

Aristotle and Expertise: Ideas on the Skillfulness of Virtue

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Abstract: Many philosophers working on virtue theory have resisted the idea that the virtues are practical skills, apparently following Aristotle's resistance to that idea. Bucking the trend, Matt Stichter defends a strong version of this idea in *The Skillfulness of Virtue* by marshaling a wide range of conceptual and empirical arguments to argue that the moral virtues are robust skills involving the cognitive-conative unification of Aristotelian *phronêsis* ('practical intelligence'). Here I argue that Aristotle overlooks a more delimited kind of practical intelligence, strongly analogous to his own account of *phronêsis*, that unifies complex forms of expertise such as medicine or even high-level sports. Insofar as the skill model of virtue is compelling, it must draw on a robust conception of practical expertise (*technê*) like the one developed here rather than the ordinary, anemic conception of practical skills.

1. Introduction

Many philosophers writing on virtue theory have resisted the idea that the virtues are practical skills, apparently following Aristotle's resistance to that idea. Such philosophers have resisted the strongest version of the skill model of virtue, according to which the virtues just are special kinds of practical skills; but they can often resist a weaker version as well, according to which the virtues display a psychological structure that is at least strongly analogous to practical skills. Bucking the trend, and in line with some earlier virtue ethicists, most notably Julia Annas, Matt Stichter develops and defends the stronger version of this idea in *The Skillfulness of Virtue* by marshaling an impressive range of conceptual and empirical arguments in order to support the idea that the virtues *actually just are* practical skills of a special sort. In what follows I argue that Stichter's defense of the skill model of virtue—and my own suggestions for a modification of this idea, one that goes beyond Stichter's already somewhat provocative position—benefits from a closer look

at the classical Greek tradition, and specifically Aristotle's initial move *away* from the *technê* model of virtue. Aristotle's move away from this model is especially noteworthy given how much the analogy between virtue and *technê* (skill, craft, art, or expertise) fascinated and very much attracted Aristotle's contemporaries and immediate Greek predecessors.¹

Like the other contributors to this symposium, my ideas on the skillfulness of virtue have been stimulated by Stichter's book, and I will offer some challenges and possible extensions to Stichter's position as an expression of admiration and friendship. The structure is as follows. I will introduce the main contrast between Stichter's position and my own on the issue of skill and motivation (§2); argue that both ethical and non-ethical skills can take robust forms that involve 'practical intelligence' (what is, in the ethical case, *phronêsis*) (§§3–4); and then briefly diagnose (§5) our tendency to overlook robust forms of non-ethical skills whose existence makes it *more* plausible to maintain, as Stichter does, that the virtues are robust forms of ethical skills.

2. Challenges for the skill model of virtue

Some practical skills are relatively easy to acquire, whereas the virtues can be hard to acquire: Learning to drive a car is rather less complicated than learning to be patient or courageous. But the mastery of certain practical skills can also be extremely difficult, for instance in highly complex activities like chess or, indeed, in the practice of medicine.² The ability to play expert chess, or the

¹ The arguments presented here are identical in substance to the arguments I presented in 2014 at the Kansas Philosophical Society meeting at Kansas State University in response to a paper of Stichter's that developed into central sections of the book: Stichter 2018, chs. 3–4. The casual tone of some of my examples was appropriate on that occasion, and—although we live in more difficult times—I do not believe it impedes understanding here. In this paper I focus mainly on the ethical virtues, as Aristotle does in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and Stichter does in the book. The extraordinarily rich literature on the *technê* model in ancient Greek philosophy precludes any detailed discussion here of how the *technê* model bears on current empirical programs on skill, personality, and character. But such a discussion remains quite valuable for virtue theory. Recent discussions of *technê* (plural: *technai*) in the ancient world can be found in Johansen (2021) and Angier and Raphals (forthcoming).

