

IGNORANCE AND BLAMEWORTHINESS IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

MORAL IGNORANCE AND BLAMEWORTHINESS IN
ARISTOTLE'S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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LAY ABSTRACT

In this thesis I identify and engage an orthodox view in Aristotelian scholarship. Many scholars maintain that Aristotle, in the third book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, claims that we should always blame people who act badly with ignorance of what is moral. This view, which I label the “common view” is widespread and unquestioned by scholars. I disagree with this reading of Aristotle. I do not think that Aristotle commits himself to this view in his writings. Moreover, I argue that the common view is a bad fit with other passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. If the common view is false, as I claim, it is important for us to formulate an alternate reading of Aristotle’s comments. I proffer one such reading, a reading on which people are not always worthy of blame when they act badly in ignorance of what is moral.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I identify and engage an orthodox view in Aristotelian scholarship. Many scholars maintain that Aristotle, in the third book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, claims that we should always blame people who act badly with ignorance of what is moral. This view, which I label the “common view” is widespread and unquestioned in the literature. I disagree with the orthodox view, and maintain that we can read Aristotle as not always holding people who act badly in ignorance of what is moral as blameworthy. There are three essential steps in my argument. First, I show that it is not certain that Aristotle commits himself to the common view in the passages usually cited as evidence for the view. I review the evidence in favor of the common view, and argue that other interpretations of Aristotle are equally compatible with his text. Second, I argue that there is textual evidence elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is contrary to the common view. Thirdly and finally, I suggest that an alternate reading – on which Aristotle allows for pardon in some cases where people act badly in ignorance of what is moral – chimes well with other portions of his ethics, and with scholarly literature: I take two such cases, moral education and ethical deliberation. Given the evidence against the common view, and the evidence in favor of an alternate reading, I suggest that the orthodox view should be abandoned by scholars.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EN Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (ed. I. Bywater, 1983).

EE Aristotle, *Ethica Eudemia* (ed. R.R. Walzer and J.M. Mingay, 1991).

INTRODUCTION

In *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 Aristotle says that “Ignorance of what is beneficial is not taken to make an action involuntary. For the cause of involuntary action is not ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; nor is it ignorance of the universal, since that is a cause for blame.”¹ What does Aristotle mean when he says that ignorance of a universal is a cause for blame? The comment on ignorance of universals in *EN* III.1 is frequently interpreted by commentators as showing that Aristotle leaves no excuses for agents who act badly when they are ignorant in this way. Although this is a widely held view, I do not think it is a correct view. Rather, I believe that there is another way to read Aristotle in this passage, and that my reading supports a preferable interpretation of Aristotle’s account of voluntariness and ignorance. On my account, the fact that an agent voluntarily performs an action in ignorance of a universal does not necessarily indicate that the action is worthy of praise or blame. Rather, I maintain that Aristotle believed an agent who acts badly in ignorance of a universal may sometimes be excused. I suggest that this reading is more appealing because it helps account for cases where an agent is, through no fault of her own, ignorant of a universal. Furthermore, there is more evidence in favor of the reading I propose than for the common view; I will show where there is evidence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to support my view. Consequently, I argue that Aristotle does not think that the class

¹ 1110b30-33. All translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are based on Terence Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), sometimes with slight modifications.

of voluntary actions is co-extensive with the class of actions which are subject to praise or blame.

Broadly speaking, for Aristotle, ignorance of a universal (*katholou*) with respect to ethics is ignorance of what is right and wrong. That is, knowledge of a universal, with respect to ethics, is knowledge of what is appropriate and good. A fair amount can be said on this topic, but now is not the appropriate place. What is important for this, our preliminary discussion, is that Aristotle is commonly read as asserting that all actions which are done with ignorance of a universal are properly subject to praise or blame. And hence, all *bad* actions which are done with ignorance of a universal are properly subject to blame. This is the view which I call “the common view,” on the basis that the vast majority of the scholarly literature is committed, either explicitly or implicitly, to this claim. Many scholars adopt the view explicitly in their reading of Aristotle; some do not comment directly, but none, as far as I am aware, adopt a reading of Aristotle that is contrary to the central claim of the common view: all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are properly subject to blame.²

² I reference some scholars who adopt the view below. In the interest of brevity, I do not analyze scholars who adopt the view, or scholars who do not commit themselves but who also do not take a contrary position. Scholars who, on my reading, subscribe to the common view include: Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), iii lect. 3:411; Francis Eterovich, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Commentary and Analysis* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 47-48; Alexander Grant, *The Ethic of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), Vol. II, 10-11; Hawkins (63-64); Gerard Hughes, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 127; Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, 204; Harold Joachim, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 99; Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* (London: Latimer Trend & Company, 1979), 50-52; Susan Sauvé Meyer, “Aristotle on the Voluntary,” *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 154; Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, an Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 126-127; John Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 235-236; James Urmsom, *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 46-47; James Weldon, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), xxiii.

I believe the common view attributes to Aristotle an unappealing position. Consider, for a moment, an agent raised without direction or guidance, in a society lacking in moral quality, who, upon entering a society of his betters, acts without knowing what is best.³ In such a case, his actions are indeed voluntary, as they have their origin in him, and he acts in accordance with what he knows (as we shall see, these are Aristotle’s criteria for an action to be voluntary). But we might think that he is not blameworthy in the same way as an agent who was brought up in good habits, in a moral society, who is careless and falls into viciousness. The common view of Aristotle has him treating these two agents in the same way; it suggests that Aristotle would think both agents blameworthy for their actions. If this is true, then Aristotle’s view of moral responsibility, praise and blame, is surprisingly and uncomfortably harsh, and far removed, at least in this respect, from our own standards. But I do not think that the common reading of Aristotle is true. In the subsequent chapters, I will defend a reading of the *Ethics* which is more charitable to Aristotle, and which has better evidence in its favor than the common view.

Before engaging with the common view, it is necessary to briefly outline the different ways scholars adopt the view, and then to categorize how they incorporate the

³ The case I present here is similar to one given by Susan Wolf in “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility” (*Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987), but it is distinct in two important ways. The case given by Wolf is of a dictator’s son who, because he is educated by his father and follows his father’s example, becomes a man whose second order desires do not distinguish between right and wrong in certain cases (for example, torturing or summary executions). This, Wolf claims, makes his second order desires insane, and so he is not responsible in a full sense. The differences in my case are that the entire society is corrupt, and that the agent *does* discriminate between right and wrong (for being solicitous of right and wrong is required by Aristotle to excuse blame). The problem here is that the agent has never had the opportunity to witness or learn non-vicious behaviors. Meanwhile, the dictator’s son does have the opportunity to view the differences in other peoples’ behavior, since his example is set by his father, and not his entire society; he simply does not think that such behaviors are applicable to him.

view into their readings of Aristotle’s treatment of voluntary action. It might not be immediately obvious that one or another scholar subscribes to the common view. For, not all scholars read the passages in which Aristotle mentions ignorance of a universal with the same goal in mind as I have here – that is, to discover Aristotle’s position on the blameworthiness of actions done in ignorance of universals. There are other issues at stake in Aristotle’s discussion to which scholars address their readings. Hence, scholars will often mention that Aristotle thought that all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy without spending any time arguing that this reading is correct, or that other readings are possible.

Take, for instance, David Ross’s translation and commentary of Aristotle. The note he attaches to the central passage in *EN* III.1, quoted above, adopts the common view without argument: “[Aristotle] assumes that all cases of ‘ignorance of the universal’ – i.e. where one fails to know right from wrong – are one’s fault, hence such ignorance does not exculpate the agent, and the acts are done merely *in ignorance*, hence voluntary.”⁴ Somewhat ironically, Ross supposes that Aristotle holds the view that all ignorance of universals is a blameworthy fault, and that Aristotle assumes this rather than arguing for it. Ross’s reading is emblematic of scholars who follow the common view. He observes *that* Aristotle holds a particular view – that all actions done in ignorance of universals are properly subject to praise and blame – and moves on with his commentary with little or no comment. Ross comments only to suggest that Aristotle assumes this position, and to claim that for Aristotle the ignorance of a person who is this way is his own fault.

⁴ David Ross, *Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 219.

The accusation of negligence is cited frequently in connection with our central passage. Contemporary scholars, such as Pakaluk, and historical figures, such as Stewart and Aquinas, all suggest that for Aristotle a person could *only* have become ignorant of a universal through negligence.⁵ This, it should be noted, is not a feature of Aristotle’s argument in III.1. Rather, it is supplied by these commentators as a justification for the view – presumably, on their reading, it is most likely the justification Aristotle would give. Perhaps this is true. However, if it is true, then Aristotle seems to be adopting a remarkable and stringently harsh position with respect to moral ignorance. Some scholars refer to further comments made by Aristotle in *EN* III.5, where he briefly discusses virtuous and vicious character formation, as the source of their reading that negligence is the only explanation for moral ignorance.⁶ However, as we shall see, reading this relationship between *EN* III.1 and III.5 is problematic if we hope to maintain the common view, as scholars tend to do.

Some scholars do comment on the harshness of Aristotle’s view on responsibility for moral ignorance, as they understand it.⁷ Though scholars consider the view harsh, and pause to consider the fact that it is harsh, they do not take this as a reason to re-evaluate whether or not Aristotle did indeed hold the view that all bad actions done in ignorance of universal are properly subject to blame. Instead, just as some scholars supply a justification

⁵ See Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 127; Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics*, 235-236; Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle*, iii lect. 3:411.

⁶ For examples, see Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, 204 and 208-209; Ross, *Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics*, 219 and 221; Siegler, “Voluntary and Involuntary,” (*The Monist* 52:2, 1968), 279; Joachim, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, 99; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Aristotle’s Theory of Moral Insight* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 240-241.

⁷ See Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, 46-48; Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will*, 50-52; Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, 126-128.

of negligence to Aristotle’s comment, scholars who pause over the harshness of the view attempt to justify it on Aristotelian terms, rather than doubting that it is his view. Urmson, for instance, contrasts the case of acting badly in ignorance of a universal with that of the akratic. He suggests that the apparent harshness of the view is not so harsh when we consider that Aristotle does not condemn *all* people who act badly (for, presumably, an akratic can be treated less harshly). Hence, Urmson thinks that Aristotle is only considering cases of extreme vice, such as people who think it good sport to harm others, and cases of akrasia.⁸ Of course, there is a large range of cases missing from this account; there seems to be a range of intermediate cases, where people are neither carelessly wicked nor acting against their better judgement. Nonetheless, Urmson seems to think that this excessively vicious person and the akratic exhaust the possibilities Aristotle considers.

Hughes, on the other hand, explains the seeming harshness of Aristotle’s view by suggesting that Aristotle has in mind the manner in which the legal courts of Athens might consider a case of acting badly in ignorance of what is right and wrong. In such cases, ignorance was no excuse. So, while the view might seem harsh when applied to *moral* cases, the view might not pertain to such cases. However, to read Aristotle as thinking only of legal cases rather than moral cases at some points in his discussion is to read the text in a strained way. Though it is true that Aristotle considers his discussion pertinent to legislators, this does not appear to be his primary concern.⁹ Hence, it would be peculiar for

⁸ Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, 47.

⁹ It is clear that Aristotle considers it important to discuss voluntariness because of his prior discussion of virtue and vice, and that *this* is the motivation for his discussion. The usefulness for legislators is incidental, though no doubt important in itself, to the investigation he is conducting. See 1109b30-35: “Virtue, then, is about feelings and actions. These receive praise or blame if they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes even

Aristotle, in the midst of his discussion in III.1, to abruptly shift his focus exclusively to legal cases without calling attention to the change. Just as with the view that excessive viciousness is all that Aristotle intends to pick out in his comment, Hughes' attempt to read Aristotle as thinking about legal cases appears to be an attempt to salvage Aristotle from the uncompromising doctrine which Hughes and other proponents of the common view insist on attributing to him. But we need not make this salvage attempt if we abandon the common view and read Aristotle in another way.

It would be erroneous to think that, since Aristotle's view is too harsh, he could not have thought these things; or, if he did, that he did not consider them deeply. I do not attempt to make such an inference. Rather, I consider it important to look at Aristotle and, upon discovering something which seems wrong, question whether he does indeed hold such a view on the basis of a careful examination of the text. If, as I argue, he does not explicitly commit himself to the view, then charity bids us to qualify our conclusions. Moreover, if there is a positive interpretation of Aristotle's view contrary to the problematic claim, which is consistent with Aristotle's theory of ethics more generally, then we ought to be strongly in favor of interpreting Aristotle in this way. The majority of commentators hold that Aristotle holds an unappealingly harsh view. I doubt this. I also believe that a positive account can be given of Aristotle's text which is contrary to the common view and which coheres with and contributes to an understanding of his ethics

pity, if they are involuntary. Hence, presumably, in examining virtue we must define the voluntary and the involuntary. This is also useful to legislators, both for honors and for corrective treatments."

more generally. Battling the common view and presenting my alternative reading of Aristotle will be my goals in the following chapters.

In Chapter I, I consider the best evidence in favor of the common view. Scholars who adopt the common view do so based upon Aristotle’s comments in *EN* III.1. Hence, in order to ascertain whether or not the common view is the only – or the best – reading of Aristotle, it is necessary to carefully consider the evidence. I argue that the evidence for the common view in III.1 does not uniquely or exclusively support the common view. Other interpretations of Aristotle are possible, given Aristotle’s comments and arguments in his discussion of voluntariness and involuntariness, praise and blame. I do not deny that the common view is a possible reading of what Aristotle says in III.1. Rather, I merely make the modest claim that other interpretations are possible, and, indeed, just as well supported by the text as the common view.

In Chapter II, I look closely at *EN* III.5 and its relationship with III.1. Scholars often point to III.5 as a justification for reading Aristotle in the common way. For this reason, it is important to investigate what relationship the two chapters have, if any, and whether or not the relationship lends credence to the common view. I argue that, far from supporting the common view, Aristotle’s discussion in III.5 in fact poses a significant problem for scholars who adopt the common view. This is because proponents of the common view introduce an important tension between the two chapters, which need not exist if we reject the common view and read Aristotle in an alternate way. I take this tension between III.1 and III.5 as a good reason to reject the common view, and to prefer a reading which introduces no such tension. As I argue, Aristotle, in III.5, clearly allows for the excuse of

at least one type of universal – the law. Given this example of exculpating ignorance, as well as the criteria which Aristotle provides for establishing when an agent can be pardoned for acting with ignorance of this sort, I argue that the common view is false, and suggest Aristotle might plausibly have considered other cases of ignorance of universals relevantly similar to legal cases.

Finally, in Chapter III, I move beyond a close reading of the passages in Aristotle which pertain directly to the common view, and argue that my preferred reading of Aristotle on moral responsibility and ignorance of universals fits well with Aristotle’s views on moral education, deliberation and decision more generally. In both of these areas, moral education and ethical deliberation, we can see that Aristotle does not consider ethical knowledge as simple or assumed. Hence, there are good reasons to think that Aristotle thought knowledge of moral universals can be difficult to acquire. Aristotle himself claims that we can excuse ignorance of laws when it was difficult for the agent to know. Therefore, it is no great stretch to suppose that, if knowledge of moral universals is sufficiently difficult, that Aristotle would admit excuse in some cases of moral ignorance.

CHAPTER I

(1)

According to what I call the common view, Aristotle asserts that we should always blame people who act badly in ignorance of a universal. My central claim is that we need not follow the majority of scholars in attributing this view to Aristotle. Rather, I believe Aristotle thought that some such acts are blameworthy, but not all. The majority of the evidence for the common view is in *EN* III.1. In this chapter Aristotle discusses involuntariness as well as some practices of praising and blaming actions. Scholars who adopt the common view focus particularly on one mention of the practices of praising and blaming – 1110b30-33. Further, Aristotle makes three other comments regarding the practices of praising and blaming (at 1119b30-35, 1110a19ff, and 1110b33-1111a2) which might lead us to think that the common view is correct, even if the comments themselves do not explicitly express the common view.

In this chapter I will consider the evidence for the common view in *EN* III.1. I argue that Aristotle does not explicitly commit himself at 1110b30 to the view that all bad acts done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy. Nor, I argue, is it necessary to take Aristotle’s other comments regarding praising and blaming as evidence in favor of the common view. Instead, I consider it possible to maintain a reading of Aristotle on which the common view is false. In subsequent chapters, I consider further passages which pertain to the common view in Aristotle’s discussion of the voluntariness of vice in *EN* III.5. I also

give a positive account of a contrary reading of Aristotle, which I argue we should prefer to the common view. For now, however, I will consider the evidence in *EN* III.1.¹⁰

(2)

Before directly examining the textual evidence for the common view, we should look closely at Aristotle’s discussion of involuntariness in *EN* III.1. Aristotle thinks that voluntariness and involuntariness are connected to the praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of actions. To understand the claim of the common view, that according to Aristotle all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy, it is necessary to first understand how he thinks ignorance can render an action involuntary. Once we do this, we can look more closely at how Aristotle thinks praiseworthiness and blameworthiness connect with actions.

It should be familiar to readers of Aristotle that he begins his discussion of voluntariness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* immediately after he has discussed virtue and vice in Book II. Here, we are told that virtue is a mean, and that we must act in accordance

¹⁰ There are two other passages in Aristotle’s ethical writings which we might think provide important evidence for the common view. First, Aristotle discusses ignorance in *EN* V.8. Second, his separate treatment of voluntary action in the *Eudemian Ethics*. I do not think either section gives stronger evidence for the common view than *NE* III.1. The discussion in V.8 does not mention pity, pardon, or blame except in the context of involuntary actions. The common view’s claim is about actions which are voluntary. The *Eudemian* account of voluntary action is largely concerned with forced action, and the problem of whether akratic agents act voluntarily or involuntarily. This is also a separate issue. The brief mention of ignorance which occurs in the short chapter *EE* 2.9 does not provide any further evidence not already given in *EN* III.1. Finally, scholars themselves, as I mentioned in my introduction, usually express the common view as part of their discussion of *EN* III.1. It is fair to say, then, that scholars take III.1 to be the significant point in the ethics which supports their reading. Since my goal in this chapter is to provide the evidence for the common view, it is somewhat beside the point to introduce these passages and spend further time on them.

with the mean for our actions to be virtuous. Further, we must act in the right way, for the right reasons, and with the right sort of feeling. Book III begins with voluntariness because voluntary action seems to be the kind of action that clearly flows from our character. It is important, then, for Aristotle to distinguish what sorts of human behavior qualify as being virtuous or vicious, or which sorts of behaviors inform the virtue or vice of the agent. Thus, it is fitting for Aristotle to turn his attention to this topic after his discussion of virtue and vice in Book II.

The terms voluntary (*hekousion*) and involuntary (*akousion*) roughly capture, in regular Greek usage, the kind of causal relationship Aristotle is hoping to show is necessary for responsibility.¹¹ Voluntary actions, then, are an important – indeed a central – feature of Aristotle’s account of virtue and vice. Meanwhile, involuntary actions are important for Aristotle to discuss because these kinds of actions are *not* directly related to the virtue or vice of the agent. He does not think that involuntary actions are worthy of either praise or blame precisely because these sorts of actions do not reflect the sort of person the agent is.

