



Habituation as a Lifelong Process?

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Aristotle on the habituation of adults

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1. Introduction

Educational philosophers interested in an Aristotelian approach to moral education cannot avoid discussing 'habituation', often understood as acquiring character traits through repeated practice of corresponding actions. It is an important part of this approach, because, as Kerr (2011, p. 643) explains, "virtue ethics understands habituation to be the process whereby the development of virtue begins." It is also considered to be a relatively uncontroversial part of Aristotle's approach to moral education (Sherman, 1989, p. 157). Nevertheless, there are several issues about the precise interpretation and justification of this method, and its relevance for educational theory and practice today.

A number of philosophers of education, such as Spiecker (1999), Kupperman (1999) and Sherman (1989) have treated habituation primarily as a method suitable for people on the 'initial' stages of moral development. They assume, like Richard Peters (1981), that habituation is an activity for the courtyard, which later provides a metaphorical passage to the palace of reason. The bone of contention is, however, whether treating habituation as a 'first, 'early' or 'initial' method justifies limiting it to *children*. The interpretation seems to be in line with the importance that Aristotle attached to training of virtuous habits right from childhood (NE 1103b21-25), in particular when we combine this with the idea that habituation is to culminate in the development of practical wisdom when one is morally mature. Habituation seems to be a ladder that (young) adults must throw away after they have reached the level of practical wisdom.

However, there are also passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that hint at habituation as a lifelong process. For example, Aristotle writes that people must "confirm their habit, when they are grown up" (NE 1080a). A number of such remarks raise the question whether habituation should be limited to those young of age. As there is already a sizeable body of literature on the questions of whether and how habituated reason is possible and desirable for adults (see e.g. Kristjánsson, 2006), this paper has the more humble goal to find out whether it is 'Aristotelian' to limit habituation to children, and if not, what an Aristotelian perspective on the habituation of adults may mean.

My plan is this. In Section 2 of this paper, I will summarise the received wisdom about the place of habituation in Aristotle's ideas about virtue and moral education. In Section 3, I will give a short overview of a recent discussion about the role of habituation in moral education, and examine in more detail the ideas of three philosophers to show that they interpret habituation primarily as a method suitable for the moral education of children. In Section 4, I revisit the *Nicomachean Ethics* and argue that the received wisdom presented in Section 2 is incomplete. On the basis of textual evidence, I conclude that habituation is not restricted to but particularly useful for already virtuous adults who want to make moral progress. In the final section, I discuss some implications of Aristotle's take on adult habituation for the formation of professional character in higher education.

2. Aristotelian on habituation

Before we can understand why some have interpreted habituation as a moral educational method suitable for children, I will first summarise the received wisdom about the place of habituation in Aristotle's ideas about virtue and moral education. As Aristotle does not

provide a comprehensive account of habituation (Dunne, 1999, p. 58; Sherman, 1999, p. 45), we will have to try to reconstruct a picture of this method by drawing on a number of remarks on habituation found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Right at the start of Book II, Aristotle distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtues, and states that intellectual virtues are stimulated through ‘instruction’ and require experience, while moral virtues are the product of ‘habit’ (NE 1103a15-20). He points out that we call such virtues ‘ethical’ because they result from habit (Greek: *ethos*). In an often quoted passage, Aristotle explains that the acquisition of virtuous habits is like developing skills: “Men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” (NE 1103a32-b2). The central idea of habit formation is that virtues are formed as a result of the corresponding virtuous activities.

