Aristotle on Moral Responsibility
Aristotle on Moral Responsibility
Character and Cause

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Cambridge, Massachusetts
Abbreviations of Aristotle’s Works

APst. Posterior Analytics
Catg. Categories
DA De Anima
De Int. De Interpretatione
EE Eudemian Ethics
EN Nicomachean Ethics
GA De Generatione Animalium
MA De Motu Animalium
Met. Metaphysics
MM Magna Moralia
Ph. Physics
Poet. Poetics
Pol. Politics
Rhet. Rhetoric
Top. Topics
## Tables

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Introduction to the 2011 Edition
Voluntariness, Morality, and Causality

This is a book about Aristotle's views on voluntariness (to hekousion) and involuntariness (to akousion), a topic to which he devotes lengthy and interestingly different treatments in the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics. The issues raised by these discussions have proved to be of enduring interest in the interval since the original publication of this volume, and my aim in the present introduction is to locate its main lines of argument in the context of this more recent scholarship.¹

While it may not appear obvious to modern readers why a treatise on ethics should be concerned with the difference between voluntary and involuntary action, Aristotle is not the first to invoke the notion in an ethical context. A familiar refrain in Plato's dialogues is that no one does wrong voluntarily.² In these contexts, Plato presents wrongdoing as deriving from ignorance of the good and he exploits the ordinary assumption that actions performed in ignorance are involuntary.³ His goal is not, of course, to absolve wrongdoers of responsibility or blame. Rather, his point is to exhort his audience to

¹ I will also refer to a few works published earlier: Broadie 1991, whose chapter on the voluntary continues to be widely cited; Donini's magisterial monograph, Ethos: Aristoteles e il determinismo (1989), now translated beautifully into English as Donini 2010; and Heinaman 1986, which was omitted from my original bibliography. Destrée 2011 has a particularly thorough account of recent literature.
² Prot. 345e1–4, 358c7, c5–6; Gorg. 509e5–6; Tim. 86d7–c3; Laws 731e2–3, 734b2–3, 860d5–e4. In these contexts, 'voluntarily' (hekôn) is often translated "willingly". I defend the appropriateness of translating Aristotle's pair of terms by 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' on pp. 9–16 below. See also Heinaman 1986: 128–130, Bostock 2000: 102–3, and Taylor 2006: 125–6. The new French translation by Bodeus 2004 uses 'consenti' (roughly, "intentional") for hekousion, on which see Labarrière 2009:11.
³ Hence the equivalent statement of the thesis as "no one does wrong knowingly" (e.g. Prot. 352c4–7, 355b1–3). On the relation between the two theses, see Segvic 2009.
cultivate ethical knowledge. Aristotle, by contrast, is interested in voluntariness as a causal notion. He considers a human agent to be an origin (archē) or cause (aitios) of actions and he investigates voluntariness with a view to capturing that causal relation. He introduces the topic of voluntariness by noting that it is a condition for praise and blame, and he is evidently concerned to establish that our good actions and our bad ones are equally voluntary—an emphatic rejection of the Platonic account, on which only our good actions are voluntary.

Just how Aristotle construes the causality involved in voluntary action, as well as the implications he thinks it has concerning praise and blame, are matters of dispute. Interpretations have run the gamut from supposing that Aristotle is articulating a libertarian analysis of human agency as the ground for holding people responsible for their actions,4 to the proposal that Aristotle is concerned simply with the conditions in which praise and blame are effective instruments for shaping character and influencing future actions.5 The reading I offer in the chapters below strikes a middle course. Aristotle is not concerned to carve out for human agency an exceptional status within the causal nexus of the natural world, but neither is he concerned simply with how educators and other social forces might influence behavior and shape character. He is genuinely interested in describing the conditions in which human agents are responsible for their actions, a form of responsibility that is, in his view, integral to the workings of character.

**Voluntariness, responsibility, and morality**

In the chapters below, I describe this as an account of what we might today call “moral responsibility” —“moral” to indicate its connection to the virtues of character (courage, temperance, generosity, justice) — and “responsibility” to indicate the causal relation Aristotle posits between agents and their voluntary actions. This terminology has proved to be a distraction, especially to readers who take “morality” to be a distinctively modern notion.6 While Chapter 1

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4 Most recently Destrée 2011 and Natali 2004 chapters VIII and IX. Broadie 1991: 158–9 takes Aristotle’s discussion of voluntariness, at least in the EE, to articulate a “proto-indeterminism” about human agency, but this is, in her view, a practical perspective adopted by those engaged in action or in the evaluation of agents, rather than a metaphysical account of action. Bobzien (forthcoming) rejects this new wave of indeterminist interpretations.


