

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLES IN THE SKILL ANALOGY

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ALONGSIDE A RENEWED INTEREST in virtue ethics in the past half century has come a renewed and growing interest in what is sometimes called the *skill analogy*, the ancient Greek idea that ethical virtue is well understood on the model of practical skills.¹ That these two interests have coincided is fairly unsurprising. Almost all ancient philosophers rely on the skill analogy in discussing virtue; so in returning to virtue, it makes good sense that we would too.

The ancients, however, rely on the analogy to differing degrees, thus also differing in the extent to which they treat it as a mere analogy. The early Platonic dialogues, for one, are often understood as extended arguments for the idea that virtue is a skill. In the *Gorgias*, for instance, Callicles teases Socrates for always going on about cobblers, fullers, cooks, and doctors, “as though our conversation were about them!”² The implication is often taken to be that Socrates holds, like the later Stoics, that the analogy is no mere analogy.³ Aristotle, on the other hand, despite making positive use of the notion of skill in developing his own account of virtue, ultimately treats a comparison with skill as merely helpful for

- 1 The analogy is also found in at least ancient Chinese and Roman philosophy. See, e.g., Stalnaker, “Virtue as Mastery in Early Confucianism”; Yao “The Way, Virtue, and Practical Skill in the *Analects*”; and Klein “Of Archery and Virtue.”
- 2 Plato, *Gorgias*, 491a.
- 3 Irwin (*Plato’s Ethics*) and Nussbaum (*The Fragility of Goodness*) contain classic expositions of this view of the early dialogues. For a dissenting voice, see Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom*. Roochnik interprets Socrates as making points in both the early and middle dialogues that suggest an important disanalogy with skill—namely, that the good practitioner of a skill, unlike the virtuous person, is best-suited to use it for bad (see, e.g., *Laches*, 195c, and *Republic*, 333e). This point is related to what I below call the “Capacity/Disposition Objection” and the “No-Bad-Ends Objection.” Plato’s *Hippias Minor* is also relevant to this discussion. There, Socrates presents an argument concerning runners in a race, related to what I below call the “Voluntary Mistakes Objection.”

beginning to think about virtue. Virtue is not a skill, he says, but we do well to start thinking of it on that model.⁴

In the ancient debate, the skill analogy is thus generally understood as taking one of two forms, as one of two positive positions on the relation between skill and virtue. The first holds that virtue is sufficiently analogous to skill to *be* a skill—call this position *Virtue as Skill*—while the second holds that virtue is analogous to skill but is *insufficiently* analogous to be a skill—call this *Virtue as Like Skill*. In this respect, the contemporary debate looks much like the ancient one. Thus, while some contemporary philosophers hold that virtue is a skill, others hold that it is merely like skill.⁵ And, further, that about which the ancients agree, contemporary philosophers largely do too. They largely agree that both skill and virtue involve practical knowledge, that both are to some degree teachable, and that acquiring each requires practice or training.⁶

Arguments purporting to show that the analogy is a mere analogy, however, seem to have multiplied. Four of Aristotle's objections remain and are often repeated. These are as follows:

The Action/Production Objection: The virtuous person performs the virtuous action for its own sake, whereas the skilled person acts skillfully for what doing so produces.⁷

The Firm Character Objection: The virtuous person acts from a firm and unchanging character, whereas the skilled person does not.⁸

- 4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. All references to Aristotle are to this work and are hereafter cited parenthetically. Bloomfield (*Moral Reality*, 59) and Annas ("The Structure of Virtue," 16–17) claim that among the ancient Greeks, *only* Aristotle held that the analogy is a mere analogy.
- 5 Annas ("Virtue as a Skill"), Swartwood ("Wisdom as an Expert Skill"), Stichter ("Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue" and *The Skillfulness of Virtue*), for instance, fall into the former camp. Notes 7–13, below, list those who fall into the latter. Still other virtue ethicists will not find the analogy useful enough to be worth special emphasis, but no one denies that virtue and skill are similar in at least some respects.
- 6 Ryle argues that the teachability of virtue is more properly understood as *learnability* ("Can Virtue Be Taught?"). I intend to include his "learnable" in my "teachable."
- 7 Apart from Aristotle (1105a28–35, 1140a1–18), at least Broadie (*Ethics with Aristotle*, 83), Zagzebski (*Virtues of the Mind*, 113), and Klein ("Of Archery and Virtue") make this objection. Annas admits the content of the objection but thinks it inconsequential for the skill analogy ("Virtue as a Skill," 230, and *Intelligent Virtue*). As we will see, this objection also entails those claiming that one's motivation matters for virtue but not for skill, as in Hacker-Wright, "Skill, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Naturalism."
- 8 Apart from Aristotle (1105a28–35), at least Wallace (*Virtues and Vices*, 46), Broadie (*Ethics*

The Voluntary Mistakes Objection: The virtuous person's virtue is impugned by voluntary mistakes, whereas the skilled person's skill is not.⁹

The Practical Wisdom Objection: Virtue requires practical wisdom, whereas skill does not.¹⁰

In addition to these, however, contemporary philosophers often note at least three other, *prima facie* distinct objections:

The Capacity/Disposition Objection: Virtue is a kind of disposition to act well, whereas skill is a mere capacity to act well.¹¹

The No-Vice-Analogue Objection: Virtue has vice as its contrary, whereas skill has only lack of skill, which is not analogous to vice.¹²

The No-Bad-Ends Objection: Virtue cannot be used toward bad ends, whereas skill can be.¹³

with Aristotle, 89), Zagzebski (*Virtues of the Mind*, 112), and Stalnaker ("Virtue as Mastery in Early Confucianism," 408) make this objection.

- 9 Apart from Aristotle (1140a21–24), Foot is most famous for making this objection (*Virtues and Vices*, 8). See also Ryle, "Can Virtue Be Taught?," 438; Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 107; and Lott, "Situationism, Skill, and the Rarity of Virtue," 390–91.
- 10 Apart from Aristotle (1097a5–8, 1140a27–31, 1140b5–6), Wallace (*Virtues and Vices*, 43), Putman ("The Intellectual Bias of Virtue Ethics," 303), and Hacker-Wright ("Skill, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Naturalism") make this objection. The content is agreed with as well by at least Stichter ("Virtues, Skills, and Right Action," "Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue," and *The Skillfulness of Virtue*), but he thinks it inconsequential for the skill analogy. (See note 51 below on Stichter's treatment.)
- 11 Rees and Webber ("Automaticity in Virtuous Action") make this objection most explicit, pointing to Ryle ("Can Virtue Be Taught?") as inspiration. Zagzebski (*Virtues of the Mind*, 107), Watson ("Two Faces of Responsibility"), and Hacker-Wright ("Skill, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Naturalism") seem to agree with the content. Related is Zagzebski's claim that skill is inherently difficult, whereas virtue is not (*Virtues of the Mind*, 108). Aristotle (1105a9–10) claims that *both* skill and virtue are inherently difficult. Wallace argues that each of skill and virtue has a *distinctive* kind of difficulty (*Virtues and Vices*, 44–46).
- 12 See Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 112.
- 13 See Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, 43; Putman, "The Intellectual Bias of Virtue Ethics," 303; Stalnaker, "Virtue as Mastery in Early Confucianism," 408. Given Plato's mention of a similar objection (see note 3 above), this is perhaps more accurately understood as an ancient objection. As it is *prima facie* not one of Aristotle's, however, I list it here. Some common objections, which I do not discuss here, are the Expertise Objection (that there are experts in skills but not in virtue), the Articulatory Objection (that virtue requires the ability to articulate what one knows but skill does not), and the Memory Objection (that while skills can be forgotten, virtue cannot be). It is worth noting that various of these and the above objections are also discussed in virtue epistemology (see, e.g., Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology").

