

Aristotle on the nature of *ethos* and *ethismos*

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Abstract

That character virtue is produced, according to Aristotle, through a process of moral habituation is a familiar feature of his ethics. And yet our feeling of familiarity with the notions of habit and habituation can engender a like feeling of familiarity with the process Aristotle describes, and encourage us to conceive of this process in an overly narrow way. In this chapter, I examine Aristotle's notion of *ethos* and *ethismos* (habit, habituation) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to better understand what Aristotle means to convey when he claims that character virtue 'arises from habit'. I argue that to characterise habituation as 'non-rational' is misleading, particularly when this characterisation forecloses questions about what kinds of activity may be involved in the process of habituation, and what kind of states can be produced as a result. Habituation, I argue, is not characterised as a *non-rational process*, but a *process that involves action and activity*. This allows that the process of habituation may be understood in a relatively broad way and as potentially involving a range of activities which engage and develop a variety of psychological capacities. It also raises interesting questions about what a learner's activity affords and how this contributes to her successful habituation.

I. Introduction

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1 Aristotle draws a distinction between two forms of virtue and the corresponding ways in which they are developed:

Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character [i.e. of *ēthos*] results from habit [*ethos*]; hence its name 'ethical', slightly varied from '*ethos*' (1103a15-18).¹

¹ Quotations are from *NE* unless otherwise stated; translations follow Irwin (1999), with occasional modifications.

The aim of this chapter is to secure a firmer understanding of what Aristotle means when he writes that character virtue results from habit (*ex ethous perigignetai*), via an examination of Aristotle's notions of *ethos* and *ethismos* (habit, habituation) as presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

That character virtue is produced, according to Aristotle, through a process of moral habituation is a familiar feature of his ethics.² And yet our feeling of familiarity with the notions of habit and habituation can engender a like feeling of familiarity with the process Aristotle describes, and encourage us to conceive of this process in an overly narrow or restrictive way.³ The distorting influence of certain ways of thinking about habit and habituation is perhaps clearest in the writings of 19th Century commentators such as Grant, who writes dismissively that “a mechanical theory is here given both of the intellect and the moral character, as if the one could be acquired by teaching, the other by a course in habits.” (Grant 1885, 482).⁴ This characterisation of Aristotle's account of moral habituation has, of course, been widely discredited, and it is customary for scholars to articulate their account of Aristotelian habituation in opposition to a ‘mindless’ or ‘mechanical’ view of this process.⁵ Indeed, some have encouraged us to construe the process in a relatively broad sense, on the basis of the richness and psychological complexity of Aristotle's account of character virtue.⁶ And yet resistance to such readings remains, in the form of the continued insistence, by some, that moral habituation is clearly, perhaps essentially, a ‘non-rational’ process.⁷

² In speaking of ‘moral habituation’, I am referring primarily to habituation towards (character) *virtue*. Of course, ‘moral habituation’ can also result in *vice* (1103b14-17). Rachel Barney has recently developed an account of what she calls ‘brute’ habituation, which is neutral between virtue or vice (see 2019, 279-288); she grants, however, that since virtue and vice are not symmetrical in all respects, neither are the respective habituation processes. Virtue might require what she calls an ‘enriched’ form of habituation. As I note in §3, Aristotle's reference to ‘a certain habituation’ at 1098b4 supports the thought that Aristotle allows for different forms of habituation.

³ This is not to claim that ‘habit’ and ‘habituation’ are inappropriate translations of ‘*ethos*’ and ‘*ethismos*’. It is rather to acknowledge that certain preconceptions about what constitutes a habit, or of what are paradigmatic cases, can encourage a narrow view of *ethos* and *ethismos*, and what this entails in the moral case.

⁴ See also Stewart (1892, 170-1).

⁵ See, amongst others, Sorabji (1973-4, 107; 126); Cooper (1986, 8), Hursthouse (1988, 211), Broadie (1991, 109), Vasiliou (2007, 42), Kraut (2012, 538).

⁶ These include, but are not limited to, Burnyeat 1980, Sherman 1989, Lawrence 2012; Nielsen in this volume.

⁷ See Moss (2011, 205); (2012, 171-2). Moss takes it to be so obvious that habituation is non-rational that she appeals to this claim to bolster her view of the nature of character virtue: “habituation is a non-intellectual [i.e. non-rational] process [...] If habituation is sufficient for virtue, virtue must be a state of the non-rational soul alone” (2012, 171-2). See also Engberg-Pedersen (1983, 160); Jonathan Lear (1988, 169). Annas refers to ‘non-rational’ habituation, though she expresses scepticism that such a process could furnish a grasp of ends (1993, 88-89).

Like several other commentators, I believe that Aristotle's account of moral habituation should be understood broadly rather than narrowly. That is, I believe that the process Aristotle describes can be understood as involving a range of activities – active, reflective, non-discursive and discursive⁸ – which engage and develop a variety of psychological capacities, belonging to both parts of the soul. Understanding Aristotle's account of habituation in this way has significant advantages over a narrow interpretation of the process, according to which habituation consists in the non-rational training of the non-rational part of the soul alone, effected through repeated movement with respect to pleasure and pain. Such narrow interpretations of the process incline towards a highly compartmentalised picture of the soul, of virtue and of moral development, on which an agent's psychological capacities are treated as relatively discrete, and trained or developed through isolated processes.⁹ It is a distorting picture of human psychology and an unlikely picture of moral education. Moreover, such interpretations leave unexplained, and even mysterious, how virtue as a unified state of a person comes to be present.