Voluntariness, Morality, and Causality

below explains my grounds for applying the label ‘moral’ to Aristotle’s virtues and vices of character, and hence the fairly minimal implications of construing the relevant kind of responsibility as moral, the bulk of the argument in the rest of the book does not depend on this construal. Readers who are allergic to associating the term ‘moral’ with the ancient ethical tradition may safely bracket the term and replace it with ‘ethical’.

Indeed, one of my central interpretive claims about Aristotle is that a thesis often associated with distinctively “moral” responsibility is conspicuously absent from his account. This is the view that moral responsibility for one’s actions, in contrast with merely casual responsibility (which inanimate objects and non-human animals can have), requires that we be responsible for the behavioral dispositions from which we act: in other words, that moral responsibility for action requires responsibility for character. Aristotle is often taken to subscribe to such a thesis, on the basis of his argument the Nicomachean Ethics III 5 that we are responsible for our states of character. However, Aristotle does not present this thesis as a necessary condition for responsible action. In fact, most of the texts where he is generally taken to be arguing for the thesis do not concern responsibility for character at all. Rather, Aristotle is there contesting the Platonic thesis that only our virtuous actions, not also our vicious ones, are voluntary. Such, at any rate, is the burden of Chapter 5.

While the implications of these issues for general philosophical questions about responsibility, causality, and agency are large, my primary focus below is on elucidating key texts in Aristotle’s ethical writings. My aim is to lay bare their structure and argumentation, with a view especially to identifying the problems that Aristotle takes himself to be addressing when he discusses voluntariness. I begin (Chapter 2) by investigating the connection that Aristotle defends the thesis that moral responsibility is at stake in Aristotle’s discussion of voluntariness, while Donini argues emphatically against the view that a distinctively modern kind of responsibility is at stake there (Donini 2010: 138–9, esp. n 6). By contrast, interpreters as diverse as Heinaman and Natali are quite happy to use expressions such as ‘moral responsibility’ or ‘moral evaluation’ à propos Aristotle’s account of the voluntary (Heinaman 1986: 128, 130; Natali 2004: 206 and 2002: 290, although the relevant passages of the latter are omitted from the 2004 version). Annas 1993 is an extended argument for reading ancient ethical philosophy as moral philosophy, although she does not discuss voluntariness or responsibility except obliquely (p. 49), when discussing EN 1106a2–4. Meyer 2008 is my own account of the distinctive features of ancient ethical philosophy.


8 The careful assessment of Aristotle’s argument in Donini 2010: 140–148 concurs with my contention that only responsibility for action is at stake in EN 1113b6–21. Ott 2000 resists this interpretation, adducing considerations from Plato’s later dialogues.

9 I offer an abbreviated version of these arguments in Meyer 2006.
posits between praiseworthiness and voluntariness, which I elucidate in light of his distinction between praise and encomium in EN I 12 and his frequent remarks about the praiseworthiness of virtue and the blameworthiness of vice. This background, together with careful attention to Aristotle’s precise statements of the causal conditions of praise and blame,10 shows that Aristotle takes character and actions to be praiseworthy in different, although systematically related, ways. Actions are praiseworthy and blameworthy because we are responsible for bringing them about, whereas states of character are praiseworthy and blameworthy because of the actions that they bring about. The focal causal notion in each case is that of character issuing in action – hence my original subtitle: “Character and Cause”.11

The Eudemian and Nicomachean accounts

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the texts in which Aristotle explores the nature of the hekousion and the akousion and develops his own positive account of the matter. These are EE II 6-9 and EN III 1.12 The former, in particular, is an exceedingly tortuous stretch of argument that has proved baffling many readers. While the latter account may appear more straightforward, it too has its puzzling elements, such as the requirement that involuntary actions be painful or regretted.13 I resist both these impressions, arguing that the Eudemian discussion is a perfectly respectable piece of dialectical reasoning, that the Nicomachean account presupposes and extends it, and that seen from this vantage point, the apparent oddities of the latter are well motivated applications of central tenets of Aristotle’s analysis.