But which actions count as involuntary? It is this question that Aristotle attempts to answer in III.1. He gives two answers which accord with what seems to be the case: actions which are forced are not voluntary, and actions which are caused by ignorance are not voluntary.¹² He speaks of forced action first, and action caused by ignorance second. He then provides a definitional statement summing up his account of voluntary action, along

¹¹ Whether Aristotle is attempting to show the causal connection between character and act is not without dispute. I generally follow Susan Sauvé Meyer’s reading. See Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), particularly 9-14, and chapters 4 and 6.

¹² 1109b35-1110a1.

with some concluding considerations to close the chapter.¹³ Actions are voluntary, we are told, when they are neither forced nor caused by ignorance – that is, when the principle of the action (*archē*) is in the agent, and she acts with knowledge of the particulars of her action.¹⁴

A complicating factor in Aristotle’s account of involuntariness is his addition to both cases – force and ignorance – of the claim that pain must accompany the action if it is to be considered strictly involuntary. In the case of forced action, Aristotle is not quite clear why the criterion of pain is part of his account. Rather, he says that so long as an action is forced – that is, where the principle of action (*archē*) is outside the agent where the agent contributes nothing, such as being abducted¹⁵ – and the agent unwilling, there will be pain.¹⁶ It seems, then, that Aristotle is thinking primarily of forced actions which are contrary to the character of the agent. This of course presents a problem, since not all actions which are forced need be against the character of the agent. One way of resolving this problem is to say that for a forced action to be involuntary in a robust way, it must not only have its principle outside the agent (the agent herself contributing nothing to the action), but also be contrary to the character of the agent (which will necessarily result in pain).¹⁷ Actions which are compelled, but not contrary to the agent’s character, are not involuntary in a full sense.

¹³ He speaks of force at 1110a1ff, of ignorance at 1110b18ff, and his definition and summary begin at 1111a22ff.

¹⁴ 1111a22-24.

¹⁵ 1110a1-4, 1110b15-16.

¹⁶ 1110b11-12.

¹⁷ Anthony Kenny claims that Aristotle should have demarcated a category of forced actions which corresponds to non-voluntary actions due to ignorance – where the agent is not pained, but she is still forced.

The subject of pain features more prominently in Aristotle’s discussion of ignorant actions. When he introduces involuntary action due to ignorance, Aristotle speaks not only of pain (*lupē*), but also of regret (*metameleia*). The introduction of the new term might surprise us, as it might indicate that Aristotle does not think that the pain involved with ignorant actions is of the same sort as pain involved with forced actions. However, I think that there is a simple way to explain the introduction of the new term. Pain is what happens when we are forced to act against our will. The pain is a sign that what is happening is contrary to our impulse, appetite, or wish.¹⁸ Meanwhile, knowing that *we* were the ones who acted (even if it was caused by ignorance) is a source of regret. On this reading, pain is felt for anything which is contrary to our will, while regret is a kind of pain which arises from an acknowledgement that it was *our* action which is against our will. If this reading is correct, then it is unsurprising that Aristotle introduces regret alongside pain in his discussion of ignorance and not in his discussion of forced action; forced actions are not properly *our* actions, so we cannot have regret (*metameleia*) for them; we can, however, be pained by them (*lupē*).¹⁹

Though Aristotle does not do this explicitly in *EN* III.1, it coheres with his account. See Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will* (London: Latimer Trend & Company. 1979), 29. However, if Aristotle’s goal is to capture the causal relation between the character and the act, he need not specify that forced actions require pain – even though, according to his criteria they do require it. The reason for this is that forced actions are more obviously the result of something beyond the agent herself. Meanwhile, the presence of pain on the part of the agent in unforced actions is a sign, both to the agent herself as well as to those observing the agent that the action was contrary to her character.

¹⁸ This is the general reading of many scholars. For examples, see Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 82-83, Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will*, 53 and 70. It should be noted that pain is only a feature of involuntary action, and not a sufficient cause – agents also experience pain in continent actions.

¹⁹ A second possibility which I am also willing to endorse is that regret (*metameleia*) is something which occurs *after* the act, while pain (*lupē*) is what occurs *during* the act. Hence, both forced actions and actions caused by ignorance can be painful, but actions done in ignorance are only painful after the fact once the agent’s ignorance is removed.

Aristotle thinks that all actions caused by ignorance are involuntary at least in a certain sense, but he also thinks that in order to count as involuntary in the strict sense they must be accompanied with pain. So, Aristotle must investigate which sorts of ignorance are necessary for involuntariness, and in what way pain is present. For there seems to be a relevant difference between an agent who acts ignorantly and experiences pain after the fact and one who acts ignorantly and does not experience pain. This difference is the motivation for Aristotle making his well-known tripartite distinction between actions which are voluntary (*hekousion*), involuntary (*akousion*), and non-voluntary (*ouk hekousion*).²⁰ The tripartite distinction captures the different ways the agent can be related to his act. There is a difference between the act the agent in fact performs and the act the agent considers himself to be performing as he is acting. The agent who does not experience pain cannot have acted strictly voluntarily, for he did not do what he thought he was doing. So, his action is involuntary in a sense. However the act does not cause him pain when he learns what he has done; pain is necessary for Aristotle’s full-blooded sense of involuntariness.²¹ Hence, non-voluntary action is an intermediate case, which is neither voluntary nor involuntary in the full sense.

²⁰ 1110b18-25.

²¹ The pain requirement for full-blooded involuntariness has been debated among scholars. I follow the reading of Aristotle on which pain is an outward sign to us that the action is contrary to the agent’s character. Moreover, if we consider our own actions, we can also see that pain is felt when our unintended actions (due to ignorance) are contrary to our character. Some scholars think Aristotle’s claim that pain is a requirement for involuntariness is an error on his part: see William Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980), 153 and 156; David Ross, *Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press) 198; Frederick Siegler, "Voluntary and Involuntary" (*The Monist*. Oxford University Press, 1968) 52:(2), 276-277; and David Charles, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 260-261. Other scholars, with whom I agree, take the pain requirement more seriously: see especially Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 82-84, as well as Kenny, *Aristotle’s*

Aristotle’s discussion of pain in connection with actions involving ignorance shows us that not all actions which are done ignorantly are strictly involuntary. Ignorance is a cause of the action when it is due to the ignorance that the agent acted in the way she did. According to my reading, when Aristotle speaks of an action as caused by the agent’s ignorance, he means that the person who acts involuntarily due to ignorance would *not* have acted in that way had she not been ignorant; hence, it is fair to describe her ignorance as the cause of her action. Meanwhile, the agent who acts non-voluntarily *might* still have acted in that way if she were not ignorant.²² As a result, her ignorance is not the cause of her action in the same way.

(3)

After explaining how the presence or absence of pain helps us to assess whether an ignorant action is involuntary, Aristotle addresses a second set of ignorant actions, which seem to be different than the involuntary actions he has just described in his tripartite

Theory of the Will, 53; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Tran. C.J. Litzinger. Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), iii lect. 3:406-408; and Terence Irwin, "Review of The Aristotelian Ethics and Aristotle's Theory of the Will" (*Journal of Philosophy*. 1980) 77:6, 347.

²² Robert Heinaman outlines an important problem: “But the force of ‘because of’ ignorance is obscure. Ignorance is the absence of knowledge, and Aristotle says little on how the absence of something explains why something else is the case. According to *Physics* II.3 195a11-14 we will ‘sometimes’ speak of the absence of x as explaining y when the presence of x would explain the presence of the contrary of y. Applied to involuntary action, this would mean that when A does x because of ignorance, the relevant knowledge would have brought about a different action. But this will not work for ‘non-voluntary’ action since in many such cases the agent would not wish to avoid the action, and hence knowledge would not have resulted in a different action.” See Heinaman, "Voluntary, Involuntary and Choice." (*A Companion to Aristotle*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 490. The solution I suggest to the problem is that Aristotle is concerned not so much with what the agent did, but with what sort of disposition she did it. So, an agent whose action is non-voluntary *might* have committed the evil act if she had not been ignorant. Nonetheless, the ignorance still made it the case that she did not know that the act she was committing was not the act she thought it was.

distinction. In his discussion of the role of pain (*lupē*) or regret (*metamaleia*) Aristotle is presenting a case where an individual is ignorant of one or more important particulars of her action. Aristotle gives us a list of examples later in III.1 of what he means by particular ignorance. For instance: accidentally setting off a catapult; mistaking a son for an enemy; mistaking the force of a blow in sparring.²³ Each of these is a mistake about a particular thing about which the action is concerned. But it seems that ignorance can sometimes affect actions in a different way. Aristotle’s next distinction, and the subsequent discussion, is what is most central to our present evaluation of the common view. We must examine what role ignorance plays in action and what Aristotle says about praising and blaming to see whether proponents of the common view are correct in claiming that Aristotle holds the view that all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy. He writes:

Action caused by ignorance (*di’ agnoian*) would seem to be different from action done in ignorance (*agnoounta*). For if the agent is drunk or angry, his action seems to be caused by drunkenness or anger, not by ignorance, though it is done in ignorance, not in knowledge. Certainly every vicious person is ignorant of the actions he must do or avoid, and this sort of error makes people unjust, and in general bad. Ignorance of what is beneficial (*sumpheronta*) is not taken to make action involuntary. For the cause of involuntary action is not ignorance in the decision (*prohairesei*), which causes vice; nor is it ignorance of the universal (*katholou*), since that is a cause for blame. Rather, the cause is ignorance of the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with, since these allow both pity and pardon. For an agent acts involuntarily if he is ignorant of one of these particulars.²⁴

This key passage begins with a distinction between actions done *because of* ignorance (*di’ agnoian*), and actions done *in* ignorance (*agnoōn*). Aristotle’s thought here

²³ 1111a10-15.

²⁴ 1110b24-1111a2.

seems to be that some actions are not caused by the agent in a full sense, but rather by ignorance, while some actions can include ignorance, but still be properly caused by the agent. He provides the example of the drunk or angry agent to illustrate his distinction. The drunk or angry person does not act *because* he is ignorant. We should recall that Aristotle does not think an action done because of ignorance is, properly speaking, the action of the agent. Though the agent does indeed *do* the action, it is not, from the agent’s perspective, the action she thought she was doing. Yet, in the case of someone who is drunk or angry it would be false to say that ignorance did not feature in his action in an important way. The drunkenness or anger is what is responsible for the ignorance, and so we say that the drunk acted drunkenly, and the angry person acted angrily, rather than saying that each acted because of ignorance. In these cases, Aristotle is suggesting, the agent is still the proper cause of the action, even though ignorance is present in an important way.

The passage continues with the distinction between actions done with ignorance of particulars, and actions done with ignorance of universals. The distinction here is between ignorance of a particular fact, such as mistakenly thinking the man in front of you is your enemy, and ignorance of general things. Presumably, Aristotle here means what we might call *moral* generalities, such as whether it is good to pay debts. The preponderance of scholarly opinion follows this reading.

However, there is no agreement among scholars about how the distinction between ignorance of particulars and ignorance of universals is related to the distinction which precedes it, between actions done because of ignorance and actions done in ignorance.²⁵

²⁵ See my discussion of the views of Hardie and Kenny below.

My reading of Aristotle is that these two distinctions – between “because of ignorance” and “in ignorance,” and between ignorance of particulars and universals – line up with one another. Acting *in* or *because* of ignorance are *ways* in which a person may act. Universal or particular ignorance are things about which a person may be ignorant when she acts. My claim is that acting in ignorance *is* acting while ignorant of a universal, while acting because of ignorance *is* acting while ignorant of a particular, as long as that particular is central to the act. This is a fairly natural way of reading the text, as the two distinctions come close together, without a break in the discussion, and they each seem to connect to Aristotle’s goal of showing that some sorts of ignorance are sufficient to render an action involuntary, while other sorts of ignorance are not. In order to show that these two distinctions line up in an important way, we must look at how the case of the drunk or angry agent illustrates Aristotle’s distinction between actions done because of ignorance (*di’ agnoian*) and actions done in ignorance (*agnoōn*).

How does ignorance factor in the action of the drunk or angry agent? One possibility is that Aristotle is indicating a prior cause, the drunkenness for instance. On this view, it seems that ignorance *is* the cause of the action, but that Aristotle is simply pointing out that the only reason that the agent is ignorant is because she is drunk. If she were not drunk, then ignorance would not have caused her action. Thus, we should point to the prior cause. This is the view expressed by Hardie and Kenny in their commentaries.²⁶ On this reading, the distinction between acting in ignorance and acting because of ignorance does

²⁶ See Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory*, 156-157, and Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will*, 49. Siegler, “Voluntary and Involuntary”, 280, also holds this view.

not line up closely with the distinction between acting in ignorance of particulars and acting in ignorance of universals.

There are some reasons for holding this view. A person who is drunk or angry can easily become ignorant of certain particulars that bear on her action, resulting in the kind of ignorance which Aristotle explicitly says makes an action involuntary.²⁷ For instance, a person who is drunk can misjudge the force of her blow, or drunkenness can make her less perceptive, which may result in her failing to notice some important particular (to take Aristotle’s later example; whether the point of a spear or sword has a button on it). Anthony Kenny imagines a case where the drunk mistakes a policeman for a barmaid (and presumably performs an action based on this mistake).²⁸ There seems to be an important difference between acting ignorantly in this way, and acting ignorantly while sober. When a person is sober, we point to her negligence. When she is drunk, we blame her drunkenness. This common sense observation might be all that Aristotle is hoping to capture in his distinction between acting because of ignorance and acting in ignorance.

However, I do not think that Aristotle’s distinction here is quite so superficial. Aristotle is not merely saying that a drunk or angry person is ignorant of *what* she is doing, or of any of the other particulars surrounding her action. The person who is drunk can indeed be ignorant of a particular, but she can also be ignorant of a kind of universal. For instance, as Irwin suggests in his commentary, Aristotle might be saying, not that a drunk or angry person is ignorant about whether or not she is shooting another person, but instead

²⁷ Cf1111a3-15.

²⁸ Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will*, 49.

that she is ignorant about whether or not it is the correct thing to do.²⁹ In this case, she would be ignorant about whether or not her action is *appropriate*. On this reading, the distinction between acting because of ignorance and acting in ignorance lines up with the distinction between acting with ignorance of particulars and acting with ignorance of universals. When we are ignorant of universals, which dictate what is appropriate, we might act badly in ignorance. When we are ignorant of particulars which are central to the act (and the act itself is contrary to our characters), then we act because of ignorance.

There are two reasons we should read Aristotle as claiming the drunk or angry agent is ignorant of what is appropriate (that is, ignorant of a kind of universal). The first reason is that Aristotle mentions that ignorance of *any* particular, so long as it is central to the action, makes the action involuntary:

Since an agent may be ignorant of any of these particular constituents of his action, someone who was ignorant of one of these seems to have acted involuntarily, especially if he was ignorant of the most important...³⁰

But the case of acting in ignorance is *not* meant to provide us with an example of an action that is involuntary. Rather, it is meant to provide us with an example of a *voluntary* action for which we blame the agent based on a prior cause – the drunkenness or anger.

Further reasons to reject the view that Aristotle is attempting to pick out particular ignorance in his example of the drunk or angry agent can be derived from Aristotle’s mentions of drunkenness and anger in his account of akratic action in *NE VII*. Here, the

²⁹ Terence Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 204.

³⁰ 1111a15-18. Presumably we should also supply, on Aristotle’s behalf, that the agent must experience pain or regret. Nonetheless, if she does *not* experience pain or regret, the action will still not be voluntary, it will be non-voluntary. Either way, involuntary or non-voluntary, the agent is not acting voluntarily.

state of the akratic agent acting akratically is explicitly compared to the state of the drunk who acts badly. On Aristotle's account the akratic agent is not confused about, or ignorant of, particulars or particular premises.³¹ The akratic agent knows, for instance, that the person in front of him is a barmaid or a policeman. In Aristotle's discussion of akratic action in *EN VII*, we are told that having knowledge and attending to it are different, and that a drunk person's ability to provide a universal premise is no guarantee that it impacts her action in a meaningful way.³² Anger is similar to drunkenness. In the case of anger, the agent is overcome by spirit because his temper is too quick, and he acts before he has the chance for sober reflection. So, he attends to reason, but not in a complete way.³³ Though these cases are different in certain respects, they are connected in at least one important way: the agent does not attend to the universal in a complete way, and the result is that he is, in a way, temporarily ignorant of it. So, if the state of the drunk or angry agent acting badly while drunk or angry in III.1 is akin to that of the akratic agent acting akratically, then this implies that the drunk or angry agent in III.1 is also acting with ignorance of some universal, and not with ignorance of some particular.

For these reasons, it seems imprudent for us to read Aristotle as intending his talk of actions done "in ignorance," such as those of the drunk, to pick out actions which are done with particular ignorance for which the agent is responsible. Meanwhile, it seems plausible

³¹ 1147a25-35. My reading of Aristotle here is influenced by Hendrik Lorenz's chapter "Aristotle's Analysis of Akratic Action" (*The Cambridge Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In this chapter, Lorenz argues against scholars who maintain that the akratic is not attending to the universal premise of the practical syllogism, and scholars who think that the akratic is ignorant of the particular premise. Instead, the akratic is unable, in her current state, to draw the correct conclusion in a way that impacts her action.

³² 1147a18ff.

³³ 1149a24ff.

that Aristotle is thinking that the agent who acts in ignorance is acting without proper knowledge of how she ought to act. This is not to deny that the agent who acts in ignorance might be ignorant of one or more particulars *as well*. However, it seems clear to me that Aristotle’s goal, in drawing this distinction, was to capture the fact that the agent who acts in ignorance is ignorant of a universal: the drunk or angry agent, like the akratic agent, is (temporarily) ignorant of what she ought to do.³⁴

If this reading is correct, it draws out an interesting nuance in Aristotle’s account, one which is particularly pertinent to our discussion. Being ignorant of what is appropriate while drunk or angry is not quite the same as being ignorant of that same thing while sober. The person who is always ignorant of what is appropriate seems ignorant in a more complete way. In cases where the person is always ignorant of what is appropriate, the ignorance is because of an enduring state, while in the case of the drunk or angry person, it is only because of their current, temporary state. A tendency to drink too heavily is bad itself, and reflects a bad state of character. However, it is not the same thing as unqualified ignorance of the universal that striking a person is wrong. An important difference between the person who has a tendency to come to be in a state where they are *temporarily* ignorant (the drunk or irascible person) and the person who is *always* in a state of ignorance is that the drunk or irascible person seems to have more choice or control over whether or not she *becomes* ignorant. This difference between being responsible for the ignorance and not

³⁴ Also, on this reading, when Aristotle says that an action is caused by drunkenness, not by ignorance, he is claiming that the action is not caused by ignorance, but rather by the temporary state the agent is in. The drunkenness or anger are responsible for her being in a state where she might act in an inappropriate way.

being responsible for it is taken up again by Aristotle in III.5. I consider this issue in more detail in the next two chapters.

