

Aristotle's Different Approaches to Habituation

The *Nicomachean Ethics*' (*NE*) closing chapter has been traditionally interpreted in such a way that it ends up contributing to lending support¹ to the upbringing assumption². Depending on how this chapter is understood, it might provide cogent reasons to accept this assumption. My interpretation takes as point of departure an uncontroversial aspect of this chapter: it plays the role of making a transition from the *NE* to the *Politics*. For that reason, its claims should be taken with a grain of salt.

The *NE* and the *Politics* deal with the topic of moral training of character from different perspectives, which are not incompatible but have differences that are not irrelevant. On my view, their main difference lies in the fact that each approach has a different investigative goal in view. This is why it is important to be cautious and not adopt a prima-facie interpretation of *NE* X.9, which tends to see the claims about upbringing as if they could be taken as giving more details about the notion of habituation presented in *NE* II.

We should not take for granted that the *NE* and the *Politics* provide a continuous account of habituation and that the *Politics*' account might be used without any caveat to elucidate the details involved in the notion of habituation in the *NE*. Furthermore, as *NE* X.9 is clearly a transition to the topics investigated in the *Politics* and shows signs that it is to some extent already embedded in *Politics*' philosophical and investigative commitments, the implications of its claims for the understanding of the notion of habituation in the *NE* deserves close attention.

In a completely understandable attempt to flesh out the details of the notion of habituation in *NE* II, a common strategy is to see in *Politics*' two last books an occasion in which Aristotle spells out what is involved in a successful habituation, that is, how habituation should be conducted so that it attains the goal of leading to the consolidation of a virtuous character. Recently, Hampson

¹ See Irwin 1978, 256; Burnyeat 1980, 75 and 81; Sherman 1989, 165; Vasiliou 1996, 774; Smith 1994, 61.

² By upbringing assumption I mean the interpretative tendency of taking habituation as if Aristotle's use of this notion were mainly, if not exclusively, related to the moral education provided in the childhood. In the scholarship on the *NE*, see, for instance, Burnyeat 1980; Sherman 1989, 157-199; Moss 2012, 197, and 2014, 233-234, and 239; Curzer 2012, 13; Kristjánsson 2013, 432; Frede 2013, 22; Jimenez 2015, 2016, 24, and 2020; Hampson 2019. This is also a prevailing view among some contemporary discussions of ethics that dialogue with the *NE*. See, for instance, McDowell 1998, 174, 189, and 197; Williams 2006, 44.

formulated this point in the following way: “where *NE* 2 offers an account in broad outline of how the moral virtues are acquired, the *Politics* offers much more detail on what the learner’s habituation involves” (2019, 304). Undeniably, the account of habituation found in the *Politics* is much more rich and comprehensive than the one found in the *NE*. But before explaining the *NE* by means of the *Politics*, we should take a step back and wonder about what is the relation intended by Aristotle between the two treatments of the same topic and what are the reasons that explain the differences between them³. If we do not have a clear view about these issues, any attempt of combining the two approaches will end up misleading us. Taking Aristotle’s account of habituation in *Politics* to flesh out the supposed blind spots of his account in the *NE* without any further consideration about the goals of each investigation has the exegetical disadvantage of not raising the fundamental question: why do they differ?

In books VII and VIII, the *Politics* undertakes an investigation into moral education with a primary focus on children’s moral development. From this, however, we should not jump to the conclusion that it constitutes a piece of evidence in favour of the upbringing assumption in the *NE*. A dialogue between the two works demands some methodological caveats.

Even though the details regarding *Politics*’ aims and order of composition of its books are a matter of scholarly controversy, there is a widely agreed consensus about one important aspect of the books VII and VIII⁴: the aim of the these two books is to outline the features of the best constitution (ἀρίστη πολιτεία) (see *Politics* 1288b2-4, 1323a14-17). Part of the effort to think about the best constitution involves an investigation into the sort of education that will be promoted in a city having this constitution. This leads Aristotle to lay down a program of education that has its starting point in the early childhood. This program shows a very stringent path to virtue. Aristotle’s educational program for the best city covers a significant number of situations in the education of children. He claims the legislator should care about the education of the young (*Politics* 1337a10-15). He proposes an early training of the body to endure the cold weather (*Politics*

³ In her account of habituation and moral development, Sherman goes back and forth between the *Ethics* and the *Politics* (1989). This strategy has some inconveniences.