10 E.g. the conclusion of the argument at EE 1223a9–15, is usually construed as the thesis that we are responsible for our states of character. However, Aristotle is careful to conclude there that the virtue and vice “concern (peri, α) things for which we are responsible”—not that they are themselves things for which we are responsible. Broadie, for example, omits this point in her analysis of the argument (1991: 162–3).
11 That Aristotle takes voluntary actions to be the route by which a person’s character makes its mark on the world is endorsed by Broadie 1991:124 and Pakaluk 2004: 118–119. On the relation of this to Aristotle’s remark that prohairesis (decision) displays character better than action (EN 1111b5–6) see Meyer 2006:140 and 2008: 71–2.
12 I refer to chapters as marked by the marginal Roman numerals in the editions of the EN by Burnet (1894) and of the EE by Walzer and Mingay (1991).
13 Broadie 1991: 132–142 is a forceful statement of the difficulties provoked by this requirement, although she fails to note (p. 133) that Aristotle articulates the requirement for involuntary actions quite generally, not just for those due to ignorance (EN 1111a32). Bostock 2000: 111–112 finds similar difficulties.
Chapter 3 explains how the argument in *EE* II 6-9 makes sense if we read it as a dialectical exploration of potential criteria for voluntariness whose aim is to secure the (anti-Platonic) result that cases of wrongdoing are voluntary. Aristotle starts out with the hypothesis that the difference between voluntary and involuntary action may be modeled by the distinction between natural and “forced” (*biaion*) movements, where forced movements are conceived of as contrary to internal impulse. He considers how to apply this paradigm to the case of human action, compares its implications to those of the Platonic conception of voluntariness, and rejects any version on which obvious cases of wrongdoing (e.g. akratic action) turn out to be forced. The conception of force that emerges from this dialectic has been revised and expanded to apply to the case of distinctively human action (where conflicting internal impulses are possible):\(^\text{14}\) in addition to being contrary to impulse, forced action must not originate in the agent.

This is the requirement for force that Aristotle stresses at the beginning of the *Nicomachean* account, where he introduces forced action as one of the two kinds of involuntary action. The other type, comprising acts due to ignorance, is also mentioned in the *Eudemian* account, but only briefly and at the end, where it is hastily and (I argue) ineptly integrated into the results of the more elaborate discussion of force. Rectifying this fault in the *Eudemian* account is one of Aristotle’s achievements in the *Nicomachean* version.\(^\text{15}\) There he also devotes considerable attention to identifying precisely the sort of knowledge that is required for voluntariness—once again with a view to resisting the Platonic contention that actions performed in ignorance of the good are involuntary. His additional goal, I argue, is to complete the project, begun in the *EE*, of integrating the two paradigms for involuntariness (forced actions and those due to ignorance) into a single coherent account.\(^\text{16}\) His error in the *EE* is to construe “action due to ignorance” as exemplifying the contrariety essential to forced actions. In the *EN*, by contrast, he recognizes that the requisite contrariety is independent of the epistemic requirement, but still views contrariety to impulse as central to involuntariness—hence his insistence that actions due to ignorance must be painful or regretted if they are to count as involuntary.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{14}\) Natali construes the potential for internal conflict as the source of the contingency of human action (Natali 2004: 211–12).

\(^{15}\) Heinaman 1986 provides additional reasons for supposing the *EN* account is an improvement over that of the *EE*.

\(^{16}\) By contrast, other readers, such as Broadie 1991 and Bostock 2000, find Aristotle vacillating between the conflicting paradigms.

\(^{17}\) In Broadie and Rowe 2002 the translation of *akousion* as “counter-voluntary” rather than “involuntary” nicely captures this essential contrariety; but it gives the misleading impression
The *Nicomachean* account of voluntariness, so understood, builds on and completes the dialectical argument of the *Eudemian* discussion.