² Joseph Dunne (1993, 246) notes Aristotle's partiality for medicine as an example of *technê*; in fact Aristotle refers to medicine more than any other *technê* (Angier 2010, 37).

ability to provide expert medical care, typically takes many years of hard work, if one can even manage it. As Stichter helpfully emphasizes, resistance to the skill model often lies elsewhere, in thinking about a number of cases which apparently support Aristotle’s idea that in the case of the virtues, but *not* in the case of skills, certain motivational and other ‘internal states’ of the agent make a difference to whether one possesses the practical capacity in question (*NE* II.4, 1105a17–1105b4).³ More specifically, this resistance can come from thinking that the following three cases, as at least, tell against the possession of a virtue but *not* against the possession of a skill (as Stichter observes: 2018, 100–105):

- (1) the agent is motivated to exercise the relevant capacity, but only half-heartedly, e.g. she does not ‘give it her all’;
- (2) the agent acts as she does for an apparently inappropriate end, or (alternatively) she acts for the wrong reason, e.g. she performs only for financial reward; and
- (3) the agent intentionally acts wrongly with respect to the capacity in question, e.g. she throws the match in cahoots with an illegal betting scheme.

Do the three cases undermine the skill model of virtue? An initial response along broadly Aristotelian lines insists that they do not: see Stichter 2018, 98–108; 121–126. According to this response, the important contrast between ethical virtue and ordinary practical skill—captured only piecemeal in cases (1)–(3) above—lies in the role played by *phronêsis* in the case of the ethical virtues but not in the case of ordinary practical skills. Stichter’s insight is to take this response further and claim that this appeal to *phronêsis* does *not* undermine the skill model of virtue. For reasons that will emerge, I will use the phrase ‘practical intelligence’ as an umbrella term: a term that captures *phronêsis* (which I will leave untranslated; Stichter uses the phrase ‘practical wisdom’) as well as other possible capacities that play a similar cognitive-conative role in cases

³ Zagzebski (1996, 106–16) helpfully discusses various objections to the skill model of virtue, a model that she herself rejects. More recently, Hacker-Wright (2015) resists the skill model for reasons similar to those I present below: viz., because of the sharp differences between the ethical virtues and non-ethical skills. The position I suggest here aims to bypass such concerns, since it relies on a robust conception of expertise (*technê*), not an ‘anemic’ conception of non-ethical skills. For an insightful and admirably concise discussion of the main features of *technê* in Aristotle, see Angier (2010, 36–41).

of non-ethical skills. Since Stichter rightly sees that *phronêsis* can complement ethical skills, he is able to insist that the ethical virtues are a special subset of practical skills in general—a moral subset, perhaps a rationally supreme subset, of such skills. Stichter’s position is a contemporary version of the ancient Greek idea that *phronêsis* marks the difference between ordinary, non-ethical skills and the specifically ethical skills that are the virtues of character (Stichter 2018, chs. 3–4).⁴ As a shorthand, we might say that for Stichter the ethical virtues are ‘skills+,’ since they are skills that have been elevated, or made more robust, by the presence of *phronêsis*. They also therefore include, quite unlike non-ethical skills as Stichter conceives of them, the motivational and other states mentioned by Aristotle in the case of the virtues.

In contrast to Stichter’s response to cases (1)–(3), the position I would urge here goes further. In common with Stichter, I do not believe the cases should lead us to deny that virtue might be a kind of skill. But unlike that response, I think the cases should encourage us to appreciate a more robust and plausible conception of practical ‘expertise’ according to which non-ethical skills can also be seen to be ‘skills+,’ in the sense that they too become more elevated or more robust by the presence of a kind of ‘practical intelligence’ that includes motivational and other ‘internal’ states. This robust conception of expertise seems to me to make the skill model of virtue considerably more attractive, since it appreciates an apparently strong *analogy* between ethical and non-ethical ‘skills+.’

