

Aristotle's
Nicomachean Ethics

Book 3, Chapters 1–5

Aristotle's motivation for analyzing the concepts of 'the voluntary' and 'the involuntary':

- We praise and blame voluntary actions.
- We do not praise or blame involuntary actions. Sometimes we pardon them or pity them.

“Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, on that that are involuntary pardon, and sometime also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honours and of punishments.” (NE, 3.1, 1109b30–b34)

involuntary actions

actions that are forced

actions that are by
reason of ignorance



There are some cases where an agent is *sort of* forced to perform an action, but is not forced according to the primary meaning of the term 'forced'. So this needs some clarification.

It turns out that there are a lot of cases where ignorance is involved in *some* way, where we still think the agent is blameworthy. So this needs some clarification as well.

actions that are forced

What are some clear examples of actions that the agent is forced?

What are some examples where the agent is sort of forced, but where he still chooses in the moment?

Does Aristotle think that it would make sense to say that I could be *forced* to do something because the object of my action is extremely pleasant?



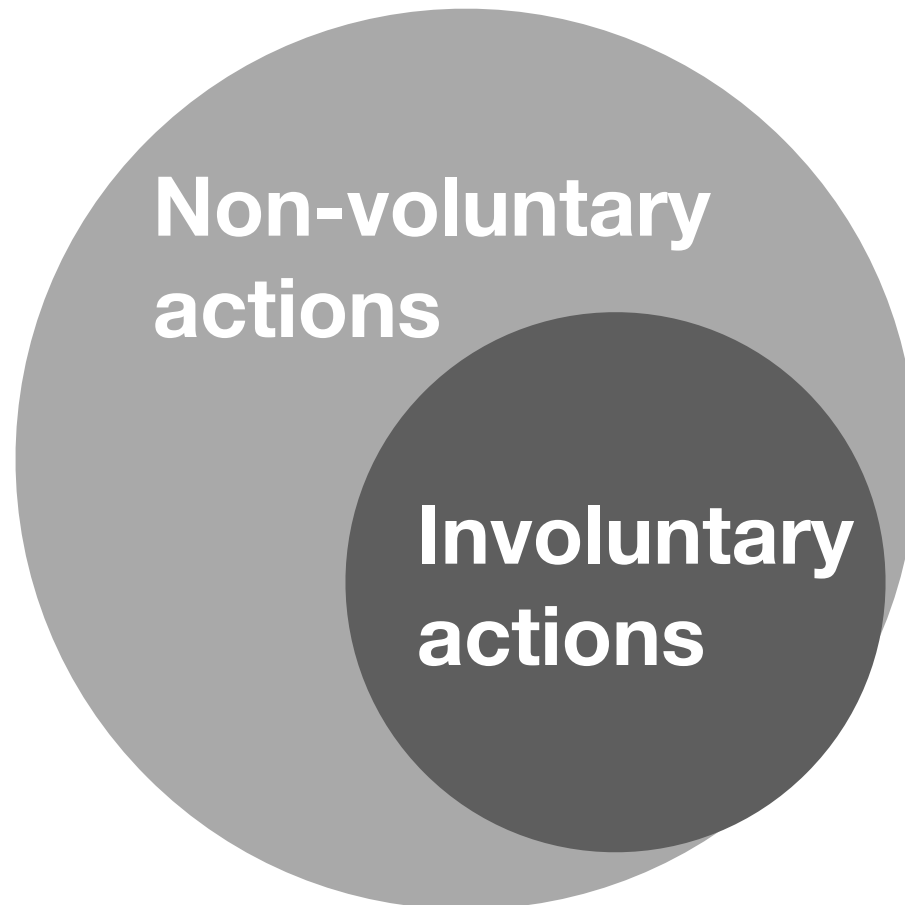
Does Aristotle think that it would make sense to say that I could be *forced* to do something because the object of my action is extremely noble?



“But if someone were to say that pleasant and noble objects have a forcing power, compelling us from without, all acts would be for him forced; for it is for these objects that all men do everything they do.” (NE, 3.1, 1110b9–b11)

actions that are by reason of ignorance

“Everything that is done by reason of ignorance is *not* voluntary; it is only what produces pain and regret that is *involuntary*.” (NE, 3.1, 1110b17–19)



“Acting by reason of ignorance seems also to be different from acting in ignorance; for the man who is drunk or in a rage is thought to act as a result not of ignorance but of one of the causes mentioned, yet not knowingly but in ignorance.” (NE, 3.1, 1110b25–1110b27)

When someone who is drunk gets in a fight, that person might be ignorant about what he is doing, but we tend to say that he fought because he was drunk rather than saying he fought because he was ignorant.

