

Aristotle on What is up to Us and what is Contingent

Most of Aristotle's invocations of the notion of what is "up to us" (*eph' hêmin*)¹ occur in his connected discussions of voluntariness, deliberation, and *prohairesis* (*EE* II 6-11, *EN* III 1-5; cf. *EN* V 8-9).² While the notion has a long afterlife in subsequent philosophy,³ Aristotle shows no interest in defining it. Instead, he invokes it to elucidate notions that he is concerned to define—for example, the voluntary, *prohairesis*, and deliberation—and he feels free to employ it without explanation in a wide range of other contexts. For example, in the *De Anima*, he claims that *phantasia* and thinking, in contrast with perception and belief, are "up to us" to engage in whenever we wish (427b17-21, 417b24-5.). By contrast, other things, like happiness, may be "up to us" (*EE* 1215a12-15), but by dint of much effort and hard work (*EN* 1099b13-20). Elsewhere in the *Ethics* he explains the conventional status of currency by remarking that it is "up to us" to change its value (*EN* 1133a31) and in the *Rhetoric* he elucidates the notion of ownership by noting that it is "up to oneself" whether and how to dispose of what one owns (1361a20-22) and he demarcates the scope of the written law by noting what it leaves "up to the judges" to decide (1354b11-15).

¹ also *eph' hautô(i)* (up to himself/oneself/itself) and occasionally *ep' autô(i)* (up to him/one)

² Other contexts concerning deliberation that invoke the *eph' hêmin* include *Rhet.* I 4, 1360a1, and *Met.* VII 7, 1032b21. I omit mention of the *MM* as this bears marks of later Peripatetics on this issue; see Eliasson 2009.

³ See M. Frede and Taormina in the present volume as well as Frede 2011.

What is natural vs. what is up to us

While Aristotle nowhere gives an account of what it is to be “up to us” or “up to” someone or other, he does remark in *EE* II 8, that “what is up to one” is “what one’s nature is able to bear” (1225a25-6). The context, to which we will return below, deals with cases in which one performs an action whose alternative (e.g. enduring an intensely painful feeling) is literally more than one can bear. The remark, however, is obviously incomplete as an account of what is up to us. Aristotle’s remarks about the scope of deliberation in *EN* III 2 and *EE* II 10 make it clear that he thinks not everything my nature can bear is up to me. I could bear it if you quit your job, but whether you quit is not up to me (since it does not come about through me—*EN* 1112a30-31; cf. b2-3). At most the remark about what one’s nature can bear states a necessary condition for something’s being up to one: it must not be ruled out by one’s nature.

Indeed, Aristotle regularly invokes a general contrast between what is “up to us” and what is due to nature. Near the beginning of the *EE* he comments, on the proposal that happiness is due to nature, that this would mean that its acquisition is not “up to” people (1215a12-15). And in the closing chapter of the *EN* he comments, on the corresponding thesis that virtue is due to nature, that “what is natural ... is not up to us” (*EN* 1179b21-2). In common book *EN* VI 12 he explains his claim that the virtue under discussion does not belong to the nutritive part of the soul (the part that best fits his conception of nature as an internal principle of growth—*Ph.* 192b13-15) on the ground that “nothing is up to it to do or not to do” (*EN* 1144a9-11).

The contrast between activity that is due to its subject's nature and activity that is "up to" that subject also figures in Aristotle's account of self-motion in the *Physics*. The elements when engaged in their natural motions (e. g., earth to the center of the universe, fire to the periphery) do not count as moved by themselves:

We cannot say that these are [sc. moved] by themselves. For this is a property of life, distinctive of ensouled things. Besides, they would be able to stop themselves. I mean, for example, if one is a cause of walking for oneself, one is also the cause of not walking. So if it were up to fire (*ep' autô(i)*) to travel upwards, it is clear that travelling downwards would also be up to it. (*Phys.* VIII 4, 255a5-10)

Here we are told that if something's locomotion is self-moved, then it is "up to it" to engage or not engage in that motion. Self-motion thereby contrasts with another kind of locomotion, *phora* in the strict sense identified at *Physics* V 2 as belonging to 'those things moving in place when it is not up to them to stop themselves' (226a34-5).

The "two-sidedness" of what is up to us

The contrast between natural activity and what is "up to us" reflects what we might call the "one-sidedness" of what is natural in contrast to the "two-sidedness" of what is up to us.⁵ While a natural change that I undergo has its origin or principle (*archê*) in me (*Phys.* 192b13-15), this internal principle is directed at a single result; alternative results are possible, due to failure or interference, but they are not within the scope of that internal principle. Thus there is a causal lopsidedness in the relation between a natural activity and its alternative. By contrast, what is "up to us" comes in symmetrical pairs, on

⁵ Thus Broadie 1991: 152 and M. Frede in the present volume rightly stress the contrast between what is natural and what is up to us, which I do not sufficiently acknowledge in Meyer 1993: 38, 41, 78, 96, 161; cf. Meyer 1994.

Aristotle's account. As he famously insists in the opening lines of *EN* III 5, a passage to which we will return: "where acting is up to me, so too is not acting" (1113b7-8). While the emphatic stretch of argument in which this affirmation occurs is peculiar to the *EN* treatment,⁶ Aristotle regularly uses such a two-sided locution when talking about what is "up to us."⁷ This indicates that he takes this two-sidedness to be a general feature of what is up to us.

