

Aristotle on Shame and Learning to be Good, by Marta Jimenez. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 214.

How do we learn to be good? Aristotle's answer will be familiar to any student of Greek philosophy: we become good—or virtuous—by doing virtuous actions. But how does the practice of virtuous actions give rise to virtuous dispositions, and, in particular, the disposition to choose virtuous actions as the virtuous person does – that is, for the sake of the noble (*kalon*)?

These questions have long occupied readers of Aristotle's ethics and offer the starting point for Marta Jimenez' excellent monograph *Aristotle on Shame and Learning to be Good*. Jimenez is particularly concerned with the question 'what are the conditions that make learners ready to receive the virtues and allow them to succeed in becoming good?' (p.18) and her answer—as indicated by her title—is that the presence of shame (*aidōs, aischunē*) is essential for ensuring that a learner acts in a way that is conducive to virtue. This book, then, can be seen as much as an attempt to rehabilitate shame as a positive emotion as it is to elucidate Aristotelian moral development. In fact, the primacy of Jimenez' interest in shame is evident from her Introduction, which highlights the complex nature of shame and helpfully situates her interpretation of Aristotle's account amongst contemporary treatments, both positive and negative. Against those who have expressed scepticism about a role for shame in moral theory and wariness of the dangers associated with 'shame culture', Jimenez argues that those features that have aroused suspicion—shame's responsiveness to the views of others and to praise and blame—make it a perfect catalyst for moral development. According to Jimenez, shame is linked to 'a concern with being seen as noble and expressing nobility (or avoiding shamefulness) in one's actions *because one aspires to genuine nobility and goodness*' (p.11) and thus directs the attention of learners towards considerations of nobility when they act.

This is a philosophically rich book and I found Jimenez' analysis of shame and her embracing of its complex nature particularly illuminating; indeed, I am persuaded that shame ought to be seen as a positive force within Aristotle's account of moral development. My more critical comments are reserved for (aspects of) her approach to Aristotelian habituation, though these should not be taken as a reflection on the merit of the project, or to detract from its many other virtues. I will begin, then, by tracing the argument of the book through a summary of its chapters, before reflecting on the assumptions that underpin Jimenez' investigation.

I. The problem of continuity

Chapter I seeks to carve out a place for shame in an account of moral development by motivating an explanatory problem that shame—or another candidate psychological state—can be shown to solve. The problem concerns the continuity that is required between the actions of a learner and those of a virtuous person in order for habituation to be successful, and is arrived at through discussion of another problem supposedly raised by Aristotle, concerning the very possibility of habituation. It is worth recapping some of the detail of Jimenez' argument here since this analysis provides not only the textual and conceptual impetus for the project, but also articulates some guiding assumptions for an account of Aristotelian habituation, to which we will return.

Jimenez' analysis begins with a puzzle posed by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4 and directed at what she calls the *learning-by-doing* thesis – the thesis that we become virtuous by doing virtuous actions. As Jimenez reads the puzzle, and as it has traditionally been read, Aristotle asks how a learner can perform virtuous actions *unless* she is *already* virtuous, given the assumption that the possession of virtue is a requirement for virtuous action (the '*priority problem*'). Aristotle's response, on Jimenez' interpretation, is to deny this assumption, a move that involves distinguishing between (a) simply performing virtuous actions, and (b) performing virtuous actions *virtuously* – i.e., as the virtuous person performs them. Whilst the former can be done by chance or under instruction, the latter requires an agent to meet three further conditions, concerning knowledge, motivation, and stability. Yet Jimenez argues that this response appears to generate a new problem, for 'if we take [Aristotle's] view to be that learners become virtuous by doing virtuous actions, but in a different way than how virtuous people do them—i.e. *not virtuously*' (p.20, emphasis original) we are faced with the difficulty of explaining how such practice could contribute to the formation of virtuous dispositions. This, Jimenez labels the '*discontinuity problem*', and is ultimately the 'problem that the proposal of shame as the proto-virtue of the learner is designed to solve' (p.6).

