

# THE ARISTOTELEAN CONCEPT OF HABITUATION

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present and critically analyze the ideas of Aristotle about how one comes to acquire a moral character, how one becomes a good person. The short, easy, straight-forward but very unsatisfactory answer to this question is: one becomes a good/moral person through habituation. As a consequence the concept of habituation is at the core of this paper. To achieve this task the translation of the Nicomachean Ethics by David Ross will be employed.

For the sake of clarity the paper is divided into three main sections. The first section provides an illustration of the most important ideas of Aristotle present in his Nicomachean Ethics. I have selected those because I find that their understanding is necessary for the construction of an appropriate interpretational background. The second section will consist of the presentation of Aristotle's ideas on habituation along with some first discreet steps towards an interpretation. The third and last section includes some further analysis of the concept of habituation but its main body consists of arguments that are directed towards the reinforcement of my own interpretation of the concept of habituation as a form of operant and social conditioning.

### The Relevant Ideas

I think it is best to start with some basic understanding of the most fundamental ideas that permeate the moral thinking of Aristotle and that directly relate to the concept of habituation and which ideas it is necessary to grapple with before proceeding to our main interest. I will thus first elaborate on the idea of the good as well as on that of the function argument before tackling the idea of habituation.

#### The Good

To begin with, Aristotle perceives ethics to be the study of and the enquiry into what is the human good. His answer is that the human good is eventually happiness. It is evident that he regards such an answer as one that is satisfactory for everyone and in this sense the proposition „the human good is happiness“ is universally endorsed. The problem that he admits to is the conception of happiness itself, namely what one perceives as falling under this category, what are the requirements that one must satisfy in order to be designated as a happy person. The above interpretation we can derive from the following passage:

Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise.<sup>1</sup>

Living well and faring well is an immediate illustration that Aristotle provides us regarding what it means to be happy but he does not elaborate further.

Nevertheless, a few paragraphs onwards we are given a new clue as to what the nature of the good that constitutes happiness might be. We learn that one must pursue this good for itself and not in order to facilitate the fulfillment of another goal; the good should not constitute a means to another end and in this sense it should be self-sufficient. As always Aristotle is rather meticulous in articulating and categorizing when he is able to do so:

Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else.<sup>2</sup>

Following the above, let us think of a couple of examples. Money could never constitute a good nor be part of happiness since money is desired always as a means to another end (say food, clothing etc.). On the other hand justice is always desirable and is to be pursued for its own sake and not because it is a necessary step for something else. Thus justice and not money can be part of the human good and an ingredient of happiness.

### The Function Argument

The second idea I would like to present is what is known as the function argument. This concept is of importance for two reasons. First of all it reflects a major conviction of Aristotle (present at least in the Nicomachean Ethics) namely the vital importance of nature in figuring out how things are and how things should be. Secondly it provides us with additional information as far as the nature of the human good is concerned. These

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1.4, 1095a17-21.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1.7, 1097a29-b2.

two aspects are heavily intertwined as I will try to show below and they also constitute a very serious weakness in Aristotle's argumentation.

Nature plays the role of the guide in our search for what is the human good. It informs us about how things are regarding the qualitative differences between animals and humans. According to Aristotle humans possess the ability to reason and this is what distinguishes them from animals:

We are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be shared even by the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has reason.<sup>3</sup>

Here Aristotle considers various different abilities/capacities that humans possess and he discards all those that other forms of life possess as well. There remains only reason that makes humans different from all the rest and that in this sense it confers upon humans this specific function, to act rationally.

What is of most interest here is not the relationship that Aristotle draws between reason and the human species but rather his assertion that humans, just like other things, have a function. Even more surprising and confusing is his claim that the function of something is the „place“ where the good of this something resides. Therefore, since the function of a human being is the capacity of reason, the good of humans is somehow directly linked to reason.

