How do we become good?

*The Big Questions*, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Margaret Róisín Hampson
· What kinds of ethical questions do we ask?
  · E.g. ‘Do objective moral values exist?’ (Dr Rachel Handley, 20th April)
  · What makes an action right? Is it something internal to the action, or about the consequences that are brought about?

· We should not forget that ethics is also a practical affair and about the kinds of lives that we live.
  · How should we live?
  · What kind of persons do we want to be? What is it to have a good moral character?
  · How do we become good persons? How do we develop a good moral character? And how do we raise children of good character too?
0. Overview of the lecture

• (1) The question in ancient Greek philosophy
  • Plato’s *Meno*: ‘Can virtue be taught?’
  • Aristotle’s claim that we become good through a process of moral habituation

• (2) Fleshing out the account
  • What is moral habituation and how might it work?
  • Some attempts to explain this process

• (3) A new proposal
  • The role of imitation in moral habituation

• (4) Some further issues considered
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

The origins of our question

- Our question has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, especially that of **Plato** and **Aristotle**

  “Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, **but to become good**, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.2, 1103b26-29)

  “The aim in practical things is not to study and know each thing, but rather to do them. **Hence knowing about virtue is not sufficient, rather we must try to possess and to use it, or to become good in any other way**” (Aristotle, *NE* 10.9, 1179a35-b4)

- I want to draw on Aristotle’s response to our question. This seems to me to be along the right lines, but need fleshing out.
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

A note on ‘virtue’

- Virtue (aretē, lit. excellence).
- What is an excellent specimen of the kind of being that I am? What is the best condition that I can be in, given the kind of being that I am?
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

**Plato’s Meno**

- “Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught, or is acquired by practice, not teaching? Or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to mankind by nature or in some other way?” (Plato, *Meno*, 70a)

“Stranger, you must think me a specially favoured mortal, to be able to tell whether virtue can be taught, or in what way it comes to one: so far am I from knowing whether it can be taught or not, that I actually do not even know what the thing itself, virtue, is at all. And I myself, Meno, am in the same case; I share my townsmen's poverty in this matter: I have to reproach myself with an utter ignorance about virtue; and if I do not know what a thing is, how can I know what its nature may be?” (Plato, *Meno*, 71a-b)
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* asks ‘what is the human good?’ and ‘how do we achieve it?’

- His answer: the human good consists in a life of virtue (Book 1)
- In *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1, Aristotle distinguishes between two sorts of virtue, and the corresponding ways in which they’re acquired

- **Virtues of thought** (e.g. scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom) are acquired ‘mostly from teaching’

- **Virtues of character** (e.g. justice, temperance, bravery) ‘arise from habit’ or a process of habituation
  - Much of Aristotle’s focus in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is on this latter sort of virtue, and this – and his claim that virtue is acquired through a process of habituation – will be our focus too.
Aristotle gives two reasons for thinking that the virtues are not possessed ‘by nature’

(1) Things that are ‘by nature’ in a certain condition cannot be changed through habituation. But we can be made good through habituation.

- E.g. A stone ‘by nature’ falls downwards; it cannot be made to move upwards (on its own) even if it is thrown in the air 10,000 times.
- But clearly people can be made good through training, as we can see in the city around us.

“And so the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit” (Aristotle, NE 2.1, 1103a23-25)
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Why virtue isn’t possessed by nature

• (2) With capacities or states that we possess by nature, we first have the capacity and then exercise it. But the reverse is the case with the virtues.
  • E.g. with capacities such as hearing or sight, we have the capacity to see or hear (from birth) and then we exercise that capacity when we see or hear.
  • But with the virtues – like skills – we acquire the capacity/state by first engaging in the relevant activity.

“For we learn a skill by producing the product we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become lyre players by playing the lyre. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just things, temperate by doing temperate things, brave by doing brave things” (Aristotle, NE 2.1 1103a31-b3)
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

How we act determines how we turn out

- The way we act determines whether we become virtuous or vicious
- Virtue is both produced and destroyed through the same things, so we need to act well:

“For by building well, makes good builders, and building badly makes bad ones. Otherwise no teacher would be needed, but everyone would be born a good or bad craftsman. It is the same, then, with the virtues. For what we do in our dealings with other people makes some of us just, some unjust, what we do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear or confidence that we acquire make some of us brave and others cowardly. The same is true of situations involving appetites and anger; for one or another sort of conduct in these situations makes some temperate and mild, others intemperate and irascible. To sum it up in a single phrase: character states come about through like activities” (Aristotle, NE 2.1, 1103b11-21)
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

A puzzle about moral habituation

- In *NE* 2.4 Aristotle raises a puzzle, that would seem to pose a challenge to his account of moral habituation
  - Note, we don’t have to read Aristotle as endorsing the challenge. It’s a challenge he recognises someone might make, and that he needs to respond to. Good scholarship...

