

**Aristotle on the Necessity of Habituation:  
Re-Reading *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4**

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**Abstract**

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4 Aristotle raises a puzzle about moral habituation. Scholars take the puzzle to concern how a learner could perform virtuous actions, given the assumption that virtue is *prior* to virtuous action. I argue, instead, that Aristotle is concerned to defend the necessity of practice, given the assumption that virtue is *reducible* to virtuous action.

**Keywords**

Aristotle; virtue; *aporia*; habituation; action; agency

**1. Introduction**

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4, Aristotle raises a puzzle about moral habituation (1105a17-21):

One may be puzzled about how we say that people must become just by doing just things, and temperate, temperate things, for if they do just and temperate things, they are just and temperate already. Just as if [they do] grammatical and musical things, they are grammatical and musical.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's response to this puzzle has received a great deal of attention in the scholarly literature, and various competing interpretations of this have emerged. Indeed, these interpretations have come, rightly or wrongly, to inform scholarship on central issues in Aristotle's ethics. Yet whilst Aristotle's response to the puzzle has been variously interpreted, the nature of the puzzle itself has been assumed almost unquestioningly: the puzzle, the thought goes, concerns the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions, and is generated on the basis of an assumption about the priority of virtue over virtuous action. If the assumption is correct, it would not be possible to perform virtuous actions unless one is virtuous already. And this, of

<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

course, conflicts with a claim at the core of Aristotle's account of moral habituation, that we *become* virtuous *by* performing virtuous actions.

I believe, however, that scholars have consistently misidentified the nature of the puzzle Aristotle is raising and, correspondingly, have misidentified the form of Aristotle's solution. The puzzle, as indicated, is typically taken to concern the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions, but I will argue, on the contrary, that we should instead see Aristotle as concerned to show why practising virtuous actions is necessary for becoming virtuous. My disagreement with the traditional reading of the puzzle, though, does not come down to a mere difference in emphasis but turns on the important matter of the assumption motivating the puzzle. On the traditional reading, Aristotle's imagined opponent claims that it is not possible to perform virtuous actions unless one is virtuous already, and does so on the basis of the assumption that virtue has explanatory priority to virtuous action. By contrast, I will argue that we should take Aristotle's opponent to be asking why a process of habituation should be necessary, on the assumption that to be virtuous just is to be someone who performs virtuous actions.

These are very different readings of the passage, but let me point straightaway to what I think is one reason not to be satisfied with the traditional and standard reading. For it is not only that Aristotle does not think that we need to be virtuous already in order to perform virtuous actions;<sup>2</sup> rather, it is questionable whether he thinks that the assumption that we *do* need to be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions is sufficiently plausible to generate a serious *aporia* – and this, we shall see, is how he frames the passage.

The reading I shall defend, and set against the traditional and standard reading, not only fits better with Aristotle's own presentation of the puzzle but enables us to provide a more satisfactory reading of Aristotle's response and the logic of his argument. This is not, however, merely a matter of challenging an unquestioned assumption in the interpretation of Aristotle, or of offering a reconstruction of the logic of an argument – although that is one aim of this paper. For, once we recognise that Aristotle is concerned in *NE* 2.4 not with the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions but, rather, with why it should be necessary to *practise* virtuous actions in order to become virtuous, this naturally and cogently leads to the posing of two further questions about the necessity of this process, each of which serves as a route to a deeper understanding of Aristotle's ethics.

Aristotle argues, in *NE* 2.4, that practice of virtuous actions is necessary to achieve the three agential conditions that are constitutive of moral virtue. They are: that an agent acts knowingly, that she choose virtuous actions and choose them for their own sake, and that she do

<sup>2</sup> That is, he does not think that our being virtuous is necessary for, and is that which alone explains, the possibility of our performing such actions

so from a firm and unchanging state of character (1105a31-3). However, it seems to me that we need to ask: (i) Why are these three agential conditions something we should *aim at meeting*, over and above simply performing virtuous actions? and (ii) Why is *practice* – that is, the very *doing* – of virtuous actions necessary for us to meet these conditions? Not only does the proposed reading of the passage lead naturally and cogently to the posing of these questions (which the traditional reading does not), but it also allows us to see that the materials with which the first question can be answered (and possibly, as a result, the second) are largely contained within this very passage.

## 2. The Passage

Before we turn to the interpretation of the puzzle, it will be helpful to have the full passage before us and to make some preliminary remarks about the structure of the puzzle and Aristotle's response.<sup>3</sup> The passage begins by stating a puzzle or *aporia* (1105a17-21):

One may be puzzled about how we say that [1] people must become just by doing just things, and temperate, temperate things, for [2] [i] if they do just and temperate things, they are just and temperate already. [ii] Just as if [they do] grammatical and musical things, they are grammatical and musical.<sup>4</sup>

The claim labelled [1] is a restatement of Aristotle's claim introduced in *NE* 2.1 that we become just by doing just things.<sup>5</sup> This claim was presented as relatively straightforward in *NE* 2.1, but Aristotle now recognises that his reader might find this claim puzzling, on the basis of the claim labelled [2] [i]: 'if they do just things, they are just already.'<sup>6</sup> This claim is taken to be analogous to (*hōsper*) – and perhaps even to derive analogical support from – the claim labelled [2] [ii] regarding skills. Aristotle does not need to be committed, himself, to the thought expressed in [2], or to the assumptions which underlie it. But this must be sufficiently plausible

<sup>3</sup> I add my articulation in square brackets, for ease of reference in what follows.

<sup>4</sup> ἀπορήσειε δ' ἂν τις πῶς λέγομεν ὅτι δεῖ τὰ μὲν δίκαια πράττοντας δικαίους γίνεσθαι, τὰ δὲ σώφρονα σώφρονας· εἰ γὰρ πράττουσι τὰ δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα, ἤδη εἰσὶ δίκαιοι καὶ σώφρονες, ὥσπερ εἰ τὰ γραμματικὰ καὶ τὰ μουσικὰ, γραμματικοὶ καὶ μουσικοί. (Bywater 1894.)

<sup>5</sup> 'The virtues we acquire by having acted first just as we do various sorts of skills. For the things we must do once we've learned [the skill in question] we learn by doing these things, men become builders, for instance, by building, and 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' (τὰς δ' ἀρετὰς λαμβάνομεν ἐνεργήσαντες πρότερον, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν· ἃ γὰρ δεῖ μαθόντας ποιεῖν, ταῦτα ποιοῦντες μαθάνομεν, οἷον οἰκοδομοῦντες οἰκοδόμοι γίνονται καὶ κιθαρίζοντες κιθαρισταί· οὕτω δὲ καὶ τὰ μὲν δίκαια πράττοντες δίκαιοι γινόμεθα, τὰ δὲ σώφρονα σώφρονες, τὰ δ' ἀνδρεῖα ἀνδρεῖοι, 1103a31-b2).

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will speak in what follows only of 'doing just things'.

to motivate the *aporia* – for this is what Aristotle calls it – and something Aristotle sees as worth engaging with.

