

Ethical Theory

Moral Responsibility

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- *Nicomachean Ethics*, book III, chapters 1–5 & book VII, chapters 1–10 (pp. 52–68 & 174–202).

Questions

1. In chapter 1 of book III, Aristotle argues that certain types of actions, some based on *constraint* and some based on *ignorance*, are done involuntarily. This is important for Aristotle, because a person is not responsible for an involuntary action. What cases of constraint are properly understood as involuntary? What cases of ignorance are properly understood as involuntary? In light of this, what is Aristotle's general principle for determining whether a given action is voluntary or not? Based on this, why is acting on passion or appetite done voluntarily?
2. Following this, in chapters 2–5 of book III, Aristotle now wants to solve a puzzle. His account of virtue (from book II, chapter 6) presumes that a person's characteristics influence his or her choices. But does this mean that a bad person can deny that they are morally responsible for bad actions? After all, the bad person might claim he or she is simply a victim or passive recipient of his or her bad characteristics, and so is simply acting involuntarily without choice. What is Aristotle's conception of choice, and how does he connect it to—and yet differentiate it from—both wish and deliberation (see especially chapters 2–4)?
3. Having laid out this account of voluntary choice, what is Aristotle's argument from chapter 5 of book III to show that while the bad person may possess bad characteristics, he or she is nevertheless held responsible for his or her bad actions?
4. In chapter 1 of book VII, Aristotle discusses three qualities of character to avoid and their respective opposites. Of these, moral strength and moral weakness are the most important. What is the difference between them?
5. In chapter 2 of book VII, Aristotle then presents a puzzle he intends to solve about moral weaknesses. Namely, how it is possible that a person can know what the right choice is and yet choose wrongly? How does Aristotle's analysis of weakness of will in chapters 3–10 of book VII ultimately answer this question?