  “One may be puzzled about how we say that (1) someone must become just by doing just things, and temperate, temperate things, for (2) if they do just and temperate things, they are just and temperate already. Just as if [one does] grammatical and musical things, one is grammatical and musical (Aristotle, *NE* 2.4, 1105a17-21)

  - i.e. If someone does virtuous things, don’t they already count as virtuous?
1. The Question in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Aristotle’s response to the puzzle

- Aristotle begins with the case of skills. We can do something grammatical by chance or under instruction.
- So it doesn’t follow that we are a grammarian from the fact that we do grammatical things.
- The grammarian, however, is someone who does something grammatical, and does it grammatically, i.e. with grammatical knowledge.
- The purpose of practising grammar, then, is to acquire grammatical knowledge, and to eventually become a grammarian.
Likewise, we can perform virtuous actions without being virtuous (doing the right thing, at the right time, to the right person).

But the virtuous person is the person who does this *virtuously*.

Acting virtuously, however, is more demanding than doing things grammatically. The agent has to meet three conditions: She must:

1. Act knowingly
2. Choose virtuous actions for their own sake
3. Act from a firm and unchanging state of character (1105a31-33)

We come to meet these conditions *by practicing virtuous actions*.
Aristotle claims that moral virtue is acquired through a process of moral habituation. This involves practising virtuous actions. By practicing virtuous actions we will eventually become such as to perform those actions knowingly, to choose those actions for their own sake, and to do so from a firm and unchanging state of character. So how does this process work? What happens when we do these things, and how does it result in moral virtue?
Some think of habituation as a *mechanical process*. On this view, by performing virtuous actions many times, we simply acquire the habit of acting that way. Habituation involves repeatedly performing certain sorts of actions; the moral equivalent of brushing your teeth or washing your hands?
2. Fleshing out the account

Problems with a mechanical view:

- (1) Virtuous actions differ from situation to situation; the agent acts with knowledge and needs to discern what to do in a given situation.
  - Acquiring the habit of performing a given action, through repeated practice wouldn’t entail that you act correctly in every situation
  - Moreover, how does mindless practice produce the kind of knowledge distinctive of the virtuous person?

- (2) The mechanical view also cannot explain how the virtuous person comes to value virtuous actions for their own sakes.
2. Fleshing out the account

Training our sense of pleasure?

- A virtuous person takes pleasure in performing virtuous actions
  - Remember, they want to do these things; e.g. they share their belongings wholeheartedly, and isn’t pained at the thought of doing so

- So perhaps habituation is the process by which we learn to take pleasure in performing virtuous actions? This might work in a number of ways:
  - Pleasure in repetition?
    - “The familiar and the habitual are among the pleasurable; for people even do with pleasure many things they do not naturally find pleasant when they have grown accustomed to them” (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1369b16-18)
    - Though sometimes our experience is otherwise...

  - Pleasure through association?
    - Incentivised to perform virtuous actions, and then begin to take pleasure in virtuous actions themselves?

  - Still quite a mechanical picture?
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Our natural tendency to imitate

- A suggestion: the process of moral habituation involves imitating a virtuous person
- We have a natural tendency to imitate

“Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes, and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man’s natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which men take in mimetic objects. An indication of the latter can be observed in practice: for we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain – such as the appearance of the basest animals, or of corpses” (Aristotle, Poetics 4).
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Two types of imitation

• A worry: when we imitate something don’t we merely appear like whatever we’re imitating? But we don’t want to simply appear like the virtuous person. We want to be like them.
  • Moreover, imitation can be deceptive (e.g. the Talented Mr Ripley)
  • So isn’t this an inappropriate model for thinking about how we become good?

• But imitation can also be transformative. By imitating a person we can also eventually become like that person.

Socrates “if [the young guardians of the Republic] imitate anything, they must imitate right from childhood what is appropriate for them—that is to say, people who are courageous, moderate, pious, free, and everything of that sort. On the other hand, they must not be clever at doing or imitating illiberal or shameful actions, so that they won’t enjoy the real thing from imitating it. Or haven’t you noticed that imitations, if they are practised much past youth, get established in the habits and nature of body, speech and mind?” (Plato, Republic, 395c-d)
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Preliminary thoughts

• So imitation seems to have the power to improve our character if we choose the right models.
• But how does this help to explain how we become good?
• Suggestion: If we copy a virtuous person’s actions, then we’ll practise performing the right actions.
  • But this suggestion in itself doesn’t shed much light on this process; we want to know what happens when we do these things and how it results in us meeting the conditions of virtue.
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Preliminary thoughts

- **Suggestion**: through imitation we acquire knowledge of virtuous action, in all its particularity?
  - This is no doubt one of the things that a virtuous model provides for a learner
  - But what work is the concept of *imitation* doing then? Couldn’t we just get this knowledge through *observation*?
  - And what about the other conditions of virtue? e.g. the motivational condition?
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Emulative imitation – translating into our own lives

- What happens when we imitate another person, with the aim of becoming like them? (Emulative Imitation)
- (1) We need to pay close attention to our model and what they do; and we need to think about how this would translate into our own lives.
  - What kinds of actions does a virtuous person perform in a given situation?
  - What would it be for me to be like and to act like that person, in the situations I find myself?
  - Note that this question doesn’t get raised when we are simply observing another person.
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

*Emulative imitation – adopting a perspective*

- (2) When we emulate a *person*, we need to do more than copy their actions
  - After all, as we have seen, being a person of a certain sort involves more than simply performing certain sorts of actions.
  - It involves having beliefs and knowledge; having certain desires and emotional responses; seeing the world a certain way.

