

*Are human beings to be blamed for flaws of character if their environment does not support suitable processes of ethical habituation and cultivation? Does Aristotle's theory of responsibility account for such cases in satisfactory manner?*

**Commented [u1]:** I should have been more precise when setting the question, which I originally intended to be located fully within an Aristotelian framework.

No, human beings ought not to be blamed for flaws of character (or the actions that flow from those flaws) if they are the result of environmental conditions unsuitable for ethical habituation and cultivation. Blaming individuals in such circumstances goes against the strong intuition we have that blame and praise are only appropriate when agents bear responsibility for the action under evaluation.

Aristotle's theory of responsibility does not provide a satisfactory account of how to deal with these cases, instead claiming that humans are always to be held responsible for their character, an unintuitive conclusion which results from his unduly weak conditions for an action being voluntary. In this essay,

**Commented [u2]:** Good, your key claim is formulated very nicely and already indicates the direction of your analysis.

I first explore the general principles for when praise and blame are appropriate according to both non-consequentialist and consequentialist ethical theories, drawing out the connections between freedom, moral responsibility, and praise- or blameworthiness. I then apply these principles to two paradigmatic examples where individuals' flaws are the result of adverse environmental conditions, showing that in each case they should not be blamed. Next, I set out Aristotle's theory of responsibility and voluntariness, before showing that it does not adequately account for our intuitions in those two cases (or in general). Finally, I consider whether the aims and intended audience of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* can explain why he holds the positions he does, concluding that although this context is important for understanding his theory of responsibility, it does not fully address the theory's shortcomings in accounting for cases of adverse environmental conditions.

**Commented [u3]:** Good!

Much of the discussion in ethics about the appropriate conditions for praise and blame depends on metaphysical questions about the nature of free will. While this essay is not the place to conduct an

analysis of free will, it is worth briefly examining these general principles before focussing on our specific problem of when to blame individuals for their character flaws. After Watson (1982, pp8-11), we can sketch out the relationship as follows:

**P1:** S's freely doing  $\varphi$  is a necessary condition for S to be morally responsible for  $\varphi$ .

**P2:** S's moral responsibility for  $\varphi$  is a necessary condition for S to be a legitimate object of praise or blame for  $\varphi$ .

**C:** Each of the necessary conditions for S doing  $\varphi$  freely is individually required for S to be legitimately praised or blamed for  $\varphi$ .

As Crisp (1997, p141) notes, a consequentialist would not necessarily accept **P2**. For them, praising and blaming are actions just like any other, with their rightness solely a function of the consequences produced: if blaming somebody for something they had no responsibility for leads to better outcomes, so be it. In treating praise and blame as mere instruments, however, this approach seems to unacceptably trivialise their moral significance. Moreover, it collapses the philosophical question of whether it is right to blame individuals for their character flaws into an empirical one of simply tallying up the costs and benefits in a particular situation. For these reasons, in the remainder of the essay I will focus exclusively on theories according to which moral responsibility *is* required for blame and praise to be appropriate.

So, using the argument presented above, if we can demonstrate that a human does not bear moral responsibility for character flaws acquired in an adverse environment, then that will suffice to show that they ought not to be blamed for those flaws.\* Intuitively, it certainly seems the case that it is unreasonable

**Commented [u4]:** Yes, and also dissociating praise/blame from the moral responsibility question also makes such theories inadequate and simply unhelpful when it comes to try to answer the question you pursue.

**Commented [u5]:** As a remark on your line of argument so far, it is interesting that you directed your attention quite swiftly to *moral* responsibility. It might be worth pausing here to say briefly why you think this is the kind of responsibility that is ascribed or denied with respect to character flaws and how you understand and intend to use the term. Moreover, I would be curious to hear to what extent the notion of moral responsibility as it is developed in modern ethical theories compares to corresponding questions in Aristotle.

