The Preconditions of Virtue: Voluntary vs. Involuntary Action

From Book III on the preconditions of virtue, it should be clear that neither the thesis that what is virtuous lies as the intermediate between the extremes of excess and deficiency nor the thesis that a good person aims at what is intermediate is intended as a kind of instruction manual or procedure for making decisions. The doctrine of the mean provides a structure that helps us understand what is virtuous and shows what is attractive about the virtues. But as far as offering a decision procedure, what must be done on any particular occasion by a virtuous agent depends on circumstances. Again, Aristotle’s framework is “this-worldly,” meaning his method of inquiry begins from praxis, or experience in the world, where we are confronted by situations that admit of being otherwise and cause deliberation and decision on the basis of practical reason to come into play. Book II of the Ethics sets out to give an understanding of what is virtuous, or that which is fine or excellent, such that our practical reason can be in accordance with it, both in the sense of actions to be taken and ends to be achieved. But if our goal is, for instance, the just resolution of a conflict, we must deliberate over what constitutes justice given the particular circumstances, determine what should be done, and undertake the appropriate action. Although we might have a general, abstract notion of what justice is, what constitutes a just act leading to a particular just state of affairs might not readily apply from one situation to another.

What constitutes virtuous action is dependent both on a variety of external factors and on the mindset and character of the actor. Recall that for an act to be truly virtuous, it must be virtuous “all the way down.” Nor must the act be considered “out of character;” for instance, we might perform a generous act on a rare occasion, but on the whole we do not sustain the kind of behavior that would disclose a generous character. It might be said that in performing sporadic acts of generosity, we are “on the way” to becoming generous in character. But consider a few of the factors or character traits generosity entails:

*In his attitude to acquisition he is neither mean nor wasteful*

Nor will he take wealth from the wrong sources; since he does not honor wealth, this way of taking it is not for him. Nor will he be ready to ask for favors, since he is the one who benefits others, receiving benefits readily is not for him.

He will, however, acquire wealth from the right sources, e.g. from his own possessions, regarding taking not as fine, but as necessary to provide something to give. Nor will he neglect his own possessions, since he wants to use them to assist people. And he will avoid giving to just anyone, so that he will have something to give to the right people, at the right time, and where
it is fine.¹

One generous act does not a generous person make, while a person that consistently gives away money with the ulterior motive of gaining praise from others does not commit generous acts nor has a generous character. It is only the generous act born of a generous character that is worthy of praise, while the same holds true for actions worthy of blame.

A crucial precondition of virtue for Aristotle is that actions must be intentional, and he begins Book III with an analysis from the most basic level of what it means for an act to count as voluntary or involuntary. For Aristotle, voluntary action—or intention—is required if praise or blame is to be appropriate. Praise and blame are important in that they testify to that which is virtuous in the polis which substantiates the virtues among the citizenry and subsequent generations through habituation. Through praise and blame we come to witness that to which we should aspire and from which we should abstain.

The origin of a voluntary action lies within the agent; whatever action has its origin in the agent is itself up to the agent and therefore voluntary. Aristotle thinks that actions are contingent rather than determined or necessary, meaning they admit of being otherwise: an agent is free to act one way or another or not at all, and a state of affairs is contingent upon a particular action or lack thereof. If an agent takes an action A instead of an action B, a state of affairs C results, one which would be different if action B had been taken. Once an action is taken, a state of affairs, at least in part, comes about through the agent. In this sense, contingency is the source of responsibility. Although as agents we are free to act, we are not free to escape this freedom and its consequent responsibility.

Aristotle defines involuntary actions as falling under two general types: actions taken as the result of force, and actions taken as the result of ignorance. Most of the discussion with regard to force centers on what it means for the origin of an action to be external to an agent, and it would seem at first glance that Aristotle takes a rather stringent view:

Suppose, e.g., a tyrant tells you to do something shameful, when he has control over your parents and children, and if you do it, they will live, but if not, they will die. These cases raise dispute about whether they are voluntary or involuntary.

However, the same sort of thing also happens with throwing cargo overboard in storms; for no one willingly throws cargo overboard, unconditionally, but anyone with any sense throws it overboard under some conditions to save himself and the others.

Such an action is a mixture of voluntary and involuntary, but taken as a whole, it is voluntary.

