**Acquiring Aristotelian Virtue**

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*Introduction*

A few years ago I used to teach one day training sessions in ethics for members of research ethics committees. At the start of one of the sessions an extra person turned up and passed me a note which read: “Please include Dr. X in this training session. We have received complaints from patients and colleagues about Dr. X’s behaviour and he needs further training in ethics.” Needless to say Dr. X spent his compulsory ethics training session sulking, uncommunicative and sullen. If the session taught him anything it was to confirm his view of ethics as a waste of time.

I don’t think anyone, or perhaps anyone other than National Health Service managers, expects ethics to be taught in one off sessions, but we do hope that we can, somehow, shape moral characters even if this is a long and not entirely transparent or fully regulated process. We hope the best for our children and we try to encourage them to become kind, courageous, loyal and fair people. We examine our own behaviour and subject it to criticism and, hopefully, improvement. We wish for reform in the behaviour of others, especially the kind of behaviour that impacts heavily or negatively on us. We spend time teaching ethics classes in universities, to professionals, to committee members, and to random unethical doctors imposed on us, all in an effort to learn from the writings and behaviour of those who went before us.

In this chapter I want to touch upon some topics relevant to the development of Aristotelian virtue. I am conscious of the enormity of the topic, a topic that ranges from exegeses of Aristotle’s own views, to the revival of virtue ethics in recent decades; from abstract debates carried out in professional journals, to practical concerns raised by teachers; from considering the foundations necessary for the moral development of children, to understanding moral weakness in adults and to determining whether there is anything that will help those who have already strayed widely from the path of virtue; from the discipline of philosophy, to psychology, to public policy and educational theory. It is impossible to do justice to the breadth and significance of this topic in one chapter, but I want to take inspiration from Aristotle when he tells us that “[t]he purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us” (NE 1103b28-30). In asking how we become good, how we come to acquire virtue, I will be concentrating on a handful of debates that I judge to be of particular importance in current literature.

A good place to start is to consider the role of the virtuous person, if one wants to acquire virtue it makes sense to look at those who have it. Early virtue ethicists relied on the virtuous person as a direct imitational model, but as we shall see there are a number of objections with this approach. Instead more recent research has focused not so much on copying the virtuous but understanding the qualities which make them virtuous. At the heart of these qualities is *phronesis* or practical wisdom, an intellectual virtue that underpins all the others. We will look at *phronesis* in detail, considering both theoretical analyses and practical enquiries by authors who try to make sense of the concept by comparison with skills in other areas and by using empirical studies to shed light on the notion of ‘expertise’ in diverse fields. *Phronesis* will turn out to be a skilled ‘know-how’ type of practical knowledge concerning itself with moral matters in diverse and unpredictable situations. The final section of this chapter will briefly outline research projects by a selection of authors who discuss the many practical ways the ‘know how’ of *phronesis* becomes relevant in a variety of contexts.

*The role of the virtuous person*

How do we acquire virtue? A plausible suggestion is to look at those who already have virtue for inspiration. Aristotle’s definition of virtue seems to point to the value of the virtuous person as a model for virtue:

Virtue is a deliberate choice, resulting in a permanent disposition, based on a judgement of the mean as relative to us and the situation, as determined by the right reason, that is, as the virtuous person would determine it[[1]](#endnote-1).

The virtuous person is able to determine the right reason which leads to virtuous action, so perhaps we can follow his example to both perceive what the right reason requires and act accordingly. Early proponents of virtue ethics relied on this definition of virtue, amongst other passages, to make the role of the virtuous person pivotal in their accounts. According to one influential version, virtue ethics claims that an action is right if and only if it is what the virtuous person would do in the circumstances[[2]](#endnote-2). At times this has been interpreted to mean that if you want to know what to do in particular circumstances all you have to do is look for the virtuous person and follow her example[[3]](#endnote-3). This particular interpretation of the role of the virtuous person has to be understood within the context from which it emerged as it ties in with moral theory’s preoccupation with action guidedness. Conceiving the role of the virtuous person as a direct imitational model went in part towards answering concerns about the ability of virtue ethics to inform our actions. If you want to know what to do, follow the example of the virtuous person, in the same way that a deontologist would follow the moral rule or a consequentialist would promote good consequences[[4]](#endnote-4). In addition, this role for the virtuous person as a model for direct imitation ties in nicely with calls by educational theorists for teachers to be models of moral behaviour for their students[[5]](#endnote-5).

