

Reason, Desire, and Character: A Critical Examination of Aristotle on Choice

The question of what makes human action distinct from mere movement has occupied philosophers for centuries. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, offers a precise answer: the origin of action is *choice* (*prohairesis*), and choice itself arises from desire and reasoning directed toward an end. He then adds a crucial condition – choice cannot exist without both reason and intellect *and* a moral state. In other words, good action (and its opposite) requires a combination of intellect and character. I find this claim deeply insightful but also incomplete. While I agree that choice presupposes reason and moral habituation, I will argue that Aristotle underestimates the role of emotion and the phenomenon of *akrasia* (weakness of will), which complicate his neat synthesis. To defend this position, I will first analyze Aristotle's key distinctions, then present two supporting arguments for his view, followed by two counter-arguments drawing on David Hume and Jean-Paul Sartre, and finally offer a nuanced conclusion.

Aristotle distinguishes between efficient and final causes. The efficient cause is what sets a process in motion; the final cause is the purpose or end for which something is done. Here, he states that choice is the *efficient* origin of action – not the final cause, which is the end desired. Choice itself springs from two sources: desire (*orexis*) and reasoning (*logos*) that calculates means to an end. This already challenges any purely intellectualist or purely emotional account of action. Moreover, Aristotle insists that choice requires a moral state (*hexis*), meaning a stable disposition of character formed through habituation. Without a good character, reason alone cannot produce good choice. The striking consequence is that *both* intellect and character are necessary. If one lacks practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or has a corrupted character, choice will be flawed.

This view is attractive because it aligns with everyday experience: we admire people who not only know what is right but also *want* to do it and have the habitual inclination to act well. However, Aristotle's framework leaves little room for moments when someone knows the good but fails to choose it – a problem I will return to.

One strong reason to agree with Aristotle is that without reasoning, action would be mere impulse. Consider a person who acts solely on immediate desire – say, grabbing a cake because it looks tasty, without considering health consequences or alternatives. Such an act might not even qualify as a *choice* in Aristotle's sense; it is closer to animal behavior. True choice involves deliberation, however brief. As Plato writes in the *Protagoras* (352c), “the power of knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone knew what is good and bad, he would never be overcome by anything.” Plato here defends intellectualism – the idea that knowledge ensures right action. Aristotle is more moderate: he grants desire a role, but he still maintains that reasoning directed at an end is indispensable.

We can test this with an example. Suppose a student decides to study for an exam rather than go to a party. This choice involves reasoning (studying leads to better grades, which leads to a desired future) and desire (the wish to succeed). Without reasoning, the student might go to the party impulsively. Without desire, the student would not even have a motive. Thus, Aristotle correctly identifies the dual source of choice. Many contemporary psychologists agree that executive functions (reason) and motivation (desire) are both required for deliberate action.

A second argument in favor of Aristotle is that reason alone cannot guarantee good action because reason is neutral – it can serve good or bad ends. A clever criminal uses reasoning effectively but lacks a virtuous moral state. Thus, as Aristotle writes, “good action cannot exist without a

combination of intellect and character.” This echoes his famous claim that virtue is a *hexis prohairesis* – a disposition involving choice. Immanuel Kant, though coming from a different tradition, agrees that moral worth depends on the will’s conformity to duty, not merely on cleverness. Kant states in the *Groundwork*: “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*.” Kant’s good will is analogous to Aristotle’s virtuous moral state: it is the inner orientation that makes action morally praiseworthy.

Therefore, Aristotle is right to insist that intellect and character must work together. A person might know that honesty is virtuous but still lie if his character is corrupt. Conversely, a person with a good character but no practical wisdom might be kind in misguided ways. Only when *phronesis* and virtue are combined does reliable good choice emerge. This is why virtue ethics remains influential: it captures the complexity of moral agency.

Despite the strengths of Aristotle’s view, I believe it overlooks the primacy of emotion in motivating action. David Hume famously argued that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*Treatise of Human Nature*). For Hume, reason alone never produces action; it only calculates means to ends set by passions. Desire, not rational deliberation, is the engine of choice. Aristotle would reply that desire without reasoning is blind, but Hume could counter that reasoning without desire is inert. The deeper disagreement concerns whether reason can *generate* desire. Aristotle seems to assume that reasoning with a view to an end naturally produces choice, but the desire for that end must already be present.

