

Topic 1:

The origin of action – its efficient, not its final cause – is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character.¹

Deep in a jungle, a deer is chased by a tiger; the deer gets close to its shelter where its 3 offsprings lie; suddenly, the deer stops in its tracks and lets nature take its course. Why such does the mammal take such an action? A biologist may explain this in terms of the mechanism – certain neuron channels open, chemical compositions across the neuron change, impulse passes in this manner to the muscles and the deer decides to stop. Another answer to the question: this kind of altruistic suicide, ethologists reason, is a simple economic problem: each calf carries on 50% of the DNA of the parent; 3 of them surviving is more valuable than the mother herself.²

Acknowledging that both of these explanations are crucial for an action is what this Aristotelian quote precisely deals with. Aristotle arguing that all actions are based in choice, shows that reason, intellect and a moral state are necessary components that go into making a choice.

Taking this quote from Aristotle as a starting point and agreeing with it and clarifying its scope, I shall aim to deepen the understanding of it by (A.1) analyzing the freeness of actions and existence of “choice” as the basis of responsibilities for actions, (A.2), following an internalist viewpoint to show how a combination of intellect and character determine whether an action is good, if it meets the responsibilities and discussing its implications in punishment theory and moral progress.

How free are animals? How free are we?

The theory that animals are mere machines whose behaviour is governed without any room for personal deliberation is a view popularly held by Rene Descartes, the founding scientists in ethology, and several inventors who “succeeded” in *engineering* animals. Indeed, it was a spectacle for tourists in the 1700s when a duck which would “eat” food, digest it, and expel waste was made in a French engineering workshop. While the engineered model was later exposed to have 2 separate components to collect food and expel waste, I shall show that, in keeping with this tradition, non-human animals do not make free choices.

¹ Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1139a30-35

² Hamilton’s rule: each animal maximizes the amount of its own genetic material passing down into the next generation ($nB > A$) where n is the number of offsprings, B is the genetic relatedness (here, 50%), and A is simply 100% since mother deer is making the one making the “choice.”

In our opening example, we see the economic rationale (deduced to be “Hamilton’s Rule”) for wanting to pass down as much genetic material as possible. Let us call this the purpose function (*p*), the reason for continued persistence of this kind of behavior.

The other kind of explanation for animal actions is through the mechanistic view which shows how the action comes about, in line with efficient causes, as Aristotle talks of them. Since this mechanism is totally deterministic, in that if one knew the exact chemical-ion channels that opened, and all the structural laws governing it, one could predict with total certainty the action that would come about.

I argue that since purpose functions concerning altruism, mating traditions – for e.g., expulsion of young lion cubs out of the pack to prevent inbreeding, abortions for lionesses after conquest by a new lion in the pack to synchronize cycles and maximize genetic continuation, etc. – are so hard coded across mammals that there seems to be little room for deliberation on their part. Non-human animals also lack the cognitive skills that are needed to deliberate on the consequences of their action. I thus conclude that non-human animal actions are determined even if they might seem *intentional*³. These actions are governed by principles which are shaped by evolutionary forces over generations. So, I propose that animals aren’t mere machines but rather they are *dynamic*⁴ biological machines. A possible counter-argument that I anticipate is that of Pavlov’s dog⁵ who after been given food several times after a bell’s ringing was able to “think ahead, anticipate and salivate” on the next ringing. This could be argued to show the ability to deliberately think and seek out such beneficial opportunities as food.

I would respond to this argument that this experiment merely shows that the animal can be trained on new purpose functions beyond the ones they inherit.

To recap then, our understanding of non-human animal actions is that

- (i) They inherit certain purpose functions which govern their behavior deterministically. These are shaped by natural evolution.
- (ii) They (at least in the current generation) can be trained on more such purpose functions.
- (iii) The mechanistic chain of causation between these functions and the action are determined by the structural laws of physics, biology, etc.

The animal actions can thus be seen to be deterministic and lacking in “reasoning with a view to an end” (a necessary condition for choice) as they work on purpose functions without further deliberation; thus, not constitute a choice and *ergo*, the Aristotelian principle doesn’t apply. This is sufficient to prove that they also do not hold responsibility for their actions.

On the contrary, we see that human choices are inextricably linked to desire and reasoning. One requires a desire to cause a certain end and a plan with the view of the end to get there. For this plan, reason to justify and the intellect to plan are key and a moral state that feeds into desire is crucial to concern oneself with deliberating on such thinking of and engagement

³ It would rather be a hermeneutic fallacy on our part if we deem them intentional

⁴ In that their behavioral principles are ever-changing in accordance with natural evolution

⁵ An example of *conditioned* behavior

with the plan. Analyzing the links in Aristotle's quotes we see him make the following connections:

- (i) (Desire)-to-(moral state): Our desires, at least the ones we can consider acting on, are in line with our moral state. It can be argued that desires are like perceptions and are instantaneous and outside of our conscious control⁶ but, this would not be a valid opposition because here Aristotle talks of desires which have a realistic chance of converting to action and this bridge between desires and desires which are plausible for us to implement is our moral state, requiring its involvement.
- (ii) (Reasoning with a view to an end)-to-(reason and intellect): One requires intellect to plan forward and reason to contemplate, justify, and self-adjust as one works through the plan.
- (iii) Alternatively (to ii), (Desire)-to-(intellect): We might argue that intellectual virtues might be able to train how one decides on which desires to act on – e.g., a desire to cling to a theory with great evidence to the contradictory will not translate into the action of lying to others about results if one is intellectually virtuous, which is what it means to possess intellect.⁷

This justifies Aristotle's mechanism of argumentation. And, humans possess all of these properties – capacity for reason and intellect is a defining human trait⁸, and we all instinctively have notions about morality if not we can access such moral truths through reason⁹. Humans are thus, beings who can make choices (as proved in the justification above) and these choices are free because we can deliberate about the ends and the method. Ergo, humans can make free actions and thus, the responsibility of these actions falls on them, making them moral subjects.