Aristotle's solution to the *aporia* is as follows (1105a21-b12):

[A] Or is it not so in the case of skills? For it is possible to do something grammatical either by chance or under the instruction of another. [B] And so he will be proficient in grammar, then, if he does something grammatical and grammatically: that is, in accordance with the grammar inside him. [C] And yet the case of the skills is not like the case of the virtues, for what is produced by skill has its good in itself: and so it is sufficient that these things are produced having a certain quality. [D] But the things that are produced in accordance with the virtues are not justly or temperately done if they (simply) have a certain quality in themselves, but only if the agent also acts having a certain quality. [E] First, if [they act] with knowledge, next if [they act] choosing and choosing for its own sake, and third if they act firmly and unchangingly. [F] With regards to the other skills, these do not count for anything, except for knowing, but with regard to the virtues, knowing is of no or of little worth, but the others are not of little significance, but of all significance. [G] These [conditions] come about through doing just and temperate things many times. [H] And so we call things just and temperate, when they are such as the just and temperate person would do. [I] But the person who does these things is not just or temperate, but only if they act as just and temperate people act. [J] And so it is well said that the just person becomes so by doing just things and the temperate person by doing temperate things: and no one would ever become good without doing these things.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ἢ οὐδ' ἐπὶ τῶν τεχνῶν οὕτως ἔχει; ἐνδέχεται γὰρ γραμματικόν τι ποιῆσαι καὶ ἀπὸ τύχης καὶ ἄλλου ὑποθεμένου. τότε οὖν ἔσται γραμματικός, ἐὰν καὶ γραμματικόν τι ποιῆσῃ καὶ γραμματικῶς· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γραμματικὴν. ἔτι οὐδ' ὁμοίον ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τε τῶν τεχνῶν καὶ τῶν ἀρετῶν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα τὸ εὖ ἔχει ἐν αὐτοῖς· ἀρκεῖ οὖν ταῦτά πως ἔχοντα γενέσθαι· τὰ δὲ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα οὐκ ἐὰν αὐτά πως ἔχη, δικαίως ἢ σωφρόνως πράττεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐὰν ὁ πράττων πῶς ἔχων πράττη, πρῶτον μὲν ἐὰν εἰδῶς, ἔπειτ' ἐὰν προαιρούμενος, καὶ προαιρούμενος δι' αὐτά, τὸ δὲ τρίτον ἐὰν καὶ βεβαίως καὶ ἀμετακινήτως ἔχων πράττη. ταῦτα δὲ πρὸς μὲν τὸ τὰς ἄλλας τέχνας ἔχειν οὐ συναριθμεῖται, πλὴν αὐτὸ τὸ εἰδέναι· πρὸς δὲ τὸ τὰς ἀρετὰς τὸ μὲν εἰδέναι οὐδὲν ἢ μικρὸν ἰσχύει, τὰ δ' ἄλλα οὐ μικρὸν ἀλλὰ τὸ πᾶν δύναται, ἅπερ ἐκ τοῦ πολλάκις πράττειν τὰ δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα περιγίνεται. τὰ μὲν οὖν πράγματα δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα λέγεται, ὅταν ἢ τοιαῦτα οἶα ἂν ὁ δίκαιος ἢ ὁ σώφρων πράξειεν· δίκαιος δὲ καὶ σώφρων ἐστὶν οὐχ ὁ ταῦτα πράττων, ἀλλὰ καὶ [ὁ] οὕτω πράττων ὡς οἱ δίκαιοι καὶ σώφρονες πράττουσιν. εὖ οὖν λέγεται ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ τὰ δίκαια πράττειν ὁ δίκαιος γίνεται καὶ ἐκ τοῦ τὰ σώφρονα ὁ σώφρων· ἐκ δὲ τοῦ μὴ πράττειν ταῦτα οὐδεὶς ἂν οὐδὲ μελλήσειε γίνεσθαι ἀγαθός.

It is worth noting that what Aristotle presents here is an argument, proceeding in a series of steps and terminating in the conclusion that his original statement, that we become just by doing just things, is ‘well said’. We should expect, then, that each step of the argument will engage with the issues raised by the challenge and contribute to establishing the conclusion; this will be relevant when it comes to assessing the merits of the traditional reading and my own proposed reading of the passage.

His original statement thus defended, Aristotle concludes the passage with a comparison between those who have engaged in proper habituation and the many (1105b12-18):

But the many do not do these things, but rather taking refuge in *logos* they think that they are doing philosophy, and in this way will become decent, acting like those who are ill, who listen carefully to doctors, but do none of the things they prescribe. And so just as none of these treatments bring health to the body, nor will these (i.e. the many) philosophising in this way [bring health to] the soul.<sup>8</sup>

These final lines are not part of Aristotle’s resolution of the *aporia*, but they are worth noting all the same, for they serve to underline Aristotle’s concern in this passage. They offer contextual support, I believe, for the reading I propose.

### 3. The Traditional Reading

It is generally assumed that the problem Aristotle poses in *NE* 2.4 has to do with the learner’s ability to perform virtuous actions:

How can we do good acts if we are not ourselves good? (Ross 1949, 194)

We are inclined to say both (a) that we become virtuous by doing virtuous actions and (b) that, unless we are already virtuous, we cannot do virtuous actions. (Hardie 1968, 104)

But there seems to be a paradox. The moral virtues are said to be developed by training in the appropriate behaviour, but how can we develop them? To become

<sup>8</sup> ἀλλ’ οἱ πολλοὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὐ πράττουσιν, ἐπὶ δὲ τὸν λόγον καταφεύγοντες οἴονται φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οὕτως ἔσεσθαι σπουδαῖοι, ὁμοίον τι ποιῶντες τοῖς κάμνουσιν, οἱ τῶν ἰατρῶν ἀκούουσι μὲν ἐπιμελῶς, ποιοῦσι δ’ οὐδὲν τῶν προσταττομένων. ὥσπερ οὖν οὐδ’ ἐκεῖνοι εὖ ἔξρουσι τὸ σῶμα οὕτω θεραπευόμενοι, οὐδ’ οὗτοι τὴν ψυχὴν οὕτω φιλοσοφοῦντες.

brave, for example, we need to do brave things; but to do brave things don't we already need to be brave? (Hutchinson 1995, 214)

Puzzle: how can we do right actions without being in the right state? . . . The puzzle arises because Aristotle has emphasised the similarity between the actions that we learn to do in habituation and the actions that we do when we are virtuous. We may suppose that if the actions are the same, their motive must be the same too, so that we can learn to be virtuous only if we already have the motive of the virtuous person. This is a practical analogue of the puzzle about learning that Meno raises at Plato (*Meno* 80a-e.) (Irwin 1999, 195)

A problem: how can one become just by doing just things if one is not just already. (Broadie and Rowe 2002, 299)

How can repetition of like actions give rise to a particular state, if possession of that state is necessary before one can perform such actions? (Vasilioiu 2007, 50-1)

If repetition of similar actions gives rise to a corresponding state of character, but the state of character in question is necessary in order to perform actions of the relevant type in the first place, then it is unclear how habituation can occur. (Vasilioiu 2011, 173)

Then in II 4 he confronts a puzzle (1105a17) about this that someone might raise on the basis of the apparently sensible claim that to do just or temperate actions we must be already just or temperate. To solve the puzzle Aristotle introduces a distinction between doing just or temperate actions, which is possible without being just or temperate, and doing them as a just or temperate person would do them, which isn't. (Reeve 2014, p. li)