In conclusion, it appears that for Aristotle the only actions which count as involuntary due to ignorance are those which cause the agent pain (or would have caused her pain supposing the agent had become aware), and of which ignorance of some particular matter of fact was the cause of the act (and not merely present). When a person acts *because of* ignorance, for Aristotle, she acts because she is ignorant of some particular matter of fact, which is due to the circumstances of her action. In contrast, for the person who is acting *in* ignorance, the ignorance is of a universal: the agent may be temporarily ignorant of the universal, such as in cases of drunkenness, rage, and so forth, or the agent may be enduringly ignorant of the universal, as in a case of vice or bad character.

(4)

Equipped with a reading of the ways Aristotle considers ignorance relevant to an act, we can now investigate the evidence for the common view and evaluate whether or not it is the only viable reading of the text. Advocates for the common view claim that for Aristotle blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are always applicable to an agent who acts in ignorance (*agnoōn*), but not always applicable to an agent who acts because of ignorance (*di’ agnoian*). The first and always blameworthy kind action is done with ignorance of a universal – that is, ignorance of what we ought to do. The second and sometimes forgivable kind action is done with ignorance of a particular central to the act. My argument is that

the evidence for the common view does not necessitate this view, and it is consistent with an alternate view.

Some scholars take Aristotle’s comments at 1110b31-33 as explicitly committing him to the common view:

For the cause of involuntary action is not ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; nor is it ignorance of the universal (at any rate, that is a cause for blame).³⁵

These comments come in the middle of the passage quoted above, in which Aristotle draws his distinction between actions done in ignorance and actions done because of ignorance. Scholars who hold the common view do not usually directly examine whether or not Aristotle is committed to the view that all ignorance of a universal is blameworthy. Rather, they seem to read his claim that ignorance of a universal is cause for blame, and then simply assume it was his view that *all* such ignorance is a cause for blame.³⁶ However, as we shall see, we need not follow them in this inference. For, Aristotle does not make this universal claim. Further, the goal of his argument is still achieved whether or not we read him as proponents of the common view read him.

Aristotle’s goal in our central passage is to show that *some* kinds of ignorance fail to make an action involuntary. The natural course for him to take is to show that actions which are not *caused by* ignorance are voluntary – and this is precisely how he approaches

³⁵ οὐ γὰρ ἡ ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει ἄγνοια αἰτία τοῦ ἀκούσιου ἀλλὰ τῆς μοχθηρίας, οὐδ’ ἡ καθόλου (ψέγονται γὰρ διὰ γε ταύτην) (1110b31-33).

³⁶ For examples, see Ross, *Aristotle, the Nicomachean Ethics*, 219; Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, 204; James Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 46-47; Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, an Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127.

the issue. He first distinguishes actions caused by ignorance from actions done in ignorance, and then argues that the latter are voluntary. He shows this in two ways.

The first way Aristotle shows that actions done in ignorance are voluntary follows from his distinction between acting in ignorance and acting because of ignorance. Aristotle provides an argument that has an implicit appeal to the absurd: “Certainly every vicious person is ignorant of the actions he must do or avoid, and this sort of error makes people unjust, and in general bad.”³⁷ If we imagine the contrary, that vicious people know what they ought to do or what is beneficial but fail to do it, we would be forced to conclude that whenever these people do bad actions, they do them akratically. That is, they know what they ought to do, but they act against their better judgement because of desire. But this is clearly false, as individuals may act viciously and at the same time defend their views and actions.³⁸ So, Aristotle seems right to claim that vicious people act in ignorance of what they ought to do. They are acting as they see fit, and they will defend their actions, but their understanding of what they ought to do is incorrect. Thus, when people act viciously they are acting voluntarily, yet ignorantly.

The second way that Aristotle shows that actions done in ignorance of a universal are voluntary is by saying that vicious people are blamed for their acts.³⁹ We cannot blame people for actions if their actions are involuntary. Aristotle clearly says that if an agent

³⁷ ἀγνοεῖ μὲν οὖν πᾶς ὁ μοχθηρὸς ἃ δεῖ πράττειν καὶ ὧν ἀφεκτέον, καὶ διὰ τὴν τοιαύτην ἀμαρτίαν ἄδικοι καὶ ὄλως κακοὶ γίνονται (1110b28-30).

³⁸ Not only is this obviously true in our own experience, but Aristotle himself mentions such cases. For example, 1135b27ff. Aristotle discusses people who do not disagree over *what* has happened, but disagree over whether what happened was just.

³⁹ οὐ γὰρ ἢ ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει ἄγνοια αἰτία τοῦ ἀκουσίου ἀλλὰ τῆς μοχθηρίας, οὐδ’ ἢ καθόλου (ψέγονται γὰρ διὰ γε ταύτην) ἀλλ’ ἢ καθ’ ἕκαστα, ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἃ ἢ πράξις (1110b31-1111a1).

does a bad action involuntarily, he is deserving of pity or pardon, not blame.⁴⁰ It therefore follows from the fact that the actions of vicious people are blamed, despite the fact that they act in ignorance of a universal, that (at least some) actions done in ignorance of a universal are voluntary.

Aristotle does not pause to consider whether or not actions done in universal ignorance *ought* to be blamed. He takes this practice as given and passes on without argument. I take this as evidence that he is basing his argument on a claim which would be undisputed by his audience. It is not only his audience who might find this claim obvious, but us as well. We also think that a person who acts in ignorance of what he ought to do should be blamed – assuming his upbringing gave him the opportunity to learn how to act well (I return to this qualification in my subsequent chapters). Thus, we need not investigate whether or not people sometimes ought to be blamed for acting in this way. It is clear that they do get blamed, and it is common sense that they ought to get blamed.

The crucial statement which is taken by some scholars as explicit evidence for the common view is short and terse, which makes it somewhat obscure:

For the cause of involuntary action is not ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; nor is it ignorance of the universal (at any rate, that is a cause for blame), but instead the cause is ignorance of the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with.⁴¹

Aristotle does not directly say that all actions done in universal ignorance are blameworthy.

His phrase in Greek (*psegontai gar dia ge tautēn*) is indefinite in two ways: he claims that

⁴⁰ 1109b30-35, 1111a1-2.

⁴¹ οὐ γὰρ ἡ ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει ἄγνοια αἰτία τοῦ ἀκουσίου ἀλλὰ τῆς μοχθηρίας, οὐδ’ ἡ καθόλου (ψέγονται γὰρ διὰ γε ταύτην) ἀλλ’ ἡ καθ’ ἕκαστα, ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἧ ἡ πρᾶξις (1110b30-1111a1).

ignorance of a universal is a cause for blame, but it does not follow from this claim (first) that *only* ignorance of universals is a cause for blame, nor does it follow (second) that such ignorance is *always* a cause for blame. Consider, for example, the end of a musical performance. It is commonly understood that the end of a performance is a cause for applause. But this is not the only cause for applause, nor is it *always* a cause for applause. Just as saying that something is a cause for applause reveals to us very little about the relationship between performances and applause, so too claiming that acting in ignorance of a universal is a cause for blame reveals to us very little about the relationship between acting in ignorance of a universal and blameworthiness. To say that men are blamed for x is not to say that they are *only* blamed for x, nor is it to say that they are *always* blamed for x.

These ambiguities in the Greek show that the common view is not necessitated by what Aristotle says. Indeed, they make any reading of the text uncertain. We may read Aristotle as claiming something different from what he is commonly read as saying. Reading the text conservatively, I take Aristotle's line of thought to be the following. Since it is descriptively true that people are (sometimes) blamed for acting badly in ignorance of a universal, and since we only blame people for voluntary actions, it follows that at least some actions performed in ignorance of a universal are voluntary. I do not think we need to read anything further into Aristotle's comment.

Terence Irwin and David Ross both adopt the common view, yet on their translations too Aristotle falls short of making the strong claim that *all* bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blamed, or ought to be blamed. Irwin translates:

For the cause of involuntary action is not [this] ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; it is not [in other words] ignorance of the universal, since that is a cause for blame.⁴²

Irwin’s translation “since that is a cause for blame” is a little more direct than the Greek. In the Greek, the short phrase (*psegontai gar dia ge tautēn*) seems to be parenthetical, but Irwin translates it without phrasing it as an aside. Yet, his translation still captures 1) the indefinite quality of the Greek, and 2) the causal connection I suggest Aristotle is attempting to make in his argument: since ignorance of a universal is at least sometimes *a* cause for blame, actions done in ignorance of a universal must be voluntary. Meanwhile, Ross translates:

...for it is not mistaken purpose that makes an action involuntary (*it* makes men *wicked*), nor ignorance of the universal (for *that* men are *blamed*)....⁴³

Ross’s translation captures the parenthetical quality of Aristotle’s comment, as well as the descriptive aspect I hope to emphasize. Saying that men *are* blamed is a more descriptive claim than saying that ignorance of the universal is *a* cause for blame. If I say that something is a cause for blame, I may be interpreted as saying either something descriptive *or* something normative. Meanwhile, saying that men *are* blamed is clearly making a descriptive rather than a normative claim. Thus, it appears that the common view is not

⁴² It is worth noting that Irwin conflates ignorance in the decision with ignorance of the universal by supplying “in other words.” There seems to be a difference here, as Aristotle assigns different effects to each; one makes us wicked, the other has the effect of people blaming us. Although treating this topic is beyond the scope of my purpose, it might still be an important issue to investigate further to gain greater clarity in our reading of Aristotle’s understanding of moral universals. See my conclusion.

⁴³ Given the emphasis Ross places on “wicked” and “blame” suggests that he thinks Aristotle’s main preoccupation here is to draw a difference between wickedness and blameworthiness. One sort of ignorance is a cause of wickedness (mistaken purpose or decision), and the other a cause of blame (universal). Ross then interprets Aristotle as saying that universal ignorance *necessarily* causes blame.

supported by the Greek text, nor is it made necessary by the usual ways in which the Greek is translated into English.

We can see the ambiguity in the Greek even more plainly if we place some emphasis on the translation of the word ‘*ge*’. I translate the crucial phrase *psegontai gar dia ge tautēn* as “at any rate, that is a cause for blame.” What this translation highlights is that when Aristotle says people are blamed for ignorance of the universal, he is parenthetically providing evidence for his assertion that at least some actions of this sort are voluntary. So, he is not necessarily making a claim about what *ought* to happen in *all* cases. Rather, he is indicating that we *do* blame people for being ignorant of universals, and that in *some* cases this is valid, and hence that some such actions must be voluntary. In *EN* III.5 he expands on his comment here. At the moment, he is simply making an inference from a descriptive claim about our actual practices of praising and blaming. The scope of that inference, whether we always blame people, or whether we ought to always blame people, is not specified. Rather, he claims only that there are at least some cases where blaming people for acting in ignorance of a universal is the appropriate thing to do, and so at least these actions must be voluntary.

Moreover, it is not necessary to read Aristotle in the common way for his argument to work. His purpose in this passage is to show that actions done in universal ignorance are *voluntary*. If he can show this, then he can conclude that they are not involuntary (as we have seen, Aristotle’s overarching goal is to define voluntary action negatively, by ejecting all actions which are involuntary or non-voluntary). So, he needs to only show this. He does *not* need to show that all such actions are also *blameworthy*. However, one way to

show that these actions are voluntary is to show that at least some of them are blameworthy. Since a blameworthy act must be voluntary (Aristotle regards blameworthy acts as a subset of voluntary acts), and all actions done in ignorance of universals are of the same kind (that is, in all of these actions the agent is ignorant of the same sort of thing – universals), if any act which is done in universal ignorance is blameworthy, this suffices to show that actions done in universal ignorance are voluntary. While we must admit that blameworthiness or praiseworthiness are sufficient to show that an action is voluntary, we need not admit that blameworthiness or praiseworthiness are necessary features of any action done in ignorance of a universal.

There are two possible ways to understand the strength of the conclusion of Aristotle’s argument. We may say either that ignorance of a universal is never sufficient to render an action non-voluntary, or that ignorance of a universal is sometimes, but not always, sufficient to render an action non-voluntary. We might construe Aristotle’s argument as follows:

1. We blame people only for voluntary actions.

2. Sometimes, we blame people for bad actions done in ignorance of universals.

C1. So *some* actions done in ignorance of universals must be voluntary.

Though construing the argument this way has the strongest support in the text, I believe Aristotle to be making a stronger claim that *all* actions which are performed in universal ignorance are voluntary:

1. We blame people only for voluntary actions.

2. Sometimes, we blame people for bad actions done in ignorance of universals.

C2. So, *all* actions done in ignorance of universals must be voluntary.

Based on the premises Aristotle provides, his argument should conclude with C1. There are two main reasons why this is the case. First, concluding that all things of a certain category have property P based on the fact that at least some things of that category have property P is, of course, fallacious (and this is how C2 is reached). In addition, we should remind ourselves that Aristotle is only looking to show that ignorance of universals does not make an action involuntary; it might still make an action non-voluntary, as in the case of ignorance causing an action which the agent would not regret. In this way, although C1 is a weaker claim than C2, it still achieves the goal of Aristotle’s argument.

However, even though C1 is the conclusion Aristotle should have drawn, I think there is good reason to suppose that Aristotle in fact believed C2, though he does not establish this by his argument. For, Aristotle introduces the reason the category of non-voluntary actions to show that an agent who acts because of ignorance but also, by coincidence, not against his character, is not properly acting involuntarily, and not properly voluntarily either. But this is not the case with the agent who acts in ignorance of a universal. She will act according to her character, which satisfies Aristotle’s criteria for voluntary action: the agent’s action must have its principle in her, and she must act with

knowledge of the particulars which constitute the action.⁴⁴ Therefore, while the argument Aristotle gives for the claim that actions done in ignorance of universals are not involuntary should lead us only to the conclusion that *some* of these actions are voluntary, it is plausible that Aristotle himself believed that *all* actions done in ignorance of a universal are voluntary, since this conclusion coincides with his official definition of voluntary action. However, even if Aristotle in fact believed that all actions done in ignorance of a universal are *voluntary*, it does not follow that he also thought that all such actions are *blameworthy*. Yet that is what the common view requires.

This then suffices to show that the comment usually taken by proponents of the common view as establishing their reading does not do so. Rather, an alternate reading of Aristotle, on which *some* but not *all* bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy, is possible. Such an alternate view is equally well supported by Aristotle’s comment at 1110b024-1110b33. However, the common view might still be uniquely supported by his comments elsewhere.

(5)

Proponents of the common view might still argue based on other passages that Aristotle believes all bad actions done in universal ignorance are worthy of blame. In

⁴⁴ 1111a22-24. We might add to this point that this applies, though not equally, to cases of persistent ignorance of universals, as well as temporary ignorance of universals (such as drunks or akratic agents). Both act according to their characters, but the persistently ignorant individual will likely defend her action, while the akratic or drunk might subsequently admit that the action was wrong.

particular, they might point out that Aristotle has already claimed that voluntary actions are praised and blamed, and that it is only involuntary actions which deserve pity, or even pardon. Indeed, it is true that Aristotle never says that voluntary actions might deserve pity or pardon. Moreover, he immediately follows his comment that universal ignorance is a cause for blame by pointing out that it is ignorance of particulars which renders an action involuntary, and it is *these* actions which deserve pity and pardon.⁴⁵ So, proponents of the common view might argue, it seems strange to suppose that Aristotle thinks that some actions done in ignorance of a universal are worthy of pardon or pity when he never mentions pardon and pity as going together with voluntary action. It seems stranger still because he consistently mentions pity and pardon alongside *involuntariness*, even to the point of contrasting pity and the pardon with the case of universal ignorance.

To be clear, I do not think it is certain that the common view of Aristotle is false. And so, I will not argue for a *refutation* of the common view based on Aristotle’s other comments. However, it is possible to deemphasize this reading, and to deny the necessary connection between voluntariness and blame, and involuntariness and pardon for bad actions. Some of Aristotle’s comments about pity and pardon *cannot* be taken as evidence for the common view, and *none* of them need be interpreted as providing evidence for the common view.

In *EN* III.1, Aristotle mentions pardon three times, only two of which are relevant here: in his introductory remarks, and in our central passage.⁴⁶ The third usage occurs when

⁴⁵ 1111a1-3.

⁴⁶ 1109b30-35, 1110a20ff.

Aristotle considers the case of a person who is strained beyond the limits of human endurance. Actions done in these circumstances, according to Aristotle, should be pardoned.⁴⁷ This passage is not of direct importance here, as the common view does not concern actions that are beyond the nature of human endurance, but rather actions done in ignorance. Of the two passages which remain, I will begin with Aristotle's introductory remark, and then discuss Aristotle's conclusion to our central passage.

Aristotle begins Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the following remark:

Virtue, then, is about feeling and actions. These receive praise or blame if they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes even pity, if they are involuntary. Hence, presumably, in examining virtue we must define the voluntary and involuntary. This is also useful to legislators, both for honors and for corrective treatments.⁴⁸

At first glance, this passage might appear to provide conclusive evidence in favour of the common view. If all voluntary actions are subject to praise or blame, and if all actions done in ignorance of a universal are voluntary (which, according to my reading, Aristotle believes), then it would seem to follow that all actions done in ignorance of a universal are properly subject to praise or blame, not pardon or pity.

However, as his subsequent discussion reveals, Aristotle does not think that the range of blameworthy (or praiseworthy) actions is coextensive with the range of voluntary actions. Praise or blame are sometimes justified by retrospective considerations. Consider, for example, a vicious person who has become vicious voluntarily, despite having a good upbringing. This sort of person is responsible for both his character and his actions.

⁴⁷ 1110a19-27.

⁴⁸ 1109b30-35.

However, sometimes praise or blame are also justified by *prospective* considerations. Children, for instance, act voluntarily, according to Aristotle, but are not responsible in the same way for their actions as adults.⁴⁹ The reason for this is that children are not yet educated in the good, nor have they been habituated. Blame and praise are used in these cases – if they are used at all – as tools for correction and instruction, in the hope that children will improve to the point where they choose the good for themselves.⁵⁰ In the same passage where Aristotle discusses children, he also classifies animals as capable of voluntary action. Yet they too are not responsible in a full sense for their character or for their actions.

The difference between actions which are blamed because of retrospective considerations and actions which are blamed because of prospective considerations is the presence or absence of deliberative choice (*prohairesis*). It is prohairesis actions which are, according to Aristotle, most representative of our character, and for which we are responsible in the deepest sense.⁵¹ *Prohairesis*, deliberation, and the education of children are all topics to which we shall return. The conclusion I wish to draw at the moment is simply that, while Aristotle *does* think that blameworthy and praiseworthy actions are always voluntary, he does *not* think this in a straightforward way; for the actions of children and non-human animals are not voluntary in the same way as the prohairesis actions of adults, and hence they are not blamed for the same reasons. Hence his eventual views on

⁴⁹ 1111a25-26.

⁵⁰ See Myles Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” (*Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1980).

⁵¹ Cf1111a25ff, 1111b4-10.

the relationship between voluntariness, praise and blame are much more complex than his opening remarks suggest. So, it would be a mistake to view his preliminary statements in Book III as a pre-commitment to the view he will develop.

What we can also see in the example of children and animals is that while Aristotle *does* think all blameworthy or praiseworthy actions will be voluntary, he does *not* think all actions which are voluntary will be worthy of praise or blame in a full sense. That is, while children and animals are indeed blamed for the bad actions they commit voluntarily, they are not worthy of that blame in the same way as a person who is blamed for a bad action following *prohairesis*. So, voluntary bad actions are not always blameworthy in a full sense, since some voluntary actions are performed by those who lack the features of a fully responsible agent.