In defending a broad view of the process, however, I want to take a different approach than the one more familiar in the scholarly literature, which begins from Aristotle's account of the nature of character virtue, and from this infers what the habituation process must be like.¹⁰ For I wish, instead, to attend directly to Aristotle's remarks on *ethos* and *ethismos* in the *Ethics* to gain a better understanding of Aristotle's characterisation of this process, and thus what he

⁸ That is, a learner's practice might involve not only the actual performance of certain sorts of actions, but also practice at deliberation, reflection on her actions (or failures to act), listening to descriptions and explanations offered by a teacher or guide. In Hampson 2019 I offer an account of how emulation and imitation, involving the adoption of another's perspective, also play a role in a learner's successful development.

⁹ In particular, certain commentators have insisted that descriptions and explanations cannot form part of the habituation process, and should be understood as part of a distinct, temporally posterior process. See especially Curzer, 2012, 322-3. See also Moss 2012, 171.

¹⁰ Discussions of the nature of habituation are often associated with a debate about the *target* of moral habituation, of what part of the soul – non-rational or also rational – the process is directed towards. This debate is, in turn, tied up with a debate about the nature of character virtue – whether it is a state of the non-rational soul alone or the rational part also – and a further debate about the relation between character virtue and *phronēsis*. Starting from a position on the nature of character virtue, scholars then infer either that habituation must be a non-rational process, targeted at the non-rational part of the soul or that it must include intellectual elements, producing a state of the rational part of the soul also.

In adopting a different approach, I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate to draw inferences about the nature of moral habituation from Aristotle's account of character virtue; I am particularly sympathetic to those arguments which point to the psychological richness and complexity of character virtue as Aristotle describes it, and argue that however we are to understand the nature of habituation, we must be able to account for the development of such a state. Karen Margrethe Nielsen's contribution to this volume is a particularly persuasive example of this approach, and I intend the argument of this chapter to complement her own. Nevertheless, I believe there is value in understanding of Aristotle's conception of habituation itself, independently of the contentious debate about the part of the soul to which character virtue belongs.

means to convey when he states that character virtue arises *ex ethous*. As a defence of a broad reading of this process my aims are largely negative then: to show that Aristotle's remarks on habituation resist a narrow reading and that, to this extent, we should avoid placing limitations on what this process might involve that are not imposed by the text. It remains for a fuller account of this process to flesh this picture out.

In what follows, I will argue that, whilst there is clearly a distinction, for Aristotle, between *ethos* and *logos* (reason, argument, word, account, explanation)¹¹ as sources of moral improvement, to characterise habituation as non-rational as such is misleading, particularly when this characterisation forecloses questions about what kinds of activity may be involved in the process of habituation, and what kind of states can be produced as a result. Habituation, as I will show, is not characterised as a *non-rational process*, but a *process that involves action and activity*; the concepts of action and activity, and not that of the non-rational are most appropriate for capturing Aristotle's notion of habituation and understanding his claim that character virtue arises *ex ethous*. The fact that habituation consists in action and activity, however, does not tell us about the nature of such activity; certainly, one cannot argue from this fact alone that it must exclude forms of activity that involve, or appeal to, an agent's rational, as well as non-rational, capacities. To insist that habituation is non-rational, and to draw conclusions on this basis about the nature of moral habituation, is not only to impose unnecessary limits on how we explain our development as moral beings, but also to miss Aristotle's crucial insight about such development, and the questions this raises. For if habituation consists primarily in action or activity, this raises important questions about what it is that such activity affords. Thus, in gaining a better appreciation of Aristotle's notion of habituation we are enabled not only to look upon the process of moral habituation with fresh eyes, but also to better appreciate the kinds of philosophical questions Aristotle's account gives rise to.

2. An assumption about the nature of habituation

The view I wish to challenge in this paper is the view that habituation is clearly a non-rational process. This is not to be confused with the view that habituation is non-cognitive – the view, seemingly endorsed by scholars such as Grant (1885), that habituation consists in the 'mindless'

¹¹ The translation of *logos* is notoriously vexed, and what Aristotle means by *logos* can change depending on the context, as we shall see.

repetition of certain action types, from which a tendency to perform such action types – a mere habit – is produced. The latter view is characterised as ‘non-cognitive’ because what emerges is a mere behavioural disposition, and the emergence of this disposition is explained by appeal to a mechanism.¹² As I noted above, this view has been long discredited, since it leaves mysterious how anything like the state of character virtue, as Aristotle’s describes it, could be produced by such a process. Since Aristotle’s notion of the non-rational is not equivalent to that of the non-cognitive, however, the denial that habituation is non-cognitive does not entail the denial that habituation is non-rational (Moss 2012 158, n.14; 172).¹³ So what does it mean, then, to say that habituation is ‘non-rational’?

