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# The Cognitive Implications of Aristotelian Habituation and Intrinsic Valuation

David F. McCaslin  
*Claremont McKenna College*

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Claremont McKenna College

**The Cognitive Implications of Aristotelian Habituation and Intrinsic Valuation**

Submitted to

Professor Suzanne Obdrzalek

And

Dean Peter Uvin

By

David McCaslin

For

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## **Abstract**

Habituation in the Aristotelian tradition claims that we develop our moral virtues through repeated and guided practice in moral actions. His theory provides important insights for moral education and as a result many contemporary philosophers have debated how to properly interpret his writing. This thesis will explore Aristotelian habituation and the competing interpretations surrounding it, namely the cognitivist and mechanical views. It will then criticize the mechanical view and argue that the intrinsic valuation of virtuous actions evidences a cognitivist interpretation of habituation in the Aristotelian tradition.

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## Introduction

In the second book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle begins to discuss the nature of virtues and argues that virtues of character, such as justice and temperance, arise in us through a process of habituation. He describes what a virtuous state entails and how one successfully habituates oneself to acquire character virtues by learning to take pleasure in virtuous actions. The first chapter of this thesis will present in depth Aristotle's account of habituation and how it relates to moral development. It will then move to a discussion of the various interpretations of his theory, which rely on various works of Aristotle but are primarily derived from his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle's account of habituation supports a virtue approach to moral education and contemporary philosophers have said that his theory is "able to account for both the emotions and the intellect in moral development" (Kerr 643). Aristotle's habituation has important implications moral education and developmental psychology and as a result contemporary philosophers have debated how one should properly interpret Aristotle's writing in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In her article, "*Habituation: A Method for Cultivating Starting Points in the Ethical Life*," Jeannie Kerr proposes, "if the virtue approach to moral education is to be defensible, its proponents must clarify and defend an interpretation of habituation that answers these critiques" (Kerr 643). Proponents of Aristotle's theory must provide clear evidence that Aristotle's process of habituation accounts for "the development of reasoning and critical independence," (Kerr 643) or else its viability as a virtue approach to moral education becomes problematic.

The contemporary literature provides two main lines of interpretation. Noted philosophers Nancy Sherman and Myles Burnyeat have argued in favor of a *cognitivist*

view of Aristotle's ethics, claiming that the developmental stages involved with the capacities for virtuous dispositions contain an overwhelmingly cognitive element. Critics of this view such as Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker argue in favor of a *mechanical* interpretation that posits that habituation is more suited to developing habits or skills than moral virtue. In this sense, they believe Aristotle's habituation is not conducive to virtue development and is therefore less competent as a model for moral education. This second chapter of this thesis will outline arguments in favor of a cognitivist view as presented by Sherman and Burnyeat. It will then discuss criticisms of these interpretations by Steutel and Spiecker and their theory supporting a mechanical view. Jeanie Kerr's article provides explanatory material regarding the relevant arguments as presented by the contemporary philosophers and will be referenced throughout the chapter.

In the third chapter, I will refute the claims made by Steutel and Spiecker and argue that a mechanical view of habituation does not accurately represent Aristotle's theory. I argue that the mechanical interpretation does not fully consider Aristotle's remarks on *how* one must commit virtuous actions for them to result in virtuous development. Furthermore, I present the view that Aristotle's requirement of valuing an action for its own sake illustrates the cognitivist elements of his habituation. Aristotle's theory is a powerful one and the debates on its proper interpretation have grand implications in determining its competency as a guide for moral education. In this thesis I hope to reinforce the notion of Aristotle's habituation having cognitive elements and being a viable model for virtue development.