The second important place where Aristotle mentions pity and pardon is at the end of our central passage, where he concludes that it is ignorance of particulars that can render an action involuntary.

Rather, the cause [of involuntary action] is ignorance of the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with, since these allow both pity and pardon. For an agent acts involuntarily if he is ignorant of one of these particulars.⁵²

This shows that Aristotle thinks that pity and pardon are the appropriate response to bad actions caused by ignorance of particulars, so long as the particulars themselves are central to the action, and assuming, given his previous comments, that pain would be felt upon

⁵² ἀλλ’ ἢ καθ’ ἕκαστα, ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἃ ἡ πράξις· ἐν τούτοις γὰρ καὶ ἔλεος καὶ συγγνώμη· ὁ γὰρ τούτων τι ἀγνοῶν ἀκουσίως πράττει (1110b33-1111a2).

learning the whole truth.⁵³ He thinks this because acting because of ignorance (and with pain) counts as acting involuntarily. However, this remark does *not* establish a precise correlation between acts that are performed because of particular ignorance and acts which deserve pity and pardon. If the agent performs a bad action which is involuntary, then the act deserves pity and pardon (so long as the action is not due to culpable negligence). However, Aristotle does not assert the converse: that if pity and pardon are called for, the act must be involuntary. So, when Aristotle claims that pity and pardon are appropriate responses to bad actions performed involuntarily, he does not thereby rule out the possibility that they might be appropriate responses to *some* voluntary actions *as well*.

In sum, nothing Aristotle says in *NE* III.1 about pity and pardon commits him to the view that all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy. His remarks *do* show he thought that only voluntary actions are properly subject to praise and blame, and that involuntary bad actions caused by particular ignorance sometimes deserve pity and pardon. But this is perfectly consistent with the view that some voluntary actions are less than fully blameworthy, and also with the view that some voluntary actions deserve pity and pardon too.

(6)

⁵³ It is worth noting that this is Aristotle’s account in III.1. Meanwhile, in III.5, he seems to add the criterion that the agent cannot also be responsible for her ignorance. I attend to this topic in the next chapter.

No passage in *EN* III.1 requires us to adopt the common view, whether it be Aristotle’s comments regarding ignorance of universals, or his comments which reference pardon, pity, and blame. However, it would be a mistake to suggest, on the basis of the arguments presented in this chapter, that reading Aristotle in the common way is impossible, or even unnatural. The persistence of the common view is, at least in part, due to the fact that it seems plausible. Advocates of the common view are only set back, not refuted, by an assertion that their view is not necessitated by the text. Adopting a satisfactory reading of Aristotle requires more than what is minimally entailed by Aristotle’s text. We also need a working positive account of his thought which provides interpretive advantages over competitive readings.

I have argued in this chapter that the common view is not necessitated by what Aristotle has written in *EN* III.1. However, up to this point I have not provided a reason for us to *reject* the common view in favor of an alternate reading. This will be my goal in the next chapter, where I will argue that rejecting the common view allows us to obtain two interpretive advantages. First, the common view introduces a tension between *EN* III.1 and III.5. We can remove this tension if we reject the common view. Second, a major obstacle to considering Aristotle’s theory of volition as tenable – namely the harshness of his view – can be softened and if we reject the common view. For this reason, rejecting the common view enables us to develop a more charitable reading of Aristotle.

CHAPTER II

(1)

In the previous chapter, I argued that the common view, according to which Aristotle considered all bad actions done in ignorance of a universal as blameworthy, is not uniquely supported by the textual evidence in *EN* III.1. This textual evidence is equally compatible with another view – that bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are sometimes blameworthy, but sometimes not blameworthy. This does not, of course, give us a compelling reason to reject the common view. There are, however, reasons for us to abandon the common view in favor of an alternate reading: my goal in this chapter is to provide some such reasons. First and foremost, I argue that a defender of the common view introduces a tension between Aristotle’s comments in *EN* III.1 and his discussion in III.5. Since my alternate account avoids this tension, allowing us to read Aristotle as being consistent, we have at least one good reason to reject the common view.

Moreover, I will also argue that if we reject the common view we gain a second important benefit. On the common view Aristotle is quite harsh, perhaps too harsh, in some cases where an agent did not know what she ought to do. If we reject the common view and read Aristotle as being more lenient in this range of cases, it makes his view more palatable. Finally, there is some textual evidence in favor of an alternate reading. For instance, in III.5, Aristotle provides criteria for excusing ignorance of the law. If, as I will argue, Aristotle regarded ignorance of the law as a kind of ignorance of a universal, these

criteria might provide an interesting starting point and tool for investigating what Aristotle thinks of ignorance of universals, moral responsibility, and moral education. In this chapter, I highlight this as evidence in favor of my alternate reading. I will provide an investigation of the significance of these criteria in my final chapter.

(2)

Chapter 5 of Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is often considered to be Aristotle’s attempt to refute the Socratic thesis that all vicious people are vicious involuntarily, or that they act viciously involuntarily. Aristotle’s goal is to show that virtue and vice are voluntary in the same way. The main argument occurs quite quickly near the beginning of the chapter:

...virtue is also up to us, and so also, in the same way, is vice. For when acting is up to us, so is not acting, and when no is up to us, so is yes. And so if acting, when it is fine, is up to us, not acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us; and if not acting, when it is fine, is up to us, then acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us. But if doing, and likewise not doing, fine or shameful actions is up to us, and if, as we saw, doing or not doing them is what it is to be a good or bad person, being decent or base is up to us. The claim that ‘no one is willingly bad or unwillingly blessed’ would seem to be partly true but partly false. For while certainly no one is unwillingly blessed, vice is voluntary.⁵⁴

The argument Aristotle provides here is dependent on what is up to us (*eph’ hemin*) and what is not up to us. As he has observed, voluntary actions are up to us, and it is possible to act wrongly yet voluntarily when one is ignorant of a universal. Hence, so long as it is

⁵⁴ 1113b7-16.

up to the person to act this or that way, and so long as acting this or that way is what we mean by a person being good or bad, then being good or bad is within the power of the individual. If it is within our power to become good or bad, and we become bad, then we seem to have done so voluntarily.

Aristotle spends the rest of III.5 considering evidence in favor of his view that virtue and vice are equally voluntary, answering objections, and concluding his discussion of voluntariness. The first evidence he provides in favor of his view that virtue and vice are equally voluntary is an appeal to common practice. He observes that if we deny that vice is up to a person, we must also deny that virtue is up to a person. But we do not deny this. Therefore, vicious actions are voluntary.⁵⁵ What is especially important about this argument for our purposes is that virtue and vice need not be completely voluntary – or even mostly voluntary – for Aristotle’s argument to work. Virtue and vice on this account are *equally* voluntary; as yet, there is no determination of just how voluntary either of them is. Virtue and vice might be voluntary to a degree, and not voluntary to a degree. Or else, they might be voluntary in part, and not voluntary in part.

Aristotle appeals to a second piece of evidence in favor of his view: the practices of honoring and correcting in society (honoring requires praise, and correction requires blame). Aristotle’s appeal to how people praise and blame should remind us of his comments in III.1, where the fact that we blame people for acting in ignorance of a universal was used as evidence for the claim that such actions were voluntary. Here, he

⁵⁵ 1137b16-21.

now points to our actual practices of praising and blaming the actions of agents in our private lives, as well as how our legislators respond to those who break the law.

There would seem to be evidence in favor of our view not only in what each of us does as a private citizen, but also in what legislators themselves do. For they impose punishments and penalties on anyone who does vicious actions, unless his action is forced or is caused by ignorance that he is not responsible for; and they honor anyone who does fine actions. In all this they assume that they will encourage the second sort of person, and restrain the first. But no one encourages us to do anything that is not up to us and voluntary; people assume it is pointless to persuade us not to get hot or distressed or hungry or anything else of that sort, since persuasion will not stop it happening to us.⁵⁶

In our private lives and in the practices of legislators, Aristotle claims, people are praised and blamed for actions based on the assumption – on the part of legislators, though presumably also on the part of private individuals – that praising people for virtuous actions will encourage them to continue doing virtuous actions, and blaming people for vicious actions will discourage them from doing vicious actions. This sort of reason for praising and blaming is based primarily upon prospective considerations: legislators (and presumably private individuals) wish to improve or correct the actions of others going forward (and since actions inform characters, presumably the hope is that the character of the offender will improve in time as well). The justification for blaming people here seems to be based less on retrospective considerations. That is, although legislators do blame people because it was up to them to act or not to act (which is a retrospective evaluation), this does not provide the purpose of praising and blaming. Hence, it seems that, for Aristotle in this passage, the reason we blame someone for bad actions is for prospective

⁵⁶ 1113b21-30.

goals (betterment and reformation), while the reason it is appropriate to blame them is also based upon a retrospective evaluation (it was up to him to do the act or not).

This sort of praise or blame does *not* take into consideration blaming or praising a person for *being* good or bad, but rather for *acting* well or badly. In the passage above, Aristotle does not claim that people are blamed for the sort of person they are – they are blamed because they did a bad action which was up to them to not do. Though their *character* might have disposed them to act in that way, *this* is not what we blame them for. So, it is not clear that Aristotle is concerned here with full responsibility. A person who is blamed for the sake of future improvement might not be blamed at the same time for being the sort of person he is – that is, he might not be blamed for the character he has. Blaming a person for an action, with primarily prospective goals, does not seem to be holding a person responsible in a deep way. A deeper sense would involve blaming someone for the bad action he commits *as well as* blaming him for the sort of person he is.⁵⁷ For instance, we blame and praise children or animals so as to encourage certain behaviors and discourage others, but we do not consider children or animals deeply responsible for their actions.

Up until this point, Aristotle has been speaking about blaming people’s actions with the goal of reforming their future actions (and eventually their characters). This sort of blame looks to the fact that a person could have acted one way or another, and he acted

⁵⁷ Consider Aristotle’s later example of blaming individuals who have become blind by drinking, rather than being blind by nature. We cannot blame someone for being blind by nature, but we *can* blame someone for becoming blind by drinking, for it was up to him to not drink. Or again, consider a person who is sick because she has not followed the advice of doctors. Neither of these people can *stop* or *undo* their current predicament, blindness or sickness, but they *can* still be blamed. Blaming people for these sorts of conditions is founded primarily on retrospective considerations (1114a12ff).

wrongly. However, Aristotle now moves on to consider a further point, which provides some additional evidence for his view that virtue and vice are each voluntary. Namely, not only are we blamed for actions upon the assumption that they are up to us, we are *also* blamed by legislators for being ignorant – for instance, ignorant of the law. As we will see, it is this new claim which poses a problem for the common view:

Indeed, legislators also impose punishment for the ignorance itself, if the agent seems to be responsible for the ignorance. A drunk, for instance, pays a double penalty; for the principle is in him, since he controls whether he gets drunk, and his getting drunk causes his ignorance. They also impose punishment on someone who acts in ignorance of some provision of law that he is required to know and that is not difficult to know. And they impose it in other cases likewise for any other ignorance that seems to be caused by the agent’s inattention; they assume it is up to him not to be ignorant, since he controls whether he pays attention.⁵⁸

Aristotle introduces a new sort of case. Not only are people’s actions praised or blamed for the purpose of encouraging or discouraging and upon the assumption that it was up to them, but people are also praised or blamed for the sorts of ignorance they possess. Ignorance is blameworthy when it could have been avoided by the agent. We are even given criteria, in the case of ignorance of the law, in which the ignorance is *not* blameworthy. An agent might not be required to know a law, or it might be difficult for the agent to know the law. As I read Aristotle, this new set of cases, where an agent is blamed for his ignorance, is also meant to provide evidence in favor of the view that virtue and vice are equally voluntary. For, just as acting and not acting are up to the agent, so too legislators (and presumably private individuals) assume that being ignorant or knowledgeable is up to the agent.

⁵⁸ 1113b30-1114a3.

An important feature of this passage, one which is critical for the reading of Aristotle I develop in my next chapter, is that an agent can be excused for an *action* if he is not responsible for the ignorance *in which* he acted. For, the legislators blame people when they act in violation of the law where knowledge of the law was within the power of the agent to acquire. The converse of this claim is that, if the knowledge of the law were *not* in the power of the agent to know, the act itself would not be punished. Thus, excusable ignorance is not merely excusable on its own, it can also render an action which is done in that ignorance excusable.

This new set of cases presents an interpretive dilemma for advocates of the common view. In III.1, Aristotle discusses blameworthiness in cases of ignorance. As I noted in the previous chapter, his comments in III.1 are used to justify the common view, according to which, for Aristotle, ignorance of a universal is never excusable, and never an excuse for bad actions. In III.5, however, Aristotle seems to be saying that an action – or the ignorance which led to the action – can be excused if the agent is not responsible for the ignorance. This is incompatible with the common view, which holds that *all* bad actions done in ignorance are blameworthy. On the face of it, then, advocates of the common view seem to have a difficulty in understanding the relationship between III.1 and III.5. There appears to be a relationship between the two passages, but they also appear to conflict.

Defenders of the common view will have to face one of two problems. Which problem they must face will depend on which interpretive path we attempt to take in reading Aristotle’s comments about blaming people for their ignorance. Anthony Kenny outlines the difficulty of reconciling the passages from III.1 and III.5. The interpretive

difficulty Kenny highlights concerns whether or not Aristotle is making some new distinction in III.5, or whether he is modifying the positions he has already taken in III.1:

Is the distinction here made between things in the laws and other matters the same as the distinction earlier drawn between error about the universal and error about the particular? If so, [1] Aristotle is now qualifying his earlier position: not all universal error is blameworthy, but only ignorance of what one should and could have easily known; not all particular error is excused, but only error which is not due to negligence. But perhaps there is no good reason for equating the ignorance of what is expedient in 1110b31 with the error about legal matters of 1113b34. Perhaps [2] ignorance of the law is just a particular case of errors about particular circumstances, in which case it will fall under the general principles of chapter I; or perhaps [3] it is a special instance of moral error, in which case the other matters of 1114a1 may be other moral considerations. It is not easy to decide between these interpretations.⁵⁹

Kenny has succinctly summarized the options for advocates of the common view. He considers three main possibilities, which I have numbered in the passage. The first possibility is that Aristotle is drawing a distinction: ignorance of the law is of universals, and the “other cases” he refers to are of ignorance of particulars.⁶⁰ For Kenny, if this is what Aristotle is saying, he has now changed his mind from what he said III.1.⁶¹ The second and third possibilities consider Aristotle treating a different topic than he did in III.1. Ignorance of the law might either be ignorance of a particular, or else it might be some special sort of ignorance. If either the second or third option is true, we should not infer

⁵⁹ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will*, (London: Latimer Trend & Company, 1979), 52-53.

⁶⁰ By “other cases,” Kenny is speaking of Aristotle’s comment that: “They also impose punishment on someone who acts in ignorance of some provision of law that he is required to know and that is not difficult to know. And they impose it *in other cases* likewise for any other ignorance that seems to be caused by the agent’s inattention...” (1113b33-1114a2, emphasis added).

⁶¹ We should also note that, if this is indeed what Aristotle is doing, he is being somewhat covert in connecting his distinctions in III.1 to his discussion in III.5. I do not read the text as providing much evidence in favor of the view that Aristotle is speaking about different sorts of ignorance between his examples of the drunk, the law, and the ‘other cases’.

that what Aristotle believes about ignorance of the law extends to what he has said previously about ignorance of universals and blameworthiness.

Kenny is unsure which reading would be best, so he presents the options and moves on to consider other topics. My proposed solution is to read Aristotle’s passage in a different way than the three possibilities presented by Kenny. I reject options 2 and 3 as being untenable. As we shall see, it is impossible to read ignorance of the law as ignorance of a particular, and it is implausible to read ignorance of the law as a special case of ignorance. Hence, I argue that we should embrace option 1 as the correct reading (that Aristotle is qualifying his previous remarks). However, as we shall see, embracing the first option conflicts with the common view. For, advocates of the common view must insist that Aristotle is changing his mind between chapters, or contradicting himself. But, as I have shown in Chapter I, we need not read Aristotle in the common way. Hence on my reading, the problem of reconciling Aristotle’s account of blameworthy ignorance in III.1 with his account in III.5 is solved by rejecting the common view, and maintaining that it is Aristotle’s position, *both* in III.1 (though it is unargued) *and* in III.5, that some bad actions done in ignorance of universals can be blameless, and are therefore pardonable.

Scholars seldom consider directly the question of whether the law is a universal or particular in their discussions of ignorance of the law and blameworthy ignorance. However, it is evident from their comments that some commentators read ignorance of the law as a sort of ignorance of a universal;⁶² some scholars seem to think that the law is a

⁶² For examples, see David Ross, *Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221; Harold Joachim, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 106; Richard Sorabji, *Necessity Cause and Blame* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 208; Thomas Aquinas,

particular;⁶³ and a minority of scholars consider cases of law a special moral case.⁶⁴ The common view is held by members of all three of these groups. Given the disagreement between scholars on this issue, yet their agreement on the common view, it is important that we take some steps towards answering the question of what kind of ignorance Aristotle takes ignorance of the law to be.

(3)

Let us first consider the possibility that Aristotle regarded ignorance of the law as a sort of particular ignorance. It is possible that Aristotle thought of ignorance of the law as ignorance of a particular thing. For instance, an agent can be ignorant of this or that law. Whatever law the person is ignorant of will be particular to this or that city or society. So, if a person travels from one city to another and acts with ignorance of the law, it would seem that she does not know all the particulars of her action, as the law itself is a particular rule enforced by the state, and the state itself is a particular entity which does the enforcing.

On this view when we blame a person for her ignorance of a law we are not blaming her for ignorance of the law as such, but rather for the disposition which *caused* the

Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Tran. C.J. Litzinger. Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), iii lect.11:506.

⁶³ For examples of scholars who claim laws are particulars in III.5, see Terence Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 208-209; Troels Engberg-Pedersen (*Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 243-244; Pierre Destrée, “Aristotle on Responsibility for One's Character” (*Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 294; and James Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 60.

⁶⁴ For an example, see Gerard Hughes, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 126-127.

ignorance of the law – carelessness, or not being solicitous of what she must do. Since the disposition was up to the person to have or not have, and it caused the ignorance of the law (which is ignorance of a particular), blame is still an appropriate response to the action of breaking the law. So too presumably with other cases of particular ignorance. On this reading, Aristotle supplements his previous remarks about involuntariness. For, based on III.1, if a person acts *because* of ignorance, the action *cannot* be voluntary.