Let me say a little more about this problem and the way in which Jimenez intends shame to provide a solution. As Jimenez notes, this problem has been highlighted by several commentators in recent decades, who have endeavoured, in various ways, to find continuity in the habituation process. Typically, these attempts have focused on the *cognitive* continuity required between the actions of a learner and of a virtuous person, but Jimenez' innovation is to argue that a certain sort of *motivational* continuity is also required: a learner must perform virtuous actions for the sake of the noble if her habituation is to be successful. This demand for continuity is a cornerstone of Jimenez' account, and it is worth noting that Jimenez takes the demand to be both conceptual—'it is hard to see how actions performed [not virtuously] can contribute to the formation of virtuous dispositions' (p.20)—and also rooted in the text. For Jimenez notes that Aristotle places great emphasis on the importance of acting *well* if we are to become good, and concludes that a learner must therefore perform virtuous actions with a virtuous motive if her habituation is to be successful, since this, Jimenez maintains, is what it is to act well (pp.23-27). To allow for this continuity, Jimenez argues that Aristotle's solution to the priority problem does *not* in fact require that a learner performs virtuous actions in a different way to the virtuous person, but rather allows that she *can* perform these actions in a way that resembles the virtuous person. For learners, she claims, are not blank slates but instead 'have some desiderative and emotional tendencies that orient them towards the noble and thus allow them to act, though perhaps imperfectly, from occurrent virtuous motives' (p.47). The task for the remainder of the book is to identify the source of a learner's *initial* orientation towards the noble (p.50), which Jimenez ultimately links to the capacity for shame.

2. Developing a 'proper sense of the noble'

Jimenez embarks on this search in Chapter 2 by exploring the role of pleasure and pain in moral habituation. This topic has been the focus of much scholarship in recent decades, notably since the publication of Myles Burnyeat's seminal paper 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good' (1980), and indeed Jimenez intends her own account as a complement to Burnyeat's. Central to

Burnyeat's account is the thought that a learner comes to appreciate the value of the noble by learning to take proper enjoyment in noble actions. The advantage of this account, as Jimenez sees it, is that it offers a way of understanding how a learner moves, through practice, away from a tendency to pursue appetitive pleasures towards a tendency to pursue the pleasures of the noble, as the virtuous person does. Yet Burnyeat's account has also been criticised by scholars insofar as it appears to presuppose a grasp and appreciation of the noble that his appeal to noble enjoyment is supposedly intended to explain. In response, Jimenez argues that, properly understood, Burnyeat's proposal is *not* that moral development consists in the *acquisition* of a taste for the noble, but rather in the shaping of an *already present* capacity to appreciate the noble. But since the proper enjoyment of virtuous actions cannot be what explains our initial grasp and appreciation of the noble, thus the task remains to identify 'some proto-virtuous condition that can guide learners towards the noble before they have fully formed virtuous dispositions' (p.75).

