

# Situationism, Skill, and the Rarity of Virtue

Micah Lott

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

## 1 What is the Problem with the Rarity of the Virtues?

An important strand of the situationist challenge to Aristotelian virtue ethics rests on the following claim:

Rarity Thesis: On the basis of evidence from psychological research, we are justified in believing that possession of the Aristotelian virtues is very rare.

The Rarity Thesis is sometimes regarded as a problem for virtue ethics, or as an embarrassing implication of claims made by virtue ethicists.<sup>1</sup> However, as many people have pointed out, Aristotle himself holds that the virtues are rare.<sup>2</sup> So the purportedly problematic Rarity Thesis is in fact affirming an Aristotelian claim! This does not show that rarity is no problem for virtue ethics, but it raises the question of exactly what the problem is.

It might be thought that the real trouble for virtue ethics comes from a specifically situationist *reason* for endorsing the Rarity Thesis, which is a different claim:

---

<sup>1</sup> See John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58–60, 110–112; John Doris and Stephen Stich, “As a Matter of Fact: Empirical Perspectives on Ethics” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), see esp. 120–123. Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For the purposes of this essay, I will use “virtue ethics” to refer to broadly Aristotelian virtue ethics.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b20, and 1179b5–19.

---

For helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, I thank Anne Baril, Aaron Cobb, John Hacker-Wright, Christian Miller, and Philip Reed.

---

M. Lott (✉)

Philosophy Department, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA  
e-mail: micahelias@gmail.com

No Global Character Thesis: On the basis of evidence from psychological research, we are justified in believing that (most) people do not have any stable, cross-situationally consistent traits.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Aristotelian virtues are stable, cross-situationally consistent traits, the truth of the No Global Character Thesis implies the truth of the Rarity Thesis. And some philosophers have seen the No Global Character Thesis as a threat to virtue ethics.<sup>4</sup> For virtue ethics supposes that even if virtue is rare, people have consistent character traits that are *evaluative* according to the standards set by the virtues – i.e. traits that are virtues, or vices, or some mix of the two. But if (most) people simply do not have consistent traits, because our psychology just does not “work that way,” then virtue ethics relies on a mistaken understanding of the objects it aspires to evaluate.<sup>5</sup>

However, the No Global Character Thesis has been strongly criticized in recent years. Multiple authors have challenged the interpretations of the empirical studies used to support it.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Daniel Russell, Nancy Snow, and Christian Miller have each authored book-length arguments for the claim that a better understanding of character and situations, together with a proper interpretation of the available empirical evidence, justifies the idea that most people *do* have stable, cross-situationally consistent traits.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, none of these three authors challenges the Rarity Thesis. Rather Russell and Snow leave open the possibility that the virtues are rare, and Miller argues strongly in favor of the claim that neither the virtues nor the vices are widespread. As he says: “My central claim will be that most people have moral character traits, but at the same time they do not have either the traditional virtues, such as honesty or compassion, or the traditional vices, such as cruelty or cowardice. Rather, most people have what I will call “Mixed Character Traits,” with some morally positive features and some morally negative ones too.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Gilbert Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error” (1999) *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315–331; Gilbert Harman, “The Nonexistence of Character Traits” (2000) *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100: 223–226. While Doris argues that most people do not have cross-situationally consistent traits, he allows that *some* people might possess virtues or vices that are cross-situationally consistent.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 239–241, 284.

<sup>5</sup> For a different sort of worry about the No Global Character Thesis, see Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 172–173.

<sup>6</sup> See Gopal Sreenivasan, “Errors About Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution” *Mind* 111:47–68 (2002); Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character” *Ethics* 458–491 (2004); J. Sabini and M. Silver, “Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued” *Ethics* 115:535–562 (2005); Gopal Sreenivasan, “Character and Consistency: Still More Errors” *Mind* 117:603–612 (2008); Gopal Sreenivasan, “The Situationist Critique of Virtue Ethics” in Daniel Russell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 209–314.

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence*; Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Christian Miller, *Moral Character: An Empirical Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Moral Character*, 3.