We can sometimes say that a person acted involuntarily by reason of ignorance, but only if that person is ignorant of the right sort of things.

For example, “it is not mistaken purpose that makes an action involuntary (*it* makes men *wicked*),

nor ignorance of the universal (for *that* men are *blamed*),

but ignorance of the particular, i.e., of the circumstances of the action and the objects with which it is concerned”
(NE, 3.1, 1110b31–b33)

Not knowing
what goals you
should have.

Not knowing
the rules you
should follow.

Not knowing the
circumstances

In chapter 5, Aristotle adds a further qualification:
Even if you are ignorant of the circumstances, you
can still be blamed for an action *if you are
responsible for your own ignorance.*

An example (not Aristotle's): If you do not know that
there is a bullet in the chamber of a gun, you can
still be blamed for shooting someone.

“Perhaps it is just as well, therefore, to determine their nature and number. A man may be ignorant, then, of

- who he is,
- what he is doing,
- what or whom he is acting on, and sometimes also
- what (e.g. what instrument) he is doing it with, and
- to what end (e.g. for safety), and
- how he is doing it (e.g. whether gently or violently).”

(NE, 3.1, 1111a3–a6, breaks added)

“... Now of all of these no one could be ignorant unless he were mad, and evidently also he could not be ignorant of the agent; for how could he not know himself? ...

You would have to be crazy to be ignorant of **all** of the things listed above.

In fact, you would have to be crazy to be ignorant of **the first** of the things listed above (who you are=the agent).

“...But of what he is doing a man might be ignorant, as for instance people say ‘it slipped out of their mouths as they were speaking’, or ‘they did not know it was a secret’, as Aeschylus said of the mysteries, or a man might say he ‘let it go off when he merely wanted to show its working’, as the man did with the catapult.” (NE, 3.1, 1111a7–a12)

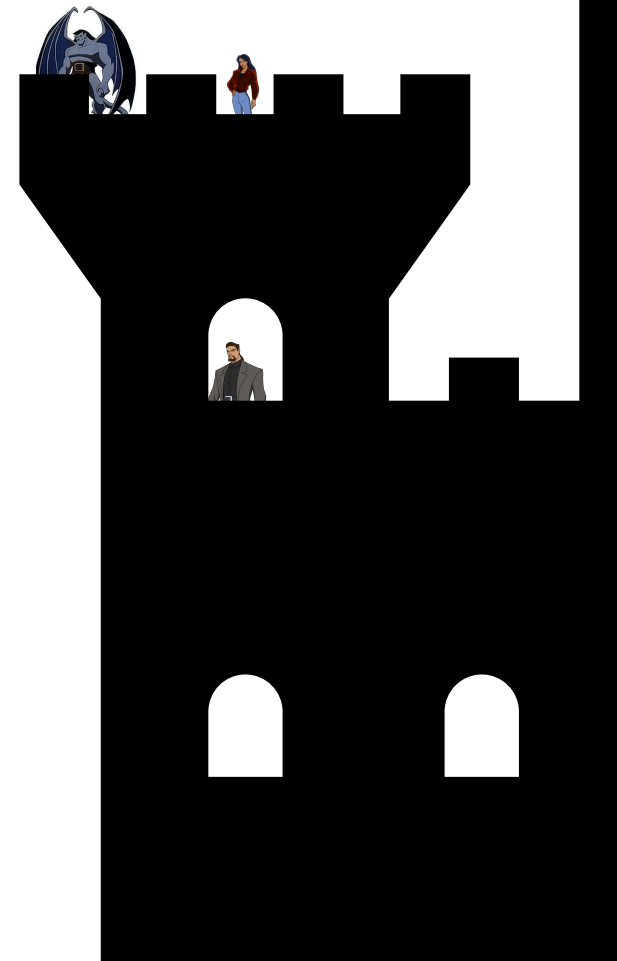
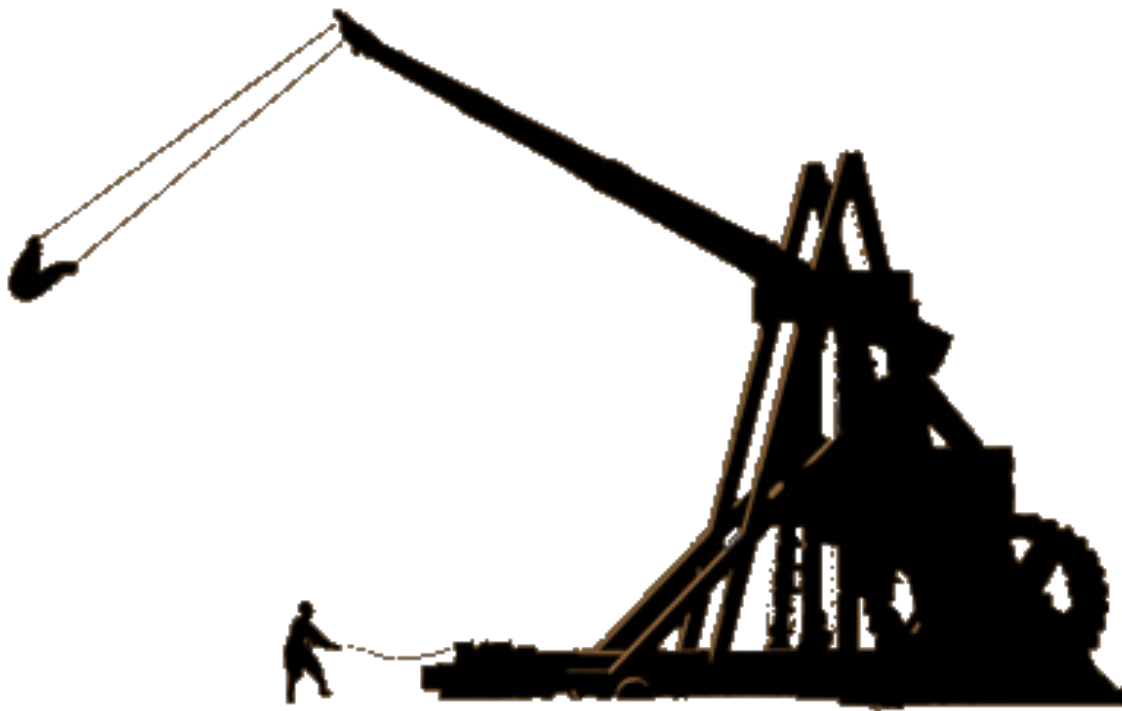
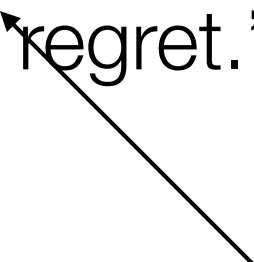