Consider a real-world case: someone who decides to donate money to charity. The desire to help others (a passion) comes first; reasoning then figures out the best charity. If the desire were absent, no amount of reasoning would lead to donation. Thus, Aristotle’s phrase “choice is desire and reasoning” might be reversed: desire is the primary source, reasoning a secondary tool. This challenges Aristotle’s claim that choice cannot exist without reason and intellect. If passion alone can move us (as in sudden heroic acts without deliberation), then choice might arise from character-emotion complexes that are not necessarily rational. Aristotle’s emphasis on reasoning may be too intellectualist.

A second, more internal criticism comes from the phenomenon Aristotle himself famously grappled with: *akrasia*, or weakness of will. An *akratic* person knows what is good (has correct reasoning) and has a decent moral state, yet still chooses the opposite. For example, someone who knows smoking is harmful but smokes anyway. Aristotle discusses this in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but his explanation – that the *akratic* has knowledge in a qualified sense, like a sleeping or drunk person – is not entirely convincing. If choice requires reason and moral state, then *akratic* action should be impossible. But it happens all the time.

Jean-Paul Sartre offers a radical alternative: choice is not determined by reason or character; it is an unconditioned act of freedom. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre writes: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.” For Sartre, even our character and reasoning are products of prior choices. The *akratic* person is not a puzzle but a proof that we can always choose against our better judgment. This existentialist view directly opposes Aristotle’s claim that choice always involves reasoning with a view to an end. Sartre would say that choice precedes reason; we choose first, then rationalize.

While I do not fully accept Sartre's radical freedom (it seems to ignore psychology and habit), his point exposes a weakness in Aristotle. If akrasia is real, then the necessary connection between choice and reasoning is broken. A 17-year-old might experience this daily: I know I should study, I have a good character (mostly), yet I choose to watch YouTube. Aristotle would say my reasoning was deficient or my moral state imperfect. But that feels like explaining away the problem rather than solving it.

How would Aristotle respond to these counter-arguments? He might accept Hume's point but insist that human desire is not blind; through habituation, our desires become rational. A virtuous person desires what reason approves. Thus, desire and reasoning are not separate forces but integrated. Regarding akrasia, Aristotle would maintain that the akratic person lacks true knowledge – they have only universal knowledge (“smoking is bad”) but not the particular application (“this cigarette right now is bad for me”). This distinction is plausible but arguably weak when we consider clear-headed akrasia (e.g., someone who smokes while fully aware of the risks and even saying “I shouldn't do this”).

In my view, Aristotle provides an excellent framework for *ideal* moral agency, but real human action is messier. Emotions sometimes override reasoning without destroying choice. And weakness of will shows that character and intellect can conflict. Therefore, I conclude that while Aristotle is right that choice requires both reason and a moral state in well-functioning agents, his claim is too strong as a universal necessity. A more accurate statement would be: *Choice typically involves reason and character, but actions can originate from desire alone or from conflict between knowing and doing.* * This revised view retains Aristotle's insight without ignoring human complexity.

In conclusion, Aristotle's account of choice remains one of the most compelling explanations of human action because it recognizes that neither reason nor desire alone is sufficient for moral agency. His insistence that good action requires both intellect and a virtuous moral state captures an important truth about ethical life: people act well not simply because they know what is right, but because they have cultivated the character to desire and pursue it. At the same time, the criticisms raised by Hume and Sartre reveal important limitations in Aristotle's framework. Human beings are often driven by emotion in ways that exceed rational control, and the reality of akrasia demonstrates that knowledge and character do not always guarantee right action. For this reason, Aristotle's theory works best as a description of the ideal moral agent rather than a complete account of actual human behavior. Ultimately, choice is shaped by a complex interaction of reason, desire, emotion, and freedom. Aristotle correctly identifies the central role of reason and character, but a fully convincing theory of action must also acknowledge the instability and conflict that are part of ordinary human experience.