

Desire, Reason, and Action

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Aristotle is widely regarded as a critical figure in the action theory—and justly so. As a hybrid area of philosophy, action theory concerns the intersection of metaphysical questions about “the status of reasoning beings who make their impact in the natural causal world” and ethical questions about “human freedom and responsibility.”¹ It seeks to shed light on both the scope of moral responsibility and the nature of mental causation by exploring the relationship between mental states and bodily movements. Aristotle develops his theory of action in *De Anima* (DA), *De Motu Animalium* (MA), and *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). He outlines the metaphysical sources of action toward the end of *De Anima* by inquiring into “whatever it is in the soul which initiates [animal] motion” (DA 3.9.1).² In *De Motu Animalium*, he fleshes out the biological and psychological details of animal movement in his investigation into “the common reason for moving with any movement whatever” (MA 698a4-5).³ This theory of action then serves as the background for Aristotle’s discussion of human action, particularly the distinction between voluntary, involuntary, and non-voluntary action, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1109b30-1115a3).⁴ This paper will focus upon understanding and integrating the sketchy and divergent accounts of action found in *De Anima* and *De Motu*, with occasional assistance from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Three Wrong Accounts of Action

According to Aristotle, judgment and locomotion are the two defining capacities of the souls of animals (DA 3.9.1). Since he has “sufficiently examined” the former as of *DA* III:9, Aristotle turns his attention to the latter by asking the seemingly simple question: What in the soul initiates animal locomotion? (DA 3.9.1, 3.9.5). After a brief digression into the difficulties of differentiating parts of the soul, Aristotle examines and rejects three possible sources of locomotion, namely the faculties of nutrition, perception, and contemplation.

In excluding the nutritive soul, Aristotle first observes that the nutritive soul of plants lack the “imagination and desire” which “occurs along with” locomotion because organisms always move “for the sake of something” (DA 3.9.6). In addition, “the faculties of reproduction and nutrition” common to all organisms “would seem to impart what belongs to all,” namely “motion in respect of growth and decay” (DA 3.9.4). So if the nutritive part of the soul was the source of locomotion, then “even plants would then be mobile and would have some organic part for this sort of motion,” which is plainly contrary to fact (DA 3.9.4, 3.9.6). Aristotle’s teleological justification for this implicit principle of the dependence of parts of the body upon

¹ Hornsby, Jennifer (1998). “Action.” In E. Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Retrieved December 15, 2003, from <<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/V001>>.

² All references to *De Anima* (DA) are taken from Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields. used in class in the form Book.Chapter.Paragraph.

³ All references to *De Motu Animalium* (MA) are taken from Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, trans. Martha Nussbaum..

⁴ All references to *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) are taken from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, revised by J.O. Urmson..

faculties of the soul is fleshed out in his denial that the sensitive part of the soul is the source of locomotion.

As with the nutritive soul of plants, Aristotle rejects the sensitive soul as the source of locomotion on the grounds that some animals are “fixed and immobile until the end of their lives” (DA 3.9.6-7). Given that these creatures are not “mutilated or incompletely developed,” Aristotle claims that their lack of the necessary “organic parts” cannot fully explain their inability to move (DA 3.9.6-7). The teleological principle that “nature neither does nothing in vain nor leaves our anything necessary” indicates that if these well-formed animals did possess the capacity for movement in their souls, “the consequence would be that they would have the organic parts belonging to forward motion” (DA 3.9.7). In other words, if the capacity for locomotion came bundled with the nutritive or sensitive soul, then all plants and/or animals should be mobile. Since all plants and some animals are immobile, the source of locomotion must be sought elsewhere.

Although Aristotle’s appeal to teleology seems out of place from the modern perspective of post-Darwinian biology, the principle of the dependence of parts of the body upon faculties of the soul can be understood in terms of Aristotle’s basic philosophic view of the relation between soul and body—independent of any biological account of the origin of the traits of organisms. In *DA II:1*, Aristotle describes the soul as “the form of a natural body which has life in potentiality” and as “an actuality of a certain sort of body” (DA 2.1.4). This ontological connection between soul and body implies that “it is not necessary to ask whether the soul and body are one, just as it is not necessary to ask this concerning the wax and the seal, nor generally concerning the matter of each thing and that of which it is matter” (DA 2.1.7). Just as a seal is a particular form of wax, a gate is a particular form of iron, and a ladder is a particular form of wood, so the soul is a particular form of a living body.

At first glance, this general view of the soul-body relation might seem sufficient grounds to adopt the principle of the dependence of parts of the body upon faculties of the soul, such that if the nutritive soul of plants or the sensitive soul of animals were the source of locomotion, then all plants and/or animals would necessarily have bodily parts for locomotion. Yet such is clearly not the case in light of Aristotle’s lingering questions about whether any parts of the soul are separable from the body. Those questions indicate that the analogy between wax-and-seal and soul-and-body is limited in scope, in that some parts of the soul may be separable from the body, even though no part of the seal is separable from the wax. So at the end of *DA II:1*, Aristotle writes “that the soul is not separable from the body, or at least some parts of it if it naturally has parts, is not unclear” (i.e. the inseparability of at least some parts is clear) because “the actuality of some parts [of the soul] belong to the parts of the body themselves” (DA 2.1.12). In other words, some parts of the soul (e.g. sight) are the actuality of parts of the body (e.g. the eyes), so neither the whole soul nor those parts could be separated from the body. However, Aristotle then concedes that “nothing hinders some parts [of the soul] from being separable, because of their not being the actualities of any body” (DA 2.1.12). Ultimately, Aristotle does seem to conclude that the active intellect is separable from the body because it is “separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality” (DA 2.1.12 and 3.5.2).