However, there are a number of concerns with this suggestion. The first problem is that in a climate of moral disagreement it is not clear how we can identify the virtuous person in the first place. Even if we do identify him it is not clear that he could be of any use to us because how we should behave is always relative to the individual. If we think that morality consists of universally applicable, exception less rules we might be tempted to see the virtuous agent as a short-cut to these rules. However, the virtuous agent is not the operator of a moral manual[[6]](#endnote-6). Observing what the virtuous has done in a specific situation does not necessarily tell us what *we* should do unless we find ourselves in precisely the same situation. A third problem with direct imitation is that since the student is different from the teacher we will never find ourselves in *precisely* the same situations as our teachers. How the situation is perceived depends on who is perceiving it and the perspective of the student will always differ from that of, not only the virtuous exemplar, but also of everyone else. If for example, the student has behaved badly he finds himself in a position the virtuous would never be in; there is no guidance from the virtuous on how to make amends as the virtuous never do wrong to make amends for[[7]](#endnote-7). Even when facing identical situations what is required by those who are on the road to virtue may be different from the virtuous, as considerations of maturity, capabilities and developmental issues, apply to the student which are not relevant to others. It is precisely because of his virtue that the virtuous person has options that are not open to me, such as, for example, behaving courageously, or with a skill and competence the non-virtuous lack[[8]](#endnote-8).

A possible solution to these problems is to see the virtuous person as an ideal[[9]](#endnote-9). However, a number of criticisms have been raised against this alternative as well. The first is to wonder what we could ever possibly learn from such an abstract ideal.[[10]](#endnote-10) We may aspire to this ideal model, but it is not clear how *aspirations* operate to help us acquire virtue. Nor do things become clearer if we think of the ideal model as a source of advice or guidance. How does seeing how the ideally virtuous act help with the situations I am faced with? In what way can examining a model that is understood to be beyond my reach offer assistance with what *I* should do? This second criticism goes further to suggest that the virtuous person as an ideal could even cause more harm than good. Swanton points out that virtue involves inner strength, the kind of strength that makes some otherwise challenging actions possible; however the student of virtue lacks this inner strength. Seeking to come as close to an ideal as possible when one can never succeed may prove quite ruinous. For example, altruism without inner strength becomes distorted into a resentful or self-serving action[[11]](#endnote-11). Finally, some authors are concerned that if the virtuous are really rare ideals, programmes of moral education may be entirely futile and all reflections on the cultivation of virtue may be misguided[[12]](#endnote-12).

All this seems rather negative. One could wonder whether this is the nature of criticisms and objections but it does seem that the very conception of the virtuous agent makes it difficult to see what role he would play in education even from a virtue ethical friendly standpoint. In a seminal article[[13]](#endnote-13) John McDowell conceives of the virtuous person as someone who can be relied upon to act virtuously when the situation demands so - therefore a kind person can be relied upon to behave kindly when this is what the situation requires. Possessing a virtue means having an awareness that certain situations require certain responses; it is a sensitivity to situational requirements. In addition, these situational requirements are sufficient to both motivate and explain the virtuous action, while the virtuous perspective is a perspective that cannot be understood unless it is shared. There is nothing that can be said to the vicious to persuade them to see the force of the reasons that explain the actions of the virtuous as they simply do not see them as reasons.

Under such an understanding of virtue the student is trying to acquire a perspective that can only be understood from the inside; without this privileged perspective there is neither understanding nor motivation to act virtuously. For the virtuous, reasons for action silence all other considerations[[14]](#endnote-14). Moral struggle and failure do not apply to the virtuous, whose virtue flows smoothly into action, unlike the continent and the incontinent who struggle to express right reason in action because of contrary desires. None of this bodes well for education, as during the developmental stage reasons that are silenced for the virtuous are very much present for the student and may de-rail his reasoning process. The student has to somehow identify which reasons would become silenced for the virtuous and ignore them in order to arrive at the right conclusion. And all the while he is attempting to do this, he has to fight contrary desires, the very contrary desires which the virtuous has eliminated.