Image of trebuchet from <http://www.trebuchet.com/imgs/TrebLogo.png>

“...Further, the doing of an act that is called involuntary in virtue of ignorance of this sort must be painful and involve regret.” (NE, 3.1, 1111a21)



Aside: the phrase ‘in virtue of’ means ‘because of’ or ‘as a result of’. Don’t confuse this phrase with a discussion of ‘virtue’ (the state of character).

Given all of this, can we construct a good definition of the voluntary?

“Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action.” (NE, 3.1, 1111a22–a24, underline added)

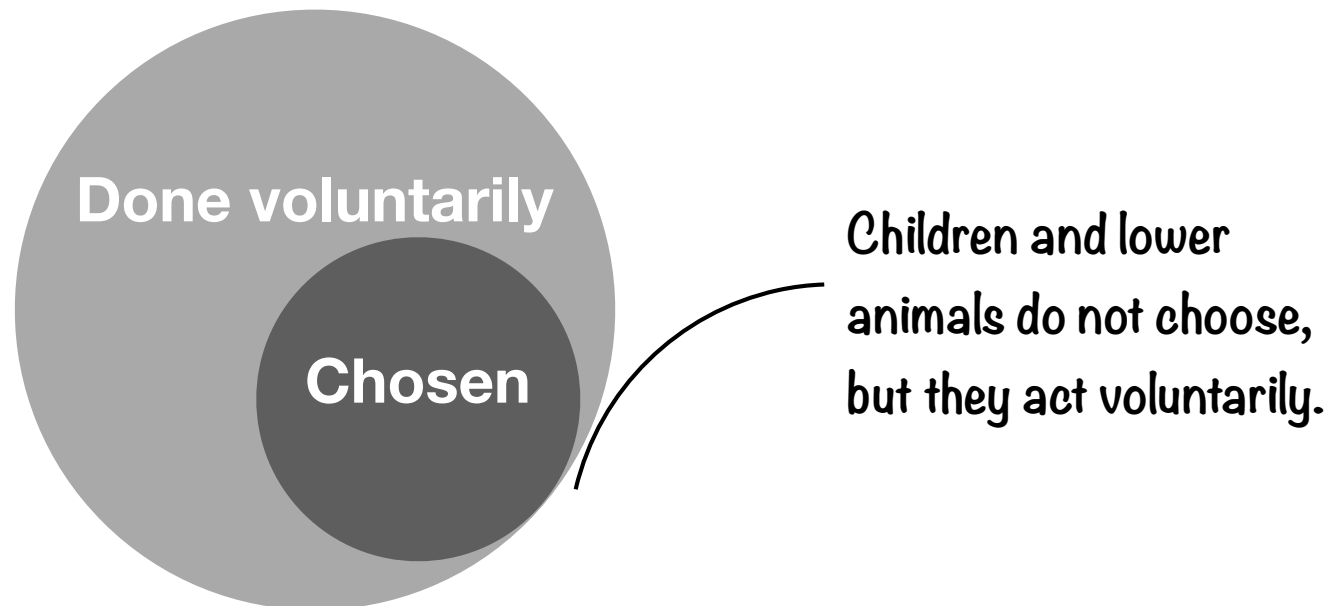
Notice that Aristotle thinks that animals and children are capable of voluntary actions.