Concretely, Aristotle himself admits, in *NE* 2.4, 1105a17-21, that the claim that learners perform virtuous actions before having virtue gives rise to a potential objection concerning the priority of actions over dispositions: how can learners perform virtuous actions unless they are already virtuous? In other words, how can learners become virtuous by doing virtuous actions if being virtuous must be prior to doing virtuous actions? (Jimenez 2016, 3)

A few remarks on these quotations will be helpful at this point for clarifying the traditional reading and bringing out the contrast with my own preferred reading of the passage, which I present in Section 5 below. As stated, these quotations signal a concern, on Aristotle's part, with the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions, as required for moral habituation. The possibility of doing so is called into question by the assumption that it is necessary to be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions. It is important to note that this assumption is taken by these commentators to concern the explanatory priority of virtue: an agent can perform a virtuous action *only if*, and *because*, the agent was virtuous prior to the act. The assumption is *not* merely that being virtuous at a given time is a necessary condition of virtuous action at that time.

The priority assumption is made explicit by Jimenez, who clarifies that this is what is meant by asking 'how can learners perform virtuous actions unless they are already virtuous?', and is all but explicit in Vasiliou's statements that the possession of a state of character is necessary *before* one can, and *in order to*, perform actions of the relevant type. But I take the explanatory nature of the assumption to be evident in the quotations from other commentators too, as we can see from their use of constructions such as 'in order to', 'unless we are already', 'already need to be', and from their focus on the possibility of performing actions of a certain sort. For on their most natural reading, these formulations indicate that the performance of virtuous actions is *dependent* on the possession of virtue and that the latter is what explains the possibility of the former. Irwin's reading of the puzzle as a practical analogue of Meno's paradox, where the possession of knowledge is posited as a *prerequisite* for inquiry and accounts for its possibility, also suggests the relevant priority. Hutchinson, meanwhile, explains that Aristotle's solution involves the thought that 'we first practise under the guidance of another person, which *enables* us to do the appropriate thing without yet having the skill' (1995, 214; emphasis added), suggesting that Hutchinson takes the imagined objector to suppose that virtue is what *enables* one to perform virtuous actions.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, no commentator within this tradition, to my knowledge, explicitly suggests that the puzzle stems purely and simply from the

<sup>9</sup> Likewise, it is hard to make sense of Broadie and Rowe's question 'how can one *become* just by doing just things if one is *not* just already?' (emphasis added), unless their supposition is that virtue is what *explains* the possibility of performing virtuous actions. For, if their supposition is, purely and simply, that virtue is a necessary condition of virtuous action, then what would surely be puzzling is how one could *become* just by doing just things, if one *is* just *already*, not how one could *become* just by doing by just things if one *is not* just already. I also take the natural reading of Ross's question to imply that being good is what explains the possibility of performing good acts.

claim that virtue is a necessary condition of virtuous action – that is, without any reference to the question of explanatory priority.<sup>10</sup>

The problem, then (on the traditional reading), is how it could be possible to become virtuous by performing virtuous actions, if one needs to be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions, and the possession of virtue is what explains the possibility of performing such actions. A learner – that is, one who is in the process of acquiring virtue – seemingly cannot perform virtuous actions, since she is not yet virtuous. And this, of course, poses a problem for Aristotle’s claim that we become virtuous *through* the practice of virtuous actions, for this requires that one can perform virtuous actions prior to the possession of virtue. In order to resolve this *aporia*, it is supposed that Aristotle must either deny that one must already be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions, entailing the denial of [2], or grant this assumption and show that the actions of the learner are not strictly virtuous actions (in effect, qualifying [1]).<sup>11</sup>

For much of the last century, scholars took Aristotle to accept the assumption motivating the problem – namely, that one must be virtuous already in order to perform virtuous actions – and to resolve the *aporia* by showing that the actions of a learner are not ‘genuinely’ virtuous.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation of Aristotle’s solution, however, rests on the mistaken assumption that the conditions listed in [E] – the three agential conditions, which a learner does not meet – are conditions on an action counting as ‘virtuous’. But as more recent commentators have noted, these conditions are in fact conditions on an action counting as ‘virtuously performed’; and Aristotle nowhere denies that a learner performs virtuous actions. Indeed, his conclusion that ‘it is after all well said that we become just by doing just things’, would seem to affirm that the learner does indeed perform virtuous actions. These more recent commentators have concluded that Aristotle instead resolves the *aporia* by denying that it is necessary to be in a given state in order to perform the actions that correspond to that state, and showing that it is, after all, possible for a learner to perform virtuous actions as required for successful habituation.

On this interpretation, Aristotle begins his response by considering whether the claim that ‘if one does F things, one is F already’ is true in the case of skills, since skills, he has just

<sup>10</sup> Note that if the commentators within this tradition were taking the assumption of a necessary condition, and without reference to the question of explanatory priority, to be that which explains the supposed impossibility of practice, then there is an onus to clarify their position and explain what they take to be the assumption motivating the puzzle.

<sup>11</sup> For the latter view, see Stewart 1892, 183; Ross 1949, 149; Hardie 1968, 104-5; Williams 1995, 14. For the former, see Jimenez 2016, also Vasiliou 2007.

<sup>12</sup> The assumption that Aristotle endorses the view that virtue is prior to virtuous action is often taken as a clear indication of his status as a virtue ethicist. For a recent challenge to the conception of Aristotle as a virtue ethicist, see Aufderheide 2017.



implied, are analogous in a relevant sense to the virtues. He points out in [A] that in the case of grammar, it is possible to do something grammatical (*grammatikon ti poiēsai*) either by chance or under instruction. Advocates of the traditional reading take Aristotle's point to be that it clearly *is* possible to perform the actions characteristic of a given state without being in that state (i.e. by chance or under instruction). If we follow the same reasoning in the case of the virtues, we are thus able to disarm the challenge to the claim that we become virtuous by performing virtuous actions: we are surely also familiar with examples of people who are not virtuous, but can perform virtuous actions. It is therefore possible to practise virtuous actions without yet being virtuous, and Aristotle's account of moral habituation is thus defended.

#### 4. Three Problems with the Traditional Reading

##### 4.1. First problem

The reading does not fit immediately and straightforwardly with Aristotle's presentation of the problem.

As the list of proponents and their paraphrasing of the puzzle make clear, the traditional reading of the passage is ubiquitous in the scholarly literature. Indeed, it is something of a cornerstone of introductions to Aristotle's ethics. Perhaps because the traditional reading is so familiar, and so frequently paraphrased in the scholarly literature, it is easy to overlook the fact that the paraphrasing of the challenge does not match Aristotle's own presentation. As it is paraphrased by critics in this tradition, Aristotle asks 'how is it possible to become just by doing just things, if we must already be just in order to do such things?' But this is not what Aristotle says. Aristotle asks 'how we can say' (*pōs legomen*) that 'it is necessary (*dei*) to do just things to become just'. This indicates that, as it appears, the traditional paraphrase gets the modality wrong in Aristotle's formulation: where Aristotle asks why something is necessary, or why it may be said to be necessary, the paraphrase has him ask how it is possible. Furthermore, the traditional paraphrase has Aristotle's clause [2], 'if they do just things, they are just already (*ēdē eisi dikaioi*)', say that, '*in order to* perform a just action, one *must* be just already'. But the *dei* in clause [1] does not qualify this clause, nor is there anything that corresponds to the English 'in order to' – all Aristotle says in it is that one who performs a just action is *ēdē* just.

