

On Action, Choice, and Deliberation

Aristotle

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In this excerpt, Aristotle distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary actions emphasizing that the latter can stem from either compulsion or ignorance. He argues that it is absurd to consider desires as compulsions, because then every action would be compulsory, leaving responsibility impossible to assign. He considers choice to be part of the deliberate actions but he argues that not all voluntary actions are chosen. Practically he separates choice from other deliberate actions such as desire, passion, wish, and opinion. He identifies choice with deliberation, which is about things that we could have done otherwise by reasoning prior to the action.

Virtue [...] is concerned with emotions and actions, and it is only voluntary actions for which praise and blame are given; those that are involuntary are condoned, and sometimes even pitied. Hence it seems to be necessary for the student of ethics to define the difference between the Voluntary and the Involuntary; and this will also be of service to the legislator in assigning rewards and punishments.

It is then generally held that actions are involuntary when done under compulsion or through ignorance; and that an act is compulsory when its origin is from without, being of such a nature that the agent, who is really passive, contributes nothing to it: for example, when he is carried somewhere by stress of weather, or by people who have him in their power. But there is some doubt about actions done through fear of a worse alternative, or for some noble object—as for instance if a tyrant having a man's parents and children in his power commands him to do something base, when if he complies their lives will be spared but if he refuses they will be put to death. It is open to question whether such actions are voluntary or involuntary. A somewhat similar case is when cargo is jettisoned in a storm; apart from circumstances, no one voluntarily throws away his prop-

erty, but to save his own life and that of his shipmates any sane man would do so. Acts of this kind, then, are 'mixed' or composite; but they approximate rather to the voluntary class. For at the actual time when they are done they are chosen or willed; and the end or motive of an act varies with the occasion, so that the terms 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' should be used with reference to the time of action; now the actual deed in the cases in question is done voluntarily, for the origin of the movement of the parts of the body instrumental to the act lies in the agent; and when the origin of an action is in oneself, it is in one's own power to do it or not. Such acts therefore are voluntary, though perhaps involuntary apart from circumstances—for no one would choose to do any such action in and for itself.

Sometimes indeed men are actually praised for deeds of this 'mixed' class, namely when they submit to some disgrace or pain as the price of some great and noble object; though if they do so without any such motive they are blamed, since it is contemptible to submit to a great disgrace with no advantage or only a trifling one in view. In some cases again, such submission though not praised is condoned, when a man does something wrong through fear of penalties that impose too great a strain on human nature, and that no one could endure. Yet there seem to be some acts which a man cannot be compelled to do, and rather than do them he ought to submit to the most terrible death: for instance, we think it ridiculous that Alemaeon in Euripides' play is compelled by certain threats to murder his mother! But it is sometimes difficult to decide how far we ought to go in choosing to do a given act rather than suffer a given penalty, or in enduring a given penalty rather than commit a given action; and

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it is still more difficult to abide by our decision when made, since in most of such dilemmas the penalty threatened is painful and the deed forced upon us dishonourable, which is why praise and blame are bestowed according as we do or do not yield to such compulsion.

What kind of actions then are to be called compulsory? Used without qualification, perhaps this term applies to any case where the cause of the action lies in things outside the agent, and when the agent contributes nothing. But when actions intrinsically involuntary are yet in given circumstances deliberately chosen in preference to a given alternative, and when their origin lies in the agent, these actions are to be pronounced intrinsically involuntary but voluntary in the circumstances, and in preference to the alternative. They approximate however rather to the voluntary class, since conduct consists of particular things done, and the particular things done in the cases in question are voluntary. But it is not easy to lay down rules for deciding which of two alternatives is to be chosen, for particular cases differ widely.

To apply the term 'compulsory' to acts done for the sake of pleasure or for noble objects, on the plea that these exercise constraint on us from without, is to make every action compulsory. For pleasure and nobility between them supply the motives of all actions whatsoever. Also to act under compulsion and unwillingly is painful, but actions done for their pleasantness or nobility are done with pleasure. And it is absurd to blame external things, instead of blaming ourselves for falling an easy prey to their attractions; or to take the credit of our noble deeds to ourselves, while putting the blame for our disgraceful ones upon the temptations of pleasure. It appears therefore that an act is compulsory when its origin is from outside, the person compelled contributing nothing to it.

An act done through ignorance is in every case not voluntary, but it is involuntary only when it causes the agent pain and regret: since a man who has acted through ignorance and feels no compunction at all for what he has done, cannot indeed be said to have acted voluntarily, as he was not aware of his action, yet cannot be said to have acted involuntarily, as he is not sorry for it. Acts done through ignorance therefore fall into two classes: if the agent regrets the act, we think that he has acted involuntarily; if he does not regret it, to mark the distinction we may call him a 'non-voluntary' agent—for as the case is different it is better to give it a special name. Acting through ignorance however seems to be different from acting in ignorance; for when a man is

drunk or in a rage, his actions are not thought to be done through ignorance but owing to one or other of the conditions mentioned, though he does act without knowing, and in ignorance. Now it is true that all wicked men are ignorant of what they ought to do and refrain from doing, and that this error is the cause of injustice and of vice in general. But the term 'involuntary' does not really apply to an action when the agent is ignorant of his true interests. The ignorance that makes an act blameworthy is not ignorance displayed in moral choice (that sort of ignorance constitutes vice)—that is to say, it is not general ignorance (because that is held to be blameworthy), but particular ignorance, ignorance of the circumstances of the act and of the things affected by it; for in this case the act is pitied and forgiven, because he who acts in ignorance of any of these circumstances is an involuntary agent.