Hursthouse makes a similar point with respect to what the virtuous knows[[15]](#endnote-15). The virtuous person cannot articulate his knowledge as it is not the kind of thing that can be captured in a set of rules, a collection of definitions or a guide that would help the non-virtuous work out what the virtuous knows; rather it is something that has been acquired through training. Without going through the same experiences there is no way of sharing what the virtuous knows; indeed students of virtue would find it hard to even see the truth of judgements about virtue. Hursthouse concludes with a depressing claim for philosophers, or at least those philosophers who may have some ambitions to teach moral philosophy, namely, we are *qua* philosophers no better equipped than non-philosophers to give guidance in moral matters. Our understanding of what is reasonable, or consistent or universalizable or objectively the case, or any of the other things we teach in philosophy classes doesn’t help in knowing what to do when it comes to practical morality. For that, and for education, we need to be virtuous.

It seems then that the more we understand virtue, the more difficult it is to see how one becomes virtuous in the first place. The virtuous person cannot play the role we conceive of him and the role required for the purposes of acquiring virtue. However, perhaps we have made a mistake in how we have conceived the educational role of the virtuous person. After all, the definition of virtue does not focus on the virtuous person as such, but on her ability to perceive the right reason, her *phronesis*. Perhaps a more fruitful avenue for accounting for the acquisition of virtue would be to consider *phronesis*.

*The role of* phronesis

Aristotle distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtues and *phronesis* is one of the intellectual virtues. Translated as practical wisdom, *phronesis*, is a dispositional state, involving both affective and cognitive elements, which manifests itself in having the ability to see what virtue requires. According to Aristotle human beings are naturally rational, this is what distinguishes us from other animals, however our nature alone does not make us *phronimoi*. Being *phronimos* is a result of acquiring certain habits of reason, and we are by our first, rational, nature, able to acquire a second nature of practical reasoning[[16]](#endnote-16). There are a number of aspects to *phronesis* as exercised by the virtuous person. *Phronesis* is an excellence, a disposition to judge rightly about human goods, which orients one’s actions towards the noble and the good. In addition *phronesis* concerns itself with action, so it also involves how to appreciate the situation one finds oneself in correctly, and it involves knowing how to act accordingly, not in terms of general principles but as applied to concrete situations. Because *phronetic* judgements lie in perception – rather than abstract reasoning or rule application - *phronesis* only comes with experience, as one has to be exposed to many different situations to become *phronetic*. *Phronesis* also includes cleverness, which is the ability to successfully execute a plan into action and helps the virtuous man recognise the right time to act, in the right place, using the right approach, etc[[17]](#endnote-17). Philosophers have tried to shed further light on the concept of ‘*phronesis*’ by comparing it to that of ‘*techne*’, i.e. ‘skill’. In what follows we shall look at a number of discussions of *phronesis* as a skill, some from a theoretical standpoint and some which take their inspiration from empirical analyses of other skilled activities.

The discussion that follows owes much to Dunne’s exceptionally nuanced analysis of the comparison between *phronesis* and skill or *techne[[18]](#endnote-18)*. *Techne* is a skill offering expert practical knowledge in a particular area, for example a skilled builder is expert at building or a skilled doctor is expert at healing. Similarly *phronesis* is expert knowledge in the living of one’s life well. Aristotle draws some important parallels between the two:

1. Both *phronesis* and *techne* have a function, they aim towards achieving a goal, and what counts as excellence for each is to perform this function well (NE 1097b25-30).
2. Both make use of the circumstances they find themselves in to make the best of things. The good builder will make the best of even poor materials if that is all he has available, and indeed you may only know how good a builder one is until you see him work in such constrained circumstances (NE 1100b35ff).
3. Both are acquired through exercise and practice (NE 1103a31-b2). One cannot become an expert builder without building walls and then rooms and then houses.
4. The doctrine of the mean applies to both, for good craftsmanship cannot be improved by either adding or taking anything away, it is just right (NE 1106b8-16).

However, at the same time there are important differences between *phronesis* and *techne*. Firstly, there is a contrast between different types of *technai*, some of which are closer to *phronesis* than others. Some *technai* are governed by a determinate body of knowledge, as is the case, for example, with a skill in grammar; while others cannot be understood in terms of general rules, such that there is no need for interpretive judgement of what is required in each situation. Medicine, for example, is a skill of the second kind, for an expert doctor cannot capture everything that is relevant to making a good diagnosis in the form of a manual, but needs to exercise his judgement in relation to the particulars of each different case he comes across. *Phronesis* clearly resembles medical rather than grammatical skill.

