
Does Aristotle have a conception of moral responsibility? A prominent feature of his treatment of virtue of character, in both ethical treatises, is an extended account of voluntariness. He announces the topic by noting that praise and blame are directed at what is voluntary, and that voluntary agents are the cause (*aitios*) or origin (*archê*) of their actions (*EE* 1222b15-29; *EN* 1109b30-35). Clearly he is interested in voluntariness as a causal notion, and so we may attribute to him an interest in responsibility (where ‘responsible’ means simply ‘the cause of’). But is the sort of responsibility Aristotle has in mind *moral* responsibility?

A few decades ago, the debate on this question turned on whether Aristotle conceives of the praise or blame directed at voluntary actions to be *prospective* (appropriate due to its effects on agents—thus Jean Roberts in 1989) or *retrospective* (appropriate on the basis of how the agent has acted). The latter tack is taken by Terence Irwin in 1980 and Susan Meyer in 1993, both of whom invoke P. F. Strawson’s seminal 1962 paper “Freedom and Resentment” as an example of such a retrospective account.¹ Javier Echeñique argues against Irwin and Meyer that several important details of Strawson’s conception of responsibility (which make it

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a theory of *accountability*) are lacking in or at odds with Aristotle’s treatment of voluntariness, and that the conception of *attributability* articulated by Gary Watson in 1996 better fits Aristotle’s concerns and commitments.² As Echeñique explains the distinction, a crucial feature of *accountability* is its connection to other-regarding behavior: we are accountable to others if we act in ways that violate their legitimate expectations of us. In addition, he claims, the praise and blame of accountability are rewards and sanctions that must be justified as fair or deserved. Attributability, by contrast, is not restricted to other-regarding behavior (it can involve ascriptions of pride and sloth no less than dishonesty or injustice); and we may rightly make such “aretaic” assessments of agents on the basis of how they have acted, regardless of whether it is fair to hold them responsible for being the sorts of people they are.

Echeñique is certainly correct that Aristotle’s virtues and vices of character are not restricted to the domain of other-regarding behavior, and that his treatments of voluntariness display no preoccupation with desert, fairness, or such paradigmatic Strawsonian reactive attitudes as anger or resentment. I also agree, and have argued at length,³ that Aristotle does not think agents are praiseworthy and blameworthy only if they are responsible for their states of character.

Echeñique is probably right that Watson’s *attributability* better captures Aristotle’s position than Strawsonian *accountability*. This is a result to which scholars of Aristotle should take heed.


Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind the point of invoking Strawson in that earlier debate. Strawson's is invoked as an example of a retrospective view. I suspect one of the reasons why Strawson’s view has been so attractive to philosophers over the last half century is that it reh habilitates retrospective blame as a topic worthy of moral philosophy. Blaming people for what they have done is not the morally dubious project of the judgmental and vindictive, but is deeply embedded in a nexus of practices that involve taking each other seriously as agents, as opposed to objects of manipulation. Echeñique is right to point out that certain prominent features of Strawsonian blame are at odds with Aristotle’s own commitments; however, the features of Strawson that he finds lacking in Aristotle do not figure in the specific theories of responsibility attributed to Aristotle by those he criticizes for invoking Strawson.

Indeed, for purposes of illustrating a theory of responsibility that is retrospective rather than prospective, Watson’s attribution theory is just as good as Strawson’s. Echeñique does make the excellent point, against Strawson, that when praise and blame are used in the moral education of children, they are not mere tools of behavioral control, but belong on the spectrum of genuinely moral engagement (36-8, 67-8, 76-82). However, he overstates his case in concluding that the attributability theory he finds in Aristotle (and calls “ethical ascription”) is not retrospective. He distinguishes on Aristotle’s behalf between a “focal” notion of ethical ascription that concerns the actions issuing from the practical dispositions of adults, and a derivative practice in which the moral educator may praise and blame the activities of children who are still in the process of developing such dispositions.
The core notion of ethical ascription he assigns to Aristotle is retrospective, and the derivative (prospective) notion is compatible with the retrospective interpretations he criticizes. Echeñique's nuanced discussion of the case of children is an important supplement to, rather than a correction of, the interpretations he criticizes.

In any case, settling the (possibly intractable) question of whether 'moral responsibility' is the appropriate label for Aristotle’s concern with voluntariness is less important than identifying and assessing his substantive views in the texts where he discusses voluntariness and related notions. In the space of a short review, it is impossible to do justice to the Echeñique’s detailed engagement with Aristotle’s views on compulsion, coercion, and culpable ignorance (chapters 4-6). I will conclude by noting some striking features of his treatment of Aristotle’s views on force, pain, and involuntariness (chapters 3 and 7).

On the theory that Echeñique attributes to Aristotle, only the actions of reason-responsive agents are voluntary and involuntary. This is a surprising view to ascribe to Aristotle, who explicitly includes animal behavior within the realm of the voluntary (EN 1111b8-9, MA 703b3). Echeñique notes these texts but dismisses them as peripheral to what he insists is an ethical notion of voluntariness that is restricted to reason-responsive agents (11-12). Along the same lines, he claims that the account of force (bia) in EE ii 8 counts only the behavior of human agents as forced (92-3, 99), which is simply not true. He further insists, on Aristotle’s behalf, that actions are either voluntary or involuntary, with no “third class” of actions that

4Thus I have dropped the issue about moral responsibility in “Aristotle on the Voluntary” 2006 and in the introduction to the 2011 reissue of AMR.
fail to be voluntary but are still not involuntary. Again, this is a surprising position to attribute to Aristotle, who famously says that acts due to ignorance are “not voluntary” (ouch hekousion), but not “involuntary” (akousion) either unless they are painful or regretted (EN 1110b18-22). Echeñique addresses this apparent counterevidence by insisting that it is only the unrepentant agents, not the unrepented actions, that Aristotle is refusing to classify as involuntary (173-8). This is a highly strained reading of the relevant texts. To that same end, Echeñique insists that Aristotle’s “core” (albeit unstated) conception of forced action requires only external causation, not the contrariety-to-impulse that is the central and persistent feature of his account of force in the EE and that underlies the requirement of pain or regret in the EN account of involuntariness (103-5).

In these instances, as in others, it seems that the details of the theory of ethical ascription are driving the interpretation of Aristotle’s texts, rather than the other way around.

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