But this conception also undercuts one reason for defending the skill model of virtue: namely, that the skill model might help us understand how to cultivate or develop the virtues by appealing to the most recent empirical studies of ordinary—or as we might now say, ‘anemic’—

⁴ Julia Annas also suggested, somewhat earlier, that ethical virtue might be considered a special kind of skill involving the exercise of *phronêsis* and practical expertise: see Annas (1993, esp. 67–73) and Annas (1995, 2011, 2012). Aristotle says that *phronêsis* and the ethical virtues are mutually entailing, so in this paper I am assuming something that follows from that, viz. that *phronêsis* is necessarily accompanied by motivational and other inner states which are partially constitutive of the ethical virtues. (It is worth noting that according to a utilitarian or otherwise very anti-Aristotelian account of the virtues, motivational and other ‘internal’ states might be taken to have no essential bearing on whether someone embodies a particular virtue. From the point of view of this paper: So much the worse for such accounts.)

practical skills.⁵ Such a hope would seem to be somewhat optimistic if the studies from empirical psychology enlisted by virtue theorists focus only on anemic skills, rather than the robust conception of practical expertise which is ultimately, and more profitably, in line with the classical Greek conception of *technê* (a conception that Aristotle is partially responsible for distorting). A proper focus on moral development would centrally include a consideration of the social-cultural contexts in which ethical and other skills are developed. In the final section (§5) I say more about social-cultural contexts and how certain contexts can encourage—as it seems to do in the case of Aristotle himself—resistance to the *technê* model of virtue.

3. Are the virtues unique in being ‘skills+’?

Why should it be thought that the ethical virtues, *unlike* other practical skills, require ‘practical intelligence’ (i.e., in the ethical case, *phronêsis*)? Perhaps it will be suggested that the difference lies in their different subject matter. Since skills like chess do not involve matters that stand seriously to benefit or harm people, there is no inherent problem with someone’s not seeing the point of playing, and so not being motivated to play (Stichter 2018, 100). Such an explanation, however, can certainly seem less than helpful. Leaving chess players aside for this discussion, consider physicians, firefighters, police officers, and criminal attorneys. The practical skills exercised—or lacked—by the people who serve in these professional roles certainly *do* stand seriously to benefit or harm people. They do so at least as much as some paradigmatic Aristotelian virtues, such as temperance. A physician’s half-hearted attempt to resuscitate an accident victim seems rather more directly connected to the benefit and harm of people than someone’s overindulging in the pleasures of chocolate, say, or masturbation.

What these examples already reveal is a serious question: Why it is only the ethical virtues that are thought to require ‘practical intelligence’? One reason Stichter gives is that *phronêsis* concerns what is good and bad in human life and that part of what this means is figuring out “which ends are worth pursuing” (Stichter 2018, ch. 3, esp. 129). So *phronêsis* is thought to be required

⁵ For this idea see e.g. Russell (2015), which includes Russell’s own reservations about it. Moral development is a major theme of Stichter’s book and other contemporary work on virtue theory that headlines its familiarity with the most recent empirical studies in psychology. For reservations about the philosophical lessons to be drawn from empirical studies in a specific recent case, see Birondo (2020b).

in the case of the ethical virtues but not in the case of other practical skills. But on Aristotle's view 'the end' to be pursued for human beings, as such, is always, essentially, *eudaimonia*. Thus physicians who practice the *technê* of medicine—a practice whose end is always, essentially, health—will also need to figure out which ends are worth pursuing *relative to the end of medicine*: for instance, whether to remove an incurably suffering patient from life-support in line with her explicit, non-coerced, and demonstrably competent request to do so. The question in this case will be: Is this what, here and now, the pursuit of health amounts to? To say that the end is 'essentially fixed' (Stichter 2018, 125) in medicine and other non-ethical skills certainly does not preclude there being a capacity of 'practical intelligence' that is relative to, and indispensable for excellence in, the practice of those skills. Physicians *qua* physicians and human beings *qua* human will both need to specify *how* the end in question—in the one case *eudaimonia*, in the other case the pursuit of health—is to be manifested in action, here and now, and for that they will need a kind of 'practical intelligence' that is relative to their domains—in the one case human life, in the other case medicine. At best, then, this reason fails to be decisive in pinpointing why the virtues alone are thought to require 'practical intelligence' in a way that transforms them into 'skills+'.⁶