He assumes that his audience will accept this as fairly obvious, and he uses this fact to argue that an act done from anger or appetite are voluntary.

You cannot get away with saying that you acted involuntarily because your anger or appetite made you do it.

What is the difference between *choice* and *the voluntary*?

“Choice, then, seems to be voluntary, but not the same thing as the voluntary; the latter extends more widely. For both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action, but not in choice, and acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not as chosen” (NE, 3.2, 1111b7–1111b9)



Aristotle argues that acting with choice is not the same thing as acting from *appetite* or acting from *anger*, and choosing is not the same thing as *wishing*.

- A person who acts from anger or appetite exercises her power of choice less than someone who does not.
- It is possible to wish for impossible things. But it is not possible to choose impossible things.

“Again, wish relates to rather to the end, choice to the means; for instance, we wish to be healthy, but we choose the acts which will make us healthy, and we wish to be happy ..., but we cannot well say that we choose to be so; for, in general, choice seems to relate to the things that are in our own power.” (NE, 3.2, 1111b27–b30)

“Is it [choice], then, what has been decided by previous deliberation?” (NE, 3.2, 1112a13)

Aristotle recognizes that deliberation seems to be a key element in making a choice, but before he is willing to settle on a definition, he needs to examine the concept of ‘deliberation’.

Deliberation

“Do we deliberate about everything, and is everything a possible subject of deliberation, or is deliberation impossible about some things? We ought presumably to call not what a fool or a madman would deliberate about, but what a sensible man would deliberate about, a subject of deliberation. Now about eternal things no one deliberates, e.g. about the universe or the incommensurability of the diagonal and the side of a square. But no more do we deliberate about the things that involve movement but always happen in the same way, whether of necessity or by nature or from any other cause, e.g. the solstices and the risings of the stars; nor about things that happen now in one way, now in another, e.g. droughts and rains; nor about chance events, like the finding of treasure. But we do not deliberate even about all human affairs; for instance, no Spartan deliberates about the best constitution for the Scythians. For none of these things can be brought about by our own efforts.” (NE, 3.3, 1112a18–1112a30)

So one key to understanding the concept of deliberation is to recognize that, *if we are deliberating well*, we will only deliberate about things that we have some control over.

This does not mean that it would be impossible for people in Sparta to engage in a kind of theoretical exercise, asking: what kind of constitution would be best for the Scythians? But this will not count as a kind of deliberation. (It might also be a waste of time.)

“We deliberate about things that are in our power and can be done; and these are in fact what is left. For nature, necessity, and chance are thought to be causes, and also thought and everything that depends on man. Now every class of men deliberates about the things that can be done by their own efforts. And in the case of exact and self-contained sciences there is no deliberation, e.g. about the letters of the alphabet (for we have no doubt how they should be written); but the things that are brought about by our own efforts, but not always in the same way, are the things about which we deliberate, e.g. questions of medical treatment or of money-making. And we do so more in the case of the art of navigation than in that of gymnastics, inasmuch as it has been less exactly worked out, and again about other things in the same ratio, and more also in the case of the arts than in that of the sciences; for we have more doubt about the former. Deliberation is concerned with things that happen in a certain way for the most part, but in which the event is obscure, and with things in which it is indeterminate. We call in others to aid us in deliberation on important questions, distrusting ourselves as not being equal to deciding.” (NE, 3.3, 1112a31–b11)

