Plato and Aristotle on Voluntary Action: Rationality and Accountability

Dissertation Summary

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For Aristotle, when an ordinary, adult human acts voluntarily, that agent is accountable for that action in the sense that she has the right standing to be praised if the action was good or blamed if the action was bad. The main question I am concerned with is this: what is it about the agent’s having acted voluntarily that makes that agent accountable for the resulting action? In order to answer this question, I examine three main sets of texts: the discussion of voluntary action in *Eudemian Ethics* II; the corresponding discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* III, and the discussions of voluntary action in Plato’s dialogues the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*. In all three sets of texts, I argue, we find one core idea that is developed and worked out in interestingly different ways: all three sets of texts agree that the fact that an adult, human agent acts voluntarily implies that that action exhibits what I shall loosely term rational control over the action -- the action is caused by the agent by means of an exercise of the capacities that adult humans have qua practically rational beings. The texts also all agree that actions that are not caused by an exercise of the agent’s rational capacities in the relevant way are not voluntary and hence the agent is not accountable for them. The texts disagree, however, both in how they understand the relevant notion of rational control and, accordingly, what actions get classed as voluntary or involuntary (or neither).

I begin, in Part I, with the Platonic background. I include a discussion of voluntariness in Plato for two main reasons. First, I think that Plato’s *Laws* and *Timaeus* contain a much more sophisticated conception of voluntariness than is commonly appreciated, and, second, I think this conception is essential background from which to understand Aristotle. Plato’s discussions of voluntariness are mostly confined to defenses of the view that vicious actions, unlike virtuous ones, are always done involuntarily. Call this view the Asymmetry Thesis.¹ The defenses of this view that are most widely known are found in the “Socratic” dialogues, the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*, and hence the view is often identified as one of the “Socratic paradoxes.” The discussions of voluntariness in the *Laws* and *Timaeus* also center around the Asymmetry Thesis, but the arguments we find there are independent of those in the Socratic dialogues and, moreover, while the Socratic dialogues do not clearly link the topic of voluntariness with praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* do.

Chapter 1 focuses on the *Timaeus*. That work consists primarily of a long oration delivered by the title-character dealing with a broad array of topics in natural philosophy. Among these is included the topic of “disease of the soul” and it is there that we find a defense of the Asymmetry Thesis. *Timaeus* uses the resources provided by the physiological and

psychological theories set out earlier in his speech to argue for the claim that all wrongdoing originates not in the agent’s mind or intellect (nous) but in a bad bodily condition of some kind, a bad upbringing, or both. He then makes the explicit inference to the further conclusion that such actions are not voluntary and that the agent is not accountable for them. In making this inference, Timaeus is implicitly connecting the notion of voluntariness to a notion of rational control. An agent exercises rational control over an action, for Timaeus, when that action is caused by the agent’s mind, and it is because Timaeus relies on a certain, fairly detailed view of the mind that he is able to draw the further inference to the Asymmetry Thesis. In Chapter 2, I argue that in Laws IX, the Athenian’s detailed defence of the Asymmetry Thesis is best understood along broadly the same lines.

In Part II, I turn to Aristotle’s Eudeman Ethics (EE). I begin, in Chapter 3, by examining two distinctive features of the EE account (by contrast to the Nicomachean account) and relating them to the question of the relationship between voluntariness and accountability. The first feature is that Aristotle makes it clear that part of his motivation for treating the topic of voluntary action is to shed light on the notion of an action (praxis) where this is understood in the narrow sense as something that only humans are capable of. There is a question, though, about how more precisely this is meant to relate to the account of voluntary action proper. I answer this question by reference to the second distinctive feature of the EE account, namely, its definition of the voluntary as what is done on the basis of thought (kata dianoian, 1225b1). An action’s being done on the basis of thought, I argue, is a matter of that action’s being done on the basis of taking something as a reason for acting. By appreciating this feature of the notion of an action’s being done on the basis of thought, we can understand both how this relates to the notion of a praxis and how voluntariness relates to accountability. The reason that only humans are capable of actions is that only humans are capable of acting on the basis of reasons. And the reason that one is accountable for one’s voluntary actions is that one’s voluntary actions reflect a response on the part of the agent to reasons, and for this she may be criticized or praised.

The EE’s conception of voluntary action, then, agrees with the late Platonic conception in that there what makes an action voluntary is that it involves a certain kind of rational control. It differs, from the Platonic, conception, however, in how it understands the relevant notion of rational control. In Chapter 4, I show how the EE conception of voluntariness allows Aristotle to respond to the counterintuitive Asymmetry Thesis. I do so by focusing, in particular, on the discussion of action due to force (bia) and necessity (anagkê) in EE II 8. There Aristotle provides an account of force and necessity that allows him to show that vicious actions and (ordinary) akratic actions are not done by force and are in fact voluntary, contrary to the views found in the Timaeus and Laws. What allows Aristotle to argue for this point is that the notion of an action’s being done on the basis of thought is considerably broader than the notion of an action’s being caused by an exercise of intellect (nous) in Plato.
In Part III, I turn to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). I consider the conception of voluntary action anew, without assuming anything about the relationship between the *NE* and the *EE*. The picture that results is one that is surprisingly different than that found in the *EE*, but which shares with it and with the late Platonic conception the fundamental thought that an action’s being voluntary is a matter of that action exhibiting rational control. In Chapter 5 I argue that we find two distinct, but related answers to the question of why one is accountable for one’s voluntary actions. On the one hand, some voluntary actions are done on the basis of decision (*prohairesis*) and these actions reflect a response to reasons for which an agent may be praised if good or blamed if bad. But some voluntary actions are not done on the basis of decision. In the case of these latter actions, Aristotle provides a distinct account of why the agent is accountable for them by reference to the idea that the agent is indirectly responsible for those actions by virtue of being responsible for the disposition that causes them. This is the main goal of the discussion in *NE* III 5, which, importantly, does not have a parallel in the *EE*.

In Chapter 6, I look for the root source of this and other differences between the *EE* and the *NE* accounts. I argue that the *NE*’s distinction between two different ways in which an agent may be accountable for a voluntary action is rooted in a distinction between a broader and a stricter conception of what the human agent is. At times, in the *NE*, Aristotle identifies the human being with the three parts of the soul that participate in reason in some way, but elsewhere he explicitly states that the person is most strictly identical with the rational part alone (*NE* IX 4, 1166a14-17, X 7, 1178a2-4). No such distinction is found in the *EE*, and, I claim, this explains why the *EE* also lacks the *NE*’s distinction between two kinds of accountability. Both the *NE* and the *EE* agree that those actions that are caused by the agent himself involve reason, since humans are essentially rational beings. Such actions are voluntary and the agent is accountable for them. They disagree, however, on how more precisely this is to be cashed out.

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2 These are the part that it itself capable of reasoning — the rational part — and the two parts that are non-rational but capable of listening to reason in a way: the spirited part (the part responsible for desires for respect, esteem, and the like) and the appetitive part (the part responsible for desires for the pleasures of food and sex and the like).