

# Moral character, commitment and persistence<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Virtue ethicists assume that the notion of (moral) character should hold a prominent place in our moral thought. In this paper, I offer an argument in support of this view. Central to my argument is a reflection on what it means to be committed to a principle of action. I argue that the notion of commitment is inherently connected to the notion of moral character in two ways. The first is based on the idea that an action that expresses our character is an action that we *own* in the most substantial way. I suggest that the notion of owning one's action can be cashed out through the idea of committing to a practical principle. The second connection arises from the thought that the notion of moral character refers to a persistent, enduring moral identity. I argue that in order for a person to be genuinely committed to a principle, she must act in accord with it in a way that is not merely consistent, but persistent across a number of situations. Accordingly, to say of someone that they are committed to a principle of action is *eo ipso* to ascribe them an enduring moral character. Against this background, I turn to a reading of Aristotle's notion of virtue as *hexis probairetike* as a paradigm example of how the idea of enduring moral commitment may be spelled out in more specific detail.

*Keywords:* Virtue; moral character; commitment; practical principle; Aristotelian ethics.

## 1. *A paradox of character?*

Philosophers have argued repeatedly that the notion of character, as we use it both in everyday discourse and in moral philosophy, is prone to give rise to paradoxes. Some of these paradoxes arise from the fact that there appears to be a discrepancy between a first-person and a third-person point of view on somebody's character. Consider what Sophia Moreau has called the "paradox of evaluation" (Moreau 2005: 27): certain evaluations of a person's character that are perfectly valid when made from a third-person point of view instantana-

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neously lose their legitimacy when they are made, about that very same person, from a first-person point of view. For instance, a person who is praised by others as modest can put such praise into question simply by referring approvingly to her own modesty. The tension between first-person and third-person perspective on character is not limited to evaluative character traits, however. Rather, it occurs more globally. One aspect of our discourse on character that has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the past decades is the fact that we refer to character traits in order to explain and predict actions.<sup>2</sup> What is puzzling about this practice is that when we explain a person's action in reference to character traits, that same explanation assumes a different meaning when employed by the person herself. For instance, my answer to the question "Why did your friend stay up all night polishing her manuscript?" may be "She's a perfectionist!" With this explanation, I imply that my friend's actions are guided by certain values and aims, and may be explained by that fact. But imagine my friend offered the same explanation for her own actions. "Why did you stay up all night polishing your manuscript?" – "Because I'm a perfectionist". That very same explanation, given from the first-person point of view, carries connotations that are absent from the third-person version. Perhaps she wants to rebuke the person asking the question for being too slack, not sufficiently honoring the value of perfection. Or else, perhaps she means to express a mixture of resignation and regret regarding the fact that her perfectionism, once again, got the better of her, depriving her of a night's sleep.<sup>3</sup>

However, this view of the essentially paradoxical nature of our discourse on character fails to take note of the fact that a person may also *herself* relate to certain traits of hers in two different ways. Consider again the example of perfectionism. On the one hand, explaining certain actions of hers through the statement "I'm a perfectionist," a person may notice this simply as a psychological fact about herself, one which she perhaps disapproves of. On the other hand, she may be deliberately committed to certain values and aims that are commonly associated with perfectionism, and express this commitment in a statement to the extent that she considers herself a perfectionist. Explaining why she spent the night polishing her manuscript, she may say things such as "It needs to be perfect;" "I can't hand in a document that contains typos" etc.; and she may even summarize these answers in the statement "Well, I guess I'm a perfectionist." In this case, in acknowledging her own perfectionism, she does not merely register a psychological fact about herself; rather, she declares

<sup>2</sup> It has been argued that this practice ultimately relies on untenable assumptions regarding the persistence and global influence of character traits on actions. For extensive discussion, see Doris 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See Moreau 2005: 280.

that she is committed to certain values. And, according to the example, she stands by this commitment, she holds herself answerable for it and believes she can justify it. Seen from this point of view, the air of paradox disappears. To the extent that the statement “I’m a perfectionist” is an expression of a commitment, rather than a description of a psychological fact, it carries no connotations of self-rebuke or internal distancing. Rather, through this expression the person “owns” the principles and values associated with perfectionism.

