We may distinguish two very different ways in which Aristotle figures in contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophizing. Some philosophers find in Aristotle an ethical theory that conceptualizes the subject matter of ethics, and the very questions an ethical theory should aim to answer, in ways that are crucially different from those characteristic of modern moral theories. Other philosophers view Aristotle as essentially toiling in the same philosophical fields as the moderns, deploying essentially the same concepts and giving analyses of those concepts that can be compared with, and perhaps preferred to, modern analyses, without undue risk of comparing apples and oranges or of changing the subject. The title of Susan Sauvé Meyer’s *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*¹ already suggests that she belongs to the second camp, and she makes it clear from the beginning of her work that she sees herself as opposing those who hold (Bernard Williams is foremost in her mind) that there is nothing in Aristotle’s ethical theory corresponding to the modern notion of moral responsibility. She aims to show, on the contrary, that “Aristotle’s concerns and aims in his various discussions of voluntariness are precisely those of a theorist of moral responsibility” (3). Nevertheless in the course of her masterly execution of this project M. takes care to point out that, on her reconstruction, Aristotle’s theory of moral responsibility lacks at least one feature that is widely, if not universally, thought to belong to moral responsibility: what M. refers to as “responsibility for character.” There is little to be gained by debating whether this feature, if it is indeed a central feature of most modern accounts of moral responsibility, is essential to the very concept of moral responsibility, or simply a feature of many modern conceptions of it (to use Rawls’s distinction); we may be grateful to M. for undertaking to show that Aristotle has a notion bearing a strong family resemblance to that of moral responsibility in the modern sense.

M. defends her thesis with a cogently-reasoned argument that draws not only on the three ethical treatises in the Aristotelian corpus (she rightly treats the *Magna Moralia* as a fairly reliable source of Aristotelian thought, though probably not by Aristotle’s own hand) but also, and importantly, on discussions of efficient causation in Aristotle’s theoretical works. On the basis of these texts M.

produces illuminating analyses of concepts well-known to be central to Aristotle’s ethical thought (such as moral character and the voluntary) as well as of overlooked notions whose importance M. amply demonstrates (such as the notion of praiseworthiness). Indeed, these analyses themselves suggest ways in which the nexus of Aristotelian ideas M. explores diverges farther from standard accounts of moral responsibility than she herself acknowledges. She stops short of seeing this, I shall suggest, because she implicitly assumes that Aristotle’s ethical theory shares a basic feature common to most modern moral theories: namely, that actions, and not character, are the primary locus of ethical value. Relying on this assumption leads M. to reconstruct an Aristotelian theory of moral responsibility rather more like modern theories than, I shall argue, is justified. But this does not diminish the great contribution this book makes, both in its lucid analyses of difficult passages and of centrally important Aristotelian concepts and in its provoking the reader to rethink the relation between Aristotle’s ethical project and that of modern moral theory.

As M.’s statement of purpose quoted above suggests, she looks primarily to Aristotle’s discussions of the voluntary and involuntary (hekousion and akousion) in her reconstruction of Aristotle’s theory of moral responsibility. Yet, as she is aware, Aristotle holds that children and animals, who are not morally responsible beings, can act voluntarily. She handles this problem by distinguishing two separate tasks that a theory of moral responsibility must accomplish. First, it must “identify the features that properly subject an agent to [the] demands, expectations, and evaluations [of morality]”; second, it must “identify the circumstances in which a morally responsible agent is morally responsible for some particular action” (3-4). In order to be a proper subject of moral evaluation in Aristotle’s theory, M. argues, an agent must possess a “moral character,” which comprises all of the agent’s developed dispositions, each of which falls somewhere on the continuum stretching from virtue to vice. Agents that possess such a moral character are morally responsible; the actions for which they are responsible, M. goes on to argue, are their voluntary actions.

M. does not give a direct account of what she takes moral responsibility to be; her indirect account seems to be that an agent’s possession of moral responsibility is what entitles us to take his voluntary actions as grounds for holding certain moral attitudes towards him, attitudes such as resentment, gratitude, and, most importantly, moral praise and blame. M. is clearly right to hold that the class of agents with developed moral character is a significant one for Aristotle, and that such agents are the subjects of Aristotelian praise and blame in an importantly distinctive way. In particular, I think she conclusively demonstrates that praise and blame for these agents is fundamentally not prospective or forward-looking; that is, its fundamental function is not that of encouraging them to continue their virtuous pursuits. Rather, as I should put it, these attitudes constitute the proper recognition of the objective worth or worthlessness of good or bad moral character.

M. wishes to argue that the praise and blame Aristotle thinks appropriate for