CHOICE AND ACTION IN ARISTOTLE

A. W. Price

I : PREFACE

A current issue in the philosophy of action is the grammar of intention.\(^1\) Take a sentential schema:

\[(1) \text{A intends to } \varphi.\]

Does this intention attach to something like a proposition? (1) might then be construed as follows:

\[(1a) \text{A intends that he } \varphi.\]

In terms of truth, (1a) takes the truth of ‘I φ’ to be intended by A: he intends that it become true that he φ’s.

More exactly, one should distinguish A’s believing (a) that he will φ, with the future indicative, from his intending (b) that he φ, with the subjunctive. (a), but not (b), can be true or false. Yet one might call (b) a ‘quasi-proposition’, since it shares (a)’s subject-predicate form.

However, there is an alternative way of reading (1). We may propose instead that it should be taken as it stands, which might, in quasi-English, be rendered so:

\[(1b) \text{A intends } \varphi’ing.\]

Here what A intends is an act (the act of φ’ing). What identifies this act as an act of his own is not the addition of some specification to the content of his intention, but the absence of any specification. It is supposed that A’s intentions are by default intentions simply to act – though he may on occasion form an intention that he (or another) act.

Here I shall focus on Aristotle, who has been neglected in this connection. This may be because he either lacks, or fails to focus upon, our concept of intention.\(^3\) However, he gives a central role to what he calls prohairesis (most often translated by ‘choice’, sometimes by ‘decision’) and boulēsis (traditionally translated by ‘wish’). Where these play roles in the explanation of action, they may well be forms of intention, and relate to

---

\(^1\) Contrast, on different sides, Broome (2002) with Madden (2011), Hornsby (2016).

\(^2\) Note that the ‘he’ here is self-referential, which captures that the intention is de re. Less happy would be the paraphrase ‘A intends that A φ’, which is de dicto, with both ‘A’'s signifying the referent of ‘A’; for it can be true that A intends to φ, even if he falsely believes that he is not the referent of ‘A’.

\(^3\) Something at least very like our concept of intention is deployed at Rhet. II.2 1378b2-4; yet it fails to become a theme.
acts as intentions centrally do, even if not all the acts that we count as intended count for Aristotle either as chosen or as wished for. Hence no conceptual deficiency precludes him from facing the same question of logical grammar that we raise about intentions. We shall find that he consistently takes a line that is of a piece with a preference of (1b) to (1a). My first task here is to substantiate this claim; my second is to explore the role that this plays within his account of the relation of thought to action.

II : THE GRAMMAR OF CHOICE AND WISH

I shall discuss first the grammar of choice, and then that of wish. What, according to Aristotle, is choice of? I believe that the evidence supports the following answer: an agent chooses an act, in preference to alternative acts, for the sake of a goal. (I shall consider the relation of choice to deliberation, which also enters into its definition, in the next section.)

The Eudemian Ethics [EE] provides evidence to resolve an unclarity present in the Nicomachean Ethics [EN]. Here we read that the very term prohaireton indicates a thing ‘selected before other things’ (pro heterōn hairēton, EN III.2 1112a16-17). What does ‘before’ signify here? One possibility is that, being chosen as a means to a wished-for goal, the prohaireton comes – conceptually within intention and execution (when it is intended and enacted for the sake of something else), though not temporally within deliberation (when it is derived from a given goal) – before the object of wish. However, a different possibility is explicit within the Magna Moralia: ‘Choice seems to be what its names suggests: I mean, we choose one thing instead of another; for instance, the better instead of the worse’ (I.17 1189a12-14). This would be decisive – if the status of that work was undisputed. As it is, we need to attend to a passage in the Eudemian Ethics from which it may well derive:

The very name makes it plain. For choice is not simply selection, but selection of one thing before another (heterou pro heterou) … About the end no one deliberates (this being fixed for all), but about that which tends to it – whether this or that tends to it … No one chooses without preparation and deliberation about what is better and worse (II.10 1226b6-15).

It is surely indicated here (as my italics highlight) that choice is between alternative ways or means towards a given goal.

A choice is further characterized by its goal: ‘No one chooses an end but rather things that contribute to an end – for instance, no one chooses to be in health but to walk or to sit for the purpose of keeping well’ (II.10 1226a7-9). More generally, ‘All choice is of something and for the sake of something’ (II.11 1227b36-7). Thus choice looks through a

---

4 In translating from Aristotle’s ethical writings, I generally keep close to Barnes & Kenny (2014).
5 Cf. III.3 1112b19-20. Aquinas asserts the converse of the end (ST qu. 18 art. 7): ‘Finis est postremum in executione, sed est primum in intentione rationis.’
6 This is why ‘choice’ is better as a rendering of prohairesis than ‘decision’; more explicit, but clumsy, would be ‘preferential choice’.
way or means towards a further goal. Further, whereas deliberation may pursue a goal that conflicts with, or at least falls outside, the agent’s conception of acting well, the ultimate end of choice is always eudaimonia. This emerges in the context of acrasia: acratic agents, like base ones, may ‘deliberate’ for the sake of ends whose achievement will harm them (AE B.9 1142b18-20); and yet the acratic, unlike the wicked or corrupt, act contrary to choice (C.4 1148a417, 8 1151a5-7, 10 1152a17).

Choice therefore has a double complexity, looking sideways (as it were) towards alternatives that are not preferred, and ahead towards ends that orient the preference.

In choosing how to act, does an agent choose to do something, or that he do something? If choosing to do something differs from choosing that one do it, this is because one chooses an act, whose doing (if it occurs) will constitute an action. Most explicit are remarks that Aristotle makes about the grammar of choosing:

We choose to get or avoid something good or bad, but we have beliefs about what a thing is or whom it is good for or how it is good for him: we can hardly be said to believe to get or avoid anything. And choice is praised rather for being of the object it ought to be, or for being correct, belief for being true (EN III.2 1112a3-7). As it happens, his distinction is clearer in English than in Greek. We can’t say, e.g., ‘I think to be well today’, meaning that I think that I am well; but Greek words for thinking typically permit just such a construction. Aristotle is making the following connected points:

(a) I make a choice to ψ, but do not have a belief to ψ, but about (e.g.) whether it is beneficial to ψ.
(b) A choice can be correct (orthos), while a belief can be true (alēthēs).

Taken on its own, (a) might be making a simple contrast in onus of match: if a belief fails to fit reality, it is faulty for that reason; if reality fails to fit a choice, it is defective in that respect. Yet (b) allows choices to be correct or incorrect, not just effective or ineffective. In Aristotle’s view, it would seem (cf. AE B.2 1139a21-6), a choice to ψ is correct if it accords with a true piece of reasoning (logos).

---

7 Cf. Rhet. 1.8 1366a14-16: choice reveals character since it ‘refers back (anapheretai) to the end’. This connection also lies behind an unexpected sentence in the AE: ‘While virtue makes the choice correct, the choice of what should naturally be done to carry it out belongs not to virtue but to another capacity’ (B.12 1144a20-2). This apparently equates choice and wish; which becomes half-explicable given that choice relates to an end as well as to a way or means.

8 So when Aristotle contrasts acratic action with action upon deliberation (bouleusis) or calculation (logismos) (EE II.8 1224b21-9, AE C.7 1150b19-21), this does not exclude that there may have been some means-end thinking on both sides. I follow Anthony Kenny in referring to the common books (EN V-VII = EE IV-VI) as AE A-C.