## **Chapter One: Aristotle's Theory of Habituation**

Aristotle begins by separating virtues into two categories, moral virtues and intellectual virtues. He argues that intellectual virtues arise from teaching while moral virtues must “come about as a result of habit” (Aristotle 23). Aristotle explains that habits inherently cannot come about by nature because they must be formed in accordance to the individual and anything that comes about by nature is set from its beginning. Thus, because moral virtues are tied to habits and habits cannot arise from nature then moral virtues must come about in some other way. Aristotle writes that these habits must come about through practice and thus virtues come about by exhibiting virtuous behavior. For example, one becomes just by doing just actions and one becomes brave by doing brave actions. Aristotle illustrates this by alluding to legislators, citing a government’s aim to properly habituate its citizens by encouraging good actions and discouraging bad ones.

Because virtues arise in us through practice, there is the potential for both positive and negative virtue development (Aristotle 24). For example, good and bad musicians are both formed from extensive practice; one has generally had proper practice and the other generally has had poor practice. In this respect, proper virtue development requires the proper practicing of virtues. Because of this, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of having a teacher or tutor. Moreover, he states that learning proper habits from youth “makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference” (Aristotle 24). At this point, Aristotle has stated that virtuous behavior comes about from developing proper states of character. These states of character arise in us through practicing virtuous actions and this practice must be guided in the proper manner.

The nature of our actions determines the nature of our states of character (Aristotle 24). Thus we must ensure that the nature of our actions is in accordance with the habits we desire to develop. Aristotle writes that virtues are a mean between excess and deficiency (Aristotle 25). For example, bravery is the mean between cowardice, the deficiency, and rashness, the excess. Exerting too much bravery to the point of rashness will encourage the virtue of rashness while exerting too little will encourage the development of cowardice. Committing brave actions in the proper sense will make it easier to be brave and to exist in the mean between excess and deficiency. Thus, in an effort to develop states of character that are conducive to virtuous behavior, the nature of our actions must be somewhere in the middle of excess and deficiency.

Committing virtuous actions habituates oneself to more easily and naturally exhibit that particular virtue in the future. Abstaining from pleasure makes us temperate and committing brave actions causes us to “despise things that are fearful” (Aristotle 25) and as a result become brave. According to Aristotle, this process of habituation of moral virtues is “concerned with pleasures and pains” and thus we must be brought up in such a way “so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought” (Aristotle 26). The just person will naturally take pleasure in just actions while the unjust person will be pained by just actions and naturally inclined to abstain from them. Aristotle writes, “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” (Aristotle 26). This is the primary aspect of Aristotle’s habituation: committing virtuous actions in the proper sense makes us take pleasure in virtuous actions and feel pain when committing non-virtuous actions.

After outlining the importance of virtuous actions in the habituation process, Aristotle draws the important distinction between being virtuous and simply acting virtuous. He writes, “if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately” (Aristotle 27). In other words, merely committing a just or temperate act does not make the actor just or temperate. Rather, for the individual to truly act virtuously he must be in the right state. This state entails three things: one must have knowledge of the act he is committing, one must choose the action deliberately and for its own sake, and, lastly, one must act from a firm and unchanging character (Aristotle 27-28). One must embody all three aspects while committing a virtuous action to truly develop that virtue.

## Chapter Two: Competing Interpretations

In his essay “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” Myles Burnyeat argues that Aristotle’s habituation has clear cognitive implications and is a viable theory for moral development. His argument states that “habituation is concerned quite specifically with providing multiple and various opportunities to acquire the *starting points* of virtue” (Kerr 650) and habituation’s cognitive power lies in the ability to acquire these starting points through guided practice. Burnyeat focuses on Aristotle’s idea that practicing virtuous actions results in genuine virtue development. He writes, “Aristotle has in mind knowledge about actions in accordance with the virtues; these actions are the things familiar to us from which we must start, and what we know about them is that they are noble or just” (Burnyeat 208). According to Burnyeat, virtuous actions result in virtue development by us recognizing the nobility and justness in our actions. Habituation is the process by which we come to be familiar with what is noble and just in our actions and this familiarity constitutes the “starting points” needed for complete virtue development.