The original question, then, remains: Why is it only with respect to virtuous activity that motivational and other inner states—the psychological states that, in the ethical case, accompany *phronêsis*—are thought to count towards an agent's possessing the practical capacity in question? My own suggestion, made on Aristotelian grounds, would be to let this claim about the uniqueness of 'morality' (in this respect) drop out of the picture, as follows.

⁶ The issues here are enormously complicated and my intention has only been to signal that they are much more complicated than Stichter's discussion indicates: see also n. 12 below. Cf. Aristotle's similar observations: *NE* 1137a14–17; *Eudemian Ethics* 1227a18–20 (quoted in Angier 2010, 37). Aristotle also says: "it is not the function of medicine simply to make a man quite healthy, but to put him as far as it may be on the road to health; it is possible to give excellent treatment even to those who can never enjoy sound health" (*Rhetoric* I.1, 1355b10–14, quoted in Dunne 1993, 266). On the corresponding 'specificatory' aspect of virtue with respect to *eudaimonia*, see Russell (2009, 79–83; 2015, §4). In both of these works Russell mentions that his discussion of this issue is indebted to McDowell (1998). Tsai (2020) and Woodcock (2020) also more recently challenge the idea that since the end to be pursued in non-ethical expertise is 'essentially fixed,' figuring out which ends to pursue is unnecessary.

4. A robust conception of non-ethical expertise

In the celebrated function argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, Aristotle appeals to the conceptual connections between ‘function,’ ‘virtue,’ and ‘activity,’ in order to establish that ‘the good’ of a certain kind of thing is its performing its function as it should be performed, performing it well. And since Aristotle thinks that the distinctive function of human beings is rational activity, he concludes that *eudaimonia*, the good for man, is rational activity in accordance with virtue (*NE* 1098a16–18). Now ‘performing well’ (or ‘doing well’) is “*eu prattein*,” which is said to be synonymous with the infinitival verb form of *eudaimonia*, “*eudaimonein*” (*NE* 1095a18–20). Aristotle therefore apparently identifies performing well (or ‘doing well’) for human beings with acting in accordance with excellence or virtue.⁷ But this thought is meant to apply not just to human beings, but also to the other cases that have come up in the discussion: to doctors, lyre-players, and other expert practitioners. In a later discussion Aristotle distinguishes the type of practical intelligence exercised in virtuous activity from mere ‘cleverness’ (*deinotês*—not *technê* as Stichter says, 2018, 125), the instrumental rationality that allows one merely to determine the instrumental means to one’s ends, independently of any evaluation of the ends themselves (*NE* VI.12–13). This means that cleverness is a kind of ‘sub-skill’—something that lacks even the unifying end typical of anemic skills—while ethical virtue transcends mere skill since it manifests *phronêsis*.⁸ But why could we not isolate, with these Aristotelian materials, a more robust conception of skill in many of its familiar manifestations—that is, a robust conception of practical expertise (*technê*)—that

⁷ This reading of Aristotle derives from McDowell (1995). See also now Rachel Barney’s brilliant paper (2021) on *technê* as a model for virtue in Plato. Barney finds in Plato a philosophical position strikingly similar to the one that I am suggesting in the wake of Aristotle. It is perhaps worth mentioning that I presented an earlier version of this paper at a conference at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, with Professor Barney in attendance at my talk. On the next day she presented her own, marvelous paper (it was one of the keynote addresses), leaving me astonished.