9 The construal of 1112a5-7 is contested. I follow Brown’s revision of Ross (2009); but Barnes & Kenny (2014), following Ross (1925), has ‘Choice is praised for being of the object it ought to be rather than for being correctly related to it, belief for being truly related to its object.’ The rendering I adopt makes a parallel with AE B.2 1139a24-5: ‘The logos must be true and the desire correct if the choice is to be virtuous.’
However, it complicates the contrast that choice can, though rarely, be said to have a propositional (or quasi-propositional) content, as here: ‘There is nothing better than such a capacity [viz. political] which they [politicians] could bequeath to their states, or could choose there to be to themselves or, therefore, to those dearest to them’ (EN X.9 1181a7-9). Choosing to have some capacity might be analogous to choosing to do something (say, in order to acquire the capacity); but choosing that those dearest to one should have it clearly relates what is here called ‘choosing’ to a state of affairs that is given by a quasi-proposition (not strictly true or false, since the ‘should’ stands in for a subjunctive, yet of subject-predicate form). No such usage is present in another passage, but it might well have been: ‘He [a virtuous agent] may even surrender up actions to his friend, and it may be nobler to become the cause of his friend’s acting than to act himself’ (IX.8 1169a32-4). Here, the agent chooses that his friend should act nobly rather than to act nobly himself.\footnote{However, an earlier passage (III.3 1112b27-8) admits an alternative formulation: he chooses to act well through his friend.}

What I have just illustrated may be a distinct use of the term prohairesis that we should set to one side. Yet the following question arises: when Aristotle writes of a man’s choosing to do something, does he really mean that he chooses that he do it? This is not excluded by points (a) and (b) above. For a quasi-proposition cannot be true, even if choosing that one act in a certain way counts as ‘correct’ if one should act in that way; and choosing that one act in some way is not itself an answer (even if it goes with an answer) to the question how one should act. So we need supplementary evidence if we are to insist that the choice that emerges out of practical deliberation is irreducibly a choice to act in a certain way; this evidence should further show how we are to interpret this way of speaking.

In fact, there is no lack of textual evidence that does both, identifying what is chosen with what may be done, and so implying that to choose to act in some way is to choose an act, or something doable (prakton) whose doing constitutes an action (praxis). The decent agent is a chooser and a doer (prohairesis kai praktikos) of just acts (AE A.10 1137b35). We choose what we especially know to be good, presumably acts (EN III.2 1111a8-9). The self-indulgent equally do, pursue, and choose pleasant things, i.e. acts (AE C.2 1146a31-2). Those living in concord choose and do the same things (EN IX.6 1167a27-8). Most explicitly, the prakton and the prohairesis are the same (Met. E.1 1025b24). The same identity carries over to the objects of deliberation (bouleuta), though with a distinction. The bouleuta and the prohairesis are the same, except that the latter ‘is already determinate’, since it ‘has been decided upon as a result of deliberation’ (EN III.3 1113a2-5); thus one deliberates whether to χ or to υ (let us suppose in order to φ), whereas one chooses (say) to χ, where the phrase ‘whether to χ or to υ’ indicates a need to decide between the disjuncts. ‘Things towards the end’, which are acts, are bouleuta and prohairesa (III.5 1113b3-4), though strictly (if we respect the point made at a2-5) not both at once.\footnote{Charles (1984: 85-6) infers from AE B.2 1139a21-6 that the object of desire is a proposition which ‘is represented as a mode of accepting the conclusion which reason has asserted to be true (e.g. φ is good)’. So, whereas an assertion might be represented as ‘AS. (χ is an apple)’, desire can be represented as ‘DES. (φ’ing is good)’. This respects in a way the requirement for a good choice that it pursue the same things that the logos asserts (a25-6), but yields a ‘DES.’ formula that cannot be read on the model of ‘AS.’; for one can}
Let us next consider wish (boulēsis), with a special interest in its role as a starting-point of deliberation. Wish itself is far from intention. This is clear in the following distinction between wish and choice:

Choice cannot relate to things impossible, and if anyone said he chose them he would be thought a fool; but you may wish what is impossible, for instance immortality. And wish may relate to things that could in no way be brought about by one’s own efforts, for instance that a particular actor or athlete should win; but no one chooses such things, but rather the things that he thinks could be brought about by his own efforts (III.2 1111b20-6).12

What is the grammar of wishing (boulesthai)? Aristotle permits it to be varied: I may have a wish of, or for, something impossible, such as immortality (b22-3); or I may wish that some actor or athlete win, which may be possible, but not through my own agency (b24); or I may wish to be healthy or happy (b27-9). Can we press a question like that which has already arisen about choice: can I have a wish to φ that is not a wish that I φ? A general reason for supposing that I can, even when the wish is idle, is derivable from reflections of Bernard Williams (1973) about imagination: I can more easily imagine being, and wish to have been, say, a member of Plato’s Academy than I can wish that I had been a member; for, knowing that I am Anthony Price, I cannot coherently imagine myself there, while I may have at least a coherent (if scrappy) idea of the charms of being there. Aristotle may have this in mind when he writes vaguely of a wish ‘of immortality’ (b23). Death is as natural and necessary for animals as generation (On Youth, Old Age 23 (17) 478b22-6). So I can no more coherently conceive of my being immortal while remaining human than I can conceive of my surviving without remaining human; and yet I may – as perhaps we all do – have an idle and unfocused wish to be immortal.

The matter becomes clearer once an object of wish has become an end of deliberation. Take the wish to be eudaimōn (EN 1111b28) that may be general, or focused upon a particular context of action. I may take it as my goal that I live and act well by trying to bring that about, like the young Hippocrates of Plato’s Protagoras, who wishes to take the sophist as his teacher, so that he may thereafter achieve eudaimonia (313a6-b2). That doesn’t yield a choice to ψ as itself an instance of acting well. The point appears to assert that x is an apple, but not desire that φ’ing is good. (One might desire that φ’ing be good, but that would not yield a choice to φ.) Aristotle’s view must rather be that a correct choice pursues what a true logos declares to be good (or the like – no predicate is specified). Which is consistent with EN III.2 1112a3-7, about which Charles’s book is silent.

However, he has paid attention to those lines since. He now cites them in distinguishing ‘preferential choice’ from ‘the conclusion of practical reasoning’ (2011: 193 n. 9.) Most recently, he has written as follows (2015: 80): ‘Preferential choice is not identical with any opinion because it is a distinctive type of truth-assessable state directed to action, in which desire and intellect are inextricably connected.’ Here he also cites 1111b33-4: opinion ‘is distinguished by falsity or truth, not by badness or goodness, while choice is distinguished rather [or more, mallon] by these.’ It is unclear to me how he understands mallon, which can be either a comparative (‘more than’) or an excluder (if x is ‘rather’ F than G, it isn’t really or precisely G). A comparative reading makes little sense here: if a good choice is also true, how is it more one than the other? So I take Aristotle’s meaning to be that, unlike opinion, choice is strictly not ‘truth-assessable’.

This passage shows that the traditional rendering of boulēsis by ‘wish’ is sometimes precisely pertinent. However, it often isn’t. I shall retain it, with this caveat, because of its familiarity.

12 This passage shows that the traditional rendering of boulēsis by ‘wish’ is sometimes precisely pertinent. However, it often isn’t. I shall retain it, with this caveat, because of its familiarity.
generalize: to have as my goal that I φ is to aim to bring it about (or let it happen) that I φ; but aiming at this need not amount to aiming to φ intentionally by and in doing something or other. Yet it is this last aim that ideally results in a choice to ψ as a way of φ’ing, and thus as an instance of acting well. To prepare for that, we rather need to start with a wish to act well:

Wish relates rather to the end, choice to what contributes to the end; for instance, … we wish to be happy (eudaimonein) and say we do, but we cannot well say we choose to be so; for, to generalize, choice seems to relate to the things that are [sc. immediately] in our power (1111b26-30).

