise 3 of the Undetermined Action Argument goes through.

To show that Aristotle isn’t committed to the rejection of determinism, at least not for this reason, I raise three considerations.

First, there are plenty of places in which Aristotle describes an origin as itself being but one link in a longer causal chain. In *EN* 6.1, for example, Aristotle describes deliberation and desire as the origin of choice; and choice as the origin of deliberate action; and deliberate action as the origin of events.\(^11\) So although initially we might be tempted to think of an origin as something that operates outside of any preceding causal sequence, Aristotle himself doesn’t conceive of something’s origin as coming to be or existing in this way.

Second, although there are places in which Aristotle characterizes the agent, not only as an origin, but the origin of her voluntary actions, there’s no reason to think that this has indeterminist implications for Aristotle’s view. Aristotle makes similar claims elsewhere, for

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\(^8\) *EE* 2.8 1224b15; *EN* 3.1 1110a15-17, 1110b4, 1111a23, 3.5 1113b20-21.

\(^9\) *EE* 2.6 1222b15-20, 1222b28-9, 1223a15; *EN* 3.3 1112b28-32, 3.5 1113b17-21, 6.2 1139a31-b5.

\(^10\) *EN* 3.5 1113b19-21.

\(^11\) *EN* 6.1 1139a32-33; 1139a31, b5. I borrow this example from Sorabji 1980, p. 228.
example, in *Meta*. 6, where he tells us that the coincidental (συμβεβηκός) has no cause (αἰτια),\(^{12}\) and that a series of events might have a coincidental origin, itself uncaused.\(^{13}\) But the context of Aristotle’s remarks here makes it clear that they’re neutral between a determinist and indeterminist metaphysics.

Aristotle’s aim in *Meta*. 6 is to account for why the coincidental fails to be a proper object of scientific enquiry, and his answer is that the coincidental has no cause (αἰτια). But we need to bear in mind that the word Aristotle uses, αἰτια, is ambiguous between two meanings: cause (as we typically understand the term) and explanation. Given that Aristotle prioritizes the latter notion in his usage, we should understand him to be saying, not that the coincidental lacks a cause, but that its occurrence lacks an explanation within the Aristotelian scientific framework.\(^{14}\) On Aristotle’s view, science seeks to explain various phenomena in the world by appeal to the necessities (i.e., natures) or regularities at work therein. It’s for this reason that Aristotle thinks that the coincidental cannot be an object of scientific inquiry, since neither is it necessary (i.e., by nature) nor does it correspond to a regular pattern in nature. As examples of coincidences, Aristotle offers a baker’s baking something healthy, a snow storm in the dog days, and a man’s being white. What these occurrences have in common and what makes them coincidences in the first place is that their coming to be cannot be explained by appeal to the natures of the things in question (e.g., to the baker’s being a baker, a man’s being a man) or to patterns of regularity (e.g., to its being the dog days). But here notice that, to deny that these things have an explanation isn’t to also deny that they have a cause; surely, the cause of the

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\(^{12}\) ὡστ’ ἐπει οὐ πάντα ἐστίν ἐξ ἀνάγκης καὶ ἀεί ἢ ὄντα ἢ γιγνόμενα, ἀλλὰ τὰ πλεῖστα ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, ἀνάγκη εἶναι τὸ κατὰ συμβεβηκός ὅν (*Meta*. 6.2 1027a8-11).

\(^{13}\) δὴλον ἃρα ὅτι μέχρι τινὸς βαδίζει ἀρχῆς, αὐτή δ’ οὐκέτι εἰς ἄλλο. ἔσται οὖν ἢ τοῦ ὑπότερ’ ἔτυχεν αὐτή, καὶ αἰτίαν τῆς γενέσεως αὐτῆς ἄλλο οὐθέν (*Meta*. 6.3 1027b12-14).

\(^{14}\) See Frede 1980, pp. 223-224.
healthiness of the baker’s concoction is ultimately something he did, though qua baker he cannot be picked out as cause, at least when cause means explanation, and this in turn involves appeal to necessities and regularities in nature.

Aristotle’s claims about the unique causal status of voluntary agents should be situated in the same framework. When Aristotle tells us that we are the sole origin of our voluntary actions, what he’s doing here is providing what he takes to be the best explanation for our actions, which involves appeal to the agent’s “being the agent”\(^{15}\)—for example, the agent’s deliberating about what to do through consideration of what he takes to be his reasons, his making a choice on the basis of those reasons, his acting on the basis of that choice, and so on. We don’t point to the wallet on the street as being what explains your picking it up and rifling through it; we point instead to the relevant features of your agency to explain your action. On Aristotle’s view, the various circumstances in which we find ourselves, and the things we encounter therein, do not explain our actions better than features of our agency. And when they do—as when a person finds herself in circumstances “which overstrains human nature and nobody would withstand”\(^{16}\) (ἂ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ὑπερτείνει καὶ μηδεὶς ἂν ύπομείναι)—Aristotle unsurprisingly claims that the circumstances are the origin, and not the agent.\(^ {17}\)

These considerations are borne out more fully in my third and final point, based on Aristotle’s most sustained discussion of voluntary action, provided in EN 3.1 where the concept of voluntariness is first introduced. It’s here that we can see that he’s interested in a more

\(^{15}\) O’Keefe 1997, p. 257.

\(^{16}\) EN 3.1 1110a25-26.

\(^{17}\) Of course, showing that Aristotle is interested in making room for attributions of responsibility to agents of a distinctly moral kind by appeal to their unique explanatory role in relation to their voluntary actions requires that more be said about the significance of this role and what it involves. I return to this question in section 5.
metaphysically modest thesis that the source incompatibilist would attribute to him, which can be put as follows:

**Metaphysically Modest Source Thesis (MMST):** the origin of $\varphi$-ing is (in) an agent $A$ if and only if $\varphi$-ing is caused by some feature of $A$’s agency (e.g., appetitive desire, choice, deliberation, etc.).\(^{18}\)

That MMST is what Aristotle intends by his claims about the source of voluntary action is suggested by his responses to two separate inquiries. The first inquiry is whether an action performed under coercive circumstances is voluntary, as when, for example, a captain jettisons cargo in order to keep his ship afloat. Aristotle’s answer is “yes”: this action is chosen ($\alpha$ἱρεταί) by the agent, which Aristotle treats as sufficient for it to have originated in the agent, who chose to act as he did given his knowledge of the circumstances.\(^{19}\) In the second inquiry, Aristotle takes up the question as to whether actions done for the sake of noble or pleasant objects are *forced* ($\betaίξκον$), where an action is forced just in case its origin is outside the agent, the agent contributing nothing. Developing the same line of reasoning, Aristotle this time answers “no”: he observes that pleasure attends these actions, an observation that bears on the inquiry since it indicates that the agents acting for the sake of such things act from their desires. This feature of the causal history of their actions is subsequently treated as sufficient to show that the actions in question originated in the agents and are therefore not forced.\(^{20}\)

Now if MMST accurately captures Aristotle’s conception of what it is to be the source of one’s voluntary actions, then on the basis of these remarks alone Aristotle isn’t committed to the rejection of determinism, and Premise 3 is false. For to have our actions caused by various

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\(^{18}\) See Meyer (2011) and Roberts (1989).

\(^{19}\) *EN* 3.1 1110a11-16. Aristotle doesn't say, though it can be assumed, that the agents in question have the requisite knowledge.

\(^{20}\) *EN* 3.1 1110b12-13.
features of our agency is compatible with the presence of antecedent causes that sufficiently and uniquely bring it about that we deploy these features as we do. And yet, the falsity of Premise 3 is not enough to reject the Undetermined Action Argument, which can do without it, so long as Premise 4 holds. It’s to this premise that I now turn.

