

The Habits of Aristotle

Diana Mertz Hsieh (diana@dianahsieh.com)

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Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Aristotle's ethics is his theory of moral habits, largely found in the opening chapters of Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*. By elucidating not only the requirements of virtue but also the methods by which we develop virtue, Aristotle's ethics offers us a realistic hope of realizing his moral ideal. However, as we shall see, Aristotle presents only a brief sketch of the process of habituation, mostly through a partial analogy between virtue and the arts. Consequently, we are in danger of misinterpreting Aristotle's moral habits as either mechanistic or emotionalistic. However and delightfully, Nancy Sherman offers a far more powerful and subtle conception of moral habits as grounded in the development of an individual's powers of discernment.

As a bit of background, in Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that happiness (or well-being) is "the chief good" of human life, as it alone is "always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else" (1097a24-b7). Although external goods such as good birth, children, and wealth are necessary "equipment" of the good life, the most basic requirement of such a life is "activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence" (1099a32-b8; 1102a5-6). Then in the opening lines of Book II, Aristotle intimately connects habits to virtue in remarking that "moral excellence [i.e. virtue] comes about as a result of habit" (1103a16-17). The precise nature of this relationship between virtue and habit is principally explicated through a partial analogy between virtue and the arts.

In Book II, Chapter 1, Aristotle presents his analogy of virtue to the arts largely in order to argue for virtues as sets of skills gradually developed over time through practice. Then in Chapter 4, Aristotle notes the incompleteness of his earlier analogy, given that virtues require a person to be in a particular internal state, while the arts do not. This partial analogy thus explains both the external and internal elements of habituated virtue.

The Analogy of Virtue to the Arts

On the positive side, the analogy between virtue and the arts is grounded in Aristotle's distinction between capacities acquired by nature and those acquired through exercise. Natural capacities are those in which "we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity" such as hearing or seeing (1103a26-30). According to Aristotle, we do not develop our capacity to hear sounds and see colors through repetition or practice. Rather, we simply see and hear in virtue of possessing properly functioning eyes and ears. In contrast, some of our capacities, such as distinguishing musical themes in a symphony or spotting a tumor in an x-ray, are skills acquired through exercise (1103a31). Or as Aristotle says, "for the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing" (1103a32). Both arts and virtues are such skills learned through practice, hence the aptness of an analogy between them.

Unfortunately, Aristotle is quite brief regarding the details of the similarity between virtue (particularly justice, temperance, and bravery) and the arts (particularly building and lyre-playing). He writes that just as "men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1103a33). He then further notes that "it is from playing the lyre that both

good and bad lyre-players are produced” and that “men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly” (1103b7-11). Similarly, “by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly” (1103b17). The same principle holds for “appetites and feelings of anger” in that “some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances” (1103b17-20). The principle general to both virtue and the arts is that “states arise out of like activities” (1103b21).

The basic thrust of this analogy is clearly that virtue, like the arts, is “acquired through practice of corresponding actions” (Sherman 1999, 231). Intellectual instruction alone is insufficient for the development of skills, whether moral or artistic. Aristotle is perhaps hoping that the obvious absurdity of learning to play the lyre without ever playing the lyre will rub off on the not-quite-so-obvious absurdity of learning to be just without ever being just. But Aristotle does indeed have a substantial argument to make here, as the inadequacy of intellectual instruction in ethics is a direct outgrowth of his views on the impossibility of precise and universal rules in ethics.

Earlier in Chapter 3 of Book I, Aristotle argues that since we find “much variety and fluctuation” in ethics, “we must be content ... to indicate the truth roughly and in outline” (1094b14; 1094b19-21). Then in Book II, immediately after presenting the analogy between virtue and the arts, Aristotle returns to the subject of the fuzziness of ethics, particularly emphasizing the extent to which good moral judgment requires us to take into account a complex of particulars. Aristotle observes that “particular cases... do not fall under any art or set of precepts” since what benefits one person may harm another (1104a6-7). We could not decree, for example, that two and only two glasses of wine with dinner is temperate, given that such an amount would likely leave a 300 pound NFL linebacker unaffected but would render an 85 pound woman unconscious. A temperate amount of alcohol is relative to the drinker, not to some external, universal standard. As a result, “the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion” (1104a7-8). Given this inescapable dependence of moral judgment upon particulars, intellectual instruction could only ever teach ethics in fuzzy outline. The student of such instruction would not learn how to wade through the messy complexity of real-life situations.