At no point, then, does Aristotle say that 'one must already be just in order to perform just actions', nor does he explicitly call into question the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions; to this extent, then, the traditional reading appears to mischaracterise the puzzle. On Aristotle's own presentation of the puzzle, he is asking why it should be necessary that we become virtuous by doing virtuous things, given that it follows from the agent's performance of

virtuous actions that she is *ēdeē* virtuous.<sup>13</sup> In order to show that the traditional reading is compatible with the puzzle as Aristotle presents it, a defender of this reading must argue that the assumption that virtue has explanatory priority to virtuous action is what *motivates* the claim that ‘if they do just things, they are just already’. The thought here (on behalf of the traditional reading) would be that, if it is the case that one must already be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions, then if a person did perform a virtuous action she must indeed be virtuous.

The challenge, then, is to show that this assumption is clearly the assumption that underpins the claim ‘if they do just things they are just already’. One reason for doubt, however, is Aristotle’s emphasis in the puzzle (and surrounding context) on the issue of why habituation is necessary. For if the priority assumption is what motivates the puzzle, we might wonder why Aristotle emphasises the challenge that this poses to the necessity of habituation, rather than emphasising – as commentators in this tradition do – what would seem to be the principal issue, namely that the performance of virtuous actions, by a learner, would be impossible. This is not to say that the question of why habituation should be necessary, for one who *is* virtuous already, does not arise, but that it is surely of secondary importance to the more pressing issue of how a *learner* (who is, after all, the focus of *NE* 2.1-3) could ever perform virtuous actions as required for *becoming* virtuous.

#### 4.2. *Second problem*

The reading fails to make sense of the *aporia* and show this to be something worth engaging with.

A no less significant problem for the traditional reading is that it fails to make sense of Aristotle’s thought that his reader may be genuinely puzzled (*aporēseie d’an tis*) by his claim that we become just by doing just things, and it fails to make sense of why this puzzlement is something worth engaging with. To be sure, if it were the case that one could perform virtuous actions only if, and because, one is virtuous already, there would be a genuine threat to the possibility of habituation, since a learner (who is not yet virtuous) would be unable to perform virtuous actions. Yet it is doubtful, given the nature of Aristotle’s response to the challenge, that

<sup>13</sup> It might be argued that, insofar as the traditional reading claims that it is a necessary condition for the performance of virtuous actions that one is virtuous, this is simply another way of putting the claim that virtuous action is sufficient for the possession of virtue, as implied by clause [2]. Yet we have already seen that the traditional reading is committed to something stronger than the claim that virtue is a mere necessary condition for the performance of virtuous actions; it is committed to the explanatory priority of virtue over virtuous action. This stronger claim is not equivalent to the sufficiency claim, for (as indeed I will argue) it is possible that the performance of virtuous actions is sufficient for virtue without it being the case that the possession of virtue is what explains the possibility of performing such actions. I thank the anonymous reader for pressing this issue and obliging me to clarify this point.

he could take this to be an assumption that his reader seriously entertains. As many commentators have noted, Aristotle formulates the objection as one that affects both the case of virtue and the case of skill, and he responds by *immediately* producing a counterexample in the case of skills. His response thus works (on the traditional reading) either by showing that the more general assumption that it is necessary to be F in order to do F things is false, or by inviting us to see that ‘we are [also] *familiar with examples* of people who are not virtuous but are able to act “according to the virtues” – i.e. to produce outcomes that are stereotypical of the virtues’ (Jimenez 2016, 12, my emphasis). At any rate, that a counterexample to the motivating assumption is so readily available makes it unclear, first, why Aristotle would take his reader to suppose that it is not possible to perform the actions corresponding to a given state before one is in that inner state. Who would ever have doubted that it is possible?

Furthermore, that the challenge is resolved so immediately appears at odds with the posing of a genuine *aporia*. The traditional reading, in effect, has Aristotle ask ‘How could a learner perform virtuous actions, since one must be virtuous already in order to perform virtuous actions?’ and to respond – albeit by way of an analogy with skills – by pointing out that it is clearly not necessary to be virtuous already in order to perform such actions, as evidenced by the case of chance or acting under instruction. Beyond the appeal to the analogy with skills, this response scarcely engages with the *aporia* and, indeed, little philosophical work seems to be required to resolve it.<sup>14</sup> These issues cast significant doubt on whether proponents of the traditional reading have correctly identified the assumption motivating the *aporia*.

#### 4.3. *Third problem*

Aristotle’s response is not clearly relevant to the issues raised in the problem and to establishing his conclusion.

Since [A] appears to be sufficient to respond to the challenge on the traditional reading (whether by undermining the general assumption that in order to do F things one must be F already, or by inviting us to think of similar and familiar counterexamples in the case of virtues), it also makes it difficult to understand why Aristotle continues as he does. Various commentators have asked why Aristotle does not conclude his argument here, or immediately

<sup>14</sup> Nor is it clear how by engaging with this *aporia* Aristotle advances his argument. A defender of the traditional reading, it is true, might argue that in raising the *aporia* Aristotle can show *how* it is possible to perform just actions before one is just – with the emphasis on *how* still within the modality of possibility. This line is defended by Jimenez 2016, 12-15. But this still does not fit with Aristotle’s presentation of the puzzle. For, as we saw when noting that the traditional reading gets the modality wrong, Aristotle does not ask *how it is possible* to perform just acts before one is just.

show that the same is true of the virtues.<sup>15</sup> In particular, commentators have wondered why Aristotle goes on to discuss a disanalogy between virtues and skills at [C], and they are obliged to explain either that from the disanalogy onwards Aristotle is presenting an entirely new argument, or that Aristotle is adding a further argument as if ‘to be on the safe side’.<sup>16</sup> In the following section I will show how the proposed reading can make sense of the disanalogy, and how this forms part of one sustained argument, each step of which is required to establish the conclusion that Aristotle’s original statement is ‘well said’. For the present, however, I want to draw attention to another puzzling feature of Aristotle’s response (on the traditional reading), which to my knowledge has not been noticed by commentators.