2.2 Voluntary action and the ability to do otherwise

Aristotle repeatedly describes voluntary actions as being those that are “up to us” (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) to do or not do, perhaps nowhere more forcefully than at the outset of *EN* 3.5, where he writes:

> But the workings of the virtues are concerned with these things [i.e., choice, deliberation, and wish]. Therefore virtue is up to us. And similarly also vice; for when acting is up to us, not acting is too, and where ‘no’ is up to us, ‘yes’ is too; in this way, if acting, which is noble, is up to us, not acting, which is shameful, is also up to us, and if not acting, which is noble, is up to us, acting, which is shameful, is also up to us. And if doing noble and shameful actions is up to us, and similarly not doing them, and this was being good or bad, then being good or bad is up to us.22

Before saying just what Aristotle is saying in this passage, let’s start with what he’s not: at least here, Aristotle is not saying that being good or bad, or having a virtuous or vicious character, is up to us. This conclusion would follow only on the supposition that being good or bad is just a matter of acting nobly or basely. But Aristotle is unambiguously clear that acting nobly or basely is neither necessary nor sufficient for one’s being good or bad. It’s not necessary because one

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21 *EE* 2.6 1223a8, 2.8 1225a9-10, 2.10 1226a28, 1226b30-31; *EN* 3.1 1110a17-18, 3.5 1115a2-3, 6.12 1144a9-10.
22 *EN* 3.5 1113b5-14.
could be virtuous (and presumably also vicious) while asleep or inactive, and it’s not sufficient, since one can perform good or bad actions without also being good or bad, since the former merely requires various agential abilities that one without a developed character can still possess.

Aristotle’s remarks, then, are restricted to the performance of good or bad actions, and what they seem to amount to is this: if \( \phi \)-ing is “up to us,” then not \( \phi \)-ing is too. In other words, when we have the ability to \( \phi \), we also have the ability to do otherwise than \( \phi \).

Imagine that you are deliberating about whether to catch up on a new novel or to begin grading the stack of exams that has been cluttering your desk for the past week or so. To read the novel would be, you realize, rather selfish; after all, your students have been anxiously awaiting their graded exams. You read that novel anyway. The implication of Aristotle’s claim seems to be that, if what you did was “up to you,” then you could have done otherwise, you could have done the right thing instead.

But here too, the question naturally arises as to whether Aristotle’s claims about what’s “up to us” commit him to rejecting determinism. There are, after all, broadly two ways of conceiving of this ability to do otherwise, one whose possession requires indeterminism, and the other that doesn’t.

**Strong ability:** an agent has the strong ability to do otherwise at time \( t \) just in case he could have done otherwise at \( t \), given the same determining conditions.

**Weak ability:** an agent has the weak ability to do otherwise at time \( t \) just in case he would have done otherwise at \( t \), given slightly different determining conditions.

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23 *EN* 1.5 1095b31-33.

The weak ability to do otherwise is compatible with determinism, whereas the strong ability is not. Consider this: at time $t$, I raised my hand to vote ‘yes.’ If determinism is true, then I lacked the strong ability to do otherwise than raise my hand at $t$, since what I did was uniquely and sufficiently brought about by antecedent causes. But it doesn’t always follow from the truth of determinism that I lacked the weak ability to do otherwise at $t$. To figure out whether I had this ability, we would have to consider what I’d do under *slightly different determining conditions*.

What determining conditions count as “slightly different” will depend on one’s *metric of closeness* to the actual world. Such metrics are used to determine what counterfactuals can be stipulated in a possible world, such that what happens in that possible world can be used to uncover facts about agential abilities in the actual world. In other words, these metrics are used to determine which possible worlds count as *nearby* possible worlds, where only what happens in nearby possible worlds is revelatory of agential abilities in the actual world. For the purposes of this paper, I don’t want to commit myself to the details of any one closeness metric, and in order to elucidate this weak ability I will use uncontroversial changes in the “external” world at the time of action. So returning to the example, to see if I had the weak ability to do otherwise, we might consider what I’d do if voting ‘yes’ required that I *refrain* from raising my hand at $t$. If I were to refrain under these slightly different determining conditions, then I had the ability to do otherwise than raise my hand at $t$. However, if no determining conditions could be specified such that they both (i) satisfy the closeness metric *and* (ii) are such that under them I’d do otherwise at $t$, *then* I lacked the ability to do so at $t$. Let’s say, for instance, that I suffer from an acute hand-raising compulsion. Presumably, as an intrinsic property of mine, this compulsion is relevant to any assessment of my abilities and therefore has to be included among any set of
determining conditions that also satisfy the closeness metric. But if possession of this compulsion is included, then I’d lack the weak ability to do otherwise, since there’d be no set of determining conditions that both satisfy the closeness metric and are such that under them I’d do otherwise than raise my hand at \( t \).

The truth of Premise 4 thus rests on whether Aristotle’s locution concerning what’s “up to us” implicates the strong ability to do otherwise. It will be my contention in the remainder of this section that when Aristotle attributes to agents the ability to do otherwise, he is best read as attributing to them the weak ability. If I’m right, then Premise 4 also fails, and the Undetermined Action Argument with it.

My argument will proceed in three stages. First, I will show that Aristotle’s claims about certain mixed actions (μικταὶ πράξεις) and about the virtuous agent entail his endorsement of the following thesis:

**Sufficiency for Action Thesis (SAT):** the possession of certain agential features, together with background conditions, is sufficient to bring about an agent’s \( \varphi \)-ing, even though \( \varphi \)-ing was “up to him” to do or not do.

Second, I will argue that understanding Aristotle as intending to attribute to agents a strong ability to do otherwise when he claims that some action is “up to them” to do or not do would thereby render SAT incoherent. Third, I will show that, if Aristotle is read as intending just to attribute to agents the weak ability, the coherence of SAT remains intact. From this, I conclude that, because we ought to avoid attributing to Aristotle an incoherent position when a plausible alternative is available, we should take Aristotle’s claims to be implicating the weak ability, and not the strong one.
Aristotle’s endorsement of SAT is revealed, first, by his remarks about the captain who orders that cargo be jettisoned during a violent storm.\(^{25}\) On the one hand, Aristotle says that he acted voluntarily and that his action was “up to him” (ἐπ’ αὐτῷ). At the same time, he also writes: “for without [such circumstances] nobody voluntarily throws out cargo, but all sensible people [would] for the purpose of the salvation of oneself and the crew”\(^{26}\) (ἀπλῶς μὲν γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἀποβάλλεται ἐκών, ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ δὲ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ἄπαντες οἱ νοῦν ἔχοντες). This last remark suggests that, on Aristotle’s view, a person’s agential features (in this case, her good sense), together with background conditions (in this case, a life-threatening storm and heavy cargo), are sufficient to bring about the agent’s action.

Aristotle’s endorsement of SAT is also suggested by his remarks about the ideally virtuous agent. On Aristotle’s view, the virtuous agent possesses a certain kind of *psychic perfection*, in which the nonrational part of his soul waits on, and is perfectly obedient to, the rational part’s orders.\(^{27}\) The virtuous person (unlike the incontinent person) never acts against his choice (προαιρεσις), since his feelings are in perfect harmony with his evaluative judgments about what’s good; and he (unlike the continent person) is never motivated by shameful desires.\(^ {28}\) For these reasons, Aristotle also claims that “the good man will never voluntarily perform bad actions”\(^ {29}\) (ἐκὼν δὲ ὁ ἐπιεικῆς οὐδέποτε πράξει τὰ φαῦλα). But here again, this characterization of the virtuous agent suggests that such a person’s agential features (in this case, her practical reason and character states), together with background conditions, are sufficient to bring about what she does (at least, that is, in circumstances in which there’s only one noble thing to be

\(^{25}\) EN 1110a6-9.

\(^{26}\) EN 3.1 1110a9-11.

\(^{27}\) For Aristotle’s use of the master-servant analogy, see for example EN 7.6 1149a26-29.

\(^{28}\) EN 7.8-9.

\(^{29}\) EN 4.9 1128b28-29.
done). And yet there’s no reason to think that such a person’s actions aren’t voluntary and so “up to her” to do or not do.

