

Sudden Actions and Decisions: Aristotle vs. Contemporary Virtue Ethics

Benjamin Koons

University of St. Thomas

I. INTRODUCTION¹

Although it was often billed as an account of character rather than action in its beginnings, in the past two decades contemporary virtue ethics has increasingly turned its attention to giving an account of right action in terms of virtuous action.² Simultaneously, virtue ethicists have been grappling with the problem of how virtuous action is even possible, since virtuous actions are both *habitual* and *done for a reason*.³ The problem is that habitual actions are taken to be automatic and hence unthinking actions, while one can't act for a reason unthinkingly.

When we turn to Aristotle, we find what seem to be a related issue: can sudden actions be decided upon? It's tempting to understand sudden action as automatic action and to think of decision as what makes an action reasons-based, but actually Aristotle's issue presupposes that the contemporary problem has either already been solved or that it's not a genuine problem.⁴ For Aristotle, sudden actions are done voluntarily, (*NE* III.2 1111b4–10) and hence they are done for a reason because one cannot act voluntarily in ignorance of the reason for which one is acting (*NE* III.1 1111a4–5). After setting out what the difference between voluntary and involuntary action consists in in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1, at the beginning of Chapter 2 Aristotle distinguishes between voluntary actions and actions based on a decision: actions based on a decision are a subset of voluntary actions. One piece of evidence he gives for this distinction is that sudden actions are voluntary but not based on a decision. If sudden actions are voluntary and hence based on a reason but they aren't based on a decision, what condition on an action's being based on a decision does voluntary action not meet? By the end of Chapter

2, Aristotle's answer is clear: what distinguishes merely voluntary action from action based on a decision is that the latter class of actions are based on previous deliberation (*NE* III.2 1112a114–5). Voluntary actions can be done for a reason, but actions based on a decision are done on the basis of a process of reasoning (*dianoia*) (*NE* III.2 1112a15–6).

What makes Aristotle's distinction between voluntary action and decision-based action so important is that back in Book II we learned that virtuous action is a subset of decision-based action. Hence, merely voluntary actions are not virtuous, which entails that sudden actions are not virtuous. Many commentators have found this to be an implausible view, since there are clearly cases of virtuous action that do not depend on a lengthy process of deliberation.⁵ In defense of their rejection of the "implausible view," these commentators all point to a passage in Chapter 8 of Book III where Aristotle apparently says that the courageous person decides upon a sudden action on the basis of his character. This seems to be evidence of Aristotle's qualifying his categorical denial of sudden actions based on a decision in *NE* III.2, but I argue in this paper that the passage in Chapter 8 has been mistranslated and that Aristotle does not retract his view in *NE* III.2. Instead, Aristotle claims that the courageous person is the one who not only decides to endure foreseen dangers but the one who also remains level-headed enough to make a decision in the face of a danger that appears suddenly out of nowhere.

In Section II, I set out and defend my interpretation of *NE* III.8. If this interpretation of *NE* III.8 is correct, then Aristotle maintains his "implausible view" throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Section III, I respond to a problem for my interpretation of *NE* III.8: how can the courageous person have enough time to deliberate and make a decision in the face of sudden dangers? Here is where I distinguish between dangers that appear suddenly (i.e., dangers that appear "out of nowhere") and dangers that harm one suddenly (i.e., imminent dangers). I argue that in *NE* III.8, Aristotle is only concerned with dangers that appear out of nowhere and not with imminent dangers, and that generally one does have enough time to make a decision in the face of a danger that appears out of nowhere. This gives us an appealing picture of the courageous person as one who "keeps his head about him" while the impetuous akratic person loses his head and fails to deliberate because of such sudden dangers, and it also puts us in a position to explain what exactly courage contributes to excellence in practical reasoning for acting virtuously.