What this label picks out exactly is not often spelled out, but it appears that the characterisation of habituation as non-rational is either thought to entail, or is used to justify, (i) a claim about what is involved in the process of habituation or what the process consists in, and (ii) a claim about the kind of state, and of which part of the soul, the process effects.¹⁴ For it is argued that (i) habituation does not involve discursive activities, and in particular that providing descriptions and explanations to the moral learner cannot form a part of the habituation process. Furthermore, the claim that habituation is non-rational is invoked to support the claim that (ii) the habituation process can only develop capacities or produce a state belonging to the non-rational part of the soul.¹⁵ Whether these two claims are contained, as it were, within the claim that habituation is non-rational, or thought to follow immediately from

¹² To the extent that many accounts of Aristotelian habituation, presented in apparent opposition to this view, still appear to explain its workings by appeal to a *mechanism*, it is worth considering how much they ultimately diverge from it. This, however, is a matter for another occasion.

¹³ For background, see Cooper 1998, 244-5. Note the pervasiveness of the assumption that habituation is non-rational is shown in Moss’ supposition that the view needs to be *disproved*, rather than proved.

¹⁴ Thus, for example, Moss states that the process consists in “the shaping of non-rational cognition” (Moss 2012, 171). See ch.8 of her 2012 for further discussion.

¹⁵ “But [the claim that habituation involves learning explanations of why certain actions are appropriate] fits poorly with the distinction we have just seen between acquiring states through habituation and acquiring them through teaching or *logos* (*EN* II.1, cf. *Pol.* 1334b8ff.). Moreover, Aristotle’s extensive discussions of habituation not only make no mention of any intellectual aspects, but explicitly present the repetition of actions and passions as what does the work [...]. It is by doing the actions and feeling the passions that one attains the corresponding state. The same is implied by the passages which describe habituation as working mainly by means of pleasure and pain: see e.g. *EE* VII.2 1237a1-7 and *EN* II.3 1104b8-12. Thus habituation is a non-intellectual process [...]. But it is very difficult to see how non-intellectual training on its own can yield an excellent intellectual state; therefore we should conclude that the virtue which results solely from habituation is itself non-intellectual, a disposition to feel the right passions and motivations in the right ways – which is precisely how Aristotle seems to be describing virtue at many points in *EN* II and *EE* II. If habituation is sufficient for virtue, virtue must be a state of the non-rational soul alone” (Moss 2012, 172).

this claim, the label ‘non-rational’ clearly carries substantial commitments about the nature of habituation and what this process effects.

We should note, however, that Aristotle nowhere characterise habituation as non-rational, that is, as *alogon*. This fact alone should give us pause, for Aristotle is upfront in calling things *alogon* when he wants to. He uses this locution to divide the parts of the soul (e.g. *EE* 1219b31, *NE* 1102a28, *Pol.* 12607, *DA* 432a26), in categorising capacities of the soul (e.g. *DA* 432a30, 432b6), or certain forms of desire (*EE* 1247b19, *NE* 1111b13, *Rhet.* 1369a2), in characterising the emotions (*NE* 1111b1), or even types of living being (*NE* 1172b10). That Aristotle does not describe habituation as *alogon*, then, already casts doubt on the appropriateness of this label and should invite us to consider his characterisation afresh.

Nevertheless, it might be suggested that whilst Aristotle does not explicitly characterise habituation as *alogon*, he does juxtapose *ethos* with *logos* on a number of occasions, particularly in the context of becoming good (e.g. *Pol.* 1332a39-40, *NE* 1179b6-31). Does this not suggest that *ethos* is, in contrast to *logos*, *alogon*? In response to this suggestion, however, it is worth reminding ourselves that *logos* has a notoriously wide semantic range – it can mean not only ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’, but ‘argument’, ‘word’, ‘speech’, ‘account’, and so on – and thus its meaning on any given occasion will largely be determined by the context. And indeed when we look at those contexts in which *ethos* is contrasted with *logos*, particularly in the context of becoming good, it appears that Aristotle has something quite specific in mind. For instance, when Aristotle contrasts *ethos*, *logos* and *phusis* (nature) as means to becoming good in the final chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he does this in the context of a discussion of the sufficiency of *logoi*, specifically in the form of *words* or *speeches*, to make people good (1179b4ff).¹⁶ Thus when Aristotle goes on to contrast *ethos* with *logos*, he appears to be contrasting *ethos* with the power of words and speeches, rather than ‘reason’ in general. The apparent contrast between *ethos* and *logos*, then, simply does not justify a kind of wholesale characterisation of habituation as non-rational from which (i) and (ii) above might be thought to follow.¹⁷

Let us consider one final piece of evidence that has been cited in support of the view that habituation is non-rational: the thought, in Jessica Moss’ words, that Aristotle’s discussions of

¹⁶ We will examine this passage more closely in §3. That Aristotle is referring to ‘words or speeches’ here is indicated not only by his use of the plural *logoi*, and his reference to what people will ‘hear’ (*akouō*, 1179b27), but in particular by his reference to the poet Theognis (1179b6) who, in the verse Aristotle is quoting, refers to the power of ‘*muthoisi*’ (words, speeches, narratives). For further discussion see Aufderheide 2020, 231-32. Broadie and Rowe also translate *logoi* here as ‘words’.