Wish ceases to be idle when it sets off a stretch of deliberation (bouleusis): ‘We deliberate about things that are in our power and are matters of action’ (III.3 1112a30); once deliberating, ‘if we come on an impossibility, we give up’ (b24-5). As is stated in the De Anima, there is a kind of nous ‘that calculates for the sake of something and is practical’ (III.10 433a14). Such thinking starts from a provisional intention to achieve a goal – provisional in that the goal may turn out to be unachievable, or not acceptably achievable. It is when wish supplies such an intention that it becomes ‘a starting-point of practical nous’ (a16).

Deliberation connects doubly with intention, being intended to serve a goal through identifying an action that intentionally achieves it. When the deliberating is for the sake of acting well, the agent is looking for an act that he can choose, in Aristotle’s restricted sense. In so deliberating, the agent gives thought in order to identify a means to an intended end for him to choose and enact. It is not, as Anselm Müller has emphasized (1992: 166), that he has first to give thought about how to give thought in a way that will

13 Imagine that my local council has neglected to clean up snow on the pavement outside my house; so I repeatedly walk along it in the hope of slipping, and then suing them. I thus intend that I slip, but not to slip, since what I have in mind is slipping unintentionally.

14 I omit a parallel at 1111b27-9 between ‘being healthy’ (hygiainein) and ‘being happy’ (eudaimonein) that is only partial. Being healthy is a state displayed in, say, feats of fitness, whereas being happy is an activity identical to living and acting well; see Price (2011: 39-40).

15 The former danger was explicit at III.3 1112b24-5. I speculatively interpret the second as implicit at AE B.9 1142b31-3: if it is good deliberation that settles the goal, this may be because it establishes whether a presumptively desirable end is desirably achievable in context (Price, 2011: 226-8). Clark (1997: 21) offers a slight correction of what I say, for simplicity, in the text: a doctor may conduct an operation in the hope of saving the patient’s kidneys, without knowing whether this will be possible. In this case, where the agent is not just conscious of human contingency, but well aware of obstacles to his success that he may well turn out unable to surmount, it is slightly too optimistic even to talk of a ‘provisional intention’; and yet the agent has a goal that he hopes to achieve, and makes his decisions with an eye to that. This will apply, in medically problematic cases, to the doctor who wishes to heal his patient (EN III.2 1111b27, III.3 1112b13):

16 Cf. DA I.3 407a23-4 (‘Practical thoughts have limits, since they aim at something other than themselves’, Ross), and Pol. VII.3 1325b18-19 (thoughts about how to act ‘occur for the sake of the results of action’). It is also most likely for this reason that the good of practical thinking is ‘truth in agreement with correct desire’ (AE B.2 1139a29-31): it is only with the help of desire that practical reasoning can achieve its inherent end, which is action. Charles states the point as follows, identifying the goal with doing what is good (2015: 75): ‘Practical thinking … is a type of thinking essentially directed at finding out what is good to do so as to do it. It results (unless impeded) in action, having as its goal the doing of what is good. This type of thinking is, in its nature, desire-involving.’
be practical: that would risk a regress, even if the preliminary thinking were determinate enough to be useful, and yet not too determinate to anticipate the content of practical thinking proper. Aristotle is conceiving of deliberation as a mode of intentional activity that is fully rational, but not itself the product of any prior stretch of deliberation (cf. EE VIII.2 1248a18-22).

We thus reach a double conclusion: Aristotelian wish or *boulēsis* must be directed not just at an object of aspiration, but at a goal that is both putatively achievable and provisionally intended, before it can prompt *bouleusis* or deliberation; and Aristotelian deliberation is itself an intentional activity directed towards intentional action. If it results in a choice or *prohairesis*, this will constitute the formation of a restrictedly rational variety of intention.

### III: CHOICE AND DELIBERATION

Aristotle further defines choice as ‘deliberate desire of things in one’s own power’ (*EN* III.3 1113a10-11, EE II.10 1226b17). We need additionally to understand that this deliberation is for the sake of acting well; for the acratic agent can ‘deliberate’, even correctly (*AE* B 9 1142b18-20), and yet he does not act on a choice (C.8 1151a6-7). Typically deliberation is initiated by a wish for a goal (*EN* III.2 1111b26, III.4 1113a15) that one thinks *good* (*AE* A.9 1136b7-8, *Rhet.* I.10 1369a2-4); it may well involve selecting what is easiest or finest among alternative ways or means (cf. *EN* III.3 1112b17). Hence the resultant choice is a desire that is *decisive* (*krithen*, 1113a4), often in being resolved between different *desirabilia*.

Effective deliberation for the sake of acting well leads the agent to a choice. More fully, a choice has a dual content, to ψ for the sake of φ’ing (*EE* II.11 1227b36-7), where φ’ing is a goal both *specific* enough to allow for a calculation of ways and means, and sufficiently *worthwhile*, in context, to constitute a way of acting well – which is the ultimate end of choice and chosen action.¹⁷ An object of wish, say φ’ing, becomes a target of thinking what to choose when the agent starts to deliberate with the provisional intention of finding and intentionally enacting a way of φ’ing that is also, and at least in part thereby, a way of acting well. He may discover as he proceeds that there is no ψ’ing, practicable in context, by which he can φ, or φ acceptably; then he must go back to the beginning, and think through another way of acting well.

It is debated whether Aristotle holds that every instance of choice is preceded by an actual stretch of deliberation. If it is usually supposed that it need not be, this may rather be for the sake of philosophical plausibility than of textual fidelity. For the definition that I quoted (from *EN* III.3 1113a10-11) is at once followed by the following gloss (a11-12, cf. *EE* II.10 1226b19-20): ‘For when we have made an assessment as a result of deliberation,

---

¹⁷ Cf. *An. Po.* I.24 85b27-35, where the goal is to pay a debt in order not to act unjustly. In *EE* II.10 Aristotle instances the conveying of goods as a reason for walking; when he adds ‘Those who have no aim fixed are not in a position to deliberate’ (1226b28-30), he envisages a concrete goal, and not just a determinable one (like acting well or nobly).
we desire in accordance with our deliberation’ (or else, cf. DA III.10 433a24-5, ‘with our wish’). Yet the following passage is often, and aptly, cited:

It is thought the mark of a more courageous man to be fearless and undisturbed in sudden alarms than to be so in those that are foreseen; for it must have proceeded more from a state of character, because less from preparation; for acts that are foreseen may be chosen by calculation and a logos, but sudden actions (ta exaiphnēs) in accordance with one’s state of character (EN III.8 1117a17-22).