I will further explain these objections later in the paper, but I will be arguing that each misses the mark. This is not, however, because any of these objections is factually incorrect about skill or virtue. I will be arguing that each misses the mark, rather, because each embodies a basic misunderstanding of the skill analogy—a misunderstanding already implicit in both of the standard treatments of it.

What is the misunderstanding? Roughly, it is to think that the skill analogy aims to understand virtuous human beings on the model of merely *skilled* individuals—individuals merely good (or very good) at making shoes, treating illnesses, or playing tennis, for instance—when it rather aims to understand them on the model of good occupants of skill-involving *roles*—individuals, that is, such as good cobblers, doctors, and tennis players.¹⁴ What follows is an effort to show that this is indeed a misunderstanding, to substantiate the distinction on which it relies, and to argue that correcting for it enables us to respond to each of the above objections—thus giving us good reason to hold that being virtuous is being a good occupant of a skill-involving role.

The paper goes as follows. In section 1, I discuss two recent defenses of the skill analogy by two of its principal contemporary proponents: Julia Annas and Matt Stichter. Though each is committed to the traditional view of the analogy (as comparing the virtuous person to the merely *skilled* individual), each is also, like myself, committed to saying that the above objections embody a basic misunderstanding of the analogy. I will be arguing, however, that neither proposal can be correct because each defends the analogy by attributing to practical skill a feature that it in fact lacks. The two proposals do lead us, however, to what I will argue is the proper view of the analogy, which relies on the distinction between “skill possession” and “skill-role occupancy.” In section 2, I develop this distinction and the corresponding notion of a “good skill-role occupant.” In section 3, I point to a similar notion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And in section 4, I return to the above seven objections to show that the analogy withstands each of them, once understood in terms of good skill-role occupancy.

14 This point could be gleaned from the *Gorgias* passage mentioned above. Watson makes a similar distinction:

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.”) (“Two Faces of Responsibility,” 287)

As I discuss below, Stichter (“Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue” and *The Skillfulness of Virtue*) attempts to use this distinction in relation to the skill analogy, but I believe he misuses it.

1. TWO PROPOSALS FOR HOW THE SKILL ANALOGY GETS MISUNDERSTOOD

1.1. Annas's Proposal

In *Intelligent Virtue*, Annas defends the view which I above called *Virtue as Like Skill*, arguing that virtue is importantly like skill along two main lines. She says, "We find the important similarity of virtue to skill in skills where two things are united: the *need to learn* and the *drive to aspire*."¹⁵ As noted above, it is widely accepted that skill and virtue each requires learning (i.e., teaching or training), so in evaluating Annas's proposal, we can focus on "the drive to aspire."

In beginning to do so, we should note that the above quotation already implies a fundamental way in which Annas's understanding of the skill analogy differs from those who make the objections introduced in the previous section. The need to learn and the drive to aspire, she implies, need be united in only *some* skills for virtue to be analogous to skill. And she makes clear in the ensuing discussion that this is because only *some* skills require the drive to aspire. The objections that we listed above, on the contrary, concern features purportedly shared by all skills—they say, e.g., "Skill is a capacity, not a disposition" and "Skill is concerned with production, not action." Each of these objections, that is, assumes that virtue (*qua* virtue) has some feature *x* that every skill (simply *qua* skill) lacks. Annas is thus committed to saying that these objections embody a basic misunderstanding of the analogy: the analogy does not require that skills *in general* align with virtue in respect to a given feature; it requires merely that some do.

I will later be making use of a similar point in my own proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood. But in evaluating Annas's proposal, we can focus on the fact that she invokes the point because she thinks that only some skills require the *drive to aspire*. We can thus evaluate her overall proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood by asking whether the drive to aspire is in fact required for the possession of some skills.

What is the drive to aspire? Annas describes it as constituted by three interrelated sub-drives, which she says must be present from the start in learning the relevant kinds of skill: the drive to understand, the drive to self-direct, and the drive to improve.¹⁶ The drive to understand is a drive to grasp *why* a skill is exercised in such-and-such a way, rather than merely *that* it is exercised in that way—so, for instance, it is a drive to grasp not only *that* one builds buildings in ways *x*, *y*, and *z* but also *why* one does so in those ways. Annas contrasts per-

¹⁵ Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 16.

¹⁶ Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 17–18.

performances done understandingly with performances done by mere routine or parroting. And this naturally connects the drive to understand with the second sub-drive, the drive to self-direct. The drive to self-direct is a drive to do things according to *one's own* understanding—it is a drive to be self-directing in one's exercise of a skill. And lastly, the drive to improve is, as it sounds, the drive to get better and better in one's exercise of the skill.

We can now ask, though, whether the possession of some skills really does require the drive to aspire. The sub-drives which constitute the drive to aspire do seem necessary for *acquiring* skill—and in the case of the drive to understand and the drive to self-direct, that is all Annas claims. But the drive to improve, in particular, is meant also to be *constitutive* of the skills with which Annas is concerned, meaning she thinks that anyone who lacks the drive to improve also lacks the skills in question.¹⁷ She recognizes that this is a very demanding requirement of a skill, but she tries to preempt any worry that it is *too* demanding by saying that if a skill does not require the drive to improve, it is simply not the kind of skill that could be analogous to virtue. Being virtuous, she thinks, does require the drive to improve, so any skill that is to be like virtue must also require that drive.

But is the drive to improve constitutive of any skill? In considering this question, we might run through various skills of which Annas claims it is—she mentions *building*, *playing piano*, and *tennis*, among others. Is one skilled at these things only if one is driven to become better at them? Annas says yes, but it is difficult to see why this should be the case. For it seems that one possible situation in which one could be driven to improve a skill is the situation in which one already possesses it. For instance, it makes good sense even to say that so-and-so is an *expert* at building *and* that they are driven continually to improve. It also makes good sense to say that so-and-so is the best in the world at building but is *no longer* driven to improve. In either case it seems that the person's expertise does not on its own entail that they are driven to improve; such a drive is independent of their skill. If this is correct, it follows that lacking the drive to improve a skill does nothing to show that one presently lacks it. And in that case, neither the drive to improve nor the more general drive to aspire is a necessary constituent of any skill. Annas's proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood, then, is mistaken.¹⁸

Before moving on to the second proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood, however, it will be useful to consider why Annas might be tempted to think that the drive to improve is constitutive of (rather than merely necessary

17 Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 19.

18 Irwin argues similarly (review of *Intelligent Virtue*, by Julia Annas, 551).

for acquiring or maintaining) some skills. Part of the answer would seem to be that she thinks that some skills (but not others) *can* continually be improved. She mentions shoelace tying as a skill that does not require the drive to aspire, and it is at least plausible that shoelace tying does not allow for continual improvement. Building, playing piano, and tennis, on the other hand, plausibly do. However, from the fact that a skill *allows* for continual improvement, it does not follow that possessing the skill *requires* that one be driven, continually, to improve it. This answer on its own, then, cannot fully explain why Annas thinks that some skills (but not others) require the drive to improve.