¹⁷ As we shall see in §3, Aristotle is not contrasting *ethos* and *logos* in a straightforward way either.

habituation “explicitly present the repetition of actions and passions as what does the work” (2012, 171). In support of this claim Moss cites the following passage:¹⁸

For, acting as we do in our dealings with men, some of us become just, some unjust; by acting as we do in terrifying situations, and becoming habituated to fear (*prattontes de ta en tois denois kai ethizomenoi phobeisthai*) or to be confident some become brave, some cowardly... To sum it up in one phrase: like states come about through like activities (*NE* 1103b14-22).

Is this evidence that ‘the repetition of actions and passions does the work’ and, moreover, that habituation is thereby non-rational? I believe not. First, Aristotle does not say here that ‘the repetition of actions and passions does the work’. But more to the point, Aristotle only tells us here *that* we become virtuous by “becoming habituated to fear or to be confident”; he does not tell us *how* this process works. So Moss is simply not entitled to conclude, as she does, that this process is ‘non-rational’ (or contains ‘no intellectual elements’) without assuming that the process of becoming habituated (*ethizomenoi*) is non-rational.¹⁹ Yet since our aim is to understand whether the habituation process is non-rational, or whether it includes any rational or discursive elements, Moss in effect begs the question. As we shall see, Aristotle’s remarks indicate that there is an irreducible role for an agent’s own activity in her habituation, but this does not tell us anything about what is involved in such activity, or what needs to accompany such activity for it to be effective.

Despite the insistence by a number of prominent scholars that habituation is essentially non-rational, there is an absence of clear textual evidence to support this characterisation of the process. I suggest, then, that we should instead be guided by Aristotle’s own presentation of the issue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and that we consider what we learn from his discussion free of preconceptions of the nature of habit and habituation.

3. *Ethos* and *ethismos* in Aristotle’s *Ethics*

¹⁸ Moss also claims support from those passages which “describe habituation as working mainly by means of pleasure and pain: see e.g. *EE* VII.2 1237a1-7 and *NE* II.3 1104b8-12” (2012, 172). Interestingly, whilst *NE* 2.3 is clearly central to Aristotle’s account of moral development, it is notable that the language of *ethos* is absent from this chapter. See Jimenez 2015 critical discussion of the role of pleasure and pain in moral habituation.

¹⁹ Moss appears to assume a narrow understanding of what is involved in practising virtuous action, where to practise an action is thought to be non-rational. Yet whilst it might be unproblematic to say that an action such as walking is ‘non-rational’, it is not obvious that this is true of performing a just action.

3.1 *Ethos* in the *Eudemian Ethics*

Before we turn to Aristotle's discussion of *ethos* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I want to begin by noting what, at first, appears to be a parallel discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics*. For here Aristotle offers a quasi-definition of habituation:

Character exists, as the name signifies, because it develops from habit (*apo ethous echei tēn epidosin*) and a thing gets habituated as a result of a pattern of conduct that is not innate (*ethizetai de to hup'agōgēs mē emphutou*), by repeated movement of one sort or another (*tōi pollakis kineisthai pōs*), so that it is eventually capable of being active in that way (*houtōs ēdē to energētikon*) (1220a39-b3, trans. Inwood and Woolf).²⁰

There is a temptation to read this definition in a reductive way, as suggesting something like the non-cognitive picture of habituation mentioned in §2, and to import this reading into Aristotle's discussion of habituation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But we should resist both of these temptations, for at least two reasons.

First, the passage tells us that a subject is habituated when, as a result of some form of repeated movement, change or process (*kineisthai*), it becomes capable of being active on its own. On a reductive or non-cognitive reading, there is no more to explaining the resulting capability than the fact of the subject's repeated movement;²¹ this is the 'mechanism' to which I referred in §2. Read in a less reductive way, however, we can grant that repeated movement (or indeed a change or process) of some sort is necessary for explaining the emergence of the capability, whilst acknowledging that it remains open in what way the subject's repeated movement (or the change or process in question) contributes to the emergence of a capability. At any rate, the definition does not tell us that, through repetition, "an act tends *to reproduce itself*" (Grant 1885, 484, my emphasis). I will return to this thought in §4.

²⁰ I quote Inwood and Woolf, though this translation of the passage has been much disputed. 'Pattern of conduct' is perhaps misleading as a translation of *hup'agōgēs*, which has *agein*, to lead, as its root. Barney thus translates the line: "by a guidance which is not innate" (2019, 281); Di Basilio opts for "by a non-innate guide".

²¹ It might be argued that 'movement' as a translation of '*kineisthai*' begs the question somewhat, since *kinēsis* can also mean 'change' or 'process' (see especially Broadie 1982). I thank Matthew Duncombe for drawing this to my attention.

Second, recent scholarship on the relation between the *EE* and *NE*, and in particular their respective accounts of habituation, has urged caution in supposing that passages of the two works are strictly parallel, and importing thoughts expressed in one work to the other.²² My point, as I hope will become clear, is not that the quasi-definition of the *EE* is *inconsistent* with Aristotle's remarks in the *NE*. But it is notable that Aristotle does not introduce the concept of habituation in this way in the latter work; to this extent the *EE* presentation provides something of a contrast in virtue of which we can appreciate the particular emphasis of the *NE* account.