This appears to state plainly that an action may be chosen, and yet uncalculated (and so not an upshot of deliberation). Yet I have argued before (Price, 2011: 213), with reference to two other problematic passages, that Aristotle can write carelessly in such cases, inviting a supplement other than the automatic and grammatical one; here, we should perhaps understand after ‘sudden actions’ not ‘may be chosen’ but ‘may occur’. Hence I think that there are two possible readings: he may mean that sudden actions are guided by choices that are in character but unreasoned, or that they are guided by character without choice or reasoning. I take his standard view of choice to exclude the first, and require the second.18 If so, such spontaneous actions are intentional but unchosen.19

It is a tempting third alternative to take the logismos and logos that are excluded to be not ethical deliberation for the sake of the noble, but prudential calculation that is based on experience.20 There is then a contrast between a courageous lack of ‘preparation’ (1117a20), and the soldiers who flee when let down by their ‘preparations’ (1116b17). The ‘sudden cases’ of 1117a22 can then be occasions for choice based upon a rapid process of deliberation that is high-minded and less circumstantial. However, this last suggestion conflicts with NE III.2 1111b9-10 and EE II.8 1224a3-4, both of which exclude choosing on the spur of the moment (with the same term, ‘exaiphnēs’). And the reference of logos and logismos at 1117a21 may be not to the calculations of the prudent, but to the logos of 1117a8 that was associated with the kalon, especially if (as isn’t clear) it not only conceives of the goal as noble, but specifies how to achieve it (cf. 1112b15-16). If so, even ethical deliberation is excluded here, and we must rather suppose that Aristotle is writing carelessly, and that it is actions, and not choices, that may be spontaneous and yet in character.

This must disappoint contemporary interpreters who would wish to connect Aristotle’s concept of acting in accordance with choice to our concept of acting on reasons, and would rather relate the second to an ability to give reasons than to a causal process leading from a conscious consideration of reasons to action. However, Aristotle is not at a loss for words

---

18 See EN III.2.1112a15-16; III.3 1113a11-12; AE A.8 1135b8-11, b19-25; EE II.4 1224a4; II.10 1226b6-9, 14-15, 32-6. It is true, though only marginally helpful, that some of the deliberation may have been performed in advance; so Cooper (1975: 7-8), Irwin (1999: 322), Taylor (2006: 189), Corcilius (2008a: 254).

19 It is then implicit that a greater courage (andreioterou dokei einai) can be displayed in courageous acts that are not done courageously, since not from choice (cf. II.4 1105a28-32); which may well seem implausible (cf. Taylor, 2006: 189). To which I reply as follows: a full expression of virtue must do justice also to its rational aspect, and so involve deliberation and choice; it may yet be true that, in certain contexts, a greater courage may be displayed – but only imperfectly displayed – in spontaneous action.

20 So Gauthier-Jolif (1970: ii. 234); cf. Rhet. II.12 1389a34-5, which say that logismos is of the advantageous, virtue of the noble.
to convey that reason can be active without a need for ‘choice’ (as he uses that term). What he does admit in such cases is a kind of wish: ‘We do many things that we wish suddenly’ (EE II.8 1224a3). (These will be a significant sub-set of the many voluntary acts that we do ‘without deliberation or forethought’, II.10 1226b32-3.) This need not conflict with the usual contrast of wish for an end, and choice of a means. An urgent situation can prompt the adoption of a concrete end that may in certain cases be very close to action, so that only obvious premises, which can be implicit, are needed to make the connection; here there is no gap between end and means to be crossed by a process of reasoning. We can still represent the rationality of the action by a practical syllogism that sets out what the agent did not need to think through. Of such curtailed thinking Aristotle provides an example (DMA 7 701a25-8), which I represent with square brackets around the premise that thought ‘does not waste time considering’:

Talking walks is good for a man.
[I am a man.] 21

In a case of simple spontaneity, a man says or thinks to himself, ‘Taking walks is good for a man’, in a context to which it straightforwardly applies, and starts to walk. We would say that he walks for a reason; Aristotle can say that he acts in accordance with a rational desire or ‘wish’. In the case of spontaneous courage, we might have an explicitly ethical premise, say ‘It is noble to stand one’s ground in the face of the enemy’, thinking which a hoplite stays put. Yet Aristotle opts to privilege acts that he counts as chosen, perhaps because deliberation is an overt exercise of practical rationality. 22

IV : FROM WISH TO ACTION

We have no reason to expect Aristotle to give a single and uniform account of how thought gives rise to action. However, I shall now set out a sequence of perceptions, desires, and deliberation that draws upon various elements that surface in different contexts.

Take an agent who finds himself in a situation that invites action of him: ‘The intuition (nous) involved in practical reasonings grasps the last and variable fact, i.e. the minor premise. For these variable facts are the starting-points for the apprehension of the end, since the universal is grasped from the particulars; of these therefore we must have

---

21 In translations from DMA, I draw upon Nussbaum (1978).
22 If choice presupposes deliberation, there is a further restriction that Aristotle states, but may not have thought through. Deliberation is indeed a searching, and one does not search where there are no uncertainties: ‘The things that are brought about by our own efforts but not always in the same way are the things about which we deliberate … Deliberation is concerned with things that happen in a certain way for the most part, but in which the outcome is obscure, and with things in which it is indeterminate’ (EN III.3 1112b3-9). As Corcilius puts it, deliberative thinking is ‘heuristic and inventive’ (2008a: 254). This may fit the connotations of our ‘choice’ (and the Greek prohairesis): I am not idiomatically said to choose to χ rather than to ψ when it is always, or evidently, best to χ. Aristotle may intend this, but its implications are restrictive. If choosing to act as one does is a precondition of not only doing the brave thing but doing it bravely (II.4 1105a28-32), it will follow that one can act bravely only in a situation of practical uncertainty.
perception, and this perception is nests (AE B.11 1143b2-5). He perceives some feature of the context that prompts him, giving the standing concerns that he has, to think of a certain goal with a desire to achieve it. Say that he has a generous nature, and perceives someone in need. (This perception need not be instantaneous. He may even reflect how to interpret the situation, and thereby come to perceive it as one where someone is in need, though not patently so.) It is then characteristic of him to form a practical desire – which is more than an idle wish, or a detached evaluation – to give help. The content of his attention is then an act: offering help. This stands for him as the object of a wish that is not idle, but directed towards what seems an achievable goal. This reveals his character, and does not depend upon any reasoning. So Aristotle can write, ‘Virtue [sc. of character] makes the target correct, and practical wisdom the things [i.e. ways or means] leading to it’ (AE B.12 1144a7-9, cf. C.8 1151a18-19, EE II.11 1227b19-25). However, such desire, though not a creature of inference, is not independent of judgement. His standing concerns correlate with patterns of evaluation; a man cannot desire an object without conceiving of it under a desirability-characterization (in Elizabeth Anscombe’s phrase), and no one wishes for what he does not think to be good (AE A.9 1136b7-8). Aristotle’s statement ‘This perception is nests’ (1143b5) is not ideally perspicuous. Yet, in my example, we could read it as implying a close internal relation between two different forms of words: I perceive the situation as one that invites me to give help, and I am struck, in context, by the thought that it would be kind to act so. Such a piece of contextual-cum-conceptual awareness is at once desiderative, perceptual, and epistemic; it evidences a good character, one that, from occasion to occasion, prompts effective desires to act in ways that one sees to be virtuous in some way (with a ‘see that’ which is both experiential and veridical).

23 Here I draw on Ross’s translation (1925); yet, with Susemihl, D.J. Allan (marginale in his copy of Bywater), and Wiggins (2012: 102), I read to katholou for Bywater’s ta katholou (1143b5).

24 Yet it is impossible to identify Aristotle’s precise position here with any confidence. There are two uncertainties:

A. Within his stratification of the human soul, does he place rational desire (choice and wish) (i) within reason, or (ii) alongside passion and perception?

B. Does (i) judgement wear the trousers (in J.L. Austin’s dated phrase), or do (ii) rational desire and practical judgement enjoy a modern marriage (viz. of a complementary equality)?