Perhaps then it will be as well to specify the nature and number of these circumstances. They are the agent, the act, the thing that is affected by or is the sphere of the act; and sometimes also the instrument, for instance, a tool with which the act is done, the effect, for instance, saving a man's life, and the manner, for instance, gently or violently.

Now no one, unless mad, could be ignorant of all these circumstances together; nor yet, obviously, of the agent—for a man must know who he is himself. But a man may be ignorant of what he is doing, as for instance when people say 'it slipped out while they were speaking,' or 'they were not aware that the matter was a secret,' as Aeschylus said of the Mysteries; or that 'they let it off when they only meant to show how it worked' as the prisoner pleaded in the catapult case. Again a person [...] might kill a man by giving him medicine with the intention of saving his life; or in loose wrestling hit him a blow when meaning only to grip his hand. Ignorance therefore being possible in respect of all these circumstances of the act, one who has acted in ignorance of any of them is held to have acted involuntarily, and especially so if ignorant of the most important of them; and the most important of the circumstances seem to be the nature of the act itself and the effect it will produce.

Such then is the nature of the ignorance that justifies our speaking of an act as involuntary, given the further condition that the agent feels sorrow and regret for having committed it.

An involuntary action being one done under compulsion or through ignorance, a voluntary act would seem to be an act of which the origin lies in the agent, who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting. For it is probably a mistake to say that acts caused by anger or by de-

sire are involuntary. In the first place, this will debar us from speaking of any of the lower animals as acting voluntarily, or children either. Then are none of our actions that are caused by desire or anger voluntary, or are the noble ones voluntary and the base involuntary? Surely this is an absurd distinction when one person is the author of both. Yet perhaps it is strange to speak of acts aiming at things which it is right to aim at as involuntary; and it is right to feel anger at some things, and also to feel desire for some things, for instance health, knowledge. Also we think that involuntary actions are painful and actions that gratify desire pleasant. And again what difference is there in respect of their involuntary character between wrong acts committed deliberately and wrong acts done in anger? Both are to be avoided; and also we think that the irrational feelings are just as much a part of human nature as the reason, so that the actions done from anger or desire also belong to the human being who does them. It is therefore strange to class these actions as involuntary.

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Having defined voluntary and involuntary action, we next have to examine the nature of Choice. For this appears to be intimately connected with virtue, and to afford a surer test of character than do our actions.

Choice is manifestly a voluntary act. But the two terms are not synonymous, the latter being the wider. Children and the lower animals as well as men are capable of voluntary action, but not of choice. Also sudden acts may be termed voluntary, but they cannot be said to be done by choice.

Some identify Choice with Desire, or Passion, or Wish, or some form of Opinion. These views however appear to be mistaken.

The irrational animals do not exercise choice, but they do feel desire, and also passion. Also a man of defective self-restraint acts from desire but not from choice; and on the contrary a self-restrained man acts from choice and not from desire. Again, desire can run counter to choice, but not desire to desire. And desire has regard to an object as pleasant or painful, choice has not.

Still less is choice the same as passion. Acts done from passion seem very far from being done of deliberate choice.

Again, choice is certainly not a wish, though they appear closely akin. Choice cannot have for its object impossibilities: if a man were to say he chose something impossible he would be thought a fool; but we can wish for things that are impossible, for instance immortality. Also we may wish for what cannot be secured by our own agency,

for instance, that a particular actor or athlete may win; but no one chooses what does not rest with himself, but only what he thinks can be attained by his own act. Again, we wish rather for ends than for means, but choose the means to our end; for example, we wish to be healthy, but choose things to make us healthy; we wish to be happy, and that is the word we use in this connexion, but it would not be proper to say that we choose to be happy; since, speaking generally, choice seems to be concerned with things within our own control.

Nor yet again can it be opinion. It seems that anything may be matter of opinion—we form opinions about what is eternal, or impossible, just as much as about what is within our power. Also we distinguish opinion by its truth or falsehood, not by its being good or bad, but choice is distinguished rather as being good or bad. Probably therefore nobody actually identifies choice with opinion in general. But neither is it the same as some particular opinion. For it is our choice of good or evil that determines our character, not our opinion about good or evil. And we choose to take or avoid some good or evil thing, but we opine what a thing is, or for whom it is advantageous, or how it is so: we do not exactly form an opinion to take or avoid a thing. Also we praise a choice rather for choosing the right thing, but an opinion for opining in the right way. And we choose only things that we absolutely know to be good, we opine things we do not quite certainly know to be true. Nor do the same persons appear to excel both at choosing and at forming opinions: some people seem to form opinions better, but yet to choose the wrong things from wickedness. That choice is preceded or accompanied by the formation of an opinion is immaterial, for that is not the point we are considering, but whether choice is the same thing as some form of opinion.