⁴ Jaeger 1948, 267-273, 275; Rowe 1977, 161 and 172; Miller 1995, 186, 188-190, and 2009, 540; Kraut 2002, 192-194; Destrée 2015, 204 and 209. What matters for my interpretation is the uncontested point that the two last books of *Politics* were written with a view to the best possible conditions that can be available to a city. It implies that Aristotle’s views about moral education in these books are based on conditions that are hardly ever available in existing cities.

1336a10-20). The diet for children should prescribe abundant intake of milk and the smallest amount of wine (*Politics* 1336a5-10). He expresses concerns about the kind of fables and stories that will be told to children (*Politics* 1336a29-31). For him, leisure should be pursued away from slaves (*Politics* 1336a39-41). The legislator should outlaw shameful talk, especially among children (*Politics* 1336b1-10). Attending comedy should be forbidden for young people (*Politics* 1336b20-25). Aristotle also outlines some cycles of education (*Politics* 1336a35-1337a1). He promotes a discussion about whether education is to be established by community or whether in a private basis (*Politics* 1337a5). Later, he defends the education must be communal (*Politics* 1337a25-27, 30-35) and provides a plan for physical (*Politics* 1338b10-1339a15) and musical education (*Politics* 1339a15ss). These are just some examples of discussions that take place in books VII and VIII. They clearly illustrate how Aristotle delves into the topic of what is required to provide a good education to children.

After reading through Aristotle's educational program in *Politics*' books VII and VIII, the impression left is that his educational program sets high requirements for becoming virtuous, almost impossible to be fulfilled. But before proceeding, a couple of questions needs to be made. Does Aristotle believe that this is the only way to developing all the necessary features to become a virtuous individual? Is it philosophically and exegetically plausible to argue that in *Politics* VII and VIII Aristotle is providing a more elaborated and detailed account of the notion of habituation expounded in *NE* II? On my view, the answer to both questions is definitely negative.

The first thing to be noticed is the nature of the investigation that takes place in the two last books of the *Politics*. As in these books Aristotle is presenting an educational program for the best possible city, the consequence is that we should not overlook the fact that he takes as a starting point for his investigation the optimal conditions that might be granted for the acquisition of virtue. This is a good reason to explain why the account sounds very stringent. If these books aimed to show the unique possible way of becoming virtuous, we would have to admit that Aristotle's virtuous man is no more than a mere ideal. However, I think it is not the case. It is much more reasonable to assume that what Aristotle does in these books is to explore how in the best possible city the legislator could promote an environment as free as possible of evil influences, in which each step of children's education is deliberately thought of with the purpose of promoting virtue. It

fits perfectly into the scheme proposed in books VII and VIII of drafting the best educational program for the best possible city.

But then what are the consequences of this view to the *NE*'s notion of habituation? The obvious aspect to be pointed out is that in its investigation into the notion of habituation the *NE* does not share the goal of *Politics*' books VII and VIII. In the *NE*, Aristotle does not seem to envisage the optimal conditions that might be available for someone to develop and consolidate a virtuous character. Rather, he seems to be concerned with the less demanding goal of investigating what is that which enables virtue of character to come about. And that is habituation. As in the ethical treatise the investigation of this notion does not take place in a scenario in which Aristotle relies on the best possible conditions for being habituated, this is a plausible and good reason to explain why the topic of education in the childhood does not occupy in the *NE* a privileged place in the discussion of habituation, in a clear contrast with what happens in the *Politics*. In the *NE*, the idea of upbringing appears scattered in three passages (*NE* 1103b23-25, 1104b11-13, 1105a1-3) and sounds more like suggestions about the positive influence that an early education of character might have than a requirement for becoming virtuous.