Anthony Kenny, by contrast, has proposed that only in the *EN* does Aristotle take "up to us" to be essentially two-sided, while in the *EE* he allows that natural processes such as going grey or getting old are up to us, but in a one-sided way, since it is not up to us not to undergo them.⁸ However, the only text that Kenny cites from the *EE* in support of the latter claim is 1224b34, where Aristotle mentions aging and going grey as instances of things that are natural, but the context (1224b29-1225a2) makes no mention of what is up to us. Kenny's case rests mainly on *EN* 1135a31-b2, a passage that is common to both the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean* ethics. There Aristotle mentions aging and dying as "neither voluntary nor involuntary" (1135b1-2); this poses an interpretive problem in the immediate context, which Kenny proposes to solve by attributing to Aristotle the implicit assumption that these processes are "up to us". This is hardly unequivocal grounds for attributing a one-sided "up to us" to the *Eudemian* Aristotle. Moreover, as Kenny notes (p. 8), Aristotle in the *EE* explicitly glosses what is "up to us" as what is brought about "through a person's own natural desire and reasoning"

⁶ Perhaps *EE* II 11 1228a4-9 is a faint precursor.

⁷ *EE* 1223a8, 1225a9-10, 1226a28, 1226b30-31; *EN* 1110a17-18, 1115a2-3, 1144a9-10; cf. *EE* 1228a5-6; *EN* 1113b6-15.

⁸ Kenny 1979: 8-9.

(1225a27), which would imply that, contrary to Kenny, processes such as aging and going grey are not up to us. Thus, the most natural way of reading both the *EE* and *EN* is that “up to us to do and not to do” is, for Aristotle, the natural expansion of “up to us.”

This “two sidedness” has proved to be the most alluring aspect of the *eph hēmin* for many modern readers, who are often tempted to construe it as a kind of contingency of action, an openness or availability of alternatives of a sort that looms large in modern debates about the compatibility of freedom or responsibility with determinism. My project in this paper is to resist this temptation. While Aristotle evidently thinks actions that are up to us are in some sense contingent (they “admit of being otherwise”), this is not what he is asserting when he speaks of an action’s being “up to” someone “to do and not to do.” Rather, he is claiming that the agent is in control of the action, that it depends on him, not on something else, whether it happens or not.

This interpretation of Aristotle’s conception of the *eph hēmin* is in line with the analysis by Michael Frede in the present volume,⁹ although Frede’s main concern is to resist those who suppose that an action’s being “up to” an agent “to do and not to do” is a matter of the agent’s having free choice or free will, and his focus is on the Aristotelian texts that invoke the *eph’ hēmin* to demarcate the scope of deliberation. My project, by contrast, addresses more directly the texts that might appear to support the alternative

⁹ Frede 2007, reprinted as **chapter 23** in this volume. However, like Bobzien in **chapter 5** of this volume, I disagree with Frede’s claim that Aristotle made the *eph’ hēmin* a technical notion. In contrast with e.g. his treatment of *prohairesis*, Aristotle *invokes* what is up to us rather than assigns it a precise technical meaning. While Frede’s discussion sometimes focuses on the availability of two possibilities (doing and not doing) that is involved in something’s being up to us (typically where he distinguishes what is up to us from what is natural), he makes it clear that an action’s being “up to us” involves, in addition to this, that it depends on the agent which of the two possibilities occurs (**#p. 5 MS**). The latter coincides with what Frede identifies as the ordinary pre-philosophical meaning of the expression in writers before Aristotle (**#pp. 1-2 MS**). Nothing in Frede’s discussion conflicts with my main contention, that the latter claim is what “up to us” *means* for Aristotle.

view, in particular *EN* III 5, 1113b5-14 (where Aristotle is often taken to be invoking the principle that an agent “could have done otherwise”) and *EE* II 6, 1222b41-1223a9 (where it has been claimed that he “grounds” the notion of what is up to us in the notion of contingency). I might stress that I am not addressing the distinct question of whether our action’s being “up to us” is compatible with causal determinism. To settle that question, one would need to do more than point out that Aristotle takes our actions to be “contingent” in some sense. One would need to establish that the kind of contingency he invokes is precluded by causal determinism,¹⁰ a task that is beyond the scope of the present project. If I am right about what Aristotle means when he characterizes our actions as “up to us to do and not to do,” then it is a mistake to take these remarks as expressing a concern with one of the central issues in that modern debate.

EN III 5

First of all, let us examine the context in *EN* III 5 where Aristotle emphatically invokes the two-sidedness of what is up to us. He is clearly concerned with human responsibility, since the chapter concludes his discussion of voluntariness in the *EN*. Having defined voluntariness in chapter 1, *prohairesis* and deliberation in chapters 2 and 3, and wish (*boulêsis*) in chapter 4, Aristotle opens chapter 5 by drawing all these notions together and concluding that actions involving these things (*peri tauta*) are “decided upon and voluntary” (1113b3-5). He then begins a further argument:

¹⁰ Of course, if one construes determinism as a simple affirmation that everything that happens is necessary, then this would follow trivially. Thus Sorabji 1980 construes Aristotle as an indeterminist and Broadie 1991: 158-9 as a “proto-indeterminist.” Even Donini 2010: 106-8, who argues that Aristotle’s mature view is determinist, agrees that any claim that actions “admit of being otherwise” is *eo ipso* an indeterminist thesis.

