Aristotelian virtue, habituation, and self-cultivation

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Introduction

Given its focus on the notion of human flourishing, both Aristotle's ethics and contemporary work in the virtue-ethical tradition, may seem like obvious choices for the investigation of self-cultivation. However, as is explained in the introduction, one of the starting points of this volume is to show that the concept of self-cultivation need not inherently be tied to the virtue-theoretical tradition in ethics, and that other philosophical perspectives have valuable contributions to offer with regard to this topic. Several reasons for looking beyond virtue ethics are provided in this volume. First of all, there is the worry, elaborated in the introduction, that contemporary virtue ethics, positioning itself as a (rival form of) moral theory, has largely framed self-cultivation in terms of the development of moral virtues. As a result of this, virtue ethics seems to have difficulty to think about non-moral forms or aspects of self-cultivation, such as the striving for happiness and mental balance. Secondly, Slote (2016) argues that the emphasis in virtue ethics (in particular the Aristotelian version) on the role of habituation and repetition "seems [...] to be more a matter of power assertion than of any other motivating factor", suggesting that such an approach is not so much an account of *self*-cultivation, but of cultivation by one's social environment. Related to this, Slote also points out that by focusing on the importance of following exemplars, Aristotelianism cannot do justice to the supposed importance of capacities such as rational insight and empathic concern for development. Finally, the focus on alternative traditions of self-cultivation in this

volume is further motivated by the worry that Aristotelian virtue ethics largely analyzes the development of virtue as the formation of habits by others in early life, making it hard to see how self-cultivation could be understood as a lifelong process of personal development.

In this chapter, we will attempt to address these worries, and argue that one does not need to understand the Aristotelian virtue-ethical tradition along the above lines. By outlining a plausible alternative interpretation, we aim to show what room there is for self-cultivation inside an Aristotelian perspective. The chapter is structured as follows: first we will clarify how Aristotelian virtue ethics as an ethical theory can account for forms of personal development that are traditionally seen as non-moral. Subsequently, we will elaborate on the Aristotelian notion of habituation, and propose that it can plausibly be understood as a form of learning that is truly a form of cultivation not only *of*, but also *by* the self. As a third step, we address the role of choice and deliberation in Aristotelian self-cultivation, and argue that this undermines the thought that self-cultivation should be seen as a form of development primarily taking place during childhood.

1. Self-cultivation and moral development in virtue theory

The first challenge for an Aristotelian or virtue-theoretical understanding of self-cultivation is the idea to which we alluded in the introduction: cultivating oneself is an activity in which one aims to make oneself better, not just morally speaking, but as it were 'on the whole'. And moreover, the idea is that the question how one becomes a good or happy person in this broad sense is the proper subject of ethics[1]. It is the appeal of this thought that seems to be part of the motivation behind the turn toward conceptions of self-cultivation or the 'art of life' in, e.g., the philosophies of Nietzsche,

[1] Or if one prefers to reserve the name 'ethics' for the study of morality in the restricted sense, then idea is that practical philosophy is broader than ethics.

Foucault, and the Stoics, to which this volume contributes. The volume departs from the premise that a reexamination of these authors is necessary, in part, precisely because the current discourse on ethical development and self-cultivation is so heavily inspired by (Aristotelian) virtue ethics, which they claim has a too narrow focus on moral questions. And indeed, if one takes a look at the role played by virtue theory in the contemporary philosophical and psychological literature, this seems to suggest that the notion of virtue should be understood in moral terms, and that the development of virtue should be understood as *moral* development. For example, in contemporary normative ethics virtue theory has positioned itself as the 'third approach', next to Kantianism and utilitarianism, and thus as a theory that aims to provide answers to moral questions (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2003). In the process of legitimizing virtue ethics as such a third approach, many of its proponents have attempted to develop an alternative, virtue-ethical criterion for morally right action. For example, Zagzebski (2004) and Hursthouse (1999) both argue that virtue ethics can provide a criterion of rightness derivative of the notion of a fully good or virtuous agent: roughly, an action is right if and only if it is such as a virtuously motivated agent would perform.[2] These attempts to show that virtue ethics can supply a theory of right action are understandable, as they can be seen as reactions to strong challenges by critics who claim that virtue ethics is insufficiently action-guiding. However, as we will argue below, it is questionable whether they are compatible with the theoretical basis of the revival of Aristotelian ethics in the 20th century.[3]

[2] Alternatively, Christine Swanton (2001) has argued in favor of a 'target based' account of right action: roughly, an action is right if and only if it is the best (e.g. most generous) action possible.

[3] For a similar criticism of the attempt to develop a virtue-ethical theory of morally right action, and an alternative way of defending virtue ethics against the objection that it is insufficiently action-guiding, see Hacker-Wright (2010). Annas (2011, pp. 41-51) also

It is also true that developmental-psychological studies working within the virtue-theoretical tradition often focus on the development of traditional moral characteristics such as empathy (Slote, 2016), benevolence (Carlo & Davis, 2016) and traditional moral emotions such as guilt and shame (Herdt, 2016). In this sense, it is certainly true that the virtue-theoretical approach to development often focuses on those features and characteristics that have traditionally been connected to morality.

