The Classical Quarterly (2025) 75.1 241–246
doi:10.1017/S0009838824001071

ARISTOTLE'S FIRST EXAMPLE OF AN EFFICIENT CAUSE: TRANSLATING *PHYSICS* 194B30

ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s progressively more translators, in several European languages, have abandoned the traditional translation of ὁ βουλεύσας *at* Physics *194b30 as 'the adviser' for a different one: 'the deliberator'. The latter translation has never been defended, and is, as this article will argue, indefensible—the active of* βουλεύω *is never used in classical prose in this sense. Furthermore, this translation obscures what may be a philosophically significant feature of the passage: the fact that all of the other examples of efficient causes Aristotle gives here, in what is his canonical account of the four causes, are cases where what causes something to move is distinct from the thing it causes to move (the father causes the child's gestation, the builder causes the lumber's turning into a house). An Aristotelian deliberator, on the other hand, while arguably an efficient cause, is the cause of their very own action. At least one ancient commentator, Simplicius, thought that Aristotle had good reasons to restrict his examples to causes distinct from what they set in motion. Both the traditional translation and the variant of it for which I shall argue, 'the one who made the proposal', fit this model.*

Keywords: Aristotle's *Physics*; βουλεύειν; βουλεύεσθαι; efficient cause; deliberation

In his canonical presentation of the theory of four causes, after describing material and formal causes, Aristotle describes the third τρόπος of cause (traditionally known as the 'efficient cause') as follows (*Ph.* 194b29–32):[1]

ἔτι ὅθεν ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς ἡ πρώτη ἢ τῆς ἠρεμήσεως, οἷον ὁ βουλεύσας αἴτιος, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ τέκνου, καὶ ὅλως τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ ποιουμένου καὶ τὸ μεταβάλλον τοῦ μεταβαλλομένου.

In the original Oxford translation of the *Physics* in 1930, Hardie renders the passage as follows:[2]

Again the primary source of the change or coming to rest; e.g. the man who gave advice is a cause, the father is cause of the child, and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed.

In translating ὁ βουλεύσας as 'the man who gave advice', Hardie agrees with Ross's earlier translation of the passage in the original Oxford translation of the corresponding *Metaphysics* passage,[3] and both are following a venerable Latin tradition. Aquinas read

[1] Later on in the passage Aristotle lists ὁ βουλεύσας again among examples of the efficient cause: τὸ δὲ σπέρμα καὶ ὁ ἰατρὸς καὶ ὁ βουλεύσας καὶ ὅλως τὸ ποιοῦν (*Ph.* 195a21–2). Aristotle's account of the four causes in *Physics* 2.3 is repeated almost verbatim in *Metaphysics* 5.2; our passage appears there at 1013a29–32. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

[2] R.P. Hardie and R. Gaye, *Physica*, in *The Works of Aristotle translated into English*, vol. 2. *Physica, De caelo, De generatione et corruptione* (Oxford, 1930).

[3] W.D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle translated into English,* vol. 8. *Metaphysica* (Oxford, 1928).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838824001071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consilians,[4] which is also to be found in both translations of the *Physics* produced by William of Moerbeke[5] (one of which Aquinas doubtless had in front of him). Subsequent Latin translations tend to use either this term or terms derived from *consulo*.[6] The Revised Oxford Translation of 1984, however, substitutes 'the man who (has) deliberated' in these two passages, and similar renderings have since turned up in other English translations,[7] as well as in translations into French, Italian and Portuguese.[8] None of those who adopt this translation explain their reasons for doing so, nor do I know of any other scholarly defence of it. This article argues that the translation is mistaken, and that while the traditional translation 'adviser' is closer to Aristotle's meaning, it also does not quite succeed in capturing it. Rather, I shall argue that 'the one who made the proposal' comes closer to doing so.

What has presumably motivated the translation I am concerned to contest is the fact that Aristotle does, indeed, treat deliberation as a case of efficient causation. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.2 he states (1139a31–3, ROT):

> The origin (ἀρχή) of action—its efficient, not its final cause (ὅθεν ἡ κίνησις ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ οὗ ἕνεκα)—is choice (προαίρεσις), and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end (λόγος ὁ ἕνεκά τινος).[9]

[4] F. Angeli and M. Pirotta (edd.), *S. Thomae Aquinatis in octo libros de physico auditu sive physicorum Aristotelis commentaria* (Naples, 1953), 91.