Such an understanding of the importance of reason is also reflected in the way reason is related to all capacities of a human being what Aristotle calls elements of the soul:

One element in the soul is irrational and one has reason.<sup>4</sup>

But as it becomes apparent in the lines following the above claim, even the element of the soul that is irrational (e.g. appetites, emotions) is in effect related to reason by being responsive to it; the agent is able to take control of this part of her soul with the use of reason and by following this path one also acquires the virtuous necessary for a happy life. But things are not that simple, for in order to become a virtuous citizen, habituation seems to play a fundamental role.

### **The Concept of Habituation**

In my view it is best to approach the concept of habituation as a lengthy learning process that results in a kind of social and operant conditioning of the individual by

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1.7, 1097b33-1098a2.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1.7, 1102a28-29.

both the immediate and the broader social environment into which the individual is embedded. But let us start from how Aristotle presents his own creation.

### Moral vs. Intellectual Virtues

Aristotle begins by making a very interesting and useful distinction about the cases where habituation is applicable:

Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit.<sup>5</sup>

We see then that habituation regards and is relevant only to the moral virtues. One can be habituated into becoming a temperate or just man but one cannot be habituated to engage in theoretical thinking which is a virtue of the fully rational part of the soul. What is unclear in the above passage is the reference to the need of experience and time when it comes to intellectual virtues. It makes it seem as if this is not so in the case of the moral virtues. Such an understanding comes in sharp contrast with our intuitions about the acquisition of the moral virtues, namely the requirement of time and experience which is implied by the concept of habituation. But since the intention of Aristotle to exclude time and experience from the process of acquiring the moral virtues is not evident I will not pursue this point further.

### Considering Psychological Nativism

The second remark is a rather confusing one and it regards the relationship between nature and the moral virtues:

None of the moral virtues arises in us by nature for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. [...] Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.<sup>6</sup>

The argument provided in support of the first part of this excerpt is the impossibility to train or habituate a rock to roll uphill or to habituate fire to move downwards. It is rather surprising that Aristotle does not consider the training of horses or other domesticated animals to behave in ways that are in effect contrary to their nature. It is certainly not in the nature of a horse to stand its ground amidst the chaos of a battle.

A second consideration that is missing is that of an individual that is born with specific tendencies, traits or personality characteristics that actually coincide with what is perceived as a moral virtue. Such a case would be one where a boy is braver than another, *ceteris paribus*, without having undergone anything similar to the process of habituation. Surely such cases are more than plausible and applicable to other moral

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1, 1103a14-17.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1, 1103a19-26.

virtues apart from courage like that of temperance; some people are simply able to control and adequately regulate the amount of cigarettes they smoke without much effort while others cannot achieve such results even when putting a lot of effort in their struggle. L. Brown actually considers such possibilities and he replies as following:

At VI.13 he [Aristotle] allows a kind of „natural virtue“, such as a naturally brave child might possess, but distinguishes it from virtue proper. Habit is not to be thought of as unthinking, but rather as intentional habituation, which then becomes second nature.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this is a highly unsatisfactory reply. I presume that intentionality here refers to the agent herself rather than to the teacher or the parent of the agent. If that is not the case then habituation remains a process that does not necessitate thinking and intentionality on the part of the subject that is habituated.

#### Adding Pleasure and Pain to the Discussion

But if intentionality refers to the agent it is hard to see why the agent would act in such a way in the first place. In a very illuminating passage, Aristotle himself states that: Moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought.<sup>8</sup>

And later on that:

It is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad, by pursuing and avoiding these – either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not, or by doing wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished.<sup>9</sup>

In these two excerpts it becomes evident that the very reason why one will opt for the non-virtuous action is because such an action is associated with some form of pleasure; and it is this very pleasure that acts as the motivating factor. Thus, getting back to Brown's comment, it does not make sense to expect from the agent to act in the self-restraining, self-disciplined, self-habituating way that he proposes.