Given that background understanding of the ontological connection between soul and body, the question of whether the source of locomotion could be the nutritive or sensitive parts of the soul can be put thusly: Is the soul’s power of locomotion naturally connected with some bodily organs, such that the former without the latter would only be found in a few defective individuals (i.e. “the mutilated or incompletely developed”) not whole species? (DA 3.9.6-7).

Indeed, the power of locomotion seems just as bound to bodily parts—whether the legs of humans, the tails of fish, or the wings of birds—as sight is to the eye (DA 2.1.9). In fact, for complicated reasons explicated in *MA* 9, Aristotle concludes that the “the origin of the movement-imparting soul must necessarily be in the middle” of the body, i.e. the heart (*MA* 702b16-7). However, that technical account of bodily movement neither implies that legs, tails, and wings are dispensable to movement, nor suggests that the power of locomotion is separable from the body. So the soul’s power of locomotion is justly regarded as bound to bodily parts, meaning that naturally immobile animals (i.e. those which lack the organic parts necessary for movement) must also lack that power of the soul. Yet such plants and animals do possess the nutritive and/or sensitive parts of the soul, meaning that those parts of the soul cannot be the source of movement. Ultimately then, both Aristotle’s teleological understanding of nature and his conditions for soul-body separability excludes either the nutritive or the sensitive parts of the soul as the source of bodily movement.

Third, Aristotle rejects the contemplative part of the soul as the source of locomotion. He observes that “the faculty of contemplation does not contemplate what is to be done, nor does it say anything at all about what is to be pursued or avoided” (DA 3.9.8). In contrast, because locomotion aims at an end it “always belongs to one who is avoiding or pursuing something” (DA 3.9.8). So knowing that two plus three equals five might help a zookeeper count up the number of hungry tigers who have escaped from their cages, but such knowledge alone will not impel him to take action to recover them. Even the knowledge that hungry tigers on the loose might eat innocent people will not generate action unless the zookeeper wishes to avoid that unseemly outcome.

Surprisingly, Aristotle does not argue the seemingly obvious point that neither contemplation nor any other rational capacity could only hope to explain the locomotion of humans because beasts do not share in the rational part of the soul. Such an argument would seem to be the natural counterpart to his arguments about the immobility of plants. Certainly, an alternate explanation for the motions of beasts could be developed, yet such a dual approach would seem to generate two immediate difficulties. First, as Aristotle later argues, “if there were two things which initiated motion... they would do so according to some common form”—meaning that the two explanations could and should be condensed and unified into a single explanation (DA 3.10.3). Second, since humans share the basic capacities of all animals, humans would either mysteriously lack the animal source of motion or be subject to two competing sources of motion. Since neither of those options would be acceptable to Aristotle, contemplation could be excluded as the source of locomotion. However, in his essay “Desire and the Good in *De Anima*,” Henry Richardson persuasively argues that Aristotle does not advance such an “under-inclusiveness” argument against contemplation because “for the animals that, strictly speaking, lack *nous* [contemplation] and calculative reason (*logismos*), *phantasia* [imagination] stands in the place of *nous*, counting as ‘some sort of thinking,’ as Aristotle writes in the first sentence of ch. 10 (433a9-12)” of *De Anima*.⁵ So because thought and imagination are functional equivalents in the generation of action, the problem of dual explanation never gains much traction. Yet as we shall see, the sort of thought relevant to action is practical reason, not contemplation.

Desire as the Ultimate Source of Action

⁵ Henry Richardson, “Desire and the Good in *De Anima*,” in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Rorty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 387.

Aristotle's arguments against the next two candidates for initiators of action—practical reason and desire—are of a substantially different form than those against the faculties of nutrition, sensation, and contemplation. He does not claim that practical reason and desire cannot initiate motion, but rather only that neither by itself constitutes an adequate explanation of motion.

As for practical reason, although it is concerned with “avoiding or pursuing something,” it does not “directly command” action (DA 3.9.8). As Aquinas explains in his *Commentary*, we can approach “a practical affair in a merely speculative way” by “considering it universally, not in view of an action in particular.”⁶ Thus our zookeeper might consider what ought to be done if the tigers escape without actually implementing the plan at that moment. In addition, “even when reason does command and thought does say to flee or pursue something,” a person is still capable of acting on the basis of feelings and appetites instead of such rational judgment (DA 3.9.8). An incontinent zookeeper faced with the prospect of five escaped tigers might allow his fear of being fired or his lust to finish his lunch to overrule his rational judgment that he ought to immediately take action to recover them. Thus practical reason alone cannot fully account for the initiation of motion.

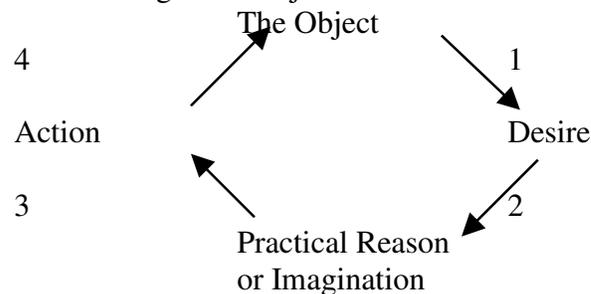
As for desire, Aristotle rejects the idea that “desire is in charge of this motion,” on the similar grounds that continent people experience desires but nonetheless follow their reason (DA 3.9.9). So a continent zookeeper would fear being fired and lust after his lunch, yet nevertheless act on the basis of his rational judgment. Such counterexamples indicate that desire alone cannot satisfactorily explain the initiation of motion.