However, if one takes a closer look at the theoretical basis of contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics, we will now argue, the picture becomes less one-sided. Although it is true that there are significant differences between the virtue-ethical perspective and the conception of self-cultivation developed in other chapters in this volume, we argue that these do not lie in virtue ethics' supposed exclusive focus on morality in the narrow sense. As we will show, virtue ethics *is* compatible with the idea that ethics, and ethical development, concern the question what to do, or what kind of person to be, in the broadest possible sense. Rather, we argue that the true source of disagreement between the approaches lies in the fact that virtue ethics does not (indeed, cannot) conceive of self-cultivation as a process of self-invention independent of norms that are in some sense shared.

The revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics in the twentieth century was set in motion by Elizabeth Anscombe's seminal paper *Modern moral philosophy* (Anscombe, 1958). One of the main messages of this essay was that the core ethical question is not *what one morally ought to do*, but instead the question what *one ought* (simply) *to do*.[4] Indeed, Anscombe argues that the notion of a 'moral ought' is no longer meaningful in the contemporary context. The division between *moral* and non-moral oughts (or reasons), Anscombe insists, ultimately

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argues that an Aristotelian approach to ethics should resist the urge to mold itself into a theory of morally right action.

[4] As Anscombe (1958, p. 1) announces, one of the objectives of the paper is to argue that "the concepts of obligation, and duty— *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say— and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of 'ought,' ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible".

makes sense only against the background of a (now outdated) divine command theory, on which the distinguishing feature of 'moral' oughts is the fact that they are ordained by divine law. Without such a background, the distinction between acts that are good or bad, and those that are *morally* good or bad, is empty.

As an alternative, Anscombe proposes to reinstate the Aristotelian notion of human flourishing as the central ethical concept, one that can serve to give content to the notion of goodness of human life and action in its broadest sense. The virtues, she suggests, should be seen as essential components of a good human life. Making the concepts of virtue and vice central allows us to sidestep the idea of moral rightness or wrongness, which Anscombe argues often confuses ethical theorizing:[5]

> It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong', one always named a genus [of vices] such as 'untruthful,' 'unchaste,' 'unjust.' We should no longer ask whether doing something was 'wrong,' passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once. (Anscombe 1958, p. 8-9)

The spirit of Anscombe's seminal intervention in the debate was therefore not that we should abandon traditional accounts of moral rightness in favor of a virtue-based criterion of moral rightness. In so far as we regard Anscombe's account as the fundament of the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, virtue should not be seen as a specifically *moral* notion. Indeed, as Anscombe points out, the distinction between moral and non-moral oughts, reasons, or

[5] One such confusion, Anscombe argues, is that it leads to the mistaken idea that it is a serious question whether something that is, e.g., unjust (say, murder) can nevertheless be 'morally right'. Once we note that an action is a case of murder, and is hence unjust, Anscombe argues, there is simply no more question whether the action is nevertheless to be performed.

considerations, is one that would have been incomprehensible to Aristotle himself.[6] Considerations belonging to all the different virtues are, in a sense, on a par: none of the virtues trumps the others. Of course, reasons of justice sometimes render certain actions to which an agent may be otherwise attracted out of the question. But this equally goes the other way: as Foot (2001, p. 79) explains, an agent who is feverishly ill, but nevertheless sets out through heavy weather to fulfill an unimportant promise (such as returning a book) does not thereby display the virtue of justice, but is simply foolish. Considerations having to do with the good or rights of others are not *automatically* overriding, in the sense in which 'moral' reasons are supposed to be.

On this picture, then, the *development* of virtue is also substantially broader than the development of moral capacities. Precisely because the virtue ethical approach denies the existence of a specifically moral domain of goodness, it has ample theoretical room for forms of self-cultivation that are not primarily about 'what we owe to each other', but for example about how to realize our own personal potential. An example can be found in Wolf (1982), who argues that flourishing requires more than developing traditionally 'moral' virtues, and that we actually do not consider becoming a 'moral saint' to be the end towards we strive in developing ourselves: "there seems to be a limit to how much morality we can stand" (p. 423). However, there are certain aspects of Wolf's point that raise questions. First of all, she makes use of the distinction between moral and non-moral values that Anscombe explicitly rejected in *Modern moral philosophy*. This shows that even though a broadening of the ethical domain seems to characterize at least some of contemporary virtue ethics, this does not mean that virtue theorists no longer make use of the notion of morality as a subdomain of norms.

[6] What we today are inclined to call moral oughts most often overlap with considerations connected to the virtue of justice, but the two concepts are clearly not co-extensional: some (but arguably not all) acts traditionally connected to the virtue of charity, for example, would often also be considered as *morally* required. Compare Anscombe (1958, p. 1-2) and Foot (2001, pp. 79-80).