“We deliberate not about ends but about what contributes to ends. For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall convince, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does any one else deliberate about his end.” (NE, 3.3, 1112b12–b14)



Cicero Denounces Catiline (1889), fresco by Cesare Maccari.
From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_speaking#/media/File:Cicer%C3%B3n_denuncia_a_Catilina,_por_Cesare_Maccari.jpg

The definition of choice is found:

“The same thing is deliberated upon and is chosen, except that the object of choice is already determinate, since it is that which has been decided upon as a result of deliberation that is the object of choice. For every one ceases to inquire how he is to act when he has brought the moving principle back to himself and to the ruling part of himself; for this is what chooses. This is plain also from the ancient constitutions, which Homer represented; for the kings announced their choices to the people. The object of choice being one of the things in our own power which is desired after deliberation, choice will be deliberate desire of things in our own power; for when we have decided as a result of deliberation, we desire in accordance with our deliberation.” (NE, 3.3, 1113a3–a12)

wish: is it for the good or for the *apparent* good?

“That *wish* is for the end has already been stated; some think it is for the good, others for the apparent good. Now those who say that the good is the object of wish must admit in consequence that that which the man who does not choose aright wishes for is not an object of wish (for if it is to be so, it must also be good; but it was, if it so happened, bad); while those who say the apparent good is the object of wish must admit that there is no natural object of wish, but only what seems so to each man. Now different things appear so to different people, and, if it so happens, even contrary things.” (NE, 3.4, 1113a15–a22)

What is the unpleasant consequence of saying that the object of wish is the good?

What is the unpleasant consequence of saying that the object of wish is the apparent good?

How does Aristotle try to resolve this difficulty?

“If these consequences are unpleasing, are we to say that absolutely and in truth the good is the object of wish, but for each person the apparent good; that that which is in truth an object of wish is an object of wish to the good man, while any chance thing may be so to the bad man, ...” (NE, 3.4, 1113a23–25)

Note that Aristotle appeals to the judgment of the good man as a (the?) standard of truth. The things that a *good* person wants are (it turns out) *objectively good*. Bad people are *mistaken about what is truly good*.

Cf., from NE, 3.1: “...every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought to abstain from ...” (NE, 3.1, 1110b28)

Virtue and vice are in our power:

“The end, then, being what we wish for, the things contributing to the end what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning the latter must be according to choice and voluntary. Now the exercise of the virtues is concerned with these. Therefore virtue also is in our own power, and so too vice. For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and vice versa; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power. Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious.” (NE, 3.5, 1113b3–b14)

Aside: Some historians have argued that the concept of a 'will' (i.e., a 'free will') is nowhere to be found in Aristotle—that it is perhaps an invention of the Stoics or of the Christians.

This might be the case if the concept of a 'free will' is defined precisely enough, but notice that at least one element of free will is present in Aristotle's concept of choice: I have the power to act if and only if I have the power not to act.

“Now someone may say that all men aim at the apparent good, but have no control over how things appear to him; but the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character. We reply that if each man is somehow responsible for the state he is in, he will also be himself somehow responsible for how things appear; but if not, no one is responsible for his own evil-doing, but everyone does evil acts through ignorance of the end, thinking that by these he will get what is best, and the aiming at the end is not self-chosen but one must be born with an eye, as it were, by which to judge rightly and choose what is truly good, and he is well endowed by nature who is well endowed with this. For it is what is greatest and most noble, and what we cannot get or learn from another, but must have just such as it was when given us at birth, and to be well and nobly endowed with this will be complete and true natural endowment. If this is true, then, how will virtue be more voluntary than vice? To both men alike, the good and the bad, the end appears and is fixed by nature or however it may be, and it is by referring everything else to this that men do whatever they do.” (NE, 3.5, 1114a32–b16)

“Whether, then, it is not by nature that the end appears to each man such as it does appear, but something also depends on him, or the end is natural but because the good man adopts the means voluntarily virtue is voluntary, vice also will be none the less voluntary; for in the case of the bad man there is equally present that which depends on himself in his actions even if not in his end. If, then, as is asserted, the virtues are voluntary (for we are ourselves somehow part-causes of our states of character, and it is by being persons of a certain kind that we assume the end to be so and so), the vices also will be voluntary; for the same is true of them.” (NE, 3.5, 1114b17–b25)

But there is a difference between the way that an action is voluntary and the way that a state of character is voluntary.

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