The activities of the virtues involve these things. So virtue, and equally vice, are up to us. For in those cases where acting is up to me, so too is not acting; and where not acting is up to me, so too is the affirmative. So if performing an action is fine and up to us, so too will not performing it, which is shameful, be up to us; and if not performing the action is fine and up to us, so too is performing it, which is shameful, up to us. But if it is up to us to do both fine and shameful things, and likewise to not do them, and this is what it is to be good and bad, then it is up to us to be decent and to be base. (1113b5-14)¹¹

In invoking the principle that “where acting is up to me, so too is not acting” (b7-8), Aristotle strikes many modern readers as invoking the principle that a responsible agent “could have done otherwise.”¹² However, it is important to note that the conclusion he is arguing for is that “virtue, and equally vice, are up to us” (1113b6-7) – alternatively stated as “it is up to us to be good and to be bad” (b13-14). He is not concluding, of virtuous agents, that it is up to them to act viciously, and of vicious agents, that it is up to them to act virtuously—which is what one would expect if he were concerned here with our ability to do otherwise. Rather, his point is that both our virtuous actions and our vicious actions are up to us. Against an opponent who claims that only virtuous actions are up to us, while vicious actions are not,¹³ he affirms that vicious actions are “equally” (*homoioûs*, b6) up to us. Both the virtuous and the vicious actions in question are things

¹¹ αἱ περὶ ταῦτα πράξεις κατὰ προαίρεσιν ἂν εἶεν καὶ ἐκούσιοι. αἱ δὲ τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐνέργειαι περὶ ταῦτα. ἐφ’ ἡμῖν δὴ καὶ ἡ ἀρετὴ, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ κακία. ἐν οἷς γὰρ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν τὸ πράττειν, καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν, καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ μὴ, καὶ τὸ ναί· ὥστ’ εἰ τὸ πράττειν καλὸν ὄν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἐστί, καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἔσται αἰσχρὸν ὄν, καὶ εἰ τὸ μὴ πράττειν καλὸν ὄν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, καὶ τὸ πράττειν αἰσχρὸν ὄν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν. εἰ δ’ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν τὰ καλὰ πράττειν καὶ τὰ αἰσχρά, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὸ μὴ πράττειν, τοῦτο δ’ ἦν τὸ ἀγαθοῖς καὶ κακοῖς εἶναι, ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἄρα τὸ ἐπιεικέσι καὶ φαύλοισι εἶναι. (EN III 5, 1113b5-14, ed. Bywater, *TLG*) All Greek texts are quoted from the *TLG*.

¹² Thus Chappell 1995: 42 and Destrée 2011: 289-96.

¹³ That the opponent’s thesis is about virtuous and vicious actions (not states of character) is indicated by (1113b13-14 cf. 1114b12-16). For fuller discussion and defense, see Meyer 1993: 129-132 and 2007:153-5; Donini 2010: 140-146; and Bobzien forthcoming §10.

we actually do rather than non-actual alternatives to what we do. What Aristotle seeks to establish of vicious agents is not their ability to act differently, but their voluntariness in acting as they do.

It is to establish this conclusion (*gar*, b7) that Aristotle invokes the two-sidedness of what is up to us: “where acting is up to us, so too is not acting, and where not acting is up to us, so too is the affirmative” (1113b7-8).¹⁴ He proceeds to instantiate the principle (*hōste*, b8) in a case that his opponent has conceded is up to us: virtuous behaviour, which Aristotle here articulates into two types: performing an action that is fine, and refraining from performing a shameful action (b8-11). From this instantiation he draws his intended conclusion: both virtuous and vicious actions are up to us (b13-14). It is unclear how the argument from the instantiated principle to the intended conclusion is supposed to work,¹⁵ but there is no evidence that the opponent Aristotle addresses (who denies that our vicious actions are up to us) is taking the modern tack of alleging that the virtuous alternatives to these actions are not available or open to us. Nor does Aristotle seek to establish that the shameful actions we perform are voluntary by pointing out that it was open to us to refrain from performing them. Rather, he seems to be arguing that actual instances of shameful behaviour are up to us, because (a) actual instances of admirable behavior are up to us and (b) the two-sidedness of what is up to us gives the grounds for treating the two kinds of cases similarly—a strategy that is totally bizarre when viewed from the standpoint of modern worries about determinism and alternative possibilities.

¹⁴ On this curious phrase, see Bobzien in the present volume, who argues that it affirms that our actions are up to us, not that our choices are.

¹⁵ For a reconstruction see Bobzien (forthcoming) §10.

Furthermore, we might note that in claiming that the virtuous and vicious actions we perform are “up to us,” Aristotle is not merely saying that these actions are possible or available to us. He clearly intends a much stronger claim: that these actions are voluntary and that we are responsible for them.¹⁶ But if that is what “up to us” means in the case of what we actually do, it can hardly mean simply “possibility” or “availability” when applied to the non-actual alternatives. In effect, the very two-sidedness of Aristotle’s “up to us” relation makes it ill-suited to play the role of a “could have done otherwise” consideration in the familiar modern arguments. Those arguments typically invoke the possibility or availability only of *the non-actual alternative*, and they do so in order to establish (or defend) a very different thesis about the alternative that is actually taken—e.g. that the agent is responsible for it, blameworthy for it, etc.—a much stronger claim than that it was possible or available to her. Here in *EN III 5*, however, Aristotle applies the “up to us” locution equally to both alternatives. Since he is making the stronger, causal claim when he says that the actions we perform are “up to us,” he can hardly be making the weaker affirmation of mere possibility when he says that what we don’t do is “up to us.”