Whilst [A] is certainly relevant (if disappointingly quick) as a response to the *aporia*, it is puzzling, on the traditional reading, why Aristotle should go on to make claim [B]: ‘And so he will be grammatical, then, if he does something grammatical and grammatically: that is, in accordance with the grammar inside him.’ This is not only because [A] appears sufficient to establish Aristotle’s conclusion, but because claim [B] appears simply irrelevant if Aristotle is concerned with whether a learner could perform virtuous actions without yet being virtuous, and wishes to expose as false the assumption that it is necessary to be in a given inner state in order to perform the actions that correspond to that state.<sup>17</sup> The problem, on the traditional reading, should invite reflection on what the requirements in fact are for performing virtuous and skilled actions: is it or is it not the case that we need to be virtuous in order to perform virtuous actions? But [B] is primarily a claim about what it is to be a person of a certain sort, not what is required

<sup>15</sup> For example, Jimenez takes Aristotle to disarm the challenge immediately, but then wonders why Aristotle does not conclude there and continues as he does. It is put to me (by the anonymous reader) that further argumentation may be required to show that virtue is relevantly similar to skills in order to show that challenge can be disarmed in the case of virtues. I take it that on Jimenez’ reading, the ready availability of similar counterexamples in the case of virtues negates the need for such further argumentation, and hence the fact that Aristotle does not conclude here remains puzzling. (Thus, Jimenez argues that Aristotle’s initial response is merely his formal solution to the puzzle, whilst the rest of the passage is his ‘full’ response, showing *how* habituation works; see n. 14 above). But even if we supposed, contra Jimenez’s reading, that we are not immediately invited to think of similar and familiar examples in the case of virtues and that further argumentation is required to show that the virtues are indeed relevantly similar to skills, this latter suggestion becomes strained when we consider that what follows is a discussion of the differences, not the similarities, between virtues and skills. Of course, it is true that showing the relevant similarities may involve discussion of the ways in which the cases are dissimilar, but we would expect Aristotle to eventually assert that the cases are analogous in the relevant respect and to make the same point as [A] for the case of the virtues.

<sup>16</sup> See Jimenez 2016, 17; Irwin 1999, 195; Broadie 1991, 83. Irwin takes Aristotle to be adding a new and independent argument which challenges the thought that the virtues are analogous to skills in the relevant way. I do not disagree with Broadie’s or with Irwin’s more general observations about the content of the disanalogy; on my reading, however, the disanalogy is not a new or separate argument, but contributes directly to establishing Aristotle’s conclusion in the one sustained argument.

<sup>17</sup> Note, then, that Jimenez’ distinction between a ‘formal’ and ‘full’ solution to the puzzle, which is intended to make sense of [C] onwards, fails to make sense of the content of [B].

in order to perform certain sorts of actions. It is thus unclear why Aristotle tells us here about what it is to be a person of a certain sort, when the puzzle (on the traditional reading) is ultimately concerned with the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions.

Ultimately, all three problems faced by the traditional reading come down to a mismatch, as it were, between the nature of the challenge Aristotle is thought to be posing on the traditional reading – where that includes the assumption motivating this challenge – and either his own presentation of the challenge or the way in which he responds. We have good reason, then, to reconsider the nature of the challenge Aristotle is posing; when we do, we will find that his response is not only relevant to resolving the *aporia* but philosophically enlightening too.

## 5. The Proposed Reading

I propose that we take Aristotle to be asking in this passage not how a learner could perform virtuous actions, but why it is necessary, for becoming virtuous, that one should repeatedly *practise* virtuous actions.

Let me clarify, first, that on my proposed reading, *ēdē* in the claim 'if they do just things, they are *ēdē* just' should be read not as a temporal 'already', in the sense that one is just *prior to* doing just things, but rather as 'immediately', thus stating that if one does just things, one is immediately just.<sup>18</sup> More substantially, however, the problem (on my proposed reading) is motivated, *not* by the thought that it is necessary to be in a given state in order to perform actions that correspond to that state, but rather the thought, readily plausible enough to motivate the *aporia*, that we count as people of a certain sort in virtue of the sort of things we do: a grammarian is one who does grammatical things, a just person is someone who does just things. Importantly, on this view, we cannot explain an agent's ability to do grammatical or virtuous things by appeal to the prior fact that she is grammatical or virtuous; being grammatical or virtuous has no such explanatory value, but simply amounts to being someone who does grammatical or virtuous things. On this assumption, virtue is reducible, as it were, to the condition of being someone who performs virtuous actions. If this is the case, there appears to be no need, for becoming virtuous, to repeatedly *practise* virtuous actions; because, as long as one performs virtuous actions, one already is virtuous.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the proposed reading also

<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, one might translate *ēdē* as 'thereby' (see Irwin 1999, 22). Whether we translate *ēdē* as 'immediately' or 'thereby', the problem is the same, namely that there would be no need to *practise* virtuous actions since one is '*ēdē* virtuous'.

<sup>19</sup> This reading is briefly canvassed, but not adopted, by Lawrence 2011, 265. I believe Nielsen 2017, 16 reads the puzzle in this way. Hirji 2018, 1012-13 possibly does too, although she does not state what assumption she takes to be motivating the puzzle.

raises the question as to how a *process of habituation* could be possible, but this is of secondary importance to the question of why such a process should be necessary.<sup>20</sup>

If this is the thought that motivates the problem, we ought to wonder where it originates from, and why Aristotle would be concerned that this challenge might be raised against his habituation thesis. The claim might have the status of an *endoxon*, a claim that Aristotle thinks is widely held and would likely be assumed by his audience. No doubt we do think there is an important connection between the things we do and the kinds of people we are, and Aristotle recognises that this might lead us to assume that someone who does things of a certain sort will thus count as a person of that sort. Alternatively, he might be concerned that some of his own previous remarks could be taken to suggest this picture. For Aristotle stressed in *NE* 2.2 that not only are the virtues both created and destroyed through the same things, but they also find their *exercise* in those same things (*hai energeiai en tois autois esontai*) (1104a27-b3). If the *exercise* of virtue consists in the performance of virtuous actions, this might lead one to wonder what more there is to being virtuous than simply doing these things.

How, on the reading I am proposing, does Aristotle resolve the *aporia*? Aristotle begins with the case of skills, and through this sets up the distinctions he will employ in the case of virtue. Taking the example of grammar, in [A] and [B] Aristotle distinguishes between doing something grammatical (*grammatikon ti poiēseie*), which picks out the thing that is done, and doing something grammatically (*grammatikōs*), which picks out the way that a thing is done and refers to features of the agent.<sup>21</sup> This distinction, indicating two ways we can think about action, allows Aristotle to begin to respond to the challenge as follows. Through the example in [A] Aristotle can show that if we think about ‘doing grammatical things’ in terms simply of the thing done (*grammatikon ti*), then we would be wrong to think that, if someone does such things, she is thereby proficient in grammar. For we would not want to call either the chance doer or the student proficient in grammar.<sup>22</sup> Rather, as he explains in [B], the person who *is*

<sup>20</sup> Contrast the traditional reading, where the question of why practice should be necessary (for one who *can* perform virtuous actions and thus must already be virtuous) is of secondary importance to the question of how it could be possible (for one who is not virtuous, namely, the learner). Notice, too, that the question of what is possible/impossible on each of the readings is importantly different: on the traditional reading what is called into question is how one who is not yet virtuous could *perform a virtuous action*; on the proposed reading the ability of such an agent to perform a virtuous action is not called into question, but rather how there could be a *process of becoming* virtuous.

<sup>21</sup> In particular his move to the *singular* – to ‘something grammatical’ (*grammatikon ti*) away from the plural ‘grammatical things’ (*ta grammatika*) – is a sign that that some disambiguation is underway. It indicates that Aristotle is talking about a concrete doing, rather than a way of behaving. Indeed, we see much more precision in Aristotle’s treatment of action from [A] onwards, including in his choice of action verbs.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle is clearly contrasting these two agents with the person proficient in grammar in the next line.

proficient in grammar is the person who does grammatical things *grammatically*, which is to say that she does them in accordance with the knowledge of grammar within her.

