A History of Habit

From Aristotle to Bourdieu

Edited by Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson
Chapter One

Habituation, Habit, and Character in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics

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The opening words of the second book of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics are as familiar as any in his corpus:

Excellence of character results from habituation [ethos]—which is in fact the source of the name it has acquired [ethikê], the word for “character-trait” [ethos] being a slight variation of that for “habituation” [ethos]. This makes it quite clear that none of the excellences of character [ethikê aretê] comes about in us by nature, for no natural way of being is changed through habituation [ethizeta].

Equally familiar, unfortunately, is the depiction of Aristotle’s notion of character formation as a form of habituation or repetition of actions which results in a “habit.” As a nineteenth-century commentator remarked on the passage above, “a mechanical theory is here given both of the intellect and the moral character.” From a Socratic perspective, such a view of becoming good seems hopelessly rigid and unconnected to the intellectual development which knowledge of the good requires. Habit and habituation in Aristotle seem eminently familiar and eminently non-philosophical.

Such a view would be mistaken on at least three counts. First, the notion of character formation (to use the broadest possible term for the phenomenon of habituation) in Aristotle is significantly more complicated than the notion that through habituation one develops good habits which are what we mean by ethical virtue. Although character formation includes the development of proper emotional responses, such as taking pleasure in what is fine and being repulsed by what is shameful, it is equally concerned with cognitive development independent of the intellectual virtues. Second, although Aristotle’s
terms for “ethics” (éthica), character-trait (éthos), and habituation (ethos, ethosmos, or ethizetai) are linguistically and conceptually interrelated, his notion of “ethical state” (hexis) is both linguistically and conceptually quite distinct from the notion of “habit,” at least as we use that term today. As one Aristotle translator has put it, “A hexis is not only not the same thing as a habit, but is almost exactly its opposite.” For Aristotle, a hexis is a dynamic equilibrium which, although always productive of virtuous actions, is nonetheless the basis for being virtuous in varied circumstances. Third, once Aristotle’s notion of a character state is retrieved from its false association with “habit” and repetitive habituation, one sees both that its apparent divorce from practical reason is more a fixture of Aristotle’s analytical method and that its connotations of inflexibility or fixedness are in fact antithetical to Aristotle’s description of ethical virtue. Rather than view ethical “character” in its Greek etymological sense as an indelibly fixed or engraved mark or stamp (charaktēr) upon one’s soul, Aristotle’s notion of ethical character (éthos) or virtue (aretē) captures the notion of a virtuo who is responsive in an excellent fashion to what reason perceives in particular and changing circumstances.

To support these claims, in my chapter I elucidate three core notions—the nature of character development, an ethical state, and ethical virtue or character—primarily following the expository order of the second book of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (in which chapters II.1–4 examine the origins of ethical virtue, chapter II.5, the notion of an ethical state, and II.6–9, the general and specific nature of ethical virtue). But before exploring the notions of “habituation,” “habit,” and ethical virtue textually, it is necessary to say a word about the use of Greek terms in my chapter. For clarity’s sake, going forward in my text I transliterate the terms ethos (and its cognate adjective éthikê), ethos (and its cognate noun and verbal forms ethosmos/ethizetai) and hexis. Admittedly, transliteration merely postpones conceptual clarification—which is what the three sections of my chapter aim at. But thinking through Aristotle’s notion of character development in terms foreign to his thought seems destined to confuse. The most striking difficulty is that contemporary English uses the term “habit” in two distinct senses whereas Aristotle’s Greek makes use of two different and etymologically unrelated terms for both senses. In English, one may speak about a person’s “habits” (e.g., “punctuality is a good habit”) but also their means of acquisition (e.g., “I learned to swim by habitual practice”). Aristotle, by contrast, uses the term hexis (derived from the verb echein—to have or possess) for the first sense of habit in English, but he uses ethos (and cognates ethizein and ethosmos, all ultimately derived from the verb echein—to be wont or accustomed) for the second sense of habit. Aristotle points to an etymological connection between éthos/éthica (things of character) and ethos (habit or custom), but there is no etymological connection between either of those two terms and hexis (ethical state) like there is between the English terms habit and habituation.

