

Nonvoluntary Action and Regret in Aristotle

Abstract: Aristotle distinguishes two species of nonvoluntary action that owe to ignorance: involuntary and not-voluntary action. He proposes that whether the ignorant agent regrets her action is what sets the two species of nonvoluntary action apart. Sarah Broadie contends that Aristotle's distinction is flawed; she proposes that whether regret follows a nonvoluntary action is *morally* salient, but that it cannot make one action more or less nonvoluntary than another. Here, I analyze Aristotle's distinction, consider Broadie's objection, and then respond to it in service of preserving the distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action that owe to ignorance as distinct species of nonvoluntary action. My contention is that Aristotle never meant to frame this distinction in terms of a difference in degree, but rather in terms of a difference in kind. As such, involuntary and not-voluntary actions that owe to ignorance are equivalently nonvoluntary, but they are different kinds of nonvoluntary action.

I. Two Sorts of Nonvoluntary Agency

Aristotle distinguishes two sorts of nonvoluntary action that owe to ignorance at *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1. The first of these is involuntary action ($\alpha\kappa\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\nu$), and the second is not-voluntary action ($\omicron\upsilon\chi\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\omicron\nu$). In general, Aristotle holds that an action falls outside of the voluntary if it owes to force or if an agent acts because of ignorance (*EN* III.1, 1109b35-1110a1). Aristotle makes this definition of nonvoluntary action even clearer when he proposes a definition for voluntary action as "that of which the originating principle is in the agent herself, knowing the particulars in which the action occurs," (1111a22-24). Action that owes to external force is nonvoluntary on Aristotle's view because the agent contributes nothing to the action or the movement. For example, someone nonvoluntarily travels from Indianapolis to Chicago if she is kidnapped and forced into a vehicle that takes her to Chicago. Action because of ignorance ($\delta\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\nu\omicron\iota\alpha\nu$) is also nonvoluntary, and Aristotle specifies that such action is subject to further classification as either involuntary or not-voluntary. At present, I am only interested in nonvoluntary actions performed because of ignorance and set aside that which owes to force.

Aristotle distinguishes between involuntary and not-voluntary action that owes to ignorance in terms of whether the painful affect of regret follows the action.

An action performed because of ignorance is all together nonvoluntary, but an involuntary action is one which pain and regret attends. For someone who has acted because of ignorance but has no misgivings for the action has not acted voluntarily, and although this person did not know what she was doing, neither has she acted involuntarily, for she is not pained. Regarding acting because of ignorance, the sort that involves regret seems to be involuntary, but when someone does not feel regret, since she is different, let her action be not-voluntary. For since there is a difference, it is better that this sort of action has its own name. [EN III.1 1110b18-24]¹

In short, involuntary action that owes to ignorance leads to regret, whereas not-voluntary action that owes to ignorance does not. Both actions are nonvoluntary, but Aristotle relies on the affect of regret as a tool for differentiating them as two kinds or species of nonvoluntary action. It is my view, which I make clearer in the final section of this paper, that it is not regret alone that makes the difference between these two species of nonvoluntary action, but rather that regret's presence or absence serves as affectual evidence for classifying an action performed because of ignorance in either way.

Importantly, on Aristotle's rendering, there are two general ways that factual ignorance can be responsible for an action. When presenting the view that factual mistakenness is responsible for involuntary and not-voluntary action in the passage above, he is only discussing action performed *because of* ignorance ($\delta\iota'$ ἄγνοιας) of some particular feature circumscribing the action; this is importantly distinct from action performed *in* ignorance ($\tau\omicron\upsilon$ ἀγνοοῦντα) because an agent is in some condition like drunkenness, enraged, or because she has developed an inferior character type such as vice (1110b24-1111a2). Actions performed because of ignorance count as nonvoluntary, but actions performed in ignorance do not fit so easily into that classification. Aristotle means to capture the difference between 1) action that results from an agent's basic ignorance of some particular feature of her action and 2) action that results from

¹ All translations herein are my own.

ignorance that is itself due to an agent being in some condition for which she is ultimately responsible.

Someone who performs a nonvoluntary action because of ignorance can lack knowledge of a variety of different features surrounding her action: who is acting, which action is being performed, what the action regards, in which circumstances one is acting, with what tool or instrument one is acting, the purpose of one's action, and in which manner one is acting (1111a3-6). Action that results from ignorance of any one of these features results in a nonvoluntary action performed *because of* ignorance. For example, suppose that I mean to add sugar to my coffee and reach for an unmarked jar containing a white powdery substance which turns out to be salt rather than sugar. When I go on to salt my coffee, I perform a nonvoluntary action because of ignorance of the substance I was using to modify my coffee. On the other hand, consider an action an agent performs *in* ignorance. Suppose that I have voluntarily become inebriated and decide that I would like to sweeten a cup of coffee; I reach for a jar marked 'salt,' and without inspecting it—because I am drunk—pour it into my cup. In this case, I have performed an action *in* ignorance. Although I am unaware that I am pouring salt into the cup, the cause of my ignorance is my voluntary inebriation, and so I am ultimately responsible for being in that condition.