In Section 6 below we will reflect on the structural difference between this response to the *aporia* and Aristotle's response on the traditional reading. For the present, however, not only does Aristotle's distinction disarm the challenge, but it also enables us to make sense of the thought that there is a process of *becoming* grammatical by doing grammatical things: a learner does grammatical things, considered in terms of the thing done, and becomes over time such as to do those things grammatically. This provides the structure of Aristotle's response in the case of the virtues. For if we apply the same distinction and reasoning in the case of the virtues, we can see too that it does not follow from an agent's simply doing just things that she is a just person; there is something further she must aim at.

However, Aristotle cannot conclude his argument yet, for there is more to do in order to show why a process of habituation is necessary for moral virtue, and to establish the conclusion that his original statement is, after all, well said.

Aristotle goes on, in [C], to point to a certain disanalogy between skill and virtue. The disanalogy, it turns out, has to do with the differing criteria for skilfully and virtuously performed action. Whilst acting skilfully requires that an agent act with knowledge, in the case of the virtues 'the things that are produced in accordance with the virtues *are not justly or temperately done* if they [simply] have a certain quality in themselves, but [only] if the agent acts having a certain quality' [D]; that is, the agent not only must act knowingly, she must also choose these actions for their own sake, and from a stable state of character [E]. On the traditional reading, where the original challenge is disarmed by [A], Aristotle's introduction of this disanalogy is somewhat puzzling. But on the proposed reading, its purpose is clear. The distinction between 'the thing done' (doing something grammatical or performing a virtuous action) and 'the way it is done' (acting grammatically or acting virtuously) allows Aristotle to show not only that there is an important distinction between the learner and the mature agent, but also what it is that our practice is directed towards. But since the truth conditions for virtuously and skilfully performed action are different, it would not suffice merely to point out, as he does at [B], that the person proficient in grammar is one who acts knowingly. For in the case of virtuously performed action, further conditions have to be satisfied as well.<sup>23</sup> Indeed,

<sup>23</sup> Note that this way of reading the disanalogy – as showing the different truth conditions for virtuously and skilfully performed action – provides a way of responding to a concern raised by Vasiliou (attributed to Barney). He writes: 'One might be puzzled, however, about whether there really is a disanalogy between virtue and craft as Aristotle claims. After all, there is a "two-level" evaluation at work in each case: there is the evaluation of what was done and there is the evaluation of how it was done – was it done as the virtuous or craftsman would do it? So where is the disanalogy?' (2011, 175). On the proposed

this is just what Aristotle goes on to emphasise in [F], when he stresses that in the case of skills these agential conditions, except the knowledge condition, count for nothing (*ou sunarithmeitai*), whilst in the case of the virtues ‘knowing is of no or of little worth (*ischuei*), but the others are not of little significance, but of all significance (*to pan dunatai*)’ (1105a31-b4).

It is with the important difference in the truth conditions of skilfully and virtuously performed actions established that Aristotle can now return his attention to the original problem regarding the necessity of habituation.<sup>24</sup> Virtuous people are those who meet the conditions specified in [E], and Aristotle now explains in [G] that ‘these [conditions] come about through doing just things many times’. The learner comes to meet the agential conditions on virtuously performed action by doing just things many times; this is why the habituation process is necessary for virtue. Then, targeting the assumption that gave rise to the original challenge – the assumption that we count as persons of certain sorts in virtue of what we do – Aristotle in effect reverses the order of explanation, claiming that ‘things are called just, when they are such as the just person would do’ [H]. At any rate, ‘the person who does these things is not just, but only if they act as just people act’ [I]. This claim, then, is the counterpart of claims [A] and [B] about skills, and makes clear that the important connection between doing just things and being a just agent concerns not simply *what* one does, but the *way* in which one does it. Through [I] Aristotle not only undermines the original challenge (that an agent who does just things is thereby just), but shows at the same time that there is something to aim at in our moral lives, over and above performing just actions. The aim is to become such as to do these things knowingly, and to choose these actions for their own sake, and to do so from a firm and unchanging state. Aristotle can thus conclude in [J] that it is, after all, ‘well said’ that ‘the just person becomes so by doing just things’, and not only that, but that ‘no-one would ever stand a chance of becoming good without doing these things’.

## 6. Why we Should Favour the Proposed Reading

In Section 4 above I pointed to three main problems that the traditional reading faces: (1) that it does not fit readily and straightforwardly with Aristotle’s presentation of the puzzle, (2) that it fails to make sense of the *aporia* and show this to be something genuinely worth engaging with, and (3) that Aristotle’s response is not clearly relevant to the concerns raised in the *aporia* or to establishing his conclusion. The proposed reading, meanwhile, faces none of these problems.

reading, there is indeed an evaluation of what is done and how it was done in each case, but the disanalogy concerns the different truth conditions of the latter in the case of the virtues and the skills.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle’s return to the original challenge is signalled in [G] by a return, from the language of τὰ δὲ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα, to the τὰ δίκαια language of the challenge and *NE* 2.1.



On the proposed reading, it is clear how the assumption that virtue is reducible to the condition of being someone who performs virtuous actions poses a problem for the thought that by practice of just actions we become just: if someone does just things, she is immediately, or thereby, just; it follows, apparently, that there is no need, for being just, for a process of becoming just through the repeated practice of just actions. Indeed, the proposed reading fits especially well with Aristotle's presentation of the puzzle, which puts the issue explicitly in terms of the necessity of habituation.

That Aristotle is concerned to defend the necessity of practice – which would be called immediately into question by the assumption that virtue is reducible to the condition of being someone who performs virtuous actions – is evident both in his presentation of the puzzle and its surrounding context. Note, first, that in *NE* 2.1 Aristotle stated only that 'we become just by doing just things' whilst, as we have seen, in *NE* 2.4 Aristotle asks instead how we can maintain that 'it is *necessary (dei)* to become just by doing just things'. The addition of *dei* here signals a particular concern with the necessity of practice. Notice too that Aristotle also emphasises the necessity of practice in his conclusion, where he asserts not only that his original statement is well said, but in addition stresses that 'no one would ever become good without doing these things' (1105b12). This emphasis is apparent once more in Aristotle's concluding remarks to the passage, in which he contrasts those who practise virtuous actions with those who seek refuge in arguments. Aristotle's emphasis here on the necessity of practising virtuous actions if we are to become virtuous supports the thought that this is the claim he wishes to defend.

The proposed reading also makes better sense of Aristotle's thought that his reader may be genuinely puzzled by his claim that we become just by doing just things, and why this puzzlement is something worth engaging with. On the traditional reading, the ready availability of a counterexample to the assumption which motivates the problem casts significant doubt on whether Aristotle could suppose that his reader would be genuinely puzzled by the claim we become just by doing just things. It might appear, at first glance, that the proposed reading is vulnerable to a similar objection, since the challenge would seem to be swiftly disarmed again. But notice that on the proposed reading the *aporia* is only resolved through philosophical work. In order to disarm the challenge, Aristotle must make an interesting and substantial distinction, and one not readily available prior to posing and engaging with this *aporia*: the distinction between *doing a just action* and *doing a just action justly*. Only by introducing this distinction can Aristotle show that, from *the doing of a just action*, it does not follow that a person is just, and clarify that this is the sense of action he had in mind when he originally claimed that we become just by doing just things (as shown from [G]-[J]).