For the purposes of this paper, I will grant this much of the position that is allowed by Snow and Russell, and explicitly endorsed by Miller – that the No Global Character Thesis is false, but the Rarity Thesis is true. My question is: *does the rarity of the virtues pose any problem for Aristotelian virtue ethics?* If by “problem” we mean a practical task, then the rarity of virtue does pose a problem, insofar as virtue ethicists have as their ultimate goal not just theoretical understanding but becoming virtuous people and helping others to do the same. But like the Rarity Thesis, this kind of practical task is itself *part* of the traditional outlook of virtue ethics.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in one passage where Aristotle posits the rarity of virtue, the larger topic is how people might become more virtuous or act in accordance with virtue.<sup>10</sup> My concern, then, is whether the rarity of the virtues poses a *theoretical* problem for virtue ethics, not just a practical task that Aristotelians can embrace while leaving their theory more-or-less intact. Does the Rarity Thesis itself – apart from the No Global Character Thesis – require revision in the key claims or fundamental concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics?

Some authors claim that it does. John Doris and Stephen Stich argue that a virtue ethics that embraces rarity must lose its main “competitive advantage” over other moral theories, which is the promise of a moral psychology with “more psychological realism and texture.”<sup>11</sup> Doris and Stich also argue that rarity leaves little role for virtue in a program of moral education, which is an unhappy result for virtue ethics. And in his recent book *Character as Moral Fiction*, Mark Alfano describes the Rarity Thesis as an unsatisfying “dodge” made by virtue ethicists, in response to troubling data from psychology. According to Alfano, accepting rarity requires sacrificing three components of the “hard core” of virtue ethics: egalitarianism, explanatory power, and predictive power.<sup>12</sup>

In the final section of this paper, I consider these criticisms, and I show why they are misguided. In order to do this, I first consider a series of parallels between our evaluations of virtue and our evaluations of *skill*, or craft. These parallels provide useful conceptual materials for assessing the significance of rarity for virtue ethics, and for demonstrating that rarity, as such, poses no (theoretical) problems for virtue ethics.

The similarities between virtue and skill were important to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and recently a number of writers have argued that contemporary virtue ethics should take these similarities more seriously.<sup>13</sup> This

<sup>9</sup> On the practical character of Aristotle’s ethics, see *NE* I.1–4 and X.9.

<sup>10</sup> *NE* X.9. See esp. 1179b5–19.

<sup>11</sup> Doris and Stich, “As a Matter of Fact,” 122.

<sup>12</sup> Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*, 62–64.

<sup>13</sup> One of the most prominent recent explorations of skill and virtue is Julia Annas’ book *Intelligent Virtue*. Urging us to take more seriously the analogies between virtue and skill, Annas argues that both skills and virtues must be learned, and that both involve a “drive to aspire” that separates them from mere routine behavior. This drive to aspire incorporates three features that skill and virtue have in common: 1) understanding, 2) self-direction, and 3) improvement. While Annas notes the potential relevance of the skill-analogy for situationist challenges to virtue ethics, she does not directly address the Rarity Thesis or worries particular to it. For other recent attempts to understand virtue by drawing on the nature of skills, see Jason D. Swartwood, “Wisdom as an Expert Skill” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16:511–528 (2013); Matt Stichter, “Virtues, Skill, and Right Action” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14:73–86 (2010).

paper, then, is both a contribution to the growing discussion of virtue's relation to skill, and an attempt to show how that discussion can fruitfully inform the continuing debate about character, situations, and empirical psychology.

## 2 Evaluations of Skill and Evaluations of Virtue

### 2.1 Virtue, Skill, and Practical Knowledge

For the purposes of this paper, I take Aristotelian virtue ethics to endorse the following set of claims about virtue: To be a moral virtue, a character trait must be governed by the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). *Phronesis* is practical knowledge of the good for a human being. The overall virtuous person – the *phronimos* – knows how to live well *qua* human being.<sup>14</sup> Individual moral virtues are distinguished by a characteristic pattern of response to a kind of consideration, or reason.<sup>15</sup> For instance, courage is marked by a response of boldness in the face of dangerous things, and justice requires recognizing and respecting the rights of others. A person who possesses courage, justice, etc., knows how to live well with respect to the considerations relevant to those virtues.