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\* The converse does not hold, since there may be further conditions required for blame to be appropriate (e.g., the blamer having an appropriate relationship to the agent being blamed, or having benevolent intentions, etc.).

to hold somebody responsible for circumstances outside their control]. Consider, for instance, the example of Jeremy:

Jeremy grew up in a war-torn region where the inhabitants depended on limited rations of aid to survive. As a young adult, he was sent out to collect his family's rations each morning, and needed to push his way through the crowds in order to get food and avoid starvation. He recently resettled in a peaceful country and is trying to adjust to the new conditions. However, the trauma has disposed him to take as many resources as he can, leading to an overly selfish character.

Even if we hold Jeremy responsible for the actions he took while securing rations for his family, extending that responsibility to the character traits gradually developed as a result seems unwarranted.

He did not, in any relevant sense, freely choose to develop this selfish character, and so he ought not to be blamed for it. A similar thing can be said in the case of Rebecca:

Rebecca is a habitual liar. She is the descendant of a long line of swindlers, and was brought up to continue in this tradition most skilfully. As a child, she was severely punished any time she spoke honestly, and was taught that deceit and deception are the highest skills. Now an adult, she struggles to be candid, having internalised her family's values of lying so early on.

The development of a flawed character is, again, not something it seems fair to hold Rebecca responsible for – one might even say that it happened *to* her, not *because of* her. Character traits are relatively stable, in that if one becomes (for instance) a habitual liar there may be no way out, since even being honest on rare occasions goes against your settled disposition. When vices come about as a result of challenging material conditions or a morally-tainted upbringing, then, it is not appropriate to blame individuals for having them.

Let us now turn to Aristotle's account of responsibility. Defending his conclusion that "being decent or base is up to us" (III.5, 1113b14) is important for Aristotle for two reasons (Sauvé Meyer 2006, p138).

First, he wants to demonstrate that virtue and vice are appropriate objects of praise and blame

**Commented [u6]:** .. and character flaws are such circumstances?

**Commented [u7]:** If we grant this particular argument of yours, what, if anything, would count as a case where someone freely chooses to develop a particular character? The way you phrase it here makes it difficult to imagine what that would look like. But if it's not possible to 'choose to develop a character' full stop, then you'd rather be making a conceptual argument about what it means to develop a character, rather than relying on an example. What I am thinking here is that there is an assumed theory about how character development proceeds at work here, which seems to do the argumentative heavy-lifting without being explicitly discussed.

**Commented [u8]:** Good. This account of character development could perhaps even be expanded a little.

respectively, and doing so requires showing that we have responsibility and agency over them. Second, Aristotle denies that the consequentialist's rejection of **P2** has any practical implications, and therefore thinks that laws are only effective at incentivising good behaviour when they reward or punish people for actions that they do in fact bear responsibility for (III.5, 1113b21–30). To reach this point, he starts by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary actions, with an action being voluntary only if its origin lies in the agent, and the agent is informed about the particulars of the action (III.1, 1111a22–24).\*

For Aristotle, the category of involuntary actions is extremely narrow: one must either be acting in ignorance, or perform (insofar as one can be described as performing) the action without any cognitive input at all, even to the extent of moving one's limbs deliberately (III.1, 1110a1–4). As a result, being coerced (but not literally physically forced) into carrying out an action, like Jeremy's pushing forward in the queue and Rebecca's lying as a child, would be classed as voluntary (III.1, 1110a12–13; Nielsen 2007, 281). It is somewhat unclear whether Aristotle thinks voluntariness is sufficient for responsibility – his claim that children can act voluntarily but cannot make decisions (III.1, 1111a24–6) suggests that he might add a further condition of deliberation occurring, implying that Jeremy, but not Rebecca, is responsible for their actions. With his distinction between the voluntary and involuntary established, Aristotle then makes a fairly straightforward move to defend the idea that we can hold people responsible for actions done due to character: since habituation means that your actions form your character, and you are responsible for your actions, transitivity of responsibility implies that you are responsible for your character itself (III.5, 1113b7–12; Sauvé Meyer 2006, p154).

As Sauvé Meyer (2006, p156) notes, Aristotle had a very particular audience in mind for the *Nicomachean Ethics*: well-educated male citizens who have been brought up “to acquire one sort of

**Commented [u9]:** Good! Note, as we saw in the last few weeks, Aristotle's methodology partly depends on this result, for very often whether a course of action or state of mind is appropriately recipient of praise or blame serves important heuristic purposes in the argument of NE.