A more enlightening answer might involve a thought that can seem to be in the background of Annas's discussion: she sometimes talks as if the drive to aspire is a possible feature of skills themselves. As we have just seen, she attaches the drive to aspire to the skills of building, piano playing, and tennis, for instance, but not to shoelace tying, saying: "We do not demand aspiration to improve in tying our shoelaces."¹⁹ This may just be a loose way of talking, but it seems to me potentially distortive. For drives are features of people, not skills themselves. *People* are driven (or not driven) to improve their skills. So what we mean when we say that we do not demand aspiration to improve in shoelace tying is that we do not demand *of people* that they continually be driven to improve in tying their shoelaces, not that we do not demand such a drive simply for the *possession* of that skill. Yet Annas can seem to attach this kind of demand (or, alternatively, lack of demand) to skills themselves.

If such a connection is what she has in mind, that would of course help to explain her view that the drive to improve is a necessary condition for the possession of some skills but not others. But if we rather accept that the drive to improve is a possible feature of people rather than skills, as I think we should, it seems that there is no pressure to think it is demanded of either *all* people or else *none* in regard to a given skill. We might instead think it is demanded of some people and not others. For instance, while it is perhaps a demand on human beings that they be driven continually to improve in respect to virtue, or on doctors that they be driven continually to improve in medicine, the former is clearly not demanded of non-humans, nor the latter of nondoctors. In that case, Annas would seem better off arguing that the virtuous human being is analogous to the skilled individual who is driven to improve and *of whom that drive is properly demanded*. It will not be my aim in what follows to argue for this particular view, but I do think that the account of good skill-role occupancy that I offer below could suit Annas's purposes well. Before offering that account, however, I turn

19 Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 18n3.

to the second prominent proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood, as it provides a natural entry point to my own.²⁰

1.2. Stichter's Proposal

In his paper "Practical Skill and Practical Wisdom in Virtue," Stichter defends the view which I have called *Virtue as Skill*, thus thinking that virtue is not merely like a skill but is a skill. In defending this view, he concerns himself directly with some of the seven objections I listed in the introduction.²¹ In particular, he focuses on the Capacity/Disposition Objection, the Voluntary Mistakes Objection, and (an objection closely related to) the Action/Production Objection.²² In discussing his proposal for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood, I will focus on his treatment of the Capacity/Disposition Objection. This is the objection that, whereas virtue is a disposition to act well, skill is a mere capacity to do so. The nature of the distinction between dispositions and capacities is a controversial one, but the point of the objection can be understood fairly simply as follows. In saying that virtue is a disposition to act well, what this means is that the virtuous agent by and large *does* act well and hence is sufficiently motivated to act well. That skill is a mere capacity to act well, on the other hand, means that the skilled agent will act well as concerns their skill *when* sufficiently motivated, but that the skilled agent (simply *qua* skilled) need not be sufficiently motivated. Stichter has two separate proposals for responding to this objection. The first, however, runs into a problem similar to the one faced by Annas: he mistakes a condition necessary to *acquire* or *maintain* a skill for a condition *constitutive* of skill.²³ I thus discuss only his second proposal.

According to Stichter, the Capacity/Disposition Objection is the result of our tendency to evaluate *performances* rather than *performers*.²⁴ For whereas performances are evaluable only in terms of standards of performance (i.e., in

20 It is worth noting that Annas ("My Station and Its Duties," following Bradley, *Ethical Studies*) does discuss the importance of roles for virtue *generally*. But she does not connect this idea to the skill analogy in particular.

21 The relevant arguments also appear in Stichter, *The Skillfulness of Virtue*.

22 He discusses a worry akin to the Action/Production Objection in the section titled "Acting for Some Other End," 440.

23 The condition Stichter invokes is a certain quantity and quality of practice. He argues that, given the necessity of proper practice for acquiring and maintaining skill, skill at ϕ -ing requires being disposed to ϕ . Wolff proposes the same in response to much the same objections ("Aspects of Technicity in Heidegger's Early Philosophy," 326). As I have argued above, however, this is insufficient reason to think that such a disposition is constitutive of skill.

24 Wolff again makes a similar point ("Aspects of Technicity in Heidegger's Early Philosophy," 325).

terms of how much skill the performance exhibits), performers, he thinks, are also evaluable in terms of their commitment to the practice concomitant with their skill. So, for instance, he takes it that any individual who is playing tennis is evaluable not only in terms of how well they play but also in terms of their commitment to tennis, and he thinks the same of any individual performing surgery and their commitment to medicine.²⁵ To be committed to a practice, he says, is to be responsive to its distinctive demands, to be motivated to act in accordance with those demands.²⁶ To be skilled at *and* committed to a practice, then, is to be disposed to act well concerning that practice. It is this basis on which he thinks the Capacity/Disposition Objection, as well as the other objections with which he is concerned, miss the mark.

In beginning to evaluate this proposal, we first need to correct for a dialectical oversight—an oversight which is well conveyed in terms of a worry proponents of the Capacity/Disposition Objection are likely to have concerning Stichter's proposal. The worry is that his proposal considers only *performers*, and the Capacity/Disposition Objection takes it for granted that one can be skilled and *not* perform. Skill is, according to that objection, a mere capacity. So if Stichter is to count as responding to the Capacity/Disposition Objection, he also needs to account for skilled nonperformers. He must be willing to say that skilled nonperformers, too, are evaluable in terms of their commitment to the practice concomitant with their skill. I will assume in what follows that he is willing to say that.

Even if we amend the scope of evaluation from “all performers” to “all skilled individuals,” however, Stichter's proposal faces a second problem. For even if all skilled individuals are evaluable in terms of their commitment to the practice concomitant with their skill, that does not entail that they *are* committed. One can be evaluable in terms of commitment to tennis, for instance, but be *negatively* evaluated—hence, assuming accurate evaluation, be *uncommitted* to tennis. The problem, then, is that even if all skilled individuals are evaluable in terms of their commitment to a practice, that does not entail that all skilled individuals will be motivated to act in accordance with the demands of the practice. For out of “commitment” and “lack of commitment,” only the former explains an agent's being positively motivated. So even if all skilled individuals are evaluable in terms of their commitment, Stichter's proposal does not show that all skilled individuals (merely *qua* skilled) are disposed to act well as concerns the practice

25 Stichter does not specify what a practice is, but I take it that practices are domains or fields of activity. I further discuss the notion of a practice in section 2.

26 Stichter, “Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue,” 443.

concomitant with their skill. Thus, it also does not show that skill is analogous to virtue in being a disposition to act well.

Now, as the skill analogy is usually understood, this would make for a failed defense of it. But I will be arguing shortly that it is rather the beginning of a successful defense, once the analogy is properly understood. Stichter, as I understand him, is tacitly committed to the view that the skill analogy relies on a feature of skilled individuals *additional* to their skill itself—namely, *commitment*. And recognizing that, I think, is essential to understanding the analogy correctly.