Like the virtuous person, a skilled person has a kind of practical knowledge. However, what defines this knowledge is different. Whereas the virtuous person knows how to live and act well *qua* human being, the skilled person knows how to bring about some particular product or change, the achievement of which is the characteristic goal of her activity *qua* skilled person – e.g. the potter's pots, the singer's song. Moreover, the virtues necessarily engage the will in a way that skills do not. I may have acquired great ability as a carpenter, but no longer wish to

---

Footnote 13 continued

There is, of course, considerable debate about the best way to understand skill, and the closely related idea of knowing how to do something. See, e.g., H.L. Dreyfus and S.E. Dreyfus, *Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* (New York: Free Press, 1986); H.L. Dreyfus, "How Far is Distance Learning from Education?" in E. Selinger and R.P. Crease (eds.) *The Philosophy of Expertise*, 196–212 (Columbia University Press, 2006); John Bengson and Marc A. Moffett (eds.) *Knowing How: Essays on Knowledge, Mind, and Action* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jason Stanley, *Knowing How* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011). The parallels between virtue and skill that are central to my argument to do not require me to take a stand in debates about the precise character of skill-knowledge, including the relation between knowing-how and knowing-that.

<sup>14</sup> There are, of course, serious difference among Aristotelians about how best to understand *phronesis*. My arguments in this paper are consistent with a range of view on this issue, and hence I will not attempt to decide among them. For a sample of positions on *phronesis* in Aristotle, see Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle*, chapter four (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard Kraut, "In Defense of the Grand End" *Ethics* (1993) 103:2 (361–374); Alasdair MacIntyre, "Rival Aristotles: Aristotle Against Some Renaissance Aristotelians" and "Rival Aristotles: Aristotle Against Some Modern Aristotelians" in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Vol 2* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 3–40; John McDowell, part I of *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle does not say this explicitly, but it seems to be implied by his treatment of the virtues, or at the very least consistent with it. And the basic idea has been endorsed my a number of contemporary virtue ethicists. See, e.g., Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* chapter 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* 12–13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

exercise the skill of carpentry. But it is impossible to possess a virtue while being similarly indifferent to its exercise. And related to this is a point about voluntary error, noted by Aristotle and reformulated by Philippa Foot:

If we think, for instance, of someone who deliberately makes a spelling mistake (perhaps when writing on the blackboard in order to explain this particular point) we see that this does not in any way count against his skill as a speller: ‘I did it deliberately’ rebuts an accusation of this kind. And what we can say without running into any difficulties is that there is no comparable rebuttal in the case of an accusation relating to lack of virtue. If a man acts unjustly or uncharitably, or in a cowardly or intemperate manner, ‘I did it deliberately’ cannot on any interpretation lead to exculpation.<sup>16</sup>

However, in spite of these and other differences, important similarities remain between virtue and skill, rooted in the fact that both virtuous and skillful activity are exercises of practical knowledge. For example, consider the skill of a baseball shortstop. Possessing skill as a shortstop means that you have practical knowledge of how to be a shortstop – you know how to do the things that a shortstop does.<sup>17</sup> You might be an *excellent* shortstop, which means that you know how to do *well* the things that a shortstop does. Or you might be a *bad* shortstop, which means that you are unable to those things well; *qua* shortstop, you act badly. Or you might fall somewhere in between. Let us call an excellent shortstop an “All-Star,” and a bad shortstop a “Bush-Leaguer.”

The All-Star, the Bush-Leaguer, and the shortstops in between all have the same skill, and that skill is a kind of practical knowledge: they all know how to play shortstop. Indeed, a person merits the identity shortstop only because he or she possesses the relevant skill-knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Thus everyone who *is* a shortstop has practical knowledge of how to play shortstop, at least to some extent. From the very best to the very worst, all shortstops stand on the same continuum of skill-knowledge. What defines and calibrates this continuum is “the shortstop” – a conception of proper shortstop activity that includes the actions, attitudes, and practical responses definitive of the model, non-defective exercise of the skill.<sup>19</sup> Those shortstops who are near the top of the continuum possess the skill in an especially perfected way, and they know how to play very well as shortstops. These we call All-Stars. At the bottom end of the continuum are those who possess the

<sup>16</sup> Philippa Foot, “Virtues and Vices” 8, in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). For the passage in Aristotle, see *NE* VI.5 (1140b). For more on the distinction between skill and virtue, see Russell, *Practical Intelligence*, 16–18.