II. DO WE EVER ACT SUDDENLY ON THE BASIS OF A DECISION?: INTERPRETING *NE* III.8

Many commentators think that Aristotle denies in *NE* III.2 that one ever acts suddenly based on a decision but that he contradicts himself in *NE* III.8 when he asserts that the courageous person decides on a sudden action in certain cases.⁶

What I show in this section is that Aristotle doesn't contradict himself in *NE* III.8 but that the passage has been frequently mistranslated.⁷ Aristotle never says that the courageous person decides to act suddenly. Rather he is saying that the courageous person decides to endure sudden dangers. Hence, Aristotle doesn't contradict the view he asserts in *NE* III.2, and he is consistently committed to there being no sudden actions based on a decision. My interpretation is novel, but there have been other attempts to save Aristotle from contradicting himself. One could deny that Aristotle really makes a categorical assertion about sudden actions in *NE* III.2 or one could point to an equivocation in terms between the two chapters. Finally, one could translate *NE* III.8 as Anthony Price does such that Aristotle merely says that the courageous person acts suddenly in the face of sudden dangers without saying that he makes any decision in such a case. I will deal with each of these alternative interpretations in this section.

In this section, I will first look at *NE* III.2 and show that Aristotle commits himself to a categorical claim about sudden actions (*No Sudden*) and spell out what he means by this claim. Second, I will compare my translation of *NE* III.8 to W.D. Ross' influential one and an alternative one suggested by Price. Ross' translation seems to land us into contradiction with *NE* III.2, while Price's avoids this. Duane Long provides one way to understand Aristotle on the basis of Ross' translation such that he doesn't contradict himself: Aristotle uses the word for "decide upon" in equivocal senses. I will argue that this suggestion is implausible. Third, I will consider Price's translation and interpretation and show some of the philosophical problems with it. Finally, I will propose a lingering problem for Aristotle if my interpretation is correct. It may be that the courageous person decides to endure sudden dangers, but if a danger is sudden how does it allow him any time to deliberate and make a decision? I'll take this problem up in Section IV.

At the beginning of *NE* III.2, Aristotle writes:

After the voluntary and the involuntary have been defined, it follows to discuss decision. For it [i.e., decision] seems to be most pertinent to virtue and to judge characters more than actions [do]. In fact, while decision appears to be voluntary [it is] not the same [as it], but the voluntary is broader. For both children and other animals take part in the voluntary, but not in decision. We say sudden [actions⁸] are voluntary, but not on the basis of decision. (1111b4-10).

The final sentence is crucial. I have translated it literally, but a fuller paraphrase would go: We say sudden actions are voluntary, but we deny that sudden actions are based on a decision. A natural way to understand that sentence is that Aristotle commits himself to the following thesis:

No Sudden: No sudden actions are based on a decision.

This thesis relies upon the notion of a *sudden action* as well as the notion of *being based on*. In *Physics* IV.13, Aristotle defines “sudden” as *changing in a time-span imperceptible on account of its shortness*. (222b14-15). Throughout his corpus, Aristotle is fairly consistent in using the term in this sense. At times, Aristotle uses it in a hyperbolic manner but without appealing to a distinct sense of the term.⁹ If we apply this definition of “sudden” to “sudden actions,” we can get the following biconditional:

An action is sudden iff there is no perceptible gap between the action and the agent’s perception of the altered circumstances to which the action is a response.

A perceptible gap is a gap that is perceptible to the agent. Even the agent does not notice any time pass between the change in circumstances and the action the agent takes. The change in circumstances and the action occupy the same “specious present” for the agent. Actually, it is the agent’s perception of the change in circumstances that is crucial. If I fail to notice the approaching storm until it is upon me and act to seek shelter as soon as I perceive that the sky has changed, my action is still a sudden one.