1. Ethos and the Development of Character

Character development for Aristotle transforms what scholars have characterized as our “first nature” (for example, our congenital endowments, immature beliefs, natural virtues or temperaments) into a “second nature,” namely, our mature dispositions, beliefs, and full-blown virtues or vices. Aristotle articulates the point well in a quote from the poet Evenus in his discussion of the possibility of character change. After noting that incontinence (akrasia) comes about both by nature (phusis) and through ethos and that ethos is easier to change than nature, he then blurs the distinction and claims this is why ethos itself is hard to change—because it resembles nature; as Evenus puts it, too:

[Éthos] comes, my friend, by practice year on year—and see:
At last this thing we practice our own nature is. (1152a30–33)

The process Aristotle has in mind has several developmental stages, but he is also clear that it never ceases and statesmen should continue the character development of their citizens throughout adulthood (1180a1–5). To even commence mature ethical reflection—the sort occasioned by a reading of the Nicomachean Ethics—one must first develop an attraction toward what is fine and a repulsion from what is base “just as,” Aristotle puts it, “one has to prepare soil if it is going to nourish the seed.” What is the nature of ethos such that it is able to prepare such a person?

Aristotle regularly presents ethos as a mode of human development in contrast to other forms of human development. For instance, Aristotle considers how well-being (eudaimonia) comes about, and his candidates include learning, fortune, divine dispensation, and “ethos or some other form of training” (askēton) (1099b9–11); elsewhere, he considers how people become good, and his candidates include nature, ethos, and teaching (1179b20–21). Several character states, for example, bestiality or weakness of will, can come about either through ethos or nature (1148b27–31, 1152a27–33). Perhaps most relevant to the understanding of ethos and ethical virtue is Aristotle’s claim that although intellectual virtues come about through learning or teaching, virtues of character come about through ethos rather than through nature (1103a14–18).

The likening of ethos to askēsis (the source of our term “ascetic”) captures the standard notion of “habituation” expressed by Aristotle’s repeated claim that we develop ethical virtue through the repetition of virtuous actions (1103b14–22, 1103b31–32, 1114a7–13). Although askēsis has a decidedly
Certainly there are times when Aristotle’s model looks non-cognitive, especially (insofar as the recipient is younger). By contrast, Aristotle also presupposes as his model a form of concerted cultivation in which individuals develop specific likes and dislikes through the prescriptions and models which parents provide, including verbal descriptions, weighing of costs and benefits, and delayed gratification. Hursthouse imagines the following example concerning training for temperance which is involved with the right attitude to the pleasure of food:

Surely this starts at least far back as saying to toddlers “You don’t want that nasty thing.” Such a remark can hardly be construed as merely “descriptive,” for the howls of frustration that follow the removal of the bit of cat food, or mud, or what have you show that literally the remark is plainly false; the child precisely does want that thing; it appears pleasant to her. But it does not profess to be purely descriptive; it is, accompanied by the act of removing the thing, normative and descriptive. The child is being taught not to want that sort of thing, and also being taught that the nasty and dirty is as such the undesirable and bad. As I will examine in the discussion of the nature of ethical virtue, on a very deep level habituation takes the form of persuasion and exhortation because the ethical part of the soul stands in relationship to reason like a child stands in relation to a parent. Ultimately, Aristotle’s notion of ethos avoids both Socratic intellectualism that views becoming good as a kind of teaching or acquisition of knowledge and a shallow behaviorism that views humans as creatures of simply negative or positive conditioning. Ethos incorporates both cognitive and emotional elements and ultimately develops a specific kind of psychic phenomenon, what Aristotle calls a hexis.