#### Me and My Daughter (Aristotle as a Behaviorist)

Let us consider an example for the above case. Think of a youth that loves eating sweets and actually does so whenever she gets the chance. Such an individual would certainly not be labeled as a temperate one. My interpretation of Aristotle's writings is

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<sup>7</sup> Notes to pages 21-25, Book 2, Chapter 1, 212.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 2.3, 1104b9-13.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 2.3, 1104b20-24.

the following. Suppose that I am the parent of this youth and a citizen of Athens that is virtuous in the full sense of the word by effectively and successfully employing practical wisdom in my everyday life. As such, my duty is to habituate my girl into becoming a morally good agent herself. I understand that due to her age she cannot as of yet grapple with the actual reasoning and justification that exists behind what is considered to be of moral worth. She will learn this when she goes to study under Aristotle in his Lyceum. But in order to be an eligible/appropriate student she must first have gone through the process of habituation:

Hence anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits.<sup>10</sup>

As an ex-student of Aristotle myself, I know that my daughter is motivated to eat sweets because she finds pleasure in doing so. I pinpoint the motivating drive behind her actions to the pleasure that she derives from eating sweets. In a similar fashion, the reason why she does not behave in a temperate way is because of the pain that such temperance causes her.

Of course the words pleasure and pain need not and should not be interpreted in a strict and limiting way but rather in a broad one where they are synonymous to words such as comfort, enjoyment, contentment or irritation, uneasiness, inconvenience, nuisance.

My aim now as a parent/teacher/guardian is to eliminate the motivation that drives such a deviant behavior by altering the consequences that her actions would normally have. I can easily achieve this by prohibiting my daughter to play with her friends every time I notice sweets missing from the vase. The assumption here (which can be granted without any complications) is that she derives more pleasure from playing with her friends than she does from eating sweets. My daughter is certainly far from being a temperate agent (not even to feel tempted whenever sweets are in the vicinity) but under my guidance she has nevertheless taken her first step in becoming one in the future. My strategy of psychological intervention increases significantly her potential of understanding in the future why maintaining control over her urges is the morally good thing to do.

#### Reinforcing the Behaviorist Interpretation

One easily notices that the way I portray my intervention above it is very hard to distinguish it from a mere punishment. This is perfectly in line with Aristotle's thinking: And in general passion seems to yield not to argument but to force. The character, then, must somehow be there already with a kinship to virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1.4, 1095b3-5.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 10.9, 1179b29-31.

And:

Punishment is inflicted by these means; for it is a kind of cure, and it is the nature of cures to be effected by contraries.<sup>12</sup>

The pronoun „these“ refers to the nouns pleasure and pain. Aristotle uses the above sentence as an argument in support of his important thesis that pleasure and pain are directly related to virtues and vices. He effectively makes a parallelism here: just like a physician heals her patient by using a cure (which is painful), a parent converts her unruly offspring from the path of vice to that of virtue through punishment (which is also in a way painful). We will get back to this important point later on when discussing Burnyeat’s distinction (misguided as I will try to prove) of fear and shame as motives, as drives of human behavior.

A very interesting passage that reinforces an interpretation of Aristotle as the first behaviorist is the following:

It has grown up with us all from our infancy; this is why it is difficult to rub off this passion, engrained as it is in our life.<sup>13</sup>

The reference to infancy and more generally to issues that pertain to contemporary developmental psychology is certainly striking. Aristotle engages in what is popularly known today as the nature vs. nurture question. It is my personal opinion that when answering the question „What matters most in the way one behaves, nature or nurture?“, the proper answer is „Both!“ and this is also how the vast majority of the academic world approaches the issue as well (very few if any would stick with the extremes). Most relevantly, we should interpret the fact that Aristotle actually considers cases where children are born with innate traits such as extraordinary courage (as this becomes evident in my citation of Brown in page 5 of this paper) as a strong sign that Aristotle is not the ancient equivalent of John B. Watson. Aristotle does not claim that habituation is the sole factor that determines the development of one’s character/personality. He makes the weaker claim that habituation is stronger than genetic dispositions. And although this is still an open question to which I will not try to provide an answer, I think he rightly supports this side.