This last observation brings to the fore a crucial aspect of our conception of character. Bernard Williams writes that “to be an expression of character is perhaps the most substantial way in which an action can be one’s own”. (Williams 1981: 130). It seems intuitively right to say that we consider a character trait our *own* to the extent that we consider ourselves to be able to justify the actions arising from it, thus holding ourselves accountable for these actions. But why is that? Consider other traits we may ascribe to ourselves, such as a propensity to enjoy soap operas, or an inclination to take pleasure in, and hence a desire for, roller coaster rides. Maybe I can justify riding the roller coaster on a particular occasion by pointing out that I believe it is healthy to indulge my desire to do so from time to time; but presumably I cannot offer any reasons (though I may be able to offer causal explanations) for having the desire in the first place. In what sense, then, is this trait not fully or genuinely my own? Sophia Moreau suggests that this is due to the fact that I am passive with regard to such traits and do not actively participate in them (see Moreau 2005: 277). However, this does not seem to be true about my inclination to watch soap operas or ride roller coasters: I can be extremely active in pursuing them, researching the highest rated soap operas and most spectacular roller coasters, traveling places, arranging my schedule so as to be able to see them etc. I would suggest, instead, that the answer lies in what it means to be able to justify an action or trait by offering reasons for it. Consider again our committed perfectionist. Imagine we push her further on why she believes that her written work must be flawless and may not contain any typos, stylistic errors, or half-baked arguments. She may perhaps pass the buck and say that this is how she was educated, that this is one of the core values her parents or teachers passed on to her. But she may also at some point take a stand and say something like: “Because striving for the best in one’s work is the right thing to do!” – indicating that, from her point of view, this is where the discussion comes to an end. That this is where the discussion ends for her can also be expressed by saying that this is a fundamental practical principle for her. What she does when taking a stance in this way – rather than passing the buck by referring to some external authority – is to take ultimate responsibility for offering reasons for her action. She thereby acknowledges that it is ultimately she, herself, who is accountable

for her action. And in this sense, her action is her own in a deeper sense than her inclination to ride roller coasters, or to enjoy soap operas, can ever be. It is justified by a principle she stands for.

There is something remarkable about the fact that an action or trait becomes our own in the deepest sense when we undertake to offer an ultimate justification for it. For to offer such a justification means to offer reasons for it. And once we start thinking about reasons, we start gravitating away from anything that is “our own” in a merely subjective, individualistic sense, such as quirks, mannerisms, idiosyncracies. These, too, can be considered as characteristic of a person, in the sense that they mark her out as a unique individual. In contrast, reasons are, by their very nature, intersubjective: if something counts as a reason in some situation for one person, it must also count (all else equal) as a reason for someone else in the same situation. And so to say that one holds oneself accountable for what one does and the way one is by offering reasons for it means to say that one holds oneself accountable for it in light of something that goes beyond one’s idiosyncratic, individual nature. In other words, one makes an action or trait one’s own in light of reasons one understands as making an intersubjective claim to validity. At this point we begin to see why when we think about character, we are naturally drawn towards thinking about *moral* character. For according to the preceding line of reasoning, one makes an action or trait one’s own in the deepest sense by taking on the burden of offering some form of ultimate justification for it. But the realm of ultimate justification is the realm of morality: the realm of ultimate principles for action.

For the time being, the notion of an ultimate justification for action as used in the preceding argument is not supposed to be tied to any particular theoretical framework. For instance, it is supposed to be compatible both with a Kantian and an Aristotelian way of thinking about character. In this context, I can rely on several commentators who have worked out parallels between the two philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Christine Korsgaard has argued forcefully that what is at stake in both Kant’s and Aristotle’s account of moral action is a notion of the intrinsic worth of an action. For both Kant and Aristotle, when we act morally, we choose an action because we consider it to have intrinsic worth – we consider it as worthy of choice in virtue of it being the kind of action it is. For Aristotle, we say of such an action that the agent does it for the sake of the noble; on Kant’s account, we say that it is performed from duty. In either case, the key idea is that an agent acts on the basis of a reflective judgment about the value of an action as such – in other words, the agent acts in light of, and is moved by, a conception of what makes an action intrinsically good. In light