[5] See the texts of Moerbeke uploaded by Martin Lansberg to the *Corpus corporum. Repositorium operum Latinorum apud universitatem Turicensem* (https://mlat.uzh.ch, accessed 6 November 2024). There is as yet no critical edition of these texts.

[6] Of the ten Latin translations available or referenced at the *Corpus corporum* website (n. 5), there is only one that translates in the manner I am concerned to contest: the *translatio vetus* ascribed to Jacob of Venice translates *deliberans* (F. Bossier and J. Brams [edd.], *Aristoteles Latinus* VII 1.2. *Physica* [Leiden and New York, 1990], 57). The *translatio vetus* was the earliest translation of the *Physics* into Latin; Moerbeke's two translations were revisions of it (see P. Roelli, 'Translating technical terminology from Aristotle's *Physics*. Comparison of ten Latin translations', in E. D'Angelo and J. Ziolkowski [edd.], *Auctor et auctoritas in Latinis medii aevi litteris. Author and Authorship in Medieval Latin Literature* [Firenze, 2014], 941–55, at 944). Moerbeke's translation of ὁ βουλεύσας seems to have set the standard for subsequent translations.

[7] J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, 1984); henceforth ROT. This may have been following the lead of W. Charleton, *Aristotle's Physics. Books I and II* (Oxford, 1970), 29, who translates 'the man who has deliberated'. C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle. Physics* (Indianapolis, 2018), 25 has 'the person who has deliberated'. Two translators into English in the 1990s took a slightly different path: C. Kirwan, *Aristotle. Metaphysics books Γ, Δ, and E* (Oxford, 1993[2]), 28 has 'one who planned something', while R. Waterfield, *Aristotle. Physics* (Oxford, 1996), 39 has 'a devisor of a plan'. In so far as these translations suggest a process of planning, rather than the simple act of proposing a plan of action, they are misleading. An English translation that recognizes the political connotations of ὁ βουλεύσας here is J. Sachs, *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick, 1995), 54, who translates 'the legislator'. While on the right track, this translation neglects the aorist tense of the participle, which indicates that Aristotle has in mind a person who has made a particular proposal.

[8] F.F. Repellini, *Aristotele. Fisica libri I e II* (Milan, 1996), 89 has 'chi ha deliberato', while G. Giardina, *I fondamenti della causalità naturale: analisi critica di Aristotele, Phys. II* (Catania, 2006), 167 has 'chi delibera'. P. Pellegrin, *Aristote. Physique* (Paris, 2000), 148 has 'celui qui a délibéré', a departure from the older French translation 'l'auteur de la décision' found in O. Hamelin, *Aristote: Physique II* (Paris, 1907), 9 and in H. Carteron, *Aristote. Physique* (I–IV) (Paris, 1961), 65. L. Angioni, *Fisica I & II* (Campinas, Brazil, 2009), 48 has 'é causa aquele que deliberou'. The trend does not seem to have penetrated Germany: G. Heinemann, *Aristoteles: Physikvorlesung. Teilband I: Bücher I–IV* (Hamburg, 2021), 59 has 'derjenige, der den Rat gegeben hat'.

[9] There is a question whether by λόγος ὁ ἕνεκά τινος here Aristotle means a process of reasoning—i.e. deliberating—or rather some propositional representation of the end—something like 'a statement for the sake of something'. Cf. S. Broadie and C.J. Rowe, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford and New York, 2002), 178, who translate: 'rational reference to the end'. This issue of translation does not

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Ethical choice—προαίρεσις—is here explicitly said to be an efficient cause (literally, 'whence the motion'). Now the reasoning an agent undertakes prior to, and which concludes in, an ethical choice is precisely deliberation: Aristotle's terse definition of choice is 'deliberative desire' (ὄρεξις βουλευτική, 1139a23). Since whenever choice is an efficient cause it is so because there is some agent making that choice, and an agent makes that choice after deliberating, the claim that a person who has deliberated is an efficient cause is a recognizably Aristotelian thought.