2. HEXIS AND PSYCHIC ETHICAL STATES

Aristotle illuminates the core notion of hexis (hexeis in the plural) in the Ethics with a minor pun. He defines hexis as “that according to which, with respect to emotions, we are having” (echomen) either well or badly” (1105b25–26). The pun plays on the fact that the word hexis derives from the intransitive use of the Greek verb “to have” (echéin) and a hexis is a kind of “having” or possession, albeit one which predisposes one adverbially, as it were. Hexes determine not only how we act, but even what we feel. To determine whether one acts from virtue depends on “how an agent holds himself when he acts” (ho prattón pós echón prattáti) 1105a30 –31. A hexis is simply the reification of such “holding” into a persistent psychic phenomenon. Hexes is Aristotle’s generic term for an entrenched psychic condition or state which develops through experience rather than congenitally. Hexes
include not only the psychic state of ethical virtues and vices, but also those of the intellectual virtues and vices and continence and incontinence. Thus, not only is ethical virtue a hexis proairetikê or “a state disposed to choosing” (1106b36), but art or tekhne is a hexis poïetikê (“a state disposed to producing”) (1140a7–8), and practical wisdom is a hexis praktikê (“a state disposed to acting”) (1140b4–5). Although Aristotle ultimately distinguishes the notion of an ethical hexis from other hexis, throughout the second book of the Ethics he makes use of the parallels between ethical virtue and the arts—since as hexis both have their origins in experience and practice—and the parallels between ethical virtue and medical states such as health—since as hexis both determine how we are disposed toward actions. 22 What is a hexis? Linguistically, the translation of hexis as “habit” arises from the etymological parallel between the Greek term hexis—which is derived from the Greek verb echein, “to have”—and the Latin term habitus—which is derived from the Latin verb for “to have,” namely habeo. Although one often finds in nineteenth-century translations and commentaries the term hexis translated as habit, more contemporary translations favor the terms “state” (as in mental state) and disposition. Aristotle’s doctrine of hexis is one of his most significant and novel doctrines and no English term—whether habit, state, or disposition—will adequately convey its sense of meaning. 23 But habit seems especially problematical insofar as in contemporary English it conveys the notion of a tendency to act in a certain way (e.g., the habit of punctuality). Although one who possesses the hexis of justice always acts justly, it does not follow that he always acts in the same way. As Socrates put it in the Republic, just because the general rule of justice requires returning what one has borrowed, it does not follow that a just person returns a borrowed weapon to a madman (Republic 331b–332a). Although hexis are distinguished from other mental states by their enduring, permanent, or entrenched nature, their permanence is paradoxically dynamic or kinetic rather than static.

Aristotle provides extensive discussion of the general notion of hexis, discussing it in the philosophical lexicon of the Metaphysics (V.20), the account of quality in the Categories (VIII), and the Physics; further, he regularly juxtaposes it with other psychic phenomena or faculties such as activities (energeias), emotions (pathê), dispositions (diathesais), and capacities (dunamais). 24 Several features stand out by means of juxtaposition:

1) Hexis are individuated by spheres of activity: Although a hexis—either in the case of an ethical or intellectual hexis—is not identical with an activity, a specific hexis arises from the repetition of a specific kind of activity. 25 Both the hexis of justice and tekhne, for example, arise from the way one acts within a certain sphere, for instance in the exchanges of goods or the navigation of a ship, and only the hexis of justice-injustice or art/artlessness arise from such activities. 26 In the case of ethical hexis, the sphere of activity includes both a domain of action and specific feelings. For instance, the hexis of courage concerns how we act in the face of death in battle and what feelings of fear or confidence one has toward such death (1115a33–35, 1115b18–21).

2) Individual hexis give rise to specific pleasures: In the same way that ethical hexis arise with respect to a sphere of activities, each sphere of activity gives rise to a specific kind of pleasure the right feeling of which derives from a virtuous ethical hexis; thus, the pleasures and pains which one feels are indicative of one’s hexis. 27 Pleasures supervene on energeiai, but energeiai are specific to hexis. 28 Thus, different pleasures are connected to different hexis, and habituation concerns the development of proper pleasures and pains in different domains of activities.

3) Ethical hexis are unidirectional: Aristotle distinguishes ethical hexis from what the Metaphysics calls “rational capacities” (dunamis meta logos): whereas the latter admit of opposites (for instance, possession of a tekhne like medicine allows one either to heal or diminish health), the former can only produce one kind of action (1129a11–17; cf. Metaphysics IX.2.1046b5–28). Thus, only just actions stem from the virtue of justice and only unjust actions stem from the virtue of injustice. 30 Even in adversity, the virtuous individual will never do unvirtuous actions and always do the most fine actions (1100b34–1101a3).