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Engstrom 2009; Hursthouse 1999; Korsgaard 1996.

of our preceding argument, we can see that precisely by implicitly or explicitly taking such an ultimate stance on the intrinsic worthiness of her action, an agent constitutes herself *as* a distinctive character. She constitutes herself as someone who owns this action, by saying, implicitly or explicitly: “I am hereby willing to take the ultimate burden of offering a reason for my action”. As Christine Korsgaard puts it:

[T]he capacity to choose is a capacity to make a reflective judgment about the value of an action as such and to be moved by that judgment to perform or avoid the action. Importantly, this is at the same time a form of self-command, a capacity to give shape to our own characters and identities. When the agent asks whether the action is a good one, she is also asking, “Do I wish to be a person who is so moved, a person who does *that* sort of act for *that* sort of end?” (Korsgaard 1996: 217)

## 2. *Commitment, consistency and persistence*

So far, I have argued that the notion of (moral) character becomes pertinent where individuals take on the task of offering some form of fundamental reason or principle for their action. I now want to examine in more detail what offering such fundamental reasons involves. Consider again our committed perfectionist. Let us assume she just justified losing a night’s sleep to us over polishing her manuscript by declaring: “Striving for the best in one’s work is the right thing to do!” We assume, accordingly, that this is one of the principles she stands by. However, the next time we meet her when she is approaching a deadline, she is content with handing in a sloppy and unpolished piece of work. When we ask her how this can be, she just says “Something more important came up,” or even “I didn’t feel like putting in more work this time.” Perhaps there is a reason why she behaves in this way: perhaps she is going through a phase of depression, or perhaps she just broke up with her boyfriend and cannot muster any energy at the moment to pursue any projects whatsoever. However, assume that there is no such obvious cause for her lack of principle, and that this kind of erratic behavior turns out to be a pattern with her: one day she solemnly declares herself a perfectionist, the next day she wavers. She acts in a perfectionist way whenever she fancies, but fails to do so when she no longer feels like it.

One way of responding to this scenario is to say that here we have merely a half-hearted perfectionist. She is a perfectionist on and off. But I want to suggest a stronger conclusion: the person under consideration in our example is not a perfectionist at all. As a first step, suppose she genuinely believes that one should strive for the best in one’s own work, and that this is the reason why she stays up late to polish her manuscript. If this principle really gives an account

of her reasons for her action, then she must be committed to adhering to this principle not just now, in this very situation, but in all relevantly similar situations. Unless, that is, a good reason presents itself for breaching the principle. This is because reasons have an in-built condition of consistency, in the sense that if they hold in one situation, they hold in all relevantly similar situations.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, if her explanation for why she isn't following the perfectionist principle on this occasion is simply "I didn't feel like it", we have reason to doubt that she has given us a correct report of her reasons in the first instance.

Inconsistency in one's adherence to a reason, then, can be a fairly good indicator that what the person gave us in the first place was not really her reason – in our present example, that the person does not really abide by perfectionist principles. However, I want to suggest that there can be a second way in which she can fail to be a perfectionist. Consider a slightly modified account of the whimsical perfectionist. Assume that whenever she stumbles into a relevant situation, she always ends up acting like a perfectionist. However, each of her particular decisions to act in a perfectionist way is ultimately due to some whim or momentary fancy of hers. Perhaps there is something – some external circumstance – that momentarily makes perfectionism appear attractive to her, or perhaps she is simply in a mood that makes her inclined to embrace perfectionism. If these circumstances did not occur, or if she wasn't in this mood, she wouldn't embrace perfectionism on this particular occasion. Her perfectionist behavior, in other words, remains isolated and somewhat random. And again, I would suggest, such whimsical behavior, even though it is consistent, gives us reason to doubt that the agent in question fails to genuinely commit to the principle she pretends (or thinks herself) to be guided by.