The problem here with attributing SAT to Aristotle, while at the same time taking him to attribute to agents the strong ability to do otherwise, is this: on the one hand, the first part of SAT states that an agent A’s \( \varphi \)-ing is sufficiently caused prior to its occurrence. At the same time, the second part of SAT, if read as attributing the strong ability to do otherwise than \( \varphi \) to A, would state that A’s \( \varphi \)-ing is not sufficiently caused. In this way, SAT is rendered incoherent.

But while taking Aristotle to attribute the strong ability to do otherwise to agents would render Aristotle’s view incoherent, taking him to attribute the weak ability to them does not. One can claim that agent A’s \( \varphi \)-ing was sufficiently caused prior to its occurrence while still ascribing to A the weak ability to do otherwise than \( \varphi \), since having the weak ability to do otherwise than \( \varphi \) is compatible with being sufficiently caused to \( \varphi \). The sensible captain, for example, had the weak ability to do otherwise than dump the goods during the storm if, on a pleasant day, she wouldn’t have.

These considerations strongly suggest that the agential ability implicated in Aristotle’s discussion of what’s “up to us” is in the end metaphysically modest. And yet, as evidence that the preceding discussion fails to capture all that Aristotle has to say about the voluntariness of action, some libertarian interpreters appeal to Aristotle’s argument for responsibility for character; they offer that Aristotle, in establishing the voluntariness of our character states, presents an additional necessary condition on the voluntariness of action. In the next section, I conclude my consideration of the libertarian interpretation by showing that this and another
libertarian reading of Aristotle’s argument are not in the end motivated by the passage in question.

3 The Voluntariness of Character and Why Libertarian Reading Here Fares No Better

Before detailing and responding to the two libertarian readings of Aristotle’s argument for responsibility for character, it will be useful to look at the passage, spanning EN 3.5 1114a1-22, used to support these readings. Here, Aristotle writes:

(i) They [i.e., lawmakers and private citizens] even punish the ones who are ignorant of something in the laws, which they should know and is not difficult. And similarly also in other cases, where people seem ignorant because of carelessness, since not being ignorant is up to them; for they are in control of taking care. (ii) But perhaps one is the sort not to take care. (iii) But they are themselves responsible for becoming people of this sort, by living carelessly and being unjust or intemperate; some by acting viciously, and others by whiling their time in drinking bouts or the like. For the particular activities make them of such a sort. And this is clear from the ones who practice for a contest or deed; for they continue practicing. Therefore, being ignorant that states arise from particular activities—this belongs to the utterly senseless. And if somebody knowingly performs actions from which he will become unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily. Further, it is unreasonable to suppose that the one committing injustice does not wish to be unjust, or that the one acting intemperately does not wish to be intemperate. This indeed is not to suppose that if ever one wishes he will cease from being unjust and be just; for neither will the sick person become healthy in this way. And if in this way he happened to become sick, then he is sick voluntarily, through living incontinently and disobeying his doctors. So it was then open to him not to be sick, but not any longer, after he has let himself go, just as the one who throws a stone is not still able to take it back. Yet taking the stone and throwing it were up to him; for the origin was in him. And in this way also to the unjust and the intemperate it was open at the beginning not to become such people, so they are such people voluntarily; but having become so, it is no longer possible for them not to be.

(i) καὶ τοὺς ἄγνοοῦντας τι τῶν ἐν τοῖς νόμοις, ἃ δεῖ ἐπίστασθαι καὶ μὴ χαλεπά ἔστι, κολάζουσιν. ὡμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις, ὥσα δι’ ἀμέλειαν ἄγνοεῖν δοκοῦσιν, ὡς ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς ὅν τὸ μὴ ἄγνοεῖν· τοῦ γὰρ ἐπιμεληθῆναι κύριοι. (ii) ἀλλ’ ἵσως τοιοῦτός ἐστιν ὡς μὴ ἐπιμεληθῆναι. (iii) ἀλλὰ τοῖς τοιοῦτοις γενέσθαι αὐτοὶ αἰτίας, ζώντες ἀνειμένως, καὶ τοῖς ἁδικοῖς ἢ ἄκολοστοις εἶναι, οἱ μὲν κακουργοῦντες, οἱ δὲ ἐν πότως καὶ τοῖς τοιοῦτοις διάγοντες· αἱ γὰρ περὶ ἐκαστὰ ἐνέργεια τοιοῦτοις ποιοῦσιν. τοῦτο δὲ δῆλον ἐκ τῶν μελετῶν πρὸς ἡντινοῦν ἄγωνιαν ἢ πράξιν· διατελεῖσθαι γὰρ ἐνεργοῦντες, τὸ μὲν όūν ἄγνοεῖν ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ ἐνεργεῖν περὶ ἐκαστὰ αἱ ἔξεις γίνονται, κομιδὴ ἀναισθήτου· εἶ δὲ μὴ ἄγνοοι τις πράττει εξ ὧν ἔσται ἁδικος, ἐκὼν ἁδικος ἀν
The passage follows a certain dialectical progression, where an objection appearing at (ii) challenges a claim Aristotle makes at (i), and this objection in turn motivates Aristotle’s argument for responsibility for character, starting at (iii).  

The objection challenges specifically Aristotle’s claim that the careless person is in control of the cause of his ignorance (EN 3.5 1114a2-3), which Aristotle earlier identifies as his disposition to be careless (EN 3.5 1114a1-2). Just before the objection is raised, Aristotle is arguing that somebody who’s ignorant due to drunkenness is in control of the cause of his ignorance, “for he is in control of not getting drunk, and this [i.e., being drunk] is the cause of his ignorance” (κύριος γὰρ τοῦ μὴ μεθυσθῆναι, τοῦτο δὲ αἰτία τῆς ἁγνοίας). He next argues that those whose ignorance is due to carelessness are also in control of the cause of their ignorance. The objection challenges this analogy. For while ignorance due to drunkenness is caused by a choice of the agent (e.g., to get drunk, or to drink too much, etc.), ignorance due to having a disposition toward carelessness involves making no such choice. Say, for example, that you’re ignorant of your students’ concerns about their exams. This ignorance needn’t be caused by a choice of yours, say, not to ask them how they feel, but might instead be a consequence of your development of a disposition toward carelessness when it comes to other people and their cares. Indeed, it might be this disposition that leads to your failure to even ask how they feel.

30 My reconstruction of the objection and understanding of its context are indebted to Meyer 2011, pp. 136-137.
31 EN 3.5 1113b30-1114a3.
about their performance on the exam. It is on the grounds of this disanalogy that the objector challenges Aristotle’s claim that the careless person is in control of the cause of her ignorance.

The argument implicit in the objection (which I’ll call the No Control Argument) can be put as follows:

1. The agent has a disposition to be careless (EN 3.5 1114a3-4).
2. Once an agent has acquired a disposition, he isn’t in control of having that disposition.
3. Therefore, the agent isn’t in control of having the disposition to be careless.

A further implication attached to the objection is the following:

4. If an agent isn’t in control of the cause of an outcome, then that outcome isn’t in his control or voluntary.
5. Therefore, outcomes caused by our dispositions aren’t in our control or voluntary.

By outcome, I mean especially to include states of being, like drunkenness or ignorance, though it is not unwarranted to also include actions.

It’s at this point that Aristotle responds with what I’ll call his Responsibility for Character Argument. While conceding the objector’s conclusion at Premise 3, Aristotle nevertheless argues:

1. If we were once in control of acquiring our dispositions, then we have them voluntarily.
2. We were once in control of acquiring our dispositions.
3. Therefore, we have them voluntarily.

The implications of Aristotle’s argument, which target directly Premise 4 of the No Control Argument, can be drawn out as follows:

4. If we have our dispositions voluntarily, then outcomes flowing from our dispositions are in our control and voluntary.
5. Therefore, outcomes flowing from our dispositions are in our control and voluntary.
Notice that in my rendering of the dialectic I have been careful not to expressly insert any metaphysical assumptions or implications. I take it as the task of the libertarian interpreter to show that Aristotle is in the end assuming an indeterminist metaphysics, or making claims that require its truth. Before considering what I take to be the strongest argument to think that he is, it is worth pausing at the outset to consider one libertarian reading of this passage that clearly fails.