But there are decisive reasons to hold that Aristotle is not offering a deliberator as an example of an efficient cause in our passage. While Aristotle uses the middle voice of βουλεύω for agential deliberation, he never uses the active voice in this sense; and our term is the active aorist participle. Aristotle's usage accords with LSJ s.v., who list the first meaning of βουλεύω as 'take counsel', 'deliberate', and comment: 'in Prose, chiefly Med. in this sense'.[10] Now while Aristotle never uses active forms of βουλεύω to refer to an agent's deliberation, he does use active forms of the verb seven times in the corpus (aside from the occurrences of ὁ βουλεύσας under consideration here). These occurrences are all found in the *Athenaiôn Politeia* and the *Politics*, and in six of the seven the word occurs in the constitutional sense of holding office as a member of the council (βουλή) of a *polis*.[11] The seventh, more relevant occurrence refers not so much to holding the office of councillor as to a certain activity that a member of the council may perform in that capacity. In *Pol.* 5.9 Aristotle reports that in some oligarchies officials take an oath—presumably upon entering office—of the following form: 'I shall both be malevolently-disposed (κακόνους) to the demos and shall propose (βουλεύσω) anything harmful to them that I can' (1310a9–10). The ROT renders βουλεύσω here as 'devise', which somewhat blurs its sense. In this part of the oath the speaker is not promising to be always hatching schemes to harm the demos—something like that is covered by the first part of the oath, to be κακόνους—but rather that he will propose measures to this effect in his capacity as member of the council. We know that an analogous oath was sworn by Athenians when becoming members of the Athenian βουλή. In Lys. 31.1–2 the speaker says: 'I entered into the Council chamber upon taking an oath to propose what is best for the city' (ὀμόσας … τὰ βέλτιστα βουλεύσειν τῇ πόλει), and [Dem.] 59.4.9 decries a proposal that someone had made 'after having sworn to propose what is best for the Athenian demos' (ὀμωμοκὼς δὲ τὰ βέλτιστα βουλεύσειν τῷ δήμῳ τῷ Ἀθηναίων).[12]

The suggestion that the active βουλεύσειν in these passages has the specific meaning of making a proposal is supported by two recent studies, one of ancient rhetoric, the other specifically of Thucydides. In a study of ancient rhetorical genres, Pepe writes:

> The verb used for deliberation is βουλεύω, in both the active and middle voices. βουλεύειν in the active expresses the idea of proposing a project, emphasizing the power of decision making, while βουλεύεσθαι highlights the confronting and reconciliation of opinions, i.e. the communal aspect of deliberation.[13]

concern the uncontroversial point that, on Aristotle's official account, choice results from a process of deliberation.

[10] I suspect (on the basis of the passages discussed later in this article) that 'chiefly' here is an understatement.

[11] *[Ath. Pol.]* 30.2.10, 30.6.2, 45.3.2, 62.3.2; *Pol.* 1282a30, 1306b8.

[12] There may also have been a democratic counterpart to the oligarch's oath to be κακόνους. At *Resp.* 558c1 Plato's Socrates says that the only requirement expected of someone going into politics in a democracy is that he say that he is εὔνους … τῷ πλήθει.

[13] C. Pepe, *The Genres of Rhetorical Speeches in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 30.

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The middle expresses a deliberative body's activity when it is engaged in what we might call deliberation proper, that is, the weighing of various alternatives. The active, by contrast, is used for the actions that take place at the beginning and end of deliberation proper: an individual's proposal of a course of action for consideration, and the deliberative body's endorsing such a proposal.[14] Aristotle's use of the middle βουλεύεσθαι for individual moral deliberation conforms to this usage. For an Aristotelian deliberator does, indeed, consider various ways of achieving their end without as yet definitively adopting one or the other. But here there is no room for the use of the active to refer to some analogue, in the individual case, of someone's submitting a proposal to a deliberative body. Nor, more importantly, is there any room for using the active forms of the verb in the individual case to refer to some analogue of the collective's adopting a proposal. In the latter case, there is typically some delay between a body's resolving upon a course of action and that resolution's being carried out—between, for example, a declaration of war and firing the first shot. In Aristotelian action theory, however, successful deliberation standardly issues in a προαίρεσις to act immediately.[15] If Aristotle had such an agent in mind as his example of an efficient cause in our passage, the most appropriate term for him to use would have been ὁ προαιρούμενος. It is worth reiterating: Aristotle *never* uses the active of βουλεύω to describe an agent's making up their mind to act.