If one agrees with the above account of the Aristotelian concept of habituation then one necessarily rejects Brown’s comment that habituation is initiated and drive by the agent herself. Maybe after some years of external intervention my daughter will see the light and realize herself the futility of her initial behavior. I think that this is a plausible potential future outcome but this is certainly not the case initially since if it was she would not exhibit such behavior to begin with and the need for habituation would not arise at all.

The above account is also in line with the general picture that Burnyeat draws. Directly related to and supportive of such an interpretation as well as related to the potential

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 2.3, 1104b16-18.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 2.3, 1105a2-3.

outcome of my daughter eventually comprehending part of the reasoning behind my restrictive intervention described in the preceding paragraph is the following excerpt: You need also to be guided in your conduct so that by doing the things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is *true*. What you may begin by taking on trust you can come to know for yourself. This is not to know *why* it is true, but it is to have *learned that* it is true in the sense of having made the judgment your own, second nature to you.<sup>14</sup>

### Minor Criticism of Aristotle's Argumentation

Let us now go back to Aristotle by considering the following passage:

The virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.<sup>15</sup>

This passage can be interpreted in two different ways that are not actually incompatible with each other due to the fact that they regard two different issues. The first interpretation is that merely holding knowledge of what the morally appropriate action is does not make one a virtuous agent. Rather one must also practice such knowledge by implementing its „doctrines“ in her everyday life.

Such an interpretation is probably one with which Aristotle would himself agree but of more interest is the alternative reading of the same passage. Under that one Aristotle provides an argument in favor of his claim that one becomes a morally good/virtuous agent through habituation by offering supposedly similar situations as tokens from which we can draw parallels, namely the situation of a builder or that of a lyre-player.

In my view Aristotle seems to conflate two different situations: the employment of some epistemic methods and the process of habituation. In the former case, the subject employs specific modes of knowledge acquisition, say that of learning by doing or that of trial and error. The builder acquires knowledge about his art, how to build a wall that will not collapse in the case of a tempest, by building walls. But such a case comes in sharp contrast with my account of habituation presented above where habituation is a process that merely reverses or alters the effects of various motivating drives and that does not necessarily result in the acquisition of knowledge. Recall that my daughter does not necessarily realize the reasoning that justifies regarding gluttony as a non-virtuous action since she only restrains herself because of my intervention (at least initially). Moreover, her restraint does not make sure that she will ever acquire the practical wisdom of Aristotle's teaching, it only enables her to do so in the future or (an even better formulation I think) such training/habituation gives her better chances to

<sup>14</sup> Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," 74

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1, 1103a31-b2.

eventually become a virtuous person than she would have without it. The essence of the point here is simple: the acquisition of habits markedly differs from the acquisition of knowledge.

A second issue with the second interpretation is an ontological one that philosophers encounter when dealing with metaethics: the realism vs. relativism problem. A builder through his practicing of his art acquires knowledge about the real and existing world. The materials that she uses exist in the real material world. Propositions such as "This wall can withstand a tempest" refer to things that materially exist (such as the wall or the wind) and the existence of which can be empirically verifiable (say by trying to demolish the wall using differing amounts of force). This is not the case with propositions such as "Lying is bad". I will not elaborate on this point further since my aim here is merely to mention such concerns and not to push such an argument as I have done with the preceding ones.

Another passage of interest is the following and it constitutes again a statement that supposedly reinforces the necessity of habituation as a means to acquire the moral virtues:

Men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft.<sup>16</sup>

Again Aristotle is trying to combat the view that some people are born good or bad, morally speaking as well as in the modern sense of what we call talented people (say in fine arts or in mathematics). This is most probably not the case regarding the latter since some people are merely born significantly more intelligent than others in biological/psychological terms. They are able to comprehend abstract and highly theoretical notions and concepts much faster than others (*ceteris paribus*) possibly due to specific neural configurations in the frontal lobe which which they were born. I do not cite here the relevant literature of psychological research since such understandings constitute common knowledge.