Before developing this view, however, we need to mention a final difficulty with Stichter's proposal. He is committed to saying that proponents of the Capacity/Disposition Objection have misunderstood the analogy in two ways, but only one of these is an actual misunderstanding. First, he is tacitly committed (as I have just suggested) to saying that whereas the skill analogy is usually thought to concern only the skilled individual's *skill*, it in fact also concerns their *commitment* to a practice. Again, I think that is correct. The remaining difficulty lies in a second purported misunderstanding, which we saw him suggest is the cause of the first: he claims that proponents of the Capacity/Disposition Objection have failed to notice that *all* skilled individuals are evaluable in terms of their commitment to the practice concomitant with their skill, in that they are criticizable if they are not so-committed.²⁷ But this is not true. On its own, possessing a skill does not entail that one is evaluable in terms of one's commitment to the corresponding practice. So this second purported misunderstanding does not constitute an actual misunderstanding.

The examples of skill possession that Stichter offers can tempt us to think otherwise. But that is because his examples happen to concern kinds of skilled individuals who plausibly *are* so-evaluable. He considers, for instance, a skilled emergency room doctor who refuses to perform surgery on a needy patient, saying that such an individual is a bad doctor for lacking commitment to the demands of medicine. He is certainly right; but *being* a doctor is not just a matter of possessing skill at doing doctorly things. Retired doctors, for instance, can possess such skill, but they are generally not evaluable in terms of their commitment to medicine. So it is not merely their skill that makes them so-evaluable.²⁸

27 Stichter, "Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue," 442–43.

28 Russell makes a similar mistake when he says the following: "To say that someone has ... a skill is to say simultaneously that that person is committed to acting for a certain standing goal and that he or she is adept at finding what it would take to realize that goal in concrete circumstances.... [For instance,] to describe someone as a physician is to describe him or her in terms of the standing goal of healing by use of medicine" ("From Personality to Character to Virtue," 100). Again, being a physician is not merely a matter of possessing skill at treating patients.

Similar to Annas, then, Stichter requires a distinction between individuals to whom the demands of a practice apply and those to whom they do not. This is the kind of distinction that I will be developing in what follows, in distinguishing between mere skill possessors and skill-role occupants.

2. SKILLS, SKILL ROLES, AND GOOD SKILL-ROLE OCCUPANTS

That virtue ethics in general is comfortable with the notion of a “role” should be obvious from the importance it sometimes places on “role models.” A key way in which the not-yet-virtuous individual is supposed to become virtuous (learn how to live) is by having and emulating role models (those who are taken to know how to live).²⁹ Even so, if we do not have a firm grasp on what a role is, that would make good sense. Contemporary Western life and society are perhaps less explicitly structured around our roles than they once were.³⁰ Nonetheless, I take it that we do still occupy roles and that we do still have a basic grasp on the notion of a role. We know what it is to be a parent, a citizen, or a carpenter, for instance, also a cobbler, doctor, or tennis player. And as at least some of these roles properly involve skill, we should also have a basic grasp on the notion of a skill role.³¹ In the present section, I aim to make that notion more explicit and to defend my understanding of being a *good* skill-role occupant against an important objection. It is this notion that I take to be essential to a correct understanding of the skill analogy. In section 3, I turn to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to argue that the “practitioners of skill” (τεχνίτες/*technites*) whom he discusses in making positive use of the skill analogy are themselves not mere skill possessors but, rather, much like good occupants of skill roles. In section 4, I then return to the seven objections with which we began.

In the introduction to this paper, I suggested that the distinction between mere skill possession and skill-role occupancy is an intuitive one by reference to the apparent difference between possessing practical skill at making shoes, treating illnesses, or playing tennis, for instance, and being a cobbler, doctor, or tennis player. Roughly, while the former are kinds of practical ability, the latter are recognized *positions* that properly require possession of the concomitant

29 See, e.g., Curzer, “Aristotle and Moral Virtue,” 118; Hill and Cureton, “Kant on Virtue,” 269; Athanassoulis, “Acquiring Aristotelian Virtue,” 422. This suggests (*pace* Hardimon, “Role Obligations,” 334) that “human being” is a role, and that “living” is the practice it concerns.

30 This is a theme in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. See Frede, “The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics,” for a nice summary of MacIntyre’s view here; and see Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, for a more in-depth treatment.

31 I take it that all of the aforementioned roles properly require skill. If one has a more specific notion of “skill,” however, one may wish to think of only some of them as skill-roles.

practical skill.³² In what follows, I want to further unpack this latter notion by reference to three core features of *good* skill-role occupants, in contrast to those of mere skill possessors.

First, in saying that skill roles “properly require” the concomitant practical skill, I mean just that occupants of a given skill role are normatively *expected* to possess the concomitant skill and that they will reliably fulfill their role only if they do possess it. There may be doctors without medical skill and tennis players without tennis skill, for instance, but they will be bad doctors and bad tennis players. If they do succeed in their activities, their doing so will be in an important sense accidental. So, while simply occupying a skill role does not entail possession of the concomitant practical skill, being a *good* occupant of such a role does. Skill possession, then, is the first of the three features of a good skill-role occupant. Perhaps rather obviously, it is the only feature shared with the mere skill possessor.

Next, to occupy a “position” in the sense relevant to occupying a skill role is to serve some function in a practice. This need not mean being employed in an official capacity or having a profession. It simply means having a task to carry out ongoingly, something for which one is responsible in a discipline, domain, or field of activity.³³ It means having a task one *ought* to perform, as an occupant of that role.³⁴ So, since a tennis player’s function (*qua* occupant of that role) is to play tennis, tennis players ought to play tennis; since a doctor’s is to see and treat patients, doctors ought to see and treat patients; and since a cobbler’s is to make shoes, cobblers ought to make shoes.³⁵ And if a role occupant regularly fails to

32 Here I talk about roles as “recognized” because recognized roles are the paradigmatic kind. A full account of roles, however, should leave room for new or at least significantly reconceived roles, which we would not immediately recognize.

33 I intend here to accept Putman’s criticism of MacIntyre’s notion (in *After Virtue*) of a “practice” as being “intellectually biased” (“The Intellectual Bias of Virtue Ethics”). Bricklaying, on my understanding, can be just as much a discipline or field of activity as architecture. One is a bricklayer if one has bricklaying as one’s ongoing task.

34 Some think that there is no obvious connection between functions (nor virtue more specifically) and such normative statuses. If one agrees, one can imagine “demands,” here, as matters of non-deontic evaluability. The crucial point is just that an individual with a function is evaluable in a sense that goes beyond mere measuring. I can measure a nondoctor by the standards of a doctor, but there is an important sense in which that measure is an inappropriate measure for the nondoctor. (See note 45 below on a related point.)

35 MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, 54–57) makes a similar point, following Prior (“The Autonomy of Ethics”). Haugeland (“Truth and Rule-Following”) and Korsgaard (*Self-Constitution*) do as well in discussing what they call “constitutive standards.” It is also worth noting that though roles are “interpretative” in that we can reasonably disagree about their more specific duties (as Hardimon, “Role Obligations,” 336; and Dworkin, *Law’s Empire*, 45, note), I take it that

fulfill their function appropriately—both in appropriate ways and at appropriate times—they are a bad occupant of the relevant role. Occupying such a position, then, and reliably fulfilling it, is the second of three features that sets the good skill-role occupant apart from the mere skill possessor.