Consistent with those arguments, Aristotle proposes a preliminary explanation of action at the start of *DA III:10* in claiming that “these two appear to initiate motion: desire and reason” (DA 3.10.1). He then immediately qualifies this proposal in two significant ways. First and as expected, the reason in question is not contemplative reason, but rather limited to “the reason which engages in calculation for the sake of something and is practical,” i.e. practical reason (DA 3.10.1). Second and more interestingly, to account for people who “follow their imaginations contrary to their knowledge” and animals possessing “neither thinking nor calculating” but instead only imagination, imagination is treated as a possible stand in for practical reason (DA 3.10.1). Before delving into such details about the nature and function of desire, practical reason, and imagination, let us first develop a panoptic sketch of the generation of action from *De Anima* and *De Motu*.

In *DA III:10*, Aristotle's portrays action as the outcome of a fairly strict progression from desire to practical reason/imagination. After noting that both desire and practical reason are necessarily purposive, i.e. “always for the sake of something,” Aristotle claims that the something which desire is for (i.e. its object) is “the starting point of practical reason, while its final stage is the beginning of action” (DA 3.10.1). In other words, a desire for some object arouses practical reason, which then concludes in action. Thus desire and practical reason (or imagination) are not independent lines of causation in the generation of action, but rather form a single causal path from object to desire to practical reason/imagination to action. However, that causal path does not consist in the sufficient, antecedent, and efficient causation found in modern causalist theories of action, but rather final causation. As already noted, both action and its mental sources are goal-directed toward the object of desire—meaning that that object of desire is the final cause of desire, practical reason/imagination, and action. As a final cause, the object

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries (Notre Dame, Ind.: Dumb Ox Books, 1994), Book III, Lecture 14, Number 814.

of desire is both “the starting point and the end point” of action (DA 3.10.8). It is the starting point in that it arouses the initial desire. It is the end point in that the action is completed when it is achieved. Thus we might helpfully represent Aristotle’s view of the generation of action as a circle originating and terminating in the object of desire as follows:



This representation of the generation of action makes sense of Aristotle’s claim that “the object of desire initiates motion and because of this thought initiates motion, because its starting point is the object of desire” (DA 3.10.2). Thought does initiate motion, but only insofar as serves as a link between a desire for some object and an action in pursuit of it. Aristotle makes a similar point in *De Motu* in saying that “the first mover [of action] is the object of desire and also of thought” (as concerns “the end in the sphere of things that can be done”)—meaning that, as Nussbaum observes, the goal of action must be “an object both of desire and of [practical] cognition” (MA 700b24-5).⁷

After sketching this basic picture of the generation of action, Aristotle declares that “it is reasonable that these two appear to be what initiates motion: desire and practical thought” (DA 3.10.2). However, that joint explanation of bodily movement does not last long, for Aristotle soon claims that “there is one thing initiating motion: the faculty of desire” (DA 3.10.3). This distilled view of the generation of action is not based upon any new set of arguments, but rather emerges straightforwardly from the account of action developed thus far. In essence, because practical reason/imagination must be activated by some desire, it is not capable of initiating action on its own. In contrast, desire (or rather the object of desire) is “the starting point and the end point” of action, as explained above (DA 3.10.8). In general, Aristotle is unwilling to adopt a dual explanation of action in terms of both reason and desire, on the grounds that “if there were two things which initiated motion... they would do so according to some common form” (DA 3.10.3). For such reasons, Aristotle claims that “it is apparent... that what is called desire is the sort of capacity in the soul which initiates motion” (DA 3.10.5)

Action in *De Motu*

Aristotle offers a slightly different and more general perspective on “the origin of an animal’s motion” in *De Motu*. In Chapter 6, consistent with the emphasis on final causation in *De Anima* III:10, he observes that all animal movement is purposive with respect to some object, in the sense that “all animals both impart movement and are moved for the sake of things, so that this is the limit to all their movement: the thing for-the-sake-of-which” (MA 700b14-7). He then considers the various sources of action, classifying them as either cognitive, desiderative, or both:

Now we see that the movers of the animal are reasoning and *phantasia* [imagination] and choice and wish and appetite. And all of these can be reduced to thought and desire. For both *phantasia* and sense-perception hold the same place as thought, since all are concerned with making distinctions—though they

⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 337.

differ from each other in ways we have discussed elsewhere. Wish and spiritedness and appetite are all desire, and choice shares both in reasoning and in desire (MA 700b17-23).

Following Nussbaum's commentary, the term *nous* (or thought) is "used generically... for the cognitive faculties," such that imagination and sense-perception are functional substitutes, but "not types of *nous*."⁸ In contrast, "the desiring faculty... has three species: wish spiritedness, and appetite."⁹ Integrating this general view with the progression of action developed in *De Anima* III:10, the generation of action requires both a cognitive element (practical reason, imagination, or perhaps sensation) and an affective element (some type of desire). As Nussbaum observes, "the division [of the sources of action in *MA*] suggests that both cognition and desire, in some form, must be mentioned in every explanation of action, and that neither is, alone, sufficient to move the animal."¹⁰ More precisely, *De Motu* makes clear the general categories required for the generation of action (i.e. cognition and desire) only discussed in terms of specifics in *De Anima*.