A particularly difficult class of actions to which Aristotle devotes attention in his discussions of voluntariness are cases of what we might call coercion or duress—for example, throwing the ship’s cargo overboard in a storm to save the ship and the lives of its crew. Are such actions voluntary or involuntary? In the *EE*, he inclines to the verdict that they are involuntary (1225a11-14), but in the *EN* he resolutely insists that they are voluntary (1110b1-6). Chapter 4 explores Aristotle’s apparent vacillation on this question, which arises from alternative options for making precise the notion of an action having its “origin” (*archē* or *emacrē*) in an agent. Aristotle resolves the issue, I argue, in the light of his over-arching goal of rejecting any account that classifies blameworthy actions as involuntary. 18

**Aristotle’s causal notions**

Exploring Aristotle’s treatment of these difficult cases reveals the continuity between the causal notions invoked in his treatments of voluntariness and those that he deploys more broadly in his natural philosophy. Most important among these, in Chapter 4, is the distinction between accidental (*kata sumbebekos*) and non-accidental causation, which Aristotle invokes explicitly when discussing the voluntariness of actions under duress. 19 To be the origin of an action, in Aristotle’s terms, is to be its non-accidental cause. Chapter 6 explores the relation of voluntariness to “self-movement”— another item in Aristotle’s causal repertoire, which is articulated at length in the *Physics*. 20 The voluntary agent, as the “origin” of an action, is thereby in Aristotle’s view a “self-mover”. This means, among other things, that some aspect of the agent is an “unmoved mover”. This is to say that it moves the agent to act, but exercises this causality that involuntariness on its own fails to involve such contrariety. I note below (pp. 9–16) that this is a feature both of the ordinary Greek notion of the *akousion* and of the English ‘involuntary’ on one of its ordinary senses.

18 Taylor 2006: 129–140 discusses the *EN* treatment of these cases in detail. Nielsen 2007 is the best recent discussion of Aristotle’s account, especially regarding its implications for our general understanding of his ethical theory. Klimchuk 2002 focuses on the jurisprudential implications of Aristotle’s position.

19 *EN* V 8, 1135a15–19. Thus Natali 2002: 275 and 2004: 181 is mistaken to object that there is no textual support for applying Aristotle’s notion of accidental causation to the case of voluntary action.

20 A flurry of relatively recent work on self-motion includes the papers in Gill and Lennox 1994, as well as Berryman 2002 and Morison 2004. Natali 2002: 271–4, 282–3 is critical of most such accounts.
without itself being “moved”. It is, however, a mistake to suppose, as some readers do, that an Aristotelian self-mover is thereby exempt from the influence of external causes, or that the activity whereby it causes its own movement is undetermined by antecedent conditions. The unmoved aspect of the agent, I propose, is the state of character that issues in the action, and the sense in which it is “unmoved” in exercising its causality is quite simply that it is not “in motion”. This is a mode of causality that Aristotle finds quite broadly in the natural world, and is closely connected with the way in which formal causes interact with efficient causes. I explain how it accords with Aristotle’s understanding of a state of character as a disposition (hexis) of our capacities for action and passion, and I explore his resources for resisting the objection that humans are not genuine self movers, on the ground that the causal history of our actions can always be traced back to external and antecedent causes. I argue that Aristotle’s distinction between accidental and non-accidental causes provides a powerful response to such worries.

What is “up to us”

Another feature of Aristotle’s account often interpreted in libertarian terms is his frequent refrain that our voluntary actions are “up to us to do and not to do”. An action’s being up to an agent in this way, it is supposed, amounts to its

21 In a new version of such indeterminist construals of self-motion, Natali 2002: 284 rightly points out, in agreement with Meyer 1994: 68–9, that the object of desire, which Aristotle identifies as the “mover” of the self-mover’s desire, is not an efficient cause that precipitates the self-mover’s desire. But he makes the stronger, and less plausible, further claim that the external object (e.g. the lamb perceived by the hungry lion) does not have an efficient-causal effect on the self-mover’s desire (Natali 2002: 285–6).

22 A point I develop in greater detail in Sauvé 1987 (see original bibliography). Natali offers a similar explanation, roughly that formal causes “channel” the motive force of efficient causes (Natali 2004: 210; cf. 189–90, 2002: 284)—an account whose plausibility is in some tension with his blanket insistence (2002: 281–4, 2004: 189–194) that causes from different Aristotelian modalities cannot be combined in a continuous causal sequence.