EE II 8

While one might concede that in *EN III 5* Aristotle does not attach special significance to the non-actual alternative’s being up to us, as we would expect him to do

¹⁶ *EN* 1113b5, 17-21, 26-27. In the *EE*, he makes it explicit that we are the cause (*aitioi*) of what is up to us to do and not to do (1223a7-9), to be discussed below. Of course, as Frede notes (chapter 23, pp. MS #10-11) an action can be up to a person to do and not to do (in that it is a proper object of deliberation), but be performed in a way that makes it involuntary (e.g. if it is due to force or ignorance). Thus we may distinguish a prospective and a retrospective (or forensic) sense of “up to us” in Aristotle’s usage. It is in the latter sense that we are responsible for what is up to us.

if he construed “up to us” as “could-have-done-otherwise,” one might still insist that in other contexts he does accord it this significance. For example, in *EE* II 8, Aristotle concedes that at least some actions we perform are “not up to us” to refrain from, and for that reason he classifies them as involuntary (1225a2-33). Accordingly, he includes in the final definition of voluntariness in *EE* II 9 a proviso that a voluntary action be “up to us *not* to do” (1225b8; cf. 1228a5-6). The actions ruled out by this proviso fall into three different types: those performed under duress (1225a2-19), those that issue from overpowering impulses (a19-27), and the prophetic utterances and movements of the divinely possessed (a27-33). In response to those who claim that actions performed under duress are voluntary, on the grounds that “it is open to the agents not to act, and to put up with the suffering instead” (1225a7-8),¹⁷ Aristotle appears to concede that in at least some such cases (a8-9) it is not “up to” the agent to bear the alternative, a point he generalizes to apply to all three types of cases. It is in this context that he says:

For what is up to us, on which the whole matter turns, is what one’s nature is able to bear. What it is unable to, and what is not of one’s own natural desire and reasoning, is not up to one.

(1225a25-27)¹⁸

Note, however, that he immediately continues:

that is why we say, of those who prophesy when divinely possessed, ... that it is not up to them to say what they said or to do what they did. (1225a27-30)¹⁹

¹⁷ ἔξεστι γὰρ μὴ ποιεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο ὑπομείναι τὸ πάθος (1225a7-8). There is a similar use of ἔξεστι at *EN* III 5 1114a16-21. It functions here as a near synonym of ἐφ’ αὐτοῖς.

¹⁸ τὸ γὰρ ἐφ’ αὐτῷ, εἰς ὃ ἀνάγεται ὅλον, τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ὃ ἢ αὐτοῦ φύσις οἷα τε φέρειν· ὃ δὲ μὴ οἷα τε, μήδ’ ἐστὶ τῆς ἐκείνου φύσει ὀρέξεως ἢ λογισμοῦ, οὐκ ἐφ’ αὐτῷ (*EE* 1225a25-27).

¹⁹ διὸ καὶ τοὺς ἐνθουσιῶντας καὶ προλέγοντας, καίπερ διανοίας ἔργον ποιοῦντας, ὅμως οὐ φαμεν ἐφ’ αὐτοῖς εἶναι, οὐτ’ εἰπεῖν ἢ εἶπον, οὐτε πράξαι ἢ ἐπραξαν (*EE* 1225a27-30).

The conclusion he draws, from the premise that *not acting* was not “up to” the agent, is that *acting* was not “up to him” either. As in our original passage in *EN III 5*, Aristotle here in *EE II 8* indicates that “up to us” applies to what we do, not just to what we did not do, or what we might do. And in this application to what a person actually does, “up to them” (1225a29) clearly does not simply mean “possible” or “available.”

Contingency or Control?

An adequate interpretation of the meaning of *eph' hêmin* for Aristotle must therefore accommodate his willingness to apply it to what we actually do. If the non-actual alternative's being “up to us” amounts to its availability or possibility, then the “up to us” status of actions that we do perform must amount to the same thing. But since, as argued above, Aristotle clearly uses “up to us” of actions actually performed, to indicate something like the agent's responsibility for the action, we cannot suppose that “X is up to us” affirms the mere possibility or availability of X. By contrast, if we construe “X is up to us” as indicating that we are *in control* of whether X occurs or not, then it makes perfect sense to suppose we stand in this relation symmetrically to both alternatives. Indeed, it makes it easy to see how “X is up to us” is naturally expanded to “X is up to us to do and not to do.”

Now, it is possible to reformulate the tempting modern interpretation of the *eph' hêmin* in a way that it applies symmetrically to both the actual and the non-actual alternative. One might maintain that an action's being up to a person “to do and not to do” amounts to both alternatives being possible or available at the time of action. Thus

construed, an action's being "up to us to do and not to" would amount to its being contingent. We may call this the CONTINGENCY interpretation of what is up to us. Now we have already noted a serious liability for this interpretation: Aristotle's evident use of the locution "*eph' hêmin*" to indicate our responsibility for what we actually do, which is a much stronger claim than that acting thus was possible for the agent. Still, it seems to many readers that there is independent textual support for the CONTINGENCY interpretation, in particular in those passages where Aristotle connects the notion of what is "up to us" to the notion of what "admits of being otherwise" (*endechetai allôs echein*).