4) Ethical hexis ground moral responsibility: Since hexis arise from activities, they differ from capacities (dunamais)—such as the ability to see or hear—which according to Aristotle exist by nature (1103a26–1103b2, 1106a6–14). Whereas no one is praised for something possessed congenitally, we are praised and blamed for characteristics the development for which we are responsible (1106a6–10, 1114a25–30). Ethical hexis arise through the repetition of actions and according to Aristotle we are ultimately responsible for those actions. “Only an utterly senseless person can fail to know that hexis concerning specific things arise from activities” (1114a9–10, 1114b21–25). Thus, we can be praised and blamed for our ethical hexis because their development is ultimately up to us. 31

5) Ethical hexis ground the permanence of well-being: A hexis is more entrenched and permanent than either a disposition (such as a bad temper or a moment of elation) or a feeling (such as pity or anger). 32 For example, although liking (philêsis) is a positive feeling or disposition which one may have toward either animate or inanimate objects, friendship (philia) as an enduring part of one’s self—is a hexis, one which persists as long as one participates in the activities of friendship with a friend (1157b28–32, 1171b33–1172a8). 33 Aristotle rejects the claim that one’s well-being is dependent upon fortune or chance because he defines happiness as activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and “of all of human functions, none are more firm (bebaiotês) than those activities in accord with virtue”; the virtues—as
hexeis—are the basis of enduring and stable activities almost impervious to external impediments (110b11–12).

All five marks together indicate why Aristotle claims that virtuous people are praised for their ethical hexeis (110a8–10). The contrast which Aristotle makes between the amoral dunamis of cleverness (deinotés) and the praise-worthy hexis of practical wisdom illustrates how the various threads fit together. In his defense of the unity of the virtues in EN VI.12–13, Aristotle juxtaposes natural virtue with complete virtue and cleverness with practical wisdom. Both natural virtue and cleverness are proto-virtues (the former is a natural propensity to act in a way that appears virtuous and the latter is the capacity to consider means/ends reasoning regardless of the end). But unlike complete virtue, natural virtue can be detrimental to its possessor (114b9–14); unlike practical wisdom, cleverness as a rational dunamis can equally determine the best way to rob a bank and to protect against such robbers. Practical wisdom and complete ethical virtue mutually entail each other, and practical wisdom cannot exist without cleverness (114a2–29), but to become practical wisdom the faculty of cleverness requires a sense of the fine. If the aim which cleverness seeks to promote is fine—something established by the presence of ethical virtue—then cleverness is transformed into the praiseworthy virtue of practical wisdom; if the aim which cleverness seeks to promote is base, then cleverness is simply unscrupulousness (114a26–28). Habitation, by inculcating a love of what is fine through doing fine activities, transforms simultaneously both the amoral dunamis of cleverness into the intellectual hexis of practical reason and the natural virtue—for instance natural courage—into complete courage. One can analytically separate the two forms of inculcation, but they are mutually dependent upon one another.

What Aristotle seems to have in mind is that in the contrast of cleverness and prudence is the paradoxical nature of the “wise villain.” Although Aristotle stands within the Socratic tradition that sees knowledge as invincible and wrongdoing as a kind of ignorance (114b9–19), his account of cleverness makes clear that ignorance is not the same thing as stupidity. The master assassin or master criminal personify cleverness—and thus personify what is “deinotés” or awe-inspiring (in the sense of awe-inspiring) in the capacity of deinotés—in that they can find the means to accomplish through careful planning and execution the most evil of goals. Further, their cleverness is, as it were, value neutral like a rational capacity—it is precisely the same sort of faculty of ends/means reasoning which the virtuous person possesses, except that they choose to use it for bad rather than fine ends. Although the virtuous person possesses such ends/means cleverness, precisely because practical wisdom is a hexis can it not be used in a value-neutral fashion. The sense of fineness which the person of practical wisdom possesses can only come about through the process of moral habitation and the simply clever person is ignorant in the sense that he or she has no sense of what is fine.

Although the five marks I have identified distinguish hexeis from other states of soul, they do not explicitly add my claim that hexis ought best be understood as a dynamic rather than a static disposition of soul. A central text which has led readers to think of hexis as a static state is Ethics II.4, wherein Aristotle distinguishes ethical virtue from art (techne). As noted above, Aristotle claims that both intellectual and character virtues are hexeis and often Aristotle makes use of their similarities—especially with respect to their acquisition—to explain the nature of ethical virtue through analogies to the arts. Although as hexeis both art and virtue arise through the practice of activities, Aristotle claims that whereas artistic or technical productions are judged on the basis of the object produced, ethically virtuous actions are judged on the basis of how one who does them “holds” himself (ho prattón pós echón prattěi, 110a30–31). More specifically, for an action to be judged as virtuous or done in accord with virtue, it must possess three characteristics: the agent doing the act does so (1) knowingly (eidos), (2) choosing the act for its own sake, and (3) if he does so in a “firm and unchangeable” way (bebaiós kai ametakinétos echón 110a30–33). Although all three criteria have generated considerable scholarly literature, I would like to focus upon the third claim and probe its relationship to the notion of ethical virtue as a hexis.