Burnyeat summarizes Aristotelian habituation as follows. Virtue development relies on learning from our actions. We learn from our actions by developing a familiarity with what they entail. In other words, by committing an action of a particular sort, we become familiar with the implications associated with this sort of thing. In order to learn to be virtuous, we must become familiar with what is noble and just. Thus, we must learn to recognize the nobility and justness in our actions. Burnyeat states, “if he is to be starting out on a path which will lead to his acquiring that educated perception, the emphasis had better be on his knowing of specific actions that they are noble or just in specific circumstances” (Burnyeat 208).

According to Burnyeat, habituation is the cognitive process that allows us to recognize and understand the virtue (justice and nobility) in our actions. He writes, “The thesis is that we first learn (come to see) what is noble and just *not* by experience of or induction from a series of instances, nor by intuition (intellectual or perceptual), but by learning to do noble and just things, by being habituated to noble and just conduct” (Burnyeat 209). Becoming habituated to virtuous conduct involves developing a sense of what is noble and just about our actions and becoming familiar with the ensuing pleasure and positive implications of them. Burnyeat describes this as “our ability to internalize from a scattered range of particular cases a general evaluative attitude which is not reducible to rules or precepts” (Burnyeat 208). In other words, when we commit virtuous acts, we are cognitively developing an attitude toward that act. Burnyeat insists that learning virtuous conduct cannot be done by studying rules or guidelines but rather must be done through developing an attitude or mental state that recognizes the nobility and justice in our actions. This “evaluative attitude” is what leads us to become familiar with what is noble and just, which, as it has been discussed, is essential for genuine moral virtue development.

The aforementioned familiarity with what is noble and virtuous encompasses the *starting points*, which Burnyeat describes as the “correct ideas about what actions are noble and just” (Burnyeat 208). Through committing virtuous actions, we acquire “an internalized conception of things that are noble and fine” (Kerr 650) which serve as basis for further moral development. These starting points give us the capacity to be receptive to moral teaching and develop a complete conception of the virtues that stem from them.

Burnyeat argues that the development of starting points illustrates the cognitive powers of practicing virtue. Starting points entail taking the “appropriate pleasure” in what is noble and just and this pleasure constitutes a genuine disposition toward virtuous action. The development of this disposition is the cognitive development that Burnyeat emphasizes. He writes, “practice has cognitive powers, in that it is the way we learn what is noble or just” (Burnyeat 209-210). Similar to other cognitive processes, habituation can result in both positive and negative dispositions, which Burnyeat describes as “the capacity for ‘noble joy and hatred’” (Burnyeat 2012). In comparing habituation to other forms of cognitive education, he writes, “habituation is actually a way of grasping [the disposition to noble joy], on a par with, though different form, induction, perception, and other modes of acquisition” (Burnyeat 209). These forms of cognition all serve as a “mode of acquisition” for a starting point. For example, we learn “by perception that fire is hot” and “by induction that all men breathe” (Burnyeat 209). Burnyeat asserts these examples are analogous with how habituation results in the learning of which actions are just and noble. Thus, Burnyeat’s viewpoint concludes that habituation is a process with cognitive powers and is therefore a viable moral development model.

Burnyeat’s essay supports a cognitivist account of habituation as opposed to a mechanical interpretation. In the chapter titled “The Habituation of Character” of her *The Fabric of Character*, Nancy Sherman similarly argues that Aristotle’s habituation contains important cognitive elements. She believes “mechanical theory of habituation ultimately makes mysterious the transition between childhood and moral maturity” (Sherman 232) and fails to show how we develop the capacities for virtue development. Her general conception is that if virtue is to meet certain conditions, this must be

reflected in the educational process. She argues that habituation allows us to develop the capacities for responding appropriately to certain situations and her account centers on “Aristotle’s view that practice yields pleasure to the extent to which it exhibits increasingly fine powers of discernment” (Sherman 233). In her essay she aims to show how “perceptual, affective, and deliberative capacities are cultivated within such an education” (Sherman 232).