Secondly, there seems to be an element of voluntariness in *techne* which is not present in *phronesis*. This has several implications; *techne* can be forgotten as well as learned if one’s interest in it, for example, declines; *techne* can be possessed but not applied, as in the case of the retired builder; and one can make voluntary mistakes in the exercise of *techne* and this shows one’s control over the exercise of the skill. *Phronesis* is different, it cannot be forgotten as it presents the demands of the noble and the good. Nor can it be possessed but not applied because it is a form of practical knowledge that is expressed in action; to fail to act is to fail to be *phronimos*. Similarly, intentional mistakes are not possible in the sphere of *phronesis* as we don’t have discretionary powers over its exercise. One can choose to give up building, not build this particular house, or expressly build it poorly, but one cannot chose to give up on kindness, not bother with courage on this occasion, or be unfair on another and still be considered virtuous.

This is because *phronesis* is fundamentally connected to the noble and the good, which is the third difference. There can be excellence in *techne* but not excellence in *phronesis* as *phronesis* *is* excellence; one can determine the direction of *techne* - a doctor who heals as opposed to a doctor who uses his skills to extract information under torture – but one cannot determine the direction of *phronesis* as it is already oriented to the good; and while *techne* may be used instrumentally, *phronesis* is an expression of ourselves.

As a type of knowledge, *phronesis* is not concerned with knowledge ‘that’, or with ethical facts and ideas. Rather it is a skill, a capacity to be resourceful, to exercise one’s judgement in response to what the situation requires. Knowing what is just is easy, but knowing how to act in order to be just is the great achievement of the *phronimos* (NE 1137a9-17). Similarly pointing at a healthy specimen does not make you a medic. The knowledge of the *phronimos* is not detached from its content, nor is it separate from the state of character of its possessor. So, on the one hand, *phronesis* involves insight, not mere perception, it is not merely general knowledge but knowledge which explains the action in terms of the particulars of the situation. On the other hand, it is dynamic knowledge that relates to the person’s character. It is not merely an accumulation of knowledge, but a learning from experience that brings to bear previous insights to future actions and shapes who the person becomes. As such it is self-correcting and self-reflective, and it is not knowledge that merely directs action, but knowledge that develops, is protected and maintained by good character.

*Phronesis* is a rational/affective disposition (for Aristotle does not see reason and desires as opposites) that takes the general but indeterminate subject matter of the virtues and judges how it is to be applied in the particular case. The challenge is the particularity of the individual cases, and *phronetic* knowledge is the type of knowledge that makes sense of the Aristotelian *apeiron* – “the uncircumscribable range of potentially noticeable features and the consequently unlimited possibilities of action that inhere in each situation”[[19]](#endnote-19).

What we have then is an ability, a knowledge how, a skilled understanding of moral matters. How does one come to develop this ability? The first step in the process is the requirement for a good upbringing. The student of virtue must begin his journey developing good habits, in surroundings that encourage virtue. Famously the student must act virtuously before he comes to understand the requirements of virtue (NE 1103b1-3). There are different interpretations of this move from mindless, mechanical habituation, to reasoning, understanding and the internalisation of the virtues. Some authors focus on habituation as a purely mechanical process,[[20]](#endnote-20) others understand the process as a two- way development from non-rational conditioning of ‘the that’ to rational understanding of ‘the because’[[21]](#endnote-21). I tend to agree with authors who see a gradual, cohesive process of development of both emotions and reason, such that one illuminates, guides and supports the other and one in which neither reason nor habit dominate[[22]](#endnote-22). ‘The that’ which develops through habituation is a particular way of seeing the world, i.e. as requiring a just, kind or temperate response. The student of virtue must begin his education in an environment that sensitizes him to seeing the world in this way.