In light of this, it seems plausible to hold that what we are ascribing to someone who is genuinely committed to a principle – such as the principle of perfectionism – is not merely consistency in her actions. Something else must be involved in addition: the agent's initial commitment must continue to guide the agent, and manifest itself, over and again, in her particular actions and decisions. In other words, we must think of the agent's commitment to the principle in question not merely as a "logical" entity, consisting in rational consistency among her actions and decisions, but as something that persists throughout her particular actions and decisions, and is active in guiding them or bringing them about. What we require, in short, is not just consistency, but persistence.

As argued above, when an agent assumes the task of offering some form of ultimate justification for their action, we can say of them that they "own" this action: they hold themselves, rather than any external authority, answerable

<sup>5</sup> See Korsgaard 2009: 72-80.

for the action. The preceding considerations have brought to light a deeper reason for why owning one's actions in this way amounts to "giving shape to our character and identity" (Korsgaard 1996: 217), as Korsgaard puts it – or why, in other words, one should draw on the notion of character at all in this context. As we have just seen, endorsing a principle as a reason for action involves committing to consistency amongst one's actions. Furthermore, however, the agent cannot be said to be committed to the principle unless her commitment persists and actively guides her actions, *thereby* ensuring consistency among them. It turns out that there is an intrinsic connection, then, between the notion of owning an action by offering a principle as a reason for it, and a central thought we intuitively associate with the notion of character. This is the thought that a person's character constitutes her identity, and as such must have some form of *persistence*. Specifically, a person's character must persist throughout a series of particular choices and actions in which it manifests or expresses itself. This thought also surfaces in the varieties of paradox briefly alluded to at the beginning of our discussion: here it was expressed in the view that we can explain and predict a person's actions by reference to their character. The upshot of our argument so far, then, is this: we need to draw on the notion of enduring, persistent states of character – however one wants to construe these more specifically – in order to get a grip on the notion of an agent's being committed to a principle of action.

Note that at this point of the argument, we have brought together two strands in our conception of character which in our opening section we treated as being separated by the fact that they are associated with two different perspectives on an agent: a first and a third person perspective. From the first person point of view, a person's character is articulated in what she accepts as a (fundamental) reason for her actions. From the third person point of view, a person's character consists in a set of fixed states in reference to which one can explain and predict the person's actions. The previous considerations have shown that these two perspectives cannot be as neatly separated as it may appear at first sight. An agent cannot be said to be genuinely committed to a principle in light of which she justifies her actions unless this commitment persists as something that continues to manifest itself in a series of actions and decisions. Something that *is* perhaps slightly paradoxical about this result is that if we take it seriously, it follows that the first person perspective does not always give us an ultimately reliable access to what our principles of action really are – to what or who we are, ultimately. Even if I now wholeheartedly declare my perfectionist convictions, whether or not I really am a perfectionist depends not merely on what I do now, but also on what I continue to do in the future – whether or not I persist in acting like a perfectionist or not.



### 3. *Aristotle on persisting moral character*

The major lesson to take away from the preceding discussion is that in order for an agent to be committed to a principle of action, her commitment must be both consistent and persistent. I now want to consider the relevant notion of persistence in more detail. One obvious figure to turn to at this point is Aristotle. Aristotle, as will become apparent shortly, offers us a powerful theory of moral character that can account in a plausible way for the kind of persistence we are looking for.

Aristotle's account emerges from his discussion of virtue, vice, human excellence and *eudaimonia*, the most important source of which is his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* famously starts out with a statement and discussion of the thesis – shared by most ancient ethical theorists – that all human action is aimed at *eudaimonia*. However, this does not mean, in Aristotle's view, that human beings are blindly driven to pursue activities that contribute to their flourishing – as might be said of animals, for instance. Rather, human beings also possess reason, the capacity to reflect and choose. As such, they operate under certain *conceptions* of *eudaimonia*, conceptions that may be more or less mistaken. One of the central aims commentators see Aristotle as pursuing in NE is to argue that the correct conception of *eudaimonia* is one according to which engaging in virtuous activity is constitutive of human flourishing. What is crucial for our concerns is that for Aristotle, to act from a conception of *eudaimonia* is to act in a way that expresses one's deliberation and choice (*prohairesis*). An agent whose actions express his conception of *eudaimonia* is an agent who can offer reasons for his actions, who is in a position to justify his actions in light of his conception of *eudaimonia*. In other words, such an agent, if asked, has available a principle in light of which he can justify his action. He can “own” his actions, in the sense discussed above.