Given Aristotle's emphasis on desire as the ultimate source of all action in *De Anima* III:10, Aristotle's claim toward the end of *De Motu* 6 that "the animal moves and progresses in virtue of desire or choice" might seem puzzling (MA 701a3-4). Aristotle does imply that choice involves some desiderative element in saying (as quoted above) that choice "shares both in reasoning and in desire" (MA 700b23). Aristotle more fully explains the nature of choice as the "deliberate desire of things in our own power" in Book III of *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE 1113a12-3). As that definition indicates, choice does involve both cognitive and desiderative aspects in that the "object of choice" is that which is "desired after deliberation" because "when we have decided as a result of deliberation, we desire in accordance with our deliberation" (NE 1113a10-3). Consequently, Aristotle's inclusion of choice with desire as a possible source of animal movement in *De Motu* does not contradict his emphasis on desire as the ultimate explanation of animal movement in *De Anima* III:10.

Also noteworthy is the role Aristotle gives to perception in the generation of action in *De Motu*, a subject not directly addressed in *De Anima*. In Chapter 6, he notes that the "desire or choice" upon which animal movement depends occurs only "when some alteration has taken place in accordance with sense-perception or *phantasia* [imagination]" (MA 701a3-5). Aristotle's basic point here seems true in a simple and obvious way. Desires do not arise willy-nilly, but rather in response to some extrospective change (via sense-perception) or introspective change (via imagination). To take an obvious example, the chocolate cake that I have hidden in the pantry will not arouse any desire in me until I either happen to see it or imagine it. In this early stage of action, imagination can serve as a stand in for perception, whereas later imagination may serve the role of practical reason. So in our later discussion of imagination, we will have reason enough to distinguish between practical and contemplative imagination, even though Aristotle does not draw such a distinction explicitly. Also to be considered later is Aristotle's apparent suggestion, found in *DM* but not *DA*, that perception may serve the functional role of practical reason in the generation of action.

The most difficult passage from *De Motu* to reconcile with *De Anima* is found in Chapter 8, for there Aristotle sketches a rather different progression to animal movement than the one found in *De Anima* III:10. In the course of considering "why it is pretty much at the same time that the creature think it should move forward and moves, unless something else impedes it,"

⁸ Ibid., 333.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Aristotle writes that “the affections suitably prepare the organic parts [for movement], desire the affections, and *phantasia* the desire; and *phantasia* comes about either through thought or through sense-perception” (MA 702a16-20). Ordered forward time, the development is from thought/sense-perception to imagination to desire to affections to prepared bodily parts to bodily movement. This progression differs substantially from that found in *DA* in two ways: (1) it omits the step of practical reason/imagination between desire and movement and (2) it presents imagination as necessary to the generation of desire. Given the general context of this description of the antecedents of action, however, it’s not clear that the seeming departure from *DA* ought to be of any great concern. Aristotle is not interested in a general account of action in this chapter, but rather with the sorts of mental states which are “accompanied by heating and chilling” (MA 701b34-5). Such bodily changes in temperature are relevant to action because, on Aristotle’s view, bodily movement is possible because “parts [of the body] expand because of heat and contract against because of cold” (MA 701b15-6). Thus he spends much of his time associating various mental states with heating and chilling, including “<the thoughts and *phantasia* of> the painful and the pleasant,” passions such as “feelings of confidence, fears, sexual excitement, and other bodily affections, painful and pleasant,” and “memory and anticipation” of the pleasant and painful (MA 701b34-702a7). In addition, Aristotle reiterates the basic view of *De Anima* at the outset of this discussion, noting that “the origin of motion is, as we have said, the object of pursuit or avoidance in the sphere of action” (MA 701b32-3). Given that context, the seemingly problematic progression to action ought not be read as a new account of the generation of action in competition with that of *DA* III:10, but perhaps instead as a summary of the mental states relevant to the heating and chilling of bodily parts. If anything, the description of action in question is problematic for the reason suggested by Nussbaum, namely that it misleadingly suggests an instrumentalist view in which non-physical psychological processes cause bodily change, rather than the properly Aristotelian hylomorphic account in which all mental states are necessarily enmattered.¹¹

In light of this survey of Aristotle’s general account of action, let us now focus upon the details of the nature and function of desire, practical reason, imagination, and perception in the generation of action.

Desire

In the course of rejecting the nutritive part of the soul as the source of action *DA* III:9, Aristotle observes that animal movement always “occurs along with... desire” because “other than by force, nothing is moved without desiring or fleeing something” (*DA* 3.9.6). (Earlier, Aristotle makes clear in that the positive and negative forms of desire, which respectively involve pursuit and flight, are the same qua actuality and capacity (*DA* 3.7.4).) Aristotle does not offer any direct arguments as to why desire is a necessary condition of action. That might seem to be a problem, for even if “motion is always for the sake of something” such that it must originate in a similarly goal-directed mental state, it’s not obvious why that goal-directed mental state must be a form of or otherwise involve desire (*DA* 3.9.6). Happily, Aristotle’s account of the origin and nature of desire sheds some indirect light on this subject.

In Aristotle’s theory of action, just as action depends upon desire, so desire depends upon perception. In particular, whether an organism has the capacity to experience pleasures and pains in perception or not determines whether it has the capacity to desire or not. The transition from perception to desire involves three steps. First, for reasons elucidated in *DA* III:12-13,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

Aristotle regards touch as the basic and primitive form of perception, in the sense that “all animals have at least one kind of perception, [namely] touch” (DA 2.3.1). Second, any creature “which has perception also has both pleasure and pain, as well as both the pleasant and the painful” (DA 2.3.1). And third, any creature with the pleasant and the painful “also has appetite, since appetite is a desire for what is pleasant” (DA 2.3.1). Although Aristotle does not argue for these inferences from perception to pleasure/pain and from pleasure/pain to desire, the connection between them is hardly mysterious. Aquinas explains Aristotle’s basic line of reasoning thusly:

All animals have at least one sense, touch; but where there is any sensation there is pleasure and pain... Pleasure and pain come from external sensations, especially touch... For everything that is touched is either congenial to the one touching, and then it gives pleasure; or uncongenial, and then it gives pain. But whatever can feel pleasure and pain can desire the pleasant. Since then all animals, without exception, have a sense of touch, all can desire.¹²

As Aristotle puts the point most simply: “If perception, then also desire” (DA 2.3.1).