Aristotle’s third criterion generates a dilemma. On the one hand, the phrase “bebaiós kai ametakinétos” conveys a sense of fixedness or permanence. The first adverb, bebaiós, derives from the perfect tense of the Greek verb “to stand” (beainō), and means something like “steadfast” (for example, like a virtue friendship rather than an association based on convenience) or stable (like the law of non-contradiction or the foundational principles of demonstration). The second adverb, ametakinétos, is rather rare in Aristotle’s writings (it is used only once in the ethical corpus), and etymologically it is close to a transliteration of “unchangeable” or “inmovable” (akinéttos), but the insertion of the prefix “meta” gives the sense of “moved away from.” Given that Aristotle has described virtue as a hexis that results from a repetition of actions and that the virtuous person will always act in a virtuous way, the third criterion has been taken by some commentators to convey that acting from virtue implies an element of fixedness.

On the other hand, throughout the Ethics Aristotle emphasizes that virtue provides what Broadie calls an “unconditional preparedness to act,” namely, an ability to act in a way which is responsive to the particular circumstances involved in any particular action. Although Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean entails that the virtuous person hits the mean between excess and deficiency with respect to actions and feelings, specifying that mean is always context dependent. He notes that
it is possible to feel fear and boldness and desire and anger and pity and in
general pleasure and distress to a greater or lesser extent, and to go wrong in
either direction; but to feel such things when one should about the things one
should, and in relation to the people one should, and for the sake of things one
should, and as one should, is the mean and the best, which belongs to virtue.
(1106b16-23)42

A person responsive to so many circumstances does not act virtuously by
mechanically reproducing the same action in different circumstances based on
a fixed rule. The person who does the same thing in every case falls under
the description of what Aristotle entitles (with opprobrium) “stubbornness”
(iskhugrovnomos), namely those unwilling to listen to persuasion and un-
willing to change their beliefs or behavior, even standing fast against reason
(1151b5-17).

By contrast, the hexeis of the virtuous person are characterized by their
ability to move and change as circumstances dictate. Aristotle suggests a
compelling analogy for such a person in his account of the virtue of eutrepesi,
which is usually translated as “witfulness” but which literally means “turn-
ning readily from one direction to another.”43 The virtue of witfulness consists
in the mean between the buffoon, who seeks to make a joke in every situa-
tion, and the boor, who finds nothing funny. It almost goes without saying
that such a person is a master at finding something funny in every situation—
much like an improvisational comedian—but as important is the person’s tact
or discretion (what Aristotle calls epidexitetos) in sensing when the joke he
has arrived at is worth stating. Aristotle explains further:

Those who are playful in a fitting way are called witty (eutrepeis)—or sup-
ple-witted (eutrepiot), as it were; for supple moves like these are thought to be
ones that belong to character (ethos), and just as we judge bodies by their
movements (kinseis), so too do we judge people’s characters (ethet).
(1128a9-12)

Character is judged by the way one’s hexeis allow one to move and respond
to particular circumstances. Although hexeis are not fleeting or transitory like
a mood or a feeling, their permanence does not imply an immovability or inflexibility. Although the hexis of justice only produces a just action, what
that just action consists in will depend entirely on the circumstances of the
action, and a hexis needs to be sufficiently supple to allow for that range of
receptivity or preparedness.

3. ETHOS AND ETHICAL TRAITS

Having surveyed the senses in which Aristotle uses ethos and hexis—the two
terms sometimes translated as “habit”—we are now in a position to consider
their relationship to ethos and more generally the nature of ethike arete.
Aristotle claims that ethos arises from ethos, and ethike arete is a hexis
proairetikos (1103a17-18, 1106b36). These two claims mean that, first, re-
peated experience with different situations within a specific sphere of activity
produces an enduring trait and, second, that such a trait makes one responsi-
vive to the variability of action and prepared to act virtuously across a broad
range of particular circumstances.44 To that extent, ethos is the sum of one’s
character traits and hexis is an enduring but flexible state or disposition of
soul that predisposes its possessor to act and feel a certain way in specific
contexts. What remains to be explained is first what it means to call this sort
of virtue ethike or “ethical,” and second, how ethical virtue in general relates
to the notion of the virtuous person. The first goal requires discussion of
Aristotle’s soul division but the second may help to explain why Aristotle’s
notion of “ethical virtue” is sometimes misleadingly depicted as a habit de-
riving from habituation.