This picture raises the following question. If an agent can own his actions by being able to justify them in light of a conception of *eudaimonia*, what, in turn, is required in order for an agent to make a conception of *eudaimonia* his own? This is an important question for Aristotle, one that he addresses most extensively with regard to the case of adopting a *correct* conception of *eudaimonia* – the kind of conception that a virtuous man owns. The issue comes up first in Book II of NE, where he discusses the question of how virtue is acquired. Two elements are crucial to the account offered by Aristotle. One is the notion of “[acting] in conformity with right principle (*orthos logos*)” (NE 1103b 33) – minimally, acting virtuously requires acting according to the *orthos logos* (which Aristotle later on spells out in the context of the doctrine of the mean). The other is, famously, the notion that becoming virtuous involves habit and



training, even from early childhood on (see NE 1103b 14-25). The acquisition of virtue, on Aristotle's account, essentially involves both of these elements. It is a process of practice and training resulting both in the formation of habits, and in the sharpening of one's judgment concerning what is in accord with the *orthos logos* – in short, one's practical reason or *phronesis*.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, Aristotle states, three conditions must be met if an agent is to act virtuously: “first he must act with knowledge; secondly he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and thirdly the act must spring from a fixed and permanent disposition of character (*bebaios kai metakinetos echon*)” (NE 1105a 29-35). One can understand these three conditions as describing the result of a successful process of virtue acquisition involving both habituation and the sharpening of one's grasp of the *orthos logos*. From this point of view, we can spell out the second two conditions (assuming that the first merely states the obvious constraint that anything that is done intentionally must be done knowingly) in the following way. An agent who has acquired virtue, whenever he acts virtuously, performs the action for the sake of its intrinsic rightness, or because he knows it is in accord with the *orthos logos*. This is what the second condition states. However, even if an agent does what is in accord with the *orthos logos*, and moreover does it *because* it is in accord with the *orthos logos*, this is not sufficient for genuinely virtuous action. This is what is stated in the third condition: the agent must act, furthermore, from a fixed and permanent disposition of character, such a permanent disposition having been acquired, presumably, through habituation. Only if all three conditions are fulfilled can the resulting act be called virtuous. Whether or not an act is virtuous, then, depends crucially on the agent who performs the act, or more specifically on *how* he performs the act: “acts done in conformity with the virtues are not done justly or temperately if they themselves are of a certain sort, but only if the agent also is in a certain state of mind when he does them” (NE 1105a–b 29-33). Because the relevant state of mind, as the third condition states, is a “fixed and permanent disposition of character” acquired through habituation, it is not always within the agent's immediate power to act virtuously or not. As Aristotle explains in the context of his discussion of the virtue of justice:

<sup>6</sup> Commentators have puzzled over how precisely these two elements are supposed to come together in the process of virtue formation. One major problem is raised by Aristotle himself: if the acquisition of virtue involves habituation, while habituation, more specifically, consists in repeatedly acting virtuously, how can we get the process of habituation started without already possessing some degree of virtue? See NE 1104b. For comments, see Burnyeat 1980; Broadie 1991: 72-74; Sorabji 1980; Vogler 2013.

Men think that it is in their power to act unjustly, and therefore that it is easy to be just. But really this is not so. It is easy to lie with one's neighbour's wife or strike a bystander or slip some money into a man's hand, and it is in one's power to do these things or not; but to do them as a result of a certain disposition of mind is not easy, and it is not in one's power. (NE 1137a: 5-9)

An agent may have a choice of either performing or omitting actions such as lying with one's neighbor's wife or striking a man. However, lying with one's neighbor's wife is not sufficient for performing an unjust action, nor is omitting to do so sufficient for performing a just action. What is missing in either case is that the action is done from a fixed state of character. But one does not always have a choice to perform an action from a fixed state of character. Whether or not the action is a manifestation of a fixed state of character lies outside of one's immediate power of control. In order for a man to genuinely own or be committed to a conception of *eudaimonia*, then – such as the virtuous man's conception of *eudaimonia* – acting in accord with it has to have become solidified into a fixed state of character.

