

Matt Stichter, *The Skillfulness of Virtue: Improving Our Moral and Epistemic Lives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 201 pages. ISBN: 978-1108472371. Hardback: \$ 105.00

In his book, *The Skillfulness of Virtue*, Matt Stichter defends the virtue as skill thesis (VS): virtues *are* skills. Although many philosophers share the view that virtues and skills bear many structural similarities, VS is a quite strong claim in that it understands virtues as another kind of skills, not just something analogous. He introduces an account of skill and shows how the nature of virtue and its acquisition can be understood in light of our understanding of skills.

I think this is an excellent book recommendable to those who are interested in knowing what a virtue is and how to cultivate it. Characteristic features of virtue ethics include its holistic approach to a person's life as a whole, its emphasis on having appropriate motivations and emotions, and attribution of an important role to practical wisdom. While these features help us to see important areas of human life that have been largely neglected in action-centered theories, they also challenge virtue ethics as a feasible ethical theory. Would it be possible for us to acquire virtues? If so, how can we learn to acquire them? How is practical wisdom related to virtues? Stichter offers insightful responses to these and related questions based on his skill model of virtue. This book would be more helpful and interesting to those who are already familiar with virtue ethics and related issues since it is an argumentative rather than introductory work that aims to defend a particular view on those issues.

Throughout the book, Stichter displays proficiency in engaging in psychological studies to support his philosophical points. His empirically informed analysis of virtue as a skill not only offers good reasons to be less skeptical about our ability to become virtuous but also provides us with effective ways to overcome our psychological limitations in acquiring virtue. For example, in Chapter 1, he explains how the framework of self-regulation grounded in recent psychological discoveries can overcome the difficulties of recent skill accounts of virtues. Then in Chapter 2, he discusses how self-regulation works in the case of moral goals and standards and shows how various issues raised in virtue ethics can be addressed if we understand virtue development as a process of skill acquisition. He successfully shows that virtues are more similar to skills than many of us think and that we can learn a great deal about the important features of virtues and ways to acquire them.

This book also convincingly addresses the challenges from situationism (Chapter 5), which suggests us not to understand or explain our behavior in terms of long-term personality or character traits on the grounds that situational factors often heavily influence our behavior. According to Stichter, his skill model of virtue can respond to this challenge by showing how we can overcome the situational influences by acquiring skills through appropriate practice and training. The reason why it is hard to find virtuous people, he says, is because they are rare just as masters in skills are. He then introduces the phenomenon of 'moral disengagement' as an important but neglected source that hinders many of us from exercising moral virtue.

I think the most interesting and thought-provoking part of this book is Chapter 3, which focuses on responding to the main objection to VS: skills lack the motivational element that is essential for virtues. He argues that skills, just like virtues, require strong motivation to act well to improve one's skillfulness and that the way we evaluate experts as performers based on their motivations mirrors the way we evaluate persons in terms of virtue. However, I suspect that many of the main points made in this book could be made without such a strong claim as VS and that more adequate arguments could be offered to defend this thesis against its major objections.

One objection to VS is the *motivation* objection, according to which “evaluations of skillfulness seem to consider only what a person can do (regardless of what motivates a skillful performance), whereas when evaluating virtue we also have to inquire what a person is motivated to do (to make sure they are motivated in the right way)” (p. 93). In response, Stichter suggests that “we switch our evaluations from the performance to the performer” (p. 105). For example, he says that my half-hearted play in a tennis game would support a negative evaluation of me as a tennis player, because a “good performer, as distinguished from a good performance, not only displays a ‘feel for the game’ but also a ‘commitment to the game’” (p. 105). I do not think half-hearted performance necessarily bears negatively on an expert as a skilled performer, however. For example, suppose that I did not play whole-heartedly with my seven-year-old son. This would not speak negatively of me as a tennis player, since being a good tennis player would not require playing tennis whole-heartedly in *every single* tennis game. It might be replied that the lack of commitment in this case is justified by my care for the young child’s feeling. However, caring about his feeling is part of being a virtuous person, not of being a skillful one.

Another important objection is that skills are compatible with pursuing evil ends while virtues are not. In response, Stichter argues that such differences only does not show that “virtues are not skills, but rather that there are some skills we have normative reasons for setting as goals to acquire – namely those related to moral and epistemic goods (i.e. acquiring moral and epistemic virtues)” (p. 100). If so, even virtues like honesty would be just one of the skills that we have an additional normative reason to acquire. Still, we should consider particular virtues as constitutive of living well, and thus subject to overarching normativity. Consider the case in which one is threatened to tell Nazi where the Jews have escaped. In such a case, it may be argued, one would not fail to be virtuous even if one fails to respond to the reasons stemming from the particular virtue of honesty. Lying in such a case may seem structurally similar to the case in which one fails to make a particular move conducive to winning a chess game. In both cases, one does not necessarily fail to be virtuous even if one does not respond to the reasons stemming the particular domains of practice (that is, honesty and chess, respectively).

However, this would be a misunderstanding of virtues. The goal of a virtue like honesty can only be evaluated properly against the standard of being virtuous or living well overall. Thus, in this sense, it would be inappropriate to say that the person tells the truth to Nazi acted as the virtue of honesty demands but failed to act virtuously, just like a case of a chess player who acted excellently as a chess player but failed to act virtuously (say, because one imposes serious harms on the opponent by winning the chess game). Honesty as a virtue would not demand to tell the truth in such a situation. Hence what we can call the *boundedness condition* of a virtue: X is a virtue only if one can act excellently in terms of X only insofar as one thereby acts virtuously overall. This boundedness to good ends is what characterizes a virtue—at least substantive moral virtues—and what distinguishes it from a ‘mere’ skill such as archery or chess skill. If it is the case that one can be honest—or good at honesty—insofar as one successfully and reliably achieve its internal goal of telling the truth regardless of whether one thereby achieves the goal of acting virtuously at the same time, it would undermine its status as a virtue. In this sense, virtues are not just compatible with being a good person, but also conducive to, or even constitutive of, being one.

Stichter attempts in Chapter 4 to save VS by arguing that practical wisdom, not virtues themselves, is the source of the overarching normativity. He acknowledges that skill does not require us to know which ends are worth pursuing, while virtue does. But he argues that this difference is attributable to practical wisdom, which plays the role of unifying virtues, and thus does not undermine the thesis that virtue is itself a skill. This calls for another explanation, however.

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Now it need to be explained why virtues require practical wisdom, which helps us “to make all-things-considered judgments about how to act well” (p. 137), while (other) skills do not, since this inseparable relationship with practical wisdom seems to be precisely what distinguishes virtues from skills. This explanation is not offered in this book, at least.

If the concerns above are addressed more adequately, the project of this rich and informative book could be more complete. As it is, however, this book makes an important contribution to the virtue ethics literature with its insightful and thought-provoking arguments.

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