Unlike many modern ethical theories, Aristotle’s ethical theory primarily focuses on a knowledge of and care for the self (which he, by the way, takes to be social by nature). He is interested in the effect of our actions on the formation of our own character, because a virtuous character is a crucial ingredient of a happy life for human beings (*eudaimonia*). While some good fortunes (health, prosperity, beauty) will make a life even more blissful, Aristotle recommends a kind of happiness that is the result of the active exercise of our faculties. Although our attitudes can make a difference once we have them, it does not mean that the acquisition of our character is completely in our own hands. Surely, at a certain point, we can become aware of how we shape ourselves through our actions. For example, I realise that I use my mobile phone to check my email during dinner, which I hate, because I don’t give my family the attention they deserve, and formulate a resolution not to do this next time. I reassess and gradually refine temperance and justice and other virtues. However, “I cannot choose to learn from scratch”, Annas (2016) writes, “...since I begin learning when very young, before I am in a position to learn critically. I learn from various sources in the culture: role models, books, in large part my parents and local peers.”

While being habituated by others is of “supreme importance” to Aristotle’s program of moral education (NE 1103b21-25), it has its limits and is not sufficient for becoming fully virtuous. Fully virtuous people have a stable and firm commitment to the good over a lifetime and hit the mean with regard to actions and emotions in all spheres of human experience, which requires practical wisdom (Sanderse, 2015, p. 393). Full virtue should be distinguished from natural virtue, which we recognise in e.g. children who we call ‘kind’, ‘generous’ or ‘honest’, although they do not have practical wisdom yet (Kamtekar, 2004, p. 480). Practical wisdom, which leads to a kind of “reasonableness” or “well-advised-ness” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 36-37), matters to Aristotle as he sees virtues not as mindless habits that produce behaviour, but as *intelligent* dispositions that involve a choice to do or feel certain things in ways that observe a mean between two vicious extremes. What captures the notion of a practically wise person, is “a virtuoso who is responsive in an excellent fashion to what reason perceives in particular and changing circumstances” (Lockwood, 2013, p. 30). For example, being a patient person does not mean that I always wait half an hour when someone is late. It means that I deliberate about what it means for me to be patient in all kinds of situations, including. Whether waiting 30 minutes is too long or too short depends on e.g. whether it is a first date or a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet the queen.

While full virtue is impossible without practical wisdom, we cannot cultivate it straight away. We can only enter the throne room of the palace after having been guided through a maze of corridors. Specifically, the education of reason should be preceded by the

education of our (moral) habits (*Politics*, 1338b). Why is habit formation necessary? In the opening sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the young are not fit to study moral philosophy, because they have no experience in life and are led by their feelings (NE 1095a5-10). Elsewhere, he states that arguments can have a positive effect on young people who, because they are brought up well, want to live a good life, but not on those who lack this education (NE 1179b24). So, Aristotle believes people are only susceptible to reason if they, through experience, have come to associate virtue with pleasure (and vice with pain). Through habituation, people develop an appreciation and taste for what is virtuous. If this appreciation is absent, arguing about the good life might be interesting, but will not lead to a change in attitude. Aristotle explicitly warns people for discussing virtue without actually doing virtuous things (NE 1105b15). He compares them with people who listen carefully to what the doctor says, but neglect to carry out the prescription. In a way, they know that the doctor is right about e.g. eating less or exercising more, but lack the motivation to change their lives. Aristotle is very sceptical about the possibility that, once less than virtuous character traits have become habitual, giving arguments for why one should change one's life will have an effect (NE 1179b18).

3. Habituation as a childhood method?

A number of philosophers have taken the idea that education of reason should be preceded by the education of our moral habits to mean that the formation of habits is only appropriate for *children*. In this section, I will locate this idea in the work of three contemporary authors, after which I will explain why I believe that habituation is a suitable method for (some) adults as well.