There are several reasons for rejecting the view that for Aristotle ignorance of the law is ignorance of a particular. One reason is that the example of ignorance of the law comes directly after the case of acting while drunk, and the cases seem to be related in an important way:

Indeed, legislators also impose punishment for the ignorance itself, if the agent seems to be responsible for the ignorance. A drunk, for instance, pays a double penalty; for the principle is in him, since he controls whether he gets drunk, and his getting drunk causes his ignorance. They also impose punishment on someone who acts in ignorance of some provision of law that he is required to know and that is not difficult to know.⁶⁵

As we saw in the previous chapter, in *EN* III.1 and VII.3 Aristotle characterizes drunks as agents who are ignorant of a universal, not of a particular. Given the similarity to the other two cases, as well as the similarity in discussion between III.1 and III.5, we should expect the case of drunkenness here to have the same features. The person is ignorant of what she ought to do because of her current state, drunkenness. According to Aristotle, legislators blame the drunk twice: because her action is wrong *and* because she is responsible for being in a state which allowed for the wrong action to occur. Ignorance of the law follows

⁶⁵ 1113b30-1114a2.

this example immediately, as a second case where legislators impose penalties. Given that there is no break in the discussion, or observation on the difference between the examples, it is natural to read the distinction as following the same lines as the case of the drunk. The person who is ignorant of the law is ignorant in a similar way to the drunk; specifically, she does not know that what she is doing is wrong. She is also responsible for that ignorance, for she could have been solicitous and learned the law.⁶⁶

Further, Aristotle himself refers to laws as universals.⁶⁷ For, a law is intended to govern more than a single instance. Laws are meant to be general in nature, and to be applied in particular circumstances. Aristotle would be inconsistent if he considered laws to be universal, but *ignorance* of a law to be ignorance of a particular thing. Hence, ignorance of the law cannot be ignorance of a particular thing unless proponents of the common view can indicate a significant difference between the cases presented in III.5 and Aristotle’s comments regarding laws elsewhere.

Moreover, if Aristotle considers ignorance of the law to be ignorance of a particular, then it should fit into his classification of the different kinds of particular ignorance. Kenny acknowledges this when he suggests that, if ignorance of the law is ignorance of a particular, then it will fall under the general rules provided by Aristotle in III.1. However, if we examine Aristotle’s account of particular ignorance, it is not clear how ignorance of

⁶⁶ So long as the law was not too difficult to know, or not necessary to know. We will return to these criteria later.

⁶⁷ Take, for instance, Aristotle’s comment during his discussion of decency (*epieikeia*) in *EN* V.10. Aristotle writes: “This is because all law is universal (*katholou*), but in some areas no universal rule can be correct; and so where a universal rule has to be made, but cannot be correct, the law chooses the universal rule that is usually correct, well aware of the error being made” (1137b13-16, Irwin’s translation). The usage of *katholou* is the similar to Aristotle’s usage in III.1 in the central passage I discussed in the previous chapter. Hence, Aristotle seems to be committed to the view that the law is a general thing.

the law can be ignorance of a particular. He provides us with three general accounts of particular ignorance: *EN* III.1, V.8, and *EE* II.9. The accounts are as follows:

EN III.1:

Presumably, then, it is not a bad idea to define these particulars, and say what they are, and how many. They are: who is doing it; what he is doing; about what or to who he is doing it; sometimes also what he is doing it with – what instrument, for example; for what result, for example, safety; in what way, for example, gently or hard.⁶⁸

EN V.8:

As I said before, I say that an action is voluntary just in case it is up to the agent, who does it in knowledge, and not in ignorance of the person, instrument, and goal (for instance, whom he is striking, with what, and for what goal)...it is possible that the victim is your father, and you know he is a human being or a bystander, but do not know he is your father.⁶⁹

EE II.9:

What is done through error, whether of thing, instrument, or person, is involuntary; the opposite, therefore, is voluntary.⁷⁰

In each of these general accounts of how a person may be ignorant of a particular, Aristotle mentions the instrument involved in the action, the person toward whom the act is directed, and for what goal or result he is doing the action. The account in *EN* III.1 includes a few more categories than *EN* V.8 and *EE* II.9. In addition to the categories of person,

⁶⁸ ἴσως οὖν οὐ χεῖρον διορίσαι αὐτά, τίνα καὶ πόσα ἐστί, τίς τε δὴ καὶ τί καὶ περὶ τί ἢ ἐν τίνι πράττει, ἐνίστε δὲ καὶ τίνι, οἷον ὄργανῳ, καὶ ἔνεκα τίνος, οἷον σωτηρίας, καὶ πῶς, οἷον ἡρέμα ἢ σφόδρα (1111a3-6).

⁶⁹ λέγω δ’ ἐκούσιον μὲν, ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον εἴρηται, ὃ ἂν τις τῶν ἐφ’ αὐτῷ ὄντων εἰδῶς καὶ μὴ ἀγνοῶν πράττει μήτε ὄν μήτε ᾗ μήτε οὐ <ἔνεκα>, οἷον τίνα τύπτει καὶ τίνι καὶ τίνος ἔνεκα... ἐνδέχεται δὲ τὸν τυπτόμενον πατέρα εἶναι, τὸν δ’ ὅτι μὲν ἄνθρωπος ἢ τῶν παρόντων τις γινώσκειν, ὅτι δὲ πατήρ ἀγνοεῖν (1135a23-30).

⁷⁰ τὸ δὲ δι’ ἀγνοίαν, καὶ ὃ καὶ ᾗ καὶ ὄν, ἀκούσιον· τὸ ἐναντίον ἄρ’ ἐκούσιον (1225b6-7).

instrument, and goal (or result in the *EN* III.1 account), an agent might be ignorant of who is doing the action, how he is doing the action, and what he is doing.⁷¹

Ignorance of the law does not fit easily into the categories of person, instrument, goal (or result), or how. Being ignorant of the law is not a case of being ignorant about whether the person before us is a barmaid or a police officer, or about an instrument, or yet about the goal of the action. Ignorance of the law, then, does not fit into either the account of particular ignorance given in *EN* V.8, or that given in *EE* II.9. The only remaining category of ignorance, which is only found in *EN* III.1, is the peculiar category of “what he is doing.”

This final category “what he is doing” should strike us as a bit strange. It seems to be obvious that the agent who acts because of particular ignorance is ignorant in some way of what it is he is doing. Being ignorant of exactly what a person is doing is applicable, in one sense or another, to all the categories Aristotle outlines. So, Aristotle must either think that the category of ignorance of “what he is doing” picks out something more specific, or he must consider it a general category which includes the others.

Reading ignorance of what the agent is doing as a narrower category fits the text better. The category is included between other ways a person can be ignorant of particulars. Further, ignorance of a particular is already the general category into which each of the subsequent categories presumably fit, so it would be strange to introduce another category which serves the same purpose. Nonetheless, even if ignorance of what the agent is doing is meant as a subcategory, what range of things is indicated by this category?

⁷¹ Aristotle immediately questions how a person might be ignorant of who is doing the action (1111a6-7).

Aristotle provides a list of examples that are presumably meant to clarify what he means by each way a person can be ignorant of particulars. He provides three such examples for the case of ignorance about what the agent is doing. Aristotle writes:

But he might be ignorant of what he is doing, as when someone says that it slipped out while he was speaking, or, as Aeschylus said about the mysteries, that he did not know it was forbidden to reveal it, or the man who, wishing to show the catapult, let it go.⁷²

It is not clear, upon a first reading, how these three examples go together. The first example, of the person who let something slip in conversation, seems to be a simple error of misspeaking. The agent is ignorant that, when he speaks, what he says will reveal something – like a secret – to his audience. The third example seems to be a mistake about what is before him. He is either ignorant that the catapult itself is loaded, or else he acts without the knowledge that his act will let off the machine. Meanwhile, the second example might not be this sort of misspeaking or misdoing. On the contrary, Aeschylus seems to be acting erroneously with respect to what he is expected to do or not do given the secretive nature of the mysteries. This, then, is the strongest analogue for how ignorance of the law might be construed as ignorance of a particular.

We know very little about either Aeschylus’s trial itself or the excuse he made for revealing the mysteries.⁷³ Aeschylus seems, somewhat contrary to Aristotle’s portrayal, to

⁷² ὁ δὲ πράττει ἀγνοήσειεν ἂν τις, οἷον λέγοντές φασιν ἐκπεσεῖν αὐτούς, ἢ οὐκ εἰδέναι ὅτι ἀπόρρητα ἦν, ὥσπερ Αἰσχύλος τὰ μυστικά, ἢ δεῖξαι βουλόμενος ἀφεῖναι, ὡς ὁ τὸν καταπέλτην (1111a8-11).

⁷³ For a discussion of the Eleusinian mysteries, what *mustēria* should suggest to us as modern readers, as well as the problem of discovering Aeschylus’s exact predicament, see Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), 248ff.

have claimed he was not an initiate.⁷⁴ So, while it is true that the law of the mysteries forbade individuals from revealing the secret to the uninitiated, it is possible that Aeschylus 1) did not think the rule applied to him, because he was not an initiate, 2) did not know that it was forbidden to reveal the mysteries or 3) that he did not know that what he was doing would reveal the mysteries.⁷⁵

I suspect the third option – that he did not know that his performance would reveal the mysteries – is what Aristotle thinks the example shows. On this reading, Aeschylus’s error closely resembles the errors of the agent who lets something slip in conversation, and the agent who lets off the catapult. In both of those cases, what the agent thought he was doing was not what he actually did. Each of these individuals knows that the action they intend to perform (speaking without slipping, demonstrating without firing, and performing without revealing) is appropriate and that the contrary is not appropriate. The ignorance is not about what they ought to do, but rather about what is going to happen when they act. If Aeschylus did not know that what he was doing would reveal the mysteries, then he is ignorant of something other than the law. Therefore, ignorance of the law does not neatly fit under the general principles outlined by Aristotle in III.1.

The final reason for rejecting the view that ignorance of the law is ignorance of a particular is that reading ignorance of the law in III.5 in this way fails to account for the kind of argument Aristotle is making. His goals in III.5, the context of his argument, and

⁷⁴ See Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), Vol. II, 12; John Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), 119; James Welldon, *he Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 63.

⁷⁵ On this third reading, Aeschylus need not know what the mysteries are. He either had knowledge of the mysteries or not, but either way he did not know that what he did would be a revelation.

the eventual objections and replies he provides to the case of ignorance of the law all favor the reading that ignorance of the law is ignorance of a universal. As scholars widely acknowledge, Aristotle’s goal in III.5 is to show that vice is just as voluntary as virtue, contrary to the Socratic thesis that virtue is voluntary but vice is involuntary. In order to interpret 1113b30-1114a3 as being about particular ignorance, we would need to give an account of how particular ignorance fits into Aristotle’s discussion of the voluntariness of vice. I argue that we cannot do this satisfactorily.

According to Aristotle, both virtue and vice are states which are connected in an important way to the knowledge that the agent has. For instance, Aristotle takes it as a given that every vicious person is ignorant of what she must do and avoid.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, virtuous action requires us to have knowledge of what is good and fine, and to pursue that good for its own sake.⁷⁷ Acting virtuously by coincidence is no substitute for possessing virtue.⁷⁸ To know about virtue and to know what is best for people is a universal kind of knowledge. Aristotle’s strategy in III.5 is to show that, since acting in accordance with virtue and vice is in our power, and since virtuous and vicious actions are in a way products of virtuous and vicious characters, it follows that virtue and vice are, at least in part, up to us and voluntary. Since we assume that the actions are up to us, we must also assume that the states are up to us (at least partially). So, in order to have virtue or vice, an agent must possess or not possess knowledge of a universal kind.

⁷⁶ 1110b28-30.

⁷⁷ Cf 1106b36-1107a2, 1112b10-20, 11140a25-28, 1144b1ff, 1220a38-1220b6.

⁷⁸ 1144b1ff.

On Aristotle’s view, the agent does *not* need knowledge of particulars to have virtue or vice. Rather, she needs particular knowledge to *act* virtuously or viciously. For, as Aristotle has shown us in III.1, particular ignorance can render an action involuntary – for, such ignorance can make it an act which is not representative of the moral character of the agent. It is not necessary, then, to speak of particular ignorance in conjunction with the topic of the voluntariness of vice. It *is* necessary to speak of ignorance of universals, since this is the sort of ignorance which can be present in an action without interfering with the voluntariness of the action.

Aristotle’s claim that ignorance itself can be blameworthy is an addition to his argument that we assume actions are up to us. He indicates that, in both private matters and in legislation, we assume some actions are up to us. Then, he says that ignorance itself can be blameworthy. It is this comment which leads him into the more direct discussion of the voluntariness of character, beginning with an imagined interlocutor suggesting that the ignorance might be a product of the person’s character.⁷⁹ By this point in his discussion, Aristotle has already achieved the first point of his argument: it is clear that we ordinarily assume that individual actions are up to us. By raising the issue of the blameworthiness of the ignorance itself, he is beginning the second part of his argument: we must also assume that character is up to us and voluntary (at least in part) since our characters are (at least in part) products of our actions. Indeed, the cases he discusses of the person who is of the sort to not take care, of people trapped in vices of the body and soul, and of individuals who simply follow their own view of the good which has already been set down, are all

⁷⁹ 114a3ff.

organized as objections and replies to the idea that ignorance itself is blameworthy. These objections and replies do not address the issue of the blameworthiness of the actions themselves. Therefore, Aristotle’s goal in raising the question of the blameworthiness of ignorance is to argue for the voluntariness of states of character. The knowledge or ignorance which goes along with a state, as we have seen, is universal, not particular. It would be no profit to Aristotle, then, to appeal to instances of the law unless he considered cases of ignorance of the law to be instances of ignorance of universals.

In sum, we cannot read ignorance of the law as ignorance of particulars. Ignorance of the law is mentioned alongside other cases of ignorance of universals (the drunk, for example, is ignorant of universals), it does not fit cleanly into Aristotle’s general account for ignorance of particulars, and it is included in Aristotle’s argument for the voluntariness of states, not actions. Each of these arguments against reading ignorance of the law as ignorance of particulars is also evidence in favor of reading Aristotle as thinking that ignorance of the law is ignorance of universals. Therefore, proponents of the common view cannot take the interpretive path of reading ignorance of the law as ignorance of particulars in reconciling *EN* III.5 with III.1.

(4)

If ignorance of the law is not particular ignorance, then proponents of the common view face an important challenge. Advocates of the common view wish to maintain that Aristotle commits himself in III.1 to the view that all bad actions done in ignorance of a

universal are blameworthy. However, in III.5 Aristotle acknowledges that some actions done in ignorance of a universal are not liable to blame, and should be pardoned – for instance, in some instances of ignorance of the law. As I see it, this problem leaves the advocate of the common view with two main options. First, she might claim that Aristotle in III.5 contradicts his previous claim in III.1, or that he changes his mind. Second, the advocate of the common view might claim that ignorance of the law, while ignorance of a certain kind of universal, is ignorance of a special kind of universal to which the common view does not apply.

To show this difficulty more clearly, let us look at the cases of ignorance of the law which Aristotle takes to be pardonable. He gives us criteria for when ignorance of the law is sufficient to excuse an action. He writes:

[Legislators] also impose punishment on someone who acts viciously in ignorance of some provision of law that is necessary to know and not hard to know.⁸⁰

Aristotle is making a descriptive claim here. This is what legislators do. We may reasonably construct the inverted claim as follow: if the agent is ignorant about some matter of the law that is not necessary for her to know, or if it is quite difficult for her to know it, legislators do not impose punishment.

To refrain from imposing punishment for a breach of the law based on the fact that the law was either difficult to know or not necessary to know is to grant pardon. For, if ignorance of the law is a kind of ignorance of universals, and an agent is exempt from punishment based on the difficulty and non-necessity of knowledge of the law, then the

⁸⁰ 1113b33-1114a2.

agent is being let off on grounds of not being a proper candidate for punishment – that is, she is not blameworthy in this case.

The central claim of the common view is based primarily on Aristotle’s comment in III.1, where he says that universal ignorance is a cause of blame:

For the cause of involuntary action is not ignorance in the decision, which causes vice; nor is it ignorance of the universal (at any rate, that is a cause for blame), but instead the cause is ignorance of the particulars which the action consists in and is concerned with.⁸¹

Proponents of the common view read Aristotle as claiming that, since all actions done in universal ignorance are voluntary, and since bad actions done in universal ignorance are a cause for blame, it follows that all such actions done in universal ignorance are blameworthy. As I showed in Chapter I, while this reading of Aristotle is possible, it is not necessitated by Aristotle’s comment, or by Aristotle’s other remarks about ignorance and blame in III.1.

The tension between III.1 and III.5 should now be clear. If we follow the common view and hold, based on III.1, that Aristotle believes all bad actions performed in ignorance of a universal are blameworthy, then we must account for the fact that Aristotle in III.5 has provided us with examples of cases where ignorance of a universal (ignorance of the law) is *not* a cause for blame, but rather an appropriate moment for pardon. Aristotle is doing more in III.5 than filling in his account of ignorance, or his account of praise and blame. It is not the case that III.5 helps clarify what he says in III.1. Rather, if we follow the common view, Aristotle is now *unsaying* and contradicting his previous commitment.

⁸¹ 1110b30-1111a1.

If we reject the common view, however, Aristotle can be understood as clarifying and filling in his account. In III.1, he shows us that some actions done in ignorance of a universal must be voluntary because some are blameworthy, and blameworthy actions cannot be involuntary. In III.5, he is filling in his account by suggesting that in some cases, ignorance of a universal, while presumably still voluntary, is not blameworthy. Therefore, the common reading of Aristotle introduces an important tension which, if we reject the majority view, we can avoid. Since the alternative view for which I am arguing – that some bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are *not* blameworthy, despite being voluntary – is just as well supported as the common view by the textual evidence in III.1, and has the added benefit of relieving the tension I have highlighted in this section, it seems that we have good reason to reject the common view and to prefer my alternative account.

(5)

I have argued that ignorance of the law cannot be ignorance of a particular, and so must be ignorance of a universal. However, there is still one possible alternative interpretation mentioned by Kenny: perhaps ignorance of the law is a special case. Perhaps knowledge of the law, although it *is* knowledge of certain universals, is not knowledge of something *moral*. Aristotle does not make any mention of morals, as we might expect in a discussion of responsibility, praise and blame. Nonetheless, there still might be a distinction in his thought between what an agent ought to do overall, and what she ought to do with respect to the law in this or that place. On this reading, Aristotle is speaking of

what we might call *moral* universals in III.1, but a special class of universals in III.5: given the special sort of universals that laws are, people can be excused when they are ignorant of them. If this is the case, then there is no tension between III.1 and III.5, and the criteria Aristotle provides for excusing an agent who has broken the law – that the law was difficult to know, or that it was not necessary to know – cannot be used in cases of moral universals. An advocate of the common view would still be able to maintain her reading, albeit as a slightly modified view which specifies that Aristotle believes all bad actions done in ignorance of *moral* universals are blameworthy. For, as I have shown, laws are universals, and acting in ignorance of them can be pardoned – so the common view cannot be true of them too.

There is certainly a distinction in Aristotle’s thought between different sorts of universals, at least with respect to praise and blame. Take, for example, knowledge of geometry. While both geometric knowledge and moral knowledge are universal, they seem to bear on importantly different things. Aristotle makes this difference clear in *EN* VI, when he discusses varieties of knowledge, only some of which pertain to knowledge of what is good.⁸² So, it is perhaps possible that, while universal, laws are not of the same sort of universals as *moral* universals when it comes to the practice of praising and blaming.