Despite this close connection between perception and desire, Aristotle later argues for desire as its own distinct faculty of the soul, separate from the basic nutritive, sensitive, and rational faculties. So although the possession of sensitive soul is a necessary and sufficient condition for the capacity to desire, perception is nonetheless distinct from desire. Aristotle’s classification of appetite, spirit, and wish as three forms of desire is critical to this argument (DA 2.3.1). Appetite concerns “the pleasant and the painful,” particularly pursuit of the former and flight from the latter (NE 111b16-17). Spirit is presumably associated with more complex emotions, such as anger, confidence, envy, honor, and so on (NE 1105b21-4). Wish concerns the selection of ends by the rational part of the soul (NE 111b20-30). Against this background understanding of the basic types of desire, Aristotle departs from the Platonic view of the soul by arguing that if we “distinguish and separate [parts of the soul] consequent upon capabilities” then there will be “faculties of nutrition, perception, thought, and deliberation, and further a faculty of desire” (DA 3.10.5). The distinct faculty of desire is broadly justified by the fact that it “would seem to differ from [the others] in account and in its potentiality” (DA 3.9.3). In particular, neither the rational soul alone nor the sensitive soul alone can adequately subsume all three forms of desire because appetite and spirit are connected to perception, while wish involves reason (DA 3.9.3). That consideration is decisive for Aristotle; he flatly rejects the Platonic division of the soul (whether into rational and irrational parts or into rational, spirited, or appetitive parts) according to which the various types of desires are found “in each part” as “definitely absurd” (DA 3.9.3). Based upon his comments in *DA* III:10, the absurdity lies in the classification of fundamentally similar mental states into different parts of the soul. There, Aristotle describes his division of major faculties (i.e. nutrition, perception, thought, deliberation, and desire) as justified on the grounds that they “differ from one another to a greater extent than do the faculties of appetite and passion” (DA 3.10.5). As such, appetite and passion (along with wish) ought to be subsumed under the single faculty of desire, rather than divided amongst the other faculties.

Aristotle’s classification of the sources of action as either cognitive, desiderative, or both in *De Motu* 6 supports this division of the soul, for reasons explained in Nussbaum’s commentary. Consider the already-quoted passage about types of mental capacities again:

Now we see that the movers of the animal are reasoning and *phantasia* [imagination] and choice and wish and appetite. And all of these can be reduced to thought and desire. For both *phantasia* and sense-perception hold the same place as thought, since all are concerned with making distinctions—though they

¹² Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book II, Lecture 5, Number 289.

differ from each other in ways we have discussed elsewhere. Wish and spiritedness and appetite are all desire, and choice shares both in reasoning and in desire (MA 700b17-23).

As Nussbaum explains:

Chapter 6 thus agrees with the anti-Platonist claim of *DA* III.9-10: the most important division made in preparing an account of the soul is not the division between rational and non-rational, but a division between cognitive and desiderative..., each of which has a rational and non-rational subspecies. The rational and non-rational subspecies have in common the fact that, in an explanation of action, they can, in the language of 700b20, “hold the same place.”¹³

So although Aristotle never directly concerns himself with the division of the parts of the soul in *De Motu*, the implicit relationship between desire and the primary faculties of the soul (nutritive, sensitive, and rational) is very much the same.

Notably, it is only in virtue of Aristotle’s unification of the various types of desire (i.e. appetite, spirit, and wish) into a single faculty of desire allows him to offer a simple and unified account of the generation of action. If appetite, spirit, and wish were divided into various parts of the soul, Aristotle would be required to develop distinct explanations in terms of each part, despite the fact that they all share “a common form” (*DA* 3.10.3).

More interestingly, the unified faculty of desire enables Aristotle to explain the way in which even continent action is initiated by desire, despite his initial claim that “continent people, though they experience desire and appetite, do not do those things which they desire, but instead follow reason” (*DA* 3.9.9). In fact, continent people do not wholly set aside their desires, such that their actions spring solely from reason. Rather, they form and act upon a wish (i.e. a desire formed by reason) contrary to some appetite or spirit. Aristotle explains this point immediately after proposing desire as the fundamental source of action, noting that “as things are, reason apparently does not initiate movement without desire” because “wish is desire, and whenever something is moved in accordance with calculation it is also moved in accordance with wish” (*DA* 3.10.3). So even the continent man is moved by desire ultimately—in the sense that his rational deliberations about the proper course of action initiate action in virtue of wish.

Unfortunately, Aristotle’s discussion of wish in Book III, Chapter 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is rather murky. Wish seems to be the form of desire associated with choice, i.e. the “deliberate desire of things in our own power” (*NE* 1113b11). In particular, Aristotle claims that “wish relates... to the end, choice to what contributes to the end,” in the sense that “we wish to be healthy, but we choose the acts which will make us healthy” (*NE* 1111b26-7). And in general, wish is the form of desire associated with reason, while choice evokes desire “in accordance with... [rational] deliberation” (*NE* 1113a12). Given this relationship between choice and wish, it is hardly surprising that Aristotle characterizes the continent man as “act[ing] with choice, but not with appetite” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* 1111a15-6). As the discussion in *De Anima* suggests, such a man does desire the object of his choice, but only as wish, not appetite or spirit. Ultimately then, continent action is not a genuine counter-example to the proposal that desire is the ultimate source of action, but an instance of it.