Sherman begins by discussing Aristotle’s view of the undeveloped child. She appeals to the following notion, “since the child is undeveloped, it is clear that his virtue is not relative to himself, but relative to the fully development individual, and the one who is an authority over him” (Aristotle). Sherman extracts from this the idea that Aristotle’s development model views a child as dynamically developing. She writes, “these remarks openly invite a development model in which the child is viewed not statically, but as in progress toward full humanity, on his way toward some end” (Sherman 234). Furthermore, Aristotle’s development model shows that a child’s reasoning will be generated not only externally but also “internally by the child’s own perceptions, beliefs, and feelings” (Sherman 236). She continues to say that these internal developments “in dialogue with the beliefs of an experienced adult, will shape desire and emotion” (Sherman 236). This point illustrates the importance of the development of a child’s internal capacities and their role in shaping emotional and desire-oriented responses. Sherman goes on to argue that moral education aims at teaching the child how to appropriately evaluate these responses and decide on an action based on these responses.

According to Aristotle, virtues are a mode of affect or conduct and Sherman's interpretation considers virtue to be "a complex of capacities—perceptual, affective, and deliberative" (Sherman 238). Sherman's task is to tie virtue with emotional and affective capacities by emphasizing the intentionality of emotions. She alludes to Aristotle's claim that there is "a kind of desire—rational wish or *boulesis*—which is distinctive to the rational part and which is intimately connected with the capacities of reflection and revision" (Sherman 235). Sherman draws upon Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to show that "Aristotle's explicit theory of emotion as intentional or cognitive provides us with a clue: emotions will be educated, in part, through their constitutive beliefs and perceptions" (Sherman 238). Her point here is that emotions are intentional and can thus possess a cognitive element for their role in moral development.

More specifically, Sherman aims to show that cultivating the dispositional capacities for emotions are tied to "learning how to discern the circumstances that warrant these responses" (Sherman 238). For example, the developed person will experience fear when he recognizes a frightful situation or compassion when he recognizes a person in need of support. To support this claim, Sherman introduces the following passages from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

"All human beings desire to know by nature. And evidence of this is the pleasure that we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are enjoyed for their own sake, and above all others, the sense of eyesight...For this more than the other senses enables us to know and brings to light many distinctions."  
(980a20-7)

Sherman extracts from this the idea of a "central human desire to perceive and discriminate difference" which she calls "critical activity" (Sherman 239). She then notes

the significance of “intellectual delight,” which she draws from a passage from

Aristotle’s *Poetics*:

“...learning is the greatest of pleasures...And it is for this reason that they delight in seeing representations. For it turns out that in seeing they learn and figure out what each thing is...” (*Poet.* 1448b4-17; cf. *Rh.* 1371b4-10)

She argues that the pleasure from learning, intellectual delight, hinges on making a discovery or figuring out something that is not familiar in terms of what is familiar. With this in mind, she makes the claim that the aforementioned “critical activity and its enjoyment [intellectual delight] characterize all stages of development” (Sherman 239). As it pertains to habituation, critical activity and intellectual delight are essential for the emotional and affective capacities Sherman deems necessary for virtue development. She writes, “The discrimination of ethical relevance will ground affective responses” (Sherman 240). In other words, engaging in the critical activity of discerning differences in ethics-oriented situations is what invokes the responses needed to commit virtuous actions. Having established this point, Sherman moves towards the importance of having a tutor guide our responses by teaching us to properly discern the ethical elements of a situation.

Sherman holds that the parent’s role in moral development is “to bring the child to see the particular circumstances that here and now make certain emotions appropriate” (Sherman 242). The parent helps induce an ability to accurately consider a situation. This allows, for example, one to differ his evaluation of an accidental action from an intentional one or a teasing action from a genuine one. Sherman claims the Aristotelian presupposition is that our ability to discern is inherent based on the pleasure we get from learning. The next step is a “continuous and consistent instruction which will allow for

the formation of patterns and trends in what the child notices and sees” (Sherman 242).

Thus, parental education aims to bring the child to see how different circumstances merit certain judgments and reactions. Because of this, Sherman concludes, education is “a matter of bringing the child to more critical discriminations” (Sherman 242).