Secondly, Wolf introduces the 'perspective of individual perfection' as a perspective that (at least sometimes) competes with the moral perspective, and subsequently asks the question how these different perspectives relate to one another, and whether there can be said to be an overarching viewpoint from where we could decide which perspective should be guiding in a specific situation. Wolf argues that such a viewpoint cannot have the form of a moral or a meta-moral theory, because any such theory would remain open to the question how it relates to non-moral perspectives (Wolf 1982, p. 439). This raises the question how one could think about such an overarching perspective, and whether it could form a basis for a broader virtue-theoretical notion of self-cultivation that involves more than cultivating those norms that are traditionally seen as moral.

One line of thinking that might provide such an account is what is now sometimes referred to as *ethical naturalism*: the thought that a good human being is a human being that instantiates the life form of its species (Foot, 2001; M. Thompson, 2008). This view thus offers a 'metaphysical basis' for attributions of goodness, and also suggests how self-cultivation, broadly conceived, should be understood: a human realizing itself *as* a human being.[7] One important feature of this view is that development cannot move in arbitrary directions: in principle there are facts of the matter regarding what is good for an individual human being, even if these facts are highly contextual, and even if (as Foot argues) there can be a large plurality of ways of living that realize the human good. According to most neo-Aristotelians, answers to the question how to live do have a truth value (Foot, 2003; McDowell, 1979; Murdoch, 1962; Wolf, 2007). Specifically, according to the Aristotelian naturalism proposed by Foot and Thompson (and inspired by

[7] Crucially, the ethical naturalist connects this normative understanding of human nature to a more general understanding of the concept of *life* in general, on which the concept of a lifeform is characterized as an interrelated set of *natural norms*, or 'Aristotelian categoricals', which together describe the typical life of the species. Individuals falling under a lifeform-concepts are *good* to the extent that they exemplify these natural norms. Compare Foot 2001; M. Thompson 2008.

Anscombe), the answers to such questions are determined by the 'natural norms' governing the life form *human being*, which constitute standards for human development.

On the neo-Aristotelian view, in cultivating themselves, human beings manifest their knowledge of the good (at least if they cultivate themselves correctly). But, importantly enough, this knowledge cannot be expressed in terms of a system of rules. This point is emphasized by McDowell (1979), who discusses the question what it can mean to understand virtue as knowledge of the good. The appeal to general rules is argued to be nothing but "a consoling myth" (p. 61): virtue is inherently *non-codifiable*. According to McDowell, we manifest our knowledge of the good *by* manifesting our form of life. Manifesting our form of life is here intended to refer not exclusively to performing good actions, but also to the development of, e.g., a sound sense of what the salient features of a particular situation are—a development which is thus not exclusively 'moral' in the restricted sense. McDowell quotes Stanley Cavell who describes this broad notion of manifesting a form of life as "our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation - all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life" (Cavell in McDowell 1979, p. 60). In manifesting our form of life and in interacting with others sharing this form of life, we develop ourselves and realize ourselves as exemplars of the kind 'human being'.

Although McDowell is clear that having knowledge of the good does not entail being able to represent a system of rules, nor the adoption of a distanced perspective, he is not very concrete regarding the question what having such knowledge *does* entail. One more specific suggestion that fits within this line of thinking in virtue theory has been

developed by Iris Murdoch, who argues that the knowledge at stake should be analyzed as a form of seeing:[8]

> …it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge: not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline. (Murdoch 1962, p. 430)

Murdoch also builds on the idea that there is truth to be found regarding the question what is good to do, and what is good for a human being. For her, development as a human being involves learning to *see things as they are*. She elaborates on the importance of attention to what is there, and this bears interesting similarities to the notion of *attention* that is found in the Stoic way of thinking about self-cultivation (see Sellars, this volume). For the Stoics, the aim of training this kind of attention was to get rid of bad habits, even though they did not believe that one should form 'good habits' instead. This suggests that certain classic aspects of the Stoic way of thinking about self-cultivation can actually also be found within the neo-Aristotelian virtue-theoretical tradition. Just as the Stoics, Aristotelian virtue theorists conceived of development as a broad form of self-realization, which covers much more than developing the

[8] McDowell (1978) also elaborates on the importance of coming to *see* a situation in a certain light, e.g., in the light of the fact that 'she is shy and sensitive', which provides the virtuous agent with a reason to treat her kindly. McDowell (1998, p. 30) thus speaks of virtue or knowledge of the good as a 'perceptual capacity that determines which feature of the situation should engage a standing concern'. On the relation between virtue and 'seeing as', also see, e.g., Goldie (2007).

traditionally 'moral' values, and which requires the person to learn to see the truth and pay attention to what is there.