Still, such considerations do not constitute any kind of challenge for Aristotle since such cases (highly intelligent humans) are incredibly rare. Thus a generous reading of Aristotle actually reveals his astonishing insight into human nature. Indeed, there are various modern theories in the field of developmental psychology, such as social learning theories, that support the claim that habituation (as the concept is understood by the author) is the most important factor when it comes to the development of a human being including her moral orientation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1, 1103b11-14.

<sup>17</sup> See the work of A. Bandura.

Yet the above passage cannot be employed to support his habituation hypothesis. Aristotle starts with a tautology and he justifies it with an unfortunate parallelism. Again he conflates the employment of some epistemic methods with the process of habituation. A teacher is not necessary for a builder to learn his art. The method of trial and error is a commonly used epistemic method by all professions and arts. In our example our builder will construct a few walls that will collapse under specific circumstances but through practice he will be able to spot his own mistakes and gradually correct them. By doing so he improves himself with the passage of time. Even when teaching is involved it is very common for artisans to learn that way as well. Another epistemic method widely used is that of observation and imitation with the latter being the predominant strategy even in modern day industrial espionage. Humans as well as some animal species are able to learn how to do something simply by observing what someone else does and then imitating her techniques, strategies etc. Thus our builder can learn how to build solid, durable walls simply by observing and imitating another builder; a teacher is not necessary.

### Habituation as a Developmental Process

#### Signs of a Virtuous Disposition

Let us start by discussing the point of how we might realize that the young person in front of us has truly managed to become a virtuous person. Here our interest is not so much about the practical issue of acquiring such information but rather about the strong inter-relations between pleasure and virtue that are revealed to us as well as an implication that is certainly very startling to a contemporary Westerner:

We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that supervenes upon acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward.<sup>18</sup>

Once more Aristotle points to his belief that pleasure and virtue are irrevocably related but he additionally surprises us with his remarks about who is the one that we may truly and fully consider a virtuous agent. It is not sufficient for one to stand her ground nor is it sufficient to abstain from bodily pleasures. One must actually *delight* in doing so and not to merely do so. This comes in sharp contrast, and in this sense it is startling, with the common Christian mentality that confers value and admires the individual that actually experiences the temptation of say indulging in pleasures of the flesh but that nevertheless does not give in to such urges. But I think it is not just

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.3, 1104b4-8.

because of our Christian dispositions that we are surprised. It seems to me that a common intuition is violated here, namely that those of strong will are to be admired. I think the above citation is a very important passage in that it strongly supports my interpretation of Aristotle as an adherent of perfectionism. The virtuous agent will not only be able to exercise his iron will in a way that will enable him to behave in a specific way, in a virtuous way. A virtuous agent in the full sense does not need her iron will anymore. Through long years of habituation, through rigorous training, the agent has been finally transformed into a new being significantly different from what she once was. The process of habituation has the capacity to confer immunity to vice upon its subject and thus an iron will is not necessary anymore. An agent that is virtuous is far beyond the point that she might be tempted to flee the battleground or to eat exceedingly. The reason is rather simple and it is in line with my example of the gluttonous daughter and my interpretations so far: the process of habituation effectively reverses the motivating drivers of the agent. This is why I mentioned earlier that habituation gives better chances to my daughter of becoming a virtuous citizen but does not guarantee such an outcome.

### The Developmental Stages

At this point I would like to divide the process of personality development into three different stages. Such a move will clarify things further. The first stage is the one where the agent merely gives in to her passions and emotions because she unthinkingly allows herself to be ruled by pleasure and pain. The second is the one where through the process of disciplining the agent through forms of punishment, the agent does not indulge anymore. The agent here barely thinks: she merely calculates, just like a utilitarian would, which action will wield the highest amount of pleasure. Since the external intervention of punishment alters the calculus in favor of not indulging, she does not indulge. The third and last stage is the one where the agent not only behaves as she should but she does so *knowingly*. The agent acts consciously in the sense of knowing „the because“ to which Burnyeat refers; the agent *knows the reasons* why eating too much or fleeing the battlefield is morally an unworthy action.

