ABSTRACT
When Aristotle refers to force (βία) in his analysis of human action, he appears to have in mind brute force, in which the person involved is wholly passive, all the causality of the action itself being attributed to another agent or some other natural factor. In this essay I argue that Aristotle accepts a wider understanding of such exonerating force. Such force involves the combined desire and intellect of the person who performs the action in question. The texts adduced in favor of this interpretation are found mainly in EN III 1, EN V 8, and EE II 8. Having argued for this expanded concept of force, I discuss how forced acts are different from the “mixed acts” (such as throwing goods overboard) discussed in EN III 1. In a final section, I make some observations about how the Aristotelian theory might be supplemented in order to facilitate the resolution of certain difficulties in the analysis of human action.

Aristotle holds that the presence of force [βία] makes an action in some way involuntary. Force is therefore different from the type of compulsion involved in what he calls “mixed acts”—the act of jettisoning goods during a storm at sea, for example, or some heinous act performed under pressure in order to save the lives of family members—which he declares involuntary “generally considered” [ἀπλωγε] but, in the end, voluntary (Nicomachean Ethics III 1, 1110a18).

Aristotle’s understanding of such force seems at first glance to be quite straightforward; it seems, that is, to be equivalent to what we might call ‘brute force.’ He says in EN III 1:

Those things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place under force or owing to ignorance; and that is forced of which the principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts or is acted

1 Some of the material contained in this essay is also contained in Kevin L. Flannery, “Ethical Force in Aristotle,” Vera Lex 6 (2005): 147–62. The present essay contains a number of significant additions and alterations to what is argued there. I am thankful to the participants of the colloquium at Clark University, and especially to Thornton Lockwood, for some good and challenging questions. I am particularly grateful to my host at Clark, Michael Pakaluk, and also to an anonymous reviewer for the Proceedings who urged me to clarify some important aspects of my argument.
upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power.2 (EN III 1, 1109b35-1110a4)

And at *Eudemian Ethics* II 8, 1224b13-14 he uses the example of someone who, “taking the hand of someone whose will and appetite both resist, strikes someone [else].” (The person whose hand is taken up is not responsible for the striking since the action has been forced.) So force seems to be present when the person involved is wholly passive, all the causality of the action itself being attributed to another agent or some other natural factor.

In this essay I argue that Aristotle accepts a wider understanding of such exonerating force. Having set out my arguments to this effect, I also make some observations regarding what is implied by this expanded concept of force. It seems to me, indeed, that Aristotle’s remarks in this regard indicate that his action theory does not pretend to be free-standing, as do many recent “analytic” theories of human action, but presupposes a particular anthropology.

My treatment of force is at times (and necessarily) very textual, for it concerns the interpretation of some very compressed arguments in the *EN* and the *EE*. The latter work is especially fraught with difficulties since it survives in far fewer manuscripts than the former. Also, it often contains what appear to be investigations of issues as opposed to their exposition. This is apparently the case with the sections devoted to the voluntary [τὸ ἐξορόσην], which are often *aporetic* in nature and leave a number of issues open: issues that appear to be resolved in the corresponding passages in *EN*.3

### I. An Ancient Interpretation

A good place to start is with a remark attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias.4 In the twelfth of his “Ethical problems,” which is a commentary upon *EN* III 1, 1110b15-17 (“The forced then, seems to be that whose principle is outside, the person forced contributing nothing”), he contrasts actions that are forced and therefore involuntary with mixed acts. As we

---

2 Often in this essay I make use of the Revised Oxford Translation of Aristotle (Barnes 1984), occasionally making adjustments.


4 In what follows, I speak as if Alexander certainly wrote the work under discussion, although it may have been written not by him but by a member of his school. See Sharples, R. W., Alexander of Aphrodisias: Scholasticism and innovation, 1987, 1189–91, Sharples, R. W., The school of Alexander? 1990, 85–86, and also Madigan 1987.