For the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing interest among educational philosophers in the meaning of Aristotle's virtue ethics for the theory and practice of moral education (Carr, 1991; Steutel & Carr, 1999, Kristjánsson, 2007; 2015; Sanderse, 2012). Habituation, often seen as one of the staples of an Aristotelian approach to moral education, has also received attention (Curren, 2014; Curzer, 2002; Bowditch, 2008; Kerr, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2006; Steutel & Spiecker, 2004). One much discussed issue is the question of how, on an Aristotelian account, habituated reason is psychologically possible. The worry is this: the habits of feeling acquired through habituation may be so strong that once practical wisdom starts to emerge, they are beyond the reach of revision. Therefore, a number of neo-Aristotelians have tried to explain why the contradiction between habit and reason is more apparent than real (Sherman, 1989, Curren, 2000; 2014; Kristjánsson, 2006). In this debate, a number of authors have made an (in my view problematic) assumption, i.e. that habituation, as a method for moral education, is only suitable for children, and not for adults. There are two reasons to question this assumption. Firstly, I doubt whether the assumption is compatible with Aristotle's own ideas about habituation. The exegetical question is: does Aristotle recommend habituation as a training program for adults as well? Secondly, I wonder whether we do not lose something about our moral experience if we restrict habituation to children. Don't we, as adults, sometimes experience that moral progress is a real possibility for us, even though it may be difficult, since certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting have become habitual (De Ruyter & Schinkel, 2016). Does 'lifelong habitation' make sense, both for Aristotle and for us living today?

Below, we will examine three examples of authors¹ who take habituation to be an ‘early’ method for moral education, suitable for children. The first example can be found in an article by Joel Kupperman (1999), who basically follows the standard account of Aristotelian habituation described above. He distinguishes between moral development on an ‘early’ and more ‘advanced’ stage. In addition, he assigns habit formation to the early stage (p. 212) and argues that it is a necessary but insufficient for moral education, which also requires a training in philosophy. What interests us here in particular is the assumption that the ‘early stages’ would correspond to childhood. Kupperman explicitly states that “The foundation, in childhood and presumably in early adolescence, requires good habits” (p. 210). In his view, habits will become less useful when people are faced with less familiar options and circumstances as they grow up. Habits can “never be entirely protective” of virtue (p. 212), as we may be overcome with strong new temptations. What is at stake for Kupperman is that relying on habituation makes us in the long run morally unreliable.

The second example comes from Ben Spiecker (1999), who set out, often with Jan Steutel, to correct Kohlberg’s cognitive development approach by paying more attention to the moral educational significance of the emotions. From the work of Ryle and Scheffler, Spiecker (1999, p. 220) derives the distinction between single-track and multi-track habits. Single-track habits, such as being toilet trained, help us behave under specific conditions in a rather uniform way. Spiecker calls them *closed* habits or ‘routines’: once they are acquired, they are relatively closed to reflection. Multi-track habits help us to “observe appropriate rules” in multiple and variable circumstances (p. 220). These habits are expressions of (dawning) moral character traits, which can be seen in how children express e.g. pity or regret, or whether they comfort other children and return toys. Virtuous habits are relatively *open*: children can learn to examine and adjust their character traits on the basis of reasons that parents often use to explain or justify a rule or value. The point worth emphasising here is that Spiecker (1999, p. 220) discusses *both* kinds of habits in the context of early childhood upbringing only. This is no coincidence; this focus is present in other publications too (Steutel & Spiecker, 2000). While Steutel & Spiecker (2004) define habituation without reference to children, all examples refer to children becoming virtuous by repeatedly acting virtuously under the guidance of a parent.

The third example is derived from Nancy Sherman (1989), who offers the most complete and detailed account of what she takes to be Aristotle’s account of habituation. She takes up arms against Burnyeat (1980), who sees habituation as the combination of a non-rational process, followed by an essentially different rational one. One of the problems of this account, she points out, is that it becomes “mysterious” how the transition can be made from childhood to moral maturity (p. 158). In Sherman’s view, this mystery disappears once we recognise that Aristotle’s conception of habituation is critical from beginning to end. With ‘critical’ she means that habit formation is all about the formation of perceptual and discriminatory capacities (for a critique, see Kristjánsson, 2006). She argues that if practical wisdom is part of the *end* of habituation, it must be reflected in the whole *process* of habituation (Sherman, 1989, p. 159). Consequently, Sherman does not think that habituation is (mindlessly) repeating the same piece of behaviour. If we are to *learn from* repeated practice, we should see habituation as a number of successive attempts to reach a goal, reflecting on what went wrong, and subsequently adjusting one’s behaviour to reach the goal better next time (Sherman, 1989, pp. 178-179). While Sherman’s ideas about the