Some philosophers, in focusing specifically on “social roles” (such as parent, teacher, doctor), have understood role demands as a kind of moral demand.³⁶ But clearly not all role demands are moral demands. The demand on a tennis player to play tennis, for instance, will in all but the oddest cases not be a moral demand. As a general characterization of role demands, then, this understanding clearly does not work. Rather, since a role is a position within a practice, whose function is a matter of its position in that practice, it is rather more plausible that role demands in general are demands of the practice of which the role is a part. We saw earlier that this is the language Stichter uses in talking of “the demands of the practice” concomitant with an individual’s skill; and it seems like the right language. The demand on a tennis player to play tennis and play in way *w* is a demand of tennis and is a result of their particular position in that practice; the demand on a doctor to do such-and-such for patient *x* with ailment *y* is similarly a demand of medicine; and the demand on a cobbler to make shoes and do so in way *z* is a demand of cobblery. Some of these demands may then *also* be characterized as being of moral concern, but as role occupants are subject to their specific role demands only in virtue of occupying those positions in the practice, the practice will be basic in this respect.

The third and final point that sets good skill-role occupants apart from mere skill possessors follows closely from this. As mere skill possessors have no obligation from within the concomitant practice to ϕ , demands on them to ϕ must come from outside the practice itself. An individual merely skilled at tennis, for instance, may play “to get some exercise” or “to please a friend” or “to blow off some steam,” but they cannot play simply “because they are a tennis player.” Skill-role occupants, on the other hand, not only *can* play for that reason; in some cases, they are evaluable in terms of the extent to which they *do*. The good tennis player, for instance, does not just happen to play tennis; they play because

this does not apply to a role’s most general duties. I will not discuss here what might ground such duties, but on this topic see, e.g., Sciaraffa, “Identification, Meaning, and the Normativity of Social Roles”; and Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation*, 161–67, and “My Station and Its Duties.”

36 Hardimon, e.g., does so (“Role Obligations,” 334). I take it that a social role, in his sense, is a role that is understood as “for the good of society.” This is much narrower than what I am understanding as a role. Though I do not discuss them here, I also allow roles that are detrimental to society, such as “thief.” But even some good roles, such as “tennis player,” are not plausibly social roles in this sense.

they are a tennis player. Tennis is, as we sometimes say, *what they do*—they identify with tennis and are noninstrumentally committed to it and its distinctive demands.³⁷

This final claim about good skill-role occupants requires two clarifications. The first concerns the scope of “the skill-role occupants” said to be good in virtue of their noninstrumental commitment. The claim is merely that for *some* skill roles, one will be a good role occupant in virtue of one’s noninstrumental commitment. It thus allows that there are skill roles for which noninstrumental commitment does *not* make one a good role occupant. This weaker claim is (as I will be arguing in a moment) not only true but is also sufficient for my larger purposes here. In this respect, I am following a similar point we have seen made by Annas. Annas holds that only for some *skills* does possessing that skill require the drive to aspire and hence that virtue will be like skill in respect to the drive to aspire insofar as it is like some skills in that respect. My similar claim is that only for some skill *roles* does being a good skill-role occupant require noninstrumental commitment and hence that being virtuous will be like occupying a skill role well in respect to commitment insofar as it is like occupying some skill roles well in that respect.³⁸

The second clarification concerns the “goodness” attributed to these non-instrumentally committed skill-role occupants. The claim is not that lacking

37 I remain neutral here on whether evaluability in terms of commitment entails a *demand* to ϕ -for-noninstrumental-reasons. I also leave to the side how such reasons for action relate to Kantian “action from duty.” See Baron, “Virtue Ethics, Kantian Ethics, and the ‘One Thought Too Many’ Objection,” for a discussion of virtue and Kantian ethics. For a discussion of Schiller and Hegel’s early thought that such a difference exists between Kantian and specifically ancient Greek ethics, see Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation*, ch. 4. That being a good role occupant is similar to possessing what Korsgaard (*The Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*) calls a “practical identity” will be obvious here—identity and commitment *are* important to being (at least some kinds of) good role occupant. Nonetheless, possessing a practical identity, as Korsgaard understands it, is distinct from being a role occupant, as well as from being a good role occupant. One’s role (unlike one’s practical identity) need not be expressed in what one actually does, and it need not be a description under which one values oneself (Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 101). There are, for instance, bad role occupants—a terrible parent might not identify with their role at all. And, further, even if one does identify with one’s role, and even if the role is expressed in what one actually does, one may still carry it out reliably poorly, which we have seen is incompatible with being a good role occupant.

38 This point can seem to (but does not) revive the view that virtue is analogous to practical skill in respect of commitment, since *some* skilled individuals *are* noninstrumentally committed. As we have seen, however, such commitment is not constitutive of any agent’s practical skill itself. Being noninstrumentally committed, on the other hand, sometimes is constitutive of an agent’s being a good skill-role occupant. Or so I will argue.

noninstrumental commitment necessarily makes one a *bad* occupant of a role. Consider being a good husband.³⁹ Part of what makes a husband a good husband is their being committed to their partner and relationship for its own sake. But a husband who treats their partner well for other reasons is not an absolutely or definitively *bad* husband—presumably such a husband is better than the husband who intentionally treats their partner poorly and so is good at least relative to them. Nonetheless, the instrumentally motivated husband is, all else equal, still bad relative to the noninstrumentally committed husband. The claim here, that the occupants of at least some roles are good in virtue of their noninstrumental commitment, is similar. It is that noninstrumental commitment is a “good-making feature” of occupants of at least some skill roles. So while one might be a relatively good role occupant even without such commitment, the *best* or *ideal* skill-role occupant (again, of at least some skill roles) will be noninstrumentally committed.⁴⁰

The claim that needs defending, then, is that for at least some skill roles, being a good skill-role occupant requires noninstrumental commitment. I will offer two examples to the effect that this claim is true, before attempting a general explanation. If one thinks that “husband” does not denote a skill role—or, alternatively, thinks that that role possesses the relevant feature merely because of its moral dimension—return first to the example of being a good tennis player. I have said that being a good tennis player in the relevant sense requires noninstrumental commitment. Given what we have said, this means that the best or ideal kind of tennis player is noninstrumentally committed to tennis and its distinctive demands, while the less than ideal player has other motivations for playing. In support of this, imagine watching Serena Williams win Wimbledon and then give an interview in which she discusses her motivations. Any of the following, I take it, would impugn her standing as a tennis player: “I don’t care about tennis, I was simply playing for the prize money” or “The only thing that really motivated me was proving to my friends that I could do it” or “I entered the tournament and played like I did just because my coach told me to.” None of these are bad motivations *per se*, but much like the case of the instrumentally committed husband, they show a kind of disrespect for tennis that is, if not definitively bad for a tennis player, at least less than ideal. Someone else who played

39 Again, I am happy thinking of “husband” as denoting a skill-role, but if the reader is not, the example can serve simply as illustrative.

40 Plausibly, one can be instrumentally *and* noninstrumentally committed to something, and it seems that some forms of instrumental commitment do not impugn an agent’s noninstrumental commitment. I will not try here, however, to give an account of *which* instrumental reasons fall on which side of this line.

just as well, just as reliably, but was committed to tennis itself would be better *qua* tennis player.