I have argued in the past in favour of A(ii) (1995: 191-2, 2011: 120-1), while adding (2011: 121-2) that Aristotle takes the edge off that issue through his recurrent analogy with the convex and the concave (EN I.13 1102a28-32, EE II.1 1219b32-4). That these are conceptually distinct but actually inseparable throws open the significance of the demarcation between the two strata. However, we need to opt for a combination of A(i) and B(ii) if we are to assert what I propose in my text; for it would be problematic, given the cognitive pre-eminence that he assigns to reason, to attach B(ii) to A(ii). The main obstacle to this is EN I.13, which appears to prescribe that desire of any kind should stand to reason in a relation of obedience. However, some (including Michael Frede in discussion) have taken the phrase ‘the appetitive and in general the desiderative element’ (1102b30) to apply there only to appetitive and spirited desires, and not to rational ones; if they are right, rational desire may not be subordinate to judgement. What I have written in my text does maximal justice to the statement ‘Virtue makes the target correct’ (B.12 1144a7-8). However, what follows, which is ‘and practical wisdom the things leading to it’ (a8-9), excludes the end’s being set by syllogismos or logos (cf. EE II.11 1227b22-5) without clarifying how virtue of character relates to nous, which also plays a role in setting the end (B.11 1143b4-5), and appears to fall within practical wisdom (B.8 1142a25-30).

What stands in my text shares a main thrust with Charles (2015: 73): ‘It is not that intellectual judgement leads to desire: rather to see (or judge) something as the good thing to do (in this way) just is to desire it.’ Yet I do not take the relation of judgement and desire, of the relevant kinds, to be one either of
Aristotle fails to deploy any pair of terms to capture the distinction between two different attitudes, being attracted towards a possible goal (perhaps among others), and adopting it as one’s practical goal (rather than any other). It is explicit that one can wish only what one thinks good; that is a necessary condition, or aspect, of wish. In one place, it is envisaged that one wishes for an end that one thinks best just because one is virtuous (AE B.11 1144a29-34). However, it isn’t evident that the second is required. What is clear is that, if an end is selected by virtue of character, this cannot depend upon a relative evaluation of the kind that is said (DA III.11 434a7-10) to involve the measurement of practical alternatives (doing this or that) by a single standard, most likely against the background of a further goal already given. On occasion, virtue may stipulate an end for the sake of which a man ‘ought to choose and do whatever he chooses and does’ (AE B.5 1140b17-20). In other cases, we should think of a practicable goal that becomes salient in context: the circumstances privilege it, and the agent pursues it without viewing it as required, or even as best in addition to good.

He will then engage in a process of deliberation, whereby he searches (ζεῖν, EN III.3 1112b22-3, AE B.9 1142a31-2, b14-15) for a way or means of achieving the end. This may well involve discovering not just a single means to the goal, but a sequence of means and ends, through a series of steps where each means becomes in turn itself a goal, until the agent identifies an act that he can perform here and now without any further reflection. He will partly think his way through a series of hypothetical necessities: at least in context, if he is to go to achieve end E he may have to pursue means M. In other cases, E may leave him a choice between M₁ and M₂; he may then want to consider by which means ‘it is most easily and best produced’ (1112b17), which may require measurement by a single standard (DA III.11 434a8-9). He may come upon a dead end: ‘If we come on an impossibility, we give up, for instance if we need wealth and this cannot be got’ (EN III.3 1112b24-6). If it is E that cannot be achieved, his present deliberation is over, though his situation may then suggest another end to pursue. If it is M that turns out to be impracticable, he will explore the possibilities of realizing a different means instead. (We could represent this by a tree structure, where deliberation retreats from a node whose branches lead to nothing practicable to a higher node with other branches of which at least one may lead to action.) Ideally, the upshot will be a single logos ‘for the sake of something’ (AE B.2 1139a32-3) that spells out the content of a resultant choice. It will specify what he is choosing, for the sake of what, and how his ways or means derive from his end. This will constitute what Aristotle calls a ‘practical syllogism’ (AE B.12 1144a31-2).²⁵ We can present the essence of this by a simplified schema (whose premises may only hold in context):

Starting-point: to φ (an act)
First premise: To φ, one should χ.

²⁵ It has been doubted whether 1144a31-2 should be so construed; for a defence, see Price (2011: 220 n. 36).
Second premise: To χ, one should ψ.

End-point: to ψ (an act) 26

Here ψ’ing is proposed as the way (in context) to χ, which is proposed as the way to φ. φ’ing may often be less determinate than χ’ing: in my earlier example, φ’ing is giving a certain person help, while χ’ing might be escorting them home. Yet the essential difference, if deliberation is called for, is that the agent is not ready to φ until he has given thought how to φ, whereas he can simply ψ at will. He is now ready to act: so we read ‘What is last in the order of analysis seems to be first in the order of becoming’ (EN III.3 1112b23-4), and ‘The object of desire is the starting-point (archê) of practical reason, whereas its end-point is the starting-point of action’ (DA III.10 433a15-17).

Two disputed issues in the interpretation of the practical syllogism have been these: how does it relate to deliberation, and what does Aristotle mean when he says that the conclusion is an action? I shall answer the first question fairly briefly, and explore the second more fully.

Our main source of examples of the practical syllogism (though the phrase does not appear there) is De Motu Animalium 7. This chapter is puzzling in that its purpose is to give a general account of animal motion that applies not only to human beings, but also to lower animals which, lacking reason, even lack beliefs (DA III.3 428a20-4, 11 434a10-11). And yet it presents us with sequences of propositions, even quite sophisticated ones. Thus we read ‘Every man should take walks’ (DMA 701a13), which is universally quantified, even though we are told elsewhere that the lower animals lack general suppositions, and only have imagination (phantasia) and memory of particulars (AE C.3 1147b4-5). We are much closer to animal capacities when we read, more simply: “I should drink”, says appetite. “Here’s a drink”, says sense-perception or phantasia or thought. At once he drinks’ (DMA 701a32-3). Part of Aristotle’s point is purely analogical, comparing the way in which, in the case of a theoretical syllogism, thinking its conclusion follows from thinking its premises (a10-11), and the way in which an animal that has a desire, and perceives an object to satisfy it, at once goes for that thing. It doesn’t follow that human beings, who can think and reason, don’t think their way into action in a manner that really involves a practical syllogism, and does not just admit an analogy with a theoretical one.27

26 I do not offer this as the normal form of Aristotle’s practical syllogism (for there is no such thing, cf. Kenny, 1979: chs 11-12), but as a perspicuous representation of some salient things he says. The starting-point will be associated with some judgement, say that it is good in context to act in a certain way. I have suggested elsewhere (2011: 242-5) that the deontic judgements that Aristotle offers in this context are typically hypothetical (like my first and second schematic premises); cf. Corcilius (2008a: 253). I leave it open here whether the force of the ‘should’ is to introduce a way or means that is not only sufficient in context (alongside other steps that one envisages taking), but also necessary. On that, cf. Price (2011: 240 n. 60, 246-50).