### 3.1 Aristotle, ultimate responsibility, and SFAs

The interpretation, offered by free will theorist Robert Kane, takes Aristotle’s argument for responsibility for character to be operating on the following assumption:

> If a man is responsible for wicked acts that flow from his character, he must at some time in the past have been responsible for forming the wicked character from which these acts flow.\(^{32}\)

It is for this reason that Kane understands this passage to be suggestive of his own view, according to which responsibility for action requires **ultimate responsibility**, where an agent has such responsibility over an action just in case he is “responsible for anything that is a sufficient reason (condition, cause, or motive) for the action’s occurring.”\(^{33}\)

Let’s say that your selfish choice to read the novel rather than grade exams “issues from, and is sufficiently explained by, your character and motives (together with background

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\(^{32}\)Kane 2011, p. 383.

\(^{33}\)Presumably, Kane means to say that one is ultimately responsible for his action just in case he is responsible for anything that is, *together with* the relevant background conditions (e.g., the particulars of the situation), a sufficient cause of the action. Although Kane makes this qualification in the next passage I have quoted, strangely he doesn’t do so when first stipulating the condition for ultimate responsibility. But without this further qualification, his condition of ultimate responsibility doesn’t seem to make sense. Here’s an example: we’ve just finished a race and are exhausted. As it happens, we are the last ones to finish and the hospitality tent has already been plundered; there’s only one remaining bottle of water. I swoop in and grab the spoils, greedily guzzling the cool water. On the one hand, my selfish character explains my action; but while I might be responsible for forming such a character, my character is not, on its own, sufficient for my action. After all, lots of other features of the situation had to be in place (e.g., there had to be a bottle of water left, etc.).
conditions).” According to Kane, if you’re morally responsible for your selfish choice, then you “must be at least in part responsible by virtue of choices or actions voluntarily performed in the past for having the character and motives” you have now.\textsuperscript{34} And, on Kane’s view, such choices or actions must be \textit{undetermined}, where a choice or action is undetermined just in case there is nothing that sufficiently causes the choice or action prior to its occurrence. Kane refers to these choices or actions as “self-forming actions,” or SFAs, and summarizes his discussion in this way: “Thus, I believe, with Aristotle, that responsibility for our wills (characters, motives, and purposes) accumulates over time. It is by making many SFAs through a lifetime that we gradually form and reform our characters, motives, and purposes in ways not determined by our past.”\textsuperscript{35}

Of course, if Kane’s reading of the passage is correct, then it is clear that Aristotle is a libertarian of sorts. But this reading isn’t correct.

First, even if Aristotle is interested in establishing the voluntariness of actions caused by our character, as Kane takes him to be, all that can be supported from this passage is the more restricted claim that

The voluntariness of one’s character states is \textit{sufficient} for the voluntariness of actions flowing from such states.

On the basis of this passage alone, we cannot conclude that Aristotle thinks that the voluntariness of our character states is \textit{necessary} for the voluntariness of action’s flowing from these states. To be clear, Aristotle certainly thinks that we are responsible for our character; this fact is evidenced throughout \textit{EE} and \textit{EN}. So what is at issue here is not whether Aristotle

\textsuperscript{34} Kane 2011, p. 383.
\textsuperscript{35} Kane 2011, p. 399.
thinks we are responsible for our character, but rather how such responsibility is supposed to
relate to the voluntariness of action. My claim is that Kane makes a necessity claim when only a
sufficiency claim is licensed by the text. What’s more, it would be strange for Aristotle to tack
another constraint onto voluntary action at the very end of Book 3 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*,
after already going on at length at the very beginning of it about two conditions offered there
as independently necessary and jointly sufficient.

Second, and more to the point, even if Aristotle is making the stronger necessity claim,
reason would still have to be given as to why we ought to take Aristotle’s claims about the
voluntariness of our character states to have the indeterminist implications Kane sees in them.
After all, Aristotle might be concerned about historical considerations having to do with the
production of certain agential features, like our character states, without also being concerned
about determinism itself.

There is but one consideration that suggests that Aristotle’s claims rest on the falsity of
determinism. I conclude my case against the libertarian interpretation by considering this.

3.2 Aristotle’s asymmetrical claims about control

In his closing remarks, Aristotle concedes to the objector that we are *no longer* in control of
our character, writing:

And in this way also to the unjust and the intemperate it was open at the beginning not
to become such people, so they are such people voluntarily; but having become so, it is
no longer possible for them not to be.

οὗτω δὲ καὶ τῷ ἁδίκῳ καὶ τῷ ἀκολάστῳ ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν ἐξῆν τοιούτοις μὴ γενέσθαι, διὸ ἐκόντες εἰσὶν· γενομένοις δ’οὐκέτι ἐξεστὶ μὴ εἶναι.

As his reason for why we are no longer in control of our character, Aristotle cites that not
having the character we now have is no longer possible for us. At the same time, Aristotle’s
Responsibility for Character Argument is premised on our once having such control—in other words, on its once being possible for us to have a different character than we now do. These remarks naturally raise the question as to what accounts for this change in the level of control we have over our character states, from the time when we were first acquiring them to when they are fully-developed.

One answer to this question is that Aristotle thinks that a person’s having a fully-developed character state at time $t$ is causally sufficient for her possession of that state at any time after $t$, and that more generally it is the presence of such a cause that undermines possession of alternatives. But if, on Aristotle’s view, it is simply the presence of a sufficient antecedent cause for some outcome (e.g., agent $A$’s being vicious) that makes it such that $A$ cannot bring it about that she isn’t vicious, then Aristotle is committed to the rejection of determinism, since he thinks that there’s a time when it’s open to not be vicious. Moreover, if these considerations are correct, then they might be taken to cast serious doubt on my argument, developed in section 2, that Aristotle’s attribution to voluntary agents of the ability to do otherwise implicates a weak, and not strong, ability.

So without an alternative explanation for Aristotle’s claims about our control, the libertarian reading takes priority as the only way to make sense of Aristotle’s remarks. Is there an alternative explanation supported by Aristotle’s texts? I think that there is.

Consider again that you’re faced with the choice between grading exams and reading the novel, and that in the end you choose to read the novel. Now also imagine that over the years, when confronted with similar such choices, you’ve repeatedly opted for the selfish alternative, causing you eventually to acquire a deep-seated, thoroughly vicious character, and that your
vicious character is responsible for your choice. While Aristotle would say that your choice to read the novel is “up to you” to do or not do, he’d still say that it’s no longer possible for you not to be vicious, although it once was.

I submit that we can make sense of the discrepancy between the kind of control Aristotle takes us to have over our voluntary actions, on the one hand, and the kind of control he takes us to have over our character states, on the other, in a way that is metaphysically neutral. Specifically, we can do this through consideration of the significant difference between acting in some way (reading the novel), and being in some way (vicious). First, notice that very little would have to change with respect to the determining conditions presently at work in your case in order to get you to grade the exams. We could now stipulate, for example, that failure to grade the exams would cause you to get seriously jammed up by horrendous end-of-semester student evaluations. Considering your behavior in this nearby possible world would allow us to conclude that, although you chose to read the novel, you could have chosen differently.

At the same time, however, notice that a great deal would have to change in order for you to not be vicious (again, presuming that you are thoroughly vicious, as Aristotle does when he claims that the vicious cannot cease any longer being vicious). So much would have to change about you that to say that it’s presently in your control to not be vicious would be false, since any such radical change to your agential features would fail any plausible metric of closeness to the actual world. But, prior to your acquiring such character states, no such difficulties arise: you’ve yet to acquire such distinguishing, thoroughly deep-seated agential features.