¹ Others who see habituation as a moral educational method for children are Kristjánsson (2014, p. 349), Silverstein & Trombetti (2013, p. 236), Kerr (2010, p. 644) and Peters (1981, p. 52).

reflective formation of habits are valuable and may well extend beyond childhood, she still only writes about e.g. how *the child* can move from habituated to full virtue (p. 158) and proposes an Aristotelian model of *the child's* ethical growth (p. 160).

In sum, the assumption that habituation is basically a moral educational method for children is well-documented in the literature, exemplified by these three authors. At the same time, some of the accounts seem to refer to the possible use beyond childhood. For Kupperman (1999, p. 211) this is not the case, as he associates habituation with a Pavlovian conditioning process. Spiecker recognises the existence of such mechanical habits, but he also discusses a different kind of open, multi-track habits that can be critically evaluated and adjusted on the basis of reasons. Sherman goes even one step further: she does not distinguish between two kinds of habits, but sees *all* habits as reflective dispositions open for revision. Of the three, Sherman's account is the most comprehensive, detailed and cognitive. The disadvantage is, however, that it becomes a mystery why the formation of habits would (have to) cease at the end of childhood. This paper sets out to improve Sherman's account by showing that what she writes about children is equally true for adults.

One reason for why the idea of adults forming habits has not been taken seriously might be relatively straightforward: the authors do not deny that habituation continues after childhood, but they have just happen to write about *children's* moral development. If this is the case, we would expect them to at least mention the possibility of adult habituation or refer to authors who have written about it. But these references are lacking, probably because philosophers have been largely silent on the issue (see, however, Sparrow & Hutchinson, 2013; Pollard, 2002)?² I have three hypotheses about why adult habituation is a largely neglected issue. First, contrary to a lot of new empirical research, it might be the orthodoxy among philosophers that moral progress is not *possible* after adolescence. It has been assumed for a long time that the brain only develops during a critical period in early childhood and then remains relatively unchanged, being closed to the influence of repetitive habitual behaviour (Sparrow & Hutchinson, 2013, p. 12). Second, even if habit formation turns out to be possible for adults, many philosophers and educationalists probably do not consider it to be *desirable*. For example, in the early 1990s, Robert Nash and Alfie Kohn criticised American-style character education, because a combination of habituation, storytelling and role modelling would be essentially authoritarian and uncritical. Recently, Harvey Siegel (2014) aired similar worries: in his view, teachers should not "shape" students' characters but "enable them to envision possible characters, traits and virtues and to evaluate their desirability critically". A third reason for why the habituation of adults is not often dealt with might be that Aristotle, who is taken (in particular by Sherman) to be an authority, is misinterpreted as saying that habituation is a childhood method. In what follows, I examine whether it is justified to read Aristotle in this way.

4. Aristotelian habituation revisited

As contemporary authors draw on Aristotle in their accounts of habituation, we want to know whether it is 'Aristotelian' to limit habituation to children. If it is not, we can adjust our ideas about what it, on an Aristotelian account, means for adults to morally mature. These theoretical insights can have practical consequences. For example, the moral education and development of *professionals* is often understood as enabling (young) adults to acquire a

² There is, however, a body psychological and cognitive neuroscientific literature on habit formation in adults, in which a distinction is made between 'goal-directed' (action-outcome) and 'habitual' (stimulus-response) mechanisms underlying behaviour. See also Snow (2006).

moral language and the ability to apply ethical concepts to cases, and not as the formation of professional character (with regard to teaching, see Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). An account of how habituation works for adults can help philosophers of education, educationalists and teachers in tertiary education to understand better how adults morally develop and how this process can be guided (see Section 5).