27 Corcilius (2008a) argues with an untiring integrity that the practical syllogism is no more than an analogy for the efficient causation of movement by a combination of desire and cognition. This holds good of the lower animals, who do not act upon practical inferences. It becomes problematic in the case of human agents, who can apply universal quantifications to particular cases (DMA 7 701a13-14), pursue a chain of means-end reasonings (a17-23), and pause, or pass quickly, over a certain premise (a25-8). What carries over from the explanation of animal motion, I shall argue in indebtedness to him, is that an awareness of what is stated in
Indeed, this is confirmed, with a qualification, a passage that follows: ‘As sometimes when we ask dialectical questions, thought does not stop and attend to the second premise, the obvious one. For example, if taking walks is good for a man, it does not waste time upon the consideration that he is a man’ (a25-8). Here one premise (‘Taking walks is good for a man’) receives attention. The other (‘I am a man’) is not overlooked, for it is essential; yet it doesn’t receive a moment’s thought. If we only had an analogy between acting and syllogizing, there would be no such distinction. Even in such cases a practical syllogism is operative, though only part of it takes time (so that there is no actual process of ‘calculating’, a28); in other cases, where both premises invite attention, action takes a little longer.

I have elsewhere detailed a mass of evidence that associates talk of deliberation with syllogistic vocabulary (2011: 220). Any claim that the practical syllogism, whatever its role, has no connection with deliberation is not credible. It does not follow, however, that deliberation, as a whole, takes the form of a practical syllogism. Deliberation, we were told, is a kind of search (EN III.3 1112b22-3). We can tell a story that converts the schema I offered above into a series of questions and answers: ‘How shall I φ?’ ‘I shall χ.’ ‘How shall I χ?’ ‘I shall ψ.’ We have a need for deliberation, involving wondering, and looking around (literally or figuratively), so long as the answers aren’t obvious. Yet that schema was greatly simplified. Most often there will be options, and the agent will want to reflect how to achieve some goal ‘most easily and best’ (1112b17). Given that his total goal is not simply to φ, but thereby to act well, this is not just an instrumental question about means to a given end: the agent may need to weigh up the independent costs and benefits of alternative ways and means; and as he thinks through what φ’ing involves and excludes in context, he may need (as he didn’t initially) to reflect about whether it is really a good idea. Part of his deliberation may be exploring what turn out to be dead ends. Only some of this will leave a deposit within the content of the resultant practical syllogism. That is a precipitate out of deliberation that connects the eventual act to the initial goal through a chain of connecting steps relating ways or means to ends. This conveys what the agent is minded to do, for the sake of what, and through what. The eventual choice is of an act for the sake of an end; the practical syllogism makes it explicit, step by step, how the two connect. The choice, and the syllogism, are products of deliberation; they do not themselves constitute deliberation.

As I presented it, both the starting-point and the end-point of a practical syllogism are acts. The deliberator starts with an act of φ’ing, often indeterminate, that constitutes the content of a wish; he ends with an act of ψ’ing, determinate and practicable without further thought, that constitutes the content of a choice. If all goes well, the upshot is an action that involves the performing of both acts. These theses already point to part of what Aristotle may have in mind when he counts the conclusion of a practical syllogism as an action. He states this in two passages within DMA 7:

---

the premises suffices to attach a general desire to a particular object; what follows in the human context is action – but in a broad conception of action that does not divorce it from thought.
Here [as opposed to a context of theoretical reasoning] the conclusion which results from the two premises is the action. For example, whenever someone thinks that every man should take walks, and that he is a man, at once he takes a walk (701a11-14).

I need a covering; a cloak is a covering. I need a cloak. What I need, I have to make; I need a cloak. I have to make a cloak. And the conclusion, the ‘I have to make a cloak’, is an action. And he acts from a starting-point. If there is to be a cloak, there must necessarily be this first, and if this, this. And this he does at once. Now, that the action is the conclusion, is clear (a17-23).

One aspect of the argument applies to the lower animals: animal action upon perception and desire is analogous to a man’s embracing a theoretical conclusion out of two premises. In his simplest example, a desire to drink generates a drinking out of the perception of a possible drink (701a32-3). He comments: ‘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 phantasias and thought’ (a33-6). So the animal starts with a desire to drink (which is an act of a kind), and acts out of a desire to drink this (which is an act of a more determinate kind). However, Aristotle offers details that go beyond that analogy, and fall within a narrative whereby human beings act not only with reason but upon reasoning whose role is inherently practical.28 In the more complex, and distinctively human, example of a man and a cloak, ‘I need a covering’ presupposes a desire to get what one needs (in this case, presumably, for health or warmth). That might not generate any practical thinking; what makes the thinking practical is the further premise, either unreal or highly contextualized (since it isn’t generally true), ‘What I need, I have to make.’ In the context of that, getting what the agent needs becomes not just a desideratum, but a practical goal whose realization is up to him. The practical syllogism then traces a sequence of acts: making a cloak, making this1, making this2. The last of these he can perform without further ado. Thus the practical starting-point and endpoint are both acts, as is the transitional making a cloak.29

My schema set out a sequence of objects of thought or desire. It started with an act (‘to φ’), which is an object of wish, continued with two propositions (‘To ψ, one should χ’, and ‘To χ, one should ψ’), and ended with another act (‘to ψ’), which is an object of choice.

---

28 Only so can Aristotle count phronēsis as at once an intellectual virtue, and a hexis ... praktikē (AE B.6 1140b20-1); cf. the characterization of epistēmē as a hexis apodeiktikē, i.e. a state that issues in proofs (B.3 1139b31-2). Thus phronēsis is actualized in action. As Jean-Marie Guyau has put it (1985: 97-8), ‘Action is only the prolongation of the idea … He who does not act as he thinks, thinks incompletely.’ Quite different, and less bold, is the conception in the mid-4th century (but pseudo-Platonic) Sisyphus, where the goal of deliberation is not acting, but identifying how best to act (387b3-4, 389b2-3).

29 Cf., without explicit reference to Aristotle, Philip Clark. He proposes (2001) that the content of a practical conclusion (and of an intention) is to do something, whereas the content of a theoretical conclusion (and of a belief) is that p. The grammar of this carries back to Aristotle’s ‘wish’. We say things like ‘My reason for ψ’ing was (in order) to φ’, as we say ‘The reason why Socrates is mortal is that all men are mortal.’ He concedes (1997: 20) that one can conclude that ψ, but not to ψ, and so suggests that what is analogous to a theoretical conclusion is a practical step. He says two things that fit well in a way with my earlier schema (1997: 21): ‘The end’s being something you want is not a premise of the practical step ... One might say the inference is valid just in case truth in the believed premises entails that the action is sufficient for the desired end.’
Does this already give a sense to the thesis, ‘The action is the conclusion’ (701a22-3)? Not exactly. What it does do is display an act (‘to ψ’) as analogous to the content of a theoretical conclusion (such as the implicit ‘To φ, one should ψ’). Yet an action, as I am using the terms, is the doing of an act, and not an act itself. An alternative translation of 701a12 would accommodate this distinction nicely: we might hope to render this as ‘The conclusion from the two premises becomes the action’, or equivalently ‘The action comes out of the conclusion from the two premises.’ Aristotle’s thesis could then run as follows: the conclusion (of a practical syllogism) is an act, which becomes an action. The elegance of this is tempting. However, it is doubtful whether the Greek word-order permits it. That rather places the phrases ‘the conclusion’ and ‘the action’ in apposition, conveying that, out of the premises, a conclusion emerges that, in some sense, is an action.\(^3\)