⁸ Russell (2009) claims that if *phronêsis* is just cleverness aimed at right goals, then, objectionably, “this would suggest that there is no real difference in the operations of *phronêsis* and *technê*” (in Stichter’s characterization of Russell’s thought: see Stichter 2018, 124). This objection already reveals an unduly anemic conception of *technê*, as something analogous to ‘cleverness’ aimed at right goals. For a more robust conception of *technê* already in Plato, see Barney (2021).

also manifests a *kind* of ‘practical intelligence,’ i.e., a capacity that plays a role in practical expertise analogous to the role played by *phronêsis* in cases of ethical virtue?

In line with that suggestion, I have been using the phrase ‘practical intelligence’ as an umbrella term, as mentioned previously, with Aristotelian *phronêsis* as the kind of practical intelligence that involves motivational and other internal states in cases specifically of ethical virtue. It seems to me that Stichter underappreciates the possibility of a more circumscribed and skill-specific kind of practical intelligence, a capacity that also involves motivational and other internal states of the agent and, together with the possession of what I am calling anemic skill, amounts to practical expertise (*technê*), something that is more strongly analogous to ethical virtue than Stichter appreciates.

By way of illustration, consider what Gary Watson says about athletic skill and the motivation to exercise that skill (cf. Stichter 2018, 105). Watson writes:

My half-hearted effort on the tennis court would not support a negative valuation of my proficiencies at that sport. Nevertheless, it might bear negatively on me as a tennis player. One can be “good at” playing tennis without being overall a good tennis player. A good tennis player, overall, possesses not only a high level of skill but, among other things, a commitment to the game, a responsibility to its distinctive demands. (In this way, ‘good tennis player’ functions rather like ‘good human being’.) (Watson 1996, 244)

What I want to say is: Why “*rather like*”? When Watson says that a half-hearted tennis performance does not count against someone’s skill at tennis, although it *does* count against her being, overall, a good tennis player, this observation bypasses the Aristotelian idea that being a good tennis player is conceptually tied, by the logic of the function argument, to whether one performs well, or does well, *qua* tennis player. Being a good tennis player is conceptually tied to whether one performs well in tennis, and hence to one’s expertise at tennis in a robust sense.

And what I want to suggest is that there is a skill-specific kind of practical intelligence that also brings along with it those motivational and other inner states whose relevance can seem to be restricted only to the practical capacities which are the ethical virtues.⁹ Some examples of this

⁹ See e.g. *NE* II.4, 1105a17–1105b4. By involving the motivational and other internal states, skill-specific

more robust conception of expertise will help to illustrate the intuitive appeal, even in our own time, of this ancient conception of expertise. They each involve cases in which (as in normal human life) a competent and skilled practitioner is expected, here and now, to accomplish something. Here are the examples:

- (1) It would presumably count against someone's being a good doctor if she made only half-hearted attempts at life-saving surgeries that were nevertheless routine. But then why not say that such attempts count against her performing well *qua* doctor, and hence against her expertise in a more robust sense, insofar as she delivers such shoddy performances when someone's life is on the line? Her truthful response that "I could do it if I really wanted to" shows only that she possesses skill in the anemic sense. That response clearly echoes the claims of a man who insists that he could stay faithful to his wife *if he really wanted to*.

- (2) Although I do not have the exact numbers, there is an apparently true story about the one-time NBA center Samuel Dalembert. Before the very last game of the NBA season some years ago, an assistant coach informed Dalembert that his contract included a clause that affixed a \$50,000 bonus if his rebounds total for the season reached a certain number. At game time he was 18 rebounds from the number in question; but he was averaging only 8.6 rebounds per game. He had 18 rebounds by halftime. In the more robust sense that I have been suggesting, this merely monetary motivation for performing well counts against his expertise as a basketball player. Though seemingly frivolous, this temporally extended example helpfully illustrates the motivational aspect of expertise in the sense that I am suggesting (for sports fans: imagine LeBron

practical intelligence differs from, and does not conflict with, the domain-specific deliberation that Aristotle refers to at the outset of *NE* VI.5: deliberating well 'in some particular respect' as opposed to deliberating well about 'the good life in general' (*NE* 1140a26–28). The skill-specific practical intelligence I have in mind is most clearly operative in those traditional *technai* and their modern analogues (e.g. medical practice, legal practice, farming, policing) whose psychological structure is most similar to, or even identical with, the psychological structure of the virtues. If it is not operative in other cases, e.g. in checkers or bricklaying, that is neither here nor there (cf. MacIntyre 1981).