<sup>17</sup> In speaking about what “a shortstop does,” we are not referring to any *particular* shortstop, but to a conception of the skill itself. We might also speak about what is true of “the shortstop,” analogous to claims about “the dolphin” in natural-historical judgments about a life-form. For an account of life-form judgments, see Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> I speak here about “being a shortstop” in the sense relevant to the *skill*. One might have the identity in a different sense – e.g. a person totally ignorant of baseball might be put onto the roster as a political protest, but that would not make him a shortstop in the sense of identity relevant to the skill.

<sup>19</sup> I have taken helpful term “calibrates” from Daniel Russell’s excellent discussion of “the virtuous person” in chapter 4 of *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*.

skill in an especially limited way and only know how to play poorly as shortstops. These we call Bush-Leaguers.

While existing on the same continuum of skill-knowledge, we might also say that All-Stars and Bush-Leaguers know different things, since the All-Stars knows things such as “how to throw reliably to first base” or “how to turn a fast double play,” and it is precisely such knowledge that Bush-Leaguers lack. There is nothing wrong, I think, in saying that All-Stars know something Bush-Leaguers do not. However, the important thing to notice is that in identifying such additional knowledge, we are simply spelling out of the belongs to “the shortstop.” For there is no difference between doing the things that “the shortstop” does and doing things *well* and *correctly* as a shortstop. Likewise, there is no difference between the skill-knowledge that belongs to “the shortstop,” and skill-knowledge of how to play well and correctly as a short-stop. Thus the excellence of an All-Star – which involves additional skill-knowledge – should not be conceived as a property that is identifiable *apart from* shortstop skill and then added “on top of” normal shortstopping, and that enables one to play well. In this way, being “excellent” in a skill is unlike being “red.” A red shortstop, a red carpenter, and a red potter all have the same property – redness – and that property is identifiable apart from the skill that defines them *qua* skilled person. But the same is not true of the excellent shortstop, the excellent carpenter, and the excellent potter. For in each of these cases, what *counts as* excellent is different, and its content is defined by their respective skills.

At the same time, any amount of skill-knowledge of how to play shortstop – insofar as it *is* skill-knowledge – is knowledge of how to play *well* as a shortstop. And this helps to explain why even non-All-Stars are able to get a lot of things right as shortstops – e.g., standing in the right place when batting or fielding, fielding ground balls and throwing to first base, running the bases in the right order, etc. For to the extent that even non-All-Stars *are* shortstops, they must possess some skill-knowledge. And the very thing that qualifies someone for the identify of shortstop – possession of the relevant skill-knowledge – enables one to act well *qua* shortstop. All-Stars possess the same skill as the Bush-Leaguers and the middling players, but in All-Stars the skill is present in a more complete way, as defined by “the shortstop.” At the extreme end of limited skill, a person will no longer possess sufficient knowledge of how to play shortstop to merit the identity “shortstop.”

Returning to the virtues, we can see parallels between skill and virtue as types of practical knowledge. Analogous to “the shortstop” is “the virtuous person,” who defines and calibrates the continuum of practical knowledge of how to live well *qua* human being. The *phronimos* is analogous to the All-Star: the overall virtuous person knows how to act well *qua* human being, just as All-Stars know how to act well *qua* shortstops. And just as the Bush-Leaguer and the All-Star are engaged in the same activity, so the non-virtuous are engaged in the same activity as the virtuous – the activity of living and acting *qua* human beings. Indeed, to the extent that they know how to live as human beings, the non-virtuous have knowledge along the same continuum as the virtuous. The virtuous, however, have this knowledge in a more complete, more perfected way. (Thus it is not surprising that even the non-

virtuous can know a lot of things about how to live as human beings, just as non-All Stars know quite a lot about how to play shortstop.)

Of course, skilled activity can typically be evaluated within many sub-activities, in addition to evaluations of overall excellence. For a shortstop, sub-activities include things like batting, fielding, and base-running, and these sub-activities can be broken down even further. Moreover, each sub-activity can be evaluated along different dimensions. For instance, a shortstop might throw quickly but without precision, or vice versa. We can use or invent classificatory terms for states of excellence and defect with respect to a sub-activity. We might call an excellent fielder a “Gold-glover” and a very bad fielder a “Butterfingers.” Analogously, particular virtues like modesty or generosity describe excellence with respect to particular considerations within the overall, unifying activity of living a human life. I explore this further in the next section.

