Comments on Stichter’s *The Skillfulness of Virtue*

Matthew Stichter’s *Skillfullness of Virtue* (2018) is a significant achievement. Over the past couple of decades, many philosophers have claimed to give empirically-informed accounts of virtue (or its lack).[[1]](#footnote-1) However, few have done so responsibly. Stichter doesn’t just cherry-pick a few studies that seem to be consistent with what he wants to argue. He is, to an appropriate extent, guided by the evidence. But he’s also aware that there are flaws and gaps in the empirical literature, so he doesn’t follow it slavishly and he frequently remarks on cases in which further research is required. This enables him to engage in responsible speculation, by which I mean: marking plausible but fallible arguments about what we might expect to find if we engage in various inquiries. The value of such responsible speculation is hard to overstate, as it provides hypotheses that can then be tested. One of the many causes of the ongoing replication crisis in psychology is HARKing (coming up with a Hypothesis only After the Results of a study are Known — see Kerr 1998), and HARKing is impossible when the hypothesis is established in advance.

Psychologists HARK for lots of reasons, but one of them is that they aren’t always as well-prepared as philosophers are to engage in responsible speculation. It’s often not part of their training — a deficit that has led some to posit a conceptualization crisis in psychology (Klein 2014, Schaller 2016). This means that collaborations between philosophers and psychologists can fruitfully employ a division of cognitive labor that involves the former doing the responsible speculation and the latter testing the hypotheses thus generated (Morawski 2019, Wiggins & Chrisopherson 2019). Of course, that’s not the only available model of interdisciplinary collaboration, but it is plausible on its face and enjoys a proven track record, including research by Stichter’s own team (Vess et al. 2019).

Here are several other chief strengths of the book:

* It updates the virtue-as-skill model to reflect the most recent and best evidence on acquisition and maintenance of expertise. Alternative virtue-as-skill models (Coeckelbergh 2019) tend to rely on the outdated Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1980) approach or on speculations by Aristotle and other ancients (Annas 2011).
* Unlike any other account I have seen, it provides an account of virtue acquisition through habituation that is sufficiently precise about what counts as success-prone habituation to provide guidance about the conditions under which habituation is liable to work. (More on this below.)
* It offers an explanation of the essential role of motivation in expertise, skill acquisition, and skill maintenance that overcomes previous challenges to the virtue-as-skill model.
* It provides an account of practical wisdom that is at once supple and responsive to everyday concerns, while also respecting the importance of practical wisdom.
* It offers a response to the situationist challenge that amounts to more than just pounding one’s fist on the table (though more on this below).

In the remainder of this commentary, I make some remarks about specific parts of the book.

First, one concern has to do with the distinction between virtues the possession of which is consistent with wanting to be in their eliciting conditions and virtues the possession of which is inconsistent with wanting to be in their eliciting conditions (Alfano 2016: 134). The latter are especially difficult to acquire because wanting to practice them is something you shouldn’t do if you possess them. Think of martial courage. Someone who genuinely possesses this virtue doesn’t *want* to be in combat, but is able to manage themselves well when they are. But if virtues are acquired through deliberate practice, how is such a virtue to be acquired? The disposition that’s more likely to be developed is the one seen in the main character of *The Hurt Locker* — a disposition that Pericles also recommends to his fellow Athenians in his famous funeral oration (Whitaker 1999) — namely, a taste for combat. This isn’t just something that crops up in military confrontations, though. Think of the active shooter drills that are now being done in American schools.[[2]](#footnote-2) These are attempts — deeply misconceived attempts, but attempts nonetheless — to engage in exactly the sort of deliberate practice that Stichter recommends. What I’ve said here is not as such an objection to Stichter’s account of virtue, but it does point to alleged virtues that are going to be especially hard or even impossible to acquire if his model is right. By distinguishing, as he does in the book, various types of courage, Stichter can reduce the scope of impossibility. For example, he canvasses some interesting evidence of the effectiveness of “moral courage” training in helping people confront and stand up to racism and other forms of social prejudice. But this will only take us so far. And it’s not at all clear how many alleged virtues are more like martial courage than moral courage. Chastity springs to mind, but then chastity probably isn’t a virtue. On the flipside, generosity and curiosity are exactly the sorts of traits whose characteristic behaviors can be practiced by someone who possesses or is on the way to possessing them, so we can hold out hope for a least some of the pantheon of virtues to be achievable in the virtue-as-skill framework.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Next, in chapter 1, Stichter distinguishes goal-setting from goal-striving. One is meant to follow the other in strict temporal order. No doubt this is fairly common. I feel thirsty. I decide to go grab a glass of water. Then I enact my plan. But there are also more complex cases. Sometimes we don’t really know what our precise goals are, and we find out (or, more accurately, establish and crystalize) our goals by striving towards something more inchoate and adjusting both our actions and our goals as we go. In other words, striving is sometimes a *transformative experience*, in which we don’t know in advance what sort of person we’re going to become (Paul 2014). Virtue acquisition is presumably a paradigm case of such transformative striving. This point is largely neglected in *The Skillfulness of Virtue*. Furthermore, I also found it a bit unclear what exactly Stichter thinks a goal is. In many cases, a goal seems to be a desired or valued state of affairs — something that can be achieved. He gives the example of being physically fit (p. 13). However, sometimes a goal seems to be an action. He gives the example of joining a gym. A more careful account of what a goal is would be helpful in this context.