3.2 *Ethos* and *ethismos* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

Let us now turn to Aristotle's introduction of habituation in *Nicomachean Ethics* and consider what a reader – free of preconceptions about the nature of this process – discovers about this as she follows Aristotle's discussion throughout the work.

We are first introduced to the notion of habituation early in Book I when Aristotle discusses the appropriate student for his lectures. Here Aristotle explains that:

a youth is not a suitable student of political science; for *he lacks experience of the actions of life*, which are the subject and premises of our arguments. Moreover, since he tends to follow his feelings, his study will be futile and useless; for the end [of political science] is action, not knowledge (1095a2-6).

Nevertheless, for those “who accord with reason in forming their desires, and in their actions” (1095a10-11), knowledge of political science will be of great benefit. Aristotle goes on to explain that since we ought, in investigations, to begin from things known to us (*tōn gnōrimōn*):

This is why we need to have been brought up in fine habits (*dio dei tois ethesin echthai*) if we are to be adequate students of fine and just things, and of political science generally. For we begin from the that (*hoti*); if this is apparent enough to us we can begin also without the why (*dioti*) (1095b4-7).

²² See Di Basilio, forthcoming, who argues that the *Nicomachean* conception of habituation is not assumed in the *EE*, and likely represents Aristotle's more developed thoughts on the nature of virtue acquisition. Thus, where Di Basilio urges against importing assumptions from the *Nicomachean* account into the *EE*, I also caution against importing elements of the *Eudemian* picture into the *NE*.

Proper habituation, it turns out, is a prerequisite for benefitting from Aristotle's lectures. The fraught issue of what Aristotle has in mind when he speaks of the 'that' and the 'why' of political science is not our present concern. What is relevant for our present investigation is that Aristotle returns to the subject of the 'that' – which he calls a first principle (*archē*) – some pages later, and here explains that:

Some principles are studied (*theōrountai*) by means of induction, some by means of perception, some by means of some sort of habituation (*ethismōi tini*), and others by other means (1098b3-4).

These passages are instructive, and in a number of ways. First, that Aristotle refers in the latter passage to 'some sort of (*tini*) habituation' is revealing in itself, for it signals Aristotle's acknowledgment that habituation might come in various forms. The *ethismos* through which sheep are trained to run together in thunder (*HA* 610b33-11a2) or through which infants become accustomed to the cold (*Pol.* 1336a12-18) may be quite different, not only in terms of the activities each involves, but in the way in which each works, to the *ethos* involved in the acquisition of virtue. At any rate, the *ethismos* that has been introduced to us in Book I of the *Ethics* is identified, first, with having suitable experience of action.²³ Moreover, it is presented as a mode of grasping principles, as something that will contribute to a certain sort of knowledge, and something that will make us excellent judges.

Of course, that habituation has cognitive powers is a familiar thought, at least since Burnyeat's seminal article on the topic.²⁴ What I wish to bring out is that this is how we have been set up to think of habituation *right from the start* of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and that this is the conception we should have in mind when we come to Aristotle's fuller discussion of habituation in Book 2 and beyond. Aristotle does not begin with a narrow or reductive understanding of habituation as a form of repeated movement as his paradigm, and then later add that this process *also* has cognitive powers; rather he begins with the thought that habituation is identified primarily with experience of action, and that this is a mode of grasping first principles.

²³ Cf. Jimenez 2019, who argues for a distinction here between *empeiria* and *ethismos*. Given his preceding argument, Aristotle's claim that *ethos* will produce an appropriate student surely implies that *ethismos* involves experience of action.

²⁴ See Burnyeat 1980, 73.

Turning now to Aristotle's discussion in Book 2, whilst Aristotle apparently contrasts *ethos* and teaching (*didaskalia*) as modes of virtue acquisition at the outset of *NE* 2.I,²⁵ in what follows it becomes evident that the relevant contrast for understanding habituation and its contribution to the development of character virtue is not teaching but nature (*phusis*). In an immediate elaboration on the claim that character virtue arises *ex ethous*, Aristotle explains that it is clear that none of the virtues arises in us naturally:

For if something is by nature in one condition, habituation cannot bring it into another condition. A stone, for instance, by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times (*muriakis*) to habituate it (1103a19-22).

The reference here to throwing a stone *muriakis* might encourage us to think of habituation as consisting, essentially, in repeated movement, from which a disposition to so move is produced. Yet we have already been made aware in Book 1 that habituation can take various forms, and that whilst some forms might consist primarily in repeated movement, this is not necessarily true of all.²⁶ More revealing, I submit, is Aristotle's second piece of evidence that character virtue is not had by nature, for here he explains that:

if something arises in us by nature, we first have the capacity for it, and later perform the activity (*hēsteron de tas energeias apodidomen*). This is clear in the case of the senses; for we did not acquire them by frequent seeing or hearing (*ek tou pollakis idein ē pollakis akousai*), but already had them when we exercised them, and did not get them by exercising them. Virtues, by contrast, we acquire, just as we acquire skills, having first been active (*energēsantes proteron*) (1103a26-32).