In the light of these considerations, it sounds unreasonable to introduce the model of habituation presented in the *Politics* to bridge the gaps in the *NE*'s account. We should avoid the exegetical temptation of thinking that between the *NE* and the *Politics* there is only a difference of depth of treatment of the same concept. There is a difference in goal that distinguishes the two approaches.

Once understood the methodological differences of treatment of the concept of habituation in the *NE* and the *Politics*, I shall turn my attention to *NE* X.9.

The last chapter of the *NE* starts out by summing up the topics investigated (*NE* 1179a33-35). At the beginning, Aristotle underscores once more that the aim of *NE*'s investigations is oriented towards action, not towards the mere acquisition of knowledge (*NE* 1179a35-b2; see also 1103b26-30 and 1105b2-5). In the sequel, he emphasizes that, when it comes to becoming virtuous, knowing is not enough (*NE* 1179b2-3) and shows himself to be highly sceptical about the power that arguments ($\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\iota$) have to make someone virtuous (*NE* 1179b4-5). This last remark introduces

what might be seen as the main concern of his initial argumentation in *NE* X.9, which goes until the line 1179b31.

In the first part of the chapter, Aristotle casts doubts on the power that arguments and reason have to consolidate a good character. He recognizes that arguments and reason do not influence all the people equally. He distinguishes some groups and makes an effort to discuss how the influence of reason varies in each case. Among the young people, arguments have some force only on those who are generous-minded (*ἐλευθέριος*) and on those who were gently born (*εὐγένειος*), and who are true lovers of the fine (*φιλόκαλος*) (*NE* 1179b7-9). In regard to those who live according to the emotions (*πάθει ζῶντες*), pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, Aristotle sceptically wonders:

T1 what kind of argument, then, would remould such a kind of person?⁵ (*NE* 1179b16)

A few lines later, he insists on the question but with a different formulation:

T2 For the person who lives according to emotion will not listen to argument that tries to turn him away from it, nor again will he comprehend such talk; how will it be possible to persuade someone like this to change? (*NE* 1179b16)

Given the impotence of the arguments to effectively move someone towards virtue, Aristotle argues that education through habits should precede the arguments. Interestingly, he firstly defends this claim without linking it to the education of children or young adults. His formulation is not restrictive and in the sequel he gives no sign of making this restriction. In order for the arguments to be effective, he establishes the following:

T3 The soul of the hearer has to have been prepared beforehand through its habits in order to delight in and loathe the right things, just as one has to prepare soil if it is going to nourish the seed (*NE* 1179b24-26).

T4 [The] person must in a way already possess a character akin to virtue, one that is attracted by the fine and repulsed by the shameful (*NE* 1179b29-31).

⁵ *NE* I.3 makes it clear that following the passions against reason is not a feature that belongs only to young people (1095a6-11).

These formulations are far away from suggesting an association between habituation and upbringing. On the contrary, what the passages show is that Aristotle is more concerned with the less demanding claim that what is required is a previous training of character. There is no interpretative need to take Aristotle as suggesting that the necessary previous training of character before attending the lessons is a good upbringing. Aristotle's formulation does not commit him to this unduly restrictive view.

If my point is granted, a pressing challenge arises. How does my interpretation deal with Aristotle's statements after the line 1179b31? From this line on, Aristotle once again takes up the topic of moral education in the first phases of life and this may be arguably seen as a piece of evidence in favour of the upbringing assumption. Is he not spelling out in this argumentative movement how habituation is to be conceived of and explicitly taking it as upbringing?

He begins the passage by saying that it is hard to be a well-brought-up person without having had the opportunity of having been raised under laws prescribing a correct education of character (*NE* 1179b31-35). One possibility of interpretation is to see the passage as counting in favour of the upbringing assumption. In this case, it plays the role of emphasizing the importance of the law to assure the fulfilment of a necessary requirement for the acquisition of a good character, that is, the necessity of a good education of character very early in life. The passage, however, might be approached in a different way.