Although the title of Aristotle’s Ethics derives from the adjectival form of
the word ethos, the adjective ethike is used almost exclusively to modify the
term arete and usually in distinction to dianoetike arete, or “intellectual
virtue”; never in Aristotle’s writings does he use the term as a plural substi-
tutive adjective corresponding to our word “ethics.”45 To that extent, the title
of Aristotle’s “Ethics” is too narrow: ta ethikes means literally “the things
concerning ethical character traits” without leaving room for the intellectual
character traits that come to the fore in the sixth book of the Ethics (and
which are elevated as the highest forms of virtue in the last book of the
Ethics). The ethical virtues are perfection of the “character-bearing” (to use
Rowe’s translation) part of the soul, namely that part which although strictly
speaking is non-rational, is nonetheless capable of “listening” to reason or
being receptive to the guidance which the intellectual virtue of phronesis
provides.46 The “character-bearing” part of the soul is the source of human
desires and motivations—both pleasures and aversions—and as we have
seen, an ethical hexis is one which allows its possessor to feel or experience
such pains and pleasures in a fashion consistent with the mean.

Focus upon Aristotle’s account of the “character-bearing” part of the
soul—which takes up the first half of the Ethics—can mistakenly influence
how we understand the relationship between ethical virtue and the virtuous
person—or the very notion of Aristotelian ethics in general. Although
methodologically, Aristotle separates ethical virtue from intellectual virtue
and examines them in two different parts of the Nicomachean Ethics (ethical
virtue in books II-V and intellectual virtue in VI), both of those analyses
operate in a kind of abstraction foreign to the nature of the virtuous person.
As Broadie puts it, although Aristotle divides virtue into two kinds, “this
division is misleading if it gives the impression that the two can occur
apart—an impression unfortunately aggravated by the fact that Aristotle
deals with them in separate parts of the Ethics."\textsuperscript{47} Aristotle’s doctrine of the unity of virtue claims that it is impossible to possess ethical virtue—at least in the fullest sense of the term—without also possessing the intellectual virtue of \textit{phronēsis} \textsuperscript{(1144a29–31, 1144b13–17)}. Although there are approximations of full ethical and intellectual virtue which can exist in isolation of each other, namely natural virtue or cleverness (which we examined above), there is no such thing as a fully ethically virtuous person who in any way lacks the intellectual virtue of \textit{phronēsis}.

Thus, when Aristotle examines the courageous person or the temperate person, analytically his focus is upon that aspect of the person’s virtue which perfects the appetitive or “character-bearing” part of the soul. Most familiar are the claims that such courage is the result of a non-cognitive habituation process, like an army private being screeched at by a drill sergeant. But the notion that that person’s courage could exist in the absence of intellectual virtue is simply false and the belief that such courage could be developed in isolation from intellectual engagement is seriously misleading. At the least, the truly courageous person possesses practical reason; but since courage perfects a non-rational part of the soul capable of responding to reason, the “character-bearing” part of the soul itself, independent of the rational part, must have a cognitive component. The notion that Aristotle’s “ethical” teachings consist of a doctrine about the acquisition of ethical habits through ethical habituation is not even half of the story; omitting that those ethical “habits” themselves possess a cognitive receptivity to the rational part of the soul and implicate the existence of the intellectual habit of \textit{phronēsis} makes that half of the story a fable.

NOTES

1. Rowe trans., slightly adapted (Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002]). Aristotle’s etymology most likely derives from Plato’s Laws, VII: 792e. My analysis is based on Bywater’s Greek text (Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachia [Oxford: Clarendon, 1894]). Although translations in this chapter are my own, they are informed by the translations of Rowe, Taylor, and Irwin.


3. For instance, in the myth of E in the Republīc, Socrates claims that one who becomes good “through habit without philosophy” (\textit{ethēi anēv philosopīφhē}) is destined to fail (\textit{Rep}. X.618cd).