These sorts of actions, then are mixed. But they would seem to be more like voluntary actions. For at the time they are done they are choice worthy, and the goal of an action reflects the occasion; hence also we should call the action voluntary or involuntary with reference to the time when he does it. Now in fact he does it willingly; for in these sorts of actions he has within him the origin of the movement of the limbs that are the instruments of the action, and when the origin of the actions is in him, it is also up to him to do them or not to do them. Hence actions of this sort are voluntary, though presumably the actions without the appropriate condition are involuntary, since no one would choose any action of this sort in itself.²

For Aristotle, an agent must contribute nothing to an action for it to count as involuntary; i.e. the agent must not be the one moving the parts of his/her body. Aristotle gives the example of being carried off by a strong wind. It would seem this position would render an “involuntary act” an oxymoron: how can an agent act involuntarily if acting in this sense means to contribute nothing to the action?

Consider what might be thought of as two different examples of involuntary action, one associated with force, and one associated with ignorance, the former involving unwilling behavior and the latter unwitting behavior. For the first example, an agent is confronted by a gunman who says, “your money or your life.” The agent removes his wallet and gives it to the gunman. It can be argued that this action is involuntary in the sense that the agent took an action that he did not want to take: he handed over the wallet unwillingly, meaning he was forced to do so. Praise and blame also do not seem appropriate here. The action does not lend itself to the idea that it is worthy of praise, and certainly the agent should not be blamed for giving money to the wrong kind of person. For the second example, an agent attempted to deliver a present to a friend’s address on her birthday, but unwittingly was given the wrong address and left the present at the door of the wrong house. The agent’s intention was to deliver the present to her friend, and if she had been given the right information, her act would have been voluntary. But given that she had the wrong address, her action was committed unwittingly and not what she intended, so she should not be blamed by her friend or others for not giving her friend a present on her birthday.

It could be said that we should think, or that we tend to think, that the above actions based in unwilling and unwitting behavior are involuntary actions. We might be motivated by the view that the agents are not worthy of praise or blame for what they do. An assumption here is shared with Aristotle that praise and blame require voluntary action. Consider the other example above of the tyrant holding an agent’s parents and

² Ibid, p. 54 (1110a5-22)
children captive, threatening their death if the agent does not perform a shameful act. Aristotle makes the argument that even though the agent performs the act unwillingly, it is nonetheless a voluntary act. In doing so, the act qualifies itself as worthy of praise or blame. Further, it is worth noting that what would in other circumstances be a shameful act and therefore worthy of blame is instead in this circumstance an act based in good judgment and worthy of praise. If Aristotle allowed that the agent’s actions were involuntary, praise or blame would simply not apply. For Aristotle, no real actions—meaning actions that are taken within the world we inhabit—are due to force. Actions can only be involuntary if there is no contingency, meaning if an action is necessarily the case through and through as opposed to admitting another option; there simply is no “room for maneuver.”

Of the two different examples of action, one as the result of force, and one as the result of ignorance, the former involving unwilling behavior and the latter unwitting behavior, it would seem that actions as the result of force and unwilling behavior present the higher hurdle for Aristotle’s argument. The example of both the gunman and the tyrant involve actions taken unwillingly, and actions taken unwillingly tend to make for a more compelling case that an action has been taken in an involuntary manner. Here, contrary to Aristotle, we tend to think that there must be no reluctance, resistance, or feeling of constraint or coercion for an action to count as voluntary. For Aristotle, even if there is reluctance, resistance, or feeling of constraint or coercion, the agent still has options and the source of the action is still within the agent and therefore voluntary.

In comparison, the threshold for an action performed unwittingly to count as a voluntary action is less formidable, and it would seem to present less of a challenge to Aristotle in attempting to argue that actions performed unwittingly are nonetheless voluntary. We tend to think that if an agent knows, or is aware of what she is doing, her action is voluntary. In the example of the birthday present, all that is required for the agent’s action to be voluntary is that she comes to know one particular aspect of the situation correctly, i.e. the right address. Yet, in the case of the gunman, we would not want to say that the agent who hands over his wallet knowing full-well what he is doing therefore takes the action voluntarily.