Given this rough sketch of Aristotle's view, we can now raise the question of how the view may be motivated. Why hold that in order for an agent to be committed to a conception of *eudaimonia*, such as the virtuous man's conception, he must acquire a fixed and permanent state of character? Rosalind Hursthouse offers an answer to this question in her reconstruction of Aristotle's view. On Hursthouse's reading, a virtuous agent for Aristotle is an agent who performs actions for a particular kind of reason: he does what he does because he thinks it is right, or he does it "for its own sake." In our preceding sketch, this corresponds to the virtuous person acting in accord with his conception of *eudaimonia*. Hursthouse defines necessary conditions for this to be the case. First, the agent must consider himself as acting on reasons he himself endorses, rather than merely following an external authority (such as God's command). In our discussion above, we tried to capture this idea through the notion that the agent must own his actions by holding himself accountable for them. Second, Hursthouse argues, the agent must show consistency in his commitment to the reasons in question. The latter condition, she argues, is not met by "[t]he agent who surprises us by her virtuous actions when momentarily transformed by love or success" and therefore recognizes "the value of the V [i.e. virtuous] actions only when it is, as it were, lit up for her by her love or success." (Hursthouse 1999: 135). The inconsistent and unsteady agent in Hursthouse's account – the agent who is only "momentarily transformed by love or success" – parallels our inconsistent perfectionist above. If her actions turn out to be inconsistent, this gives us reason to doubt that she is genuinely committed to the principle in question. In contrast, Hursthouse goes on to argue, the

condition of consistency is met by an agent whose actions are predictable and consistent, because they flow from a permanent state:

What it is that makes the agent who does what is V for X reasons on a particular occasion both actually and counterfactually reliable and predictable, if she is – what it is for her to be “really committed to the value of her V act” – is that she acts “from a fixed and permanent state”, namely the virtue in question. (Hursthouse 1999: 135)

Accordingly, she concludes, in order for an agent to be consistently committed to a principle of action, his commitment must be predictable and reliable, by taking the form of a fixed and permanent state. On my own view, Hursthouse’s argument is moving too quickly at this point. As our example of the whimsical but consistent perfectionist shows, acting reliably and predictably on a fixed and permanent state is sufficient, but not necessary for showing mere consistence in one’s commitment to a principle. I therefore suggest that we can better capture Hursthouse’s thought by slightly reformulating her second condition: in order for an agent to be genuinely committed to a principle of action – a conception of *eudaimonia* – he must show not merely consistency, but moreover persistence in acting in accord with it. If we accept this reformulation, we can then read Aristotle as holding that in order for an agent to show both consistency and persistence in his commitment to a principle, he must be acting from a fixed and permanent state (the acquisition of which is partly due to habituation).<sup>7</sup>

Let us now consider in some more detail the notion of a fixed and permanent state of character in Aristotle’s account. Specifically, we need to address the question of how such a state can grant the kind of persistence of principle we are looking for. It is helpful to slice up the question into two parts, though as will become apparent, we will have to piece them together again in the end: how can such a state grant persistence, and how can it grant persistence of principle? The answer to the first part of the question is relatively straightforward. Aristotle’s own expression for the relevant kind of fixed and permanent state of character is *hexis probairetike*: a disposition involving choice.<sup>8</sup> As Aristotle emphasizes repeatedly in Book II of NE, such a disposition determines both feeling and desire or action (see NE 1104b 13-14; NE 1106b 16-17; NE 1106b 23-7; NE 1107a 4-5; NE 1109a 22-4, NE 1109b 30). More specifically, it determines when, at what objects, to which degree and in what manner we

<sup>7</sup> For a reading of Aristotle that supports this line of argument, see also Anscombe 1965: 149.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sauvé Meyer points out that the notion *hexis probairetike* has both a wider and a more narrow scope: on the narrow scope, it refers only to the virtues and vices, on the broad scope it refers also to states such as continence and incontinence etc. constitute different examples. See Meyer 2011: 29.