Central to the idea of critical discriminations is the ability to make choices.

Sherman alludes to the importance of a child’s emotional vulnerability, which, according to Aristotle, allows him to emphasize character and emotion in decision-making rather than careful calculation. Sherman further states that the “child is capable of voluntary choices which may require a certain level of means-end reasoning” (Sherman 244).

However, a transition to “full rationality” requires cultivation of an “all things considered” deliberation ability. This entails an ability to consider various ends ‘in the light of other ends which might take priority,’ or simply judging a situation based on the overall picture and not one specific outcome (Steutel, Spiecker 244). In the earlier stages of development, a child does not have this ability. Thus, they must aim to develop an appreciation of actions for their own sakes. This notion relies heavily on Aristotle’s second condition of habituation, one “must choose virtuous acts and choose them for their own sakes.” Sherman’s point is that a child’s ability to make choices must be tailored to value actions intrinsically. She writes, “actions derive their original value from external ends, in time it is the actions themselves that come to be valued” (Sherman 245-246).

Having established these points, Sherman moves to her account of “critical practice.” Critical practice in her view is what illustrates the cognitive elements of habituation. She writes that repetition in Aristotle’s view entails two things. First, “any

just action will be contextually defined and will vary considerably, in terms of judgment, emotion, and behaviour, from other just actions” (Sherman 247). Second, the repetition must yield some sort of progress or improvement. One cannot commit the action involved in the exact same manner as he previously did, as this is not conducive to any sort of progress. To remedy this condition, Sherman proposes that there is “some ideal action type that has been set as one’s goal. Learning through repetition will be then a matter of successive trials that vary from one another as they approach this ideal way of acting” (Sherman 248). From these remarks she concludes “practice achieves progress to the extent that repetition is critical” (Sherman 248). This type of repetition, deemed critical practice, must be applied to the type of practice needed for virtue development. Virtuous actions, in Aristotle’s view, must entail this notion of critical practice.

This critical practice is supported by Aristotle’s discussion of intrinsic pleasures. Actions are critical when they involve taking the proper pleasure in themselves. Sherman writes, “it is the pleasure proper to a particular activity that impels us to perform that activity the next time with greater discrimination and precision” (Sherman 251). Similarly, experiencing pain from an activity impedes progress and alien pleasures distract from meaningful virtue development (Sherman 252). Thus, Sherman’s model is that “practice yields pleasure to the extent to which practice itself is critical. And pleasure, in turn, yields further critical activity” (Sherman 252). Because pleasure “arises from discriminatory activity,” one must discern the proper pleasures in virtuous action in order to yield the initial cognitive capacities for virtues (Sherman 252).

When applied a moral development model, critical practice yields an “imperfect actualization... a pleasure specific to the capacities of a human being, though a pleasure

lesser in degree than that of the most perfect actualization” (Sherman 253). In other words, the pleasure generated for non-fully developed individuals is a less perfect critical activity than for the fully developed individual. Sherman writes, “exercise of the perceptual and critical faculties appears to admit of degrees...even the learner gains pleasure from the exercise of his abilities” (Sherman 254). Sherman’s point is that the learner of virtue must exhibit at least a smart part of the actual virtue. She argues “to become aware of the circumstances necessary for the specific virtues, and to begin to form the right sorts of emotional responses and decisions for action, is itself a part of having virtue” (Sherman 256). In other words, the learner gains a *part* of the virtue in question and his critical activity “yields pleasure to the extent to which it develops that part” (Sherman 256).

In short, Sherman’s view is that proper habituation requires a genuine engaging of cognitive elements. Her notion of critical practice, repetition that yields pleasure based on discerning the circumstances of a particular circumstance, is necessary if virtuous actions are to result in virtuous development. This critical practice illustrates the cognitive powers of Aristotle’s theory. According to Sherman, “the practice is more a refinement of actions through successive trials than a sheer mechanical repetition of any one action” (Sherman 248). Thus, she concludes Aristotelian habituation merits a cognitivist interpretation and is a competent model for virtue development.