James or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar doing the same). Is it difficult to imagine a physician's expertise being distorted by a motivation for status or profit? (See further §5 below.)

Moreover, despite the qualms of some virtue ethicists about using sports examples in this context, one might also cite the following notorious case. In the highly anticipated 1980 championship boxing rematch between Sugar Ray Leonard and the revered Panamanian champion Roberto Duran, Duran suddenly refuses to continue fighting, in the eighth round of the bout, apparently exasperated by Leonard's showboating style. Duran quits the competition mid-fight—and some have suggested that Duran's motivation for *entering* the ring was mainly monetary. This episode counts not just against Duran's being, overall, a good boxer, as Watson might say; it counts against Duran's performing well *qua* boxer, and hence against his expertise as a boxer in a more robust sense. That is true even if Duran retains his boxing skill in the anemic sense, as he presumably does. Hence, the episode *counts* against Duran's expertise: His skill as a boxer, and a partial rehabilitation of his expertise, are manifested in the success of his subsequent career. The case is like a parent who quits on her children when they become adolescents, but then successfully reengages with them later on—and yet nothing can change the past. Sports can serve as a model for virtue, then, despite the aggression and violence involved in them, since it is their psychological structure that matters for the *technê* model, not the content of the expertise (cf. Annas 1993, 72–73). The brutalizing 'hitmen' (Spanish: *sicarios*) of the illegal drug cartels of our time could certainly demonstrate, in my sense, a genuine expertise in that capacity.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1046b10–13; Angier (2010, 40; 145, n. 12); Müller (2018, 71–75). In presenting this material at conferences, I have found that there is an overwhelming tendency for people to say that expert physicians, lawyers, etc., *must* possess the ethical virtues, at least to a certain extent. But even if the *sicarios*, for instance, seem to display courage and other virtuous traits, this appearance is utterly misleading: such traits are simulacra of the genuinely virtuous traits whose excellence is indexed to the overall goodness of a human life. This is especially clear in the case of the *sicarios* of narco-culture whose expertise is sheer, terrorizing brutality. Separating the 'ethical' from other skilled dimensions of a particular *technê* is also somewhat arbitrary, although expert physicians, lawyers, philosophers, etc., *might* also be

- (3) Suppose that a prosecuting attorney commits various procedural transgressions that lead to a mistrial, allowing a child rapist or war criminal eventually to go free without penalty for their crimes. Does it really restore our confidence in her expertise as a prosecuting attorney to learn that she intentionally precipitated the mistrial? If that additional information fails to restore our confidence in her expertise, a good explanation of that failure would be the more robust conception of expertise to which I have been advertent, a conception that is all but explicit in the logic of Aristotle's function argument.

This robust conception of expertise, in both the ethical and non-ethical cases, involves practical intelligence and the motivational and other 'internal states' that accompany it. In both ethical and non-ethical cases there are forms of what I earlier called 'skills+'. It is true that *being human* is something that remains non-optional for human beings, at least without drastic measures, and this is rather unlike the optional case of being a physician, musician, or other skilled practitioner.¹¹ So it is also true, as Watson suggested, that a gap remains between virtue and *technê* (lying in some conception of human nature) in spite of the strong psychological analogy between them, which I have emphasized. But it is *not* true that 'morality' is the only domain involving a robust kind of skill or expertise. Why did Aristotle miss this?

If a robust conception of *technê* is consistent with Aristotle's best thinking in this area, and even implicit in the logic of the function argument, then why does Aristotle seem so clearly to reject the idea? I will address this question in the final section by emphasizing the importance, as I see it, of social-cultural contexts (and even dominant social ideologies) for the development and appreciation of ethical and non-ethical forms of 'skills+'.

good people. On the brutality of real-world narco-violence, see Sánchez (2020); see also Barney (2021) on the deontological constraints of 'practical identities.'