Two additional points about the role of desire in the generation of action are worth noting before turning to the nature and function of practical reason. First, the object of desire will be “either the good or the apparent good—and not every good, but the good concerned with what can be done” (*DA* 3.10.4). As concerns human action, Aristotle observes that the apparent goods are generally mistaken for real goods “due to pleasure” which “appears a good when it is not” (*NE* 1113a34). The mark of the good man is that he “judges each class of things rightly,” so that he correctly identifies that which is diseased, wholesome, bitter, sweet, heavy, hot, and so on

¹³ Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*, 333.

(NE 1113a29-30). More generally, Aristotle proposes that “each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant” (NE 1113a31-2). So the cowardly man would regard almost any risk to life and limb as horribly frightful, whereas the rash man would find even substantial risk invigorating. Yet the fact that vicious men are deceived by such appearances of the good does not imply that “all men aim at the apparent good, but have no control over how things appear to him” since “the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character” (NE 1114a32-1114b2). Men cannot be so exonerated of responsibility for wrongdoing: a person is “responsible for how things appear” to him because he is responsible for his state of character, which is not given “by nature” but rather “depends on him” (NE 1114a2-3, 16-17). Second, creatures with “a perception of time” may develop contrary desires “whenever rationality and appetites are opposed” (DA 3.10.6). Aristotle uses such conflicts to illustrate that “the things which initiate motion will be more than one [in number],” even though the faculty of desire “which initiates motion is one in kind” (DA 3.10.6). Unfortunately, he offers no account of the way in which such conflicting desires impact the generation of action.

Practical Reason

Aristotle doesn’t say much about the nature and function of practical reason in the generation of action in *De Anima*, other than to describe it as the intermediate between desire and action (DA 3.10.1). He does offer further details in both *De Motu* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, although the interpretations thereof are the subject of much controversy in the secondary literature. Generally speaking, Aristotle does not regard practical and contemplative reason as “two reasons” but rather “one reason operative in two distinct fields.”¹⁴ Practical reason is “the reason which engages in calculation for the sake of something and is practical,” meaning that it differs from “the contemplative reason because of its goal” (DA 3.10.1). As William Hammond distinguishes the two, “the function of theoretic [i.e. contemplative] reason is to discriminate between the true and the false; the function of the practical reason is to discriminate between the good and the bad.”¹⁵ Or, as Sarah Broadie writes, “just as theoretic reason works to convert and initially brute fact into a fact intelligible to a mind seeking understanding, so it is the work of practical reason to convert the agent’s particular situation into elements of a realised good action.”¹⁶ Practical reason is thus inherently concerned with “deliberation and conduct, with knowledge as applied to action.”¹⁷

As presented in Chapter 7 of *De Motu*, practical reason generates action through the practical syllogism, i.e. through a deduction from premises to action. After raising the question of why “thinking is sometimes accompanied by action and sometimes not,” Aristotle draws a speculative parallel between the methods of theoretical and practical reasoning:

It looks as if almost the same thing happens as in the case of reasoning and making inferences about unchanging objects. But in that case, the end is a speculative proposition (for whenever one thinks the two premises, one thinks and puts together the conclusion), whereas here the conclusion which results from the two premises is the action (MA 701a6-12).

Aristotle then offers a series of examples of practical syllogisms, including:

P1. Every man should take walks.	P1. I should make something good.
P2. I am a man.	P2. A house is something good.
C. (The action of walking.)	C. (The action of making a house.)

¹⁴ William Hammond, *Aristotle's Psychology* (New York: MacMillian, 1902), lxiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 225.

¹⁷ Hammond, *Aristotle's Psychology*, lxiv.

As William Hammond observes, the general pattern of such syllogisms is the major premise is “a general conception or a moral maxim,” the minor premise is “a particular instance,” and the conclusion is “an action involved in subsuming the particular instance under the general conception or law.”¹⁸ Aristotle rather cryptically characterizes the premises as being “of two kinds,” namely “the good” and “the possible” (MA 701a24-5). Nussbaum regards these two kinds as applying to the major and minor premises respectively, in that the major premise “mentions the object as desirable” or good while the minor premise “pertains to the particular situation and shows how it is possible for the desired goal to be attained.”¹⁹ That the major premise concerns the good seems fairly obvious from Aristotle’s examples, but the precise way in which “I am a man” or “A house is something good” shows “how it is possible for the desired goal to be attained” is rather mysterious.²⁰ Perhaps the mere fact of being a man is supposed to imply the possibility of walking, while the house is a possible way of making something good. After his initial examples, Aristotle continues the parallel to theoretical reasoning by observing that “reason does not start and consider at all the second of the two premises, the obvious one,” such that “if taking walks is good for a man, it [i.e. reason] does not waste time consider that he is a man” (MA 701a26-8). In other words, we reason practically via action-enthymemes—and so introspection will not reveal any laborious process of step-by-step deduction to action.

Perhaps the most obvious and pressing worry about Aristotle’s discussion of the role of the practical syllogism in the generation of action rests with his puzzling examples. Walks are indeed goods, but they are not unconditional goods that ought to be performed continuously or regardless of present circumstances. Similarly, building a house is a generally worthwhile activity, but not for someone who already has a house in which to live, for someone who is a terrible builder, or for someone who is engaged in other worthwhile pursuits. In general, Aristotle’s examples of practical syllogisms seem so narrowly focused upon the question of whether to perform some action or not that they fail to consider the wider context of choices and option in which all of our actions take place. An additional problem is seen in Aristotle’s more complex example of cloak-making:

- P1. I need a covering.
- P2. A cloak is a covering.
- C1. I need a cloak.
- P3. What I need, I have to make.
- C2. (The action of cloak-making.)

