

Javier Echeñique

Aristotle's Ethics and Moral Responsibility.

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Javier Echeñique presents a meticulous examination of Aristotle's doctrine of moral responsibility. The study focuses on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*, but in addition to these, and to the *Magna Moralia*, works that are not explicitly about ethics are also brought up and discussed where appropriate. The focus of Part I of the text, which comprises two chapters, is to establish that Aristotle indeed presents an account of moral responsibility. In the course of defending this line, it becomes necessary to establish what counts as an account of moral responsibility and to flesh out Aristotle's view, which Echeñique calls ethical ascription, in detail. Echeñique argues that Aristotle's is not simply one possible account of moral responsibility; it is, on his view, a plausible account. The view derives a good part of its plausibility from Part II, the consideration of the defeaters of ethical ascription.

Chapter 1 offers a brief overview of the debate concerning the nature of moral responsibility, starting with the latter half of the twentieth century. To this end, Echeñique gives prominence to the influential work of P.F. Strawson. This move situates the sort of account of moral responsibility Echeñique takes Aristotle to be offering. In particular, Aristotle's account differs from the Strawsonian account in several ways. First, Aristotelian praise (*epainos*) and blame (*psogos*) are not Strawsonian reactive attitudes, like admiration, condemnation, and disdain (24). They are, rather, *logoi*. Second, Aristotelian recipients of praise and blame need not be *accountable*, that is, full-fledged moral agents (25). Children, therefore, are candidates for Aristotelian praise and blame, even if from a Strawsonian point of view they typically are not. Third, despite the fact that children are not themselves already full members of the moral community (a point on which Aristotle and Strawson would seemingly agree), children are not exempted from praise and blame on Aristotle's view, in the way they are on Strawson's. On the Strawsonian account, children are seemingly fully exempted from moral responsibility in the same manner as psychopaths (28). When one is so exempted, we adopt what Strawson called the *objective stance* regarding that person. Strawsonians might encourage children to, or discourage children from, certain courses of action through practices that look like praise and blame. In reality, these practices are prospective, looking forward to a time when they are apt targets of praise and blame. Again, children may well be appropriate targets of Aristotelian praise and blame, and in that case that praise and blame need not be prospective; they are already qualified insofar as they are reasons-responsive (27).

There are at least two perhaps competing senses in which one might be morally responsible. One is responsible in an *attributability* sense for a particular bit of behavior, x, just in case x is appropriately the agent's own x. One is responsible in the *accountability* sense for x just in case it would be appropriate to call upon that agent to offer an account of oneself for the x-ing. Because his intent is to situate the Aristotelian view within this rubric, Echeñique steers clear of debating the relative merits of the two sorts of moral responsibility. While this bracketing of the problem, without entering into the background debate, has the merit of focusing

Echeñique's text around Aristotle's own work, it seems also to be one of several steps that makes the text much more readily consumable by those interested in particular in Aristotle, as opposed to those interested in moral responsibility or ethics more generally.

Echeñique does a marvelous job of demolishing the view, defended by the likes of Terence Irwin and Susan Sauvé-Meyer, that Aristotle's account is Strawsonian. The key here is to understand why neither children nor beasts can be virtuous. Children cannot be virtuous, Echeñique argues, because while they may possess (*echein*) reason, reason is not present in (*enestin*) them (35). Beasts, on the other hand, neither have reason, nor, *a fortiori*, is it present in them (35). This distinction, Echeñique argues, shows that the Aristotelian does not regard children from the objective stance, as the Strawsonian view recommends (31). The very act of praising and blaming children is, in fact, a way of holding him or her responsible, by likening his or her behavior to the behavior of the virtuous person. Indeed, because Aristotelian praise and blame are *logoi*, words, it is possible to liken the behavior of immature humans, who have reason, to the behavior of the virtuous agent in a way it is not possible in the case of non-human animals (38–39, 70). That is, a child's behavior and the child herself can be courageous in a way that non-human animals (on Aristotle's view) cannot.

Perhaps what those interested in moral responsibility and ethics more generally will find most useful is Echeñique's reconstruction of what he sees as Aristotle's attempt to close the gap between overt behavior and otherwise inscrutable character. This reconstruction is found in Part II of the book, where Echeñique tackles the defeaters of ethical ascription. Echeñique focuses on the way violence (obvious in cases of coercion and compulsion) and lack of awareness (obvious in nonculpable ignorance) can defeat ethical ascription in a way that renders the deed inappropriately our own. In the same way that one might not *do* something but be said to have it forced upon her, so she might say that she *did not know* what she was doing. Echeñique considers the conditions under which these are legitimate excuses or justifications. Echeñique discusses cases of violent behavior that are external to one's "whole motivational set" (103). He discusses coercion (112) and psychologically compelling reasons (115) in ways that reveal Aristotle's way of thinking to be rather different from many contemporary theorists but still quite insightful and indeed beneficial for a theory of action. For instance, by making the virtuous person the standard of judgment regarding when it is appropriate to praise and blame, there is allegedly no such thing as being compelled by the power of goodness, for the good person insofar as she is good is attracted to the good. Nonetheless, there is such a thing as being compelled by the lure of avoiding pain, for there are things even the good person cannot bear. Because the overt action is all that is immediately obvious, we (or the virtuous spectator) must rely upon other cues if we are to close the aforementioned gap appropriately. By paying mind to the agent's aversion and/or compliance attitudes, we are able at least to narrow the gap. These attitudes are those that arise through recognition of what one is doing or has done. If one does something seemingly cowardly but suffers appropriately for it, we can at least say that the agent is non-vicious with regard to the action because the agent is non-voluntary with regard to the act, even if the act is voluntary (190–191).

As previously noted, this text is probably best suited for reading by scholars of ancient philosophy. The Aristotelian account, as presented, is surely interesting and thorough. Unfortunately, from an accessibility point of view, much of the discussion is highly nuanced

textual analysis. Of course, this is not a point that counts against the text itself; it is, rather, standard for a work on Aristotle. Those interested in ancient philosophy will find that arguments for key departures from commonly accepted views are sometimes sparse. For instance, Echeñique explains away the apparent distinction between two senses of *voluntary*, one sense in which non-human animals behave voluntarily and one sense in which they do not. He does this in less than two pages, and his principal argument seems to be that Aristotle uses the more basic, more action-theory appropriate sense of voluntary in only two places in the Aristotelian corpus. So, Echeñique says, this is unlikely to be the sense intended by Aristotle in his *Ethics*.

Additionally, Echeñique reads the virtue terms, in the case of children, as derivative from the focal meaning of the terms. There is an argument, of course, but the best argument for the view that Aristotle employs a term with a focal meaning is that his text says that the term is *pros hen* (70–71). Aristotle does not do this with respect to the virtue terms. Even if some of the arguments are quick or seem a little too dismissive of rival accounts, the text is still thorough in a way that creates the impression of plausibility. None of the arguments offered are patently bad. Stylistically, however, the text could be much improved. Absent at times are clear statements of what a particular chapter is supposed to do or where it is heading. Subsections begin without indicating why the transition has been made. The index is quite incomplete, which is a shame: in a book where arguments are densely packed, some terms must appear in the index. For instance, among the several terms that seemed worth searching, *contrariety condition* and *focal meaning* are missing, while *accountability* and *attributability* appear only as entries under moral responsibility. These are not condemnations of the text, but they are areas that could render the work more readily consulted and enjoyed.

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