The explicit purpose of Chapter 3 is 'to learn about the practices that generate true virtue by looking at a variety of failed cases where the practices are insufficient to produce genuine dispositions' (p.77). Jimenez proceeds via an examination of several practices which fall short of courage, as discussed in *NE* 3.8 and *EE* 3.1—cases when an agent acts from shame, fear, experience (*empeiria*), spirit, hope and ignorance—eventually identifying shame as the most conducive to virtue. That we can learn about the requirements for success by looking at cases of failure strikes me as promising methodology, though it requires that the cases under consideration will indeed fail to produce virtue. It is worth noting, however, that Aristotle does not make this claim himself: he says only says that these fail to *constitute* virtuous activity, not that they fail to *produce* it. Jimenez believes that these practices will not produce virtue, I take it, on the grounds that they lack either cognitive or motivational continuity with the actions of a virtuous agent (p.78)—here, again, we see the influence of the continuity requirement—though if it turns out that such strong continuity is *not* a requirement for successful habituation, I worry that this risks ruling out prematurely a role for these other capacities or states. Jimenez offers persuasive reasons for thinking that some of these practices—such as acting from ignorance—will not be productive of virtue, but in other cases it is less clear why they should not contribute in some way. Jimenez argues, for instance, that whilst experience clearly contributes to the development of *phronēsis* by providing knowledge about the means towards our goals, it does not play a direct role in the development of the character virtues since it does not contribute 'to acquiring a *proper sense of the noble* and its value' (p.105). But why should experience not contribute to our sense of the noble? Perhaps, as per *Posterior Analytics* 2.19, experience enables us to form a concept of the noble, or perhaps it affords direct contact with the noble and its value, contributing in this way to our 'sense' of it. At the very least, Jimenez needs to say more about what a 'proper sense of the noble' amounts to and why it is not permeated by experience.

3. Shame and nobility

Having singled-out shame as a potential 'proto-virtue' of a learner, the remaining chapters are devoted to showing how shame is able fulfil this role. Chapter 4 seeks to defend shame against the charge that its concern with honour and reputation make it an unsuitable candidate for

explaining the development of virtue, on the grounds that it makes our values and behaviour too dependent on the opinions of *others* and focuses our attention too much on *appearing* rather than *being* good. Whilst acknowledging that shame is undoubtedly connected with honour in Aristotle, Jimenez argues that Aristotle's treatment of shame establishes a firm connection between honour and the noble, such that 'people who obey their sense of shame are primarily concerned with the nobility of their actions' (p.133). In Chapters 5 and 6, meanwhile, Jimenez turns to Aristotle's two discussions of shame in the *NE* – discussions that are often thought to stand in tension with one another, insofar as one presents shame as a praiseworthy possession, whilst the other presents shame as the opposite and inappropriate for the virtuous. Scholars have often attempted to resolve this tension by suggesting that Aristotle is discussing two different types of shame, but Jimenez argues in Chapter 5 that Aristotle has a unified notion of shame, but is emphasising its different aspects for different argumentative purposes. In Chapter 6, she goes on to show how the various aspects of shame emphasised by Aristotle make it an appropriate guide for moral progress. Drawing on Aristotle's contrast in *NE* 10.9 between those who obey their sense of shame and those who merely respond to fear, Jimenez argues that these passages point to three aspects of shame—(i) an orientation to the noble, (ii) a basic grasp of the noble, and (iii) access to noble pleasures—which render learners both receptive to external advice and enable them to perform in the right way the kinds of actions that produce virtuous dispositions.

I should say straightaway that I learned much from Jimenez' analysis in these chapters and believe that these will provide an invaluable resource for students seeking to understand Aristotle's views on shame, as well as surrounding scholarly controversies. I was, nevertheless, left with some residual questions, two of which I will raise here, before returning to the problem that motivates the project.

One question concerns the 'other-related' aspect of shame. Jimenez argues that those who are motivated by shame are concerned primarily with the nobility of their actions, thus casting shame in a more positive light than traditional analyses. A consequence of this analysis, however, is that shame's other-related aspect is somewhat eclipsed. Jimenez seems to suggest that we value others' opinions—as expressed through praise and blame—insofar as they offer us practical and epistemic guidance (pp.133-34). Yet in her Introduction she seems to acknowledge a more fundamental value that we attach to others' opinions when she explains that shame is directly connected to '*our human concern with status, respect and recognition*—a concern that is also behind our appreciation of honor, reputation and praise and behind our aversion to contempt, aversion and disrepute' (p.3). Indeed, Jimenez claims here that learners gain access to the value of the noble 'through a *more basic* concern with honor, reputation and praise' (p.12), raising the question whether the learner who acts from a sense of shame is aiming ultimately at nobility, or the respect and recognition of others, as achieved through noble action. Jimenez suggests the former (p.173)—not least, I take it, because the latter risks violating her continuity requirement—but I wondered, then, what she means by saying that our concern for honour, reputation and praise is 'basic', and what place our supposedly fundamental concern with status, respect and recognition has in her analysis.