Even ignoring the false premise “What I need, I have to make,” the inference from P1 and P2 to C1 is invalid: it presumes that there exists only one type of covering, namely cloaks. The house-making example suffers from a similar problem, in that it treats house-building as the only good thing that a person could make. Clearly, rational human action ought not be grounded in such transparently faulty reasoning.

Another puzzling feature of Aristotle’s treatment of the practical syllogism in *De Motu* is the total lack of any role for deliberation about the proper means to the desired ends, as discussed at length in *NE* III:3. There, Aristotle emphasizes that we do deliberate the best course of action for obtaining our already-established ends:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*, 190.

²⁰ Ibid.

For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall convince, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does any one else deliberate about his end. Having set the end they consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and best produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means *this* will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last (NE 1112b12-19).

Such deliberation is constrained by the possible (i.e. “things that might be brought about by our own efforts”) and may concern “the instruments” and the “use of them” or “the means” to the end, the “mode of using [the means],” and “the means of bringing [the means] about” (NE 1112b26-30). Aristotle explicitly connects such deliberation to self-generated human action. He observes that the facts that (1) “deliberation is about the things to be done by the agent himself” and (2) “actions are for the sake of things other than themselves” implies that “man is a moving principle of actions” (NE 1112b31-3). All considered then, it is quite strange that Aristotle gives no role to deliberation in his discussion of practical reason in *De Motu*.

Both of these worries about practical reason in *De Motu*—i.e. about the strange practical syllogisms and the absence of a role for deliberation—are fairly well-resolved by regarding the practical syllogism as a condensation and formalization of deliberations. Nussbaum seems to adopt this approach in arguing that the practical syllogism is “a model in the service of Aristotle’s theory of reasoning back from a desired goal to the first action necessary for its achievement that is in our power,” even “when such reasoning is not explicit.”²¹ She writes:

The two premises correspond to what we saw were the who major elements in an anankastic explanation: the desire for the goal, and a belief to the effect that if the goal is to be realize such-and-such will need further deliberative work; the chain will continue until the agent reaches a minor premise that is in his power. At this point, if both “premises” are present, the agent acts “unless something presents or compels him (701a16).”²²

Nussbaum argues that the examples of practical syllogisms offered by Aristotle in *DM* 6 do not contain sufficient detail to constitute “an adequate explanation of an action”—but that is not worrisome because Aristotle “is more interested in claiming that we need some combination of cognition and desire than in showing just how our goal must be specified before we take action toward it.”²³ If that interpretation is correct, it implies that Aristotle’s examples ought to be regarded as sketchy outlines of practical reasoning, not fully-developed lines of reasoning from desire to action. In that case, the absence of critical steps like “Given my other projects, it would be appropriate for me to walk now” and “A cloak would be the best sort of covering for me” are not philosophically significant.

Aristotle’s discussion of practical wisdom in *NE* VI:7 supports this general approach to integrating deliberation with the practical syllogism. There, Aristotle writes that “practical wisdom... is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate” (1141b8-9). The man of practical wisdom is “capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action” (NE 1141b13-4). Then, in the context of indicating the importance of knowledge of particulars and thus experience, Aristotle offers the following telling example:

For if a man knew that light meats are digestible and wholesome, but did not know which sorts of meat are light, he would not produce health, but the man who knows that chicken is wholesome is more likely to produce health (1141b18-20).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 191.

That example is noteworthy precisely because it can be easily transformed into a practical syllogism, as commentators on his ethics routinely do.²⁴ To reconstruct elaborately:

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|--|
| P1. Foods which produce health are good for me to eat. |
| P2. Digestible and wholesome foods produce health. |
| C1. Digestible and wholesome foods are good for me to eat. |
| P3. Light meats are digestible and wholesome. |
| C2. Light meats are good for me to eat. |
| P4. Chicken is a light meat. |
| C3. (The action of chicken-eating.) |

So in this case, as in others, the practical syllogism is perhaps best understood as the formalization of the process of deliberation.

Before turning to imagination, one last element of Aristotle's discussion of the practical syllogism in *DM* 7 is worth noting. Aristotle characterizes the conclusion of the practical syllogism as an action—not as a reason to act, a motive, or some other mental state. So given the necessary desire and practical reasoning, no further trying, willing, or whatnot is required for action. So as Nussbaum notes, “the account of the practical syllogism in chapter 7 says quite clearly that a certain combination of cognitive and desiderative activities is a sufficient condition for motion; there seems to be no room here for a stage at which an immaterial resolve is translated into bodily movement.”²⁵ Given that general view, it's hardly surprising that Aristotle's analysis of moral failure in *NE* VII:3 concerns a failure to connect the universal and the particular in the practical syllogism, not any mysterious failure of will despite the requisite desire and reasoning (*NE* 1147a1-9). So a person may know both the universal (e.g. “Dry food is good for every man”) and the particular (e.g. “I am a man”) of a practical syllogism, yet fail in the “exercising [of that] knowledge” (*NE* 1147a5-7). Such knowledge is merely potential in him, not actual—and thus not generative of action (*NE* 1147a10-7).