Also in chapter 1 (but again in chapter 5), Stichter points out that if the virtue-as-skill model is right, then virtue acquisition is going to be possible only in a sufficiently regular environment in which there’s adequate opportunity to practice with the benefit of rapid, unequivocal, and accurate feedback (p. 30). These constraints are one reason why it’s harder to learn to pilot a barge than to learn to drive a car: feedback in the barge training is on a longer time-delay. It’s also why it’s basically impossible to acquire expertise in picking stocks: the stock market is too noisy (in the informational and statistical sense of the term) and irregular a training environment. Stichter seems to assume without much argument that *life* — including especially moral life — is more like driving a car or maybe piloting a barge than it is like picking stocks. I’m not sure why he is so optimistic. Is moral life really as regular as Stichter needs it to be? Perhaps in small-band hunter-gatherer communities it might be, but what about the industrialized kakistocracies that many people find themselves living in? Likewise, the feedback we get on our moral (and immoral actions) is often not rapid, unequivocal, or accurate. Regarding rapidity: sometimes it takes days, weeks, or decades to learn whether one’s moral decision was the right one to make. Sometimes one never finds out. Regarding univocal feedback: for many of our most weighty moral actions, we are likely to receive mixed feedback. And regarding accuracy: just think of all the feedback that protest movements such as Martin Luther King’s, the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, and the #MeToo movement receive. Being on the receiving end of a police beatdown or the victim of a pepper-spray attack isn’t exactly positive feedback. Again, this is not an objection to the virtue-as-skill model as such. But what it suggests is that if virtues really are skills, we are going to have a very difficult time acquiring a range of extremely important virtues — perhaps the ones we need most to make urgent political changes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Moving on to chapter 2, one of Stichter’s key insights (p. 71) is that there is a certain relativity to what virtue recommends. More specifically, what you should do depends on what you can (reasonably expect to be able to) do, so the right course of action will depend on how far you’ve come in developing whichever virtues are relevant in a given context. The right thing for a novice to do will sometimes differ from the right thing for an expert to do. More generally in chapter 2, I began to wonder whether the picture that emerges from Stichter’s account requires what we might call a *division of moral labor*. Philosophers have addressed the division of cognitive labor in, for example, scientific collaborations. Given how much time and effort go into acquiring expertise, it’s understandable that we don’t expect one person to have all the expertise required to conduct interdisciplinary inquiry. If moral virtues are forms of expertise, should we also expect a division of moral labor? I’ll take care of the courage, you take care of the kindness, she takes care of the humility, he takes care of the chastity? I’m a bit skeptical that this will work, but I also don’t see how we can reasonably expect everyone to develop the full panoply of virtues.