The traditional translation of ὁ βουλεύσας here as 'the adviser', while certainly preferable to 'the deliberator', has some drawbacks: (1) the English word, unlike the Greek, does not have a distinctively political use in the sense of formally moving a proposal; (2) perhaps relatedly, it may seem somewhat strained to consider someone who merely advises a course of action to be responsible for it. It makes more sense, however, to blame someone who initiates a course of action by officially proposing it to an official body, or by urging it on a private individual. And several Greek authors, both philosophical and non-philosophical, remark on the natural tendency to assign blame in this way. In *De falsa legatione* Demosthenes tells the Athenians that on an earlier occasion Aeschines had told them that he (Aeschines) had 'personally explained to Philip that those who proposed an action (οἱ βεβουλευκότες) are no less guilty of impiety than those who carried it out (οἱ ταῖς χερσὶν πράξαντες)' (19.21).[16] So, too, Plato's Athenian Visitor, when legislating about murder in the *Laws*, considers the following scenario: 'And if a person, while he does not [kill] with his own hands, yet proposes the death to someone else (ἐὰν δὲ αὐτόχειρ μὲν μή, βουλεύσῃ δὲ θάνατόν τις ἄλλος ἑτέρῳ) and is

[14] The distinction between these two uses of the active is more clearly highlighted by Frazier: '[I]l faut d'abord distinguer le cas où le sujet n'est pas la collectivité, mais une personne ou un groupe de personnes; le verbe signifie alors "proposer un projet", "conseiller" …': F. Frazier, 'Réunion et délibération. La représentation des assemblées chez Thucydide', *Ktèma* 22 (1997), 239–55, at 250.

[15] At *De motu an.* 701a19–20 Aristotle famously tells us that 'the conclusion' of practical reasoning—of which deliberation is (at the very least) a species—'is an action' (τὸ συμπέρασμα … πρᾶξίς ἐστιν). For recent discussion of this doctrine, see J.M. Cooper, 'The role of thought in animal voluntary self-locomotion: *De motu animalium* 7 (through 701b1)', in C. Rapp and O. Primavesi (edd.), *Aristotle's* De motu animalium (Oxford, 2020), 345–86.

[16] According to Demosthenes, Aeschines reported to the Athenians that he had offered this general maxim to Philip to justify holding the Thebans accountable for the Phocians' seizing a temple treasury—supposedly at the Thebans' instigation. Given that the Thebans presumably formally adopted the plan to urge the Phocians to seize the temple, οἱ βεβουλευκότες here may have both of the connotations that the active may have. For discussion of the political situation, see R. Wardy, *Demosthenes. Selected Speeches* (Oxford, 2014), 458–9.

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responsible in virtue of having killed by intention and plotting (καὶ τῇ βουλήσει τε καὶ ἐπιβουλεύσει ἀποκτείνας αἴτιος ὤν), then …' (871e8–872a2).[17] Here the Athenian Stranger emphasizes that the person who initiated a murder by urging another to do the killing is just as guilty of murder as one who straightforwardly commits the deed with their own hands. A few lines later, when considering the case of a slave murdering a free person, he treats the two cases, once again, as on a par: ἐὰν δὲ δοῦλος ἐλεύθερον ἑκών, εἴτε αὐτόχειρ εἴτε βουλεύσας, ἀποκτείνῃ … (872b4–5).

Now that the proposer of an action is responsible for it is just the point Aristotle makes—or rather relies on as intuitively obvious—when he introduces the efficient cause in the passage with which we are concerned: 'and [a] further [kind of cause], that from which the first origin of the change or rest [proceeds]; for example, the proposer is responsible (οἷον ὁ βουλεύσας αἴτιος) …' (*Ph.* 194b29–30). Aristotle could have in mind here the kind of non-political cases Plato discusses in the *Laws* passage just discussed: the person who puts the idea of committing an action into someone else's head is responsible for the resulting action.[18] I suspect, though, that he has political cases particularly in mind. The Athenian demos was notorious for its propensity to blame political decisions gone bad on the speaker who had proposed them.[19] And Aristotle does sometimes illustrate the efficient cause by taking an example from the political realm: in particular, the efficient cause of a city's being at war. When Aristotle returns to a consideration of the four causes and their interrelations in *Physics* 2.7, he introduces the efficient cause as follows: '… what first sets something in motion (τὸ κινῆσαν πρῶτον), for example: why did they go to war? Because they had conducted a raid' (198a19–20; cf. also *An. post.* 94a36–b8). Now it is true that here Aristotle gives not a proposal, but an action—the Athenians' raiding Sardis—as the efficient cause of the Persian War. This is particularly appropriate when explaining why a city finds itself in a war it did not intend to start. But in a 'war of choice'—for example, the Athenians' Sicilian expedition—it would be natural to place the blame on the person who proposed the war in the Assembly. ('How did we get into this mess with Syracuse in the first place?' 'It was Alcibiades' idea.') And indeed, Philoponus understood Aristotle's reference to ὁ βουλεύσας in our passage in just this way. He comments: 'The productive cause. For when we ask, who is responsible for the war? (τίς τοῦ πολέμου αἴτιος;) we shall say that it is the person who proposed it (ὁ βουλεύσας).'[20]