My other main question concerns the connection between shame and our grasp and appreciation of the noble, for the precise relation between these was not always clear to me: at various points Jimenez speaks of shame as the 'source' of our grasp and appreciation (p.15,

p.50, 186), but what does this mean, exactly? Is the thought that shame is *the* psychological capacity that enables us to grasp and appreciate the noble as a source of value? But then Aristotle also speaks—in *NE* 9.9 and *Politics* 8—of reason and our perceptual capacities more generally as if they are also able to fulfil this role (see Coope 2012, Cagnoli Fieconi 2016). Or is the thought that we have an innate grasp and appreciation of the noble, and that shame is what enables us to bring this to bear in action? In any case, Jimenez states in both her Introduction and Conclusion that her account is intended to complement accounts of moral development which appeal to musical education and imitation, and I wondered in what sense, then, she takes shame to play an *essential* role in the developmental process, and how she understands the relation between shame and these other practices?

4. The continuity requirement reconsidered

I want to return now to Jimenez' motivation for the project and the assumptions about Aristotelian habituation that guide her investigation. I mentioned earlier that Jimenez' investigation is driven by the assumption that there needs to be strong continuity between the actions of a learner and those of a virtuous person—that a learner must act fulfilling the conditions of knowledge, choice, and stability 'at least occasionally'—if her habituation is to be successful, and that the perceived need for continuity is both conceptually driven and textually based. I am less convinced, however, that the continuity requirement has a strong textual basis and believe that when we scrutinise this, we have occasion to reflect on its conceptual basis too.

The thought that a learner must act virtuously if her habituation is to be successful comes from reading Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of acting 'well' in *NE* 2.1 alongside the conditions of virtuously performed action specified in *NE* 2.4. But if we look carefully at *NE* 2.1, it is not clear that here Aristotle is referring to the *way* in which certain actions should be done, so much as emphasising the importance of *doing the right actions*. That is to say, when Aristotle writes that 'by acting as we do in our dealings with men, some of us become just, some unjust', his point might simply be that, within the sphere of 'dealings with men', it is important that we perform *just actions* rather than *unjust actions* if we wish to turn out well – indeed, I think there are contextual reasons to favour this reading. It is notable, for instance, that Aristotle does not say, as he might, that by doing *just actions* well or badly, we become just or unjust; the reading fits with the *analogy* with skill that is being pressed here (rather than the disanalogy introduced later), where the focus is on getting the actions themselves right; it also makes sense of the fact that Aristotle immediately raises the issue of the codifiability of ethics. This is not to say, of course, that the way we perform these actions has no implications for the success of our habituation, but rather that this is not obviously Aristotle's point here.

Now, Jimenez argues that the conditions of virtuously performed action specified in *NE* 2.4 make explicit what is required for a learner to act well and her habituation to be successful (p.31). But this, I believe, is based on a misreading of the original puzzle Aristotle raises and what Aristotle wants to show by pointing to these conditions. Jimenez, as I explained, takes Aristotle to be asking '*how* can learners perform virtuous actions *unless* they are *already* (*ēdē*) virtuous' (p.20, first and second emphases added), but Aristotle's actual presentation of the puzzle asks about the necessity ('*dei*', 1105a17) of practice, on the grounds that one who

performs virtuous actions is virtuous *ēdē* ('already', 'thereby', 'immediately'). The underlying assumption is not that virtue is *prior* to virtuous action, but that virtue is *reducible* to it (see Hampson 2021). Aristotle thus needs to show why the learner does not count as virtuous simply by performing virtuous actions and does so by showing that the virtuous agent meets three further conditions, which come to be met *through* the practice of such actions. These conditions, then, are not presented as placing a requirement on successful habituation—Aristotle isn't asking '*how* practice contributes to the formation of the corresponding dispositions' (p.29)—but are intended to highlight the *difference* between a learner and a virtuous person and to show what her practice is directed towards. Jimenez is right, of course, that it doesn't follow from this that a learner could not fulfil, to some degree, at least some of these conditions, but it nevertheless undermines the thought that Aristotle takes these to be conditions on a learner's acting well and that fulfilling these is a requirement for successful habituation.

