An Aristotelian Account of Human Agency

4.1 Introduction

In *Metaphysics Θ*, Chapter 2, Aristotle provides what is, perhaps, the first systematic distinction between two-way powers and one-way powers.¹ As Stephen Makin observes, Aristotle makes ‘two distinctions among active capacities: that between rational and non-rational capacities (1046a36–1046b4), and that between two-way and one-way capacities (1046b4–7)’. Makin, then, observes that Aristotle claims that the relationship between these two capacities is as follows:

[A] If a capacity is rational then it is a two-way capacity.
[B] If a capacity is non-rational then it is a one-way capacity.²

Here, Aristotle is distinguishing between natural causal powers that will necessarily be exercised on a given occasion (one-way powers), and rational powers that may or may not be exercised on a given occasion (two-way powers). For example, as Anthony Kenny illustrates, ‘fire will burn wood if the wood is sufficiently dry. But if these conditions are met, then the power will infallibly be exercised.’³ On the other hand, powers such as the power to give money in response to a street person’s plea may not be exercised even though all the necessary conditions are in place (e.g., one has change in one’s pocket, one has the ability and time to reach into one’s pocket to retrieve the change, etc.). On such occasions, one may either help the poor person or refrain from doing so. And to say that one refrains from doing so is not to indicate that it is not within one’s power on that occasion.

But, in qualification of Aristotle’s analysis, there are good reasons for not equating two-way powers with rational powers. Understanding
language is a rational power. And as Kenny notes: ‘If someone speaks a language I know in my hearing it isn’t in my power not to understand it’. Under these circumstances, one does not have the two-way power to understand or not understand. Further, it seems questionable, at best, to maintain that some animals do not have two-way powers by virtue of not having rational powers.

So two-way powers should not be equated with rational powers. Given this qualification, over the next several chapters, I provide an analysis showing that—in keeping with a broadly conceived Aristotelian tradition—to engage in much of the conduct we, at least, think we engage in is to exercise a two-way power; i.e.—it is to V or not V when one is able to V and able to not V on that particular occasion. But we will also see that if we actually do, and accomplish, much of what we think we do throughout our everyday affairs, often, we exercise power to choose in the following sense:

We engage in conduct knowingly, or in the awareness that we do so, when aware of being able to behave in alternative ways on that occasion.

Here, I should point out that, for simplicity’s sake, I use ‘conduct’ and ‘behaviour’, in a broad sense, to include what one does mentally, as well as passive forms of behaviour. I should, also, point out that, in this chapter, I will focus on thought about our conduct in general, including our actions as well as passive forms of conduct, which—in keeping with observations made in Chapter 2—is critical for coming to a correct conception of voluntary conduct. The following analysis will reveal that event-causal accounts of our action (see Section 2.3) do not align with the way we, typically, think and talk about, at least, a broad number of our actions. If we do and accomplish much of what we typically think we do, we are causal agents.

My analysis of human agency will have implications for the compatibilist and incompatibilist debate about free will, which I discuss in the next chapter, Chapter 5. It will, also, have implications for what Libet-style experiments can reveal about our agency, which I will mention at the end of this chapter, but discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 6. Further, what I have to say here will have wider implications regarding whether the way neuroscientists predominately interpret our neural findings is compatible with the idea we are voluntary agents. I will not, however, discuss what contemporary neuroscience research reveals as it pertains to voluntary agency in any detail until Chapter 7. I do this after having sufficiently