One final point on the significance of rectifying the translation of this passage. The larger context in which it figures is Aristotle's canonical treatment of the four causes; it occurs not only in the *Physics* but also in the philosophical lexicon of *Metaphysics* Book 5. As previously noted, the expression Aristotle here uses for the efficient cause is ὅθεν ἡ

[17] My translation highlights the fact (obscured by the translation in J.M. Cooper [ed.], *Plato: Complete Works* [Indianapolis, 1997], 1530) that Plato refers not just to a person's planning a murder, but to that person's suggesting that murder *to another* (ἑτέρῳ). The activity of planning is expressed here by the noun ἐπιβούλευσις (which apparently occurs only in this Platonic passage); there is no reason to suppose that it is included in the sense of the verb.

[18] Simplicius' interpretation of our text (in H. Diels [ed.], *Simplicius. In Aristotelis physicorum libros quattuor priores commentaria* [Berlin, 1882], 315.22–4) is consistent with such a reading: 'so that the one who has counselled (ὁ βουλεύσας) something good or bad would be the productive cause more properly than the one who did the deed (τοῦ πράξαντος). For the first beginning comes from the person who suggested it (ἀπὸ τοῦ βουλεύσαντος)'.

[19] On this Athenian tendency, see the remark of Diodotus at Thuc. 3.43.5, where ὁ πείσας designates the person who successfully made the case for a course of action they had proposed. Compare also Thucydides' description of the Athenians' reaction to news of the Syracusan disaster at Thuc. 8.1.1.

[20] G. Vitelli (ed.), *Philoponus. In Aristotelis physicorum libros tres priores commentaria* (Berlin, 1887), 245.23–4.

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ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς ἡ πρώτη ἢ τῆς ἠρεμήσεως—'that from which the first origin of the change or rest [proceeds]'. The most perspicuous way of illustrating such a notion is with examples in which the source of motion is distinct from the thing that it causes to move; and the examples Aristotle uses all fit this model. The father is distinct from the child whose development he initiates, the doctor from the patient she heals, and in general the producer from the thing produced.[21] The same holds of someone proposing a course of action that someone else—individual or city—then carries out.

The choice of these examples suggests that an efficient cause distinct from the thing moved has some kind of priority in Aristotle's understanding of the efficient cause, if only a pedagogical one. Simplicius, for one, thinks that the priority is more significant than that. He maintains that Aristotle employs the fuller expression in referring to the efficient cause at *Ph*. 194b30 to indicate that 'that which is properly (κυρίως) the productive cause is separated and removed (κεχωρισμένον … καὶ ἐξῃρημένον) from what comes to be' (315.9–11). The proposed translation of ὁ βουλεύσας leaves Simplicius' suggestion an interpretative possibility.

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[21] Is the σπέρμα (mentioned at 195a21) distinct from the embryo whose development it initiates? Aristotle's answer: yes. While σπέρμα has many senses in Aristotle (see most recently X. Hu, 'Aristotle's theory of seed: seeking a unified account', *Filosofia Unisinos* 23 [2022], https://doi.org/10.4013/FSU.2022.231.01), it is the male seed that must be meant here, since, in Aristotle's view, that is 'whence the origin of the motion' (ὅθεν ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως, *Gen. an.* 729b13–14). And for Aristotle the male seed is no more part of the embryo than the art of medicine is part of the patient being cured or the carpenter part of the table (*Gen. an.* 729b14–21). σπέρμα at 195a21 is just a more fine-grained version of πατήρ at 194b30.

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