Here habituation is again characterised by way of contrast with nature (rather than teaching or *logos*), and what the contrast reveals is that habituation – of the sort relevant to the case of virtue acquisition – consists precisely in being *active*.²⁷ Of course, Aristotle makes reference

²⁵ See Nielsen in this volume [her §6] for discussion of how this contrast is less stark than first appears.

²⁶ The example appears to be chosen for argumentative effect: *even* if a stone is thrown *ten thousand times*, it will immediately revert to downwards movement when the source of upwards motion is removed.

²⁷ In speaking of 'being active', I am speaking relatively loosely, and intend the term to encompass the thought that habituation can involve the performance of actions, but also the experience of emotions, and perhaps also engagement in other sorts of mental processes such as deliberation. I do not use the term in a technical sense, as

again to repetition, but it remains clear from the context that the most important concept (and that which distinguishes nature from habit) is the concept of prior activity, rather than repetition *per se*. And this is just what Aristotle's subsequent discussion goes on to underline. For, as he explains, just as we acquire skills by attempting to do what we will do once we have acquired the skill in question, so too in the case of the virtues "we become just by doing just actions (*ta dikaia prattontes*)" (*NE* 1103b1-2). His emphasis is on action (*poieisis*, 1103a33; *praxis*, 1103b1) and engagement in certain forms of activity.

Aristotle continues to emphasise the analogy between the acquisition of character virtue and skill, an analogy which encourages us to think of habituation as a relatively sophisticated process (cf. *Met* 1047b2), consisting essentially in the activity of the agent. Moreover, the analogy with skills also invites us to reflect on the important role teachers have to play in this process and the contribution these make to its successful outcome (1103b12). Indeed, if we reflect on the way in which skills are taught, it becomes clear that a teacher's role is not simply to guide their student to perform the 'right' actions, but to offer certain explanations as they proceed. A master builder does not merely instruct her apprentice to lay stones a certain way, but also explains that laying them in this way makes the structure stronger, and so on.²⁸ The student needs to lay stones herself, of course, but to insist that a teacher does no more than guide the student to lay the stones in the right way would be to ignore the way in which skills are typically taught, and what the skills analogy thus invites us to see about what successful habituation involves. For a student's practice to get the right kind of purchase, often explanation and reflection are required as well, and these are not clearly any less important for successful habituation than the 'doing' itself.²⁹

Nevertheless, in the case of skill acquisition – and in the case of virtue – there is clearly an ineliminable role for the agent's own engagement in the relevant activity, and this is just

a translation of Aristotle's term *energeia*, nor in my usage of the term do I mean to suggest that in 'being active' an agent is thereby 'actualising a capacity'. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that Aristotle does seem to imply here (and perhaps in the *EE* etymology passage too) that certain capacities, capacities to be active in a certain way, are acquired precisely by being active in that way. To the extent that I wish to emphasise the centrality of the notion of activity (in a loose sense) to Aristotle's notion of habituation, my account naturally invites reflection on these issues (and perhaps in a way that an account which emphasises the mechanism of repetition does not). However, these are issues for Aristotle's metaphysics in general, and not for my particular interpretation of his notion of habituation.

²⁸ To say that the apprentice receives explanations does not collapse the distinction between their training and a more theoretical training that, for example, an architect receives.

²⁹ Note that in the case of skill acquisition, the teacher or guide will expect the student not only to understand their instructions and explanations, but to remember these explanations in the future without guidance from the teacher, and to act with this in mind – i.e. reflectively. I thank Fiona Leigh for this point.

what Aristotle in *NE* 2.1 makes clear. What we do in our dealings with others, what we do in terrifying situations, and likewise how we comport ourselves with regards to appetites and anger, makes us just, courageous, temperate and mild – or the opposite (1103b13-21). “In one word, from similar activities come similar states (*kai eni dē logo ek tōn homoiōn energeiōn hai hexeis gignontai*)” (1103b21-22). The question remains, of course, just how this works and how it is that the agent’s activity contributes to her successful development. But what Aristotle’s remarks make clear is that the habituation process consists importantly in the agent’s own active engagement in a relevant activity; this is at the core of his notion of ethical habituation.

Indeed, we can see Aristotle underlining just this point in *NE* 2.4. Although the language of *ethos* or *ethismos* is absent from this chapter, its back reference at 1105a17-19 to his claim that we become just by doing just things clearly indicates that this chapter is a continuation of the previous discussion. Aristotle’s task is to show why practice of virtuous actions should be necessary for becoming virtuous; as he goes on to explain, it is only through practice that we come to meet the three agential conditions that are constitutive of character virtue (1105a31-33). Here Aristotle refers again to the importance of repeated performance (*pollakis*, 1105b4-5), but once more the context makes clear that his emphasis is on the importance of actively engaging in virtuous action, rather than on the notion of repetition as such.³⁰ This is brought clearly to our attention in Aristotle’s concluding lines, where he asserts that “no one would ever become good without doing these things” (1105b11-12). He goes on pointedly to contrast those who engage in the right activities with those who “do not do these things, but rather taking refuge in *logos* they think that they are doing philosophy, and in this way will become decent” (1105b12-18), reinforcing the idea that active engagement is at the core of habituation. This contrast, in particular, should be in our minds when Aristotle returns to the topic of habituation at the end of the *Ethics*, and help us to appreciate the force of his argument there. For the present, it serves to underscore what appears to be Aristotle’s central thought when he claims that character virtue arises *ex ethous*: that character virtue is established only as a result of the subject’s own engagement in a relevant form of activity.