However, the twentieth-century interpretation of the Stoic ideal of self-cultivation by Michel Foucault seems to point in a different direction, which truly seems to differ from the Aristotelian perspective. According to Foucault, the aim of self-cultivation is to acquire mastery of oneself, and thus to achieve tranquility of spirit, body and soul (see Sellars, this volume). This suggests that there might be certain aspects of this way of thinking about self-cultivation that cannot be covered by the virtue-theoretical paradigm. For what Foucault seems to be after is a conception of self-cultivation as a means to making *oneself* happy, where happiness is understood in a non-Aristotelian eudaimonistic sense, e.g.., as being tranquil, and thus not necessarily as leading a life of virtue. This also comes out in the later Foucault's statement, mentioned by Sellars (this volume, p. XXXX), that self-cultivation, or the practice of self-mastery, "could contribute to developing the subject as a site of resistance against external forces and so become a 'practice of freedom'." This seems to entail a highly individualistic perspective, in which the self is pitted against 'external forces'. A similar individualistic view of self-cultivation is expressed in the introduction to this volume, where virtue ethicists are criticized for "an overly strong focus […] on conditions for rightness of action, which has overshadowed insights into conceptions of, and techniques that enable, a human life that is *best for the one living it* [emphasis ours]." As we have shown, such a perspective is alien to the tradition of neo-Aristotelian ethics inspired by Anscombe, according which self-regarding and other-regarding reasons are logically speaking on a par—and according to which, therefore, there is no such thing as self-cultivation in the individualistic sense *as opposed* to the development of one's 'moral' character. To illustrate what may be the subject of ethical self-development in such a

broad sense, consider again Foot's rejection of the distinction between traditionally moral and non-moral considerations. In this context, she argues:

> …it seems important to recognize as virtues of the will (as volitional excellences) a readiness to accept good things for oneself, and to see the great importance for life of the self-regarding aspect of virtues such as hope and a readiness to accept good things. And on the negative side, we might want to use the description 'moral fault' in thinking of the kind of timidity, conventionality, and wilful self-abnegation that may spoil no one's life but one's own. (Foot 2003, p. 79)

Foot thus points out that there are many areas in life in which seeing what is salient in a particular situation means being ready to accept and pursue happiness for oneself, and that it sometimes takes effort and self-development to accomplish this. A life well-led is not one in which all thought of one's personal happiness is relinquished in the pursuit of, say, justice or charity.[9]

So although Aristotelianism can certainly understand self-cultivation as cultivation of features that are not necessarily or specifically moral, it does seem to be incompatible with an understanding of self-cultivation as development that can be essentially individual or idiosyncratic, in the sense of not being guided by norms ultimately grounded in the lifeform. Now, the proponent of self-cultivation in the former sense might object: how can general norms grounded in human nature (that one should be just, charitable, courageous, etc.) guide one in the sort of highly individual decision

[9] Another example of the way in which ethical self-development, on the Aristotelian view, is broader than tradtionally moral development can, of course, be found in Aristotle's own treatment of the importance and value of friendship for a happy and virtuous life, in book VIII-IX of the *Ethics*.

making that one must sometimes engage in to determine what kind of life one wants to lead—the question whether to pursue a career in business or in the arts, say? To the extent that the Aristotelian's natural norms apply to *all* human agents, do they not leave open what is the best way for *me* to lead my life? But the Aristotelian need not disagree with this: surely, the question, e.g., what career a certain individual should pursue is *not* determined in advance by human nature (as it *is* determined how, say, a particular ant should behave, based on whether it is a worker or a soldier). The answer to such a question depends, crucially, on one's individual talents and preferences, and even then there may be more than one good choice. The vital point for the Aristotelian, however, is that such decision making cannot be cut loose from the kind of considerations relevant to virtue. In choosing what kind of life one wants to live, we should thereby always be sensitive to the requirements of, say, justice and benevolence. That does not mean that everyone with the required talent is obliged to, say, study medicine, but it does put certain constraints on the ways in which one can shape one's life and still flourish (it at least seems up for debate, e.g., whether Bernard William's (1976) example of Gauguin, who abandons his family to cultivate his artistic interests, is really an example of sound self-cultivation). On the other hand, the virtue of courage may require someone with special artistic talent to continue to pursue art in the face of difficulty, even if he or she would prefer to give up.

2. Habituation as self-cultivation

So far, we have argued that Aristotelian virtue theory allows (even suggests) a broad conception of self-cultivation as encompassing much more than just 'moral' development. The second worry mentioned in the introduction was that Aristotelianism has a hard time

accounting for true *self*-cultivation in adult life, given its insistence that ethical development comes about through habituation and repetition—as Aristotle says "by doing just things we become just; [by doing] moderate things, moderate, and [by doing] courageous things, courageous" (EN1103b1). It is indeed often held that the notion of habit stands opposed to the idea of cultivation *by a self*, which seems to require a certain kind of autonomy. Michael Slote puts the point this way: self-cultivation or self-development seems to be "a process that an individual can take charge of and accomplish largely through his or her own efforts" (2016, p. 195).

