

Aristotle

(384-322 BCE)

The Pythagoreans, Socrates, and Plato attempted to reconcile an element of human freedom with material determinism and causal law. But the first major philosopher to argue convincingly for some [indeterminism](#) was probably [Aristotle](#). This is despite the fact that he described a causal chain back to a prime mover or first cause, and he elaborated the four possible causes (material, efficient, formal, and final).

In his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* Aristotle also said there were "accidents" caused by "[chance](#)(τυχή)." In his *Physics*, he clearly reckoned chance among the causes. Aristotle might have added chance as a fifth cause - an uncaused or self-caused cause - that happens when two causal chains come together by accident (συμβεβηκός). He noted that the early physicists found no place for chance among the causes.

Aristotle knew that many decisions were quite predictable based on habit and character, but they were no less free if one's character itself and predictable habits were developed freely in the past and were changeable in the future. This was the view of Eastern philosophies and religions. Our *karma* has been determined by our past actions (even from past lives), and strongly influences our current actions, but we are free to improve our karma by future good actions.

As a principal architect of the concept of [causality](#), and the formulator of the four causes, Aristotle's statements on *indefinite* causes are perhaps his most significant contribution to freedom, in the world and in human decisions.

In his [Metaphysics](#), Aristotle makes the case for [chance](#) and uncaused causes ([causa sui](#)) and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he shows our actions can be voluntary and "[up to us](#)" so that we can be [morally responsible](#).

Nor is there any definite cause for an accident, but only chance (τυχόν), namely an indefinite (ἀόριστον) cause.
(*Metaphysics*, Book V, 1025a25)

Without such indefinite (uncaused) causes, everything would happen by necessity.

It is obvious that there are principles and causes which are generable and destructible apart from the actual processes of generation and destruction; for if this is not true, everything will be of necessity: that is, if there must necessarily be some cause, other than accidental, of that which is generated and destroyed. Will *this* be, or not? Yes, if *this* happens; otherwise not.

(Metaphysics, Book VI, 1027a29)

Some determinist philosophers have interpreted Aristotle's "accident" as the convergence of two causal chains as being compatible with determinism, but Aristotle himself is unequivocal in opposing strict necessity. Accidents are a consequence of chance.

Aristotle rejected [determinism](#) in his statement on [chance](#). Unfortunately, his description of chance as "obscure" (ἄδηλος) to human reason led centuries of philosophers to deny the existence of chance:

Causes from which chance results might happen are indeterminate; hence chance is obscure to human calculation and is a cause by accident.

(Metaphysics, Book XI, 1065a33)

Aristotle clearly believed our deliberations (βουλευτῶν) involved choices (προαιρετῶν) between [alternative possibilities](#). At a minimum it was up to us whether to act or not to act, and this implies both the possibility to [do otherwise](#) and [moral responsibility](#) for our actions.

His definition of the voluntary will as caused from within an agent (the first [agent-causal libertarianism](#)) is still valid today.

If then whereas we wish for our end, the means to our end are matters of deliberation and choice, it follows that actions dealing with these means are done by choice, and are voluntary. But the activities in which the virtues are exercised deal with means. Therefore virtue also depends on ourselves. And so also does vice. For where we are free to act we are also free to refrain from acting, and where we are able to say No we are also able to say Yes; if therefore we are responsible for doing a thing when to do it is right, we are also responsible for not doing it when not to do it is wrong, and if we are responsible for rightly not doing a thing, we are also responsible for wrongly doing it. But if it is in our power to do and to refrain from doing right and wrong, and if, as we saw, being good or bad is doing right or wrong, it consequently depends on us whether we are virtuous or vicious.

But if it is manifest that a man is the author of his own actions, if we are unable to trace conduct back to any other origins than those within ourselves, then actions of which the origins are within us (ἐν ἡμῖν), themselves [depend upon us](#) (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and are voluntary (ἐκούσια - willed).

(Nicomachean Ethics, III.v.6, 1113b19-22)

Aristotle challenged those who said our actions are determined by our character. That would deny [moral responsibility](#). He admitted that some aspects of our character may be innate and thus limit our responsibility. But we are at least partially free to form our character.

Works of Aristotle, vol. 1, p.682