

INTENTIONAL ACTION IN NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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*Nicomachean Ethics*¹ is an important contribution of Aristotle to the field of Ethics. The subject matter of this work is human action and pursuit; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for man.² This article analyses those sections that pertain to the topic of action and examines whether Aristotle is talking of intentional action. In particular, the attention will be on Book III, 1-5 which deals with the conditions of accountability to actions.

Aristotle distinguishes two types of actions *hekousion* and *akousion*, which have been variously translated as voluntary-involuntary,³ willingly-unwillingly⁴ and intentional-non-intentional.⁵ This variety of translation itself reveals their incapacity to capture accurately the sense of the characterization given to it by Aristotle. In consideration of these difficulties, in this article the Greek words *hekousion* and *akousion* will be retained.

AKOUSION

Those actions which are called *akousion* by Aristotle are those which are done under external compulsion and those done by reason of ignorance. Aristotle gives the

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* takes its name from Nicomachus, which could refer either to Aristotle's father or his son, for both of them had it as their name. It may have been dedicated to his father Nicomachus, or it is so called because it was edited and given its present form by his son.

² Cf. 1094^a1, 1104^a4. A note on reference to Aristotle's works: The standard system has a combination of numbers and a letter. The number before the letter refers to the page, and the letter to the column, and the number after the letter to the line of the standard Berlin Greek text. References to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, is from W.D. Ross' translation found in Mortimer J. Adler (Ed.), *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. II. *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol.8 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, INC., 1990), 339-436.

³ W.D. Ross' translation.

⁴ Cf. Hughes, *Aristotle: On Ethics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 118.

⁵ Cf. David Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action* (London: Duckworth, 1984), 61.

following examples to illustrate compulsion: A man is carried away by wind; a man is bound and carried by persons who have him in their power; and my hand is used by another to hit a third person.⁶ So, compulsion is an external force or circumstance, and the agent does not contribute anything to the action.⁷ Now, a question may be asked whether it can be called an action at all, as the person does not actually act; it is rather done to him.⁸ That which Aristotle refers to is the externality of the moving principle. It is outside the agent, i.e., that which gives origin to the bodily movements is not in the agent. Now let us consider some cases. The captain of the ship throws the cargo overboard to avoid sinking. A man, held captive by a tyrant and threatened with the murder of his parents and children, does something bad commanded by the tyrant.⁹ Analysing these Aristotle discovers that they are not *akousion* actions but *hekousion* actions, "for the principle that moves the instrumental parts of the body in such actions is in him."¹⁰ If it is so, we need to ask if the pleasant and noble objects are compelling. Aristotle denies that pleasant and noble objects compel us. In those things, we are not compelled, for compulsion that he speaks of is only the external force.¹¹

Aristotle distinguishes 'acting in ignorance' from 'actions done by reason of ignorance'.¹² Only the latter make the actions *akousion*. He gives the following examples for actions done by reason of ignorance: passing on knowledge which one did not know was a secret; letting the military catapult go off when he merely wanted to demonstrate how it works; injuring a person with a spear mistaking it for a practise spear with a button on it; giving someone some medicine to save him but actually killing him; wounding a man during a practise of sparring while all he wanted to do was to touch him.¹³ In these examples, the agent is said to have acted by reason of ignorance. So, ignorance refers to ignorance of the particulars, i.e., the circumstances of the action and the objects with which it is concerned: what he is doing; what or whom he is acting on; what instrument he is using; to what end; and how he is doing it.¹⁴ If the agent is ignorant of the particulars listed above, the action would be *akousion*.¹⁵ In these examples, the agent is not accountable for being ignorant, i.e., actions are to be judged by agent's desires and

⁶ Cf. 1110^a1-4, 1135^a23-28.

⁷ Cf. 1110^a2-3, 15.

⁸ Cf. Hughes, *Aristotle: On Ethics*, 119.

⁹ Cf. 1110^a5-9.

¹⁰ Cf. 1110^a16.

¹¹ Cf. 1110^a9-14.

¹² Cf. 1110^a24-25.

¹³ Cf. 1111^a8-13.

¹⁴ Cf. 1111^a3-6, 1135^a13-16.