The passage from the NE cited at page 11, causes some complications to my above categorization. For it is theoretically possible that one more stage exists that manifests itself in between the second and the third. This stage (let us call it the Z stage) is one where the effects of habituation, doing and not doing certain things, have become second nature to the individual. At this stage the behavior of calculation of the second stage has been eliminated and only the socially acceptable behavior remains. Two issues arise that must be resolved in order to add stage Z in our list.

The first is the following: are we to call an agent virtuous when she has reached the third or the fourth or either of these two stages? At first sight it seems that both the third and the Z stage, when reached, can grant to the agent the status of temperate or

brave. But I do not think that this is what Aristotle has in mind. Taking into consideration the value he puts on knowledge as well as his claim that practical wisdom is necessary for an agent to be a virtuous person (and practical wisdom requires knowledge) I think that only the third stage is to be regarded as the one that, when reached, grants the status of virtuousness. Additionally, recall that doing the right thing by chance is not enough; one must knowingly do the right thing in order to be virtuous.

The second issue is whether it is possible for someone to be in stage Z (developmentally speaking) and to derive pleasure from acting accordingly. For example, is it possible for someone to not indulge in the pleasures of the flesh and to derive pleasure from such restraint despite the fact that she does not know „the because“? If that is the case then stage Z should be broken down to two: stage Za where pleasure is not present and stage Zb where pleasure is derived. That way stage Z can be added to our list along with the rest.

### The Nexus: Motivation

Now that our categorization is clear of complications and contradictions, let us focus our attention to what distinguishes these four stages from each other: it is the source of motivation, it is what drives behavior in each case. In the first two stages it is nothing more than pleasure that does so (inversed in the second stage). In the third it is knowledge of „the because“ that motivates; my daughter is perfectly aware of the reasons why being temperate is virtuous.

But of most interest is stage Z since habituation is our focus and this is the stage that one finds oneself after she has been habituated. In stage Za it is the perfect adjustment to operant and social conditioning that motivates; the perfect internalization of imposed (in one way or another) social norms and behaviors (social and operant conditioning are simply more advanced and elaborate forms of classical conditioning). Such internalization is the result of a variety of stimuli to which the agent is subject to. These stimuli are in turn the results of operant and social conditioning in action that are in turn informed by, dependent upon and shaped by the predominant social norms.

### Conditioning: Operant & Social

Operant conditioning is a form of controlling and altering human and, in some cases, animal behavior. The mechanisms that are employed are those of reward and punishment. In the first case there is reinforcement of a particular behavior that is perceived as desirable. In the latter there is inhibition of a particular behavior that is perceived as undesirable.<sup>19</sup> The example, that I have already mentioned, of myself as a parent that imposes a punishment on my daughter when she exhibits a specific behavior that I perceive as undesirable is a case of operant conditioning. The

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<sup>19</sup> Skinner, "Science and Human Behavior," 62-66.

predominant social norm (or at least the one that would exist if Athenians were adhering to an Aristotelian worldview) is that of not eating exceedingly, namely temperance. The stimulus is the punishment of not allowing my daughter to see her friends. And internalization occurs when my daughter eventually ceases to eat excessive amounts of food.

Notice here that my daughter does not become temperate, she merely adopts the behavior that I force upon her. Most importantly, notice that this is not the case when she reaches stage Zb of the developmental process. At this stage there is some sort of knowledge that my daughter has acquired and this is the reason why she derives pleasure from being temperate. Still, it is not the kind of knowledge that she acquires when she reaches stage three, the stage where she acquires knowledge about „the because“ and as a consequence she becomes temperate.