Thus Aristotle’s asymmetrical attributions of control or lack thereof in relation to our voluntary actions and character, respectively, need not have metaphysical implications of any
kind. Instead, this asymmetry could be premised on the obvious difficulty raised by having to specify determining conditions that result in substantial changes to the agent but which still satisfy our metric of closeness to the actual world. In providing this alternative, metaphysically neutral explanation for the discrepancy between Aristotle’s control claims, and failing to see any other reason why Aristotle should be committed to indeterminism on the basis of this passage, I take myself to be done with the libertarian defense of Aristotle on the voluntariness of our character states. And since I have already provided sufficient evidence against the libertarian reading of Aristotle on the voluntariness of action, my treatment of the libertarian interpretation is at its end.

4 The Deflationary Interpretation and Response

But that Aristotle doesn’t have a libertarian theory of moral responsibility does not mean that he has a compatibilist one. He might not have a theory of moral responsibility at all. This is what Jean Roberts thinks. While agreeing with the account of voluntariness I’ve so far sketched, Roberts rejects any connection between this account and moral responsibility, offering instead a deflationary interpretation of the purpose behind Aristotle’s turn to voluntariness. On Roberts’ deflationary interpretation, Aristotle’s purpose in articulating his conditions for voluntariness is merely to pick out those actions that can be reinforced or discouraged, depending on their desirability, through praise and blame. Practices of praise and blame are themselves justified solely on consequentialist grounds, and so too is one’s desert; as Roberts claims: “One ‘deserves’ punishment, for Aristotle, if there is something wrong with one’s soul of the sort that might be correctable.”

4.1 Robert’s three-part defense

Roberts provides three distinct reasons in support of her interpretation. First, she notes Aristotle’s concern to show that children and animals also act voluntarily. Therefore, if voluntary action is perfectly coextensive with morally responsible action, then children and animals not only act voluntarily but are morally responsible for what they do. Roberts believes that this conclusion should make us rethink whether voluntariness is intended to track moral responsibility for action, saying: “I take it that whatever precisely moral responsibility is, animals and small children do not have it.”

Second, while one might try to forgo this difficulty by drawing a distinction within the category of voluntary agents, Roberts blocks this by arguing that there’s no feature common to average adults that could sufficiently and relevantly distinguish them from children or animals. Although one might respond by appealing to adults’ possession of reason, Roberts argues that on Aristotle’s view reason cannot sufficiently and relevantly distinguish adults from children. She writes:

Aristotle does not, in discussing responsibility for action, go out of his way to distinguish adults from children because he thinks that many adults are very much like children. It is part of being good that appetite obey reason and that reason reason well. Those who act badly almost always have reason which has been perverted by appetite and are to that extent as much creatures of irrational desire as children.

That the possession of reason fails to sufficiently and relevantly distinguish adults from children on Aristotle’s view is further suggested, Roberts thinks, by Aristotle’s failure to distinguish between the sorts of pedagogical and corrective measures appropriate to each. If reason

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37 Roberts 1989, p. 25.
38 Roberts 1989, p. 27.
39 Roberts 1989, p. 27.
played an important role in controlling and motivating adults’ actions, then he’d emphasize the use of rational persuasion or argument. But he doesn’t, even explicitly rejecting it while emphasizing instead the role of fear and penalties in controlling the behavior of the majority.\(^{40}\)

Finally, Roberts claims that, in view of Aristotle’s theory of moral development and moral psychology, Aristotle cannot have a theory of moral responsibility. Aristotle thinks that the formation of good habits in youth makes “all of the difference” for how one turns out.\(^{41}\) From this, Roberts argues that when Aristotle claims that an agent is responsible for having the character that he has, his claim cannot be an answer to the question of “what determines, or has determined, any individual’s character?” This is because, as Roberts puts it, “if the question here is ‘what ultimately caused x to be of this character?’ Aristotle ought to say, if he is to be consistent, that other people had at least a great deal to do with it.”\(^{42}\) Thus, it is doubtful that this is the question Aristotle is attempting to provide an answer to, and so it is doubtful that Aristotle’s discussion is really about moral responsibility for character.\(^{43}\) Moreover, because on Aristotle’s view character determines how the good appears, and the agent always pursues the apparent good, the agent also cannot be said to be morally responsible for his voluntary actions, either.

### 4.2 Response

I’ll now respond to each of these points in turn, ultimately arguing that the deflationary interpretation is both unsupported by, and irreconcilable with, Aristotle’s texts.

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\(^{40}\) EN 10.9 1179b4-29.  
\(^{41}\) EN 2.1 1103b24-26.  
\(^{42}\) Roberts 1989, p. 28.  
\(^{43}\) Roberts 1989, p. 28.
To begin, Roberts is correct that voluntary action cannot be perfectly coextensive with morally responsible action. But she’s wrong to draw the further inferences that Aristotle isn’t interested in moral responsibility and that voluntariness has nothing to do with it. Aristotle’s texts don’t warrant these inferences, and there’s more reason to think the opposite; namely, that Aristotle is interested in attributing moral, as opposed to strictly causal, responsibility to agents.

Recall that moral responsibility involves a relationship between the agent and her action such that, when it obtains, it is in principle appropriate to respond to the agent with praise, blame, or other related actions or attitudes, even if there are no prospective reasons for doing so. We can now see that Aristotle accepts moral responsibility, and that he even has reason to defend it, by considering what he says about moral desert, as well as his conception of the place of indignation, anger, and vengeance in the overall good life and city.

Although Aristotle tells us that indignation (νέμεσις) isn’t a virtue, since it’s without choice (ἄνευ προαιρέσεως) and is an emotion, he nevertheless characterizes it as praiseworthy, since it is a mean state between two vicious ones (envy and malice) and contributes to just action. Whereas envy involves feeling pain when one’s neighbors are deservedly prosperous, malice involves joy at undeserved adversities; neither envy nor malice is ever praiseworthy because they’re always unfitting for their objects. Indignation, on the other hand, is always praiseworthy since it’s always fitting for its object: it involves feeling pain at undeserved, and

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44 EE 3.7 1234a24-35.
45 EE 2.3 1221a3, 3.7 1234a33; EN 2.7 1108b1-2.
46 EE 3.7 1233b19-23.
pleasure at deserved, good or bad fortune. Its manifestation is a sign of good character, because indignation truthfully tracks something about the people toward whom it’s felt; namely, whether or not they deserve the good or bad fortune that attends them. What’s especially important is that Aristotle implicates a conception of distinctly moral desert, in which one’s desert is tied to the moral quality of one’s past actions. He writes:

For instance, parricides and assassins, whenever they meet vengeance, no good man would be grieved. For one should rejoice at such people [i.e., the bad men], and in this way also at those who fare well, in accordance with their desert; for both are just, and make the good man rejoice.

Parricides and assassins are those who have acted badly, and so we should feel pleasure at their being the objects of vengeance, since they deserve it in virtue of their past bad acts. And at least within this context, we can assume that those who are deservedly fortunate are those who are so in virtue of past good acts.

Aristotle’s belief that the quality of our past actions makes it so that we are deserving of certain fortunes and undeserving of others is hard to square with the deflationary interpretation. The burden is on Roberts to say why we shouldn’t take Aristotle’s appeal to

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47 EE 1233b23-27. There are places in which indignation is restricted to feelings of pain at undeserved good fortune (e.g., EN 2.7 1108b3-4 and perhaps also Rhet. 2.9 1386b, though it’s unclear), and where Aristotle characterizes pity as pain at the undeserved misfortune of another (Rhet. 1386b1). I use EE’s definition for convenience, since whether it is indignation specifically or some other nameless emotion that is involved in this range of praiseworthy responses is irrelevant. What is relevant is that the emotion, and the character from which it springs, is praiseworthy and contributes to justice since it truthfully tracks whether its target deserves the good or bad fortune that befalls him.

48 When Aristotle describes somebody as deserving something, he uses the adjective ἄξιος or some adverbial form.

49 There are other notions of desert at work here, ones that are not distinctly moral in the sense identified above. For example, when listing those toward whom indignation is often felt, Aristotle also mentions the newly rich (Rhet. 1387a9).