What then is it for an action to be *based on* a decision? Aristotle here uses the preposition “kata,” which can in Greek merely express bare logical conformity, e.g., that my action of *going on a run* has the same sort of content as my decision *to go on a run*. Beside mere logical conformity between a decision and action, the preposition “kata” can also include a causal element.¹⁰ I use the phrase “on the basis of” as a translation of “kata” to capture that the relation between decision and action goes beyond mere logical conformity and includes a causal element. Given Aristotle’s rich conception of causation, we should specify what sort of cause a decision is of an action. In *NE* VI.2, Aristotle describes decisions as principles of actions not in the sense of being the end of an action but rather as that from whence the motion comes, i.e., the efficient cause (1139a31-32).

One might doubt that Aristotle means to commit himself to *No Sudden* in *NE* III.2, and aspects of the passage might suggest as much.¹¹ Nevertheless, there are two reasons to think Aristotle is committed to *No Sudden* in III.2. First, Aristotle needs a claim as strong as *No Sudden* at the beginning of *NE* III.2 because he is showing that voluntary action is a class that has a wider extension than action based on a decision so that he can distinguish the two and then define decision. To prove this point, Aristotle provides two kinds of actions that are voluntary but not based on a decision: the actions of children and non-human animals and sudden actions. If there were sudden actions that were decided upon, the class of sudden actions as a whole wouldn’t be evidence of a voluntary action that isn’t decided upon. Second, in the second book of the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), Aristotle clearly commits himself to *No Sudden* in chapters 8 and 10. In chapter 8, he says, “While wishing for many

things we act suddenly, but nobody decides on anything [oudeis ouden] suddenly”(EE II.8 1224a3-4), and in chapter 10, “For nobody decides suddenly, but it seems that one acts and they do wish [suddenly]” (EE II.10 1226b3-4).¹² This is further evidence that Aristotle is also committed to *No Sudden* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well and that his claim at NE III.2 should be read as a categorical statement about all sudden actions. Given these two reasons, it’s highly plausible that Aristotle commits himself to *No Sudden* in NE III.2.

If Aristotle asserts *No Sudden* in NE III.2, he asserts in NE III.8 1117a16-22 however—at least according to W.D. Ross’ influential translation—the following:

- Lines 16-17¹³ ...but it was the mark of a brave man to face things that are, and seem, terrible for a man, because it is noble to do so and disgraceful not to do so.
- Lines 18-19 Hence also it is thought the mark of a braver man to be fearless and undisturbed in sudden alarms than to be so in those that are foreseen;
- Line 20 for it must have proceeded more from a state of character, because less from preparation;

Up to this point, I largely agree with Ross’ translation, but both Anthony Price and I depart from him in the final two lines:

- Lines 21-22
 Ross: acts that are foreseen may be chosen by calculation and rule, but sudden actions must be in accordance with one’s state of character. 22 23
- Price: for acts that are foreseen may be chosen by calculation and a logos, but sudden actions (ta exaiphnēs) [may occur] in accordance with one’s state of character.
- Author: for one would decide [to endure] the foreseen [dangers] by calculation and a reason, but [one would decide to endure] the sudden [dangers] in accordance with one’s state of character.

On Ross’ translation, in lines 21-22, we would have the following thesis:

Deciding from Character: For any sudden action, one decides upon that action on the basis of one’s character-state.

Assuming that some actions are in fact sudden, *No Sudden* and *Deciding from*

Character contradict each other unless there's some equivocation in the terms between the two claims.¹⁴ Duane Long proposes just such a solution to avoid the contradiction.