In addition, we might suppose that Aristotle’s examples of what legislators do are merely *describing* what legislators do, and not prescribing what they *should* do. This objection is similar in outline to an argument that I make in the previous chapter. There, I argued that the fact that we do (sometimes) blame people for doing bad actions in ignorance

⁸² Cf 1139b12-13, 1139b31-36, 1140a28-1140b6.

of a universal gives us no certainty that we ought to do so in *all* circumstances. In III.5, Aristotle’s approach is strikingly similar. He says that legislators *do* pardon people for their ignorance. But perhaps this is not Aristotle’s own considered view of what ought to happen.

Neither of these objections – that Aristotle does not consider legal universals as importantly connected to moral universals, or that he is describing the practices of legislators without endorsing them – should convince us that legal cases are importantly distinct from moral cases for the purposes of praise and blame, or distinct from what Aristotle thought ought to happen in such cases. Aristotle allows the practice of legislators to go by without objection or complaint. Moreover, the argument structure in III.5 is based on an appeal to common, well established practices of how people praise and blame. If Aristotle thinks that this argument is convincing against the view that vice is not voluntary, then this indeed must be his view; he provides no further argument for the voluntariness of vice. His subsequent discussion of objections and replies is an attempt to show *how* it is the case that vice is voluntary. None of the objections he raises for himself constitute a new argument in favor of the position.

It is also evident that Aristotle takes legal cases to be connected in an important way to moral cases. Recall that Aristotle’s argument that vice is voluntary is supported by an appeal to evidence:

There would seem to be evidence in favor of our view not only in what each of us does as private citizens, but also in what legislators themselves do. For they impose punishments and penalties on anyone who does

vicious actions, unless his action is forced or is caused by ignorance that he is not responsible for; and they honor anyone who does fine actions.⁸³

Aristotle thinks that there is evidence for his view in the acts of legislators *as well as* in the private lives of citizens. By the private lives of citizens, Aristotle must mean something different from legal issues, but which provides the same sort of support for his argument as the legal issues. For otherwise he would distinguish and show us how private matters of citizens differ from legal matters. He does not do this. The fact that he provides a legal example does not change the fact that he intends his overall point (that since actions are up to us, so are states) to apply to both private and legal matters. The common item between what private citizens do and what legislators do is to praise and blame both actions and ignorance. It is people whose actions are vicious and not caused by force or ignorance that the law blames. The passage should be read as saying that both legislators and citizens in their private lives act as if vice is voluntary, and only excuse vicious actions under certain conditions. The cases where praise and blame are inapplicable are force or when the agent is not responsible for the ignorance. Thus, Aristotle considers both the private matters of citizens and the law as evidence for his view that vice is voluntary. His explanation of what legislators do should not lead us to think that this is necessarily different from what private citizens do in their own affairs.

Further, some of the examples Aristotle provides to support his view are not legal in character. For instance, Aristotle speaks of physical maladies which are natural (*dia*

⁸³ τούτοις δ' ἔοικε μαρτυρεῖσθαι καὶ ἰδίᾳ ὑφ' ἑκάστων καὶ ὑπ' αὐτῶν τῶν νομοθετῶν: κολάζουσι γὰρ καὶ τιμωροῦνται τοὺς δρῶντας μοχθηρά, ὅσοι μὴ βία ἢ δι' ἀγνοίαν ἢ μὴ αὐτοὶ αἴτιοι, τοὺς δὲ τὰ καλὰ πράττοντας τιμῶσιν, ὡς τοὺς μὲν προτρέψοντες τοὺς δὲ κωλύσοντες (1113b19-26).

phusin) or the result of neglect or vice.⁸⁴ Cases such as this do not seem to concern legislators.⁸⁵ And yet, the purpose of the examples is to show that vices of the body and vices of the soul are both sometimes blameworthy. They are blameworthy only when we are in control of how they came about. Aristotle does not distinguish that one is a matter of legality and the other of morality. Rather, his general account is that, so long as the agent is not responsible for her ignorance, then she can be pardoned for her actions done in that ignorance. He goes on to provide criteria in legal cases. Though he does not provide them for moral cases, it is still possible he thought some criteria could apply to moral cases.

Any sort of vice, then, will be blameworthy only insofar as we had control over how it came about. How much control we have is, as yet, an unsettled issue. However, Aristotle insists at several points that vice will be *as* voluntary as virtue, not that they are both fully voluntary.⁸⁶ So long as they are not *completely* voluntary, there may be some cases where the agent does not have control over having the character she has. In these cases, there is a possibility, on Aristotle’s account, for the agent to be excused of blame, either in a full or partial sense.

⁸⁴ 1114a23-31.

⁸⁵ Cases such as this might not be considered as strictly moral cases by modern readers. However, Aristotle’s reason for blaming is the same for these kinds of cases as moral cases. The person who becomes blind from a life of drunkenness is blamed, on Aristotle’s account, because of the person’s character. It is a bad character that is disposed to drink habitually until agent becomes blind. He could foresee this consequence, and it was within his power to prevent it, but he did not. This is the same sort of criticism which can be applied to vices of the soul, and to cases that correspond more closely to modern conceptions of immoral behaviour, such as an agent acting unjustly because the agent is unjust. Therefore, while we might not consider the case of blindness straightforwardly moral, the reason Aristotle thinks it is blameworthy is similar to why he think all other vices are blameworthy.

⁸⁶ 1113b11-14, 1114b12-13, 1114b21-25.

In sum, Aristotle’s legal example in III.5 should be read neither as a case of ignorance of particulars, nor as a special case of ignorance. Rather, ignorance of the law is a kind of ignorance of universals. We are on the whole responsible for becoming aware of universals, such as the law. Nevertheless, Aristotle gives us two criteria for when ignorance of legal universals can be excused: when the universal was difficult to know, or not necessary to know. In these cases, people can be or become ignorant through no fault of their own. Therefore, Aristotle believes that some bad actions done in ignorance of universals cannot be properly subject to blame.

(6)

In this chapter I have argued that there is at least one reason for preferring my alternate reading of Aristotle – that some bad actions done in ignorance of a universal are not blameworthy – over the common view. The textual evidence proponents of the common view cite in support of their view is equally consistent with my alternate reading. However, we now have an argument in favor of the alternate reading and against the common view. The tension present between III.1 and III.5 – that Aristotle is unsaying what he has previously said – exists only if we accept the common view as true. Hence, the passage in III.5 directly conflicts with the common view.

There is another reason for rejecting the common view in favor of an alternate reading: proponents of the common view read Aristotle as holding a fairly harsh and uncompromising view of moral ignorance. For, on Aristotle’s account, as they argue it

should be understood, a person is *always* blameworthy when she transgresses a moral principle out of ignorance. This excludes a range of actions from excuse which we might think important to include in a workable theory of moral responsibility. Indeed, several of those who read Aristotle in the common way remark on the harshness of his position.⁸⁷

Consider, for example, the case I introduced in my introduction, of a person raised in a horrible society who has had no opportunity to know what she ought to do or avoid, or what is beneficial. As a result of her upbringing, which she did not choose, she is unaware of certain moral universals which, had she been raised elsewhere, she would have had the opportunity to know. It seems to be important, for a theory of moral responsibility, to insist at the very least that an agent ought to act a certain way only if it is possible for her to act in this way. That is, if it is up to her. We might also expect a theory of moral responsibility to claim that an agent ought to act a certain way only if it is *reasonable to expect* her to act this way. The common view requires us to read Aristotle as denying both points, and as blaming people for acting contrary to what they ought to do. Or else, the common view requires us to read Aristotle as insisting that all universals are always knowable for all agents, and that the only way an agent can become ignorant of a moral universal is through negligence. But this cannot be, for, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Aristotle seems to think that children do not have this access to moral universals, and that they must be taught.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ For examples see Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, 50-5; Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, 127; Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, 47.

⁸⁸ Cf 1059b4-8, 1111b6-10.

I have highlighted the benefit of reading Aristotle as being less harsh than how he is commonly read. In reading him this way, it is not my intention to read our own views into the writings of others. Rather, the goal is to provide a charitable reading of the text, one which does not suppose that Aristotle held extreme positions without explicit evidence. If all instances of bad actions done in ignorance of moral universals are blameworthy, then always acting without blame would require an incredibly demanding level of knowledge on the part of the agent. Since, as I have argued, we need not read Aristotle as being so demanding in his view, given the evidence in the text, it is preferable for us to not suppose that he is.

Now that we are equipped with reasons against the common view and in favor of an alternate reading of Aristotle, we can investigate whether this alternative view passes muster. In the next chapter, I will show that my alternate reading of Aristotle is consistent with literature on Aristotle's understanding of moral education and ethical deliberation. Based on these discussions, we can also shed some light on how we might evaluate which cases of ignorance of universals are blameworthy, and which cases are candidates for pardon.

CHAPTER III

(1)

We have seen in the previous two chapters that we need not accept the common view, and that there are good reasons to reject it. I argued in Chapter I that the common view is not necessitated by the evidence present in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 – where the best evidence for the view is found. Meanwhile, I argued in Chapter II that the common view introduces a tension into Aristotle’s text which we can avoid if we adopt an alternate reading of Aristotle. On the alternate reading I proposed, bad actions done in ignorance of universals are always voluntary, but not always blameworthy. Although this alternate reading has advantages over the common view (as I argued in Chapter II), and is equally consistent with the text (as I argued in Chapter I), we should still investigate whether it is consistent with, or useful for, a broader view of Aristotle’s accounts of moral psychology.

One important feature of the reading I advanced in the previous chapter is that Aristotle does not simply say that people are responsible for their ignorance only insofar as becoming ignorant was up to them. He also provides some guidance in one circumstance, ignorance of the law, about how to determine whether the ignorance was up to the person. When people are ignorant of some provision of the law which is not necessary for them to know, or which is difficult to know, we can excuse them for being ignorant.

Are these criteria applicable in all circumstance of ignorance of universals? In this chapter, I will argue that, while the first criterion Aristotle provides for cases of legal

ignorance (not necessary to know) cannot be easily applied to other cases of ignorance of universals, the second criterion of difficulty to know does apply to other cases. I argue that there are good reasons to suppose that Aristotle considered moral knowledge quite difficult to acquire, and that it is sufficiently difficult in some circumstances; in these cases, we may excuse people who fail to acquire it. This claim is supported by its consistency with scholarly work on Aristotle’s conception of moral education. Scholars who write on Aristotle on moral education often leave out a discussion of whether or not a person can be praised or blamed for becoming ignorant. However, once we apply the criteria under which ignorance of a universal can be pardoned, I believe we can achieve a picture of when such ignorance can be pardoned, and when it cannot. I will develop this picture by appealing to three cases, in which – based on my rejection of the common view, and also on the scholarly work on Aristotle’s view of moral education – Aristotle might consider pardon to be the appropriate response to a person who acts badly in ignorance of a universal.

We should note, before going forward, that there is no direct textual evidence which supports or opposes a reading of Aristotle on which he considers ignorance of moral universals excusable based upon specific criteria. My goal in this chapter is to indicate a view which is consistent with the text and with scholarly literature on moral education and ethical deliberation, and which represents a palatable and charitable reading of Aristotle. It is a view which accounts for the gap in Aristotle’s account of moral ignorance. Hence, although Aristotle was not explicit on this point, I believe that the view I defend represents a plausible and appealing account of what he, in fact, believed.

(2)

Aristotle’s general account of blameless ignorance of universals is that people are blamelessly ignorant so long as they act because of ignorance for which they were not the cause (*di’ agnoian hēs mē autoi aitioi*),⁸⁹ or when not being ignorant was not up to them.⁹⁰ I have argued that in III.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers it possible for people to be blamelessly ignorant of at least one kind of universal – law. Let us consider then, the ways in which Aristotle considers ignorance of the law excusable, before moving on to discuss whether he thought other ignorance of universals excusable upon the same, or similar, grounds.

Aristotle writes:

[Legislators] also impose punishment on someone who acts viciously in ignorance of some provision of law that is necessary to know and not difficult to know. And they impose it in other cases likewise for any other ignorance that seems to be caused by the agent’s inattention; they assume it is up to him not to be ignorant, since he controls whether he pays attention.⁹¹

The implication of Aristotle’s statement here is that legislators do *not* impose corrective treatments on individuals who act in violation of some provision of law which is unnecessary or difficult to know.⁹² These criteria are how we can evaluate whether the

⁸⁹ 1113b24-25. In this passage, Irwin breaks from the usual translation of *aitioi* as “cause” and translates instead “responsible”. Hence “caused by ignorance for that he is not responsible for.” Though I use the word cause to translate the phrase, it is worth noting that “cause” in this case is closer to our common usage of responsibility than it is in other passages.

⁹⁰ 1114a1-2, cf *EE* 1225b11-14.

⁹¹ 1113b33-1114a3.

⁹² In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle makes a similar stipulation, but adds that negligence in knowing the law which is due to pleasure or pain is inexcusable. See *EE* 1225b11-16.

agent satisfies the general account of blameless ignorance. The two criteria concern what knowledge the agent would have to possess in order to act appropriately. It is obvious that if a person is bound to know something – that is, if it is necessary – then she must be blamed for not knowing it. If a person is *not* bound to know something – perhaps it is only recommended, or not especially important at all – then there is a weaker case for blaming her. Meanwhile, acquiring knowledge is often difficult, so we might not blame people who do not know something which is especially difficult to know. This criterion seems to allow for a consideration of reasonableness and degree – some things are too hard to know, others are not. Presumably this is not an exact criterion – there may be many cases where it is ambiguous whether or not something is too difficult to know.

From the criteria Aristotle provides, we can see that “responsible” (*aitioi*) or “up to them” (*ep’ autois*) are standards of *reasonableness*. We might be tempted to interpret “up to them” as suggesting that people’s ignorance was up to them so long as it was possible for them to not be ignorant. This is a much more stringent standard than viewing “up to them” as suggesting that people are responsible only for what they could reasonably have known. To illustrate the difference, consider a society in which laws are written down, but not widely accessible. It might be possible for a person to go and read through all of the laws. Under a standard of possibility acting with ignorance of the laws will always be responsible, since it was technically possible for the agent to know the law, had she made a great effort. Meanwhile, under a standard of reasonableness, we would consider whether or not the agent was expected, reasonably speaking, to know the law in question. A standard of reasonableness allows pardon for a person for whom it was *possible* to know the law but

who did not know it because it was too difficult (reasonably speaking) for her to have the knowledge.⁹³ This standard involves an evaluation of *both* the agent and the law; it is about whether we consider it necessary for the agent to know, given the law in question and the circumstances of the individual in question.⁹⁴ Therefore, Aristotle’s criteria show that, when he claims that we are blameworthy when ignorance was up to us, or when we are responsible for the ignorance, he is thinking of a standard of reasonableness, not possibility.⁹⁵

In addition, as I argued in Chapter II, being blamelessly ignorant of a universal can, but does not always, exculpate the agent for the *action*. Thus, it is possible that a person who acts ignorantly and badly might be blamelessly ignorant, but still blameworthy for the act. This sort of blame would not, of course, be justified based on prospective

⁹³ This does not mean that the law is not binding in these circumstances. The individual did, indeed, still break the law. It is still necessary to *follow* the law, but it might not be necessary for the agent to *have* the knowledge of the law. Thus, following the law would be the ideal, but an agent might be excused of being ignorant based on whether it was necessary to have that knowledge.

⁹⁴ It is somewhat challenging to think of when a law might not be necessary for a person to know. I take Aristotle as suggesting that a law might not be pertinent to an individual’s daily life, or it might not be importantly connected to ethical behavior. Hence, we might have a law which is not especially important, and which does not bear relevance for the usual activities of a person’s life. Were the person to act against this law, while being ignorant, the court might excuse them for the offense because, in normal circumstances, it is not necessary that the agent have such knowledge.

⁹⁵ Though I think the evidence provided by Aristotle’s two criteria is sufficient to establish that he is speaking of reasonableness rather than possibility for when a person is not responsible for her ignorance or when the ignorance is not up to her, there is another reason, not present in the text, for us to read Aristotle this way. If Aristotle is speaking only of *possibility*, then we might find ourselves in a situation where, given the complexity of law, and the even greater complexity of morality, an agent might be caught in an impossible situation of having to choose *which* aspect of the law or morality he must study. If he studies part of the law in an attempt to be solicitous, but acts in violation of provision ϕ from another place in the law, he could be blamed for not knowing provision ϕ despite the fact that the *reason* he does not know provision ϕ was because he was attempting to be solicitous of the law elsewhere. Either the entirety of the law, and of morality, is sufficiently simple such that it is possible for all of us to know it, or else we should expect a judgement of reasonableness when determining whether or not an agent is responsible for his ignorance. Therefore, though it is uncertain whether Aristotle thought this matter through, it seems that he, and we, have good reason to suppose that being responsible for ignorance, or ignorance being up to us, is meant as a claim of whether it was reasonable for us to know, not merely whether it was possible for us to know.

considerations, for the agent is already being solicitous, and she needs no external encouragement to act rightly. Rather, the blame is justified by retrospective considerations, because the agent is still responsible for the act. Hence, we might blame the agent for the act, but not for her ignorance, or we might blame her for neither the ignorance nor the act. So, agents who, reasonably speaking, fulfill the criteria, may be found blameless for the ignorance in which they acted, and possibly also for the act itself.

(3)

Ignorance of the law is pardonable in some cases, and actions done with that ignorance are sometimes pardonable as well. The criteria Aristotle gives, non-necessity and difficulty, are ways for courts and individuals to determine the culpability of the agent. Are other sorts of universals similar to laws? Can people be blamelessly ignorant of these universals and have their action pardoned based on that ignorance, despite the action being voluntary? On my reading, Aristotle leaves this issue open. As I argued in Chapter II, we have good reason to suppose that legal cases and moral cases are importantly connected with respect to the agent's praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. A charitable reading of Aristotle, and one which is consistent with contemporary scholarship on his views of moral education, chimes well with the view that Aristotle thought that, at least in some cases, both ignorance of moral universals and acts done in such ignorance can be excused.

Aristotle never speaks clearly on this matter; this is why I characterize him as leaving the issue open. We might wonder why Aristotle does not speak directly on the topic

of pardoning bad actions done in ignorance of universals, or about how we can determine whether a person is blameworthy. It is possible that he held these views implicitly, and thought they needed no concerted defense. For instance, Aristotle takes it to be correct that we sometimes blame people for their actions. He does not argue for this view, but takes it as given, and appropriate. So too, it is possible that Aristotle takes it as given that a person can be ignorant of a universal, act badly and voluntarily with that ignorance, and be pardoned upon an appeal to the ignorance, so long as he or she was ignorant blamelessly.

One feature which is conspicuously lacking, however, is that Aristotle provides no such criteria for ignorance of other universals in the way he provides criteria for ignorance of the law. Are these criteria meant to apply across the board? This seems implausible. The criteria of non-necessity does not seem applicable to other kinds of universals. For, it seems that in the sphere of morality, there are no non-necessary items. So, if not all of Aristotle’s criteria can be applied to ignorance of all other universals, and he does not provide criteria for ignorance of other universals, then we seem to be at a loss. While I do not think we can discover with certainty what Aristotle thinks about these matters, I do think we can shed some light.