¹¹ On this point see especially Barney (2021), Nussbaum (1995), and Annas (1988). Here the discussion intersects with my own previous work on the prospects for a philosophical validation of the virtues that appeals to an 'external,' but nevertheless morally determinative, conception of human nature and what the alternative 'internal validation' might plausibly look like: see e.g. Birondo (2015, 2017, 2020a).

5. Aristotle, external incentives, and corrupted expertise

My suggestion has been that Aristotle himself seems to have neglected a skill-specific sort of practical intelligence that is a much more robust capacity than the so-called practical intelligence that he alludes to in the opening remarks of *NE* VI.5 (1140a26). But if there is a robust conception of expertise that invokes a skill-specific kind of practical intelligence, then what explains Aristotle’s insistence on a sharp distinction between virtue—a practical capacity that invokes the workings of ‘practical intelligence’ (*phronêsis*)—and mere *technê*—a practical capacity that, as Aristotle sees it, does not invoke a form of practical intelligence or the ‘internal states’ that accompany it?¹² Three points can be made here.

First, it would be implausible to think that Aristotle is merely rehearsing ‘reputable opinions’ (*endoxa*) about the virtues when he stresses the point about the internal states in *NE* II.4. But it is *not* implausible that certain assumptions about ‘productive’ skills are influencing the points that Aristotle makes there and implicating ‘performative’ skills as well. It may be that in order to make the points he wants to make about ‘internal states’ in the case of the ethical virtues, Aristotle needs to leverage his arguments against the common attitudes about productive skills which he thinks he can count on in his audience, well-bred Athenians such as they are. These attitudes would include the one that Aristotle headlines in the *NE* II.4 passage, that “the products

¹² In drawing his own contrast between *phronêsis* and *technê*, Stichter says that an expert practitioner’s responsiveness to the distinctive demands of a practice “does not require *phronêsis*,” i.e., it “does not also require reflecting on the ends of the practice within an overall conception of living well” (2018, 125–126). That is true but irrelevant: The *technê*-specific practical intelligence that I am suggesting only requires reflecting on the ends of the practice from *within the ongoing historical development of that practice* (e.g. of medicine). Barney (2021) rightly says that any genuine *technê* must be organized around a unifying end, and so be more than “merely a grab-bag of techniques.” So any genuine *technê* requires reflecting on such an end at least enough for there to be such a unity, although it need not be concerned with *eudaimonia* more broadly (see §3 above, as well as Tsai 2020 and Woodcock 2020). But if an expert practitioner goes still further, by reflecting on the ends of her expertise within “an overall conception of living well” (*eudaimonia*), which is crucial for unifying her life’s projects as a whole, this would certainly *not* require the virtue of *phronêsis*, as Stichter suggests, since that would restrict such practical reflection, absurdly, only to people who possess the ethical virtues. There are many conceptions of *eudaimonia*.

of the *technai* have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they have a certain character” (1105a27–28). This attitude toward the products of ordinary practical skills—abstracting from the skilled practitioner’s *reasons* for engaging in his craft at all—is exactly the attitude one would expect well-bred Athenian students to hold toward ordinary practical skills. Maybe Aristotle also held such an attitude. If so, that is an unfortunate biographical point. We need not exemplify that attitude ourselves in developing a plausible skill model of virtue.