Thus Aristotle’s argument for the necessity of habituation through practice in the development of virtue, while presented most persuasively through his analogy to the arts, is ultimately grounded in his argument that moral decision-making requires more than simply the application of universal rules.

The Disanalogy of Virtue to the Arts

After a small digression into pains and pleasures, Aristotle reexamines and limits his analogy of virtue to the arts in Chapter 4 by arguing that virtue requires certain internal states of the agent while the arts do not. Aristotle first wonders “what we mean by saying we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts” given that “if men do just and temperate acts, they are [or seem to be] already just and temperate” (1105a17-20). For example, how can a person become kind by doing acts of kindness without already being kind first? It seems that either the person is already kind in regularly performing acts of kindness, in which case there is no need to become kind, or the person is presently unkind, in which case

regular acts of kindness would be impossible. Aristotle's solution to this dilemma lies in a distinction – one not shared with the arts – between the internal and external conditions of virtue.

The arts, Aristotle argues, require only the proper performance of the appropriate actions because they “have their goodness in themselves” (1105a27). Consequently, Aristotle observes that in the case of grammar “it is possible to do something grammatical either by chance or under the guidance of another” (1105a22-23). The goodness of virtue, in contrast, requires more; the moral agent must also be in a “certain condition” when he acts (1105a28-30). So for example, politeness cannot consist in our saying “please” and “thank you” while inwardly cursing and gnashing our teeth; we must also feel the appropriate respect, gratitude, and so on. In short, unlike the arts, virtue requires harmony between the external actions and the internal states of a person.

Returning now to the dilemma of how we become virtuous by performing virtuous actions, we find that the term “virtue” is actually being used in two somewhat different senses in Aristotle's argument for habituation. We do not cultivate virtue by simply practicing virtue; rather we cultivate the internal states of virtue (as well as hone the skills of action) by practicing the external actions of virtue. And in cultivating those internal states, we thereby make the external actions of virtue far easier to perform. Thus Aristotle writes that

...by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and it is when we have become so that we are most able to abstain from them; and similarly too in the case of courage; for by being habituated to despise things that are terrible and to stand our ground against them we become brave, and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against them (1104a33-b3).

Thus we might say that while the person learning virtue will do virtuous acts, he will only learn to do those virtuous acts *virtuously* with the practice that comes with real-life experience.

Before we turn to the hard question of how the performance of acts of virtue creates the corresponding states of character, we ought to pause for a moment upon the precise nature of the internal states necessary to virtue. Perhaps the most important and salient internal requirement of the virtuous person is the appropriate feeling of pleasures and pains, i.e. feeling “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (1106b21-22). Aristotle's primary concern with such pleasures and pains lies in their motivating force in moral decision-making. They may motivate us wrongly, for “it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones” (1104b10-11). Or they may motivate us rightly, given that “to feel delight and pain rightly has no small effect upon our actions” (1104b4). The goal of the moral person will thus be to use pleasures and pain well, as motivators of virtue rather than vice (1105a13). Consequently, in the case of temperance “the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent” (1104b5-6). Similarly, “he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward” (1104b6-9). By molding our pleasures and pains properly then, we need not “fight down strong desires countering right action” because our “relevant motivation [is already] habituated and trained in the right direction” (Annas 1999, 37).

In exploring the disanalogy of virtue to the arts, Aristotle also enumerates three other necessary “conditions” of the moral agent: knowledge, choice, and character. First, the moral agent must “have knowledge” (1105a31). Although Aristotle doesn't specify such knowledge as either knowledge of the significant particulars of a situation or knowledge of the relevant moral universals, accidental virtue due to ignorance or error is fairly clearly disallowed. So a soldier who attempts to flee but instead runs headlong into the front lines is not brave, but rather likely stupid – and definitely still cowardly. Second, the moral agent must “choose the acts, and

choose them for their own sakes” (1105a31-32). Moral action must be voluntary, and chosen for the sake of ends appropriate to the virtue. Consequently moderating food and drink one day, in order to facilitate the gluttony of a feast the next would not be an exercise of virtue, as such “moderation” aims at an inappropriate end. Third, the action “must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (1105a31-b1). The genuinely virtuous person is virtuous all the time, not merely when convenient or easy. To be civil to others when life is going well, but a raging beast in difficult circumstances is not to possess the virtue of civility at all. In sum, according to these three conditions imposed upon the moral agent, virtue cannot be either accidental, involuntary, or erratic.