The analogy with perception is often used to account for this first step. The non-virtuous are ‘morally blind’, they do not perceive the relevant features of the situation which stand out in the ‘vision’ of the virtuous. This analogy is helpful in that it captures the sense of revelation that is inaccessible to those who are ‘blind’, but misleading in that it suggests an instantaneous and clear moment of awareness, akin to opening one’s eyes. Hursthouse[[23]](#endnote-23) points out that a situation that requires me to act may not be something that faces me, i.e. something whose importance I have to passively perceive, but something whose details I have to actively work out. For example, working out what the situation is really about may require detailed understanding of the motives and feelings of others, e.g. “She tends to exaggerate the intent of personal slights because she has low self-esteem” would allow a more insightful interpretation of her resultant actions and is a piece of knowledge that can only be arrived at if we know her, understand her motives, engage our empathy, are able to read her body language as well as listen to what she says, etc. The student of virtue needs to develop certain technical skills in order to understand when people are hurt, embarrassed, uncertain, etc. and how these feelings impact on what they say and do. Kupperman[[24]](#endnote-24) makes the same point when he criticises the use of narrow philosophical examples like the trolley problem. Real life requires the understanding of complex situations, situations that are coloured, for example, by a variety of commitments and projects one is engaged with, or situations that are affected, for example, by involving specific family members or friends, etc. This kind of understanding of the complexity of the faculty of perception leads some authors to recommend the use of literature in teaching virtue, as poetry and fiction allow not only scope for the development of complex characters, but also engage our emotions in a way that facilitates our understanding of the detailed situations others find themselves in[[25]](#endnote-25). Coming to see morality then is not akin to opening our eyes and seeing but rather to developing vision over time, i.e. having a functioning optic never is not sufficient, we need to develop the ability to focus, gradually become able to see across greater distances, coordinate the use of two eyes, develop the neural connections associated with what we are seeing, etc.

Does this focus on literature as a source of inspiration and understanding of the process bring us back to the importance of the role model? In a sense yes, in another no. The discussions of exemplars in virtue ethics make two mistakes: they focus on the importance of persons rather than qualities, and they fail to understand the Aristotelian concept of emulation[[26]](#endnote-26). If the discussion focuses on the person it is easy to lose touch with why this person is admirable in the first place. If we are not able to specify the qualities that bring this example to our attention, we cannot be of use to the student of virtue. Consider this example of virtue: Jadav ‘Molai’ Payeng has spent over 30 years planting a 1,360 acre wildlife refuge forest[[27]](#endnote-27). If we want to follow his example we don’t need to plant trees, or plant so *many* trees; what we should copy is his concern for animals and for the environment which can be instantiated in an immeasurable number of ways that fit in with my life, my circumstances and the context of my actions. He is not a moral exemplar because we should all be planting forests, but rather because we should all develop the quality that led him, in his particular context, to plant forests.

Modelling the qualities of others requires judgment and this is evident in Aristotle’s understanding of emulation. Emulation requires that one feels distress at the absence in oneself of the desired goods in the exemplar. Already this means that emulation requires self-understanding, appreciation of one’s strengths and weaknesses as well as the ability to identify the good in others. In addition one needs to be attuned to react to this observation about one’s relative weakness with distress. This is a specific type of distress, it is not pain because others possess something worthwhile that we do not, rather it is pain that *we* do not possess this quality. While envy is base and its object is to prevent others from having something, emulation is the characteristic of the student of virtue as its object is to acquire for oneself a good evident in others[[28]](#endnote-28). Furthermore emulation requires the effort to change oneself in order to acquire these goods. This is not a blind copying of a role model, but a targeted approach towards a specific goal, an approach that is informed by self-understanding and by the exercise of one’s judgement with respect to which qualities count as virtues.

Annas[[29]](#endnote-29) develops an account of educating for virtue as a skill, according to which the student needs to, firstly, understand what qualities in the role model he should follow, secondly, exercise the skill in a self-directed way and, thirdly, strive to improve. The acquisition of virtue as a skill requires that the expert role model is able to articulate his reasons for action so that the student can use this explanation to truly understand what is being modelled. None of this process is mechanical or direct copying, the student is not expected to merely repeat actions, but to come to understand why what is being done is important, which may mean that the way he instantiates the same quality in other circumstances is entirely different from the model’s actions. Virtue is not just a disposition to act reliably in certain ways that can be directly copied by others, but a disposition to act for certain reasons and the student needs to come to see the force of these reasons and judge how they may operate in other circumstances. Bakhurst[[30]](#endnote-30) makes the same point when he argues that the student of virtue has to join a culture of evaluation, joining a tradition of thinking, justifying and reasons. However, the student does this is a particular manner, that is, he embraces a set of attitudes that he has chosen by himself and for which he can be held accountable. Therefore, the process of emulation involves as part of it choice and responsibility for one’s choices. Crucially, since emulation involves qualities of persons we don’t need a fully virtuous role model to learn from. We need not rely on the perfectly or ideally virtuous as examples, all we need is instances of virtue for which the continent will do well enough[[31]](#endnote-31).