**Commented [RS10]:** (And also his discussion around 1135a20 about actions done out of spirit not being constitutive of a vicious character)

**Commented [u11]:** Good observation and discussion. Can you say more about how you understand this additional condition?

**Commented [u12]:** Your interpretive summary of Aristotle's position is overall very accurate and well-cited, well done!

\* These particulars include what is being done, to whom, in what way, and with what goal in mind.

habit or another, right from [their] youth” (II.1, 1103b22-25). In fact, he is explicit that certain virtues are inaccessible to individuals without the appropriate material conditions – “a poor person could not be magnificent”, he claims, since “he lacks the means for large and fitting expenditures” (IV.2, 1122b27-29). Given that Aristotle repeats several times the qualification that to be virtuous, one “must be finely brought up and habituated”, it would be strange for him to view those who lacked such an upbringing to be somehow blameworthy for their misfortune. Indeed, when considered in conjunction with Aristotle’s conviction that flourishing consists in being virtuous, he might even pity individuals who, like Jeremy and Rebecca, are unable to attain the good life because of difficult environmental conditions.

So, to conclude, it is not reasonable to blame agents for flaws of character or their behavioural consequences when those flaws are the result of an impoverished material or moral environment. Aristotle’s account of responsibility is predicted on an overly narrow view of the involuntary, and it therefore attributes responsibility to people in cases where it should not. However, his apparent oversight of the role played by upbringing is understandable when set in the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics* being a work aimed at well-off male citizens, for whom the assumption of a suitable early environment was a justifiable one.

## Bibliography

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**Commented [u13]:** Yes, good. Why do you think this is in fact not something that Aristotle seems to take into account? The way that you formulate it here makes it seem that it should certainly be a concern that should arise in making claims about the external requirements that cultivation of the virtues relies on, on the one hand, and the supreme praiseworthiness of virtuous character, on the other.

**Commented [u14]:** The importance of the role of upbringing certainly is, but what about the conclusions about responsibility, which you have deemed rather counterintuitive—can they also be made sense of by appeal to the particular context and audience?

## Other points

- On ignorance of universals being caused by upbringing and making actions involuntary:
  - You might not be to blame for this ignorance, if it's because of socialisation! (contra his discussion about how you're responsible for your own conception of the good).
- His response that it is "totally insensible" not to realise that habituation occurs could also be rejected
  - Children in general probably lack the reasoning faculties for this. And, again on the upbringing point, neither would adults who haven't been well-educated.

Rohan,

This is a well-argued and concise essay, which succeeds at demonstrating good knowledge of Aristotle's theory of the voluntary and praise- and blameworthiness and at discussing the essay question in a creative and fruitful way. Framing the issue partly by relying on contemporary ethical theories' perspectives on moral responsibility seems like a useful strategy here. Your overall argument, that humans should not be blamed for character flaws resulting from unsuitable environments and that Aristotle's theory does not adequately account for this, is well developed and pursued throughout the essay. The examples you choose are largely instructive, your description of Aristotle's theory is well-supported with textual evidence, and you taking into account the historical context and audience of the Ethics rounds out the analysis in a nuanced way.

I wonder to what degree the essay assumes that Aristotle categorically blames people for bad character in all cases. Perhaps thinking about what other external constraints are recognised by Aristotle would change your position as developed in this paper. Moreover, you argue that Aristotle sets the bar too low for voluntary action, but we should remember that he distinguishes different degrees of voluntariness, for example in mixed actions. In particular the case of Rebecca might be an unclear case for Aristotle. Since he denies that children have full responsibility (III.1, 1111a24-26), if Rebecca's actions as a child don't count as fully voluntary, would Aristotle hold her responsible for her adult character? You do mention the issue, but it could have been discussed more deeply.

While the framework of modern ethical theories serves your essay well in giving it a succinct structure, we might ask whether there also are shortcomings of this approach. Do we frame Aristotle's discussion in terms that are alien to his intentions by adopting such a perspective? Is Aristotle's interest in blame and responsibility similarly motivated as that of modern ethical theorists? This could be an interesting question for our tutorial discussion.