It should come as no surprise that Aristotle does not provide us with a list of criteria by which we can assess whether an agent is responsible for her ignorance of a universal. Aristotle’s general method does not lend itself to a full statement of definitions and clarifications (though he does work towards definitions, and often provides

clarifications).⁹⁶ Aristotle’s goal – broadly construed – in his ethics is to provide aid to individuals who wish to become good.⁹⁷ As a result, he does not speak at great length about many topics which might occupy a full theoretical account of ethics. At which times we can appropriately apply praise and blame in cases of universal ignorance, is one among these. Indeed, this is not the only missing piece in his discussion of praise and blame, let alone the only missing piece in his theory of ethics.

Although it seems implausible to apply the criterion of non-necessity to other cases of universal ignorance, the other criterion, difficulty, *can* be applied meaningfully. I consider Aristotle’s position on blameless ignorance of universals to include at least the criterion of difficulty to know. It is possible that other criteria might apply to such cases, on Aristotle’s account, but it is not my goal to speculate or investigate what these other criteria might be. The main reason I consider the exculpation of an agent who is ignorant based on the criterion of difficult to know as Aristotle’s position is that moral education, and becoming good, are in no way considered by him to be a simple processes. Indeed, even with excellent upbringing, and with the best intentions, it is still difficult for people to gain the knowledge necessary to act rightly. This can be seen most clearly when we focus on Aristotle’s views of moral education, and his views on ethical deliberation. If, in these two areas, we can construct plausible cases wherein an agent could not reasonably be expected to have acquired the necessary knowledge to act rightly because it was too

⁹⁶ See Richard Kraut, "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method" (*The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

⁹⁷ Cf 1095a2-8, 1104a26-31. See Gavin Lawrence, “Acquiring Character: Becoming Grown-Up” (*Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

difficult, then we have a good reason to suppose that Aristotle would admit the exculpation of an agent for ignorance of moral universals (and, presumably in some cases, the bad actions done with such ignorance).

I believe there are three possible cases where the criterion of difficulty to know might apply to an individual’s moral ignorance. Each case involves difficulty for an agent to acquire knowledge of moral universals. Two cases arise from the sort of upbringing an agent has, while the third involves the inherent difficulty in deliberating about right action. In what follows, I develop these cases, and submit them as candidates that may satisfy the criterion of difficulty to know. Whether they satisfy the criterion is not a matter of certainty, but of probability. It is my own view that the criterion can be successfully applied to all three sorts of cases. However, to establish my thesis, that Aristotle thought it possible for an agent to be excused for moral ignorance in some circumstances, the criterion of difficult to know need only be satisfied by *one* of these cases.

(4)

Let us first consider moral education, before moving on to discuss deliberation. Scholars who discuss Aristotle’s views on moral education seldom connect their discussion of education to culpability. Rather, discussions of moral education in Aristotle usually proceed in one of two ways. I take one example of each approach. Either moral education is considered on its own, as in Gavin Lawrence’s piece “Acquiring Character: Becoming Grown-Up”, where the central question is how Aristotle thinks moral education occurs. Or,

it is considered in reference to a specific problem, as in Myles Burnyeat’s article “Aristotle on Learning to be Good”, where the central question is how an akratic agent follows the weaker practical syllogism over the stronger. In either case, while culpability is not referenced, it is evident that acquiring knowledge of right and wrong, of morals, or of what is truly beneficial for us, is neither a simple nor easy task.

Take, for example, Burnyeat’s reading of Aristotle on moral education. In his article Burnyeat is interested in moral education generally, but he is interested more particularly in how his reading of Aristotle’s theory of moral development can help resolve the problem of the akratic – the akratic knows what is right, but does not follow through with right action.⁹⁸ In order to answer his questions, he explores the complexity in Aristotle’s views on how a person comes to know that and why certain things are worthwhile and good. Burnyeat divides the moral progression of an individual into two stages: learning the *that* and learning the *why*. He notes that Aristotle perceptively acknowledges that moral development is both emotional and cognitive (the emotional corresponding loosely to the *that*, and the cognitive corresponding loosely to the *why*).⁹⁹ He then goes on to explore the features of these two aspects of moral development.

Knowing the *that*, on Burnyeat’s reading, is knowing that this or that is good: that the just life is superior to the unjust life, and that *this* is just and *that* is unjust; that my goal in life is to live finely, not merely comfortably; that some goods are better than others, and that I should choose the better over the worse. Knowing that all these things – and more –

⁹⁸ Myles Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” (*Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 70.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 70-71.

are the case, and wanting to pursue the good, is, for Burnyeat, what we get from a good upbringing. In other words, we are given the correct *starting points* for the acquisition of true virtue. Habituation is how we get the correct starting points. However, in the early parts of our life, we do not have true virtue yet, for we also need to learn, through instruction and the use of our *own* reason, the reasons why these things are good: why it is that justice is best, and what justice is in more detail; why it is that the best life is one which accords with reason. But the well habituated individual is, on Burnyeat’s view, educable, and so is well positioned to take a course with Aristotle investigating the *why* and thereby obtaining the more precise knowledge achievable by a study of ethics.¹⁰⁰ Presumably, it is possible to achieve full virtue without taking a course with Aristotle; Burnyeat’s point is not that one must study with Aristotle in order to become good. Rather, his point is that Aristotle draws a distinction between two stages of learning. We can have one, the *that*, and be good to a certain extent, but we cannot have true virtue without something further – Aristotle’s course helps us to obtain that further something.

Burnyeat considers habituation, which is how we acquire the *that*, as a process which begins before we have control over it. But it does not remain this way. As adults, we are capable of directing our actions this or that way with the express purpose in mind of fashioning ourselves into better individuals. Aristotle seems to assume this point when he says that only a senseless person would deny that our actions form our characters.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the analogy Aristotle employs for the good person is that of an athlete forming

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 78.

¹⁰¹ 1114a8-10.

his body for competition. Burnyeat’s reading of Aristotle is that learning the *that* is an ongoing process, one which is eventually integrated and at times corrected (when it errs) by the *why*.¹⁰² We will return to this ongoing process later. For now, we should note that habituation is a process which is in part a practice of virtue, but also, in part, a *discovery* that acting in accordance with what is just or noble is pleasant and good. Thus, it is important for children to be introduced to this reality first, connecting their minds and behaviors to this crucially important fact.¹⁰³ And it is important, too, for adults to direct habituation for themselves, or for laws to chastise them if they err (for some people, of course, will only act rightly when there is threat of pain, which is why Aristotle suggests, in III.5, that laws encourage good behavior and discourage bad by ascribing praise and blame).

The discovery, and the need for a good upbringing to facilitate that discovery, is what is most crucial for our purposes here. On Aristotle’s account, people who are not instructed in their early years through habituation to know what is good, and to find some affinity for it, will not have the correct *starting points* for the acquisition of virtue. Indeed, if they are introduced to what is base and come to associate base things with what is pleasurable and good, their starting points will be actively contrary to a virtuous life. For them, acquiring virtue in later life will be especially difficult, for they begin with incorrect

¹⁰² Consider as well Aristotle’s own comment of getting closer to a virtuous state by acting contrarily to vice, even if the action does not accurately hit the mean. He suggests that forming characters is like bending wood – in order to be made straight, it must first be extended past the point (1109b5-7). The ongoing process of adult improvement is also well-expressed in William Bondeson, “Aristotle on Responsibility for One’s Character and the Possibility of Character Change” (*Phronesis* 19:1, 1974) and Gianluca Di Muzio, “Aristotle on Improving One’s Character” (*Phronesis* 45:3, 2000).

¹⁰³ Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning,” 76-80.

beliefs about what is good, and hence instruction in a course like Aristotle’s would not be of much help to them. They do not find what is good either pleasant or worthwhile, because they were poorly formed in their youth. The poor formation is, of course, beyond the control of these people – for it is their elders and their society which nurtures them and oversees their habituation. In such cases as these, where the agent has few or none of the correct starting points for the acquisition of virtue in later life, it hardly seems possible, on Aristotle’s account, for an agent to come to know what is good.

But it is not only these poorly raised individuals who experience difficulty in knowing what is good. As Burnyeat and other scholars have argued, Aristotle’s intended audience is individuals who have *already* been brought up well, and are well disposed to learn the finer points of what it means to live well.¹⁰⁴ Yet, despite the fact that they are, on the whole, well brought up and good people, they are not yet at their best. So, *both* the well brought up *and* the poorly brought up require something extra to be truly virtuous.

Now, a course in ethics is not necessarily required to obtain this extra aspect, the *why*, to become virtuous. A person can presumably manage this on her own. My argument is that, since Aristotle considers such a course in ethics helpful even to those who are well brought up, he must view it as more difficult for individuals who have been well brought up to attain virtue *without* such instruction. He must also think it even more difficult for people raised poorly to attain both the *what* and the *why* of living well. This idea of varying degrees of difficulty, which is implicit in Aristotle’s account of moral education, is all that

¹⁰⁴ 1095b2-13, 1179b20-35. See also, Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning” esp. 84-85; Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Ancient Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 85-86. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, 17-19; Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, 3.

is necessary for me to establish the point that, theoretically, we can apply the criterion of difficulty to know to the case of moral universals.

This is, of course, not enough to establish that it is possible for knowledge of a moral universal to be *sufficiently* difficult to acquire for the agent to be excused for moral ignorance, or for acting badly as a result of moral ignorance. A range of varying difficulty establishes only a framework of more and less; it does not establish that there are some cases in which the morally right course of action is *too* difficult for an agent to know. However, if we consider the debilitating effects a poor upbringing can have on the outlook of the agent, and how she will not have some – or any – of the correct starting points for the acquisition of virtue (through no fault of her own), it seems excessively demanding to insist that it is reasonable for an agent to overcome such difficulties and act always in a virtuous way. Given Aristotle’s keen awareness of the difficulties, and the importance of being brought up well, we have every reason to suppose that Aristotle himself would acknowledge that some difficulties are sufficient to render an agent blameless.

(5)

Burnyeat’s account of moral education is directed at resolving the issue of the akratic agent, who has knowledge of what is good, but acts contrary to the knowledge. Hence, his analysis, while general to a certain extent, is still focused on how people acquire a certain *sort* of character. By contrast, Gavin Lawrence concerns himself with character

development as such, and not with a goal of resolving some further issue.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the akratic does not stand behind her action in a full sense. She knows at least in some way that her action is wrong while she does the action (or after the fact). But the vicious person believes her action to be correct, and she will defend her view. Lawrence’s article shows how people reach the point that their character is fully developed, though it might be faulty in some respect.¹⁰⁶ His reading of Aristotle’s views on moral education helps elucidate a second point about the difficulty of acquiring knowledge of moral universals.

There is one important feature of Gavin Lawrence’s reading of moral education which is similar to Burnyeat’s reading of Aristotle. For Lawrence, as for Burnyeat, Aristotle thought that an agent depends on the instruction of others, through habituation as well as formal education, to develop and supplement his natural abilities. Nature provides us with a certain amount of preparedness for being virtuous, which we may call natural virtue, or natural vice. A person can be well supplied with natural virtue, or not, and this provision of nature is the first step in preparing a person to tread the path of moral development.¹⁰⁷ This development involves, on Lawrence’s reading, three stages beyond the deposit of nature: 1) proto-character, 2) experiential character, and 3) proper-character.¹⁰⁸ The stage of proto-character requires some sort of habituation. This stage occurs early in life, where it is not the agent, but those around the agent, who direct her

¹⁰⁵ See Lawrence, “Acquiring Character.”

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 238-240.

¹⁰⁷ I do not think that natural virtue or vice can be part of evaluating when a person is morally culpable. There does not seem to be a way to determine whether or not a person began his character formation at a natural advantage or disadvantage. Hence, though it might bear on how culpable a person is in fact, it does not bear on our evaluation of the culpability by way of the criterion of difficulty to know.

¹⁰⁸ Lawrence, “Acquiring Character,” 276ff.

habits. The following stage is where the agent herself begins to take ownership over the direction of her development. This stage, and the proto-character stage, are similar to how Burnyeat describes acquiring the *what* of ethics: the agent is given and discovers, through action, the correct starting points for virtuous life, at first under the direction of others, and then on her own as she becomes older. Finally, at what Lawrence calls the proper character stage, the agent stands fully behind her actions, and has come to view the good as good not only because of habituation, but also because it is *her own* considered view (for a vicious person, she will have an incorrect view of the good, despite being her own considered view).

If Lawrence's reading of Aristotle is well founded, we can see that the actions performed by the agent in the final stage, the stage of proper-character, resemble most closely the prohairetic actions which Aristotle takes to be the best signs of character. Actions resulting from this sort of character are the actions for which the agent is most deeply responsible. Meanwhile, experiential character also seems to include prohairetic action, but with less experience and less commitment than actions resulting from a proper character. The further we go back in the stages of development, as outlined by Lawrence, the less the agent seems fully responsible for her actions. Yet, each of these earlier stages will have great effect on the later stages. Thus, the agent who is not well supplied in natural virtue, or who is ill-formed in the stage of proto-character, will have a much more difficult time discovering what it is good.

We can see from Lawrence's account that there is a second way in which the agent might struggle to attain knowledge of the good. The experiential stage, on Lawrence's

reading, is a critical stage in which an agent might not be exposed to the circumstances necessary to develop proper knowledge of the good. Consider, for instance, an individual who is raised without the opportunity to act courageously, or one who lives in extreme poverty and who therefore cannot act generously. Such individuals will not have had the opportunity to develop knowledge of what the mean would be. This case is different from a person who has had the opportunity to act virtuously, but, because of poor upbringing, has never learned that to act virtuously is good and pleasant. Rather, this new case is of a person who, though not ill-formed, has never even had the opportunity to perform actions of a certain sort. We might say that, rather than being *ill*-formed, the agent is *un*-formed with respect to one or more of the virtues.

Therefore, it seems that for Aristotle an agent might not always be in control over whether or not she is ignorant of a moral universal. A great deal will depend on the circumstances in which she is raised, and in which she continues to live. Since Aristotle’s general account of excusable ignorance is that we may pardon the agent so long as she is not responsible for her ignorance, or so long as the ignorance was not up to her, it seems that a person who is raised poorly has a strong case for pardon if the action she performs is done with ignorance which her circumstances made it improbable or impossible for her not to have.

For Aristotle moral education is by no means an easy process, nor is it one of equal difficulty for everyone involved. As Burnyeat and Lawrence make clear, Aristotle regarded moral education as a challenging process which requires that a person be well situated to receive the right kind of instruction, and have the right opportunities to perform actions of

certain sorts. Some of these challenges – the worst sort of upbringing, or no opportunity to perform certain actions – may make it all but impossible for a person to know a moral universal. If such circumstances obtain, then it seems plausible that Aristotle would admit that pardoning the agent is the appropriate response. Some of these challenges may exceed reasonable expectations of what an agent is expected to do in order to have the knowledge necessary to act rightly – for instance, if an agent’s upbringing is poor but not the worst, or if there are some but not many opportunities to act. In such cases, given that Aristotle’s criterion of difficulty to know seems to include an evaluation of what is reasonable and not just what is possible, it seems *likely* that Aristotle would admit that pardoning the agent is the appropriate response. Hence, in evaluating a person’s blameworthiness for acting in ignorance of a moral universal, we can look to his upbringing to see whether or not it was too difficult for him to know the moral universals necessary to act rightly.

(6)

I have argued that Aristotle regarded moral education as challenging, and that he implicitly acknowledged that an individual might be disadvantaged in her education to the point that it is either impossible for her to know a universal, or at least unreasonable to expect her to know. However, it is important to consider more than the fortune of the agent in evaluating how difficult acquiring knowledge of universals can be. Aristotle considers it quite difficult for an agent to know what the mean is with respect to our circumstances. We determine the mean in action by the process of deliberation. In *EN* III.2-4 the chapters

between the passages I have focused on so far, Aristotle deals with puzzles about how we act in accordance with our view of the good. As we shall see, there is support in these chapters for the view that, given the difficulty of deliberation, Aristotle thought there might be cases where ignorance of moral universals can be blameless, even for individuals who have been raised well.

On Aristotle’s account, deliberation (*bouleusis*) is a process by which we reach a decision (*prohairesis*). Actions resulting from decisions, we should recall, are what Aristotle considers to be most representative of the character of the agent. Prohairesis actions are a subset of voluntary actions; for children and animals can act in accordance with volition, while being unable to decide or deliberate.¹⁰⁹ Being ignorant in our decisions does not, on Aristotle’s account, render an action involuntary. This is because an action which results from decision is, on the agent’s view, the correct and appropriate action to perform in the circumstances – in Lawrence’s terms, the agent stands fully behind her action.

The actions most representative of an agent’s character, then, are arrived at through the process of deliberation, which results in the decision and then the act. When do we deliberate, and about what do we deliberate? Aristotle answers each of these questions in *EN III.3*: we deliberate in situations where an action is up to us and the answer is unclear;¹¹⁰ we deliberate about which means serve the end of our action best.¹¹¹ Deliberation is about universals, and about actions. It is not about particulars, since, as Aristotle says, we do not

¹⁰⁹ 1111b6-10.

¹¹⁰ The action must be up to us: see, 1112a27-34. The answer of “what do I do?” is unclear: 1112b2-9.

¹¹¹ 1112b11-20.

deliberate about what is in front of us – particulars are a matter of perception (and these fall under the principles of ignorance of particulars).¹¹² Nor is it about the end itself, but what promotes the end – actions are not the goal for which we do them.¹¹³ For instance, it is impossible for happiness to be an act, but it is possible that happiness will come about *by* our actions.

The end, then, is not deliberated about. Rather, we already have some goal in mind, then we begin to deliberate how to bring it about.¹¹⁴ The decision which results from successful deliberation is the desire which prompts us to act.¹¹⁵ Now, the end of our action is not always eudaimonia – there might be intervening goals towards which we direct our actions – but let us consider eudaimonia, as this is the end to which, according to Aristotle, all people aspire. Moreover, acting in accordance with what will in fact bring about eudaimonia is, on Aristotle’s view, always consistent with right action, but not all things that we wish will be consistent with right action. Indeed, the vicious person is ignorant in such a way that the end of his action is inconsistent, at least in part, with right action (for he might choose the best action to promote the end, but his conception of the end is wrong). Therefore, acting consistently with what will bring about happiness on Aristotle’s view is, more or less, the same as acting morally.¹¹⁶

¹¹² 1112b34-1113a2.

¹¹³ 1112b11-16, 1112b31-34.

¹¹⁴ 1112b11-16.

¹¹⁵ 1112a15-17, 1113a9-12.