These passages are in his accounts of deliberation in *EN* III 3 and *EE* II 10, and in his introduction to the *Eudemian* discussion of voluntariness in *EE* II 6. Let us turn our attention to these passages, keeping in mind the difference between the CONTINGENCY interpretation, on the one hand, and a weaker thesis about the relation between what is up to us and what is contingent, which we may call the IMPLICATION thesis:

IMPLICATION thesis:

If X is up to us to do and not to do then X admits of being otherwise.

CONTINGENCY interpretation:

To affirm that X is up to us to do and not to do is to affirm that X admits of being otherwise.

As a rival to the CONTINGENCY interpretation, I am urging instead the

CONTROL interpretation:

To affirm that X is up to us to do and not to do is to affirm that we are in control of whether X occurs.

The CONTINGENCY interpretation is much stronger than the IMPLICATION thesis, for it claims not simply that actions that are “up to us to do and not to do” are *in fact* contingent, open, etc., but that this contingency or openness is *what it is* to be “up to us to do and not to do”—that what Aristotle means when he says that X is “up to us” is that both X and its alternative are possible. We can appreciate the difference between the CONTINGENCY interpretation and the weaker IMPLICATION thesis, as well as the case for the CONTROL interpretation, by scrutinizing those texts where Aristotle links what is “up to us” with what “admits of being otherwise.”

Deliberation, Contingency, and What is up to Us

When Aristotle demarcates the proper scope of deliberation in the *EE*, he indicates that what is “up to us” is a sub-category of “what is capable both of being and of not being:”

Of the things that are capable of both being and not being (*dunatōn kai einai kai mê*) some are the sort that admit (*endechesthai*) of being deliberated about, while others do not admit of this. For some are capable of both being and not being, but their coming-into-being is not up to us (*eph' hēmin*) but rather due to nature or to other causes, about which only an ignorant person would undertake to deliberate. But those that admit not only of being and not being, but also of being deliberated about by human beings—these are the things that are up to us to do and not to do. This is why we don't deliberate about affairs in India, or about how to square the circle (for the former are not up to us, while the latter is not something that can be done). Nor do we deliberate about all the things that are up to us... (*EE* II 10, 1226a20-31)

This passage does not give a definition or elucidation of what is up to us, but it does indicate that Aristotle takes the things that are “up to us” to be a sub-category of “what is capable (or admits) of both being and not being.” Aristotle makes the same point less

compactly in the parallel *Nicomachean* discussion (*EN* 1112a18-34). Thus the passage is evidence for the IMPLICATION thesis. But it is also fairly decisive evidence against the CONTINGENCY interpretation. Since Aristotle here explicitly allows that some things admit of being otherwise without being up to us, it is clear that he takes the locution “up to us” to mark a distinct property from “admitting of being otherwise” (even if it implies the latter).

As to what that property is, what it means to say of some things that they are “up to us,” Aristotle is here evidently not concerned to explain—although his remarks do show that he takes it to be contrasted with being due to nature and with being due to unspecified other causes. Thus he clearly takes “up to us” to be a causal property of some sort. Earlier in the *Eudemian* discussion of voluntariness, he invokes a fuller list of causal properties and contrasts “things that obtain of necessity, or by chance, or by nature” with “the things of which we are ourselves the cause (*aitioi*)” (1223a11-12) and in the parallel discussion of deliberation in the *EN* he gives the coordinate list of causes (*aitiai*): “nature, necessity, chance and, furthermore, intellect (*nous*) and everything that is done through a human being” (1112a31-33). In the latter context, he also contrasts the things that are “up to us” with things that “would not come about through us (*di’ hêmôn*)” (1112a30). It is evident that he is appealing to an ordinary notion of what is within the causal scope or power of a human being or of some particular human beings—in other words, what we control. Hence these passages support the CONTROL interpretation.

Eudemian Ethics II 6

The strongest apparent evidence that Aristotle construes the *eph' hêmin* as a kind of contingency of action or openness of alternatives is in *EE* II 6, where in the course of his introduction to the *Eudemian* discussion of voluntariness, Aristotle explicitly connects the notion of what is “up to us” with the notion of “what admits of being otherwise” (1222b41-1223a9, quoted below). Sarah Broadie, for example, who interprets the passage as “meant to establish the contingency of voluntary agency” (158), takes Aristotle to be there “grounding” the notion of what is up to us in that contingency.²¹ While it is not always clear whether Broadie is advocating the CONTINGENCY hypothesis as opposed to the IMPLICATION thesis, it will suffice for our present purposes to establish that the passage does not support the contingency hypothesis.

Let us begin by putting the passage in the broader context of the chapter in which it occurs. The chapter begins (1222b15-20) by introducing the notion that a human being is a “principle of action” (*praxeôn... archê*, b19) and it concludes (1223a9-20) by proposing that an account of voluntary action will capture the conditions in which an agent is such a principle. The passage of interest to us serves to effect this transition, as we will see in some detail below. In the interval before that passage (1222b20-1223a9), Aristotle locates the notion of a “principle of action” within a four-fold taxonomy of principles. The taxonomy arises from two cross-cutting distinctions regarding what we might call the “result” of a principle. First of all, there is the distinction between motions or changes (*kinêseis*) on the one hand (for example, the orbits of the celestial bodies, and

²¹ Broadie 1991: 149-50, 155, 158-9. Natali 2002: 290 also takes the argument’s point to be to establish that a human agent is “a variable motor cause.”

human actions) and unchanging facts or states of affairs (*akinetois*, 1222b23)—for example, mathematical or geometrical truths. The principles of *changes* are called “controlling” (*kuriai*) principles (1222b20-24). Second, there is the distinction between things that do not admit of being otherwise (*endechetai allôs*)—both the celestial motions and mathematical truths are examples of these—and things that do admit of being otherwise (1222b22, 41), for example human action and animal reproduction.