Is this any more than a scholarly quibble about the interpretation of a puzzle in Aristotle? It may undermine the *textual* basis for the continuity requirement, but is there not still the *conceptual* demand for continuity between the actions of a learner and those of a virtuous person? One reason that this interpretive issue matters is that it invites us to reflect on what issues do and do not exercise Aristotle, and where his own focus lies. The reading of the puzzle in *NE* 2.4 adopted by Jimenez takes Aristotle to be raising the question of how successful habituation is possible, and encourages readers to search for the conditions that make it so. The alternative reading of the puzzle, however, takes Aristotle to be less concerned about this and to be focusing our attention on other matters, such as the *change* that takes place as a result of habituation and what is afforded by the practice of virtuous actions. Not only does this point to an alternative set of questions that an account of Aristotelian habituation might engage with, but it pushes us, I think, to reflect on the continuity requirement again. Jimenez claims that if learners perform virtuous actions in a way that differs from the virtuous agent, it is hard to see how actions so performed could contribute to the formation of virtuous dispositions. But this seems to ignore the possibility that the very performance of these actions might itself effect some change – that there might be something that happens when a learner does these actions, and that this might enable us to understand how, by performing virtuous actions, she acquires virtuous dispositions. Perhaps Jimenez is right that *at some point* in the process the learner must perform these actions in a way that resembles the virtuous agent if a *disposition* is to emerge, and I think she is right to reject the view that a learner, as such, could not act for the sake of the noble. But at the same time, we can ask why we need to seek continuity in the learner's *pre-habituated* condition. At the very least it seems worth considering what the actual performance of certain sorts of actions might itself afford; indeed, I think Aristotle's insistence in *NE* 2.1-4 on the importance of *doing* virtuous actions invites us to do just this.

I suspect that Jimenez would respond by saying that what the performance of virtuous actions affords is access to the pleasures of nobility and the opportunity to appreciate their superior value over appetitive pleasures, thus contributing to her hedonic transformation. But that in order to experience those pleasures, as argued in Chapter 2, a learner must perform virtuous actions in the right way, namely on account of their nobility – hence we must look to her pre-habituated condition. Perhaps, then, the issue of how much we think is achieved through the learner's action and how much we need to appeal to her pre-habituated condition

ultimately turns on where we locate the noble and our experience of its value in all of this: whether this value resides in virtuous actions themselves or in an agent's virtuous activity. Jimenez, I suspect, takes it to reside in the latter, and thus takes there to be a limit on what can be achieved through the performance of virtuous actions themselves, without the learner already being in a certain condition. If, however, we take nobility to reside in the former, this might allow for more to be achieved through the performance of those actions themselves. Aristotle himself speaks as if virtuous actions have this quality (e.g. *NE* 1099a21-24; 1116a10-12; 1120a11-15) and it is not implausible—within Aristotle's framework—to think that it is by engaging in such action that a learner is enabled to 'taste' (*NE* 1179b16) this quality.

That these questions, about action and value, can be raised in response to Jimenez' analysis is testament, I hope, to the philosophical interest of her book. And whatever the answer, I am in no doubt that Jimenez has made a significant contribution to our understanding of Aristotelian moral development in elucidating Aristotle's account of shame and inviting us to see how this element of a learner's psychology could make a positive contribution to this process.

References

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MARGARET HAMPSON

University of St Andrews, Scotland

mrh8@st-andrews.ac.uk