On Long's view, *No Sudden* and *Deciding from Character* involve equivocal uses of the term "decision [prohairesis]."¹⁵ If Aristotle commits himself to *No Sudden* in *NE* III.2 and doesn't equivocate in his use of terms between chapters 2 and 8 of Book III, then either Aristotle contradicts himself by accepting *Deciding from Character* or chapter 8 has been mistranslated and Aristotle makes no such claim. Both Price and I accept the latter option, but we do so in different ways. Price denies that we should supply "decided upon" in Lines 21-22 in the relevant clause: sudden actions are not decided upon on the basis of character but rather *may occur* on the basis of character. I render Lines 21-22 such that the courageous person decides to endure sudden *dangers* on the basis of character.¹⁶ On my view, sudden actions are not mentioned in *NE* III.8, and Aristotle does not speak there of courageous people even making sudden actions. Rather what distinguishes the courageous person from the non-courageous person is that while the courageous person does make a decision in the face of sudden dangers, the non-courageous person makes no decision at all and merely acts without deliberation or fails to act and freezes up. It is the unique ability of the courageous person to make decisions in the face of sudden dangers. On Price's view, however, the whole point is that the courageous person does a sudden action in emergencies where how he acts is "guided by character without choice or reasoning" (Price 444-445.) Character all on its own without any reasoning is able to get the right answer when it needs to.

There are three problems with Price's interpretation of *NE* III.8. First, it is intelligible how one could decide to endure foreseen or sudden dangers, but Price's translation (and Ross') says that one decides upon foreseen acts. It's baffling to me how one could decide upon one's own foreseen act, but it's also opaque why Aristotle would assert in this context that the acts one decides upon are foreseen acts. Second, Price's interpretation makes character sufficient all on its own for determining the right action in emergency situations without any reasoning or deliberation, but why couldn't it do the same in non-emergency situations? And if it can do so in non-emergencies, then there's no need for the virtuous agent to deliberate at all. Third, Price's courageous sudden actions wouldn't meet Aristotle's requirement a few lines earlier in *NE* III.8 that the courageous person endure what is and appears fearful on the basis of two distinct thoughts: (i) because it is fine to endure such fearful things and (ii) because it is shameful not to endure such fearful things.¹⁷ If the courageous person has to have these two distinct thoughts, then there must be a perceptible gap between the perceived danger and the action which responds to it, which entails that the action is not a sudden one.

Even if we accept my translation of *NE* III.8 such that Aristotle doesn't say anything about deciding on a sudden action, Aristotle does still say that one decides

to endure sudden dangers. He accepts the following thesis:

Sudden Danger: A courageous person is one who decides to endure sudden dangers.¹⁸

This thesis leads to its own puzzle. *Sudden Danger* is not an obvious contradiction of *No Sudden* in the same way that *Deciding from Character* was, but it seems to threaten *No Sudden* all the same. For suppose that a courageous person is faced with some sudden danger and decides to endure it. Suppose too that *No Sudden* is true, and hence there is some perceptible gap between the courageous person's perception of the sudden danger and his action in response to it. But this delay in acting on the part of the courageous person seems like bad strategy. The danger if it truly is sudden will have already inflicted harm on the courageous person if he delays acting. So perhaps courageous people really do decide about enduring sudden dangers on the basis of their characters immediately upon perceiving the danger, and there really is no gap between perception and action.

III. SUDDEN DANGERS

In Section II, I raised a problem for the combination of views *No Sudden* and *Sudden Danger*: sudden dangers don't leave the courageous agent enough time to respond to them except by acting suddenly, and hence one can't decide to endure sudden dangers. In this section, I solve this problem. I argue that in *NE* III.8 Aristotle's phrase "sudden dangers" refers to dangers that appear out of nowhere rather than imminent dangers, and if that's right, it's possible for the courageous person to make decisions and act non-suddenly in the face of sudden dangers.

We can distinguish between two different kinds of dangers that the phrase "sudden dangers" could plausibly refer to. These are both dangers and sudden, but they aren't sudden for the same reason. The first kind of sudden danger, which I call "imminent dangers," is or appears imminent, i.e., the object of fear is or seems to be on the point of inflicting harm. In other words, the perception of the imminent harm and the beginning of the infliction of harm occupy the same specious present. There is no perceptible gap between my perception of the danger and its beginning to inflict harm. Characterized thus, there is no possibility of responding to an imminent danger unless one acts suddenly. Given *No Sudden*, that means there is no opportunity to decide how one will respond to an imminent danger. Hence, one cannot accept *No Sudden* and *Sudden Danger* while understanding "sudden dangers" to mean imminent dangers in the latter claim.