It is not implausible that the arguments proposed by Aristotle starting in line 1179b31 are better taken as having the aim of officially demarcating the transition from the *NE* to the *Politics* and, consequently, as introducing Aristotle's views about the best possible education, a topic important to *Politics*' project. All the topics discussed from line 1179b31 on show an undeniable interest in issues that will be investigated in the *Politics*. For instance, Aristotle claims that law should prescribe about the nurture and the occupations (*NE* 1179b34-35) and should cover the whole of life (*NE* 1180a3-4)⁶. He mentions Sparta as one of the few cities that the legislation gave

⁶ In the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the best form of regulating the different aspects of a live in community. He discusses about education in the different phases of life (1336a3-1337a3). He defends the best constitution to live is the one in which the citizens can practice the best actions and have a happy life (1324a23-25, a32-35). He discusses how the roles of ruling and being ruled should be assigned to the citizens and if the age is a factor to be considered (1332b12-1333b3). He expresses a preference for assigning to the older people the task of ruling (1332b35-1333a3, 1333a11-16). He proposes several conditions for marriage and reproduction (1334b29-1335b38). In *Politics* VIII, he launches a long investigation into musical education and gives some attention to the physical education.

some attention to nurture (τροφή) and occupations (ἐπιτήδευμα) and reproaches the fact that most cities neglected these aspects by saying that in them people live as they please, like the Cyclops (*NE* 1180a24-29)⁷. He shows preference for a common education provided by the community over particular education (*NE* 1180a29-32)⁸. He points out that communal provisions for education is effected by law and the good ones by good laws (*NE* 1180a34-35)⁹ and that those who wish to make other better by means of care should become able to legislate (*NE* 1180b23-25)¹⁰. In one of his last remarks, Aristotle proposes an investigation into legislation (*NE* 1181b13), a task that will be carried out in the *Politics* and that will provide a better view about what kind of constitution is the best (*NE* 1181b21).

Given all these remarks, it is arguably reasonable to see part of the final chapter of the *NE* as already embedded in sketchily advancing discussions that will receive more attention in the *Politics*. It provides us with good reasons for not taking by its prima-facie value the discussion of training of character in terms of upbringing in the second part of the chapter. Aristotle is not endorsing the claim that a good upbringing is a necessary requirement for achieving a virtuous character.

It is much more plausible to interpret *NE* X.9's second half by taking Aristotle as already advancing some considerations about the best education. His claims are already committed to the *Politics*' underlying assumption in books VII and VIII that takes the development of a virtuous character in its optimal conditions. Exegetically, a preliminary discussion about the best education in the *NE*'s last chapter is not something that might be regarded as highly unlikely. Philosophically, it has the advantage of not putting on Aristotle's shoulders the burden of defending the claim that in the absence of a good upbringing no one can become a virtuous individual.

⁷ The Sparta's legislation is discussed in the *Politics* on several occasions: *Politics* 1324b5-22, 1327b18-36, 1329b2-35, 1333b12-26, 1337a28-29, 1338b9-14.

⁸ Aristotle proposes the question whether education should be provided privately or by the community (1337a4-5). For him, the education of the citizens must be provided by the community (1337a18-27).

⁹ A good political and legal arrangement is necessary for the city to achieve its aim of promoting a happy life (*Politics* 1331b24-26, 1332a3-7, 1332a28-34).

¹⁰ In the *Politics*, Aristotle highlights on many occasions the role the legislator must play to make the citizens virtuous individuals. For instance, the education of the young people should be one of the primary concerns of the legislator (1337a8-9; see also 1337a30-31). The legislator should be concerned about shameful talk among children and young (1336b3-6). Given the circumstances, the seasoned legislator should look for the best way of making the citizens participate in the happy and good life (1324b41-1325a14). Aristotle discusses what are the expected features that citizens must have in order to be easily led by the legislator (1327b36-38). For him, the aim of the legislator is to grant the conditions for the citizens to become good. The legislator must care about the activities that make the citizens develop a virtuous character (1333a14-15).

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