50 Rhet. 2.9 1386b4.
moral desert in the straightforward way suggested by his texts. Indeed, Aristotle’s mention of τιμωρία (vengeance) suggests that he isn’t here invoking any form of consequentialist desert, according to which one is deserving of some fortune just in case its receipt serves prospective concerns. Instead, all evidence suggests that Aristotle’s conception of moral desert is retrospective, where one is morally deserving of something in virtue of the moral quality of her past actions. And it’s because Aristotle thinks that people are morally deserving of certain fortunes that indignation is praiseworthy: it inclines us toward just action, that is, toward treating others in accordance with their desert.

Anger (ὀργή), like indignation, is an emotion and so not a virtue, though it too can be praiseworthy. Aristotle defines anger as a desire for vengeance against a particular person, because this person has acted unjustly—“for anger is not toward the just”\textsuperscript{51} (οὐ γίγνεται γὰρ ἢ ὀργὴ πρὸς τὸ δίκαιον)—toward oneself or a friend.\textsuperscript{52} The aim of anger, then, is the pain of the person who has acted unjustly,\textsuperscript{53} which is why it’s often (though perhaps not always) mitigated or extinguished when its target falls on greater misfortune than what would have been inflicted by oneself.\textsuperscript{54} While Aristotle generally recommends mildness (presumably because people tend more often than not to fail in the direction of the other side of the mean, toward irascibility), he still thinks that one can be deficient in anger,\textsuperscript{55} and that there are instances in which anger is appropriate and its absence inappropriate.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{51} Rhet. 2.3 1380b15.
\textsuperscript{52} Rhet. 2.2 1378a30-33; 2.4 1382a31; 2.5 1383b21. He also defines it as ὀρεξὶν ἀντιλθῆσεως, an appetite to return pain (bodily or mental) for pain (De An. 1.1 403a30-31).
\textsuperscript{53} Rhet. 2.4 1382a31.
\textsuperscript{54} Rhet. 2.3 1380b14-15.
\textsuperscript{55} EE 2.3 1221a17-18; EN 2.7 1108a4-5.
\textsuperscript{56} EN 2.9 1109b14-16, 3.1 1111a30-31.
Although some morally responsibility skeptics have made space in their theories for emotions like anger and indignation by appeal to the overall positive effects of these emotions, Aristotle seems not only to be uninterested in doing this (e.g., the aim of anger, he tell us, just is the pain of the offender), but also to get into trouble if he were to be doing this. On Aristotle’s view, these emotions are constituted in part by certain beliefs about their target, including the belief in his *truly* deserving vengeance or a bad lot. If Aristotle were to reject moral responsibility while at the same time insisting that these emotions, themselves constituted by a belief in moral responsibility, ought to be kept around, then he would be opening up room for a kind of psychic split in the agent, and with it the need to quarantine one belief set off from the other. In itself a problematic position, it should not be attributed to Aristotle without some indication that he himself endorses it. And there is no such indication.

Finally, consider what Aristotle says about vengeance (τιμωρία). In *Rhet.* 1.9, he encourages it, claiming that

> Also taking vengeance on enemies is better than reconciling; for retaliating is just, and the just thing is fine, and a courageous man should not allow himself to be beaten.\(^{57}\)

> καὶ τὸ τούς ἐχθροὺς τιμωρεῖσθαι μᾶλλον καὶ μὴ καταλλάττεσθαι. τὸ τε γὰρ ἀνταποδίδοναι δίκαιον, τὸ δὲ δίκαιον καλὸν, καὶ ἀνδρείου τὸ μὴ ἠττᾶσθαι.

In *EN* 3.5, Aristotle appeals to the practice of people’s taking vengeance (τιμωροῦνται) against wrongdoers as evidence for his claims about voluntariness.\(^{58}\) Not only that, he tells us that “just acts of vengeance and punishment are from virtue, and are necessary”\(^{59}\) (αἱ δίκαιαι τιμωρίαι

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57 Rhet. 1.9 1367a24-25.  
58 EN 3.5 1113b22-24.  
59 Pol. 7 1332a12-16. Aristotle is also clear that just vengeance is only conditionally necessary (and so we might say only conditionally constitutive of) happiness, since it would be better not to need it, but we do on the condition that people act badly. Brickhouse (1991, p. 142) also raises this point against Roberts’ interpretation, but he fails to address this important objection.
καὶ κολάσεις ἀπ’ ἀρετῆς μὲν εἰσιν, ἄναγκαξαι δέ (i.e., in the city’s governance). Although here one might read Aristotle as providing a consequentialist justification for just vengeance, doing so would be a mistake, since just vengeance is a means that is partly constitutive of the city’s aim, namely the happiness of its citizens. As such, just vengeance is desirable for its own sake, as are the virtues and virtuous action more generally. To say that just vengeance is a constitutive means is to say that its value cannot be understood on consequentialist grounds, since the act itself is valuable, as a constituent of happiness.

Aristotle’s views about moral desert and his approbatory claims about indignation, anger, and vengeance cannot be accommodated outside of a robust conception of moral responsibility, so that these considerations alone speak decisively against the deflationary interpretation. But next recall Roberts’ second reason: there’s nothing to sufficiently distinguish adults from children, since the majority of adult human beings are (and act) very much like children. This belief is reconcilable with the equally plausible view that adults are still morally responsible for their actions. For from the fact that a great many adults fail to deploy their rational capacities as they should, we cannot conclude that they lack the relevant ability to do so. Children and animals, on the other hand, lack this ability, for they lack rational capacities or have them only to a limited degree.

Finally, consider the third point Roberts makes in defense of her deflationary interpretation; namely, that for Aristotle human beings are determined to act and to have the character that they have by their childhood upbringing. Roberts might simply deny that adults who fail to deploy their rational capacities had the ability to do so, reasoning that because they weren’t properly habituated to do so, they lacked the ability to do so. Without now saying whether
Roberts is correct to construe moral upbringing in this way, my response should be obvious from preceding considerations. Put simply, the problem with Roberts’ response is that it begs the question of the compatibility of moral responsibility with determinism and picks out as the relevant ability the strong ability. But as we’ve already seen, there’s no reason to think that this is the relevant ability according to Aristotle. And if there’s no reason to think that this is the relevant ability, then it cannot be used in defense of the deflationary interpretation as a reading of Aristotle.

So much for the deflationary interpretation.

5 Aristotle’s Compatibilism

Above, I defined compatibilism as the view that there’s one possible world at which causal determinism is true and there is at least one person who’s morally responsible for something. What I’ve shown up to this point is that Aristotle thinks that we’re generally morally responsible for what we do, and that determinism isn’t a threat to our being so. Though in showing these things, I’ve provided sufficient evidence that Aristotle’s view of moral responsibility is compatibilist, I’ve said little about the specifics of his view. I do that now, along the way defending Aristotle’s view against one objection.

5.1 Voluntary action

At the outset of EN 3.1, Aristotle says the following about his purposes in articulating the conditions of voluntariness:

And because virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and because praise and blame are bestowed on voluntary actions, and because forgiveness, and sometimes even pity, is on involuntary ones, perhaps it is necessary for those who are studying

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60 I return to this below.
virtue to delimit the voluntary and the involuntary, and also useful for those who make laws toward the distribution of honors and punishments.\textsuperscript{61}

Τῆς ἀρετῆς δὲ περὶ πάθη τε καὶ πράξεως οὐσίας, καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς ἐκουσίοις ἐπαίνων καὶ ψόγων γινομένων, ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς ἐκουσίοις συγγνώμης, ἐνίστε δὲ καὶ ἐλέου, τὸ ἐκουσίον καὶ τὸ ἀκουσίον ἀναγκαῖον ἑσώς διορίσαι τοῖς περὶ ἀρετῆς ἐπισκοποῦσι· χρήσιμον δὲ καὶ τοῖς νομοθετοῦσι πρός τε τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς κολάσεις.