While Burnyeat and Sherman present compelling cases for a cognitivist interpretation of habituation, other contemporary philosophers, most notably Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker, argue against the cognitive implications of Sherman’s account and present evidence for a mechanical view of habituation. Steutel and Spiecker argue that

Sherman overplays the centrality of cultivating discriminatory abilities in habituation. Because of this, she “tends to marginalize the formative role of the characteristics of habituation highlighted by Aristotle himself” (Steutel, Spiecker 547). Steutel and Spiecker grant that Sherman discusses the relevance of practice and repetition as well as the role of the threat of punishment in habituation. However, the authors criticize that “she nowhere acknowledges that these characteristics of Aristotelian habituation may play an important role in cultivating sentimental dispositions” (Steutel, Spiecker 547). Steutel and Spiecker consider “frequent and consistent” practice to be pivotal in developing sentimental affections and thus find Sherman’s lack of emphasis on this idea to be problematic. The authors believe that Sherman’s dismissal of habituation as mechanical causes her to “downplay the extent to which Aristotle sees habituation as essentially involving the establishment of virtuous sentimental dispositions through acting frequently and consistently” (Steutel, Spiecker 548).

In presenting their view for a mechanical interpretation, Steutel and Spiecker begin by discussing two aspects they deem vital for Aristotelian habituation, that moral education centers on sentimental education and that habituation is necessary for sentimental education. Furthermore, they develop a concise conception of Aristotelian habituation that focuses on three key characteristics. They deem that Aristotle’s habituation “consists in (i) practicing the virtues or, more precisely, performing those actions that correspond with virtuous sentimental dispositions, (ii) performing such actions frequently and consistently, and (iii) doing so under the guidance or authority of a virtuous tutor” (Steutel, Spiecker 536). It is from the first two characteristics that they

develop their mechanical interpretation, which will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

The first bit of evidence for a mechanical interpretation is that Aristotelian habituation is more conducive to developing skills than sentimental dispositions. Steutel and Spiecker propose, “the educational means, habituation, and the educational aim, the growth and settlement of virtuous affective dispositions, seem to be ill-matched” (Steutel, Spiecker 537). The authors argue that the first characteristic (i) of habituation is indicative of a model for learning skills rather than sentimental dispositions. Skills must be acquired by practice whereas affective dispositions, they argue, can be acquired in other ways such as classical conditioning or affective contagion (Steutel, Spiecker 537). For example, “a single experience with a snapping dog may lead to ineradicable feelings of distrust regarding this animal’s nature” (Steutel, Spiecker 537). This example illustrates the idea that affective dispositions do not need to be the result of learning through practice and doing. This of course does not undermine Aristotle’s view but shows that developing some sorts of sentimental or affective dispositions do not require repeated practice. This gives insight to the nature of affective disposition development that supports Steutel and Spiecker’s view but they still must show why affective dispositions cannot be the result of learning by doing.

Steutel and Spiecker maintain that practice and repetition are requisite for the development of skills, at least in the paradigmatic sense. However, they contest that the same relationship between practice and developing affective dispositions cannot exist without a compelling explanation. The authors assert that practicing certain actions allows one to develop the proper skills associated with those actions but does not yield

any sentimental dispositions related to the actions. For example, participating in charity work develops the ability of effective assistance and help-oriented problem solving but does not directly result in the “growth and settlement of the affective dispositions involved in the virtue of helpfulness, such as concern, sympathy and feelings and responsibility” (Steutel, Spiecker 538). Steutel and Spiecker believe that one implication of charitable work is developing an aversion to the norms of community support. Their point is that it is evidently unlikely that participation in these actions will lead to developing dispositions to the virtues associated with charity.