23 Berryman 2002 objects that my invocation of accidental causation in this context fails to capture what is distinctive of self-movement. I am inclined to agree now that my proposal does not explain the “two-sidedness” of animal locomotion, but I still think that it shows Aristotle to be justified in halting the regress of causes with the voluntary agent. The interpretation of animal self-motion in Morison 2004, which has concerns about cosmology rather than action theory as its focus, deploys Aristotle’s notion of the “accidental” in a manner different from, but compatible with the view I defend. Natali, who objects to my invocation of the accidental in this context (see note 20 above), responds to the threatened regress by arguing that it commits the anachronism of reducing formal and final causes to efficient causes (Natali 2002: 282–3).
Voluntariness, Morality, and Causality

alternative being “open” or “possible” in a sense that determinism precludes.\textsuperscript{24} While I do not address this position directly in the chapters below, I would supplement my remarks on what is “up to us” in Appendix II with the following observations. While Aristotle does say at that such actions “admit of being otherwise” (\textit{EE} 1222b41-1223a9), the sort of contingency invoked by the latter locution has, first of all, no implications regarding the truth or falsity of determinism.\textsuperscript{25} Second, Aristotle does not explain the notion of being “up to us” in terms of that contingency. Indeed, where Aristotle does elucidate the notion of something’s being “up to us”, he proceeds simply by distinguishing it from things whose occurrence or non-occurrence depends on factors other than ourselves: for example, whether the sun will rise this morning or whether my ticket will be drawn in the lottery.\textsuperscript{26} Thus he explains what is “up to us” as “what might happen through us” (\textit{EN} 1112b27) and the “us”, as I argue in Appendix II, is identified in terms of the psychological faculties involved in voluntary agency: roughly, thought and desire. So construed, it follows quite easily that those actions which originate in us are up to us to do and not to do. Thus Aristotle’s insistence that our voluntary actions are “up to us” in this way is not an invocation of their contingency, but of their dependence on our powers of voluntary agency.

Indeterminist interpreters of “up to us” in Aristotle sometimes appeal for support to his contention that only what is up to us is a proper object of deliberation (\textit{EN} 1112a31).\textsuperscript{27} Such, for example, is the position of the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 CE) who proposes that the “two-sidedness” of what is “up to us” is to be understood in terms of Aristotle’s notion of a rational capacity, which is explicated in \textit{Metaphysics} IX as a “capacity for opposites” (1046b1-7). Aristotle here says that a non-rational capacity, such as fire’s capacity to burn, is one that, given the appropriate

\textsuperscript{24} Thus Broadie 1991: 150–54, 171–2, who labels Aristotle a “proto-indeterminist” (158–9); also Chappell 1995: 42–7, Destrée 2011: 289–96 and Natali 2002: 288–9. Even Donini 2010, who takes Aristotle’s fully developed view in the \textit{EN} to be a form of psychological determinism, finds the \textit{Eudemian} account to be “more decisively indeterministic” (p. 108). By contrast, Bobzien 1998: 282, 412 and 1998a argues that Aristotle’s conception of what is “up to us to do and not to do,” in contrast to that of later philosophers, is not libertarian. On the history of the notion in ancient philosophy see Frede 2011 and Destrée et al. (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{25} A point I argue in greater detail in Meyer 1998.

\textsuperscript{26} Thus Frede 2007 and 2011. See also Bobzien (forthcoming) §§ 5–6, who uses the helpful locution “things within the agent’s reach” to capture the relevant category.

\textsuperscript{27} Broadie 2001 and Zingano 2007 chapter 9 are sympathetic to such interpretations, which are roundly criticized by Nielsen 2011.
conditions for its exercise, necessarily brings about its effect. By contrast, when a rational capacity (such as the medical art) is similarly situated, its exercise is not necessary (1048a5-8). For example, the physician may either treat the patient or leave him to die. Such a conception of “two-sidedness”, however, does not make Aristotle an indeterminist. Whether the physician treats the patient, he explains, depends on his desire or choice; but once this factor is taken into account his action (or inaction) is no less necessary than fire's burning (1048a10-15). Furthermore, this account implies nothing about whether the crucial desire or choice is determined by antecedent conditions; thus Alexander is wrong to invoke it as evidence that Aristotelian action is libertarian.28

**Questions about determinism**

In resisting these libertarian interpretations of Aristotle, my aim is not to establish that he is a determinist about action.29 Even if libertarianism and determinism are exhaustive options for the classification of human action, it is misleading to classify particular philosophers as libertarian or determinist unless they explicitly face or articulate a recognizable thesis of determinism.30 To be sure, a version of determinism was hotly contested in post-Aristotelian philosophy, in the context of debates over the Stoic doctrine of fate,31 and

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29 Thus I would dissent from the classification of my interpretation as “determinist” in Destrée 2011: 286 n4. By contrast, Donini 2010 expressly argues that Aristotle is a determinist about action.