An alternative way of understanding *Sudden Danger* is that the courageous person is one who decides to endure *suddenly appearing dangers*, i.e., dangers that appear out of nowhere. I will refer to this second kind of sudden danger as both "suddenly appearing dangers" and "dangers that appear out of nowhere." Such a

danger is sudden in the sense that there is no perceptible gap between one's becoming aware of the object of fear and one's being afraid of the object. For instance, if I learn of an army's approach by report, and while intellectually I conceive of it as a great threat, I do not yet fear it, then this is not a suddenly appearing danger. Likewise, if I see the army approaching a long way off and yet do not fear it because of its distance, then this is not a suddenly appearing danger. Yet if an enemy appears out of nowhere and stirs up fear in me at my first sight of it, then this is a suddenly appearing danger. Some dangers that appear out of nowhere are imminent, while others are not. For an instance of the latter sort, imagine that a bear walks out of the bushes into the path ten feet in front of me. The bear's appearance and my becoming afraid of him are simultaneous, and I have not learned of the bear before he appeared. Yet he is not on the point of inflicting harm upon me, since there are a few seconds before he could catch me should he pursue me. Likewise, there are imminent dangers that do not appear out of nowhere. For instance, imagine that I had learned about Napoleon's army's advance into Russia from reports for months. It is the hour of battle now, and my position is within range of his artillery. I am in imminent danger, but I had been warned about it for months. So, this is an imminent danger that does not appear out of nowhere.

On my interpretation, Aristotle in endorsing *Sudden Danger* is really only considering the dangers that appear out of nowhere without being imminent. Such dangers require courage in order for one to be able to make a decision in the face of them, but they also allow time for one to deliberate.

When Aristotle speaks of sudden dangers in *NE* III.8, he does seem to have dangers that appear out of nowhere in mind. Aristotle contrasts in 1117a20 how one acts from preparation in the face of foreseen dangers with how one acts from a state of character in the face of sudden dangers. Thus, it is characteristic of the "sudden dangers" mentioned by Aristotle that one not be able to prepare for it, but this is a characteristic of dangers that appear out of nowhere but not of imminent dangers. For while one can prepare oneself mentally in advance of an imminent danger that doesn't appear out of nowhere, one cannot prepare oneself mentally for a danger that appears out of nowhere. I can prepare myself mentally for the approach of Napoleon's army, but I cannot prepare myself mentally for a surprise ambush. Moreover, when Aristotle speaks of sudden dangers (or sudden fears), he always contrasts them with dangers that are foreseen, i.e., ones that are "clear in advance [prodēlois]" or "appear beforehand [prophanē]." Yet imminent dangers may in some cases be foreseen, i.e., one can have advance warning of an imminent danger that is now upon one. Hence, imminent dangers are not characteristically opposed to foreseen dangers in the way that the sudden dangers mentioned in *NE* III.8 are.

Thus far I have restricted myself to arguing for a plausible exegetical solution of the puzzle involving *No Sudden* and *Sudden Danger*, but I contend that

understanding “sudden dangers” to mean dangers that appear out of nowhere also makes better sense of the role of courage in emergency situations. In the context of the entire Chapter 8 of *NE* III, Aristotle wants to present certain situations and markers that distinguish the courageous person from simulations and approximations of the genuine article. A pertinent question here then is: is it more of a mark of the courageous person (*a*) to act suddenly in the face of imminent dangers or (*b*) to make a decision in the face of dangers that appear out of nowhere? I have argued in this section that in *NE* III.8 Aristotle claims that (*b*) is the mark of the courageous person and he simply doesn’t consider (*a*), but now I argue further that on philosophical grounds (*b*) is a better marker for the possession of courage than (*a*) is.