When human reason is engaged, and the syllogism is not just an analogy, what is the conclusion anyway, apart from being (in some sense) an action? Aristotle uses the term ‘conclusion’ (symerasmas, or to symperanthen) several times in connection with the practical syllogism (DMA 7 701a12, 23; AE C.3 1147a27). Most often, however, he leaves it implicit (as at DA III.11 434a17-19, where he states two premises but mentions no conclusion), and offers no formulation of it. If he does formulate it at DMA 7 701a20, this may be because it then sets in train a further sequence of thoughts. My schema offered, instead of a conclusion, an ‘end-point’ that was simply the content of a choice, ‘to χ’. Yet a conclusion must at least be implicit when the syllogism encapsulates a process of reasoning. Presumably, as the content of a conclusion, we must have something like ‘I should χ’ (just like ‘I should make a cloak’ at DMA 701a20). Yet how should that be read? The premises from which it follows are hypothetical, and the starting-point was ‘to φ’ as the content of a wish. About that I suggested earlier that it involves the thought ‘It is good to φ’, but may select φ’ing as a goal of thought and action not because it takes φ’ing to be best, let alone mandatory, but because φ’ing presents itself in context as the salient option. So in some cases there may be no first premise ‘I should φ’ from which a categorical ‘I should χ’ could derive. What we shall always have, implicitly if not explicitly, is a kind of hypothetical imperative: the agent must be willing to say to himself ‘I should ψ’, with a ‘should’ that is relativized to the goal of φ’ing. This will prescribe ψ’ing given that φ’ing is his goal, whether or not he takes φ’ing to be the best available goal. While there is no direct indication of this in Aristotle, it is wholly of a piece with his conception of choice: the agent chooses to ψ for the sake of φ’ing (which does not entail his supposing that he should φ).\(^4\)

---

\(^3\) See Nussbaum (1978: 342-3). In trying to make sense in a different way of 701a18-23, Charles (1984: 93-4) claims that LSJ takes symerasmas, within the phrase hypo to symerasmas in An. Pr. II.1 53a17, to signify ‘the subject matter of the conclusion’, i.e. not a proposition but ‘the objects referred to the proposition’, thus avoiding ‘a use/mention confusion’. If we apply this to DMA 7, it is not the conclusion of a practical syllogism, but its subject matter, that is identical to an action; which replaces a paradox by a truism (though far from facilitating the flow of the text, it impedes it). But Charles misreads LSJ: what they say is that the term may signify not ‘conclusion’ but ‘subject of the conclusion’; they are in no disagreement with Ross (1949: 426), who glosses the An. Pr. phrase as ‘subsumed under the minor term’ – a usage that is of no help to us.

\(^4\) Even in such a case, judging ‘I should ψ’ does not become a mere exercise of executive know-how (deinotēs, AE B.12 1144a23-6). One may deliberate correctly without deliberating well (B.9 1142b18-21).
How then do thinking and acting connect? The *Metaphysics* presents a transition from thought into production (*poiēsis*): ‘Of the processes of generation, the one part is called thinking, namely that which proceeds from the starting-point and the form, and the other is called production, namely that which proceeds from the end-point of the thinking’ (Z 7 1032b15-17). The *De Anima* speaks similarly of action: ‘That of which there is desire is the starting-point for practical *nous*, and the final step is the starting-point for action’ (III.10 433a15-17, cf. EE II.11 1227b32-3). It might be inferred that the thinking and acting do not overlap, and that the acting takes its departure from the thinking (cf. Corcilius, 2008a: 251). Drawing the conclusion can then at most be a preliminary to enacting it. However, the term ‘starting-point’ may mislead in a way that the Greek archē should not; an alternative rendering might be ‘beginning’. The ‘form’ (*Met. 1032b16*) is part of the content of a thinking that rather starts with it than from it; and the object of desire is likewise part of what practical *nous* attends to. In the *De Motu Animalium*, Aristotle can write, ‘The conclusion which results from the two premises is the action’ (7 701a11-13, cf. a22-3), and even ‘The conclusion, the “I should make a cloak”, is an action’ (a19-20), although this conclusion is not the end-point of thinking, but a point of transition. To make sense of this, we must suppose that he can permit himself to place the inception of action earlier than we might expect. The agent can count as starting to act once he infers ‘I should make a cloak’, even though he only starts to move once he has further concluded that he needs, more specifically, at once to realize a final ‘this’ (whatever that may be, a22).

Both thought and movement belong within action. We have in any case to note that commonly, when movement starts, thought continues. As Peter Strawson (1974: 172) urged years ago against any attempt to separate out mental and bodily components within a typically human activity such as writing a letter, ‘Writing a letter is essentially not something that a mind does or something that a body does, but something that a person does.’ Writing a letter, like giving a paper, involves a continuing mental engagement with a bodily process. There are cases when one loses control: Aristotle cites throwing a stone, where it was in one’s power not to throw it, but is not in one’s power to stop it (*EN* III.5 1114a17-19). In other cases, he writes, ‘We control our actions from the beginning to the end if we know the particular facts’ (b31-2). Here exercising care and intelligence continues through the execution, through a period of time, of an archē that both initiates action and sustains it.

To understand *DMA* 701a17-23, we need not only to extend thought through action, but also to bring action forward into thought. Once the agent has seen that he can, and

---

32 Within the *DA*, Ross has ‘starting-point’. Shields has ‘starting-point’ in 416a16, but ‘beginning’ in a17.
33 Thus no one supposes that what is given as the archē of a practical syllogism at *AE* B.12 1144a31-4 (‘Such is the end and what is best’) cannot be part of it – though I have suggested that it may not be (2011: 245 n. 70).
34 McDowell (2010: 422) writes, ‘Going on intentionally doing something cannot be equated with drawing a conclusion from some practical reasoning, any more than going on believing something can be equated with drawing a conclusion from some theoretical reasoning.’ However, the equation is rather between persisting in action, and continuing to accept a theoretical conclusion.
decided that he should, make a cloak, his further calculations are part of putting his
decision into effect; he has discarded any uncertainty as to whether making a covering is
indeed what he ought to be doing now. (It may yet be prevented or interrupted; but he has
set aside the possibilities of its turning out to have always been either impracticable or
inadvisable.) We may say that, at this point, he has no further need to deliberate. Hence we
can view further thought about how to make a cloak, like later attention to its making, as
aspects of a unified psycho-physical process that constitutes an action. This is why
Aristotle can say that, having reached the initial conclusion that he must make a cloak, he
‘acts from a starting-point’ (701a20-1). In Aristotle’s conception of change, making a
cloak is an actuality that realizes a capacity to bestow the form of a specific kind of
covering upon some appropriate matter; part of what the capacity enables one to do is to
give expert and effective thought to how to make a cloak – and one can start to exercise
this aspect of the capacity before one’s hands are actually at work.35

We can thus make sense of the thesis that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an
action, interpreting it as meaning that drawing the conclusion is itself part of the activity of
acting upon the premises; for this acting includes thinking. As I have said, even when (as
with the lower animals) syllogizing is only an analogy for acting, acting upon a desire and
a perception is presented as being analogous to making an inference: just as premises yield
a conclusion, so a desire that is focused by perception upon a particular generates action. It
is striking that at DA III.11 434a16-21 it is the pair of premises, and not the conclusion, of
a practical syllogism that is taken to generate action. When it is remarked earlier in AE C.3
(1147a9-10), ‘To know in one way would not seem at all absurd, while to know in the
other way would be extraordinary’ (in the case where pertinent knowledge fails to generate
action), the knowledge is of the premises, with no mention of a conclusion.36