Or consider being a good artist. The ideal artist, I take it, is noninstrumentally committed to art—in particular, they will be noninstrumentally committed to creating art. They will not merely reliably create good art, however. They will love art; they will be devoted to it and to artistic creation for its own sake. Consider, for instance, Irving Stone's portrayal of Vincent Van Gogh in the novel *Lust for Life*. For the sake of his work, Van Gogh regularly goes without much that he could otherwise have had: nice clothing, high society, and a reliable source of food. Instead, he lives in places and moves in circles that some of his friends consider unsuitable for him, wears clothes they consider unsuitable, and regularly goes without food—spending his money on models to paint, for instance, rather than on these other things. And when mocked by his cousin as “not a real artist,” on the basis that he has not been able to sell any of his work, Van Gogh responds by offering just the conception of the good artist in which we are interested: “When I say I am an artist, I only mean ‘I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart.’” He would certainly be a better artist if he were also making art worth buying, but his commitment to art is part of what constitutes the goodness he does have as an artist.

If one doubts that *any* skill-role occupant is made good by such commitment, one also likely doubts that any role and its related activity are noninstrumentally valuable—that is, one likely doubts that any such thing is *properly* noninstrumentally valued.⁴¹ Such a person would see the value of roles, if at all, only “from the outside,” as extrinsic to them and as merely for the sake of something else. But if at least some skill roles and their related activities are also of intrinsic value, such a doubter will be missing out on something. Indeed, so would a merely instrumentally committed occupant of any of the relevant roles. If artistic creation is intrinsically valuable, for instance, then the artist who does not recognize that and does not create for its own sake would be a less than ideal artist. And the same will be true of a tennis player who does not recognize the value of tennis and engages in it merely instrumentally. As it seems that at least some activities and their associated roles are of intrinsic value, however, being the most excellent skill-role occupant will sometimes require noninstrumental commitment.⁴²

41 I stay neutral here on whether “noninstrumental value” should be given a realist or non-realist reading.

42 My understanding of a role thus diverges from that of Dreyfus (*Being-in-the-World*, 95) and Blattner (*Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*, 83–84), who understand role-talk as looking at an agent's activity only from the outside, as denoting a “mere social status” rather than a “for-the-sake-of-which.” In thinking that role-talk can also look at an agent's activity from the inside, my view is closer to that of Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed*.

To sum up the account defended in this section, then, I have said that skill-role occupants are individuals serving a function in a practice and subject to certain demands of that practice, including the demand to exercise their skill and to exercise it well. And I have said that good skill-role occupants, as concerns at least some skill roles, do so out of noninstrumental commitment. Again, it is this notion of a good skill-role occupant that I believe is the relevant one for the skill analogy, rather than the merely skilled individual. I now want to offer some evidence that a similar notion is at work in Aristotle's positive treatment of the analogy in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In section 4, I then return to the objections with which we began, to show that understanding the skill analogy in terms of good skill-role occupancy allows us to respond to each of them.

3. SKILL ROLES IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Despite our having inherited the skill analogy from the ancient Greeks and others, I do not believe that we are completely beholden to them in understanding it. So, even if they did not understand the analogy in terms of roles rather than mere skills, that would not be conclusive evidence that it should not be understood in those terms. However, the ancients did understand the analogy in similar terms, at least at times. In particular, in drawing the analogy between virtuous and skilled individuals, they very often had in mind more than merely skilled individuals.

In the present section, I argue for this point by reference to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth, "the *Ethics*"). I think that in the *Ethics*, Aristotle in fact makes use of two distinct analogies with skill. However, in drawing *positive* analogies between virtuous and skilled individuals, we often find him using a notion very similar to that of the good skill-role occupant. Here my aim is just to show the core of this positive use and to demarcate both how the notion he invokes goes beyond that of merely skilled individuals but also how it stops short of good skill-role occupants as I have understood them. I will offer some brief reasons to go further than Aristotle does, along the lines of the discussion of the previous section, but the primary aim is just to make our similarities and differences explicit.

In discussing the core of Aristotle's positive use of the analogy, two preliminary points are worth making. First, what we translate as "virtue" (ἀρετή/*aretê*) is a fairly general term in classical Greek meaning "goodness" or "excellence." In the *Ethics*, in particular, the main topic is human excellence, or ethical virtue—which amounts to a human being's "living well" and "acting well" (1095a18–20). But, in the general sense, hammers are just as apt to be virtuous as human beings

are. Hammers of course do not live or act, but they can be excellent nonetheless. Second, as Aristotle understands virtue, the virtue of a thing is essentially related to its function or, in the case of a human being, to its “characteristic activity” (εργον/*ergon*) (1139a17–18). Thus, hammers and human beings are only apt to be called excellent in this sense because they both have a function, some activity or use proper to them. The function of a human being on Aristotle’s account is to live, so our characteristic activity (*qua* human beings) is living (1097b30–1098a5).⁴³ That is why a human being’s being excellent consists in their living *well*.

A key way in which Aristotle introduces these points is by use of an analogy with skilled individuals—in particular, by use of an analogy with what he calls “practitioners of skills” (τεχνίτες, often translated “craftspeople”).⁴⁴ In Book I, for instance, he makes an important connection between *the good* of each:

Just as the good—the doing well—of a flute-player, a sculptor or any practitioner of a skill (τεχνίτη), or generally whatever has some characteristic activity (εργον) or action (πραξις/*praxis*), is thought to lie in its characteristic activity, so the same would seem to be true of a human being (1097b25–28).

Since the good (the doing well) of a human being is the same as their being virtuous, then, Aristotle can be seen here as drawing a connection between the virtuous human being and practitioners of skills on the basis that, like human beings, the latter have characteristic activities. Practitioners of skills, then, as Aristotle understands them, are no mere skill possessors. They are individuals with a function related to their skill, some ongoing task or activity to carry out.⁴⁵ For Aristotle, just as the characteristic activity of a human being is living, so the characteristic activity of a practitioner of a skill is the exercise of their skill—the flute player’s is playing the flute, the sculptor’s is sculpting, “and so on, without qualification” (1098a11). And, further, as the good of anything with a characteristic activity is performing that characteristic activity *well*, a good practitioner of a skill is good in virtue of performing their characteristic activity well (1098a12–17). To

43 I take for granted here that the form of life distinctive of human beings is different from that of other creatures and plants.

44 These tend to be individuals who produce crafted objects, though not always. The lyre player, for instance, also has τέχνη.

45 Again, whether functions should be seen as entailing deontic normative statuses is a point of controversy. Anscombe (“Modern Moral Philosophy”) and Darwall (“Grotius at the Creation of Modern Moral Philosophy”) have argued that “oughts” are out of place in virtue ethics. I disagree. I think it is significant, for instance, that Aristotle says of the “sophisticated gentleman” that he acts as he does “as a sort of law (νόμος/*nomos*) unto himself” (1128a30). A full response to this worry, however, would require its own discussion.

this extent, then, good practitioners of skills are good skill-role occupants, rather than mere skill possessors: like the mere skill possessor, they possess skill, but they also have a function or characteristic activity concomitant with that skill, which they reliably perform well.

Performing one's characteristic activity well, however, involves more than merely performing it and performing it successfully. An assumption of the *Ethics* is that "a good" is anything worth acting for the sake of (1094a). So to say that the good of a thing with a characteristic activity is performing that characteristic activity well means also that such performance is a thing worth aiming at for those who have that characteristic activity. Performing a characteristic activity well, that is, also involves having a certain kind of aim or reason for (and in) exercising one's skill. It involves exercising one's skill, as it were, because that is one's characteristic activity.