3.3 *Ethos* and teaching in *NE* 10.9

³⁰ The ‘*pollakis*’ is intended to contrast with the thought implicit in the opening challenge, that insofar as someone performs a virtuous action, she is immediately virtuous. The ‘*pollakis*’ emphasises the sense in which an agent must *continually* engage in virtuous action if the agential conditions are to be met.

We are now in a position to appreciate Aristotle's discussion of habituation in the final chapter of *NE*. This passage in particular has been cited as evidence that habituation cannot include (and indeed, must precede) any discursive modes of instruction, such as description and explanation, and to bolster a narrow understanding of moral habituation and what it effects. Here Aristotle observes that:

if *logoi* were sufficient by themselves to make people decent, the rewards they would command would justifiably have been many and large, as Theognis says, and rightly bestowed. In fact, however, *logoi* seem to have enough influence to stimulate and encourage the civilised ones among the young people, and perhaps to make virtue take possession of a well-born character that truly loves what is fine (*kalon*); but they seem unable to turn the many toward being fine and good. For the many naturally obey fear, not shame; they avoid what is base because of penalties, not because it is disgraceful. For since they live by their feelings, they pursue their proper pleasures and the sources of them, and avoid the opposed pains, and have not even a notion of what is fine and [hence] truly pleasant, since they have had no taste of it (*tou de kalou kai hōs alēthōs hēdeos oud' ennoian echousin ageustoi ontes*). What *logos*, then, could reform people like these? For it is impossible, or not easy to alter by *logos* what has long been absorbed by one's character traits. [...] Now some think that it is nature that makes people good; some think it is *ethos*; some that it is teaching. [...] *Logos* and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish the seed. For someone who lives in accord with his feelings would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change? And in general feelings seem to yield to force, not to *logos*. Hence, we must already in some way have a character suitable for virtue, fond of what is fine and objecting to what is painful (1179b4-29).

The passage appears to contrast the role and effects of *logoi* in moral education, with the role and effects of *ethos*, and in such a way – as noted in §2 – that might suggest that *ethos* is essentially non-rational, and thus cannot involve teaching (at least of the sort that involves *logos*). As Howard Curzer forcefully states:

Aristotle's main point in the passage is that this habituation must precede 'argument and teaching.' Farmers prepare the earth before they sow. *The two activities are not mingled*" (2012, 322, my emphasis).³¹

In particular, Curzer argues that this passage excludes description and explanation from the notion of habituation: "description and explanation are teaching, and Aristotle insists that successful teaching presupposes successful habituation. He denies that descriptions and explanations should accompany parental commands and exhortations" (2012, 322, n.13).

This is a strong claim and not one that Aristotle explicitly makes. On the contrary, it is from clear that the passage quoted does indicate that description and explanation are excluded from the notion of habituation, or that this passage ultimately supports a narrow interpretation of this process. Let us look again at the passage, particularly in light of what we have established about the nature of habituation. The passage begins by challenging the supposition that *logoi* are sufficient (*autarkeis*) to make people good. We have already seen, in §2, that Aristotle is contrasting habituation with the power of words and speeches, rather than with reason in general. More importantly, however, Aristotle's question is about the *sufficiency* of words and speeches to make people good; he is considering whether *these alone* could produce virtue. Aristotle's answer is, of course, 'no'. As he explains, such *logoi* can have influence on a character that truly loves what is fine, but they cannot turn the many towards the fine and the good. What explains the difference between the two? The many, Aristotle explains, have no sense of shame and instead obey only fear; indeed, they have not even a notion of what is fine, *having never tasted it*. Someone who has no notion of the fine, and obeys only fear, will not be made good by speeches that appeal to notions of what is fine and shameful. Indeed, in an important sense they will not even comprehend such speeches. The taste metaphor implies that an agent's relevant grasp of the fine comes as a result of first-hand experience, and Aristotle's later emphasis on the importance of practising virtuous actions and continuing in decent practices (II80a2-4, 15-16) implies that such first-hand experience comes in the form of action.

This, I submit, is the insight of this passage. That we require first-hand experience, in the form of engagement in virtuous action, to be able to grasp the fine in the relevant sense, and for speeches, arguments and further teaching about virtue to be effective. The passage makes clear that there is an essential role for an agent's own experience of virtuous action in coming to

³¹ It is worth noting that the translation of *logos* as 'argument' here already assumes a particular interpretation.

appreciate the fine. But whilst a certain form of teaching and certain sorts of *logoi* – in particular, speeches and arguments about virtue – are dependent on a subject’s own prior engagement in virtuous action, this does not rule out a role for *logoi* as such – and in particular, description and explanation – as part of the process through which a love of the fine is instilled. An essential role for experience and practice in instilling a proper appreciation of the fine does not entail that experience and practice, considered by themselves, are sufficient to produce such appreciation. It may be that descriptions and explanations are required on the part of a guide – and perhaps also some form of reflection on the part of the learner – to appreciate those aspects of her experience and practice that are necessary for gaining a proper appreciation of the fine.³² How it is that such an appreciation is developed, and what is required for this, is a matter for further investigation. But that a range of activities may be involved in this process is in no way ruled out by this passage.