This yields a four-fold taxonomy of principles, only three of which Aristotle mentions, possibly because there are *in fact* no principles in the fourth category:

1. controlling principles of what cannot be otherwise (e.g. god).
2. non-controlling principles of what cannot be otherwise (e.g. mathematical axioms).
3. controlling principles of what can be otherwise (e.g. humans and other animals).
4. non-controlling principles of what can be otherwise (*not mentioned*).

Aristotle here discusses the first and second categories explicitly, spending considerable time explaining the sense in which those in the second are similar to those in the first (1222b25-41). In the text of interest to us, he makes the transition to the third category, and argues that the human “principle of action” belongs here:

So [A] if in fact there are things that admit of being the opposite, it is necessary that their principles too be of this sort, for from what is of necessity the result is also necessary, while in the other case they admit of coming to be the opposite. [B] Now what is up to human beings themselves comprise a large part of the class of such things,²⁴ and they themselves are the principles of such things. So [C] it is clear that those actions of which a human being is the principle and in control admit of both coming to be and not coming to be; and that [D] it is up to him whether they come to be or not—those, at any rate, of whose being or not being he is in control. And [E] of the things that are up to him to do or not do, he is himself the cause; and the things of which he is the cause are up to him. (*EE* 1222b41-1223a9; *reference letters added*)²⁵

Sections [A] through [C] locate human actions within the category of what Aristotle earlier described as “what admits of being otherwise” (1222b22). Here he uses what he evidently takes to be the equivalent locutions: “what admits of coming to be [or: being] the opposite” and “what admits of both coming to be and not coming to be.”²⁶ For simplicity, let us refer to this as the category of the contingent.

[A] states and defends the thesis that if there are contingent entities, their principles are likewise contingent. It falls short of affirming the antecedent of the conditional, but [B] discharges that provisional assumption: yes, there are things that admit of being otherwise; more precisely, “what is up to human beings themselves”

²⁴ See note 27.

²⁵ ὥστ’[A] εἴπερ ἐστὶν ἕνια τῶν ὄντων ἐνδεχόμενα ἐναντίως ἔχειν, ἀνάγκη καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς αὐτῶν εἶναι τοιαύτας. ἐκ γὰρ τῶν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἀναγκαῖον τὸ συμβαίνον ἐστὶ, τὰ δὲ γε ἐντεῦθεν ἐνδέχεται γενέσθαι τάναντία, καὶ [B] ὃ ἐφ’ αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, πολλὰ τῶν τοιούτων καὶ ἀρχαὶ τῶν τοιούτων εἰσὶν αὐτοί. ὥστε [C] ὅσων πράξεων ὁ ἀνθρώπος ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ καὶ κύριος, φανερόν ὅτι ἐνδέχεται καὶ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ, καὶ ὅτι [D] ἐφ’ αὐτῷ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ, ὧν γε κύριός ἐστι τοῦ εἶναι καὶ τοῦ μὴ εἶναι. [E] ὅσα δ’ ἐφ’ αὐτῷ ἐστὶ ποιεῖν ἢ μὴ ποιεῖν, αἴτιος τούτων αὐτὸς ἐστίν· καὶ ὅσων αἴτιος, ἐφ’ αὐτῷ (*EE* 1222b41-1223a9, ed. Susemihl 1884).

²⁶ Taking ἐνδέχεται καὶ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ (1223a5-6) to be intended as equivalent to ἐνδεχόμενα ἐναντίως ἔχειν (1222b41-42) and ἐνδεχεται ἄλλως (1222b22).

(subject) “comprise a large part of the class of such things” (predicate).²⁷ The second clause of [B] makes it explicit that the things that are up to a human being are things of which the human being is the principle. This returns the discussion to the chapter’s original focus on the things of which a human being is the principle (cf. 1222b15-20). So far the passage has made no mention of action (*praxis*). This Aristotle does in [C]: the *actions* of which a human being is the “principle and in control (*kurios*)” are instances of the contingent entities hypothesized in [B].²⁸ Thus [C] suffices to locate the human agent in the third category of principles: controlling principles of things that admit of being otherwise.

Two things are worth noting immediately about the present stretch of argument. First of all, Aristotle displays no interest in drawing the further conclusion—which he is entitled to draw, given [A] and [B], and which we would expect him to draw if the CONTINGENCY interpretation were true—that human beings admit of being otherwise. Broadie, for example, infers it on his behalf: a human being is a “contingently causing cause.”²⁹ Instead, the conclusion Aristotle draws in [C] concerns the things of which the human is the “principle,” claiming that these are contingent. Second, Aristotle is not defining or explaining the notion of what is “up to us.” Rather [B] invokes that notion in a manner that indicates Aristotle expects his readers to understand what it means. There

²⁷ The predicate phrase “πολλὰ τῶν τοιούτων” is awkward after the singular subject (ὃ ἐφ’ αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις) (1223a2-3). Kenny 1979: 7 notes the possibility of translating πολλὰ adverbially (“a good deal of what is up to us is of this sort”) – which would allow some non-contingent things to be up to us, but this construal makes the inference in [C] invalid. Woods (1992: 191), following Walzer and Mingay 1991, would excise the ὃ in a2, making “up to human beings” the predicate, and “many such things” the subject; but this also has the result, as he notes (1992: 118-119), that the inference to [C] is insecure. The present translation follows Broadie 1991: 150.