Aristotle's distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action because of ignorance does not map onto the distinction between acting because of ignorance and acting in ignorance. Rather, he presents the distinction between them as depending on whether or not regret attends the nonvoluntary action an agent performs because of ignorance: if regret follows, then he holds that the action is involuntary, but if regret does not follow, then he holds that the action is not-voluntary. Perhaps the simplest way to determine whether regret follows is to observe the agent

after she has performed it, or to rely on her firsthand account of how she feels afterward. If I pour salt into my coffee because of ignorance of what is in an unmarked container and afterward regret it, I might express my regret with a sigh or a similar emotive response. Regret may also attend actions performed in ignorance, but since actions performed in ignorance are not all together nonvoluntary on Aristotle's view, the presence or absence of regret does not make a difference regarding how to evaluate them. Since an agent who performs an action in ignorance is ultimately responsible for being in the condition that gives rise to her ignorance, then she actually performs a voluntary action in a remote sense. Regret can also fail to attend to an action performed in ignorance; an agent can be so drunk as to not realize that there is something off about the salted coffee she is drinking, for instance, or not take her mistake as seriously as she would if sober. Yet Aristotle does not posit that the absence of regret in such a case affects how we evaluate the action any more than the presence of regret. Similarly, regret can follow a voluntary action: if I voluntarily steal from a friend, I might regret it later, but this does not retroactively change my action into a nonvoluntary one, let alone further specify it as involuntary.

Aristotle writes as though agents who perform involuntary actions because of ignorance must experience regret, whereas agents who perform not-voluntary actions because of ignorance must not. As I will show in the next section, this way of differentiating types of nonvoluntary actions is open to objection. Sarah Broadie proposes that the distinction is faulty and that Aristotle should have revised it so as to collapse the distinction, replacing it with the simpler distinction between voluntary and nonvoluntary action. In the next two sections, I first review her objection and then offer a response in service of preserving Aristotle's distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action. I propose, in agreement with Broadie, that the presence of

a feeling or an attitude after acting is not by itself sufficient to justify distinguishing two species of nonvoluntary action, but *contra* Broadie, I preserve the regret condition that Aristotle imposes on involuntary action by arguing that regret's presence serves as affectual evidence that an action is involuntary rather than not-voluntary.

II. Broadie's Objection

In "*NE VII. 8-9 (1151b22)*: *Akrasia, enkrateia, Look-Alikes*," Sarah Broadie holds that Aristotle's distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action is mistaken. She characterizes the passage where Aristotle presents the distinction at *NE III.1*, which I cited in the last section, as one in which Aristotle

draws what he clearly regards as an important distinction between the ignorant agent of some disaster who on finding out afterwards is distressed and wishes (though surely not with a bad conscience) that he had not done what he did, and the ignorant agent who on finding out does not care (1110b18-24).²

She frames the distinction in terms of agents who perform nonvoluntary actions because they are ignorant "of some disaster" in her construal, but not all of the examples of nonvoluntary action which Aristotle provides are disastrous. Some certainly are: there is the person who practices spear-fighting who is factually mistaken that there is a button or pad on the tip of her spear and ends up wounding her sparring partner; there is also the person who flings a boulder when she merely means to show an audience how a catapult works (1111a10-13). But Aristotle also includes a less disastrous example: someone who mistakenly reveals a secret when having a conversation because of ignorance of what she is doing (1111a8-9). It is important to keep this in mind, as the regret that follows disastrous involuntary actions should be more severe than the regret that follows less disastrous—and more common—involuntary actions. Involuntarily salting my coffee should lead to less regret than involuntarily flinging a boulder.

² Broadie, 164

Broadie proceeds to write that “the difference between the agents’ retrospective attitudes is no doubt morally important,” but she expresses doubt regarding whether feeling regret can “justify a distinction between different types of non-voluntary agency as such.”³ By holding that whether an agent feels regret after performing a nonvoluntary action is “morally important,” she must mean that it can tell us something about the ethical character of the agent who performed the action. This is especially clear if we presume that the involuntary action is a disastrous one. If someone nonvoluntarily flings a boulder across town when she was merely trying to demonstrate that a catapult is in working order, then we expect her to feel regretful or repentant afterward. If she were able to walk away afterward without regretting her action, then we would have reason to call her ethical character into question; the same goes for someone who mistakenly stabs her sparring partner without regretting causing the wound afterward. Despite the fact that feeling regret after performing either of these actions makes a clear moral difference, Broadie denies that this moral difference justifies the distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action that owes to ignorance. She denies that the presence of regret further specifies a nonvoluntary action owing to ignorance as involuntary, and likewise denies that the absence of regret further specifies a nonvoluntary action owing to ignorance as not-voluntary.

Broadie proposes a possible world in which Aristotle revises his view, composing an argument in which he rejects the distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action that owes to ignorance. I have reproduced Broadie’s revision in full below; it should be read in Aristotle’s voice.