To support their claim, they discuss the work of Gilbert Ryle in his essay, “Can virtue be taught?” Ryle maintains that skills and virtues have distinct differences and that the natural association between virtue development and practice is grounded in the fact that some skills are deeply imbedded in virtues, particularly as they pertain to will-power (Steutel, Spiecker 538). For example, exhibiting temperance requires the skills of self-intervention and self-control. According to Ryle, the use of skills is often required when we showcase virtuous behavior and this utilization of skills is what causes us to associate virtue with learning by doing. A deeper analysis reveals that virtues and skills are fundamentally different; being virtuous implies having wants, aversions, feelings, and desires (Steutel, Spiecker 538) while skills are an ability cultivated through practice. Ryle concludes that because moral virtues are constituted by affective dispositions rather than skills, virtue development cannot be contingent on practice. These remarks, coupled with their earlier analysis, lead Steutel and Spiecker to conclude that habituation leads to skills rather than sentimental dispositions.

Next, the authors contend that habituation is more suited toward establishing habits than sentimental dispositions. This claim focuses on their second characteristic of Aristotelian habituation (ii) that emphasizes practicing frequently and consistently. First, Steutel and Spiecker define habits as “dispositions to *do* certain kinds of things, and not...dispositions to be affected in certain ways under particular circumstances” (Steutel, Spiecker 539). Secondly, they write, habits are relatively settled and permanent dispositions to perform certain actions. Habits are capable of changing but their fundamental nature implies a sort of consistency and fixedness. Third, the authors argue that habits are dispositions to actions performed relatively regularly (Steutel, Spiecker 539). More specifically, “having a habit implies always or at least usually doing certain things when the moment has come or the circumstances occur” (Steutel, Spiecker 539). Lastly, habits are dispositions to commit certain actions automatically. In other words, when we commit the actions associated with a particular habit, we are doing so without deliberation, reflection, or active choice (Steutel, Spiecker 539).

Steutel and Spiecker argue that the third characteristic most strongly evidences a connection between habits and habituation. Not all habits are the result of habituation, they argue, but the innate regularity of habits is similar in nature to the consistency and frequency associated with habituation. Thus, this similarity makes “the process of habituation particularly apt for cultivating habits” (Steutel, Spiecker 540). The authors argue that a similar relationship between habituation and sentimental dispositions is difficult to ascertain. They again present the example of committing charitable acts. They argue that giving money to a homeless man or helping an elderly lady across the street is conducive toward developing habits related to those actions; however, these actions do

not themselves “result in the firmly settled affective dispositions that are constitutive of the virtue of charity” (Steutel, Spiecker 540). From this analysis of the differences in developing skills, habits, and virtues, the authors conclude that Aristotelian habituation does not present a compelling case for why committing virtuous actions frequently and consistently lead to the development of related virtues.

Steutel and Spiecker’s view implies a mechanical interpretation of Aristotle’s habituation. They believe, unlike Sherman and Burnyeat, that habituation in the Aristotelian tradition is conducive toward developing habits and skills rather than virtues. The mechanical view undermines Aristotle’s habituation as a model for moral development while the cognitivist views of Sherman and Burnyeat interpret his theory as a viable virtue development model.

### **Chapter Three: The Cognitive Elements of Intrinsic Valuation**

Nancy Sherman and Myles Burnyeat present compelling accounts for a cognitivist interpretation of Aristotle's habituation. While I believe Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker do a great service by outlining the mechanical interpretation, their account ultimately fails to disprove the presence of cognitive elements in habituation in the Aristotelian tradition. They argue that committing virtuous actions on a regular basis does not itself "result in firmly settled affective dispositions that are constitutive of the virtue" in question (Steutel, Spiecker 540). To begin with, Aristotle's account of habituation does not require affective dispositions to be firmly settled for the development of virtue. Rather, these affective dispositions must simply be present in the individual to give him the capacity to develop the related virtues. Second, and more importantly, Aristotle does not hold that merely *acting* virtuous results in virtuous development. Rather, it is the recognition of the virtue in the action that leads to developing these dispositions. This is evident in Aristotle's specification of a certain state being required when committing the actions. He writes, "in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes" (Aristotle 27).