What then are the genus and differentia of Choice, inasmuch as it is not any of the things above mentioned? It manifestly belongs to the genus voluntary action; but not every voluntary act is chosen. Perhaps we may define it as voluntary action preceded by deliberation, since choice involves reasoning and some process of thought. Indeed previous deliberation seems to be implied by the very term *proaireton*, which denotes something chosen before other things.

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As for Deliberation, do people deliberate about everything—are all things possible objects of deliberation—or are there some things about which deliberation is impossible? The term ‘object of deliberation’ presumably must not be taken to include things about which a fool or a

madman might deliberate, but to mean what a sensible person would deliberate about.

Well then, nobody deliberates about things eternal, such as the order of the universe, or the incommensurability of the diagonal and the side of a square. Nor yet about things that change but follow a regular process, whether from necessity or by nature or through some other cause: such phenomena for instance as the solstices and the sunrise. Nor about irregular occurrences, such as droughts and rains. Nor about the results of chance, such as finding a hidden treasure. The reason why we do not deliberate about these things is that none of them can be effected by our agency. We deliberate about things that are in our control and are attainable by action (which are in fact the only things that still remain to be considered; for Nature, Necessity, and Chance, with the addition of Intelligence and human agency generally, exhaust the generally accepted list of causes). But we do not deliberate about all human affairs without exception either: for example, no Lacedaemonian deliberates about the best form of government for Scythia; but any particular set of men deliberates about the things attainable by their own actions. Also there is no room for deliberation about matters fully ascertained and completely formulated as science; such for instance as orthography, for we have no uncertainty as to how a word ought to be spelt to the activity of man he ascribed them to fortune or chance.

We deliberate about things in which our agency operates but does not always produce the same results; for instance about questions of medicine and of business; and we deliberate about navigation more than about athletic training, because it has been less completely reduced to a science; and similarly with other pursuits also. And we deliberate more about the arts than about the sciences, because we are more uncertain about them.

Deliberation then is employed in matters which, though subject to rules that generally hold good, are uncertain in their issue; or where the issue is indeterminate, and where, when the matter is important, we take others into our deliberations, distrusting our own capacity to decide.

And we deliberate not about ends, but about means. A doctor does not deliberate whether he is to cure his patient, nor an orator whether he is to convince his audience, nor a statesman whether he is to secure good government, nor does anyone else debate about the end of his profession or calling; they take some end for granted, and consider how and by what means it can be achieved. If they find that there are several means of achieving it, they proceed to consider which of these

will attain it most easily and best. If there is only one means by which it can be accomplished, they ask how it is to be accomplished by that means, and by what means that means can itself be achieved, until they reach the first link in the chain of causes, which is the last in the order of discovery. (For when deliberating one seems in the procedure described to be pursuing an investigation or analysis that resembles the analysis of a figure in geometry—indeed it appears that though not all investigation is deliberation, for example, mathematical investigation is not, yet all deliberation is investigation—and the last step in the analysis seems to be the first step in the execution of the design.) Then, if they have come up against an impossibility, they abandon the project—for instance, if it requires money and money cannot be procured; but if on the other hand it proves to be something possible, they begin to act. By possible, I mean able to be performed by our agency—things we do through the agency of our friends counting in a sense as done by ourselves, since the origin of their action is in us.

(In practicing an art) the question is at one moment what tools to use, and at another how to use them; and similarly in other spheres, we have to consider sometimes what means to employ, and sometimes how exactly any given means are to be employed.

It appears therefore, as has been said, that a man is the origin of his actions, and that the province of deliberation is to discover actions within one's own power to perform; and all our actions aim at ends other than themselves. It follows that we do not deliberate about ends, but about means. Nor yet do we deliberate about particular facts, for instance, Is this object a loaf? or, Is this loaf properly baked? for these are matters of direct perception. Deliberation must stop at the particular fact, or it will embark on a process ad infinitum.

The object of deliberation and the object of choice are the same, except that when a thing is chosen it has already been determined, since it is the thing already selected as the result of our deliberation that is chosen. For a man stops enquiring how he shall act as soon as he has carried back the origin of action to himself, and to the dominant part of himself, for it is this part that chooses. This may be illustrated by the ancient constitutions represented in Homer: the kings used to proclaim to the people the measures they had chosen to adopt.

As then the object of choice is something within Final our power which after deliberation we desire, Choice will be a deliberate desire of things

in our power; for we first deliberate, then select, and finally fix our desire according to the result of our deliberation.

Let this serve as a description in outline of Choice, and of the nature of its objects, and the fact that it deals with means to ends.

References

1. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, new and revised ed., Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1934) reprinted 1956.