The case where the regretted action was genuinely non-voluntary is one where it was done because the agent was factually mistaken about what he was doing. It is this mistakenness alone that makes for the non-voluntariness, and the regret afterwards in no way makes it the case that the agent was more factually mistaken at the time of acting than if he had been regretless later. Since regret later does not add to the factual

³ *Ibid.* 165

mistakenness at the time, it does not add to or heighten the non-voluntariness of the non-voluntary action.⁴

Broadie has Aristotle collapse the distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action; the only real and relevant distinction in this context is the one separating voluntary from nonvoluntary action. The hinge on which voluntary and nonvoluntary agency turns is factual mistakenness; if an agent is ignorant of some particular feature circumscribing her action and performs it because of this ignorance, then the action is nonvoluntary. Broadie then has Aristotle deny that an agent's feeling of regret afterward makes her nonvoluntary action more nonvoluntary than one after which an agent feels no regret. The problem she perceives with Aristotle's distinction is that it attributes more nonvoluntariness to some nonvoluntary actions than others on the basis of a moral distinction. She proposes that how an agent feels after performing a nonvoluntary action is irrelevant to its correct evaluation *qua* type of agency even if it does tell us something about her ethical character.

If indeed Aristotle holds that involuntary actions are more nonvoluntary than not-voluntary actions, and that regret can "heighten the non-voluntariness of the nonvoluntary action," then one can clearly understand Broadie's objection and agree with her proposed revision to Aristotle's thought. For sometimes the presence of regret after a nonvoluntary action depends on the subtle fact of whether an agent realizes her mistake. Suppose that one person mistakenly lets a secret slip does not realize what she has done and goes on about her day afterward without realizing, and suppose that another person makes a similar mistake but realizes it straightaway and cups her hand over her mouth in regret; it would be strange to classify the second action as more nonvoluntary than the first. It may be that the first person is more careless than the second, but this is a moral difference, and both people act because of ignorance of what

⁴ *Ibid.*

they are doing. On Broadie's view, this moral difference does not justify the evaluation of either action as more or less nonvoluntary than the other.

III. Response to Broadie's Objection

There is a way to respond to Broadie's objection while preserving Aristotle's distinction between involuntary and not-voluntary action. It depends on pointing out that the difference between the two species of nonvoluntary action is not one of degree, but rather one of kind. Aristotle's distinction sets apart two sorts of nonvoluntary action that are equivalently nonvoluntary in degree because they both result from factual mistakenness, but the two species are nonvoluntary in different ways. This way of looking at the difference makes it possible to sidestep Broadie's objection since it does not require that we consider involuntary action to be more nonvoluntary than not-voluntary action or that we hold that presence of regret can "heighten" the nonvoluntariness of an action. An involuntary action performed because of ignorance is one that directly opposes what an agent intends to do and this is why it leads to regret; a not-voluntary action performed because of ignorance is one that does not directly oppose what an agent intends to do and this is why it does not lead to regret. The presence or absence of regret alone is not sufficient evidence that an action falls under either classification, for even some voluntary actions lead to regret.

At the end of the last section, I considered two agents who mistakenly let a secret slip: someone who does not realize her mistake and so does not experience regret afterward, and a second who does realize her mistake and subsequently regrets it. Here I add a third agent who lets a secret slip: someone who realizes her mistake but does not regret it afterward. When Aristotle distinguishes involuntary from not-voluntary action, he has in mind the contrast between the second and third agents rather than the contrast between the first and third agents. The second and third agents both realize that they have performed a nonvoluntary action because

of ignorance, but the second agent regrets what she has done, so she has performed an involuntary action, while the third agent does not regret it, so she has performed a not-voluntary action.

Broadie is correct to point out that second agent's regret makes a moral difference, for the second agent reveals a secret that she intended to keep. The third agent also reveals a secret, but since she is not regretful, we can suppose either that she was not very intent on keeping it or that it did not matter much to her whether she kept it or revealed it. This makes the third agent a bad friend or confidant, and perhaps ethically inferior to the second agent, but there is a further difference between her and the second agent that we can describe in non-ethical terms. The third agent's nonvoluntary action does not directly oppose what she intends to do and her lack of regret serves as affectual proof of this; she performs a not-voluntary action. In contrast, the second agent who means to keep the secret but fails because of ignorance does perform a nonvoluntary action that directly opposes what she intends to do, and her regret is the affectual proof of this; she performs an involuntary action.

The second and third agents both perform nonvoluntary actions when letting their secrets slip. This is the only criteria that matters when classifying their actions as nonvoluntary because of ignorance rather than as voluntary. Yet we can further specify each nonvoluntary action as either involuntary or not-voluntary due to whether and to what extent it departs from what the agent intends or commits herself to do. The affect that an agent experiences after performing a nonvoluntary action is not sufficient by itself to justify a distinction between two species of nonvoluntary agency, for the real difference maker is whether the action runs counter to an agent's intention or commitment. The presence or absence of regret after performing a nonvoluntary action merely serves as affectual evidence of the extent to which an action has or

has not conflicted with an agent's intention or commitment. The second and third agents' actions are indeed morally different, but aside from this, their actions are also factually different.

Bibliography

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