30 I discuss the difference between affirming a thesis of (in)determinism and being committed to it in Meyer 2003. In effect, Donini 2010 is an argument that Aristotle is committed to determinism about action.

31 On that debate see Bobzien 1998 and Salles 2005. While Natali proposes that the Stoic conception of a causal chain coincides largely with modern conceptions of determinism (Natali 2002: 283, 295; 2004: 178), I argue in Meyer 2009 that this appearance is deceiving.
Alexander’s libertarian interpretation of Aristotle is informed by those debates. But what would count as an affirmation (or denial) of determinism in the context of Aristotle’s causal vocabulary and background assumptions is a very tricky question, which I won’t address here, beyond the simple observation that given the wide semantic range of ‘necessity’ in Aristotle, it is unsafe to read his affirmation of the contingency of our actions as eo ipso a denial of anything recognizable by philosophers today as a thesis of determinism. While it is safe to say that Aristotle insists on features of human action whose compatibility with determinism has been hotly debated by philosophers for centuries, contemporary libertarian interpreters of Aristotle tend to construe these features as straightforwardly indeterminist—which is to beg the question on the issue of compatibility.

I take the position in the chapters below that Aristotle himself shows no inclination to worry that determination by antecedent conditions is incompatible with voluntariness, praiseworthiness, or our actions being “up to us”. While he does assume that an action whose “origin” is “in us” cannot be attributed to origins “beyond those in us” (e.g. EN 1113b19-20), this is a concern about external causation, not causal determination, and the proper Aristotelian

32 On the complexities, see Broadie 1991: 130–1, who maintains that he nowhere engages with the thesis of determinism (157–9, 171), as well as Frede 2011: 15–16, 28. While Natali also stresses the differences between Aristotle’s causal notions and those invoked in familiar formulations of determinism, he does take Aristotle to have “identified the main theoretic difficulties of determinism” in De Interpretatione 9 and Metaphysics E 2 (Natali 2002: 278 n19).

33 See the range of uses of ‘necessary’ (anankaion) enumerated in Metaphysics V 5.

34 A point I develop in Meyer 1998. By contrast, Destrée 2011 takes it to be sufficient proof of Aristotle’s commitment to indeterminism that he affirms the contingency of particular actions. Donini 2010, although arguing that Aristotle is a determinist about action in the EN, takes the EE’s ascription of contingency to actions to be indeterminist, but also an immature view later superseded by the determinism in the Nicomachean account of the “unidirectional” of developed character. Against construing Aristotelian character as fully determining how one acts in particular circumstances, see Dimuzio 2000 and 2008, as well as Destrée 2011.

35 Such is explicitly the case with Natali, for example, who writes that whether to classify a philosopher as determinist depends inter alia “on the criteria we deem necessary in order to demonstrate the freedom of human choice” (Natali 2002: 267; 2004: 175). This leaves no conceptual space to raise the question of whether freedom is compatible with determinism. Destrée 2011: 289–96 allows some room for a compatibilist interpretation of Aristotle’s claim that our actions are up to us, it invokes a “general” capacity to do otherwise rather than the possibility of performing either a particular pair of alternatives; yet, he still begs the question against a wide range of compatibilist positions (see note 34 above). This may be why he classifies my compatibilist interpretation of Aristotle as “determinist” (p. 286 n4).

36 On the difference between these two worries, see Meyer 2009: 87–89.
context for interpreting his concerns is the doctrine of self movement. While I do argue in the course of Chapter 6 that Aristotle’s repertoire of causal notions provides him with the resources to mount a powerful response to incompatibilist challenges, I take this to be a strength of his position, but not a goal of his discussion.

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