Habituation without Habitat:
Aristotle and the Knowledge-Action Gap
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1. James Arthur, *Education with Character*, p. 146

The family and the school are at the heart of the moral economy for they, especially when operating together, hold out the best possibility of nurturing in the child the ability to transcend self-interest and to regard the interests of others as in some way their own.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* ii.1 $1103^{a}14$-$1103^{b}25$ (translation adapted from Taylor)

Excellence being then twofold, excellence of thought on the one hand and excellence of character on the other, excellence of thought (διανοητικὴ) comes into being and develops chiefly through teaching (ἐκ διδασκαλίας), which is why it requires experience and time, but excellence of character (ἠθικὴ) results from habit (ἐξ ἔθους), whence it has acquired its name by a slight modification of the word *ethos* (habit; ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθους). Hence it is clear that none of the virtues of character comes to us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature is habituated in a different way (ἐθισθείη)... So the virtues do not come to us either by nature or contrary to nature, but it is natural for us to be receptive of them, and we are perfected in them through habit (διὰ τοῦ ἔθους).

...[W]e acquire the virtues (τὰς ἀρετὰς) by having previously exercised them, as also in the case of the skills. For what one has to learn to do, we learn by doing (ποιοῦντες), e.g. people become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre; and so too we become just by performing just acts and temperate by temperate acts and courageous by courageous acts. What happens in states bears this out; for legislators make citizens good (ἀγαθούς) by habituating (ἐθίζοντες) them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not do this well go wrong... in the case of the virtues, it is by their actions in relations with others that some of us become just and others unjust, and by their actions in frightening situations and by being habituated to be afraid or bold that some become courageous or cowardly. It is similar in the case of the appetites and of anger; some people become temperate and good-tempered, others intemperate and irascible, because the former behave one way in those situations and the latter the other way. To sum up, states arise from similar acts. Therefore one must ensure that one's acts are of such a kind; for one's states follow according to the differences of the acts (τὰς τούτων διαφορὰς ἀκολουθοῦσιν αἱ ἕξεις). So one's being habituated one way or another from youth (ἐκ νέων ἐθίζεσθαι) upward makes no small difference, but an enormous one, or rather it makes all the difference.

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* ii.4 $1105^{a}17$-35

Someone might raise the following difficulty over our assertion that people have to become just by performing just actions, and temperate by performing temperate ones; if they perform just and temperate actions, they are already just and temperate, and those who perform literate and musical actions are literate and musical. ... Someone can do something literate by luck, or under the direction of someone else. So he will only be literate if he both does something literate and does it in a literate way, i.e. in accordance with the literacy which he possesses.

...But in the case of the virtues it is not the case that if the output is of a certain kind, the action is performed justly or temperately, but also if the agent is in a certain condition when he acts, first if he acts knowingly (εἰδώς), secondly if he acts from choice (προαιρούμενος), and choice of these things for their own sake (δι' αὐτά), and thirdly if he acts from a stable and unchangeable state of character (ἔχων).

4. Margaret Hampson, "Aristotle on the Necessity of Habituation," *Phronesis* 66 (2021)

In stressing the importance of our coming to meet the three agential conditions of NE 2.4, Aristotle need not be seen as claiming that an action itself is made better when performed in a certain way, but that as practical beings, we are in our best condition when each of our capacities concerned with action is in its best condition and responsive to the nature—including the value—of things within the practical sphere. ... In showing that the habituation process is aimed at achieving the conditions concerning knowledge, choice and stability, Aristotle makes clear that in speaking of habit and the formation of habit, he is not conceiving of habit simply as a state from which certain sorts of actions regularly or reliably issue. Aristotle's notion of habit here seems to pick out something more like a way of being, and the habituation process to describe something more like the formation of a second nature. Through the habituation process we come to act in a certain way, where this way of acting—which includes our epistemic and evaluative attitudes—becomes a part of our nature.

5. Marta Jimenez, "Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous," *Phronesis* 61 (2016)

...[I]n the case of acquiring the virtues, the 'something of' virtue that the learner possesses will not be virtue properly speaking—since virtue too is a perfection and a stable disposition of the soul—but will rather consist in perceptions, memories, notions, true beliefs, desires or emotions that are significantly related to the virtue which the learner aims to acquire. In the view that I propose, then, the learners of virtue are not blank slates, and they are also not exclusively motivated by pleasure and gain at first. Instead, they have some desires and emotions that orient them towards the noble and allow them to have occurrent virtuous motives, even if they do not yet have the relevant practical knowledge or stable dispositions of character. ... Since the learners' virtuous actions must be

performed well to contribute to the formation of virtue, they must be cases of properly hitting the intermediate in action, where the learners are both aware that they are doing so, and willing.

6. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, pp. 171-172

We should begin by asking how the perceptions constitutive of emotions, and ultimately of moral responses, become refined. The parent, like the orator, is in the position of persuading. He or she makes prescriptions to the child and the child listens out of a complex set of desires (love of parents, the desire to imitate, fear of punishment, hope of reward, etc.). But the parent aims not simply to affect specific actions or desires; e.g. to thwart greed, to encourage compassion, to temper anger. Rather, part of what the parent tries to do is to bring the child to see the particular circumstances that here and now make certain emotions appropriate. The parent helps the child to compose the scene in the right way. This will involve persuading the child that the situation at hand is to be construed in this way rather than that, that what the child took to be a deliberate assault and cause for anger was really only an accident, that the laughter and smiles which annoy were intended as signs of delight rather than of teasing, that a particular distribution, though painful to endure, is in fact fair—that if one looked at the situation from the point of view of the others involved, one would come to that conclusion.

7. Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," p. 78

I may be told, and may believe, that such and such actions are just and noble, but I have not really learned for myself (taken to heart, made second nature to me) that they have this intrinsic value until I have learned to value (love) them for it, with the consequence that I take pleasure in doing them. To understand and appreciate the value that makes them enjoyable in themselves I must learn for myself to enjoy them, and that does take time and practice—in short, habituation.

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* x.9.6-8, 11 $1179^{b}$20-32, $1180^{a}$15-17 (translation adapted from Irwin)

Now some think that it is nature (φύσει) that makes people good; some think it is habit; some that it is teaching (διδαχῇ). ... Arguments and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits (ἔθεσι) for enjoying and hating finely (πρὸς τὸ καλῶς χαίρειν καὶ μισεῖν), like ground that is to nourish (θρέψουσαν) seed. ... Hence we must already in some way have a character (τὸ ἦθος) suitable for virtue (ἀρετῆς), fond of what is fine and objecting to what is shameful. It is difficult, however, for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under correct laws; for the many, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live in a temperate and resistant way. That is why laws must prescribe their upbringing and practices; for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them.

9. Rachna Kamtekar, "Aristotle on Learning By Doing Voluntary Actions," *Australasian Philosophical Review* (2026)

Aristotle says that character virtue, which involves loving the fine, arises from habit, by the doing of certain sorts of actions. ...[F]ine action itself, without the help of accounts, enables a learner to come to love the fine. To be fine, action must be voluntary: the agent must contribute something to it and know its circumstantial particulars. It's when one does actions knowing what one is doing that one is most ready to discover their fineness. Attention to what one is doing is enhanced by the action-descriptions given in the law or by an instructor—not by accounts.

10. Aristotle, *Politics* vii.13 $1332^{a}$27-$1332^{b}$7 (translation adapted from Everson)

A polis can be excellent only when the citizens who have a share in the government are excellent...; let us inquire how a man becomes excellent. For even if we could suppose the citizen body to be excellent, without each of them being so, yet the latter would be better, for in the excellence of each the excellence of all is involved. There are three things which make men good and excellent; these are nature (φύσις), habit (ἔθος), reason (λόγος). In the first place, everyone must be born a man and not some other animal; so, too, he must have a certain character, both of body and soul. But some qualities there is no use having at birth, for they are altered by habit (ἔθη μεταβαλεῖν ποιεῖ), and there are some gifts which by nature are made to be turned by habit (διὰ τῶν ἐθῶν) to good or bad. ... For this reason, nature, habit, reason must be in harmony with one another (συμφωνεῖν ἀλλήλοις); for they do not always agree; men do many things against habit (παρὰ τοὺς ἐθισμοὺς) and nature, if reason (διὰ τὸν λόγον) persuades them that they ought.

11. Randall Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, p. 85

These aspects of Aristotle's political thought raise the question of where, if at all, he would draw the line between those things which promote virtue and constitute education and those which promote virtue but are not forms or aspects of education. In general, he demonstrates little concern to clarify this point, and he invites virtual identification of education with the means through which one becomes virtuous, with such remarks as that "all else [beyond what nature provides] is the work of education; we learn some things by habit and some by instruction."