Moreover, and appropriately for a genuine *aporia*, we see Aristotle engaging with the thoughts that gave rise to the challenge. For whilst his distinction allows him to disarm the challenge, it also allows him to grant that there is some truth to the assumption which motivated the *aporia*, namely that there is an intimate connection between what we do and the kinds of people we are. The person proficient in grammar *is* someone who does grammatical things, just not in any old way: she does them grammatically. And likewise for the virtuous person.<sup>25</sup> The important connection between the kinds of people we are and what we do does not concern action understood simply in terms of the thing done, but rather action understood as incorporating both the thing done and the way in which it is done. In short, the *aporia* is well motivated, and by engaging with it, and doing so philosophically, Aristotle can shed light on the relation between virtue and action.

Finally, on the proposed reading each step of Aristotle's response is relevant to the concerns raised in the *aporia* and clearly contributes to establishing Aristotle's conclusion. On the proposed reading, the *aporia* is generated by the assumption that we count as persons of a certain sort in virtue of what we do (or, less prosaically, that – in the case of virtue – virtue is reducible to the condition of being someone who performs virtuous actions); we should expect a resolution to the *aporia* to involve an examination of what it is to be a person of a certain sort, and this is just what we find. Moreover, the proposed reading can explain why Aristotle does not conclude his argument following the grammar example, but goes on to discuss the disanalogy between virtue and skills. Aristotle cannot conclude his argument until he has addressed this disanalogy, precisely because the requirements for being a virtuous agent are more demanding than those for being a skilled agent. If he did not acknowledge this, a reader might conclude on the basis of [B] that simply by performing virtuous actions knowingly, one is virtuous, and that acquiring knowledge is all there is to aim at. But, as Aristotle makes clear, knowledge is the least important agential condition in the case of virtue; more important are the choice and stability conditions, and indeed, it is towards achieving these conditions that the practice of just actions is especially directed.

## **7. The Wider Significance of the Proposed Reading**

This, then, is Aristotle's response to the hypothetical challenge to his account of moral habituation. Faced with the problem that, if we are virtuous simply because we do virtuous things, it is puzzling why we should need to practise such things in a process of moral

<sup>25</sup> Unlike the traditional reading, then, this reading can make sense of what Aristotle writes in [B] with its focus on the *person* and the way in which they behave, which seemed irrelevant if his concern was with the learner's ability to perform virtuous actions.

habituation, Aristotle has shown that we are virtuous only if we meet three agential conditions, and that these conditions are only met through the repeated practice of virtuous actions.<sup>26</sup> So understood, Aristotle's resolution of the *aporia* informs his claim that we become just by doing just things, allowing him to tell us something of what this process involves and what it is directed towards.

I want to end, however, by pointing to the further philosophical significance of reading the passage in the way proposed. Because on the proposed reading (but not on the traditional reading) Aristotle is primarily concerned with why habituation should be necessary, and because Aristotle responds as he does, pointing to the agential conditions that must be met if we are to be virtuous, we are naturally and cogently led to the posing of two further questions, each concerned with the necessity of this process: (i) Why are the three agential conditions something we should *aim at meeting*, over and above simply performing virtuous actions? and (ii) Why is *practice* – that is, the very *doing* – of virtuous actions necessary in order for us to meet these conditions?<sup>27</sup>

Both of these questions can serve as routes to a deeper understanding of Aristotle's ethical theory, though a full treatment of either question goes beyond the scope of this paper. In the remainder of this paper, I thus limit my focus to the first question – since this question is especially pertinent in light of the assumption motivating the puzzle of *NE* 2.4 –<sup>28</sup> and to the material in *NE* 2.4 which may be employed in developing an answer on Aristotle's behalf.<sup>29</sup> The

<sup>26</sup> Or certainly the second and third conditions, concerning choice and stability. The *haper* in [G] clearly refers back to these two conditions at least. For the purposes of this paper I leave it open whether Aristotle also thinks that the knowledge condition is met through practice of virtuous actions.

<sup>27</sup> On the traditional reading, on the other hand, which takes Aristotle's response to the challenge to be that it is perfectly possible to perform virtuous actions without already being virtuous, this challenge is done and dusted by the response, and it prompts no further or deeper questions.

<sup>28</sup> For discussion of the challenges in answering the second question, see Hursthouse 1988. I discuss in Hampson *forthcoming* why practical engagement in virtuous action is necessary in order to meet the conditions of virtuously performed action, and in particular, the motivational condition. See also Hampson 2019.

<sup>29</sup> It might be argued, in defence of those commentators who took Aristotle in *NE* 2.4 to be drawing a distinction between 'genuine' virtuous actions on the one hand, and the 'not strictly' virtuous actions of a learner on the other, that these commentators at least had available a simple answer to our question: since, on this view, an agent does not perform virtuous actions unless she meets the three agential conditions, she must aim to meet these conditions if she wishes to perform genuinely virtuous actions, where virtuous actions are understood as morally 'good' actions. Thus, if we wish to perform morally good actions, it is necessary that we come to meet these three conditions. This, however, cannot be our answer, since, as we have seen, the agential conditions listed at 1105a31-33 are not conditions on an action counting as *virtuous*, but on an action counting as *virtuously* performed. Even the learner can, and (in the case of successful habituation) does, perform genuinely virtuous actions. Moreover, Aristotle's second agential condition, that the agent must choose virtuous actions for their own sakes, suggests that these actions have an independent value that makes them worth so choosing. Elsewhere he tells us that virtuous actions themselves have the quality of being fine (*kalon*, 1099a7-15; 1099a21-4; 1109a30; 1116a10-12; 1120a11-15). This being the case, we can ask with renewed emphasis: if virtuous actions themselves have this value,

question why virtue is worth aiming at is, in many ways, at the heart of the dispute between virtue theorists and other so-called act-centred approaches to morality, and whilst it is not my aim to defend Aristotle's view as such, I believe that the proposed reading of the passage helps us to appreciate the approach to this question that Aristotle takes.

There is a temptation to seek an answer to our question in the stability condition. For, insofar as this condition would seem to guarantee that an agent will reliably perform virtuous actions, as opposed to doing so infrequently or by chance, we might suppose that the value of virtue thus lies not just in its enabling or issuing in right action, but in doing so reliably – in *guaranteeing* right action. But such an explanation is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it does not account for the significance of the other two conditions. And secondly, it still places the emphasis on the agent's ability simply to perform the right actions – 'we want, above all to perform the right actions, so we should want to do so reliably' – which is the position occupied by our imagined act-centred opponent, who asks why virtue and not merely right action is something we should aim at.