To sum up, through the partial analogy of virtue to the arts, Aristotle outlines his theory of the cultivation of virtue through moral habit. As the analogy indicates, such habituation is critical to the development of the skills of good moral decision-making necessitated by the imprecision of ethics. In addition, the disanalogy shows the importance of habituation in cultivating the internal states appropriate to and motivating of virtue, most notably pleasures and pains. Such is Aristotle’s theory of moral habits in outline.

Three Interpretations of Moral Habits

Although Aristotle is clear about the necessary connection between habit and virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he unfortunately reveals little of his understanding of the actual process of habituation (Broadie 1991, 104). Precisely how, we might ask, does the practice of virtuous actions over time create a virtuous character? How does repetition cultivate skills and shape affect? Despite the lack of a direct answer to these questions, Aristotle does offer us some clues.

Given our modern understanding of habits, two conceptions of moral habits – one mechanistic, the other emotionalistic – might at first glance seem plausible understandings of Aristotelian moral habits. However, as we shall see, neither makes good sense of the entirety of Aristotle’s commentary on habits. In contrast, Nancy Sherman’s view of habits as grounded in discernment appears far more promising.

In our modern, post-behaviorist times, we often think and speak of habits as mechanistic, non-conscious, almost Pavlovian patterns of action created by sheer repetition. Along these lines, a doctor is said to be in “the habit of hand-washing” because now after so many years she soaps up between patients without conscious awareness or intention. Such mechanistic habits automatize our routine actions, thereby allowing us the freedom to multitask by, for example, pondering philosophical questions while driving.

A cursory reading of Aristotle might tempt us to endorse such a mechanistic view of habits as Aristotle’s, particularly in light of his occasional comments on the instillation of habits in others. Legislators, Aristotle remarks, ought to “make the citizens good by forming habits in them” (1103b3-4). Similarly, parents must instill good habits in their children so that those children feel the appropriate pleasures and pains (1104b11-14). For example, in *Politics*, Aristotle recommends that parents “accustom children to the cold from their earliest years” on the general principle that “human nature should be early [but gradually] habituated to endure all which by habit it can be made to endure” (1336a11-19). Such comments, found peppered throughout Aristotle’s writings, seem to indicate that a process of habituation could be imposed upon others from without, perhaps even without their knowledge or consent.

However, this mechanistic construal of moral habits is clearly untenable in light of Aristotle’s emphasis on the complex judgments of particulars required in moral decision-making. Actions to be mechanically habituated must be extremely similar, such that even relatively minor

changes, such as swapping hands in tying a knot or driving on the left side of the road, confound us completely. In contrast to such rigid action-types, various commentators on Aristotle have observed that the actions associated with virtue exhibit great variety. Thus Sherman explains that “there is no external husk of all just actions that we can isolate and repeatedly practice” (Sherman 1999, 247). Instead, “any just action will be contextually defined and will vary considerably, in terms of judgment, emotion, and behavior, from other just actions” (Sherman 1999, 247). Broadie makes a similar point about the physical and psychological differences between just actions, adding that the practice of justice “should cover all sorts of cases, in which the just action is sometimes a giving, sometimes a withholding, sometimes treating people alike, sometimes differently and so on” (Broadie 1991, 108). Thus virtue cannot be developed through mechanistic habits, as such habits cannot accommodate the necessary fine-tuned judgment of particulars in moral decision-making.

The need for virtuous actions to be accompanied by appropriate mental states in Aristotle’s ethics also highlights the inapplicability of this mechanistic model of habituation. Such mechanistic habits are supposed to be non-conscious by their very nature. In contrast, Aristotle’s virtuous person must not only be aware of his actions, but also take the appropriate cognitive and affective stance towards them.