Here, we will revisit the *Nicomachean Ethics* and see whether Aristotle has anything to say about habituation beyond childhood. Aristotle's point of departure is that moral philosophy is a practical science that should not result in knowledge about what virtue is. Instead, we should "carry out our theories in action" and "endeavour to possess and to practice" virtue (NE 1179b1-4). We have seen that Aristotle believes that virtues are the result of repeatedly doing corresponding virtuous activities. Does this only apply to children? In Book II, Aristotle compares virtue with bodily strength and health, and argues that virtues such as temperance and courage can, just as health, be "destroyed by excess and by deficiency" and "preserved by the observance of the mean." (NE 1104a12-26). Aristotle gives examples of people who, through the decisions they make when they experience fear, develop towards rashness or cowardice, or who, through the ways they deal with feelings of pleasure, become either more profligate or insensible. This applies equally to actions. Aristotle writes that it is "by taking part in transactions with our fellow-men that some of us become just and others unjust" (NE 1103b14-15). When virtuous people encounter new situations, they will have to deliberate about what is appropriate to do and feel, towards whom, on which moment, in what way and for what reason. When they hit the mean, virtue is persevered, and when they do not, they slightly deviate from the virtuous path, which, if this new path is followed, might ultimately result in vice. Because virtue is 'difficult' to realise, Aristotle gives several tips on how to hit the mean in every situation (NE 1109a20-b12).

There is no hint in these passages that Aristotle is talking about children. Quite the contrary: he has responsible adults in mind whose virtues are reinforced or weakened through how they feel and act in all kinds of situations. In addition, there are two specific passages in Book X in which Aristotle explicitly talks about adults practicing the virtues. First, Aristotle acknowledges that a good man must have been disciplined in youth, but adds that "they must also practice the lessons they have learnt, and confirm them by habit, when they are grown up." (NE 1180a1). He repeats this message a few paragraphs later, when he writes that a good education and resulting good habits are not enough for a good life. After that, he "must subsequently continue to follow virtuous habits of life, and to do nothing base whether voluntarily or involuntarily" (NE 1180a15-17).

At this point, two things are worth emphasising. First, Aristotle seems to distinguish between being 'disciplined' or 'educated' *by others* from ways in which people can habituate *themselves* by observing the mean in all circumstances, leading to 'habits of life'. Although he does not elaborate on how this works, there is a place for moral self-cultivation in an Aristotelian reading of habituation. Second, with regard to the relationship between the two: Aristotle clearly states that the virtues we acquire through childhood habituation are necessary, but not sufficient for leading a good life. This does not mean, however, that adult moral development is *only* a matter of becoming practically wise. Being virtuous involves the active exercise of our rational faculties in all kinds of situations throughout our lives, and depending on our choices, our educated habits will be weakened or strengthened further. On the basis of this textual evidence, I think it is safe to conclude that Aristotle believes that

people can and have to practice the virtues once they are grown-up. We will return to this conclusion below, because it needs to be qualified.

One argument for why habituation beyond childhood matters is that self-cultivation is necessary for a character trait to be called a virtue at all. We can only be praised for our virtues if we assume that we have some freedom, and can at least partly be responsible for the development of our character traits (for a discussion, see Battaly, 2016). Another argument is that ‘being virtuous’ does not mean that one has reached a certain state, after which we can sit back, relax and enjoy the fruits of our childhood upbringing. The ‘last’ stage of moral development is an “indeterminate and open-ended level”: even for the virtuous person there is room for improvement (Sanderse, 2015, p. 393). This point is developed by Julia Annas (2011) on the basis of the analogy between virtue and skill acquisition. She concludes that we should not see moral habit as a “plateau of routine, which, once established, is unchanging and can be left alone”, but as ‘dynamic’ conditions that enable us to respond to new challenges and need “constant monitoring for improvement or worsening” (pp. 14-15). Although Annas does not work within one (i.e. Aristotelian) type of ethical framework, her account of virtues as being dynamic and intelligent habits is in many ways in line with and further refines Sherman’s account of habit formation (see Section 3).