Social conditioning functions just like operant conditioning in that the result is the alteration of human behavior and in that this is achieved through the mechanisms of reward and punishment. Another feature they share is that they produce the same result: conformity to specific norms and behaviors that are dictated by external factors. It is of importance to realize here that because we deal with specific forms of operant conditioning, these two modes of conditioning are more similar than in other cases. By specific forms of operant conditioning I refer to the fact that in our case the external factor that imposes the stimulus on the subject (the parent that punishes the daughter) is inextricably linked to the society in which it is embedded (the city of Athens that shares an Aristotelian conception of the good) since it has been formed by it. As a citizen of Athens I have internalized in my youth, through both operant and social conditioning, specific norms and modes of behavior. In operant conditioning this is not necessarily the case since this method can be employed even for the training of animals. The narrowing of the scope causes the result of operant conditioning to coincide with that of social conditioning: conformity *to the same* norms and behaviors.

Let us turn to the two crucial differences. The first is that the one that imposes the stimulus in the case of social conditioning is a group of people and not an individual. The second is that the form that social conditioning takes is much more discreet and difficult to discern. This is because the environment in which social conditioning takes place is highly social relatively to that where operant conditioning takes place and as a result the way it functions is much more complicated due to the fact that there are a lot of individuals, groups and sub-groups that dynamically interact with each other. Additionally, social conditioning is by nature a very discreet form of conditioning since, most often, none of the two interacting elements are aware of the process (this crucial point will become clearer in the example I will provide). Lastly, the considerations that

apply to stage Zb in the mode of operant conditioning also apply to the mode of social conditioning in the exact same manner.

A prime example of social conditioning is peer pressure. A youngster that desires to be accepted by her fellows, a very natural inclination especially in young ages, will do the same things that they do. She will listen to the same music or dress in the same way. Very often youngsters that for various reasons do not conform to their social environment will face pressures to do so. For example dressing in an unconventional fashion can easily provoke mocking and criticism. This is the stimulus that is imposed on the subject-individual by the group. The response of the subject can be either to conform or not to do so. Most of the times, the subject of social conditioning adopts and conforms through mimesis to the social context into which she is embedded.

Yet the whole process can take much more unconscious forms and this is where social conditioning becomes a very powerful process of creating social cohesion and uniformity through discreet disciplining. That is when no pressure is imposed directly by any group or individual on the subject. This is the case when the subject internalizes specific norms, ideas and behaviors through mere exposure to a human social environment. Children for example exhibit remarkable degrees of mimicking the behavior of the individuals they come in contact with. Later in the developmental chain of a human being, individuals start to internalize ideas. Formation of gender roles is a good example here. Girls and boys learn what kind of activities are suitable for them; suitability here is regulated by their own gender. Yet the nature of the learning process has nothing in common with the nature of conventional learning processes, such as those at work in schooling institutions. In the case of gender roles, the individual internalizes unconsciously how she or he is to behave in specific situations and even how to think. More specifically, the person adopts a specific identity that is deemed appropriate and suitable, and thus is acceptable, by the rest of the society.

In our case, the imaginary Aristotelian Athens, we have a society with a very solid and specific worldview. According to Athenians, acquiring practical wisdom is a necessary precondition for one to become a happy and virtuous person. Thus both operant and social conditioning will take this direction. The aim of both modes of conditioning, which according to my interpretation they combine to create the process of habituation, will be to create individuals that have the potential of becoming virtuous.

### Shame as a Form of Social Conditioning

According to Burnyeat:

Argument and discussion will encourage him toward virtue because he obeys a sense of shame (aidos) as opposed to fear. [...] Shame is the semivirtue of the learner<sup>20</sup>

And in between he cites Aristotle:

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<sup>20</sup> Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," 78.

Shame should not be described as a virtue; for it is more like a feeling than a state of character. It is defined, at any rate, as a kind of fear of disgrace.<sup>21</sup>

Here Burnyeat discusses how a young citizen is habituated into doing the right thing. Shame is described as a “semivirtue” because it acts as a mechanism that prevents the youth from behaving in an undesirable way. What I find unsatisfactory with Burnyeat is his distinction between shame and fear and the way such distinction contrasts with Aristotle’s definition that shame is a kind of fear.