Having shown that Aristotle accepts moral responsibility, we must rethink Roberts’ characterization of voluntariness, preserving its \textit{prima facie} significance when Aristotle links it together with praise and blame in this passage. Specifically, voluntariness should be understood as a necessary condition for moral responsibility for action, where

\textbf{Voluntary Action Condition (VA)}: $\varphi$-ing is voluntary for agent $A$ just in case it is caused by some feature of $A$’s agency (e.g., appetitive desire, choice, deliberation, etc.), and $A$ is herself knowledgeable of the particulars of the situation in which she acts.

Interestingly, Aristotle also indicates that he’s interested in introducing gradations of voluntariness into his account of voluntary action which aren’t presently reflected in VA. He seems to take actions that are caused by certain agential features, in particular deliberation and choice (discussed below), to be more voluntary than those that are caused in other ways, for example, as a result of mere non-rational desire.

One interesting feature of Aristotle’s conception of voluntariness is that it allows for moral responsibility for action performed under coercive circumstances. Here, it’s important to draw attention to the distinction Aristotle draws between (i) a merely coercive circumstance, on the one hand, and (ii) a circumstance “which overstrains human nature and nobody would withstand” (ἀ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ὑπερτείνει καὶ μηδείς ἂν ὑπομείναι), on the other.\textsuperscript{62}

Whereas acting under coercion often gives rise to duress, duress alone on Aristotle’s view isn’t

\textsuperscript{61} EN 3.1 1109b30-35.

\textsuperscript{62} EN 3.1 1110a25-26.
enough to excuse one from moral responsibility, thus indicating one way in which Aristotle’s view is distinct from other accounts of morally responsible action that categorize duress as excusing.\(^{63}\) But though how we act under duress can reveal something deeper about us, including the durability and reality (or lack thereof) of our virtue, Aristotle is also clear that circumstances of type (ii) are excusing: in the event that we act shamefully under such circumstances, we should be forgiven, since we did so only involuntarily. One way we might distinguish between circumstances of type (i) and those of type (ii) is by appeal to various counterfactual scenarios, through which we test whether and the extent to which the agent had the “weak” ability to do otherwise. In the event that she didn’t, and her action was shameful, she is to be excused from blame and forgiven.\(^ {64}\)

### 5.2 Morally responsible agency

Of course, because Aristotle also thinks that children and animals act voluntarily, voluntariness cannot be sufficient for moral responsibility for action. What’s needed is a way to distinguish merely voluntary agents from morally responsible ones. At the outset of *EN* 3.2, Aristotle provides just this; here, he makes a point to distinguish adults from children in terms of the former’s possession of choice (προαίρεσις), saying:

> Indeed, choice appears to be voluntary but not the same [as the voluntary]; the voluntary extends further. For even children and the other animals partake of voluntary action but not of choice, and we say that the things done abruptly are voluntary but not according to choice.\(^ {65}\)

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\(^{63}\) I’m thinking of P.F. Strawson’s influential “Freedom and Resentment” (1962, p. 189).

\(^{64}\) It’s worth pointing out that Aristotle’s description of forgiveness as being for involuntary action also makes his view of this aspect of our responsibility practices distinct from others like Strawson (1962, p. 187) and Watson (1987), who each describe forgiveness as presupposing its target’s responsibility for the past harm in question.

\(^{65}\) EN 3.2 1111b7-11.
While I’ve used choice throughout as a translation for προαίρεσις, this does not perfectly capture the original Greek. This is because προαίρεσις is also a type of rational desire, and, qua desire, has a duration: it begins when deliberation has ended and the agent has settled on a single course of action, and in normal circumstances it terminates when the chosen action has been executed. Of course, there are exceptions to this, as when the agent is prevented by external circumstances from acting in accordance with his choice, re-deliberates and settles on another alternative, or suffers from incontinence. Children and animals lack choice because they lack full-fledged reason (λόγος), and so cannot engage in the requisite activities of thought (διάνοια) and deliberation (βούλευσις), which precede it. Though adults often fail to use their reason as they ought, being controlled instead by nonrational elements in their psyche, even to the point of acting incontinently, nevertheless that they possess choice and the rational capacities it requires is sufficient to distinguish them from non-morally responsible agents. Possession of these rational capacities is what picks one out as a mature human being, making one the target of a distinctive kind of evaluation involving consideration of whether and to what extent one is performing well qua human being.

The moral significance of possession of these rational capacities shouldn’t be downplayed simply because one often fails to use them properly or at all; at this point two observations regarding their moral significance are noteworthy. First, on Aristotle’s view, their possession permits a kind of control over one’s actions and character formation one would otherwise lack.

66 EN 3.2 15-18.
67 EN 1.7 1098a1-5.
They are what allow us to do well qua human beings, and to determine the mean between excess and deficiency. Specifically, while Aristotle believes that the end of action (i.e., our conception of happiness, be it virtue, pleasure, honor, etc.) is set by habituation, he also thinks that through our possession of these rational capacities we’re able to determine the means whereby we achieve our end. And in this respect, we can either fail or succeed.

Moreover, when character has yet to be fully formed, whether we fail or succeed in achieving our end will impact the kind of person we ultimately become. And it’s for this reason, among others, that Roberts’ deterministic picture of moral upbringing is false. For although upbringing sets one’s end, one still has to effectively deploy one’s rational capacities in its attainment. For example, you might have had the great fortunate of an upbringing in which the virtuous life was extolled and set as your end. Yet should you allow yourself to engage in processes of thought whereby you rationalize selfish choices (like reading the novel over grading exams), ultimately seeing these selfish choices as virtuous, then you’ll become selfish regardless of what you think and had set as your end. It’s in this way that our rational capacities are involved in our moral responsibility for our character.

Second, given how Aristotle conceives of these rational capacities, it is clear that on his view they make possible a distinctive form of self-expression. Aristotle conceives of happiness as a comprehensive end, or an end for the sake of which all things are chosen and done. Because choice, deliberation, and reason allow one to determine the means whereby one’s end is to be

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68 See, for example, EN 6.13 1145a5-7. I follow Moss (2011) in my characterization of Aristotle’s claims about the end-setting role of character, and the strictly means-determining role of practical reason. Even if one is disinclined to agree with my arbitration of roles, there’s no disputing the basic point: at the very least, our possession of practical reason is what makes it possible for us to deliberate and to select means to achieving our conception of the good.

69 EN 1.2 1094a19-23.
achieved (reason itself allowing one to have a conception of that end), agents who possess these rational capacities are capable of acting for the sake of their conception of happiness, which can then be expressed in what they choose and do. Without these rational capacities, however, children and animals lack a conception of happiness and simply do, and what they do cannot be said to express a conception of the good life (since they both lack a conception of the good life, and the capacities whereby they’d determine the means to achieve it).

Agents who are morally responsible for their voluntary actions and character, then, are those who possess, and have the weak ability to exercise, these various rational capacities. But at this point we might wonder whether Aristotle includes an additional constraint on moral responsibility for character. On an alternative compatibilist proposal defended by Meyer, Aristotle’s argument in EN 3.5 is limited in its scope to those who have a correct view about what’s good, and therefore to those who’ve had the benefit of a decent moral education.\(^70\) Meyer provides two reasons: (i) this more narrow group is Aristotle’s target audience, to whom he calls attention in various places throughout the beginning stages of EN; and (ii) Aristotle thinks that, without a decent moral education, knowledge of what’s good is impossible and yet his argument in EN 3.5 hinges on one’s possession of moral knowledge. For Aristotle here writes: “and if somebody knowingly performs actions from which he will become unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily”\(^71\) (ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀγνοῶν τις πράττει ἐξ ὧν ἔσται ἄδικος, ἐκὼν ἄδικος ἂν εἴη).

Pace Meyer, these reasons are unpersuasive. First, the mere fact that Aristotle’s target audience is of a certain sort doesn’t mean that such a group is also the target of his argument for responsibility for character. Second, Aristotle’s reference to knowledge in this context is

\(^{70}\) Meyer 2008, pp. 155-156.