I believe this picture of virtues as wise habits and habituation as a lifelong intelligent process of self cultivation makes sense (see, for a slightly different account, Snow, 2006, 2016). However, there is a problem lurking in the background. We saw in Section 2 that Aristotle stresses “it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance” whether we are trained in virtuous habits right from childhood (NE 1103b21-25). This suggests that he is not very optimistic about the possibility that people who lack this training can still work their way towards virtue when they are older. Does this mean that habituation is only suitable for adults who are already virtuous, and who can *continue* and *confirm* their already established virtuous habits, but not for adults who have not developed virtuous habits in childhood? And if that is the case, what does Aristotle have to offer to less virtuous adults? One option is offered by Kristjánsson (2014), who argues that, despite Aristotle’s remark that is “difficult if not impossible” to “dislodge by argument habits long firmly rooted in their characters” (1179b16-17), philosophical contemplation could lead to radical self-transformation by bypassing *phronesis*-guided acquisition of new habits. However, Kristjánsson (2014, p. 480) admits that this route is ‘elitist’ in the sense that this it requires high levels of intelligence.

There might be a less elitist solution, and this brings me to the third point worth emphasising about the passages on adult habituation in Book X. We may understand better why Aristotle is rather optimistic about adults following virtuous habits throughout life when we take the context into account. Both passages about adult habituation occur in a context in which Aristotle discusses the relevance of *laws* for the development of virtue. For example, he writes that “we shall need laws to regulate the discipline of adults as well, and in fact the whole life of the people generally” (NE 1180a1-3). And he adds that doing virtuous things throughout life is “...secured if men’s lives are regulated by a certain intelligence, and by a right system, invested with adequate sanctions.” This makes clear that when writing about adult habituation, Aristotle is not (only) thinking about individuals who, completely detached from community expectations and rules, succeed on their own in refining their actions (see Battaly, 2016, p. 220). So, the less elitist way for adults to change their lives is having a legislator that guarantees that all adults live in a state under just laws.

Aristotle states that laws have particular authority over ‘the many’ (*hoi polloi*), also translated as ‘the common people’. This group may often be but is not necessarily the

statistical majority of people (Garrett, 1993, p. 171). In Aristotle's view, most people are somewhere between the level of 'a lack of self-control' (*akrasia*) and 'self-control' (*enkrateia*), which means that they already care about virtue (Pakaluk, 2005, p. 235). The common people have, in Aristotle's view, had no taste of what he considers to be truly fine and pleasant, because their souls have not been habituated to it (NE 1179b11-17). Adults in this group take happiness to consist in things such as bodily pleasure, honour or money, but not in virtue (NE 1095a22-23). Nevertheless, they can and sometimes do act virtuously, if only because they want to avoid punishment. They obey laws or rules not because they see their purpose and care about them, but because they fear that bad consequences will follow (Sanderse, 2015, p. 389). While it would be better if they refrained from doing bad things out of a sense of shame or regret (*aidos*), these people are not thoroughly vicious either. We could call them 'amoral': their desires change so often that neither immoral nor moral habits have been formed.

When we consider the context of Book X, we have to amend the previous two conclusions. Yes, habituation is a suitable method for the moral education of adults, but habituation is only a kind of self-cultivation for adults who are already virtuous and aspire to become even better. However, for adults who, because of their upbringing, care about money and pleasure instead of virtue, laws are needed to force them to behave well. Does this leave us with an opposition between what habituation can achieve for the common people and the already virtuous ones? Garrett (1993, p. 187) has argued that Aristotle is not someone who has "high hopes or expectations of reforming" the multitude, but aimed at providing an education for those who have proven to be educable. There are also reasons for optimism. Aristotle does not completely rule out the possibility that the multitude can make moral progress (Sanderse, 2015, p. 389). Some people will gradually *internalise* the judgments or punishments, and eventually learn (through the feeling of shame) to refrain from doing bad things even when they are not likely to get caught - making it possible for them to start cultivating their own character (Bowditch, 2008, p. 317; Curzer, 2002). Moreover, there is a grey area between the *hoi polloi* and the *phronimoi*, with people who care about virtue but have varying degrees of self-control, and have a better chance of becoming virtuous than the amoral adults.