4. Approaching Aristotelian habituation afresh

In seeking a better understanding of Aristotle’s claim that character virtue arises *ex ethous*, I have sought to challenge a prevailing assumption about the nature of habituation and urged that we attend specifically to Aristotle’s own remarks on *ethos* and presentation of the topic in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. When we do so, we discover that, far from the concept of the non-rational being the guiding concept in Aristotle’s account, it is the concept of prior engagement in activity which characterises *ethos* and distinguishes this from other sources of moral development. To claim, then, that character virtue arises *ex ethous* is to claim, above all, that character virtue arises through a process in which the ethical subject is necessarily engaged in some relevant activity. And nothing in the nature of habituation, so understood, entails that this process should be understood in a narrow as opposed to broad way. Nevertheless, this chapter remains a prolegomenon to a fuller account of the habituation process, and I want to close by noting two remaining tasks for such an account.

4.1 What kind of activity?

³² I am not claiming that these are *always* required, but that these cannot be *ruled out* as part of the process on the basis of the contrast between *ethos* and *logos* in this passage.

First, whilst I have argued that Aristotle's central claim is that the learner must herself be engaged in some relevant activity, Aristotle does not tell us – or not in sufficient detail – what kind of activities the moral learner must engage in. We know, of course, that she must practice 'doing just things' and become habituated to feeling appropriate passions, but precisely what is involved in doing these things is not spelled out. It is here, perhaps, that one's conception of the nature of character virtue will play a role in fleshing out an account of the habituation process and, in particular, of the capacities of the soul that must be engaged in the course of the learner's practice. Those who endorse a narrower conception of the nature of character virtue, as consisting simply in disposition of the non-rational part of the soul, might then argue that the relevant activities of the learner will be limited to those that engage and develop the capacities of the non-rational part (though this is not entailed by the nature of habituation as a process itself). But for those who take character virtue to consist in more than a disposition of the non-rational part of the soul, it is plausible to suppose that the learner will be engaged in activities which engage and develop a range of psychological capacities, not least her capacity for deliberation.³³

4.2 The contribution of 'activity'

Moreover, in coming to appreciate that the concept of activity, and not the concept of the non-rational, is the central concept in Aristotle's characterisation of habituation, an important question now comes into focus, concerning the way in which prior activity contributes to the establishment of the relevant state or disposition.

When noting Aristotle's quasi-definition of habituation in the *EE*, I pointed to one way of thinking about the nature of habituation, according to which the very repetition of some prior movement simply results in a tendency to be active in that way in the future. The emphasis, in accounting for the resulting capability, is placed on the *mechanism of repetition*.³⁴ But

³³ Karen Margethe Nielsen's contribution to this volume provides such an argument, and one with which I am broadly in agreement. I believe, however, that the most promising starting point is not the question of the part of the soul character virtue belongs to, but a description of the kind of activity in which the mature virtuous agent is engaged, the realisation of which an account of habituation should seek to explain.

³⁴ More sophisticated versions, such as Barney's (2019), might elaborate on this picture: insofar as habitual movements become increasingly like natural movements, they become increasingly pleasant, since what is felt to be natural is felt to be pleasant (*Rhet.* 1370a3-6). Habitual actions will be easy and pleasant to do, in the same way that physically natural movements are (Barney 2019, 283-4). Certainly, the latter is a plausible account of how some forms of habituation work.

Aristotle's remarks in Books I and 10, in particular, open up another way of thinking about the process. We saw that *ethos* affords a certain grasp of first principles and enables ethical subjects to have a 'taste' of the fine. Such remarks suggest that activity can also be understood as a mode of learning or discovery and provides a certain form of apprehension or insight – particularly into matters of value – that cannot be gained in any other way. If this is the case, this raises questions for the moral psychologist about what sort of apprehension an agent's activity affords, and why it is that such apprehension cannot be gained but through her own active engagement in relevant sorts of activity.³⁵

This possibility raises interesting questions not only about what is afforded by *action*, but about the cultivation of *emotional responses*. For is it the case, as per the first way of thinking about habituation, that by repeatedly disdaining (or attempting to disdain) frightening situations, a subject simply comes, over time, to disdain frightening situations on her own? Or is it that, in assuming an attitude of disdain, the subject comes to discover something about such situations that she did not previously grasp and, as a result, to see such situations differently? On the latter view, the very act of assuming, or attempting to assume, a particular evaluative attitude or emotional response would seem to enable a kind of *discovery* that informs the subject's responses in the future. If such a possibility is suggested by Aristotle's account of habituation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this points to a possible epistemic role for emotional responses and with it a new avenue for research on Aristotle's account of the emotions; one, moreover, that is not unaligned with contemporary concerns.³⁶

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³⁵ I raise some of these questions, and gesture at some possible answers, in Hampson forthcoming.

³⁶ I am grateful to Elena Cagnoli, Saloni de Souza, Giulio Di Basilio, Matthew Duncombe, Fiona Leigh, Daniel Vazquez and Ellisif Wasmuth for discussion of the material in this paper. I thank Jeremy Dunham for the opportunity to contribute to this volume.

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