

Stella Reneke

PHIL 160

March 10, 2017

### Midterm Paper: Aristotle on Moral Responsibility

Over the course of Book III of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle crafts and defends what has become a longstanding and significantly influential theory of moral responsibility. However, in the process of articulating his theory, he considers one particular, very powerful objection to which many critics believe that he failed to successfully respond. Herein, we will discuss first the premises and conclusion of Aristotle's theory, then analyze the degree to which the aforementioned objection derails it and attempt to modify the theory so that it is no longer vulnerable to the same criticism. I will ultimately suggest that while the objection does well to find the holes in Aristotle's theory as originally set forth, those holes are not so impossible to patch with just a little reshaping of the rhetoric and an account for modern research that was unavailable to Aristotle at the time of his theory's conception.

Necessarily, we must lay out some key definitions before dissecting the minutiae of Aristotle's complete theory of moral responsibility. First, at 1103b1-2 in Book II, Aristotle suggests that we acquire our unique characters through the conscious choice to behave virtuously (or otherwise) repeatedly in a variety of circumstances, until we develop a habit of virtuous (or otherwise) behavior and can therefore call ourselves virtuous (or otherwise) on the whole. This is called his theory of character acquisition, which he later uses to support his thought that people ought to be in control of their virtue to at least some extent because they are in control of their own character development. Then, he goes on to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary

actions, which are generally defined as follows over the course of Chapter 1 of Book III:  
voluntary actions - those which are made in ignorance of the universal and/or those which are made when one could have certainly done otherwise; involuntary actions - those which are made in ignorance of particulars and/or as a result of external force(s) or limitation(s) of possibility. Another important definition to note is that of a decision, which falls into a subset of voluntary actions distinct from beliefs and wishes, and must follow a period of deliberation in order to qualify, as described at 1112a14-18.

Now, based on the above-described terminology, Aristotle proceeds, in Chapter 5 of Book III, to establish an argument for how to determine when a person is morally responsible for their action(s), and it is not nearly as simple as we might assume prior to in-depth thought about it. In all, he appears to conclude that we are responsible for our actions if any or all of the following criteria are met: we acted voluntarily; we acted involuntarily due to ignorance of particulars, but the ignorance could have been easily avoided; we acted involuntarily due to ignorance of particulars, but we were being neglectful; or we acted involuntarily due to an external force or limitation of possibility, but that force or limitation was brought on voluntarily in the first place. At first glance, this seems a robust and reasonable theory of moral responsibility.

Unfortunately, the theory appears to fall short when Aristotle pauses to consider the objection at 1114b that perhaps we are never responsible for our actions. Intuitively, many of us balk at that suggestion, thinking that it surely must be false and that we are at least sometimes responsible for our actions. However, Aristotle does not quite manage to prove this criticism invalid, and if he fails to do so, his theory will be utterly dismantled.

Aristotle provides a two-pronged defense, addressing first the claim that people cannot be responsible for their actions because they are a result of their characters, then the claim that people cannot be responsible for what seems good to them at the start of their character acquisition. He deflects the former at 1114b2-4 by restating his theory of character acquisition and reminding us that if we are in control of our individual character development in the first place, then we are in control of the actions that result from the character we have acquired over time, even once it becomes habit. He rejects the latter at 1114b13-14 and 1114b19-22 by suggesting that if we are not responsible for what strikes us as good and appropriate to do at the very beginning of our lives, then we can never be responsible for any of our actions, virtuous or otherwise, and he seems to assume that this is absolutely ridiculous and untrue.

Alas, there is no such assumable consensus that it is absolutely untrue that we aren't responsible for any of our actions. For instance, rather a large portion of people consider themselves determinists, having decided that all events to ever occur on this planet and in the universe are theoretically traceable results of previous events and the circumstances of the universe at its conception, and therefore that the future is already determined by everything that has happened in the past. If one believes this to be true (and many do), then it is quite easy to stand by the objection that we are never in control of any of our actions.

Still, even to consider the objection outside of the determinist mindset, Aristotle would do well to qualify his original theory so as to evade the claim that we are *never* responsible for our actions, even if that means he must reconsider the actions for which he believes we are always responsible. For instance, in light of modern knowledge of human psychology and neuroscience, we can now confidently say that there exist situations in which a person is hardly

morally responsible for the actions that they take under the duress of brain abnormalities and/or mental health disorders, in the same way that children and animals are not responsible for their actions to the degree to which we consider able-minded adults to be--and we are far better at detecting these abnormalities and disorders than we were in Aristotle's time. Furthermore, we have performed enough research to know that people are born with different brain chemistries that might not qualify as abnormal so much as unique to the individual, over which they have zero control, and which certainly influence their decision-making and inclinations towards certain behaviors rather than others. Given these facts of science, we might alter Aristotle's original theory of moral responsibility to say that our control over our actions is more limited than previously believed, and that while we still maintain control in some situations, those are perhaps fewer or at least more specific situations than originally thought. What is left now is to establish a means of identifying those situations in which we *can* assign moral responsibility to a person for their actions.

I propose that since brain chemistry has a significant capacity to warp our perception of our environments, leading to misinterpretations of outside input and then misinformed actions, we must attempt to reach an agreement about what sort of brain chemistry places a person in the best possible position to correctly perceive their surroundings and make well-informed and morally good decisions about the world and their actions within it. Once we establish a standard for the "best" kind of brain chemistry in this particular sense, judgements of moral responsibility on the basis of a person's brain chemistry will be much easier to make. This is a task for a neurologist more than for a philosopher, but it is key to developing a practical theory of moral responsibility.

Beyond this step, we might say, too, that in this day and age we are no longer often in ignorance of our mental and neurological limitations, given the access we typically have to psychologists and medical professionals who can diagnose problems with depression, anxiety, psychosis, tumors, etc.. Such ignorance is, in fact, typically easy to avoid (at least in a first world country)--and even without a professional diagnosis, it is reasonable to expect some level of self-awareness and introspection in adults that at least leads us to monitor ourselves and beware of situations in which we typically struggle to behave morally well. Again, ignorance of our own shortcomings is easily avoidable even if the shortcomings themselves are a matter of unavoidable nature, and therefore Aristotle can claim again that we are responsible for the actions that fall from a failure to acknowledge and deal appropriately with those shortcomings.

This response also applies to any objections against Aristotle's theory of character acquisition on the basis that we cannot control what looks good to us when we first begin to acquire our character. For instance, even a person who is naturally inclined to behave in an emotionally volatile way is bound to realize over a lifetime of interactions with other people that he/she behaves regularly in an emotionally volatile way, and upon such a realization, becomes morally responsible for continuing to act without modification of this element of his or her character. The reality is that human character is always malleable, at least with medication (in extreme cases of mental disorder) if not with basic attention to one's continued personal growth.

In short, I posit that Aristotle's theory of moral responsibility does require some reconsideration of the situations in which we can claim a person is morally responsible for their actions, but that with only minor alterations, the theory still stands and the objection that we are *never* responsible for our actions is invalid.

## Works Cited

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin, 2nd ed., Hackett Publishing Co., 1999.