There are three reasons for thinking that making decisions in the face of dangers that appear out of nowhere is a better marker of courage than acting suddenly in the face of imminent dangers. First, both the foolhardy and the courageous are capable of acting suddenly in the face of imminent dangers, but the foolhardy person often fails to make a decision in the face of dangers that appear out of nowhere. The foolhardy person is an instance of the “impetuous akratic” that Aristotle considers in *NE* VII.7 1150b19-28. Such a person acts on the basis of how something first appears to him on the basis of his feelings without deliberating about it, but if he were to have seen a danger or pleasure in advance and had deliberated about it he would have acted on the basis of his deliberation rather than his feelings. The problem with such people is not that they deliberate badly or that they fail to adhere to the results of their deliberation. Rather they lack virtue, and so their feelings impede their ability to deliberate in the first place. Second, both the expert and the courageous person are capable of acting suddenly in the face of imminent dangers where there is time for mental preparation, but the expert often flees in the face of dangers that appear out of nowhere beside his expectation.¹⁹ In warfare, the professional mercenary has a wider experience than most soldiers, even courageous ones, so he will have a more accurate perception of how dangerous various dangers actually are as well as greater confidence in his own means of defense because of his greater skill. Yet in truly novel and unexpected situations in which both the mercenary and the courageous neophyte have little experience, the mercenary’s experience will be useless in steadying him and allowing him to appraise the situation, while the neophyte’s courage will still operate and allow him to deliberate. Third, both the spirited animal and the courageous person are able to act suddenly in the face of imminent dangers, and while the animal can retain its spirit against dangers that appear out of nowhere only the courageous person can decide in such cases.

These considerations point to a particularly important role courage is supposed to play in human life. In situations where a threat to one’s life appears, it is especially difficult for us humans who are not only rational agents but mortal animals with a strong fear of death to retain our ability to apply our rational faculties

to the present situation and come to the best decision. The fear of death is so overwhelming that we are liable to fail to even begin deliberating about what to do and either act or fail to act merely from emotion. In cases in which we have forewarning of a danger, we can prepare ourselves mentally, and so the actual appearance of the fearful object will not incapacitate our reasoning. For if we have forewarning, we can consider how dangerous the threat actually is, coming to a more realistic appreciation of it, and we can also tally up our various defenses and resources against the danger. Yet when we lack this forewarning, we are liable to exaggerate the danger and forget about our means of defense. So, in such cases, i.e., in cases of dangers that appear out of nowhere, it is critical that we have some way of keeping our fear of death sufficiently in check so that we can still deliberate. This *means of moderation* needs to have a certain stability, though, in order to be useful in situations of sudden dangers. The means of moderation needs to be a stable enough attribute of the person so that it persists through extreme and unfamiliar situations that would otherwise give rise to disturbing emotions. Beyond stability, it also needs to be able to resist being disabled. If the means of moderation were an ability like one's ability to reason that could be disabled in an emergency, then it would lose its usefulness. Courage is the sort of attribute that plausibly meets all three characteristics: (1) it is a means of moderating one's fear of death, (2) that is stable, and (3) can operate even in the face of fears that would be otherwise disabling.

IV. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Aristotle is consistently committed to his claim in *NE* III.2 that sudden actions are not decided upon and that his later statement in *NE* III.8 that suggests the contrary is merely a mistranslation. This commitment by Aristotle has important implications for his virtue ethics insofar as he is also committed to the claim that a necessary condition on virtuous action is that it be decided upon.²⁰ Therefore, no sudden actions can be virtuous. Hence, contemporary virtue ethicists who consider virtuous actions to be those that come automatically from a person's state of character without any rational deliberation are actually departing from Aristotle's own theory of virtuous action.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. I used the *Oxford Classical Text* for the Greek text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (ed. Bywater) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (eds. Walzer and Mingay).

2. See Karen Stohr, "Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 22–7 for some of the history of this development. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) responded to the criticism that virtue ethics was too focused on evaluating characters and couldn't provide adequate action guidance, and in the process

she gave greater prominence to the notion of virtuous action.