But why, precisely, should we believe that the claim that true self-development requires an active contribution from the subject herself is in tension with the thesis that ethical development occurs through a process of habituation? This idea might have been inspired by the relatively recent body of work in social psychology on the automaticity of much of our everyday behaviour (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), according to which most of our everyday actions are habitual in the sense of not being characterized by conscious control or awareness. Such insights have been embedded within the popular dual-process model of cognition, a model positing the existence of two distinct 'sub-systems' of cognition: a fast, automatic, 'primitive' system (System 1) and the slow, conscious and deliberative System 2 (Strack & Deutsch, 2015). Given this model, habits and habit-formation are frequently linked to the operation of System 1, and as such are being kept distinct from conscious, deliberative cognition. This framework has led several psychologists working in the virtue theoretical tradition to explore how habits could be shaped by shaping 'System 1 activity' (Narvaez, 2008; Snow, 2010). Snow for example argues that imitating role models and following practical advice might automatically lead to the formation of certain cognitive schemas or general knowledge structures: schemas that are generally not consciously accessible, but nevertheless automatically organize information. On such an approach, habituation indeed

seems to come down to a certain form of manipulation-of-oneself, rather than active self-development: it involves the operation of mechanisms that bring it about that one's cognitive structures acquires a certain shape—mechanisms that operate blindly, or behind the subject's back. Moreover, it is a form of self-change in which others seem to play the most important roles. After all, what a learning agent *does* is just following others and listening to their advice. Especially when we couple this thought with the idea that habituation is largely a process occurring in childhood (see section 3)—an idea that seems to combine naturally with the blind, mechanistic view of habituation—the process of habit-formation seems to be one in which the subject is passively molded from the outside. In other words, the agent does not really change herself, but lets herself be changed by others.

Many commentators also ascribe this quasi-mechanical understanding of habituation to Aristotle. Slote, for example, claims that Aristotle's account of "moral self-cultivation" depends crucially on the claim "that voluntary actions of a certain kind are more likely to occur and become habitual once *enough* such actions have occurred (on the part of the given agent)" (Slote 2016, p. 201). Slote claims (correctly, to our mind) that Aristotle does not view habituation as a process that relies on reward and punishment (the psychological 'law of effect'). Instead, he claims that Aristotelian habituation:

> corresponds, not to the law of effect, but to another 'law' that behaviorists and others have spoken and written about, the so-called 'law of exercise'. According to this law, behavior that wasn't particularly likely to occur in a given kind of circumstance becomes more likely to occur in similar circumstances in the future (simply) as a result of having occurred once (or perhaps several times) in c. (Slote 2016, p. 201)

Here the idea again seems to that habituation is a process in which certain patterns of response automatically become entrenched in one's cognitive and motivational systems. Slote himself, unlike e.g. Snow, is skeptical about the psychological plausibility of such a mechanism, and thus he rejects the possibility of Aristotelian moral self-cultivation outright. However, commentators who are less skeptical of this model have also argued that it correctly applies to Aristotle.[10]

So it is this automatic, quasi-mechanical, and even (according to Slote) behaviorist view of the process of habituation that seems to imply that moral development must be a passive process driven by external forces, rather than an active process of self-cultivation to which the subject *herself* contributes something. And although we cannot definitively argue against this account of habituation here, it is important to note that this view of Aristotelian ethical development is contested, and that there are good reasons to insist on a different account. Below, we sketch the outlines of such an alternative understanding.

As a first step, it should be noted that alternatives to the quasi-mechanical view of habituation have been presented in the psychological literature. A more nuanced view on the relation between habits and automaticity can be found in a recent paper by Thompson and Lavine (2016) on the interaction between automatic and reflective habits in virtue development. They discuss developmental (and largely automatic) adaptations occurring in childhood that "contribute to dispositions toward others and how to interact with them that nonconsciously orient the child towards others in ways that are relevant to the development of character, and that also contribute to other skills (such as self-regulation, resilience, persistence) that are important to the development of virtue" (p. 103). They subsequently describe how such automatic adaptations form the background for the development of

[10] For example, see Sleutel and Spiecker (2004) and Curzer (2012). Unlike Slote, however, many of those who believe habituation is a process of blind or mechanical repetition believe that punishment and reward (i.e., operant conditioning) play an important role in this process.

reflective dispositions, which involve acquiring an understanding of certain goals and acts as good or bad, and an understanding of *why* certain goals and acts are good or bad. In order to develop such reflective dispositions, the developing agent needs to be actively and consciously involved. However, Thompson and Lavine are surprisingly noncommittal about how to understand the formation of such reflective habits, and don't go beyond hinting at a wide variety of theoretical approaches that might be able to answer this question.

An alternative understanding of habituation has also been developed in the philosophical literature. A number of commentators on Aristotle have rejected the mechanical view as a reading of the sections in the *Ethics* that deal with the development of virtue, in favor of a view that emphasizes the role of the agent's rational capacities.[11] Moreover, the relation between habits and automaticity has been addressed systematically by, for example, Richard Peters (1998) and more recently, by Matthias Haase 2016). They argue that it is a mistake to think that habits (at least in the sense of Aristotelian *hexeis*) are characterized by automaticity in the sense that they are the manifestation of inner necessities or 'mechanical connections forged through repetition' (Haase 2016). In contrast, Haase argues, on the basis of a reading of Aristotle, Aquinas and Hegel, that only rational beings can acquire habits, because habit (*Gewohnheit*) should be understood as a rational or intelligent disposition. A habit, in this sense, is a disposition that we do not possess by nature (as e.g. an animal is born with the disposition to see or hear), but that we must instead acquire by learning. On this view, it is thus a confusion to see a habit (*habitus* or *hexis*) as something that stands in contrasts with conscious, rational, or deliberate behavior (despite the fact that 'habitual' often has this connotation in ordinary language[12]): the proper contrast is, rather, with *unlearned* and