Imagination

As already noted, Aristotle treats imagination as stand-in for practical reason in order to account for people who “follow their imaginations contrary to their knowledge” and animals possessing “neither thinking nor calculating” but instead only imagination (*DA* 3.10.1). Regarding practical reason and imagination as functional analogs in the generation of action may seem strange, as imagination seems more analogous to perception than practical reason. In order to see the parallel, let us consider precisely what Aristotle means by his concept “phantasia,” since it's not clear that it maps perfectly onto our modern understanding of “imagination.”

In *De Anima* III:3, Aristotle positively characterizes imagination as “that in virtue of which a particular image comes about for us” (*DA* 3.3.6). Generally however, Aristotle spends so much time distinguishing imagination from other mental states in this chapter that understanding its role in the generation of action is difficult. Yet even the negative claims about what imagination is not are illuminating. It is not conceiving, since it is “an affectation which is up to us” (*DA* 3.3.4). It is not perception, since it is not always present, does not seem to belong to all animals, and is “for the most part false” (*DA* 3.3.7). It is also neither knowledge nor understanding, since (like perception) those states are always true (*DA* 3.3.8). Although belief may be true or not, imagination is not belief because “every case of belief implies conviction, while conviction implies being persuaded, and persuasion implies reason” and “among the

²⁴ Gerard Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 96-7.; Hammond, *Aristotle's Psychology*, lxxv.

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*, 150-1.

beasts, none has reason, but some have imagination” (DA 3.3.9). Aristotle also rejects the possibility that imagination is somehow “fashioned from” a combination of belief and perception for various reasons which need not concern us (DA 3.3.10). Nonetheless, imagination does require perception in the sense that it seems “to occur in things which perceive and concern that which perception concerns” (DA 3.3.11). Thus Aristotle claims that imagination is “a motion effected by actual perception,” yet such perception need not be visual, despite the fact that the word for imagination (*phantasia*) derives from that of light (*phaos*) (DA 3.3.14-15). Ultimately then, it seems that Aristotle’s concept of *phantasia* is not too far from our notion of imagination.

At the very end of *DA III:3*, Aristotle connects imagination with action in animals as follows:

Because instances of imagination persist and are similar to perceptions, animals do many things in accordance with them, some because of their lacking reason, e.g. beasts, and others because their reason is sometimes shrouded by passion, or sickness, or sleep, e.g. humans (DA 3.3.16).

In his commentary on this passage, Aquinas explains that “images very largely determine the behavior of animals” because “just as sensation arouse appetitive impulses whilst the sensed objects are present, so do images when they are absent.”²⁶ Notably, this form of imagination is the functional equivalent of desire-arousing perception, not action-generating practical reason. It is the sort of imagination mentioned at the end of *De Motu* 6: “The animal moves and progresses in virtue of desire or choice, when some alteration has taken place in accordance with sense-perception or *phantasia*” (MA 701a3-5). In contrast, the form of imagination analogous to practical reason must perform the same role as deliberation, meaning that it must concern “what contributes to ends” (NE 1112b12). While we do not tend to think of imagination such a practical way, examples are not difficult to construct. So a dog who desires to run free in the world will start digging under the fence upon imaging a tunnel to the other side, a child will climb onto the kitchen counter upon imagining reaching the desired but forbidden cookies from that height, and a man will stop by the grocery store based upon an image of himself buying milk there. In such ways, as Aquinas suggests, imagination can “impel action in the absence of sense-objects.”²⁷ So like practical reason, some imagination is goal-directed, in that it enables animals to consider various means of fulfilling desires.

Perception

In *De Anima*, Aristotle mentions only practical reason and imagination as functional equivalents in the generation of action. Yet in *De Motu*, Aristotle repeatedly allows that perception might also serve the same functional role as imagination and practical reason. So in the course of illustrating the principle that “whatever we do without calculating, we do quickly,” Aristotle writes:

For whenever a creature is actually using sense-perception or *phantasia* or thought toward the thing for-the-sake-of-which, he does at once what he desires. For the activity of the desire takes the place of questioning or thinking. “I have to drink,” says appetite. “Here’s drink,” says sense-perception or *phantasia* or thought. At once he drinks. This, then is the way that animals are impelled to move and act: the proximate reason for movement is desire, and this comes to be either through sense-perception or through *phantasia* and thought (MA 701a29-38).

Throughout this passage, Aristotle treats sense-perception as capable of fulfilling the calculative role normally played by either imagination or practical reason. Such functional equivalence seems reasonable enough from a consideration of cases. If I desire drink, then all that is required

²⁶ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book III, Lecture 6, Number 669.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Book III, Lecture 15, Number 818.

for action is perception of the location of the glass of wine—provided that it lies within sight or touch. If the wine is hidden behind some books, then a bit of imagination as to where I might find it will be necessary. If it is still in its bottle down in the cellar, then practical reason must navigate the complex course of action required to open the bottle and pour a glass. Yet upon further consideration, either imagination or practical reason does seem necessary to the generation of action because perception alone indicates nothing about the appropriate means to the desired end. So even when the glass of wine is within both sight and reach, I must either know or imagine that that liquid will quench my thirst. Perception alone cannot connect the liquid in the glass to my thirst.

As already indicated, the inclusion of perception with imagination and practical reason is only found in *De Motu*. The well-developed action theory of *De Anima* speaks only of imagination and practical reason as capable of calculating means to ends. Although it seems that *DA* offers the correct view, it's not clear which text represents Aristotle's considered view.

Concluding Thoughts

While the metaphysical foundations of Aristotle's action theory are developed in just a few short chapters of *De Anima* and *De Motu Animalium*, the theory is generally complex and occasionally murky. Happily, it is also still plausible and fascinating, particularly in its biological perspective and emphasis on final causation.

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