- So in order to imitate a person in an emulative way, we need to adopt their perspective.
  - We need to attempt to see situations as that person sees them
  - Think of the difference between a mime and a method actor
  - E.g. sharing: see this as an opportunity to bring joy to another person, rather than having less of something.
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

**Acquiring a new perspective**

- How might this help to explain how we become good?
- We get better at reading situations; we see certain features as salient.
- We learn to see the world, and our own situations, not as structured around our own immediate concerns (esp. pleasures) but as the virtuous person sees them
  - E.g. Where we previously saw our pocket money as something to spend on ourselves, say, we now see that it could also be used to help other people.
- We can appreciate the things that make these actions valuable
  - E.g. The fact that sharing brings joy to another person is part of what makes sharing valuable. In this way we learn to see what makes these actions worth choosing for their own sakes.
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

*Taking stock again*

- So by emulating a virtuous person, by adopting their perspective and trying to see our own situations as the virtuous person would we:
  - Acquire knowledge of the situations in which we find ourselves and how to act in those situations
  - We see the value of so acting; we come to choose those actions for their own sakes.
  - Over time, this way of seeing things becomes our own. We acquire a firm and stable disposition to see things and to act in that way.
4. Some issues considered

- What if we don’t have the right models around us?
  - This account isn’t meant to be infallible.
  - We are no doubt subject to the influence of those around us

- How do we know who to emulate?
  - Again, we may be subject to the influence of those around us
  - But notice that we do tend to have a grasp of exemplars of particular virtues (and vices!)
  - Of course this might be influenced by the norms of a given community
4. Some issues considered

• Is this too demanding for a young learner?
  • We need to begin right from childhood. But can we really expect that a young child will be adopting the perspective of another person?

• Yet we do see this form of imitation even in children’s games
  • E.g. Playing doctors and nurses. Children do more than just copy actions. They don’t simply copy holding up a stethoscope to the chest (although this is part of the imitation), but they look for opportunities to provide ‘medical care’, e.g. to teddy-bears!
  • A learner’s ability to inhabit the perspective of another may be more limited at an earlier age, but it is a capacity that will develop as she matures
4. Some issues considered

• How can we see what is salient to the virtuous person?
  • Perhaps this is puzzling only if we think that we are alone in this process
  • We are members of communities; we have parents and guides around us who can point these things out.
  • Over time, we are able to do this more on our own.
4. Concluding thoughts

- The process of becoming good is a process that importantly involves action and activity.
- How we act plays an important role in how our characters turn out.
- But it is also importantly a social process. Other people also play a significant role in influencing and guiding our development.
  - And since ‘man is a political animal’, this shouldn’t be surprising!
Thank you for listening!
2. Fleshing out the account

Discerning practice

- So habituation cannot be mindless or mechanical.
- The moral learner needs to engage her perceptual and critical faculties when she practices virtuous actions
  - Notice that sometimes courage involves standing at your post, other times it involves standing up for your friends
  - Pay attention to the details of the situation, notice what matters about the situation
  - Practice making decisions themselves, not just following instructions.
- But what might this process involve?
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Adopting another’s perspective:

- How might these two features of *emulative imitation* (translating into our own lives; adopting a perspective) help to explain how we become good?

- **Adopting another’s perspective:**
  - This forces us to step away from our own particular concerns, even if just momentarily. Our own perspective becomes enlarged, and we begin to appreciate that the world is not just structured around our own particular needs and concerns.
    - Where we previously saw our pocket money as something to spend on ourselves, say, we now see that it could also be used to help other people.
  - We pause before we act. So we are not just acting on our own immediate inclinations.
  - We can appreciate the things that make these actions valuable
    - E.g. The fact that sharing brings joy to another person is part of what makes sharing valuable. In this way we learn to see what makes these actions worth choosing for their own sakes.
3. A new proposal: the role of imitation

Translating into our own lives

- Translating into our own lives
- We learn to see our own situations as a virtuous person would see them.
  - E.g. I see that I have a chocolate bar, that my brother doesn’t, and that by sharing this, I can bring him joy.
- In this way we become better at reading the situations in which we find ourselves and knowing how to act. We see certain features as salient.
- And we see these actions as valuable