[11] This includes, famously, Sherman (1989), who argues that "'Contrary to the popular interpretation according to which ethical habituation is nonrational [...] it includes early on the engagement of cognitive capacities" (p. 7). Also see, e.g., Burnyeat (1980) and Jimenez (2016). We flesh out this cognitive understanding of habituation below.

[12] Russell (2015) also notes that the ordinary translation of *hexis* and *ethos* as 'habit' has an unwarranted association with automaticity or routine:

> ...for Aristotle *ethos* contrasts not with, say, focused and mindful effort, but with developmental paths that are merely natural, such as the development of our

therefore a-rational dispositions. Peters uses an in certain respects similar understanding of habits as intelligent dispositions, and argues that habit:

> is a term which we use to say extra things about people's *actions.* They must pick out the sorts of things that we could, in principle, have reasons for doing and the sorts of things that we could, in principle, stop doing if we tried. It would be odd to talk about a heart-beat or a nervous tic as a habit… (Peters 1998, p. 55).

Repetition is indeed important, but in the sense that only by doing things in a certain way on various moments in time, in various contexts, do those actions become ingrained to such an extent that they can be called habits. This notion of repetition is thus anything but mindless: to the contrary, forming a habit, according to Peters, might require substantial conscious effort and self-control.

If we do not start from the idea that habituation is by definition an automatic, unconscious, and thus passive process, but rather from the view that it is the intelligent and rational formation of dispositions that one can acquire only by practice, habituation might thus truly constitute a form of self-cultivation. However, we have yet to better understand the role of the subject in the formation of habits: in what sense, precisely, is habituation an active, cognitive process? It is here that recent authors have drawn upon the analogy with *skill* (that is, Aristotle's *techne*).[13] Like virtues, skills are a species of habits (*hexeis*): both can be acquired only by practice, i.e., by performing the actions which exemplify them.[14]

> perceptual capacities. Making the point that character comes from *ethos*, then, is supposed to draw attention to the fact that it comes about in ways that people can do something about. (p. 24)

[13] Although we here focus on Annas (2011), also see, e.g., Russell (2015) and Bloomfield (2012) for the analogy between virtue and skill.

[14] As Aristotle says: "as regards those things we must learn how to do, we learn by doing them" (EN1103a31). There is a well-known paradox that immediately looms here: if one must perform virtuous (or skillful) actions in order to become virtuous (or skillful), how does one get started? See, e.g., Jimenez (2016) for an investigation of and answer to this paradox.

Annas, for example, argues that the acquisition of skill differs from the merely mechanical effects of repetition, and from blind copying or "rote learning" (p. 19). One cannot become a good electrician, for example, by merely repeating the same actions over and over: given the large variety of situations one might encounter, indiscriminately cutting these-and-these wires when trying to mend this-and-this problem "could lead to disastrous mistakes" (Annas 2011, p. 19). Nor does it seem possible to state in advance exactly in which cases one *shouldn't* cut the wires: the range of exceptions is too large and varied. So to learn this skill, it is not enough to blindly copy previous actions: instead, one must know *why*, in a certain electrical situation, the cutting of the wires is called for: "the learner needs to *understand* what in the role model to follow" (Annas 2011, p. 17). That is, acquiring a skill involves knowing when two situations are relevantly similar to merit copying one's teacher's actions:

> What the learner needs to do is not only to learn from the teacher or role model how to understand what she has to do and the way to do it, but to become able to acquire *for herself* the skill that the teacher has, rather than acquiring it as a matter of routine, something which results in a clone-like impersonator. To acquire the skill you have to be able to do it yourself… (Annas 2011, p. 17-18)

Now the analogy between skill and virtue is the following: virtue, like skill, requires understanding when the situation is *similar enough* to a previous one to merit the same response. For as Aristotle never tires of emphasizing, the performance of an action-type (e.g., standing up to an advancing enemy) can be virtuous in some circumstances, but not in others: if there is nothing to be gained from standing and fighting, such an action does not manifest courage, but rashness or overconfidence. So the mere repetition of these action-types cannot

suffice for learning virtue: to acquire the virtue of courage, say, one must know whether in a given situation it really is courageous to stand and fight. That is, in short, to develop an understanding of what, in a given circumstance, it really means to act like one's examples of virtue.