3. See the following for some different solutions to this problem: Bill Pollard, “Can Virtuous Actions Be Both Habitual and Rational,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6 (2003): 411–25; Nancy Snow, “Habitual Virtuous Actions and Automaticity,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9 (2006): 545–61; Julia Peters, “On Automaticity as a Constituent of Virtue,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18 (2015): 165–75; Lieke Asma, “Habitual Virtuous Action and Acting for Reasons,” *Philosophical Psychology* (2022).

4. We see this point clearly in Aristotle’s definition of virtue as a “decision-making habit/state [prohairesis]” in *NE* II.6.

5. For instance, C.D.C. Reeve, “Aristotle on the Virtues of Thought” in Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006): 198–218; Richard Sorabji, “Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue” in Amelie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981): 201–20; John Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 6–10; John McDowell, “Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics” in Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 19–35; C.C.W. Taylor, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics II–IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189–90. In his article “On the Necessity of Deliberation in Aristotle,” *Ancient Philosophy* 41 (2021), Duane Long, Jr. does an excellent job of showing the problems with various alternative views that seek to allow for virtuous sudden actions, and he also shows why deliberation need not be a lengthy process in Aristotle’s view. I find his interpretation of *NE* III.8 unpersuasive, though, since he ends up taking the term “decide upon [proairesis]” in a deflationary sense, which is both unnecessary and poorly attested. Effectively, on Long’s interpretation “decide upon [proairesis]” just means the same as “choose [airesis],” but if Aristotle meant “choose” he would have just left off the prefix.

6. E.g., Reeve, Sorabji, McDowell, Cooper, and Taylor.

7. One might wonder how a passage could admit so many different translations. As we’ll see, in his customarily elliptical style, Aristotle leaves several words to be supplied by his reader in the relevant lines. When I say that others “mistranslate” the lines, I mean that they supply the wrong words.

8. “Actions” may be a needlessly limiting word to supply here, both because “actions” (*praxeis*) as a feminine noun cannot be supplied for the neuter phrase “ta exaiphnēs” and because passions as well as actions could also make sense as a referent.

9. So, Aristotle does use the term in cases in which the change would not literally happen in an imperceptibly Short time. For instance, in *Politics* 1259a15, philosophers could get rich “suddenly” if they so wished, and in *Historia Animalium* 563a10, vultures appear “suddenly” following an army.

10. A good example of this use of “kata” is *NE* II.4 1105a28–30 where Aristotle speaks of one producing a grammatical sentence *on the basis of* [kata] one’s grammatical knowledge. Mere logical conformity would make no sense here because Aristotle wants to show that when the grammarian (i.e., the person with grammatical knowledge) acts on the basis of his grammatical knowledge he produces grammatical sentences neither by chance

nor by following an instructor's example. For one could have grammatical knowledge, fail to make use of that knowledge, and produce a grammatical sentence merely by chance.

11. Some point to Aristotle's expression "we say [*phamen*]" in the passage, but Aristotle standardly uses that expression to convey an endoxic opinion, i.e., a claim made either by most people or most of the wise which will be taken as true initially for the purposes of inquiry. While endoxic opinions aren't infallible, they have defeasible warrant, and since Aristotle doesn't later contest or revise *No Sudden*, Aristotle presumably takes it to be true. Aristotle expresses some of his endoxic method in *NE* VII.1 1145b2-7.

12. In both passages, Aristotle distinguishes having a wish and acting versus making a decision. One can have a wish and act without any perceptible gap between the wish and the action, but one cannot make a decision suddenly, i.e., making a decision cannot occur in a specious present. This is presumably true because making a decision involves undertaking a process of deliberation (*NE* III.3), and nobody can undertake and complete deliberation in a single specious present.

13. For the ease of Greekless readers, I provide these line numbers that correspond roughly to the Bekker numbers, although for ease of reference if a single word from a sentence appears on a different line from the rest of the sentence I keep it on the same line as the rest of the sentence (e.g., 'Hence (dio)' actually appears on line 17).