I believe, however, that the distinctions Aristotle introduces in order to resolve the *aporia* on the proposed reading – distinctions which we must attend to carefully on this reading – help to show why being virtuous is something we should aim at. To see how this is so, it will be helpful to remind ourselves briefly of the overall project in which Aristotle is engaged. The focus of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the human good and what a good human life consists in (e.g. 1094b10-11, 1002a14-15).<sup>30</sup> Aristotle is concerned, that is, with what *human excellence* and a *good human life* amounts to, rather than the question of what makes *actions*, as such, good. Now, as both Aristotle's discussion of the human function in *NE* 1.7 and examination of the human soul in *NE* 1.13 make clear, the human good is importantly connected with human nature, and the kinds of beings we are. As Aristotle's investigation proceeds, we learn that we are beings whose nature is both practical and contemplative (e.g. 1077a15-16, 1178a14). Much of Aristotle's discussion throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and in particular his discussion of moral virtue, has to do with our *practical* nature. We can see Aristotle as concerned here, then, with our excellence as practical beings.

Our practical nature concerns our ability to act, and to engage, generally speaking, with what is *prakton* (practicable, doable). It is uncontroversial, then, to suppose that at least part of

why is it not enough for an agent simply to perform these actions? Why is it important that she performs these *virtuously*?

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the focus on the *human* good and a good *human life*, is perhaps already a feature of Aristotle's ethics that marks it out from other (modern) ethical approaches concerned primarily with the concept of right action

our excellence as practical beings will have to do with the actions we perform. We might reasonably suppose, moreover, that our being the best agents we can be will involve performing the best sorts of actions, and that the best actions are fine and virtuous actions. So far, then, our question would seem to retain its force, and we might ask why we shouldn't count as excellent agents simply in virtue of performing fine and virtuous actions? The distinctions Aristotle employs in resolving the *aporia* provide the materials to answer this question.

We saw earlier, in the grammar example, that Aristotle draws a distinction between the thing done and the way it is done. I suggested then that in doing so Aristotle presents us with two ways of thinking about action. I now propose, in addition to this, that his distinction also presents us with two ways of thinking about being an agent. We can think about being an agent in a thinner sense, as concerned with the actions that are performed (the things done), or in a thicker sense, as concerned with the way in which one acts, that is, with one's epistemic and evaluative attitudes associated with the actions one performs. So understood, *NE* 2.4 invites us to think not only about the nature of action, but the nature of agency, and encourages us to conceive of agency in a richer way.

Each of the agential conditions emphasised by Aristotle in this passage picks out an important aspect of our agential nature, pertinent to our excellence as practical beings. The knowledge condition is tied to our nature as rational beings, with a capacity for practical reason. The choice condition, meanwhile, acknowledges that we are also desiring beings, endowed specifically with the capacity for choice (*prohairesis*, see esp. 1111b6-10). Indeed, if we turn to *NE* 6, we learn that choice is to be understood either as desiderative intellect (*orektikos nous*) or deliberative desire (*orexis dianoētikē*, 1139b4-5), suggesting that it is a capacity connected with both our desiring and our rational nature, and crucially concerned with action.<sup>31</sup> Each of these capacities, for practical reason and for choice, are concerned with action and thus form part of our agential nature, alongside the capacity to act in the narrower sense. The stability condition, meanwhile, indicates that being an agent of a certain sort and acting in a certain 'way' is not something achievable on occasion, or something episodic, but something extended over time and, ultimately, concerned with life as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

If we then ask what our *excellence* as agents – as practical beings – consists in, a plausible answer is that it consists in this: our performing fine actions; our having knowledge of

<sup>31</sup> Importantly, insofar as choice involves desire, it involves an evaluation of an object. The virtuous agent, who chooses virtuous actions for their own sake, correctly evaluates virtuous actions, and is in this way responsive to their inherent value.

<sup>32</sup> This coheres with Aristotle's view that *eudaimonia* is not episodic, but necessarily whole and extended in time (1098a14-19).

these actions,<sup>33</sup> our motivational states being responsive to the value of these actions such that we choose them on account of the value we correctly identify them as having; and this being a stable and permanent characteristic of ourselves. In stressing the importance of our coming to meet the three agential conditions of *NE* 2.4, Aristotle need not be seen as claiming that an action itself is made better when performed in a certain way,<sup>34</sup> but that as practical beings, we are in our best condition when each of our capacities concerned with action is in its best condition and responsive to the nature – including the value – of things within the practical sphere.<sup>35</sup> This, I submit, is what the proposed reading enables us to see.

Let me end by bringing this discussion back to the context in which Aristotle first asserted that we become just by doing just things, namely in elucidating his claim that character virtue ‘arises from habit’ (*ex ethous perigignetai*, *NE* 1103a17). For in responding to the *aporia* raised in *NE* 2.4, Aristotle also tells us something of the sense of habit he has in mind when he made this claim. In showing that the habituation process is aimed at achieving the conditions concerning knowledge, choice and stability, Aristotle makes clear that in speaking of habit and the formation of habit, he is not conceiving of habit simply as a state from which certain sorts of actions regularly or reliably issue. Aristotle’s notion of habit here seems to pick out something more like a way of being, and the habituation process to describe something more like the formation of a second nature.<sup>36</sup> Through the habituation process we come to act in a certain way, where this way of acting – which includes our epistemic and evaluative attitudes – becomes a part of our nature.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this also helps to explain why practical engagement in

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle does not tell us what the virtuous agent knows when she acts virtuously. Certainly, she knows which actions to perform; it is also plausible that she knows of these actions that they are fine.

<sup>34</sup> This is a further claim he may, or may not, wish to defend. My point is that we do not need to defend this claim in order to see why – given Aristotle’s project – he recommends that we aim at the three agential conditions.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion along similar lines, see Crisp 2015, esp. §5. Crisp writes: ‘there is room for virtue ethics as a theory about *the kind of person one should be*. According to virtue ethics so construed, being virtuous is morally valuable in itself’ (271, my emphasis). Of the disposition to act ‘rightly’, he continues: ‘What is really valuable is the “categorical” base of the disposition to feel and to act in the right way, and that, on the Aristotelian view, consists primarily in a properly habituated set of standing concerns, desires, and wishes, along with the cognitive capacity to grasp what is morally salient in the circumstances and what those circumstances require of one. As we develop such an account, it becomes hard not to think that the burden of proof is on those who deny the moral value of being such a person.’

<sup>36</sup> See *NE* 1152a31-3: ‘[habit] is like nature, as Evenus says: “Habit, I say, is longtime training my friend, and in the end training is nature for human beings”’ (ὅτι τῆ φύσει ἔοικεν, ὥσπερ καὶ Εὐήνος λέγει. φημὶ πολυχρόνιον μελέτην ἔμεναι, φίλε, καὶ δὴ ταύτην ἀνθρώποισι τελευτῶσαν φύσιν εἶναι, trans. Irwin). For further discussion of the sense in which virtue is a ‘second nature’, see amongst others Burnyeat 1980, 74-5; Vasiliou 1996, 779-81; McDowell 1998, 169-73.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, habituation also effects a good disposition with regard to feeling, since virtue is a mean in feeling, as well as action (1106b24-5).

virtuous action is necessary to achieve this state. For if the aim of the habituation process is to become certain sorts of *agents*, it is hard to see how this could be achieved but through action.<sup>38</sup>

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