Another approach in this area of research which tries to understand *phronesis* seeks inspiration in empirical research. Daniel Russell[[32]](#endnote-32) draws a distinction between expertise in *phronesis* and expertise in other areas and looks at what we can learn from empirical studies of experts in other areas. Expert chess players play better not because they have better memorisation skills or computational skills such that they can recall and eliminate a larger number of possible moves, but rather because they seem to have an ability to narrow their focus on moves that are of strategic relevance. Similarly, expert radiologists are quicker at identifying disease relevant features in x-rays and ignoring irrelevant details. Russell draws a parallel from work in social-cognitive models of psychology about expertise in areas like chess playing and radiology to suggest that *phronesis* is a similar type of expert skill in morality. The moral expert is better at focusing on what is salient in the first place and is better able to draw on background information to process what he has seen in light of his goals. Like Dunne above, Russell sees moral development as a two way process; “…becoming generous involves learning both what helps based on the feedback one received and the very criteria for interpreting that feedback in the first place. If feedback worked that way with driving, we would have to learn how to stop a car while also having to learn what counts as ‘stopping’”[[33]](#endnote-33).

Russell[[34]](#endnote-34) also finds empirical evidence from the study of expertise to support the idea that skilled practitioners have access to the reasons why they do what they do, which as we saw above is crucial in many accounts of the acquisition of *phronesis*. Social-cognitive theory understands personality as a ‘mediating process’, again a two-way process which involves both interpreting one’s surroundings and adjusting one’s behaviour in response to them – experts are particularly good at doing this in their specialist field. Experts not only have larger stores of knowledge but are better able to access salient information. Their actions are goal directed, they do not rely on memorization but learn strategically relevant groupings of information. They are also more skilled at distinctive strategies such as defining problems and matching them to solutions, employing complex rules, etc. Finally, they do all this with control. They don’t act mindlessly, but their attention is attracted, employed and concentrated exactly where it should be. Skill, like virtue, is oriented towards not just any standard, but towards the right standard, and what is perceived, how it is perceived, how it relates to existing information, how it is processed and how it is applied, is all informed by this standard specific to each skill.

Phronesis, then, is a type of know how that is supported by a variety of abilities, from emotional maturity, to self-reflection, to an empathic understanding of what moves others, to an ability to see beyond the surface and understand the complexities of human behaviour. These abilities develop gradually, over time, subject to favourable circumstances, but one by one they eventually form an impenetrable barrier, in Aristotle’s words “[i]t is like a rout in battle stopped by first one man making a stand then another, until the original formation has been restored; the soul is so constituted as to be capable of this process” (An Post 2.19.100a12-14). In the final section of this paper I want to consider discussions of how we come to acquire such abilities.

*Education and the empirical sciences*

In this final section, I want to bring together a number of authors who work on diverse ideas. What unites their work is an attempt to understand *phronetic* ‘know how’ in all the assorted contexts it manifests itself. I will concentrate on work which tries to bridge the gap between theoretical understandings of virtue ethics and practical pedagogy or psychology. I have chosen to focus on research on education because of its central importance to Aristotle – for Aristotle in ethics "education is the main thing - indeed, it is the only thing" (NE 1103b24). I will also bring in a number of diverse authors engaging with empirical research as this has been an extremely fruitful area of recent research. In both cases, i.e. education and the interplay between philosophy and psychology, I think that what unites the authors below is their interest in understanding not just wanting to be good but how we actually become skilled at being good in particular contexts.