\(^{71}\) EN 3.5 1114a12-13.
likely not a reference to moral knowledge, but rather to knowledge of the particulars of the situation at hand, which is discussed at length in EN 3.1. Without evidence to the contrary, we must conclude that Aristotle doesn’t intend moral education to be an additional constraint on responsibility for character. Although one might fault Aristotle for his omission here, doing so would be premised on a concern that Aristotle’s view of our responsibility practices already accommodates; namely, that to subject a person lacking in such an education to retributive practices would be unfair, since her moral development was so severely stunted by her deprived childhood. While Aristotle is himself silent on this particular matter, he does acknowledge that there are propriety considerations that can count against holding another person morally responsible for something for which she is in fact morally responsible.\(^2\) Thus, while still taking such a person to be morally responsible for her character, and so in principle an appropriate target for certain responses, it’s open to him to appeal to considerations of fairness in order to say why we shouldn’t in fact hold her responsible. In this way, Aristotle’s view has the advantage of maintaining the distinction between being responsible and being held responsible, a distinction that this appeal-to-fairness objection risks conflating.

5.3 Objection and response

But perhaps there are other philosophical reasons that should at the very least make us wary of accepting the sort of compatibilist view I’m attributing to Aristotle. I’ll briefly raise and respond to one such concern, forwarded by Harry Frankfurt in his influential “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person.” Frankfurt’s specific concern is with Aristotle’s account of voluntariness, since he thinks that it overlooks the phenomenon of internal compulsion, which

\(^2\) At Rhet. 2.6 1384b19, for example, Aristotle suggests the avoidance of hypocrisy as one such propriety condition.
happens when one is moved by a desire one would wholeheartedly or all-things-considered prefer not to be moved by. An unwilling addict is moved to take a drug while wholeheartedly desiring not to do so, and in the end takes the drug. Concerns about internal compulsion have led responsibility theorists like Frankfurt, Gary Watson, and others to develop so-called “real self views,” according to which the ability to act on the basis of some set of psychic elements (e.g., wholeheartedly endorsed first-order desires or evaluative judgments) picked out as bearing a special relation to one’s “point of view” or real self is both necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility. The implication of Frankfurt’s criticism, then, seems to be that internal compulsion is a significant threat to voluntariness that Aristotle’s account leaves untouched.

My response to Frankfurt’s criticism comes in three parts. First, it’s worth beginning with the observation that Aristotle is able to exempt from responsibility those agents who suffer from certain psychological disorders that deprive them of or impair their rational capacities. We might take some addicts, unwilling or otherwise, to be counted among such agents. Second, given that Aristotle’s account of voluntariness permits of gradations within the category of voluntary action, where actions in accordance with choice (προαίρεσις) are more voluntary than those that aren’t, he can say that internally compelled agents are less (albeit still) responsible for what they do when compared with agents who aren’t. For example, imagine that in reading the novel over grading exams you were actually acting incontinently, since your choice was to grade exams. On Aristotle’s view, while you’re morally responsible for reading the novel and thus blameworthy for doing so (since we’ve said that your doing so was actually selfish), nevertheless you’re less morally responsible and thus less blameworthy than you would

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73 Frankfurt 1971, p. 12.
74 Frankfurt 1995, p. 171.
have been if your choice had been to read the novel and you acted on this choice. Finally, we should question the significance real self views attach to the ability to act in accordance with one’s real self, where this is taken to be sufficient for moral responsibility, even for agents with compromised rational capacities. We can imagine a case of a person suffering from a psychological disorder that impairs these capacities without also depriving her of the ability to act in accordance with her wholehearted desires or evaluative judgments. But while real self views cannot say why this person is less or not at all morally responsible for what she does, Aristotle can, since his view makes moral responsibility status depend precisely on possession of such rational capacities.

6 Conclusion

This paper rose out of my dual interests in Aristotle and moral responsibility. At the very least, I aimed to show that Aristotle has a compatibilist theory of moral responsibility for action and character. Thus, the burden was on me to show that, first, contra the libertarian interpreter, none of the claims Aristotle makes about voluntariness assume or implicate an indeterminist metaphysics, and that, second, contra the deflationary interpreter, we should read Aristotle’s inquiry into the conditions of voluntariness at face-value, as an inquiry into conditions for moral responsibility.

I began by responding to three arguments in favor of the libertarian interpretation. In response to the first, premised on Aristotle’s claim that we are the sole source of our voluntary actions, I argued that Aristotle should be best read as making a more metaphysically modest source claim, which amounts to the claim that various features of our agency function as the best explanation for our actions. This is clear from Aristotle’s argument for the conclusion that
mixed actions and actions done for the sake of noble or pleasant objects originate in us. In response to the second, premised on Aristotle’s attribution of the ability to do otherwise to voluntary agents, I argued against a strong ability attribution, in support of a weak one. I did this by showing Aristotle’s commitment to the Sufficiency for Action Thesis, according to which various agential features, together with background conditions, are sufficient for an agent’s acting in a particular way. Finally, the third libertarian argument is premised on Aristotle’s claims about the amount of control we have over our not-yet-fully-acquired character, on the one hand, and our fully-acquired character on the other. Whereas he takes us to have control over the former, since alternatives are available, the lack of alternatives with the latter leads him to conclude that we’re not in control of our character once it’s fully acquired. While one explanation for this discrepancy is that Aristotle thinks that antecedent causes sufficient for a particular outcome undermine alternatives, I argued that even a compatibilist could be committed to these seemingly discrepant control claims.

Next, I took up the deflationary interpretation, arguing that it can’t be sustained in light of Aristotle’s conception of moral desert (one’s being worthy of, τὸ ἄξιος εἶναι, something in virtue of past actions) and the place of indignation (νέμεσις), anger (ὀργή), and vengeance (τιμωρία) in the overall good life and city. Aristotle’s characterization of these things — his conception of anger, for example, having its end in the infliction of pain on its target — suggests his acceptance of desert-based responsibility. And while some of Aristotle’s suggestions about the excellence of anger, indignation, and just vengeance might be read along consequentialist lines, I blocked this by arguing that these emotions and actions are, on Aristotle’s view, not only
means to happiness but constituents thereof, and that, as constituents of happiness, they are desirable for their own sake and not on strictly forward-looking grounds.

I concluded by detailing the compatibilist view that emerges from these considerations. Specifically, I argued that voluntariness for Aristotle is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral responsibility for action. In addition to performing the action voluntarily, to be morally responsible for it, one also has to be a morally responsible agent, which one is, on Aristotle’s view, if one possesses choice and the various rational capacities its possession requires.

As with most any project, acceptance of some incompleteness seems also to be a condition for the project’s being completed. I close by pointing out three things this paper leaves underdeveloped or untouched altogether. First, more could be said about the sorts of agential features Aristotle takes to be at the heart of voluntary action, and which of these he prioritizes and why. In my paper, I pick out choice and the various rational capacities its possession requires, since Aristotle himself seems to do this. But more should be said about why he does this. Another question in need of further consideration is to what extent Aristotle’s argument for the voluntariness of character in EN 3.5 is meant also to supply a sufficient condition for the voluntariness of action; while it’s clear that in this passage Aristotle wants to establish the voluntariness of certain states, like drunkenness and ignorance, by appeal to our control or past control over their cause, action seems not to be directly within the scope of his interest here. Finally, while in this paper I argued that Aristotle should be interpreted as attributing to voluntary agents a weak ability to do otherwise, the possession of which is to be determined by consideration of relevant counterfactuals that satisfy our metric of closeness to the actual
world, I did not go into much detail about what kinds of counterfactuals would or would not satisfy such a metric. I think that consideration of Aristotle’s discussion of abilities in Meta. 5.12 and 9.5 would put me in a better position to do this. In fact, I actually think that this discussion would support a more straightforward approach to resolving the question of the compatibility of the ability to do otherwise and determinism, on Aristotle’s view.
WORKS CITED