Aristotle spends a considerable amount of time in addressing the relationship between actions taken as a result of ignorance and whether they are voluntary or involuntary, and he comes to the conclusion that for an act to be voluntary an agent must not be ignorant of the particulars that the action consists in, and must feel pain or regret after the fact. It would seem then, contrary to our inclinations that action as a result of ignorance associated with unwitting behavior allows for more room for that which would constitute involuntary action than actions taken as a result of force associated with unwilling behavior. Aristotle’s argument, however, lies elsewhere: although he accepts that ignorance of particulars renders an action involuntary, he makes a more fundamental argument at the level of character: actions taken as a result of ignorance

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3 Ibid, p. 56 (1110b20).
are the result of character for which we are entirely responsible. Thus, although an
action might be discreetly involuntary, the wider framework that is the source of that
action is not.

To explain, Aristotle makes distinctions between what an agent does (an action), the
decision to take an action, and the deliberation undertaken prior to making a decision.
The end or goal for which an agent acts is associated with the decision to take an
action—it is what motivates the decision—while the action itself is the means toward the
end or goal. Whether something is voluntary or involuntary is a property of actions, not
motivations. Given this distinction between an action and its motivation, Aristotle is able
to distinguish two sorts of knowledge. On the one hand, there is knowledge about the
action itself—knowledge of what one is doing. On the other hand, there is knowledge of
one’s reasons for acting.

Thus, an action can involve two different types of ignorance: ethical ignorance,
or ignorance of what is good and bad, of what is right and wrong, to pursue; and
non-ethical ignorance, or what Aristotle calls ignorance of particulars:

Presumably, then, it is not a bad idea to define these particulars, and say
what they are, and how many. They are: (i) who is doing it; (ii) what he is
doing; (iii) about what or to what he is doing it; (iv) sometimes also what he is
doing it with, e.g. the instrument; (v) for what result, e.g. safety; (vi) in what
way, e.g. gently or hard.

Now certainly someone could not be ignorant of all of these unless he were
mad. Nor, clearly, (i) could he be ignorant of who is doing it, since he could
hardly be ignorant of himself. But (ii) he might be ignorant of what he is doing,
as when someone says that the secret slipped out while he was speaking, or
as Aeschylus said about the mysteries, that he did not know it was forbidden
to reveal it; or, like the person with the catapult, that he let it go when he only
wanted to demonstrate it. (iii) Again, he might think that his son is an enemy,
as Merope did; or (iv) that the barbed spear has a button on it, or that the
stone is pumice-stone. (v) By giving someone a drink to save his life we might
kill him; (vi) and wanting to touch someone, as they do in sparring, we might
wound him. 4

Ethical ignorance, on the other hand, concerns the goals one pursues in acting and not
one’s grasp of the action being done. Even if bad character involves ignorance of the
good, it is only ignorance for which one is not responsible that exempts an agent from
praise and blame. Since we are responsible for our characters, and hence for our
ignorance of the good, then our wrongdoing is still up to us. Aristotle addresses this
issue through the example of someone who has committed a vicious action in ignorance

of some provision of law that he is required to know, but which has does not know out of inattention:

But presumably his character makes him inattentive. Still, he is himself responsible for having this character, by living carelessly, and similarly for being unjust by cheating, or being intemperate by passing his time in drinking and the like; for each type of activity produces the corresponding character. This is clear from those who train for any contest or action, since they continually practice the appropriate activities. Only a totally insensible person would not know that each type of activity is the source of the corresponding state; hence if someone does what he knows will make him unjust, he is willingly unjust.⁵

For Aristotle, we become generous by performing generous actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, and so on. But more importantly here, we know that we are doing what will make us generous or miserly, temperate or intemperate. Thus, we voluntarily become the sorts of people we are, which in turn determines how we decide which actions to take.

At the same time, it is important to recall Aristotle's emphasis on habituation and the worldly character of his approach to ethical inquiry. Our sense of self and our ethical purposes are derived from and bound by participation in an existing community, the world of parents, ancestors, friends, customs, institutions, and laws. There is no individual existence prior to or independent of the community. Our knowledge of what will make us generous or miserly, temperate or intemperate, is the result of our surroundings and education acquired from our youth and beyond, and is the concern of both parents and legislators. Aristotle does not suppose that no matter what the circumstances, a person is responsible for becoming virtuous or vicious.⁶ Aristotle's argument regarding responsibility for one's character is directed toward those who aspire to what they have been taught and have experienced as being virtuous— responsibility for one's character a prerequisite toward the achievement or realization of that which is good, which in turn contributes to the kind of polis which makes for or perpetuates the right kind of habituation for both our peers and for the next generation.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 6768 (1114a3-13).