¹⁵ Cf. 1110^a30.

thoughts at the time of acting.¹⁶ Aristotle also affirms that an action to be *akousion* on account of the ignorance of the particulars, should involve pain and repentance.¹⁷ On the other hand, ignorance of the universal (the good, what one ought to do and ought not to do) does not constitute the requisite criterion to be classified as *akousion*.¹⁸ Aristotle asserts this without giving any explanation.¹⁹

'Acting in ignorance' signifies that the agent does not act with knowledge at the time of acting. For example, the one who is drunk does not know what he is doing. He acts in ignorance. He does not act by reason of ignorance but in ignorance. There are at least three types of actions which can be classified as acting in ignorance: (1) actions done due to passion, (2) actions done in drunkenness, and (3) actions done in ignorance due to carelessness. (1) Actions done due to passion refer to actions due to anger, lust, appetite, etc. Here, the agent is overcome by emotion and the emotions, so to say, make him ignorant of what he is doing. But, Aristotle refuses them the term *akousion*, because the moving principle of the action is in the agent and it cannot be established that the agent is compelled from outside. Instead, he says that they are not rightly called *akousion*, that it would be odd to treat them as *akousion*, and that if they are called *akousion*, animals and children cannot be said to act with *hekon* (willingly).²⁰ (2) Now as regards actions which are done in a state of drunkenness, Aristotle avoids classifying them either as *akousion* or as *hekousion* but says that the agent is accountable (because we punish him) for his state of drunkenness (i.e., state of ignorance) because he got himself drunk. His drinking was an *hekousion* action that caused his ignorance. He is responsible for that action.²¹ (3) Acting in ignorance due to neglect and carelessness is when an agent acts, not knowing the laws that he ought to know and which are not very difficult to know. It is in his power to know or not to know.²² Here too, Aristotle refrains from saying that such actions are *akousion* but holds that the agent is accountable (we punish him) for his ignorance (he did not know what he could and ought to know). Ignorance of the wicked man is of this type. He is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought not to do. He is accountable for his ignorance. He is accountable for his state of mind and state of character. His wickedness is *hekousion*.²³

¹⁶ Cf. Hughes, *Aristotle: On Ethics*, p.124.

¹⁷ Cf. 1111^a20.

¹⁸ Cf. 1110^a32.

¹⁹ Cf. Jean Roberts, "Aristotle on Responsibility for Action and Character," in Llyod P. Gerson (Ed.), *Aristotle: Critical Assessments*, Vol. III *Psychology and Ethics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 236.

²⁰ Cf. 1111^a24-30, 1111^a2.

²¹ Cf. 1113^a30-35.

²² Cf. 1114^a1-3.

²³ Cf. 1114^a1-15.

HEKOUSION

If he has defined *akousion* in terms of compulsion and ignorance, he defines *hekousion* in terms of the presence of the moving principle and of the knowledge of the circumstances in the agent.²⁴ Aristotle includes under this category spontaneous actions which we do without reflection and also the actions of animals and children.

What Aristotle affirms by saying that the moving principle is in the agent is that the agent is not compelled from outside. The starting point, the *arche* is in the agent. Does he refer to the bodily movements? It seems to be so, for he says that captain's throwing of cargo overboard is *hekousion* because the bodily movement is in the agent.²⁵ The bodily movements arise from choice and desire. "Choice is either the desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire and such an origin of action is a man."²⁶ A further explication of the moving principle being in the agent is that the agent has the power to do or not to do, the power of choice to do or not to do a particular action, i.e., the action is not determined by nature, necessity or chance but by desire and choice.²⁷ It needs to be mentioned that Aristotle does not have the concept of free will when he talks of the power to do or not to do. He simply means the spontaneity of the action as opposed to being compelled from without.

Secondly, the actions to be *hekousion*, the agent should perform them with the awareness of the particular circumstances of the action such as the person acted on, the instrument used and the end to be attained.²⁸ Knowledge of the end for which the action is done is an important aspect to be considered, because it is the end chosen or desired which moves the agent to act.

PROHAIREISIS

Prohairesis refers to the choosing to do of an action in order to achieve an end, an aim.²⁹ Aristotle defines *prohairesis* as desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire.³⁰ That which Aristotle calls *prohairesis* is rendered as choice or decision (W.D. Ross)

²⁴ Cf. 1135^a23-28, 1136^a31-32, 1138^a8. Jean Roberts claims that Aristotle defines *hekousion* as those to which the agent is liable to praise and blame. See Roberts, "Aristotle on Responsibility for Action and Character," 234.

²⁵ Cf. 1110^a15.

²⁶ 1139^a4.

²⁷ Cf. 1112^a31-33. On this interpretation see Roberts, "Aristotle on Responsibility for Action and Character," 248, endnote 7.