experience certain passions, what desires arise in relation to such passions and how we act in response to them (NE 1105b 19-28). In case the *hexis* in question is a virtue, its bearer on the one hand feels the right amount of passion at the right time and in the right situations; on the other hand, he desires the right objects, in the right way, and at the right time, and acts accordingly. For instance, in the case of the virtue of courage, he will feel the right amount of fear at the right time and with regard to the right objects, and he will perform the right actions in light of his passions (for instance, attack the enemy or not).

The relation between the *hexis* and its particular manifestations is best understood in the sense of an efficient cause. On this view, a *hexis* is a causal power that endures as different occasions of feeling and action arise, bringing about the relevant desires, actions and feelings on each occasion. For instance, an agent's courage endures throughout a variety of situations and with regard to a variety of objects, bringing about different degrees of fear and different desires and actions in response to them. As a result, while the agent's passions, desires and behavior change, his virtue endures.<sup>9</sup> However, at this point one might object that while an Aristotelian *hexis*, understood in this way, establishes persistence of an agent's practical choices, it does not grant persistence of the right kind. If it is simply a causal power that determines the agent to make certain choices in particular situations, to what extent does it reflect her commitment? It now seems like an external power that has influence over the agent, but does not express her practical principles. In other words, it seems like now we have secured persistence, but not persistence of principle. However, Aristotle's account has resources in order for us to respond to this concern. This brings us to the second question above: how does the Aristotelian *hexis* grant persistence of principle? Let us focus again on the case of the virtuous agent. We saw that for Aristotle, virtue is acquired, on the one hand, through habituation, on the other hand, through a progressive deepening of one's grasp of the *orthos logos*. Habituation is a process that forms one's desires and feelings. Through habituation, the virtuous person's desires gradually come to be more inclined towards the good, while her feelings gradually come to be in accord with what is the mean in particular situations. At the same time, as her desires are more and more inclined towards the good and she increasingly acts in accord with them, she gains a deeper, more detailed, more comprehensive understanding of the conception of *eudaimonia* that is reflected in her choices.<sup>10</sup> Acting on her generous desires, for instance, she gradually gains a

<sup>9</sup> See Meyer 2011: 155.

<sup>10</sup> This is what Richard Sorabji has in mind, I take it, when he states that in Aristotle's view, virtue contributes to the preservation of the virtuous man's conception of the good life: Sorabji 1980: 212.

better understanding of the salient features of situations in which generosity is required, of how to be generous in an efficient way, of how to balance generosity against constraints arising from other virtues such as temperance etc. This understanding, in turn, will guide her in performing further virtuous actions. In this way, her practical insight and her disposition to feel and desire mutually support and reinforce each other. This mutually supporting structure is what Aristotle means by virtue.

It is noteworthy in this context that the Aristotelian picture sketched so far implies that the more virtuous an agent is, the less she will be faced with having to choose between alternative courses of action in cases in which virtuous action is called for. The more virtuous she is, the more will her desire be directed at the good of virtue, and the more will this desire for the good be backed up by a corresponding conception of *eudaimonia*. At the outer limit, the virtuous agent will find herself faced with what Bernard Williams calls a “practical necessity” (Williams 1981:124) to act in accord with virtue.<sup>11</sup>

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For a discussion of the process of virtue education according to Aristotle more generally, see Sorabji 1980: 214-218.

<sup>11</sup> One might object that if this is the case, it is no longer clear why Aristotle calls the *hexis* which constitutes virtue a *hexis probairetike*, a *hexis* involving choice. However, choice, for Aristotle, does not necessarily mean choice between alternative options. Aristotle's position is not an incompatibilist-libertarian one. Rather, acting from choice means acting in accord with one's conception of *eudaimonia*, of the good. There is no tension in the idea that one can act in accord with this conception without seeing any practical alternative to acting in this way. For extensive discussion, see Meyer 2011, especially XIX-XXI. See also Broadie 1991: 75.

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