¹¹⁶ We might wonder at this claim. Acting in accordance with *my* happiness (eudaimonia) might not, in fact, always be consistent with what we deem to be moral, in which case acting for our happiness might not always be correct. Issues of egoism are present here, which is no new criticism of Aristotle. I set these issues aside, however. The puzzles over whether Aristotle’s ethics coincide with what we might consider to be moral are not my concern. Rather, for Aristotle, acting in accordance with what will bring happiness is what is best and choiceworthy. So, in order to see whether Aristotle allows blameless ignorance of what *we* consider to

Heda Segvic, in her article “Deliberation and Choice in Aristotle,” points out certain important (and perhaps surprising) features of the Aristotelian good deliberator (*ho haplōs euboulos*). The good deliberator, of course, is the person who has the virtue of deliberating well (*euboulia*). Segvic argues that, according to Aristotle, this is a person who is successful in setting down the right end for action, *and* who is successful in modifying her desires based upon rational reflection.¹¹⁷ That is, the good deliberator is excellent at finding the best means to achieve the end of her action, and at forming her desires to match (the ends too, are the correct ones). Segvic argues for her position against views on which Aristotle thought practical syllogisms (either actual or hypothetical) were the means by which people deliberated, and also against views which characterize agents as only deliberating in the moment of action.¹¹⁸

For Segvic, Aristotle’s good deliberator does sometimes deliberate in the moment of action, but at other times he does not. For instance, as Aristotle himself points out, we deliberate more about uncertain things, such as navigation.¹¹⁹ We can imagine here the captain of a vessel, out at sea, who considers which course to set in order to arrive at the appropriate port at the appropriate time. Action in this case is not immediate, or particularly

be moral, we can look at cases where what is choiceworthy and correct on Aristotle’s view coincides with what we as readers consider to be moral.

¹¹⁷ Heda Segvic, “Deliberation and Choice in Aristotle” (*Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 160-161. And again: “Seen as a process of arriving at a choice, deliberation is an activity that modifies an initial set of desires and concerns which the agent brings to bear to his action into another set of desires which are wants or willings. His activity is deliberative only if the modification of desires can be regarded as a result of an exercise of reason. Deliberation, as Aristotle understands it, is not simply reasoning that serves a practical purpose, but an effective direction, or redirection, of one’s will by means of reasoning” (167).

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 163ff.

¹¹⁹ 1112b2-8.

pressing; the captain can have several hours, perhaps days, to consider his options before acting – setting the course of the ship. We might also think of a person who decides on one career path over another, or on one path of education over another. She has time to consider and weigh her options before the decision must be made. However, not all – perhaps not even most – actions are this way. Many decisions have an immediacy to them which does not allow for rational reflection before action is required. Consider, for example, moments in battle, or emergencies, or any time when pressing concerns are suddenly thrust before the agent; these scenarios allow for little – if any – time for the agent to consider her action.

Segvic argues that it is cases such as these, where the agent has little or no time to consider her options, which show that there is more to deliberation than “in the moment” thinking. For, Aristotle thought that virtuous actions are prohairetic, and a prohairesis is arrived at by deliberation. So, either pressing actions for which an agent has no time to consider are not virtuous, or else deliberation is possible even without consideration in the moment. What is missing in our account of deliberation, Segvic claims, is the reflective character it has. That is, a person can have a deliberative character without deliberating here and now. Reflection outside of action, and forming a character by actions, is part of what it is to be a good deliberator. Thus, when immediate action is required, the good deliberator is already well disposed to act.¹²⁰

I consider Segvic’s reading of Aristotelian deliberation to be correct. From it, we can glean two ways in which deliberation is difficult. Both involve ignorance of universals (for deliberation results in a decision, which is one of the universals specified by Aristotle

¹²⁰ Segvic, “Deliberation and Choice,” 171ff.

in *EN III.1*).¹²¹ The first way successful deliberation is difficult concerns what knowledge the individual attends to when she acts. The second way concerns the open-ended nature of an agent’s personal conception of eudaimonia. As we shall see, an agent’s knowledge in her action is constrained in both of these ways, with the result that even well brought-up, attentive and solicitous individuals may act badly in ignorance of a universal because of the difficulty involved, and not because they have been negligent (the sign of a vicious person) or are overcome by passions (the sign of an akratic).

Let us consider first what knowledge the virtuous individual has when she acts. In all deliberation, the end is set down as the starting point of deliberation. So for Aristotle, all prohairesis actions, in some way, accord with what the agent considers good and beneficial. However, it is not always certain what is at stake in our circumstances. Segvic writes:

“Human life involves facing situations in which it is not immediately, or even upon reflection, clear what is at stake, from the point of view of the person involved. A given situation will typically not activate a virtuous person’s whole conception of the good life; it will activate only a part of it. However, which part is activated depends on what the whole conception is.”¹²²

Even a person who is well along the way to being virtuous might act without attending to a universal which she knows and which bears upon the circumstances at hand, but which she has not connected to the circumstances. Hence, according to Segvic, the agent might

¹²¹ 1110b31-33. In this passage (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter I) Aristotle claims that ignorance of what is beneficial, or ignorance in the decision, or ignorance of a universal cannot render an action involuntary. The predominant view among scholars is that each of these three sorts of ignorance are, in fact, the same ignorance. For examples, see John Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), 117; Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory*, 157; Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, 204.

¹²² Segvic, “Deliberation and Choice,” 172-173. See also David Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reason” (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. New Series 76, 1975).

not always acts with *everything* in mind of what she believes to be beneficial. I take Segvic’s line of thought to be something like the following. When an agent acts (especially if she acts spontaneously) she does not have before her, in her mind, her entire conception of the good life, with a ready list of objectives or ordering of goods. Rather, the agent considers those features of her circumstances which she thinks relevant. The circumstances of her action are what bring into focus certain aspects of her conception of the end, and it is based on what is present in her minds that she decides upon a particular action.

If Segvic is correct, then actions such as these, in many respects, resemble the actions of the akratic: the akratic knows that an action is wrong in a way, but cannot properly attend to that knowledge. In this case, however, the agent is not overcome by passion, nor is she being inattentive (though this might be one explanation as to why an agent might not connect relevant features of her view of the good life to the circumstances at hand). Rather, she is temporarily ignorant of the universal because the way the circumstances present themselves does not clearly show her what is salient. If she were asked in abstraction from the circumstances what was good, or if the circumstances themselves were somewhat clearer, then she *would* act rightly and virtuously.¹²³

This, then, is one way in which successful deliberation might be difficult for an individual. On this reading, the agent is temporarily ignorant of certain aspects of what is beneficial. She has not become this way because she is inattentive or overcome by passion,

¹²³ Undoubtedly, a practically wise person who is especially virtuous is excellent at understanding quite quickly and accurately what is at stake in almost any given situation. However, so long as it is common for the stakes of an action to be obscure, as I maintain they often are, we have good reason to believe that knowing what is at stake in every action is a challenge to individuals who are, on the whole, good people.

but because she is situated in ambiguous circumstances. An agent who has the right sort of conception of the good life might still fail to act in accordance with it due to this ignorance. Discovering exactly what is at stake in our actions is a difficult affair, sometimes rendering it especially difficult, or all but impossible, to arrive at the correct action. Hence, it is possible that even a good person might not be fully responsible for her ignorance.

The second way that successful deliberation is difficult concerns more persistent ignorance; for Aristotle, even a good person’s view of the good life is not complete. The incompleteness of our knowledge can be attested to by our previous discussion of moral education. However, this is not the only evidence that our knowledge of what is good is incomplete. Although Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is a work of practical philosophy – that is, its aim is to help us to become good – part of that discussion necessarily concerns an investigation of *what* is good. Aristotle does not consider this a settled matter. His entire approach, which is endoxic, is based on a supposition that most people grasp *part* of what is true, but not all. We become more certain in the realm of ethics by carefully considering what seems to be the case, the reputable opinions, and discriminating what turns out to be false from what appears to be true. Aristotle follows this method not only for beliefs about more theoretical discussions, such as what decision is and what it is not, but also with distinctly practical questions, such as what life is best.¹²⁴ As we have seen, our incomplete knowledge is filled in, so far as it can be, through education and experience. Neither is

¹²⁴ Consider his discussion of the various lives in *EN* I.5. Though he is quick to dismiss lives of pleasure, honour, and wealth, it is still clear from the passage that Aristotle does not take what the good life is as a closed or obvious topic.

sufficient to provide a full account of what is good. Instead, Aristotle provides an answer which is an outline.

In addition, exactitude is not sought in a study of ethics; so, while we may know in outline what is good (assuming we have had the right upbringing and an excellent education), we cannot know completely the connection between the general truths of ethics and the particular circumstances in the world. How we connect our knowledge of universals to the variety of particular circumstances will not always be clear.¹²⁵ Hence, our view of the good life seems to always be incomplete in a way.

According to Segvic, our conception of the good life can also be inconsistent.¹²⁶ Not all experience or education amount to a single, unified, view, as if the correct view is in a way already within us, merely waiting to be filled in through our education and experience. Rather, teaching and experience are forays into discovering what is best. We are consistently re-evaluating and modifying aspects of what we believe to be best.¹²⁷ The fact is that a person’s view of the good life is, even when perfectly correct, *her own* conception of the good life, and not someone else’s (which in Segvic’s words is “irreducibly subjective”). This is a feature of Aristotle which is important to underscore.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Cf 1103b34-1104a7, 1094b11-27, 1097a11-13, 1098a26-9, 1137a4-26, 1180b13-20.

¹²⁶ Segvic, “Deliberation and Choice,” 173

¹²⁷ Consider Gavin Lawrence: “In short, we are, ordinarily, in the swim of our human practices... we are engaged typically in mutual adjustment and correction as an everyday, often hardly noticed, part of our ordinary practices, of our ordinary training and then maintenance as a participant in the practice, by enmeshment and immersion” Lawrence, “Acquiring Character,” (252).

Also consider Segvic: “A conception of the good life, which is the starting point of ethical deliberation, is a set of evaluative attitudes... which, if their content were fully spelled out, would jointly amount to some specific picture of how one should live one’s life. An ordinary person’s conception of *eudaimonia* is to a large degree implicit; it is also usually vague and full of gaps in parts, not well integrated, and, more often than not, inconsistent” Segvic, “Deliberation and Choice,” 173.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 180-181.

For, we must each reach this view, *as our own view*, by actively discerning throughout our life, and actively eliminating prior inconsistencies and ignorance of which we had heretofore been unaware. Such re-examining takes place, once again, in the midst of our actions, not prior to them. Hence, to have full knowledge, prior to action, of what is beneficial, is by no means normal or easy, even for a well-educated and solicitous person.

So, once again, a person who is on the whole good and solicitous might find it quite difficult to always know, and always apply, a complete and correct view of the good life to her actions. Acting mistakenly, whether because the agent does not properly evaluate the moral stakes of the circumstance, or because her understanding of the good life is incomplete or inconsistent, is possible even for a well-brought up, and on the whole good person. This seems to be especially true for actions which require quick decisions. An agent who is attempting to become better, but who is pressed to act quickly, and due to the difficulty in deliberation acts wrongly, should be held less than fully responsible. For, it seems unduly harsh to insist that an agent in these sorts of circumstances be blamed for her ignorance and actions every time she fails to act admirably. This view is consistent with Aristotle and, where he pressed, it is possible that he would acknowledge this range of cases.¹²⁹ Therefore, in addition to agents who are poorly raised, or agents who have lacked the right opportunities to act, we have a third sort of person for whom right action might be difficult and – in some circumstances – beyond the expectations of what is reasonable.

¹²⁹ Although beyond the scope of my thesis, it is my view that we should acknowledge this range of cases, even if Aristotle would not. Once again, the view is justifiable on Aristotelian principles. Hence, those who wish to develop a contemporary Aristotelian ethic can include this range of cases without violating or disrupting any other Aristotelian principles or commitments.

(7)

According to Aristotle, arriving at knowledge of universals in moral matters, while by no means impossible, can be more or less challenging. I have outlined three ways in which acquiring and accessing knowledge of moral universals can be difficult on his view. First, people can be raised in such a way that they are introduced to what is base and not what is good, so that they lack the correct starting points for acquiring virtue. Second, people can have no opportunity to perform the actions by which they could become habituated in the right way for acquiring virtue. Third, even well brought up individuals, who hope to become more virtuous and who are solicitous of what they ought to do, might not have knowledge of some universals, either temporarily or persistently, due to the constraints under which ethical deliberation must occur.

There is no doubt that, for Aristotle, becoming good and consistently acting well is hard. Whether these difficulties are sufficient to render an agent less than fully responsible for her ignorance of a moral universal, or for actions that result from this ignorance, will depend on what we, or Aristotle, mean by the term “reasonable”. According to Aristotle, an agent can be excused for her ignorance if she was not responsible for it, or if it was not up to her. I have argued that, on his view, this condition can be met if it was not reasonable to expect a person to know a moral universal, because it was sufficiently difficult for her to know. I take it that the first case, of the person who was poorly brought up, is a strong candidate for fulfilling the criterion of difficult to know. The character of the agent in this

case is misshapen because of circumstances beyond his control. The second case, of the agent who lacks the opportunity to perform virtuous actions, is also, I take it, a strong candidate, albeit less strong than the first. Finally, the third case, of the agent whose conception of the good life is temporarily obscured (through neither vice nor passions) or whose view of the good life is incomplete or inconsistent, seems to be the least likely candidate for fulfilling the criterion of difficult to know. It is easiest, in this case, for an objector to retort that living well is not something simple or easy, and it belies the importance and justification of blame to suggest that any and all difficulty can exculpate people who act badly.

In conclusion, there is good evidence, once we consider Aristotle's broader understanding of moral education and ethical deliberation, to suppose that he considered the criterion of difficult to know to apply in some instance where an individual acts badly in ignorance of a moral universal. Whether other criteria could be used for the pardoning of moral ignorance is, of course, a matter of further speculation. What we have, and what I conclude with, is the claim that for Aristotle an agent can, in some cases, be found blameless for acting badly in moral ignorance, on the basis that the right thing to do was too difficult to know.

CONCLUSION

According to the reading I have defended, Aristotle thought that an agent can be pardoned both for bad actions done in ignorance of universals and for the ignorance itself, so long as the agent is not responsible for her ignorance; and that we can judge her degree of responsibility for the ignorance based on certain criteria, one of which is how difficult the knowledge was to acquire given the circumstances. According to the common view, Aristotle denied this range of cases is possible. I have argued that the common view, though predominant in the literature, is not necessitated by Aristotle’s comments in the passages typically used to support the view. Rather, my alternate reading fits the text just as well. Moreover, the common view introduces a tension between two passages, *EN* III.1 and III.5, which we avoid if we reject the view and adopt my alternate reading. In III.5, Aristotle explicitly commits himself to the possibility of pardoning actions done in ignorance of one sort of universal – the law – so long as it was too difficult or not necessary to know. Hence, it is no great stretch to suppose that he also allowed pardon for other cases of ignorance of universals. My reading of Aristotle gains indirect support from its consistency with Aristotle’s views on moral education and ethical deliberation.

We can imagine three sorts of individuals who are good candidates for pardon, despite acting badly in ignorance of a universal. First, there is an individual who lives in circumstances as I described in my introduction and in Chapter III; one who is disadvantaged in education such that knowledge of moral universals is beyond what we can reasonably expect, because he was brought up poorly. Second, a similar sort of person

who, though not ill-formed, is un-formed, because he had no opportunity to act in accordance with virtue. Finally, we can consider a person who is raised well, and who attempts to be solicitous of what he ought to do or avoid but, due to the inherent difficulty in forming a view of the good, and properly accessing that view in the right way at the appropriate times, fails to act in the best way at all times. Such individuals might, on occasion, be forgiven for their ignorance, or their errors.

One important result of my discussion of Aristotle’s views on the praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of actions is that for him voluntariness and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness do not always go together. There are some actions which, though they satisfy Aristotle’s criteria for voluntariness, do not satisfy his criteria for praise and blame. On my interpretation, Aristotle thought that many actions – perhaps even most – which are voluntary are also worthy of praise or blame, and that it is *because* these actions are voluntary that an agent is praiseworthy or blameworthy. However, there are still further conditions beyond mere voluntariness which must be satisfied for praiseworthiness or blameworthiness.

A few issues arose in the previous chapters which are adjacent to my central claim and which should be given at least some comment. A question which has remained unanswered is how frequently we might expect exculpating circumstances to obtain. While I argued in Chapter III that cases of pardon are conceivable, they might only happen rarely. This topic is one that is beyond the scope of my purpose. My goal has been to argue against a specific view, and to justify a fairly modest claim – that Aristotle thought it possible for such circumstances to obtain and that he allows for this possibility in his treatment of the

topic. Nonetheless, something small might be said about the frequency of exculpating circumstances.

As I suggested in Chapter III, how we determine whether a person’s ignorance was, reasonably speaking, up to him or not, will depend on the criteria used to evaluate it. Moreover, the criteria itself might have an inexact nature. This is certainly the case with the criterion of difficulty to know. So, we should expect a fairly wide range of opinions on whether a person’s ignorance was up to him or not. The debate here would center on which criteria we accept, and how we interpret the criteria. As for Aristotle, his own view will be difficult to piece together. Advancing any sort of reading would require further discussions of Aristotle’s views on virtue, his opinions on how virtuous the average person is, a more detailed analysis of when he thinks people become autonomous, and so forth.

Another issue which has been set aside, but which I think could be the subject of a fruitful inquiry, is the question of the sorts of universals Aristotle thinks are pertinent to a study of ethics. He seems to provide a list of them in *NE* III.1. There, he references ignorance of what is beneficial (*sumpheronta*), in the decision (*prohairesei*), and of the universal (*katholou*). It is the prevailing view among scholars that the three categories mentioned in III.1 are all the same thing – that they are three expressions of one and the same ignorance.¹³⁰ For example, Burnet claims that they are the same, as each turns out to

¹³⁰ For examples, see John Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), 117; Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1973), 11; William Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980), 157; Terence Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 204; John Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 236-8.

be ignorance of the major premise in a practical syllogism.¹³¹ But this is no guarantee that they are the same. First, I am inclined to agree with Segvic that Aristotle himself does not consider deliberation (which involves universal knowledge, a view of what is best, and which results in decision) as being an operation of syllogisms.¹³² Second, even if it *were* the case that Aristotle considered deliberation a syllogistic process, we cannot insist that these three sorts of ignorance are indistinguishable on the basis that they are all ignorance of the major premise. I think that these terms can be held as somewhat distinct, even though they are intimately related. A closer investigation of the differences here might be useful in reaching greater clarity for Aristotle's position on how actions are done in ignorance. Further, an investigation of this sort might give a more fine-grained account of how a person can be in error about moral matters, while still actively pursuing a life of virtue.¹³³ Hence, pursuing this line of thought, though impossible here, would be useful for a more complete account of Aristotle's thought on matters of moral ignorance.

Although the circumstance in which a person acts badly yet blamelessly in ignorance of a universal might not obtain in many cases, and though our investigation of the psychology present in the action is not a complete analysis, we still have enough evidence in Aristotle's ethics to see that the common view, which has long been held by

¹³¹ Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, 117.

¹³² Heda Segvic, "Deliberation and Choice in Aristotle" (*Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 164-6.

¹³³ For an opinion that is contrary to the generally held view that all three sorts of ignorance mentioned by Aristotle (what is beneficial, in the decision, and of the universal) are the same, see Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, an Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127ff, who suggests that there are two sorts of ignorance possible – either ignorance *that* something is good or bad (universals), or ignorance of how these goods should be ordered (ignorance of what is beneficial, which leads to ignorance in a decision).

the vast majority of commentators on Aristotle, is false, and that my alternate reading should be preferred. Given this evidence, the common view should be abandoned and an alternate reading of Aristotle should be endorsed – one on which he allows for pardon of at least some ignorance of universals, and actions done therewith, under some circumstances.

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