However, a possible counter here could agree that humans can make choices according to Aristotle's definition but disagree on the link such choices are free. They may propose similar purpose functions as with non-human animals to apply to humans.

The best the counter could do here is argue that all desires follow certain reducible principles – e.g., self-preservation, passing on genes, desire for power, etc. – likening humans to animals. However, the counter-argument cannot rid humans of their defining ability for reason which is the deciding factor on what desires are pursued. One can think of these human purpose functions as imposing a certain temperament towards what actions come about more *naturally* than others however, one can resort to reason to overcome these. For e.g., despite growing up in an immediate culture where theft is very common, one can, through reason alone, come up with universal maxims such as the Universalizability Principle, and take a different moral state than is common around them. This can also be seen to be the cause of moral progress as humans through rational inquiry identify problems in their society and seek to adjust their actions – for e.g., abolition of slavery – so as to better the

⁶ Akin to John Locke's argument of uncontrolled perception

⁷ Virtue Epistemology (VE) thinkers like Linda Zagzebski

⁸ Kantian analysis of human reason

⁹ Kant on reason as the basis of moral axioms.

state of the world. Identifying what is better is also a test of one's intellect while the desire to do so is a matter of one's *character*.

How to take good actions?

Actions are composed of an (I) epistemic part and an (II) ethical part. It is the goodness of these 2 parts which determines the goodness of an action.

In analyzing the goodness of an action, one intends to take, I argue that:

1. the *de dicto*¹⁰ shall be determined by the individual actor through the use of intellect and the accuracy of this analysis would be the epistemic component.
2. the character shall govern the degree to which one sticks to this *de dicto* interpretation in its real manifestation.

Part 1 of this analysis is relatively unproblematic as one can see how an epistemic responsibility exists on identifying the right goodness and right method for an action and how this relates to reason.

I will thus focus on resolving clashes in the more substantial Part 2.

Aristotle introduces the new term “character” in the last line of his quote and I take this to be the broader principles we live by – similar to our purpose function, the character of any being is

- a. something it inherits/is born with,
- b. imposes a temperament to act a certain way,
- c. is influenced by natural evolution/social pressures,
- d. something that can be added onto, for e.g., through rational deliberation on morality.

One may give the counter-argument that the ethical judgment and the judgment of character should instead focus on the external resultant net harm/benefit of the action that is taken. This approach would propose that the *de re*¹¹ impact of the action is all that should matter in its ethical consideration.

I would like to reply to that with that it is essential to recognize the luck that aids/harms such character's judgement when looked at only through the external results it has and that it would be incorrect to judge the character through the outcomes if factors such as luck have an effect on the consequences much more than the actor herself. With reference to this, Thomas Nagel believes proposes several forms of moral luck:

- a. Circumstantial luck: being in a position where no choice is good. For e.g., being ordered to kill Lucy and being told with surety that if you do not, someone else will both of you.
- b. Constitutional luck: being born in a privileged background with no injustices faced might make you more likely to make ethical decisions.

¹⁰ About what is said/interpreted

¹¹ About what actually exists

- c. Consequential luck: despite having the intention to save Billy from the killer at your door, your act of lying to the killer about Billy's whereabouts, led to a homicide.

These examples show that other than just the objective moral benefit/harm that results from actions, it is necessary to recognize the conditions of luck under which the actions were taken. Consequential luck especially poses problems as it allows for cases where a person had the right desire, plan and interpretation of how to get there and took all the right steps but her action would not be considered good because of luck that changed the effect of it independent of all of her deliberation. To do so is to strip humans of their capacity for reason as we would be giving luck precedence.

This is why I reject the externalist manner of judging the ethical goodness of character only based on the final result and resort to focus on sticking to the *de dicto* interpretation which considers in the judgement of one's character only the aspects internal to themselves.

This is of course not to say that one can be incredibly wrong in their *de dicto* and still take a completely good action because their character sticks with it. *Episteme precedes Ethics* after all.

These 2 components work together to ascribe the final goodness of the action as whole.

This way of viewing actions is helpful because we can decide on what form of punishment do those who make bad decisions receive. One who is more wrong in the epistemic (intellect) aspect shall receive restorative justice – teaching them critical thinking would prove helpful so they can navigate their decisions. On the other hand, one who is more wrong in the ethics (character) aspect shall be subjected to punishment with the intention of correction/deterrence, depending on the severity of deviation of action from episteme.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that this Aristotelian theory of actions has its scope limited applies to humans because of their ability for reason. In conjunction with this, I have shown that humans make free choices and thus hold responsibility for them. I divide this responsibility into two components – the epistemic and the ethical. I propose a new way of defining ethical responsibility which strengthens the value of human reason against luck. I also propose ways for correcting character and improving intellect by suggesting differing punishments.