The result in the case of a good human being is that they live and act well just for the sake of living and acting well—that is, they do so for its own sake. But as we saw earlier in stating the Action/Production Objection, the result in the case of good practitioners of skills is supposed to be different. Whereas virtuous human beings act well simply for the sake of acting well, those with skills, according to Aristotle, exercise their skills for the sake of what their skills produce—meaning that good practitioners of skills are taken *not* to exercise their skills for their own sake.

Aristotle has two reasons for thinking this. First, he thinks that if any activity has a product, the product is always more valuable than the activity itself—implying that the activity itself is merely instrumentally valuable (1094a4–5). Along these lines, he says, "The products of the skills have their worth within themselves, so it is enough for them to be turned out with a certain quality" (1105a26). Second, however, as Aristotle later qualifies, even such products are not valuable without qualification (1139b1–4). The only thing valuable without qualification is the good life—what he calls the "chief" or "universal" good. All other aims are subordinate to and aim at it (1094a19–23). On Aristotle's account, then, the good practitioner of a skill exercises their skill for what it produces and, ultimately, for the sake of living a good life.

These points mark the main differences between good practitioners of skills, as Aristotle understands them, and good skill-role occupants as I understand them. Whereas good practitioners of skills, on Aristotle's account, do not exercise their skills noninstrumentally, good skill-role occupants of at least some skill roles do. The latter fulfill their function because the concomitant activity is "what they do," which is to be understood as involving finding their activity in-

trinsically valuable. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the only thing intrinsically valuable (valuable without qualification) is the good life.

The worry that Aristotle would have about our notion of good skill-role occupants, then, is much like the one considered in the previous section: that good role occupants need not be (indeed, in a sense, *cannot* be) noninstrumentally committed to their practice. I, of course, want to disagree with Aristotle here as well. By taking up the perspective of the committed role occupant, I think we see that their engagement in their activity is noninstrumental, and at least sometimes properly so. First, the committed role occupant does not engage in their activity as a mere means to some end; the activity is important in itself. It is a proper *part* or deep *aspect* of who they are. And second, though such an individual's engaging in their activity plausibly does contribute to their living well—hence, is instrumental to their living well *in a sense*—it is no mere means to their living well. Their activity as a committed role occupant is a proper *part* of their life, rather than an activity separate from it. Hence, when their activity is of noninstrumental value, their engaging in it is also *part* of their living a good life.⁴⁶

4. RETURN TO THE OBJECTIONS

4.1. *The Aristotelian Objections*

In section 1, I argued that two prominent proposals for how the skill analogy gets misunderstood are incorrect and that at least the second of these proposals depends on the possibility of distinguishing between merely skilled individuals and good skill-role occupants. A skill-role occupant, again, is an individual serving a function in a practice and subject to certain demands of that practice, including the demand to exercise their skill and to exercise it well; and the good skill-role occupant, as concerns at least some skill roles, does so out of noninstrumental commitment. Finally, I have also argued that a similar notion is at work in Aristotle's positive use of the analogy in the *Ethics*. Again, Aristotle stops short of seeing good practitioners of skills exactly as I see good skill-role occupants, but the former still amount to more than mere skill possessors; they have a characteristic activity, which they fulfill reliably and well.

Again, my contention is that the skill analogy is correctly understood as likening the virtuous human being to the good skill-role occupant. Here, I return

46 Swanton relies on a similar difference with Aristotle, implicitly agreeing also that his "practitioners of skills" are to be understood as a kind of role occupant: "The goodness of a role [on Aristotle's account] is determined by reference to its place in the life of a good human being. . . . [But] there is another, non-Aristotelian, possibility. . . . Roles must themselves be worthwhile or valuable" ("Virtue Ethics, Role Ethics, and Business Ethics," 208).

to the seven objections with which we began, to see whether conceiving of the analogy in these terms can account for those objections as promised. Insofar as it can, we have good reason to think that being a virtuous human being is being a good occupant of a skill role. In that case, the skill analogy not only has those points that a comparison with practical skill has to offer but, also, those points offered by a comparison with being a good role occupant. In reconsidering the seven objections, I will simply be talking in terms of “good skill-role occupants,” rather than constantly making the qualification that noninstrumental commitment makes one a good role occupant “for at least *some* skill-roles.” But I will have in mind just those roles for which noninstrumental commitment is a good-making feature.

I begin with the four Aristotelian objections. If the above account has been adequately detailed, we should be able to respond to each objection fairly quickly. The Action/Production Objection has already received a fair amount of attention in the above sections. Again, Aristotle claims that whereas the virtuous person acts well for its own sake, the skilled person exercises their skill for what it produces (1105a28–35, 1140a1–18). To choose an action for what it produces, again, is to perform it instrumentally; whereas to choose it for its own sake is to perform it noninstrumentally.⁴⁷ As I have argued above, however, good skill-role occupants also exercise their skill noninstrumentally; they are characterized by noninstrumental commitment to their practice. Thus, if we understand the skill analogy in terms of good skill-role occupancy, the Action/Production Objection misses the mark.

Next, the Firm Character Objection is the objection that whereas the virtuous person acts from a firm and unchanging character, the skilled individual does not (1105a28–35).⁴⁸ Like the idea of the good of a human being, Aristotle introduces the idea of having a firm and unchanging character (which he sometimes also refers to as “stable” or “unshakeable”) by comparison with good practitioners of skills. He says:

The truly wise and good person, we believe, bears all the fortunes of life with dignity and always does the noblest thing in the circumstances, as a good general does the most strategically appropriate thing with the army at his disposal, and a shoemaker makes the noblest shoe out of the leather

47 “While production has an end distinct from itself, this could not be so with action, since the end here is acting well itself” (1140b6–8).

48 This objection is especially related to the “situationist challenge.” For good discussions of that challenge as concerns the skill analogy, see Lott, “Situationism, Skill, and the Rarity of Virtue”; Russell, “From Personality to Character to Virtue”; Stichter, *The Skillfulness of Virtue*.

he is given, and so on with other practitioners of skills. If this is so, the good person could never become wretched. . . . Nor indeed will he be unstable and changeable. He will not be shifted easily . . . and not by ordinary misfortunes, but by many grave ones (1101a).

To have a firm character, then, is to continue to be disposed to act well even in difficult circumstances, so long as those circumstances stay within reason. The virtuous human being *is* so-disposed. But as Aristotle makes clear in this passage, so are good practitioners of skills. When he makes the Firm Character Objection, then, Aristotle must be relying on a distinct analogy to the one invoked in this passage. As he notes here, good practitioners of skills reliably perform their function well—and the better the practitioner, the more reliable. The good skill-role occupant, then, certainly will as well. For they, too, reliably perform their function well, and they do so in the additional sense that they do so out of noninstrumental commitment.