²⁸ Kenny (1979: 9) finds it hard to see how [C] amounts to more than a restatement of [B], but he overlooks the crucial point that “action” does not appear in [B], but does in [C].

²⁹ Broadie (1991: 150). Kenny 1979: 9 notes the omission and finds it curious.

he uses it to demarcate a sub-category of things that are contingent. This is not to define or “ground” in the notion of contingency the notion of being “up to” an agent; rather, it does no more than Aristotle’s discussions of deliberation, which indicate that what is up to us is a subset of things that admit of being otherwise.

Aristotle in [D] continues to draw conclusions; with [C] it is within the scope of the *hōste* of 1223a4. On the CONTINGENCY interpretation, one would expect that after drawing the conclusion about the contingency of the effect in [C], Aristotle would turn to infer the contingency of its principle in [D]. But while [D] does make a claim about that principle, the human being, the claim is not that the human being is contingent, but rather that it is “up to him” whether the contingent thing occurs. Kenny (p. 9) worries that this amounts to no more than a restatement of [B]; however, once we distinguish between being contingent and being up to us, we can see the difference: [B] states, of the things that are up to humans, that they are contingent, while [D] states, of these contingent things, that it is “up to humans” whether they occur or not.³⁰ The latter serves to invoke the causal role or control of the human being over the occurrences in question, thus indicating that being “up to someone” is a matter of CONTROL rather than mere CONTINGENCY.

The new emphasis on the causal role of the human agent continues in [E], where a new notion is introduced into the passage, that of being *aitios* of a result (causally

³⁰ The last clause of [D], “those, at any rate, of whose being or not being he is in control” (ὧν γε κύριός ἐστι τοῦ εἶναι καὶ τοῦ μὴ εἶναι—1223a6-7) serves to remind us of the antecedent in [C], the proximity of whose consequent (“things that admit of coming to be and not”) might distract one into thinking that the first clause of [D] affirms that *all* such things are “up to us”. Kenny, by contrast (1979: 10) supposes that the clause introduces an additional condition on things that are up to us to do and not to do. Kenny’s translation, however, transposes the order of clauses and wrongly implies that Aristotle takes the conclusion in [C] to be within the scope of the concessive “γε” clause in [D]. While it is possible to construe his meaning as Kenny does, Aristotle’s text does not require the scope of the concessive clause to be beyond [D].

responsible for it; cf. 1222b30). This notion is important for linking the present discussion of the human as “principle of action” to the topic of voluntariness, which the following paragraph (1223a9-20) serves to introduce. There the voluntary is proposed as the category that will capture those actions of which a human being is “the cause (*aitios*) and the principle of action”:

So we must grasp of what sorts of things a human being is the cause and the principle of action.

Well, we all agree that he is the cause of those things that are voluntary and according to choice, and that he is not the cause of those that are involuntary, and what he does from choice he clearly does voluntarily... (1223a15-18)

[E] effects the transition to this final topic by stating that a human agent’s being “*aitios* of X” is inter-entailing with X’s being “up to him to do or not to do.” After this point, the notion of what is “up to” a human agent drops out of the discussion, not to appear again until the passage we have discussed in EE II 8.

Conclusions about EE II 6

What does this discussion in EE II 6 tell us about how Aristotle understands the notion of being “up to us”—in particular, what evidence does it bring to bear on the IMPLICATION thesis, the CONTINGENCY interpretation and the CONTROL interpretation? While [B] locates what is “up to us” in the broader category of the contingent and thus supports the IMPLICATION thesis, [D] and [E], which make no appeal to contingency, explicitly invoke the causal control (*to kurion*) and responsibility involved in having contingent things “up to one.” Aristotle makes it clear that our causal or controlling role is what serves to mark off the things that are “up to us” from the wider

class of contingent things. Thus the CONTROL hypothesis, rather than the CONTINGENCY hypothesis, is supported by this passage.

An objector might respond at this point that the IMPLICATION thesis is enough; that even though Aristotle is not *affirming* the “contingency” of human actions when he speaks of actions being “up to us to do and not to do,” he is thereby *committed* to the contingency of our actions.³¹ However, the question we are addressing is not whether Aristotle is committed to the view that we or our actions “admit of being otherwise.” There are those who suppose (wrongly, I believe) that establishing these points amounts to establishing that Aristotle is an indeterminist about human action.³² But that is not the concern of our present discussion. We are *not* asking what Aristotle is committed to, in the sense of what is logically implied by the theses he explicitly affirms, but rather what Aristotle’s own philosophical concerns are, as expressed in his explicit affirmations.³³ What are the considerations that Aristotle thinks are significant when he discusses human responsibility for action? The CONTINGENCY interpretation proposes that when Aristotle invokes what is “up to us to do and not to do” in his account of voluntary action, he is expressing the concern that our actions be contingent, that it be possible for us to do otherwise than we do. On this interpretation, Aristotle would be concerned with the same issues that inform modern debates about responsibility, freedom, and determinism. What

³¹ Thanks to Laura Gomez and Pierre Destrée for pressing this objection.