5. Aristotle uses the Greek term \textit{charaktēr} only in the sense of “impression” or “stump” (e.g., \textit{Pol}. I.9.1257a40–41, \textit{Gen Anm} V.2.781a28; cf. \textit{Rep} II. 1347a10, 1349b31), although his student Theophrastus composed a work entitled \textit{Characteres} which captures our sense of character as a certain way of life (for instance, the bête, the shepherd, the cheat). By contrast, one finds in Epictetus’s \textit{Encheiridion} both the Greek term \textit{charaktēr} and its notion as a fixed and unchanging state exemplified by a stubborn and unyielding Socrates. See, for instance, \textit{Encheiridion}, 33.


7. As several commentators point out, Aristotle’s procedure in the second book of the Ethics violates the Socratic claim made in the \textit{Meno} (\textit{Ch} II) that one must know what something is (e.g., arrive at its definition) prior to determining its characteristics (e.g., how it is acquired). See, for instance, M. Pakulski, Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95. If so, it would hardly be the only Aristotelian quibble with the Socratics in the \textit{Meno: Politics} 1.13 (1260a24–26) rejects the Socratic claim from the \textit{Meno} that virtue is the same for men, women, and slaves.


11. \textit{Ethos} is cognate with \textit{ethnēs} (usually indicating the process of \textit{ethos}), the verbal adjective \textit{ethētikē}, and the verb \textit{ethētēnai}. A survey of Aristotle’s use of these four terms in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} shows no differences in meaning, thus throughout this section I will refer to \textit{ethos} including passages that make reference to other cognates of the term.

12. Although Aristotle acknowledges a form of “natural virtue”—certain congenial endowments which render virtue relatively easy and make virtuous actions and can even be detrimental to their possessors (1144b3–9, 1144b9–5).

13. W. F. R. Hardie, Aristotle’s Ethical Theory, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 99–100; see further \textit{EN} 1101b12, 1101a10–11. Note that Aristotle also claims that the intellectual virtues of \textit{phronēsis}, \textit{boulētērēsis}, and \textit{sophia} come about by nature, although \textit{ethos} and \textit{phronētēsis} do not (1143b6–9, 1143b11–21).

17. For further discussion of this passage, see P. J. Bartok, "Aristotle on Habituation and the Development of Moral Virtue" (lecture delivered at St. John's College (Santa Fe), March 30, 2003, 11-12).
18. I take the term "concerted cultivation" from Annette Lareau's Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Although Lareau does not ascribe the term to Aristotle, she describes it within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, a concept derived from Aristotle's notion of hexis. Curzer contests that Aristotle endorses such a model on the basis that there is no textual evidence for such a combination of instruction and habituation, and a fair amount of evidence against it (Curzer, Aristotle and the Virtues, 2003).
20. Commentators generally note that identifying virtue as an ethical hexis responds to the classical Socratic dilemma of how to guarantee that the virtue of the virtuous person can be regarded as being virtuous - to be used in practice, the virtues must be such that we are individually responsible for our character states. Generations much more extensively, see B. D. Reisman, "Aristotle on Responsibility for One's Character," in Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle, ed. M. Kakko and G. Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 285-318.
21. See 1105a28-1110a6. Although Categories VIII clearly distinguishes hexis and diathesa Aristotle will often use them synonymously in the Ethics. See, for instance, 1105b16, 350, 1106a24.
22. For similar reasons, Aristotle denies that shame (tautos) is a virtue because it is a reaction to circumstances rather than the psychic state according to which those reactions take place (1128b10-14).
24. For further discussion, see T. Angles, Téâtêon àrístôtèlê: Crafting the Moral Life (New York: Continuum, 2011), chapter 5.
27. The most common usage of behvaiour in EV is found in Aristotle's description of permanent friendships (see, e.g., 1159b8, 1162a15; cf. EE 1235b9; 1230a31, 1230b35). For the claim that the lack of non-contradiction is "the most stable" of principles, see Meta IV.7:1011b13; cf. Meta IV:1055b11, 1055a16-17.
28. Sachs suggests that the term means "in a condition from which one can be moved to act in a more favorable way into a different condition" ("Three Little Words," 4). In his translation of the Ethics, Sachs renders the phrase "being in a stable condition and not able to be moved off the way out of it"; in a note he writes, "The last eleven words of the sentence translate A's marvelous adverb aeres kai to miros; aeres kai to miros would mean in the manner of someone immovable or rigid, but the added prefix makes it convey the condition of those toys that can be knocked over but always come back upright on their own, a flexible stability or equilibrium" (Sachs, Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics, 26). Another instance of the term is found in Physics IV.4, where place is
said to be immovable with respect to something else—for instance, in the sense that one can say that with respect to a river’s current, a boat is “immovable” (if it is not under power), but nonetheless the boat is still moving (212a12).

