

Aristotle on Responsibility for Character

In III.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that “each man is somehow responsible for his state of mind” (1114b2-3)¹ and “men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, in the one case by cheating and in the other by spending their time in drinking bouts and the like; for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character” (1114a4-7). This, however, seems to be in *contradiction*, or, to say the least, in tension with what he asserts in II.1 on the importance of early moral education. Namely, that “it makes no small difference [...] whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference” (1103b24-26).

In my presentation I shall argue that the most plausible interpretation one can resolve the mentioned difficulty with is to claim that Aristotle held a compatibilist conception of moral responsibility. My argument proceeds as follows. I begin my presentation with reviewing two possible explanations as to how the tension between the responsibility for character and the importance of early moral education can be folded up. According to the first one (endorsed by Susan Sauvé Meyer)² early education is important in the Aristotelian theory, its role should not be exaggerated. As she points out, Aristotle clearly distinguishes *two stages of habituation*. The first is the stage of nurture and care, where one’s development is under the control of one’s educators. This stage is highly important in the process of developing a virtuous character, but Aristotle does not think that it could ensure that the person educated will indeed develop an unshakable disposition to perform right actions in his adult life. The second stage of habituation is also essential to the formation of character – this stage is the adult life, where people continue forming their character by the way they spend their time. Since Aristotle recognizes that not even the best early moral education can guarantee that one will become a virtuous adult, it is completely plausible for him to argue that it is up to the individual what kind of character he develops by his actions. As Meyer see it, however, it is true only with regard to those who received a good education. Those who received a *seriously flawed early moral education* cannot be responsible for who they are.

According to the second possible explanation, there is no contradiction between Aristotle’s insistence on moral responsibility for character, on the one hand, and on the importance of education, on the other. Good education makes it easier to become a virtuous man. But even if one has received a bad education, in virtue of his *reflective capacity* he becomes responsible for having a bad conception on what is choiceworthy and noble. Therefore, if he sticks to the bad conceptions he was given, acts according to these conceptions and thereby becomes a bad character – then he is culpable for it.

I shall suggest that the explanation Meyer offers is highly attractive, but her point *lacks textual support*. It is by no means clear that Aristotle wants to establish moral responsibility only for those who have received a good upbringing. In addition, I shall suggest that one cannot fix this flaw by arguing that though proper education makes it easier for an agent to develop firm dispositions to do the right thing, all adults are responsible for their character by virtue of possessing reflective capacities. In my view, this latter explanation presupposes that the *criterion of moral judgment* is intelligible and thereby accessible to anyone, and this is clearly not something in which Aristotle believes.

In the second part of my presentation I shall canvass Aristotle’s account of responsibility for action; for it seems that his account of responsibility for character presupposes an understanding of the pair-notions of *voluntariness and involuntariness* evolved in his inspection of voluntary and involuntary actions. I will suggest that the only way one can establish *universal responsibility* for character (responsibility for each and every person for who they are) in the Aristotelian framework is to argue that in Aristotle’s understanding, for an agent to be responsible it is not required that he could have done otherwise; it is enough that he has voluntarily chosen to do what he did. People need not be the original knowing authors of their character. Since *character is formed by one’s voluntary actions*, the agent will be responsible for his character by virtue of *this* voluntariness.

¹ All the Bekker numbers refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (W. D. Ross translation).

² MEYER, S. S. (1993). *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility: Character and Cause*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.