Given the failure of the mechanistic version of moral habits, perhaps a more plausible interpretation can be found in the view of habituation as the “non-rational training of desires towards appropriate objects” (Sherman 1999, 231). On this emotionalistic reading, found to a great extent in M. F. Burnyeat’s “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” the process of habituation is essentially the orientation and attachment of proper feelings to the appropriate situations. In children, such habituation consists in the connection of “unreasoned evaluative responses...with the right objects” through internal pleasures and pains (Burnyeat 1999, 216-217). Thus a child might shun foul language, not so as to avoid painful beatings, but rather because of a not-yet-rational feeling that such language is ignoble and shameful (Burnyeat 1999, 216). As an adult, this habit would likely become integrated with the mature insight of practical reason, perhaps thereby revealing the appropriateness of such language in the heat of battle (Burnyeat 1999, 222). So according to this emotionalistic approach, habituation is essentially a process of non-rational training particularly concerned with the proper ordering of pleasures and pains.

The primary strength of this interpretation of moral habits lies in its insistence, also found in Aristotle, on virtuous actions being accompanied by appropriate internal states. In fact, habits are here so deeply connected with feelings that to act on habit is to essentially be guided by (eventually rational) moral feelings. However, in so emphasizing the non-rational internal states, the skills of virtue are neglected. In particular, no account of the cultivation of the adult skills of moral judgment grounded in practical reason is offered. The result, as Sherman observes, is that this interpretation of moral habits “ultimately makes mysterious the transition between childhood and moral maturity” (Sherman 1999, 232).

In a nice twist, because this interpretation of moral habits basically ignores Aristotle’s original analogy between virtue and the arts, reversing that analogy highlights the precise nature of the inadequacy of the interpretation. Imagine a young builder who has developed the proper affective attitudes towards beautiful and sturdy buildings. He delights in the mere sight of a well-built structure, so much so that he seeks out such buildings wherever he travels. But that pleasure clearly will not automatically provide him with the necessary knowledge and skills to build such structures. The pleasure may *motivate* the development of those skills, but it cannot *explain* the process by which those skills develop over time. The exact same need of further

explanation applies to virtue. Thus the emotionalistic reading of Aristotelian habits is incomplete.

In contrast to both the mechanistic and emotionalistic visions of moral habits, Nancy Sherman offers a comprehensive and nuanced theory of habituation in her essay “The Habituation of Character.” In essence, she regards habituation as the development of “increasingly fine powers of discernment” in our “perceptual, affective, and deliberative capacities” (Sherman 1999, 232-233). So for example, “cultivating the dispositional capacities to feel fear, anger, goodwill, compassion, or pity appropriately will be bound up with learning how to discern the circumstances that warrant those responses” (Sherman 1999, 238).

In children, Sherman sees the discernment of particulars as habituated through a sort of friendly mentoring, such that the adult is “instructing [the child] to attend to these features rather than those” (Sherman 1999, 240). So if a boy gets into a fight with a friend, the parent might attempt to deflect the child’s attention away from the minor wrong done to him and towards the wrong he did earlier that day to his friend. Such a shift in attention towards the relevant particulars, if successful, would naturally temper the boy’s feelings of anger and likely elicit feelings of remorse. This change in moral perception and affect would also alter deliberation and judgment. Instead of seeking revenge, the boy might wish to apologize and invite his friend over for dinner to make up for his earlier wrong – at least after prompting from the discerning parent.

For adults, the process of habituation would be remarkably similar, in that the development of the perceptual, affective, and deliberative capacities would result from the practice of virtuous actions. Of course, no other adult would be supervising the process; likely the habituation would be guided by the individual’s own goals and judgment. In some significant sense, the process of habituation is thus the training of our moral attention towards the relevant, important particulars of a situation and away from the irrelevant, distracting particulars. As a result of such training, the right thing to do in any given situation will seem as plain as day to the virtuous individual.

In sum, Nancy Sherman’s discernment-based modern of Aristotelian moral habits sketched here seems to make excellent sense of both sides of the analogy of virtue to the arts. It accounts for the development of skill seen in the analogy, as well as the development of proper affect seen in the disanalogy.

Those Hidden Habits

Much of the difficulty of interpreting Aristotle’s theory of moral habits is the result of his failure to directly comment upon the actual process by which practice makes perfect in ethics. But we also are hindered by the fact that our own moral habits seem so obvious to us, given that we always look at moral situations this way or that way. Thus it is difficult to step back from such engrained perspectives to notice precisely what moral habits do for us. Nevertheless Nancy Sherman seems to have at least set us upon the right path.

References

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