²⁸ Cf. 1110^a18-1111^b3, 1135^a23-28.

²⁹ Cf. 1113^b3-8.

³⁰ Cf. 1139^a4.

and moral conclusions.³¹ Miss Anscombe calls *prohairesis* intention.³² In this paper, the Greek word *prohairesis* will be maintained.

Prohairesis implies *hekousion*. What would be the difference between *prohairesis* and *hekousion*? Evidently, they are not one and the same. *Prohairesis* implies acting with *hekon* (willingly) but not *vice versa*. *Prohairesis* is something more than *hekousion*. *Prohairesis* is *hekousion* done with previous deliberation. For example, when I see sweet dishes on the table and I reach out my hand, take and eat them, it is *hekousion*. *Prohairesis* would be to choose to eat it or abstain from it as it would be commanded by my reason, the practical intellect. To know the difference between *prohairesis* and *hekousion*, we need to consider that Aristotle makes animals and children sharers in *hekousion* but not in *prohairesis*. And again, the action that is done at the spur of the moment (without previous deliberation) would be *hekousion* and not *prohairesis*. And again only the continent man would be said to act with *prohairesis*, whereas the incontinent man is said to act with *hekon*; therefore, not a *prohairesis* action.³³

Prohairesis implies deliberation. The selection of an action to be performed, is preceded by a process of deliberation about that action in its relation to the end which is to be achieved by the considered action. The action chosen should lead to the achievement of the aim, the end. If there are many actions that could lead to achieve the end, the choice is of the most efficacious or the best (in accordance with reason, for we are rational beings). Practical intellect is the faculty which deliberates.³⁴

Now the deliberation or calculation is not of the end but of the means to the end. The end is assumed and the means is deliberated. So, deliberation has to consider how to put the objective into practice, i.e., what to do in order to achieve the intended goal. Deliberation also signifies calculation of the means that are within ones reach, within ones power to do or not to do. D.S. Hutchinson gives the following example to illustrate it. One wants to have good health (it is the objective). He considers how he could achieve that aim. He could achieve health by better nutrition. He, then, considers how he could achieve better nutrition. He could do that by becoming a better cook. To become a better cook he could enroll in a cooking school.³⁵ This way of reasoning backwards from the goal until one reaches that which one can actually do, is what is called deliberation.

³¹ Cf. Hughes, *Aristotle: On Ethics*, p.129 footnote 16.

³² Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), §40 (footnote). When referring to Anscombe's *Intention* the paragraph numbers will be indicated.

³³ Cf. 1111^b8-15.

³⁴ Cf. 1112^a17.

³⁵ Cf. Hutchinson, "Ethics," 210.

Deliberation is in view of something we want (the end) about which we have beliefs,³⁶ i.e., wanting something means that the agent thinks of it as worth having in some way or another. Therefore, as it can be seen, wanting is not merely being inclined to (as in hunger, sleep or anger). Wanting to go to the dentist, although not feeling inclined to, is wanting. It is this wanting that is being referred to in here. This wanting is presupposed by deliberation.

Detailed deliberation does not take place every time we choose the same means. Because we know already (we have already done it and we know what to do). Because, the object of choice is determinate, already chosen.³⁷ "For everyone ceases to enquire how he is to act when he has brought the moving principle back to himself and to the ruling part of himself; for this is what he chooses."³⁸ This is called acquiring of a state of character.

That which is chosen after deliberation is the action as a means to the end. But in a way the end is also a thing chosen. Now, what is the end of the action? It is the good, as it appears to the person. How do we know that something is good? What is the criterion of the good? What should one choose? "... [A]bsolutely and in truth the good is the object of wish, but for each person the apparent good; that that which is in truth an object of wish is an object of wish to *the good man*."³⁹ Therefore, the good man is the standard or criterion of the good, because the good man judges each class of things rightly. Aristotle gives the example of the bodies to support his claim. In the case of the bodies, that which is in truth wholesome is that which is wholesome for the bodies which are in good condition, while for the sick, other things are good.⁴⁰ So also in our case. That which is good for the goodman is in truth good for man.

HEKOUSION AND INTENTIONAL ACTION

Here, I shall use Elizabeth Anscombe's concept of intentional action to examine Aristotle's treatment of human actions. Elizabeth Anscombe uses a concept of intentional action which is not there in Aristotle. She defines intentional action as that action for which the agent gives a reason for acting in response to the question 'why?' he is doing what he is doing.⁴¹

³⁶ Cf. 1112^a11-13.