³² The assumption is shared by both those who take Aristotle to be a determinist about human action (e.g., Donini 2010), and those who take him to be (implicitly or otherwise) an indeterminist: e.g. Natali 2002, Destree 2011, Broadie 1991.

³³ I discuss the difference between these questions in Meyer 2003: 408. Broadie too cautions against attributing to Aristotle a concern with modern issues about determinism, noting that features of Aristotle’s metaphysical world view militate against the sorts of worries that inform modern debates about determinism (Broadie 1991: 129-131, 155-157). By contrast, Natali 2002: 295 takes the divergence between Aristotle’s and modern causal notions to be grounds for attributing indeterminism to Aristotle.

the present discussion has established, in proving the CONTROL interpretation to be superior to the CONTINGENCY interpretation, is that this construal of Aristotle's project is false. When Aristotle affirms that our actions are "up to us to do and not to do" he is not concerned with the contingency of our actions, but with our control over them.

Those who seek to establish that Aristotle is concerned with the contingency of human actions, and that he takes this to be an important feature of our responsibility for action, may therefore not cite as evidence his invocation of a two-sided "up to us" relation. And once this evidence is ruled out, it is much harder to find textual support for attributing this very modern concern to Aristotle. For Aristotle conspicuously declines to invoke the notion of what "admits of being otherwise" anywhere else in his accounts of voluntariness. For example, once the taxonomy of "principles" in *EE* ii 6 is concluded, the notion of "what admits of being otherwise" drops out and does not appear again until Aristotle turns, in the passages we have already discussed, to demarcate the scope of deliberation. And even in the present passage, "admitting of being otherwise" is not accorded any special or honorific status, since it is common to both human action and animal reproduction, and the cause that Aristotle identifies as a controlling principle "most properly" (*malista dikaiôs*)—that is, god—has this honorific status precisely in virtue of *not* having effects that admit of being otherwise (1222b21-3).³⁴

³⁴ Aristotle believes god is *kurios* of the celestial motions (*EE* 1222b21-23; cf. *Met.* 1072b), but he does not say here whether he would say that those motions are "up to" the god. If he did think so, then even the IMPLICATION thesis would be false (except in the restricted case of what is up to human beings). The contingency of the "up to us" relation would be a feature of the *relatum* "us", not of the relation captured by "*epi* + dative". It is, however, beyond the scope of the present project to investigate whether Aristotle thinks being *kurios* of a something entails that it is "up to one." Thanks to Marco Zingano for stressing the importance of this issue.

Works Cited

- Bostock, D. 2000, *Aristotle's Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 103-22.
- Bobzien, S. 1998, 'The Inadvertent Conception and Late Birth of the Free Will Problem,' *Phronesis* 43 (2): 133-75.
- forthcoming, 'Choice and Moral Responsibility in *Nicomachean Ethics* III 1-5,' in Polansky, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Broadie, S. 1991, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Bywater, I. 1894, *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*, Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Chappell, T. D. J. 1995, *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom: Two Theories of Freedom, Voluntary Action, and Akrasia*, New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Destrée, P. 2011, 'Aristotle on Responsibility for One's Character,' in Pakaluk, M. and Pearson, G. (eds.), *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 285–319.
- Donini, P. L. 2010, *Aristotle and Determinism*, Louvain, Peeters. Translation into English by Laura Kopp of *Ethos: Aristotele e il determinismo*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'orso, 1989.

- Eliasson, E. 2009, 'Magna Moralia 1187a29-b20: The Early Reception of Aristotle's notion of Voluntary Action,' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37: 213-244.
- Frede, M. 2007, 'The $E\Phi HMIN$ in Ancient Philosophy,' *ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ* 37: 110-23.
Reprinted in the present volume, **chapter 23**.
- 2011, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, edited by A. A. Long, Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 68, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Kenny, A. 1979, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, London, Duckworth.
- Meyer, S. S. 1993, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility: Character and Cause*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell; reissued 2011 with a new introduction, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 1994, 'Self Movement and External Causation,' in Gill, M. L, and Lennox, J. (eds.), *Self Motion from Aristotle to Newton*, Princeton, Princeton University press, 65-80.
- 2003, Review of Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. *The Philosophical Review* 112 (3): 405-409.
- 2006, 'Aristotle on the Voluntary,' in Kraut, R. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 137-157.
- 2011, 'Voluntariness, Morality, and Causality,' introduction to the reissue of Meyer 1993, Oxford, Oxford University Press, xiii-xxv.

Natali, C. 2002, 'Responsibility and Determinism in Aristotelian Ethics,' translated by S. Wise in Canto-Sperber, M. and Pellegrin, M. (eds.), *Le Style de la Pensée*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 267-295 (reprinted in French, with some changes, as Chapter VIII of Natali 2004).

——— 2004, *L'action efficace: études sur la philosophie de l'action d'Aristote*, Louvain, Peeters.

Sorabji, R. 1980, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory*, London, Duckworth.

Susemihl, F. 1884, *Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1884; reprinted 1967, Amsterdam, Hakkert.

Walzer, R. R. and Mingay, J. M. 1991, *Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia*, Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Woods, M. 1992, *Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics Books I, II, and VIII*, translated with introduction and commentary, 2nd edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press.