Central to the idea of recognizing the virtue in actions is the idea of choosing acts deliberately and for their own sakes. Aristotle requires that we recognize the intrinsic value of our actions. Sherman writes, "in time it is the actions themselves that come to be valued" (Sherman 245-246). For the child, actions are initially recognized by their external value or noticeable impact. However, through habituation he comes to see that the actions should be mainly, perhaps solely, judged based on their internal value. This

process of learning to value an action for its own sake involves a clear increase in cognitive ability and illustrates the cognitive value of Aristotelian habituation.

Valuing an action intrinsically requires a much more complex reasoning process than valuing an action for its external implications. For valuing an action based on its outcome can essentially be reducible to certain rules and guidelines that can be followed with minimal engagement of cognitive faculties. However, coming to judge an action for its internal value engages more complicated faculties of emotion, discernment, and deliberation. To recognize the virtue in an action directly, one must discern the ethical elements pertaining to an action. To do this, one must have an actual conception of the relevant virtues in order that he may recognize their presence in an action. Furthermore, one must prioritize the ethical elements of an action and allocate their importance based on the present circumstances. Recognizing the presence of ethical elements and discerning their importance and relevance demonstrates a higher-level cognitive process than what is required when valuing an action externally. I conclude that intrinsic valuation requires a genuine utilization of cognitive capacities and it is this valuation that leads to affective dispositions.

In this sense, I believe that proponents of the mechanical interpretation narrow the scope of habituation to a more superficial means-ends process that fails to consider the intrinsic value of actions. Steutel and Spiecker make their argument from the perspective that children committing virtuous acts only value the external implications. The philosophers argue that acting virtuously is conducive toward developing skills and habits rather than affective dispositions. This is a fair assessment if we are to consider practice in the mechanical sense; that is, as a process of rote learning based on an

evaluation of how to act given certain rules or notions of the related external outcomes. The proponents of this view fail to consider how one may involve intrinsic valuation in his practice. The recognition of an action's internal value cannot be made without engaging cognitive faculties and because of this, I conclude that a cognitivist interpretation is more in line with Aristotelian habituation than a mechanical interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

Aristotelian habituation posits that the development of moral virtues stems from the proper practicing of virtuous actions. As simply acting virtuously is not enough to result in development, Aristotle details how we come to recognize actions for their intrinsic virtuous value and how we must utilize the guidance of a tutor so that our actions result in moral progress rather than diminishment. This thesis has outlined Aristotle's theory and presented the details of his account so that they may be adequately considered in determining a proper interpretation of the text.

This thesis then explored the two main interpretations of Aristotle's theory as presented by philosophers Myles Burnyeat, Nancy Sherman, Jeannie Kerr, Jan Steutel, and Ben Spiecker. Burnyeat, Sherman, and Kerr support a cognitivist interpretation that legitimizes Aristotle's theory as a viable moral development model. They argue that cognitive faculties are utilized in the "starting points" and "critical practice" pertinent to habituation. Steutel and Spiecker, in contrast, believe that habituation in the Aristotelian tradition is more conducive to developing habits and skills rather than affective dispositions requiring cognitive engagement. They argue that the repetition involved in habituation is similar to learning a skill and supports a mechanical interpretation of Aristotle's theory.

In the last section, the thesis presented a criticism of Steutel and Spiecker's view and argued that proponents of a mechanical interpretation do not appropriately consider Aristotle's notion that we must recognize the internal value of virtuous actions. I argue that this intrinsic valuation requires the use cognitive faculties and therefore illustrates the cognitive elements of habituation. My argument hopefully reinforces the ideas of

Burnyeat and Sherman that habituation contains clear cognitive elements and thus the cognitivist interpretation of Aristotle's theory is the proper one. Aristotle's theory of habituation giving rise to moral virtues has significant implications for moral education and development theory and thus explorations of the cognitive powers of Aristotelian habituation is as fruitful as it is fascinating.

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