40. See, for instance, Burnet, Ethics of Aristotle, 87, and Grant, Ethics of Aristotle, vol. 1, 486, 495. By contrast, Taylor takes the third criterion to mean that acting from virtue implies that one’s character state cannot be lost (Taylor, Nicomachean Ethics Books II–IV, 93). At 1152a30, Aristotle claims that ethos is easier to alter ( metametaboló) than nature, which appears to support Taylor’s claim that ametaboló marks out that character change is what Aristotle rules out with his criterion. See further G. Lawrence, “Acquiring Character: Becoming Grown Up,” in Moral Psychology and Human Action, eds. M. Paskale and G. Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 271.

41. Brodie, Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics, “Philosophical Introduction” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19. In Ethics with Aristotle, she explores the concept as follows: “every such response at the same time carries the claim that under no reasonable circumstances would one voluntarily act otherwise than as the one who in this particular case responds like this. The claim does not assume knowledge of how one would act in other circumstances, but it does assume that a response different from the present one would be different for a reason” (90).

42. Aristotle’s claim that action is context dependent is repeated at 1104b25–26, 1109a24–30.

43. Taylor, Nicomachean Ethics Books II–IV, 234. For further discussion of the virtue of wit which shows that its domain is far more than simply telling jokes, see C. Collins, Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147–65.

The exception to this claim is Aristotle’s account of “natural” character ( ethos) which he attributes to different geographical or racial groups in Politics VII.7. See further M. Lessig, “Aristotle on Natural Character and Its Implications for Moral Development,” Journal for the History of Philosophy 50 (2012): 507–30.

45. See 1103a4–7, 1103a14–15, 1139a4–5, 1139b13–14, 1139a1–4, 1144b32, 1152a5, 1178a16–17. The only exception to the claim that Aristotle uses the adjective ethos in opposition to intellectual virtue is the juxtaposition of ethos and nomos in (legal) friendship in EV VII.12.


47. Brodie, Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics, “Philosophical Introduction,” 17. Sarabji puts the point well: “Someone who reads in isolation WE 2.1 could be forgiven for concluding that Aristotle thinks habitation sufficient to make men virtuous. It is tempting to combine this with the further assumption that habitation is itself an unthinking process” (Sarabji, “Role of Intellect,” 214).

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Chapter Two

The Roman Stoics on Habit

William O. Stephens

The ancient Stoics believed that the cultivation of proper habits is indispensable for making progress toward virtue. They maintained that the goal of life is to live in agreement with nature. For human beings, they insisted, this entails living in agreement with reason. The perfection of reason they understood to be virtue. Consequently, according to Stoic theory, rehearsing rational judgments about what is good, what is bad, and what is neither good nor bad, and consistently applying these judgments in our daily circumstances to decide what to do and how to live, enables us to become virtuous and thereby live happily. But these rational judgments and the appropriate actions that flow from them require vigilant practice and discipline to maintain in the face of life's challenges, which non-Stoics mistakenly believe are debilitating hardships. Such so-called hardships are conceived by Stoics as opportunities to exercise one's virtue(s) by applying the proper judgments to each event that occurs and making the correct decisions in each situation of public and private life. Consequently, the virtues result from disciplining oneself consistently to make sound judgments about (a) the actions performed by accountable human agents, (b) the behaviors of children and non-human animals, (c) events uncaused by human beings, and (d) one's personal and professional roles and social relationships. This consistency is manifested in habitually acting in accord with those judgments. For virtually everyone, achieving this takes a lifetime of training, or longer. The Stoics called this rigorous, deliberate, and painstaking training askēsis in Greek and meditatio in Latin. They compared it to the grueling program of exercises adopted by athletes preparing to compete in the Olympic Games, medical treatment of disease, and the boot camp drills and active duty service of soldiers. In this chapter I will outline the views on habit of three of the four...