Any interpreter who gives the crucial role to a practical judgement or choice that
ensues (in the case of deliberation) upon reasoning, and then directs action, relegates the
practical syllogism to the background of the explanation of action. Reasoning, or
something analogous to reasoning, explains the emergence of a practical judgement, say ‘I
should now take a walk’, and it is the link between this and desire that explains why action
follows.37 So long as it is sincere, the judgement would have no less effect if it came out of
nowhere (though of course it doesn’t). Aristotle seems rather to suppose that, in the case of
the lower animals, the focusing of a general desire (‘I should drink’) upon a particular
(‘This is drink’) immediately generates movement (DMA 7 701a32-3). It is true that he can
continue, ‘This, then, is the way that animals are impelled to move and act: the proximate

35 Imagine the following scenario. Looking in at a friend’s house, I see him bent over his desk, doing some
drawings and making some calculations. He looks up, and says in a preoccupied tone, ‘Come back later – I’m
making a cloak in a new style.’ In such a case, reflection is part of action. Such a conception is indicated at
AE B.4 1140a10-13, where a coming-to-be, and exercising a craft, and reflecting how some possibility may
be realized, are all equally things with which each craft is concerned.
36 However, this text needs discussion in the light of Morison (2011). He reads it as contrasting two ways of
knowing a conclusion, citing An. Pr. II.21 67a9-21. I would rather compare EE II.9 1225b8-16 on two ways of
knowing a particular fact. (Taken so, AE C.3 1147a9-10 depend on the EE much as B.12 1144a7-9 depend
on EE II.11 1227b22-5.) This connects with whether one supposes ‘the last protasis’ (AE C.3 1147b9) to be a
premise or a conclusion.
cause of movement is desire, and this comes to be either through sense-perception or through phantasia and thought' (DMA 7 701a33-6). However, he seems to suppose, reasonably enough, that in the case of animals, who do not actually reason, the final premise at once itself focuses the general desire upon a particular object. The term ‘immediately’ (euthys) is recurrently applied to the relation between the action and the premises (DMA 7 701a14, 15, 17, 22, 30, 33; AE C.3 1147a28).\textsuperscript{38} It seems to convey the absence at once of a time-lapse, and of any causal intermediary.\textsuperscript{39} This carries over to human agents once we take any judgement or choice that rests on premises and directs action as integral to action itself.

Of course, this is subject to a qualification: a conclusion may fail to be an action through incapacity or interference. A more cautious statement is that action follows on the premises when the agent ‘is able and not held back’ (AE C.3 1147a30-1; cf. DMA 7 701a16, 8 702a16-17).\textsuperscript{40} However, this should not be read as a further condition, additional to the drawing of a conclusion, which must always be present if action is to follow, but rather (as Klaus Corcilius puts it, 2008b: 171 n. 23) as ‘a sort of ceteris paribus clause’ which indicates the absence of impediments to the ensuing of action ‘once the “premises” are given (not the “conclusion”’).\textsuperscript{41} When chosen action follows, it follows on the premises and is initiated by the conclusion; if it doesn’t follow, we need an explanation in terms of inability or impediment. This qualification does not take away the thesis that, when nothing goes wrong, the conclusion is the action, in the sense that to draw the conclusion is to start the action. The identity is not unqualified, but forms the default that Aristotle displays in his deployment of the practical syllogism.

Doubts may remain especially about the relation of judgement to action. How can it be that, if nothing interferes, judging that I should make a cloak already embarks me upon making one? Judging that I should do an act sounds nothing like doing it. Here, I suggest, the entry of choice may make a real difference. Judging that I should make a cloak brings with it, in the right context, choosing to make one. This may well require giving further thought to the means: ‘If there is to be cloak, there must necessarily be this first, and if this, this’ (DMA 7 701a21-2). Such productive thinking starts from a choice much as practical thinking starts from a wish. It is striking, as I have noted, that Aristotle places the former within ‘acting from a starting-point’ (DMA 701a20-1). The choosing, the calculating, and the actual manipulating all fall within the action of making a cloak. Perhaps this permits

\textsuperscript{38} Slightly different is DMA 8 701a15-17: ‘It is pretty much at the same time (hama) that he thinks he should move forward and moves forward, if nothing else impedes it.’ The hama may link a deontic conclusion and action yet more intimately than euthys links the premises and action. However, Nussbaum (1978: 358) takes the reference to be to the major premise (comparing ‘Every man should take walks’, 7 701a13), explaining this as follows: ‘The minor premise does not detain the agent, and the bodily pars interact rapidly; so there is virtually no gap between the thought of the major premise and the motion.’

\textsuperscript{39} See Corcilius (2008a: 268, 2008b: 171 n. 23), who cites Bonitz 296a12-17.

\textsuperscript{40} I say little here about the important passage AE C.3 1147a24-31; for more, see Price (2011: 291, 295-6 n. 35).

\textsuperscript{41} Ideally, Aristotle would have distinguished two kinds of hindrance: one makes the syllogism idle from the first, so that no cloak-making even begins; the other interrupts a cloak-making, so that the agent turns out to have been making a cloak though not to have made one. A standing state of paralysis may cause the first, whereas a subsequent interruption causes the second. An impediment that is effective and evident must cancel or suspend the practical conclusion.
him to view the action as also, though derivatively, taking in the judgement that is inseparable from the choice.

If this is right, it remains true that choice and action are more intimately connected than action and judgement. If the content of this choice is precisely an act of ψ’ing, then choice is correlative to execution: one and the same act is both chosen, and carried out. This parallelism makes it apt that the grammar of choosing (‘What I choose is to ψ’) should be of a kind with the grammar of doing (‘What I do is to ψ’). An act must be the kind of thing to be carried out, and also to be chosen, both falling within the action of an agent.

V : CONCLUSION

Though Aristotle’s focus is narrower than we might prefer, his account of prohairesis has turned out to be illuminating in two ways. First, it is felicitously that he identifies what one chooses as to act. A background wish to act well is translated by deliberation into a choice to act in some concrete way. Acting as I choose, I do what I choose to do. An intention that I φ, like an intention that someone else φ, is more precisely an intention to bring it about (or else let it happen) that I φ. In some cases, I may bring it about that I φ simply by ψ’ing, where ψ’ing is a way of φ’ing; but in others, I may bring it about that I φ by taking preliminary measures that have my φ’ing as a consequence. If I intend that I φ, without being in a position either directly to intend to φ or simply to let it happen that I φ, I must directly intend to take whatever preliminary steps are needed; which is also what, in Aristotle, I may choose to do.

Secondly, the relation between choice and action that I have unearthed in Aristotle is one elaboration of what John McDowell has explored under the label ‘intention in action’. Just as, on one persuasive account, intending to ψ turns into ψ’ing intentionally as ψ’ing starts, so, as I read Aristotle, choosing to ψ can help to constitute ψ’ing ‘voluntarily’ (hekôn) as ψ’ing starts. Such choosing can even count as starting to act (as when I start making a cloak in my head); and it typically continues to infuse its own execution. Choice is action, when all goes well, not just in commencing it, and setting it going, but (where it calls for continuing control) in initiating a state of active attention that sustains it.

In the case (central to Aristotle) where the agent aims at acting well, it is this intimate relation between choice and action that permits reason to be practical in the double and unified sense of being exercised for the sake of acting well, and of issuing in action. Choice is the hinge that links reasoning for the sake of acting well to acting: it is a corollary of a practical conclusion, and the beginning of its realization. Within Aristotle’s moral psychology, rational action centrally involves choice, and it is by analyzing choice that he displays how reason can be practical.42

42 This paper has benefited from the participants in two occasions when an ancestor of it was presented, at Stanford, and in Oxford; also from the comments of an anonymous referee.
REFERENCES

Aquinas, St Thomas, *Summa Theologica* [ST]