Acting virtuously thus always involves a decision on the part of the agent herself: she needs to figure out how to apply what she has learned up till now to the new situation. Someone who needs to be *told* what the courageous thing to do is in a new situation is precisely *not* virtuous, just as someone who needs to be told whether or not to cut the wires in *this* circumstance precisely does *not* count as a master electrician. Thus, *pace* Slote (2016),[15] one's ethical role models, or even the ethical treatises that one reads, are not just "external factors" (p. 195) that influence one's behavior: they provide the material on the basis of which one must learn *for oneself* how to discriminate between situations.[16]

So this is the sense in which the formation of habit, on the alternative picture that we have sketched, requires the active involvement of the subject herself: learning to do something is learning to do something for oneself, and that is, acquiring the insight or

[15] Slote (this volume, p. 195) gives an example, intended as an illustration of the impossibility of moral self-cultivation, of a factory owner who is one day struck by the fact that his workers look at him with distaste, and thereupon tries to become a better person and treat his workers more fairly. Slote argues that we do not have an example of moral self-cultivation here, because the change in the factory owner is occasioned by "external factors" (the look on the face of his workers). But this is unconvincing, precisely because it seems that the factory owner is not automatically triggered or compelled to change his ways: rather, as Slote admits, he thinks about what the angry look might mean, whether his workers are right to hold a grudge, and what to do about it. Should he again shout at one of them when he comes in late, for example? In deciding to do so, he must exercise his judgement: in this particular situation, is it right to be angry with the worker? Is the situation relevantly similar to other occasions? In doing so, the owner engages (*ceteris paribus*) in a process of Aristotelian habit-formation.

[16] This might be put by saying that there is an active moment on the part of the learner, even when she is being taught by someone else. Aristotle, in *Physics* III.3, affirms this by saying that the instructor's teaching and the student's acquiring knowledge are one and the same event, describable in two different ways: once as the activation of the instructor's potentiality to teach, and once as the activation of the student's potentiality to learn.

understanding to *know how to go on* in a relevantly (dis)similar situation—in this sense, acquiring virtue is *self-directed* (Annas 2011, p. 18). Minimally, this requires that an agent who acquires a habit does so by acting with a certain consciousness of what she is doing and why, and indeed, that she does it on account of that understanding. Aristotelian habituation, on this picture, thus does not function through mere repetition (Slote's "law of exercise"). Rather, it functions through the subject's acquiring an ever clearer understanding of what the salient features of a situation are, and how the circumstances differ from previously encountered ones.

It is clear that, on the picture of habituation presented here, the primary objects of ethical self-development are one's voluntary actions: one becomes virtuous only by performing virtuous actions. But that does not exclude that habituation also forms one's thoughts and emotions: indeed, Aristotle is clear that a fully virtuous agent is one who has fashioned his emotional responses in such a way as to conform with reason. The virtuous agent, as opposed to the merely self-controlled one, has trained himself to not even be tempted by the wrong desires (which is not to say that he abrogates desire altogether). Still, the only way to become virtuous in this sense is to perform good actions, and learn to enjoy them for their intrinsic value (Burnyeat 1980). It is a difficult question to what extent theoretical activity can contribute to self-development. There is, in the Aristotelian tradition, clearly nothing that corresponds to the Stoic's 'process of self-examination'. On the other hand, the point of the philosophical study of ethics, according to Aristotle, does seem to be becoming *eudaimon*: reflection on ethics *itself* seems to be part of acquiring the kind of understanding relevant to virtue.[17]

3. Aristotle on life-long development

[17] As we explain in section 3, it contributes to acquiring 'the because', and not just 'the that', of virtue.

This analysis of virtue as skill can also form the basis of a response to the third worry which motivates the turn to alternative conceptions of self-cultivation in this volume. This worry derived its force from the emphasis in Aristotelian virtue theory on habituation and following exemplars: because both the formation of habits and the learning-from-others is supposed to largely take place in early childhood (with parents and educators taking care of instruction and presenting exemplars), such a theory does not seem to be able to account for self-cultivation as a life-long form of development. However, if self-development in accordance with one's form of life is about acquiring an ever clearer understanding of what to do in different kinds of situations, and of how the different virtues hang together, then it becomes much more plausible to assume that this learning trajectory covers the whole of a person's life. It is indeed characteristic of Aristotelian virtue ethics to consider virtue development as a process continuing throughout maturation (see for example Swanton (2016)). In fact, what is generally seen as the greater challenge for virtue theory is not to give an account of self-cultivation in adult life, but to give an account of self-cultivation in childhood (Swanton 2016, see also Slote (1983)). For example, to what extent can children be said to be virtuous, and is virtue for children the same as for adult human beings? This question is raised precisely because there is an apparent connection between virtue and maturation. Aristotle himself makes the even stronger claim that when it comes to the right audience for his lectures on ethics, "a young person is not an appropriate student, for he is inexperienced in the actions pertaining to life" (1095a3), adding that it is not age per se that is the problem, but the fact that young people tend to run after every passion instead of fashioning their longings in accord with reason.