5. Implications for professional character formation

We have seen that habituation in childhood never ceases and can further be reinforced in adults. In addition, we saw that habituation, understood as a kind of moral self cultivation, can only be used by people who are already virtuous and have a kind of wisdom to guide the process of practicing. Adults who do not care yet about virtue will need some kind of authoritative 'external' wisdom, such as the law, to guide their moral training. In the remainder of the paper, we will examine some implications of this account of habituation for the moral education of adults today. One field for which the idea of *adult* habituation seems particularly relevant is the moral education of professionals.

Before we turn to the formation of professional *character* today, we need to have grasp of the moral education of professionals. Originally, many universities and colleges were virtue-based in the sense that they as a whole offered students an experience and exercise in character development. A separate course on moral philosophy or professional ethics "epitomized, secured, and brought to a focus" something that was interwoven with the function of higher education (Sloan, 1980, p. 7). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, universities gradually abandoned the mission to cultivate

professionals' character. With regard to the medical profession, this had something to do with the rise of the modern hospital: it "provided an environment where the competing claims of good character were inadequate to ensure ethical practice" (Kenny, Mann & MacLeod, 2003, p. 1205). As codes of ethics emerged, moral education became more principle-based. Education focused on enabling professionals to know these principles, discuss them and apply them to relevant cases. Throughout the twentieth century, a large part of what used to be the moral education of professionals disappeared from college and university curricula, and was rediscovered in medical, law, and business schools during an 'ethics boom' in the 1970s (Glanzer & Raum, 2007, p. 271). A virtue approach reappeared in some domains (such as business, medicine and teaching) about ten years later through Alasdair MacIntyre's (1981) influential ideas about virtue and social practices. Virtues were rediscovered as qualities that professionals need to realise goods internal to their professional practice, such as health or justice, which constitute part of what it means to flourish as a human being. The moral education of professionals was understood (again) in terms of the formation of professional character, i.e. the process of people becoming virtuous *qua professional*.

During the last twenty years, a lot of work has been done in philosophy to specify a virtue ethical approach to professionalism (e.g. Oakley & Cocking, 2001; Walker & Ivanhoe, 2007) and to elaborate what character demands in specific professional settings, such as in nursing or social work. For example, in the early 1990s, Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993), described a number of virtues for doctors, focusing in particular on the 'indispensable' virtue of practical wisdom. More recently, Radden & Sadler (2010) stressed the importance for psychiatrists to have virtues such as empathy, integrity and patience. Each profession now seems to have its own lists of virtues, but practical wisdom is often seen as the most important one (Jones, Lewis & Reffitt, 2013; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012; Bondi, Carr, Clark & Clegg, 2011). Virtue ethical approaches to professional moral education have become so popular that, at least within the teaching profession, a "paradigm shift has occurred in recent years about the cultivation of personal dispositions as a legitimate aim of ethics education for teachers." (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 361). I doubt, however, whether approaches to professional character formation are, besides being morally justified, also psychologically realistic and pedagogically effective.