14. This is Duane Long's proposed solution (172). On Long's view, *No Sudden* and *Deciding from Character* involve equivocal uses of the term "decision [*prohairesis*]." In *NE* III.2, Aristotle is presenting his canonical account of decision, and he uses the term in the strict sense there, which implies that one has a certain end and decides upon the means to attain the end. In *NE* III.8, by contrast, Aristotle does mean to say that "sudden actions must be decided upon," but this doesn't mean decision in the strict sense. Instead, Long indicates that it means something more like "choose [*hairetai*]," which doesn't imply a process of deliberation and doesn't involve preferring one means to an end over another. Indeed, while decision is always of the means and not the end, choice can be of either one. Although Long admits that Aristotle almost always uses "decision [*prohairesis*]" in the strict sense, he points to two passages in *NE* I.5 1095b19-22 and *EE* I.4 1215a35-b1 as evidence of Aristotle's use of the non-strict sense of "*prohairesis*" in his ethical writings. The main problem with Long's interpretation is that even if there were two distinct senses of "decision" throughout Aristotle's corpus or even within the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself, the sort of equivocation some scholars suggest is that between a decision that is about the end and a decision that is about that which relates to the end (the "means"). Yet that distinction is irrelevant between *No Sudden* and *Deciding from Character*, since in both passages Aristotle would be concerned with the sort of decision over the means.

15. The other possibility is that Aristotle uses "sudden" equivocally in the two claims, but this is unlikely. In the only passage where Aristotle provides a characterization of what he means by "sudden," he says it means *changing in an imperceptibly short time-span* (*Physics* 222b14-15), and he provides no other characterization of the term. There is no indication in the text or the cases of action described that pushes us to think Aristotle is making use of some novel sense of "sudden" or using the original sense hyperbolically, so this suggestion is unattractive.

16. So, Terence Irwin translates, "For if we are warned in advance, we might decide what to do [not only because of our state of character, but] also by reason and rational calculation; but in emergencies [we must decide] in accord with our state of character"

(54). Christopher Rowe translates, “For in the case of what is clearly foreseen, one can decide also as a result of calculation and reasoning about it; with what comes suddenly one decides according to one’s disposition” (137). C.C.W. Taylor also seems to have the same idea, “...when things are apparent in advance, one can choose what to do from calculation and reasoning, but in sudden cases one acts in accordance with one’s state of character” (31). Olof Gigon’s translation also accords with mine supplying “Gefahr [danger]” in line 21.

17. It might be tempting to consider *i* and *ii* logically equivalent and hence equivalent to a single thought, but that is not obvious. The two thoughts are not logically equivalent if either (a) the achievement of certain ends is supererogatory (i.e., there are ends where accomplishing them is fine while either failing to accomplish them or not attempting to accomplish them is not shameful) or (b) there are multiple fine means of achieving some end (e.g., my buying you a copy of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* would be a generous act even if by spending that money I am unable to buy you a copy of Plato’s *Republic*). Both of these possibilities could apply to a case in which it was fine to endure some danger. For instance, if I am surrounded by the enemy with no possibility of overcoming them, fighting to the death would be supererogatory, and surrender would not be shameful. Similarly, if I am in a position where I can serve my army’s military ends either by holding my position and enduring the dangers of the enemy’s assault or by leaving my position and helping an injured comrade to the field hospital, both actions might be fine even though by leaving my position I am not enduring the dangers of battle.

18. This is a defeasible mark of the courageous person, a characteristic trait.

19. Aristotle considers a similar case in *NE* III.8 1116b15-24

20. See especially *NE* II.4 for decision as a necessary condition on virtuous action, but the definition of virtue as a decision-making state in *NE* II.6 and the distinction between natural virtue and virtue proper in *NE* VI.13 also presuppose this condition.

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