This suggests that one way to flesh out this connection is to take a closer look of the importance of rational capacities for virtue development. It is clear that the capacities for

understanding, reasoning, choice and seeing specific things as just, benevolent, courageous etcetera develop in human beings during a long process of maturation, and that they are not yet fully developed in children. If, as we have suggested above, such rational capacities are essential for self-cultivation and the acquisition of virtue, then this would provide grounds for arguing that the center of gravity of self-cultivation as a developmental process lies in adulthood and not in childhood. In an important way, this refers back to the features of virtue theory discussed in the previous sections on knowledge of the good and habituation. Developing oneself as a human being requires acquiring knowledge of what is good, and this involves the exercises of capacities for choice and deliberation. However, many authors emphasize that the kind of rational capacities at stake are not 'intellectual capacities' in the sense that they would require a high score on intelligence tests (Wolf, 2007, p. 155) or in that they would involve long episodes of 'hard thinking'. Instead, what is meant is precisely the sort of understanding that allows one to see certain features of a situation as salient, and to judge when a situation is relevantly similiar to a previously encountered one, that we discussed in section 2. Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* is meant to cover the kind of wisdom required, a concept which is spelled out in different ways by different authors (think of Murdoch's notion of *seeing things as they are*, or McDowell's account of expressing one's form of life). But even if habituation and acquiring knowledge of the good do not necessarily require hard thinking, they do involve the exercise of rational capacities. This idea is explicitly defended by McDowell (1989, p. 39-40), when he states that:

> We travesty Aristotle's picture of habituation into virtue of character if we suppose the products of habituation are motivational propensities that are independent of conceptual thought, like a trained animal's behavioural dispositions. On the contrary, the topic of Book 2 [of the *Ethics*] is surely initiation into a conceptual space, by way of being

> taught to admire and delight in actions in the right way". […] Possessing "the that", those who have undergone this initiation are already beyond uncomprehending habit; they are already some distance into the realm of the relevant intellectual excellence. They have a conceptual attainment that, just as such, primes them for the reflection that would be required for the transition to "the because".

McDowell takes his distinction between 'the that' and 'the because' from Aristotle, who uses it to distinguish knowledge of *what* is true or good from knowledge of *why* things are true or good. Developing virtue involves coming to know not just the that, but also the because (see also Burnyeat (1980)—as we also emphasized in our discussion of the analogy between skill and virtue.

We have suggested that because of the involvement of rational capacities such as understanding and 'seeing things as they are', self-cultivation seen from an Aristotelian perspective is intrinsically connected to maturation. Also, it is a process which is (for human beings) never finished: the virtuous human being is the ideal towards which human beings strive in developing themselves, but it is not a clearly defined end state. This is so precisely because it involves acting in the right way in every situation one is confronted with, and throughout one's life one will always encounter unfamiliar situations that require active self-development. Moreover, as already suggested in the earlier quote by Aristotle, human beings are such that they are frequently tempted by bad or excessive appetites that are contrary to reason. Self-development requires active effort and learning because not every aspect of the human life form is automatically conducive to reason. This explains why the Aristotelian literature on vices and weaknesses is almost as large as that on the virtues.

Given all this, it is actually quite surprising that much developmental work in the virtue theoretical tradition attempts to apply its theoretical insights by formulating

recommendations for parenting and the education of children (see for example Annas, Narvaez, & Snow, 2016; Peters, 1998). One reason for this might be that both parenting and education are practices that are explicitly about learning, practices in which new and better theoretical models and ideas are in constant high demand. However, it will be clear by now that this does not reflect an inherent emphasis on childhood development in the theoretical framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics itself. This suggests that the current focus in the psychological literature on moral development and childhood education might miss a crucial point. In order to understand development , it seems important to also explore the psychological processes involved in *mature* virtue development, something which is, for the traditionally *moral* virtues, hinted at in the literature on the development of virtue in different professions, see for example Ladd (1989) or Meara (2001).

Of course, all this does not mean that there is no such thing as self-cultivation in childhood. After all, who would deny that school children have at least partially developed rational capacities?. But it does indicate that it is a mistake to suggest that there is a biased focus in virtue theoretical thinking on childhood development.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to address three worries discussed in several contributions to this volume. Firstly, the worry that Aristotelian virtue ethics cannot offer a sufficiently broad perspective on self-cultivation because it is ultimately, or mostly, a moral theory; secondly the worry that because of its focus on habituation and following exemplars, it cannot provide an account of cultivation *by* oneself. These worries in turn gave rise to the third worry: that the Aristotelian tradition is only concerned with development during childhood.

We have tried to show that an influential line of contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics points in a different direction. Anscombe's seminal critique of 20th century moral theory paved the road for an understanding of ethics as the quest for the good in its broadest sense. Self-cultivation, in this tradition, is an acquiring of an ever clearer understanding of what it means to manifest one's form of life, to be a flourishing human being. Such understanding requires the active development of various rational capacities such as seeing the world and oneself in certain ways, understanding the 'what' and the 'why', and choosing on the basis of such knowledge. Developing such capacities does not happen by itself just by mindless copying of others: learners need to determine for themselves what situation they are in, what exactly to follow in their role models and why. Given that humans are not born with these capacities, and given that throughout their lives they will constantly be confronted with unfamiliar situations, self-development is a life-long process.

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