In any case, Aristotle’s definition of shame reinforces my interpretation of habituation as a form of conditioning. In the case of shame it is the effects of social conditioning that are in action and not the process of social conditioning itself. Consider how shame functions in the example I will provide and notice how it exhibits all of the characteristics that social conditioning exhibits.

Think of a society where to be fat means to face social discrimination in your everyday life. Exercise and fitness on the other hand is of utmost importance and people that excel in athletics enjoy widespread admiration and are highly esteemed members of the society. In such a social context most young persons will internalize the ideas and norms that being healthy and generally in good physical condition. Most youngsters not only conform in the sense of reaching stage Za where it is some form of punishment they are afraid of but they reach stage Zb where they themselves truly and sincerely believe that the norms they have internalized are actually the proper ones and they confer upon them normative value and power.

Now think of a young person that for one reason or another eats exceedingly and as a consequence she gains a lot of weight. But when she reaches the age of ten she starts having feelings of shame. The age I mention here is a random one but I presume that by the age of ten the child will have internalized the norms of her society to a significant degree. By significant I mean that the subject is able to comprehend normative propositions (e.g. „this is bad“) and has also developed through socialization a basic sense of self and identity. As a consequence, even if no external pressure is imposed on her (e.g in the form of punishment or verbal criticism) she will experience the feeling of shame.

The power of such an emotion is rather indirect but is still very effective in curving and shaping behavior. It is very interesting that Aristotle has noticed the potential of shame as a mechanism of conformity and it is no surprise that he praises the existence of such an emotion in young people. If the young girl of our example indeed experiences such a feeling there is a high possibility that she will put quite some effort to alter her eating habits. This is certainly a very good starting point for a young person since she will be indirectly forced to exercise her strength of will. Such self-disciplining behavior renders direct external intervention (such as the prohibition I imposed on my daughter) completely unnecessary. On top of that it is possibly significantly more efficient since

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.9, 1128b10-12.

punishment can result in boomerang effects where the youth behaves in a reactionary manner and instead of altering her behavior to fit the norms she augments her „bad“ behavior.

### Concluding Remarks

My interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of habituation as a form of conditioning might not appeal to everyone. Yet I think that the historical context into which Aristotle was embedded strongly supports such an interpretation. The general picture that I have obtained of Aristotle by reading his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is of a man that is interested in politics and in the foundation of politics, ethics, purely for practical reasons. Aristotle's concern is not to be recognized by an academic community to which he will present his arguments and theories. His concern is to provide a political manifesto that will be put into use by his fellow citizens and the implementation of which will enable the city-state of Athens to maintain its independence and to thrive.

The text of *Nicomachean Ethics* is imbued with a very strong spirit of community. The prominence that is given to the virtue of courage, for example, is not just a coincidence but a very good indicator that the citizens of Athens, by embracing the egoistic goal of attaining virtue for their own happiness, they will effectively contribute to the well-being of the entire community. This is why habituation is of such importance. It is a process that produces remarkable individuals; individuals that pursue their own happiness and by doing so they also promote the happiness of those around them. It seems that Aristotle is very aware of the self-interested nature of human beings and he tries to solve the major social problem of living together along with the problem of survival of the community with the implementation of an educational policy the aim of which is to manipulate the sources of motivation.

Despite the highly perfectionist and even elitist spirit that the implementation of habituation into a society implies, it is my personal opinion that it is a kind of necessary „evil“ for any society that wishes to benefit from democratic forms of governance. Even contemporary liberalism, despite its alleged championing of the freedom that it grants to its citizens to freely choose a way of life and a moral worldview, faces serious problems when it comes down to state interventionism. The alleged value neutrality of the state has come increasingly under fire with the Frankfurt school accurately pointing to the hidden power relations and structures that are always present in a liberal society. In short, the weaknesses of Aristotle's perfectionist ideas are weaknesses that are present in contemporary political philosophy as well.

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