³⁷ Cf. 1113^a2-5.

³⁸ 1113^a5-7.

³⁹ 1113^a24-25 italics mine.

⁴⁰ Cf. 1113^a27-28.

⁴¹ Cf. Anscombe, *Intention*, §5.

Some hold that *hekousion* action as outlined by Aristotle can be called an intentional action. David Charles, who would define intentional action as action done for a purpose, takes this position.⁴² But there are others who think that it is not apt to call it intentional action.⁴³ David Charles argues that Aristotle is concerned with intentional action on the basis of the characterization of throwing of the cargo overboard as *hekousion*. The captain does it for a purpose: to avoid sinking and the consequent destruction of all on board. Acting for a purpose is an intentional action. And since Aristotle says that normally such actions are *akousion* but in this particular situation it is done for a purpose, it is to be considered *hekousion*. David Charles claims that there Aristotle is actually talking of intentional action.

No one would deny that throwing of the cargo overboard to avoid impending adverse consequences is an intentional action. But the question is whether we can say that all those actions which are characterized as *hekousion* by Aristotle could be termed as intentional actions. For example, one has to explain how the drunken action could be called an intentional action.⁴⁴ David Charles overcomes this problem by observing that Aristotle does not call the drunken action *hekousion* but his drinking which caused his ignorance.

But the major problem for such interpretation is Aristotle's affirmation that animals and children share in *hekousion*. If *hekousion* action is intentional action, do animals and children act intentionally? If not, what does Aristotle exactly mean by saying that animals and children have *hekousion* actions? According to Aristotle, *hekousion* action is one which has the moving principle in the agent and the agent knows the particular circumstances of the action. He also says that if actions due to appetite, passion, anger are called *akousion* then "none of the animals will act voluntarily [*hekousion*] nor will children." It would mean that acting according to appetite (which animals also have) is *hekousion*. So having the moving principle in oneself and pursuing an object of appetite (food is the goal, walking towards it is the action) is sufficient for being characterized as *hekousion*. In that category are included actions of animals and children. If so, how can we call *hekousion* an intentional action? David Charles does not address this problem. Therefore, it may not be appropriate to call *hekousion* action intentional, although many actions which are listed as *hekousion* are intentional actions.

But, in saying so, are we not saying that animals and children are incapable of intentional actions? Is it true that animals do not have intentional actions? That will be an interesting research in itself, but that is not our interest here. We have defined intentional

⁴² Cf. Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*, 61.

⁴³ For a list of those who oppose, see Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*, 256.

⁴⁴ In this regard see also Roberts, "Aristotle on Responsibility for Action and Character," 247 (footnote 4).

actions, following Elizabeth Anscombe, as an action for which the agent gives reason for acting in answer to the question 'why?' By this delimitation children and animals would not be said to have intentional actions. Thus, we hold that the *hekousion* actions of Aristotle do not properly lend themselves to be termed intentional actions.

PROHAIRETIC AND INTENTIONAL ACTION

Now, let us enquire whether *prohairesis* actions as detailed by Aristotle can be called intentional actions. It seems that *prohairesis* action can be called as intentional action. Because, according to Aristotle, animals and children do not share in *prohairesis*. *Prohairesis* implies *hekousion*. *Prohairesis* also implies that there is a rational wish (goal, purpose) and that the action is chosen before the actual performance by deliberation, which further implies that there is a rational faculty. In itself, these characteristics of *prohairesis* are the same as that of the requirements of intentional action, i.e., there is a reason for acting. So we may call it an intentional action.

But Aristotle relates *prohairesis* very strictly to virtue. *Prohairesis* is not a choice of an action for some goal to be achieved but the choice of the right thing (in accordance with right reason). So he says that the continent man acts with *prohairesis* while the self-indulgent man acts with appetite (*hekousion*). So, Aristotle would call only virtuous actions as *prohairesis* actions. While by definition, *prohairesis* action would include many (what he calls) *hekousion* actions, Aristotle restricts it only to virtuous actions. Thus, severed of its restriction to virtuous actions, *prohairesis* action can be called intentional.

CONCLUSION

Examining we find that both *hekousion* as well as *prohairesis* cannot be properly characterized as intentional actions, going by the definition of Elizabeth Anscombe. *Prohairesis* is too narrow. *Hekousion* is too broad. This is understandable, because Aristotle was not interested in intentional actions but virtue.