There have been some practical examples of attempts to bring Aristotelian theory to educational practice. One type of programme introduces the idea of a school ethos through rules and principles that govern everyone's behaviour and attitudes qua members of the school. The aim here is for students to internalise particular values in coming to see themselves as part of this institution and to then display these values in their behaviour – if they come to see themselves as kind people they will become kind people. Another has tried to introduce the practical syllogism in the classroom as a way of forming more robust moral beliefs. It seems to me that discussing ethical concepts, engaging in philosophical debate, forming arguments and objections are all useful skills. Hursthouse suggests that discussing concepts such as informed consent may make the relevant virtues easier to teach, and that coining terms such as ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ or using catchy phrases like “don’t drink and drive” may help sensitize us to moral demands[[35]](#endnote-35). There has been one limited study suggesting that teaching in accordance with the Socratic *elenchus* may promote moral behaviour[[36]](#endnote-36), but overall the impact of teaching ethics on ethical behaviour has not been widely studied[[37]](#endnote-37). Neither approach, the school ethos, or the teaching of the *elenchus*, has seen much success and while there is a lot of interest in developing good characters, and a lot of rhetoric surrounding the social evils that will be avoided through doing so, there is little understanding how to go about doing this. One project that conceivably has Aristotelian routes is the Philosophy 4 Children initiative which uses collaborative philosophical inquiry methods to develop problem solving skills based on an evaluation of evidence, an analysis of concepts and generally an ability to construct persuasive arguments. It is a good example of how one can take the work of philosophers such as John Dewey and Matthew Lipman and make it practically relevant in the educational curricula of thousands of children. Early reports back from this initiative are optimistic, suggesting students exposed to philosophical thinking have better critical thinking skills, an improved ability to express themselves orally, greater emotional and social maturity, and the ability to endorse and express their own values[[38]](#endnote-38). It seems to me that elements in the work of other philosophers could also be appropriated for practical pedagogy recommendations; for example, the work of Karen Stohr on manners.

Karen Stohr writes persuasively on the importance of good manners as an aid to expressing one’s moral beliefs[[39]](#endnote-39). In an argument that should be familiar by now, Stohr points out that *wanting* to defuse an embarrassing situation, or comfort someone in pain does not produce the knowledge of *how* to do this successfully. Manners are an essential part of the skill of *phronesis*, of knowing how to bring about what you want to achieve in the moral sphere. Stohr argues that it is possible to fail in either direction here; one can have perfect manners, i.e. powers of moral imagination that allow one to understand the nuances of interactions with others, but not be interested in directing them towards the noble and the good. Or one can have the best intentions but be entirely unskilled in how to bring them about. She illustrates this point using two types of failure from literature, that of Mr Wickham, the suave but vicious gentleman, and Mrs Jennings, the well-meaning but embarrassing lady. Mr Wickham, appears successful on the surface; he understands other people’s emotions, he perceives their state of mind, he sees how to influence them in particular directions However, his skills are employed towards the wrong aims, he is self-serving and vicious so he uses his social graces to further this own ends. Mrs Jennings’s aim, on the other hand, is good, she wants to help others, but she is incompetent in bringing this aim about. Her attempts to aid result in confusion and embarrassment for the subjects of her concern. Acquiring virtue requires both the right aim and competence in the skill of brining it about, although, as these two examples show, there are many interesting ways to fail.

Other philosophers take inspiration from the conclusions of studies in psychology to explain how we succeed in being moral and to help us understand factors that promote or hinder this goal. For example, if we look at how we learn other skills and under what conditions we are successful in that, we can understand under what conditions we are most likely to succeed in acquiring virtue. Empirical studies indicate that we learn skills better when the target area has sufficiently regular patterns and when we receive prompt and clear feedback on our actions. However, we learn about virtue in a ‘messy’ environment, an environment that lacks regular patterns and may not provide feedback, so we need to employ techniques to mitigate this. Ideas for dealing with messy environments are suggested in a number of psychology experiments. Our behaviour seems to be influenced by, sometimes trivial, situational factors. This, at first, appears concerning, however, other experiments show how the influence of situational factors can be negated if we become aware of it[[40]](#endnote-40). So if we want to withstand the pressure of authority in urging us to behave unethically we should become aware of its very influence. If we become aware of how easily we can be manipulated by tiny, trivial features of a situation, such as the colour of the experimenter’s coat, we become more able to withstand the influence of these features and better able to identify similarly trivial but influential features in other situations.

Another approach considers moral failures, so if an examination of expertise can help us understand what the virtuous does when he acts, an examination of the conditions under which we fail can help us avoid them or respond to them more successfully next time. Psychology can help us identify situations favourable to learning. In novel, formal and public contexts, with detailed and complete instructions, offering little or no choice, contexts of brief duration and with narrowly defined responses, manipulations are more influential on behaviour. This means that if we want to manage learning, in such situations we should manage manipulations, i.e. we should make sure the student of virtue is exposed to positive manipulations and is aware of the influence of negative ones. Whereas in familiar, informal and private contexts, with general or no instructions, offering considerable choice, of extensive duration and broadly defined responses, traits are more influential, so we should use these contexts to encourage the expression of virtuous traits[[41]](#endnote-41). Being reminded of morality also seems to be a crucial factor in influencing behaviour; subjects tend to copy the actions of those around them who belong to their group, subjects tend to act morally when morality has just been made salient to them and they tend to act morally when they identify themselves with their actions[[42]](#endnote-42).

