

24.200: Ancient Philosophy  
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November 22, 2004

### **Aristotle on Voluntary Action**

1. What constitutes voluntary action? Under what conditions does one act involuntarily?
2. When are we responsible for our actions, and so subject to blame and praise?

#### involuntary:

"What comes about by force or because of ignorance seems to be involuntary. What is forced has an external origin, the sort of origin in which the agent or victim contributes nothing-if, e.g., a wind or human beings who control him were to carry him off." (NE III: 1109b36-1110a4)

"What sorts of things, then, should we say are forced? Perhaps we should say that something is forced unconditionally whenever its cause is external and the agent contributes nothing." (1110b1-3, also 1110b14-16)

"Everything caused by ignorance is non-voluntary, but what is involuntary also causes pain and regret." (1110b19, and 1111a32-b4)

#### involuntary actions:

A. Actions which are forced and painful/regretted

B. Actions which are done by reason of ignorance (through ignorance, because of ignorance), e.g., when ignorance is the genuine cause of the action, i.e., when knowledge of a significant particular is lacking.

#### mixed actions:

C. (non-voluntary): actions done through ignorance but not painful or regretted.

D. (non-voluntary): actions done in ignorance, e.g., when one's state prevented one from making the appropriate choice:

- i) When knowledge of the universal is lacking.
- ii) When one is moved by passion or incapacity (drunkenness).
- iii) When one makes a bad judgement.

E. Actions which are chosen, but under dire circumstances, i.e., the action would not be chosen for its own sake, i.e., it is not an action which would be chosen otherwise (e.g., throwing cargo off ship).

voluntary actions: "...what is voluntary seems to be what has its origin in the agent himself when he knows the particulars that the action consists in." (NE III:1 1111a23-25)

#### Responsibility:

1. Voluntariness is not the sure test of responsibility, since animals and children behave voluntarily, but are not responsible. One is responsible if the voluntary action (or mixed action) arises from the kind of character which is responsive to deliberation.

2. We are also responsible for some non-voluntary actions; though these cases will be harder to adjudicate, since it depends on the character and choice, also on the extent to which the individual is responsible for the character and choice...