Next is the Voluntary Mistakes Objection. This is the objection that the individual who makes voluntary mistakes is preferable in the case of skill but not in the case of virtue (1140a21–24)—“preferable” meaning, as Philippa Foot has put it, that voluntary mistakes impugn a person’s virtue but not their skill.⁴⁹ So, for instance, shooting an arrow and intentionally missing the target (when one ought not to) does not impugn one’s skill at archery; but voluntarily *lying* (when one ought not to) does impugn one’s virtue. As we have seen, however, the overall goodness of a skill-role occupant, unlike their skill alone, *is* constituted by their exercising their skill in accordance with the demands of the practice. Being a good role occupant requires not only the ability to do well but, also, a *commitment* to doing well. In competition, for instance, the good archer is able *and* committed to hitting the target. Voluntary mistakes, then, do impugn their status as a good occupant of their role, and the Voluntary Mistakes Objection thus misses the mark.

The last of the Aristotelian objections is the Practical Wisdom Objection, the objection that whereas virtue requires practical wisdom, skill does not. This objection is also stated by Aristotle as that skills are ignorant of the universal good and fail to look for it (1097a5–8), that what conduces to living well as a whole “lies outside the ambit of a skill” (1140a27–31), and that production (and, by implication, skill) is “not concerned with what is good and bad for a human being” (1140b5–6). How can we respond?

True, the good skill-role occupant is not concerned with what is good or bad for a human being *qua* human being. But they *are* concerned with what is good

49 Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 8.

and bad for an occupant of their role—that is, they are concerned with doing well in their role. The good tennis player is concerned with doing well as a tennis player, the good doctor with doing well as a doctor. And, of course, as good occupants of these roles, they also *in fact* do well in them. So, though the universal good (again, taken as a good life) is not their concern *qua* occupant of their role, they do possess a feature analogous to practical wisdom.⁵⁰ They are concerned with what is good and bad for a thing occupying their role and they choose well as concerns such things; and that is all that an analogy with virtue requires. The challenge put forward in the Practical Wisdom Objection, then, is met as well.⁵¹

4.2. The Contemporary Objections

Only the three contemporary objections remain. I begin with the Capacity/Disposition Objection, the objection that whereas skill is a mere capacity to act well, virtue is a disposition to do so. It should be obvious by now that this objection is in fact closely related to at least the Firm Character and Voluntary Mistakes objections, for they too rely on skill's being a mere capacity to act well. As we responded there, we can thus say here that the good skill-role occupant does not merely have the practical ability to act well; such an individual is disposed to and does act well. The good doctor, for instance, does not sit at home all their life. They exercise their skill. They, again, are both skilled at and committed to their practice. So reinterpreting the skill analogy in terms of good skill-role occupancy sidesteps the Capacity/Disposition Objection.

Next is the No-Vice-Analogue Objection, the objection that virtue is dis-analogous to skill because there is no "vice-analogue" for skill. Why is there no vice-analogue for skill? First, we should say what vice is, at least roughly. Whereas virtue is a disposition to act well, vice is a disposition to act badly—either to act instrumentally in accordance with standards of good action or else to act out of accord with those standards altogether. As a disposition to act badly, though, there can be no vice-analogue for skill, because lacking skill is either lacking a capacity altogether or else having a capacity to do something only badly. And neither of these is a positive disposition to act badly.

There is, however, a vice-analogue for the good skill-role occupant. There is the bad skill-role occupant, who is disposed to act poorly. Such an individual is

50 Aristotle, in fact, seems to admit this late in the *Ethics*, when he says that medicine and the other sciences "require some kind of care and practical wisdom" (1180b28). The implication is that there are *kinds* of practical wisdom.

51 Stichter responds similarly in saying that the Practical Wisdom Objection asks that skill be *coextensive* with virtue ("Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue," 446–47). That alone, however, cannot be a *response* to the objection. To be analogous, skill requires an analogous feature. I have argued that the good skill-role occupant possesses such a feature.

the bad doctor, cobbler, or teacher. They, too, are bad either in virtue of acting in accordance with the standards of their practice for the wrong reasons or else in virtue of acting out of accord with those standards altogether. The bad occupant of a skill role, like the vicious human being, is the person who has *learned* to act badly, as the virtuous person and good skill-role occupant have learned to act well (1103b9–10).⁵² Just as the vicious human being is still a human being, so the bad role occupant is still a role occupant; they just occupy the role badly. Thus, understanding the skill analogy in terms of good skill-role occupancy also allows us to avoid the No-Vice-Analogue Objection.

Finally, we have the No-Bad-Ends Objection, the objection that whereas skill can be used for either good or bad ends, virtue can only be used for good ends. The view of virtue implied here is especially contentious, and if it fails, then so does the objection.⁵³ But I will argue that even if the implied view of virtue is correct, the No-Bad-Ends Objection is met by a correct understanding of the skill analogy.

I will take it, again, that the “good end” of virtue implied by the No-Bad-Ends Objection is what we above called “life going well as a whole.” That, at least, is what we must say if we continue to take a roughly Aristotelian line on virtue. The question that the No-Bad-Ends Objection asks of us, then, is “Does the good skill-role occupant (*qua* role occupant) also have *life going well as a whole* as their end?” We can answer here much as we did concerning the Practical Wisdom Objection: no, not every skill-role occupant (*qua* occupant of that role) has life going well as a whole as their aim, but every such occupant does aim at life going well within their role, at doing well by the standards of the practice of which that role is a part. The problem with the No-Bad-Ends Objection, then, as with the Practical Wisdom Objection, is that it asks that goodness in a role *be* ethical virtue. But good skill-role occupants only need an end concomitant with their roles in order to be analogous to the virtuous human being in this respect. And they have such ends. They have the ends of cobblery, medicine, and tennis, for instance. They pursue those ends for their own sake, not for the sake of life going well as a whole. And this leaves ethical virtue and its requisite practical wisdom the jobs often associated with them: that of evaluating and organizing the various *parts* of a life—one’s various roles and projects—into a whole, coherent life.

52 Jacobson tries to use the fact that vice is like skill in this way to argue *against* the skill analogy (“Seeing by Feeling,” 395). Clearly, that attempt is misplaced. Vice *should* fit the skill model (at least in this respect) if the analogy is to be a good one. Annas makes essentially the same point (“Virtue, Skill and Vice”).

53 For arguments to the effect that virtues *can* have bad ends, see, e.g., MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 142; Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 93; and Jacobson, “Seeing by Feeling,” 400.

5. CONCLUSION

I noted earlier that we find it natural to talk of the virtuous human being as a role model. That description should now seem even more apt. We now have good reason to think that being virtuous *is* being a good occupant of a skill-involving role. For in each of the respects with which we have been concerned, good skill-role occupancy is analogous to virtue. As a human being's activity is living, the virtuous human's distinctive skill would be "skill at living"—the know-how they possess, knowledge how to live. But being a good human being, like being many other kinds of good skill-role occupant, plausibly requires more than mere practical skill. It requires a certain kind of noninstrumental commitment to the practice of which one is a part. Being virtuous, in that case, requires not only knowing how to live but also being noninstrumentally committed to life and to living well. I have argued by analogy that such commitment in a role is the main difference between being virtuous and being a mere possessor of a practical skill.

Where does this leave the two traditional versions of the skill analogy with which we began? These were, on the one hand, that virtue *is* a practical skill and, on the other, that virtue is merely *like* practical skills in certain respects. If being virtuous is a way of being a good occupant of a skill-involving role, the stronger of these traditional ways of understanding the analogy is false, while the weaker is true but limited. In that case, while Aristotle was correct that we do well to start thinking of virtue on the model of practical skills, we do better once we grasp the importance of roles as well.⁵⁴

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