Turning next to chapter 3, Stichter follows Quassim Cassam’s (2015) Kantian analogy in arguing that we want people who are developing expertise in epistemic virtues to care about the truth intrinsically (p. 115). The basic idea here is that, just as respect for persons means not treating them as mere means, so respect for the truth means not treating it as a mere means. I confess that I almost always find Kantian arguments implausible, so for those with my philosophical taste, it might be more plausible to suggest that the reason we want people to care intrinsically about the truth is that this makes their intellectual virtue more modally robust in Philip Pettit’s (2015) sense. The skilled doctor who really knows her stuff but is motivated only by profit is more liable in a range of counterfactual scenarios to stop being an expert or to misuse her expertise. Think Theranos.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I have less to say about practical wisdom, so I now jump to chapter 5. The situationist challenges to virtue ethics and virtue epistemology have been troubling philosophers for a couple of decades. In chapter 5, Stichter offers a new take on the debate. The essential problem posed by the situationist challenge is that there seems to be evidence that people are responsive to a range of somewhat bizarre, normatively irrelevant, and seemingly trivial situations in both their mental lives and their behavior (Doris 1998; Alfano 2012, 2013). These situational influences include things like ambient sensibilia (light, noise, heat, cold), subtle frames on decision making, and other stuff that social psychologists have been documenting for decades. Some of them, like the presence of others who are either responding to an emergency or ignoring it, are pretty understandable. If others aren’t reacting, I might reasonably (though erroneously) infer that they’ve already checked and confirmed that nothing is wrong. But it’s just baffling to think that whether one ends up treating other people in a kind or unkind way would depend on whether one was holding a warm mug of hot coffee or a cold glass of iced coffee. Such influences are influences “non-reasons” (Alfano 2013, chapter 2; Doris 2017) because, unlike temptations, they seem to lead us to act poorly (even by our own standards) for no reason at all. Well, here’s the good news: almost all of these studies don’t replicate. Basically all of the embodied cognition literature turns out to have been bunk — especially the embodied metaphors literature (Klein et al. 2014; Klein et al. 2017; Ebersole et al. 2016). But the bright side of this replication crisis is that the thorniest problem posed by the situationist challenge was a mirage.

Still, that doesn’t mean that social psychology poses no challenges to certain conceptions of virtue, and I appreciate the way that Stichter handles these challenges in chapter 5. Essentially, what he says is that we should see this work in social psychology as providing a to-do list for individual and communal moral improvement. If these are the sorts of obstacles we face in being and doing good, we need to develop strategies (such as implementation intentions) for the most consequential problems (such as the unresponsive bystander effect).

Another valuable point that Stichter makes (p. 148) is that, on the virtue-as-skill model, we can reasonably decide that outright expertise in a given virtue is supererogatory. What we then end up with is a satisficing approach to virtue that focuses on getting everyone above a minimal threshold of competence (moral and epistemic decency, we might call it) while also being able to praise supererogatory expertise in virtue.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps this point helps him address my question about the potential for a division of moral labor above. I do want to point out, though, that this satisficing approach is probably inconsistent with the pipe-dream of defining other normative concepts — such as right and wrong action — in terms of what the virtuous person would do, as Hursthouse (1999), Zagzebski (2017), and others want to do.

The last point I want to bring up relates to Stichter’s discussion of the relation between the virtue-as-skill model and various forms of moral disengagement. He canvasses six types of disengagement and points out — quite rightly — that “disengagement is mainly fostered by social, political, and economic structures. For example,” he says, “much of corporate culture includes mechanisms that foster disengagement” by, for instance, creating diffusion of responsibility or separating agents from seeing or even knowing about the consequences of their actions via rigid power hierarchies. I’d point out that the modern university often does the same.

In sum, Stichter’s book represents a significant advance for virtue theory, one that respects the constraints imposed by the empirical literature while also articulating a plausible and attractive account of what virtues are, how they are acquired, and how they integrate with practical wisdom.

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1. For monograph-length see, among others, Alfano (2013), Doris (1998), Flanagan (1993), Miller (2013), Russell (2009), Snow (2009), Upton (2009), Zagzebski (2017). It’s also worth noting that, of these, only Alfano (2013) and Zagzebski (2017) address both moral and epistemic virtue, as Stichter does. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-utah-gun-training-for-teachers-20190707-story.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One might object that, in certain traditions, such as Christian philosophy, curiosity is seen as a vice. This is certainly true of Augustine and Aquinas, but even they recognized a cognate virtue of love of knowledge. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a related concern about the damage people may sustain by embodying virtues in deeply morally flawed communities, see Tessman (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See <https://www.businessinsider.nl/theranos-founder-ceo-elizabeth-holmes-life-story-bio-2018-4?international=true&r=US> for context. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One might object that there is no satisficing when it comes to virtue, but that would be a controversial position according to which there is precisely one set of moral and epistemic traits that everyone ought to cultivate. Stichter allows for more diversity, which seems both more modest and more plausible. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)