Second, it is worth emphasizing that Aristotle makes this claim about the products of the *technai* having their goodness in themselves, not only in the midst of a craft economy, as some commentators have been right to stress (e.g. Annas 1995), but also in an economy based more specifically on slavery.¹³ Aristotle debars natural slaves from full possession of the ethical virtues; and that seems to me to be philosophically important. If there is a kind of rational freedom (as I would put it) required for the acquisition of the virtues, then a similar kind of freedom would be required for the robust kind of expertise that I have been suggesting. In a slave economy this robust expertise would therefore be easy to overlook. In such an economy it would be extremely natural for the autonomy of productive expertise—that is to say, the spirit with which such expertise is exercised—to be almost entirely eclipsed. Such an occlusion would certainly help to explain Aristotle’s overly stark contrast in the *NE* II.4 passage.¹⁴

¹³ In these observations I have benefitted recently from Schlaifer (1936, 192–202). MacIntyre (2011) emphasizes the modern socio-economic conditions that can impede moral development; Reséndez (2016) helpfully documents the historical pervasiveness and enduring inheritance of slavery in North America as far as the Pacific coast (an institution traceable to European appropriations of Aristotle: see Birondo 2020a). In thinking more generally about philosophy and its history, I have benefitted especially from the recent work of Karl Ameriks on the ‘historical turn’ in post-Kantian philosophy (or ‘late modernity’) up to and including the best philosophical work of our time, by writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, and others even more recently. See Ameriks (2021; 2020, esp. Part II); see also Piercey (2009, esp. chs. 1–4).

¹⁴ Lobkowitz (1967, 20–23) also emphasizes the capacity that I refer to here as ‘rational freedom.’ Sarah Broadie observes that in *NE* II.4, 1105a17–1105b4 (1) Aristotle’s claim about the products of the *technai* having their goodness in themselves involves a kind of exaggeration or overstatement (Broadie 1993, 83) and that (2) the claim is anyway superfluous to the main point Aristotle insists upon in the passage, which is that doing what is grammatical (e.g.) is *not* sufficient for being proficient in grammar (Broadie 1993, 119, n. 17). In a similar vein Annas (1995) says that Aristotle’s chief reason for denying that ethical virtue

Third, although most expert practitioners will not be exercising their expertise as part of any institution of literal slavery, Aristotle’s disparaging remarks about people who earn their living by means of productive skill are extremely telling. His idea seems to be that such lives are contingently incompatible with cultivating the virtues. It is therefore understandable that Aristotle underappreciated a robust kind of expertise that remains uncorrupted by the pressures of external incentives. Today we are perhaps better placed to appreciate this point. Consider how straightforwardly two contemporary writers can characterize the threat from external incentives to medical practice. They maintain that the ‘guiding ideal’ of medicine is health, and they rightly insist that “were efficiency—or some other value external to medicine—to become an overriding guiding ideal for a doctor in the way he uses his skills, there would be a real question about whether this doctor had now ceased to ‘practise medicine’ (regardless of what other characterization of his actions would be appropriate)” (Oakley and Cocking 2001, 87). The external incentives of efficiency, wealth, and status can undermine the guiding ideals of medicine and other forms of practical expertise. And the utter pervasiveness of such incentives can undermine our ability even to recognize the more robust conception of expertise that I have been suggesting.

If we can appreciate Aristotle’s oversight of the strong analogy between ethical virtue and non-ethical expertise (*technê*), I think we can also begin to appreciate our own oversights here as well—for instance, to appreciate that empirical psychology cannot by itself provide the answers we most urgently need (if only philosophy will learn from it) about questions of moral development. For those answers virtue theorists need to think much more, not only about empirical psychology, as Stichter does in his helpful new book, but also about the many different ways in which social-cultural contexts—in a very broad sense that includes enduring historical and systemic features—can affect the development of the robust ethical skills, the virtues of character, that remain indispensable to a human life well lived.

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is a skill is that “skill is concerned with making (*poiêsis*), while virtue is concerned with action or doing (*praxis*).” She writes that “this is itself an artificial distinction, which runs against Aristotle’s language elsewhere” (Annas 1995, n. 5; but cf. Angier 2010, 42–46; Müller 2018, esp. n. 34). When Russell (2015, 22) contrasts virtue and *technê* in Aristotle, these subtle interpretative points seem to go missing.

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