In this chapter, I will accomplish a few general tasks. First, I will discuss Aristotle’s basic notion of voluntariness. In doing so, I will explore his claim that knowledge is required for voluntariness, and I will probe into some issues surrounding his understanding of ignorance and its relation to voluntariness. This discussion will moreover lead to the realization that the problem of negligent omissions may even lurk in one of Aristotle’s most basic distinctions between types of ignorance: the distinction between ‘ignorance of particular circumstances’ and ‘ignorance of universals.’ The results of this chapter will thus partially point out the necessity of solving negligent omissions so as to ground Aristotle’s own action theory. Perhaps more importantly, however, the work of this chapter will also enable us to problematize NO’s in terms of Aristotelian (and thus medieval) understandings of voluntariness and ignorance. As will become apparent, the solution to the puzzle of NO’s will depend largely on how we are to understand Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is required for voluntariness and that ignorance, in some cases, removes voluntariness.

I. Aristotelian Agency

A. The Basic Notion of Voluntariness

Although Aristotle lacks the theological concept of ‘sin,’ he nonetheless believes there are certain actions one is obligated not to perform and blamed if one does.¹ For such an action to be culpably ascribed to an

¹ I do not believe a full exploration of exactly which actions one is required to perform is necessary. First, the class is very broad and varies with the individual (e.g. some persons are required to perform certain actions that others are not). More importantly, such an investigation into the details of this issue in regard to Aristotle’s theory does not advance our investigation, given that the important issue is not what one is obligated to do, but rather (as indicated in the Introduction) given that one is obligated to do something, how can she be or not be held responsible for omitting to do it.
agent, however, that action must be ‘voluntary’ (hekousion). Discerning under which conditions Aristotelian voluntariness obtains, however, is somewhat difficult.

In the first place, it will not be correct to say (as it is for some other authors in this study) that the voluntary is that which issues from the faculty of the will. Aristotle, as is widely recognized, has no concept of the will as faculty. Second, Aristotle’s development of the notion of hekousion is at times problematic. Not only does he explicate it in different ways in various texts, he also (seemingly unwittingly) attributes two distinct senses to it. In addition to meaning what we now commonly call ‘voluntary,’ i.e. a description of an action that is intended and inherently linked to praise or blame, hekousion can also mean ‘willing’ (in the sense of wanting to, and as opposed to ‘unwilling’). These are two logically distinct meanings, either of which may be appropriate depending upon the situation.

Despite this problem, it is possible to state Aristotle’s conditions for hekousion in the sense we are interested in. An act is voluntary in this sense if “the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of

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2 “Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning of both honours and of punishments” (NE iii.1; 1109b30–35). Quoted from: Aristotle, The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Aristotle will be from this source.


5 It is primarily due to chap. 8 of Hardie’s book that I came to this knowledge. (W.F.R. Hardie, Aristotle’s Ethical Theory, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1980]). Cf. also chap. 5 of the following: David Bostock, Aristotle’s Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6 Analogously, the negation of hekousion expressed by akousion is ambiguous between ‘involuntary’ and ‘unwilling.’

7 That hekousion can be used in such varied ways is most easily pointed out by the observation that one can voluntarily do something and yet do it unwillingly (i.e. she would rather not do it). A prime example is that of a ship’s captain throwing cargo overboard during a storm (1110a8–11). It is, as Hardie points out, because of this “unrecognized ambiguity” in hekousion that there are such puzzling statements as actions that are a “mixture” (Hardie, Aristotle’s Ethical Theory, 153).