Yet another approach is to examine the circumstances of failure. Lorraine Besser-Jones identifies three elements to moral character:

1. The moral beliefs to which one is evaluatively committed,

2. one's dispositions, and

3. the nature and degree to which one's moral commitments influence one's behavioural dispositions.

She interprets some of the empirical evidence of surprising vicious behaviour as indicating a gap between one's moral beliefs and one's dispositions to act. While many moral philosophers focus on how to correct the wrong moral beliefs, for Besser-Jones a more useful task would be to question why those who have the right beliefs fail to act on them. The process of closing the gap between beliefs and dispositions is a complex one and much can go wrong between thought and action. By re-focusing attention on how we fail we may learn something useful about the type of ‘know how’ involved in *phronesis*; Besser-Jones discusses inter-goal conflict and goal imprecision but I suspect there are many more phenomena which should be considered, perhaps with the help of evidence from the empirical sciences, to shed light on the instances where the continent fall into incontinence. Doing so might shed light on what the virtuous can do which the continent fail at.

I think that the interplay between philosophy and psychology is a very promising area of research for virtue ethics. It is already helping us understand the concept of expertise and highlighting the many different ways we can go wrong in turning our beliefs into action, but this is just the tip of the iceberg and much more can be gained by further research in this area. In this section I have given a very brief overview of philosophers working on a variety of different topics. What unites them is an attempt to elucidate *phronetic* ‘know how’-. What the *phronimos* knows is detailed, context-sensitive, relative to the agent and subject to change as appropriate – as a result we cannot have a comprehensive account of this knowledge. What we can investigate, which these authors are doing, is separate, smaller aspects of *phronetic* knowledge. Thus our discussion has veered from the importance of learning good manners as an expression of our moral beliefs, to the significance of learning environments whether this concerns conditions that are favourable to beginners or how expertise emerges from complexity, to the value of managed failure and how to manage these experiences of failure, to the general concern with how continent agents fall into incontinence which may, by contrast, illuminate what the virtuous do. If the discussion has spread over a wide variety of phenomena we should not be surprised as our subject matter is ‘know how’ concerning the *apeiron*.

*Conclusion*

This chapter has taken the question of how we acquire virtue and re-interpreted it into asking how we acquire *phronesis*. We saw how a direct appeal to the virtuous agent is not particularly illuminating when we want to know how to act in complex, variable and agent-relative situations. Instead of looking at the person, we should look at what he does, i.e. he judges wisely. The virtuous person is able to judge wisely because she possesses the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. Key to acquiring virtue then, is to understand *phronesis*. We considered a number of approaches to this task. We saw how philosophers analyse the concept of ‘skill’ and compare it to *phronesis*, so that practical wisdom becomes a kind of applied expertise in morality. We also saw how work from the empirical sciences, such as analysing other skills, sheds light on *how* the virtuous person does what she does. Finally we considered the diverse work of a number of philosophers who try to enrich the content of *phronetic* knowledge as a ‘know how’ ability by appeal to experiments in practical pedagogy and evidence from the empirical sciences[[43]](#endnote-43).

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2. I have in mind here Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue theory and abortion”, in R. Crisp and M. Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), but see also J. Oakley, “Varieties of virtue ethics”, *Ratio*, 9 (1996) 128-52, p.129, and Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example, Robert Louden, “On some vices of virtue ethics”, *American Philosophical* Quarterly, 21 (1984), 227-36 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This influential interpretation of the three theories is developed by Hursthouse, “Virtue theory and abortion”. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for example, R.V. Bullough, “Ethical and moral matters in teaching and teacher education”, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 1(2011), 21-28, a review of a number of articles making this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. To borrow a phrase from Julia Annas, “Being virtuous and doing the right thing”, in R. Shafer-Landau, *Ethical Theory: an anthology*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.680. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Annas, “Being virtuous and doing the right thing”, p.680 and Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, p.106 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See for example, Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.64-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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18. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
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29. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Ch.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. D. Bakhurst, “Particularism and moral education”, *Philosophical Explorations*, 8, 3, (2005), 265-279. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
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41. All from Athanassoulis, forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. More on all this in Athanassoulis, forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. I am very grateful to Richard Hamilton and Nancy Snow for constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)