Concrete ideas about how the character of in-service and pre-service professionals can be educated in intentional, systematic and planned ways are at an initial stage. In my experience, two strategies are often recommended. One is the imitation of virtuous tutors or other role models; the other is using individual reflection and collective dialogue to foster practical wisdom. While both are, from an Aristotelian point of view, important methods for character education (Sanderse, 2012, ch. 4), their popularity may also be seen as an expression of embarrassment about the more substantial cultivation of virtues. For example, teachers embrace role modelling as a way to morally educate children (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013), but they like it because they think that everyone can in a non-verbal way model matters that are of personal value to him or her (Klaassen, 2002, p. 155; Sanderse, 2013). Something similar may be the case with fostering practical wisdom. Why this may be laudable, we can also interpret its popularity as not wanting to face the probably long and difficult process of helping adults acquiring professional moral virtues. It presupposes that people's characters are fully formed once they enter (or: are selected by) a university, and the only thing left to do for schools is to help them judge how to apply their (existing) virtues

to professional situations. Young adults are taken to be, by and large, virtuous when they enter university, and the habituation of their characters is taken for granted.

There are several examples of professional character education where habituation is taken seriously. In particular in medical education, habituation is sometimes mentioned (Radden & Sadler, 2008, p. 379; Bryan & Babelay, 2009). In *Lost Virtue*, a recent book on professional character formation of doctors, Rhodes and Smith (2006) recognise that because virtues are habits, “molding the necessary and distinctive habits of a physician requires repetition.” (p. 109). They conclude that professional character should be integrated in every part of curriculum “in order to allow the emotional exposure to clinical settings and the social learning from peer mentors to take hold.” (p. 109). The idea of character mentors, who can help students through guided self habituation, is developed further by Moberg (2008), who points out that positive psychological literature offers several (scientifically proven) exercises that adults can use to improve their character. One exercise includes making a hierarchy of one’s virtues, and using one of them in a new and different way every day for one week (Seligman, Steen & Peterson, 2005, p. 416).

Armed with the Aristotelian account of habituation developed in this paper, it seems that two lessons can be learnt with regard to the character formation of adults in professional contexts. First of all, our account shows that professional character formation has, from an Aristotelian perspective, more in stock than just role modelling and dialogue, and that habituation is an intelligent practice as well. While virtuous habits become enduring, permanent, or ‘well-entrenched’, they are not mindless routines to behave in a certain way (Lockwood, p. 24). Habituation may be more mechanical in the early childhood years, but will probably reach a critical level soon. A dialogue with a 6-year old about whether he should still be angry with his playmate does not seem too difficult to imagine (Kristjánsson, 2000, p. 409). Lesson 1, as Sherman has put it, is that habituation is not simply a matter of repeating certain actions or feelings over again. Practice does *not* make perfect. It needs to be a series of attempts to reach a goal, and after each try we reflect on what went well and wrong, and adjust our behaviour to reach the goal better next time. Aristotle would not advise students to universities and colleges to become more experienced, but to support professionals to turn their experiences into a kind of practical wisdom that informs moral actions and feelings in future situations.

Secondly, our account shows that habituation may start in childhood, but may well continue during adolescence and adulthood, although Aristotle is pessimistic about the possibility that *all* adults can use this method effectively. As De Ruyter & Schinkel (2016) suggest, moral progress for adults is a ‘project’ that ‘requires tremendous effort’, is often slow and ‘hard-won’, if it occurs at all. Aristotle is aware that our character may reach a point of no return (Kristjánsson, 2000, p. 408). Having well-entrenched habits is a blessing when these habits are virtuous, but a nightmare when our childhood upbringing was close to vicious. Aristotle’s take on this is twofold. While he reserves moral self cultivation for adults who are already on the level of virtue, laws are needed to discipline amoral adults to act virtuously. So, lesson 2 is that students’ characters formation should not be taken for granted. Precisely because they have already been habituated well, Aristotle would *not* leave them to their own devices, but recommend colleges to invest in them even more, for example through teachers or colleagues who act as character mentors. For those on the other side of the moral spectrum, who are ‘emotionally immature, unsure about their moral beliefs and vacillating in their professionals commitment’ (Pellegrino, 2006, p. 11), Aristotle

emphasise the (for some non-Aristotelian sounding) point to have a just law, and probably a clear professional code of conduct, coupled with disciplinary sanctions.

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