## 2.2 Skilled and Virtuous Activity: Description, Evaluation, and Explanation

In the last section, we saw how evaluations of both skill and virtue can be seen as placing individuals along a continuum of practical knowledge. The standard for the evaluation of skilled individuals is the model, or ideal, skilled person, who possesses perfected skill-knowledge. To judge how well Lee is acting *qua* carpenter, we measure Lee according to “the carpenter.” This is neither a particular craftsman nor a statistical summary of actual carpenters (who may in fact be largely defective in skill) but a conception of the skill of carpentry itself. In the same way, “the virtuous person” is a standard for acting well *qua* human being, and a conception of the virtuous person is not a statistical summary of human beings but an account of the well-lived human life.

Terms like “Master Carpenter” or “All-Star” imply that a person has crossed some threshold of excellence in the skill, approaching the activity of “the carpenter” or “the shortstop.” These terms do not imply that a person’s skill is perfect in every (or any) way. Similarly, ascriptions of a particular virtue (or overall virtue) imply that the person is above some threshold for excellence in some domain of character (or overall). And a vice term implies falling below some threshold for defect. But it is not necessary to be perfect in a given domain, or perfect overall, to count as just or charitable or generous. And it is certainly not necessary to be “perfectly vicious” to count as unjust, uncharitable, etc.

In describing particular instances of skillful activity, we often do not use terms like “All-Star” or “Gold-glover.” Rather we simply refer to the perceptions and purposes of the agents. We say that DiMaggio didn’t swing because he saw the pitch was far outside, or that Pete the potter added water in order to make the clay malleable. Moreover, our descriptions of skillful activity often convey the *manner* in which something was done – e.g. the carpenter worked with steady hands, Tyson pounded his opponent. Typically, such descriptions are also evaluative. Sometimes the evaluation is explicit, as when a piano teacher tells her student “You’re hitting the keys too softly.” Other times the evaluation is implicit but clear from the context – e.g. “running slowly” is almost always a negative description of a sprinter.

Likewise, we often do not use virtue terms to explain particular actions, referring instead simply to the agent's perceptions and purposes. When we do employ virtue and vice terms to characterize actions – e.g. “it was unkind of her to speak to harshly to him” – the primary point is to evaluate the manner in which something is done, with a specific focus on the agent's reasons and motivations.<sup>20</sup> As noted earlier, the virtues are distinguished by their characteristic responses to certain kinds of reasons. Thus to say that a person acted kindly (or unkindly) is both to describe and evaluate the action. For it implies both that the person acted (or failed to act) for reasons characteristic of kindness, and that she responded properly (or improperly) to the relevant reasons in the situation. Often our evaluative descriptions imply evaluation according to the standard of the virtues, even when no virtue terms are used – e.g. “she spoke too harshly to him” implies (or at least strongly suggests) that she spoke unkindly.

In the case of skill, we commonly refer to the general way that a skilled person does things. We not only say things like “Lee is sawing that board with precision,” referring to a particular act of carpentry, but “Lee saws boards with precision,” referring to his characteristic way of sawing. We thus shift our focus from particular acts to a *pattern* in Lee's activity. And behind that pattern is Lee's skill *qua* carpenter that explains his characteristic way of doing things: “Lee is a skilled sawyer.” By explaining a skilled agent's actions in terms of her skill – i.e. her capacity as a skilled person – we make clear that what she does is not the result of luck or chance.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the idea of ethically evaluable character traits – whether virtues, vices, or “mixed” – allows for (at least partial) explanation of an action in terms of a pattern of activity and an underlying disposition within the agent. In saying that Ben kept his promise *because* of his fidelity, we express the idea that Ben kept *this* promise for certain reasons (= those characteristic of fidelity) and that his doing so is to be explained by his trait of fidelity, rather than viewed as a one-time event, or something out of keeping with his usual pattern of activity. And to the extent that we regard fidelity as a virtue, we also express the judgment that Ben acted *well* in keeping his promise because of his fidelity.

Explanations of actions in terms of either skill or virtue do not compete with but rather *presuppose* explanations in terms of an agent's particular perceptions and purposes. If I say that Lee saws a particular board well *because* he is an excellent

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics,” 477–479.

<sup>21</sup> For example, suppose I am watching Robin doing what I know to be a characteristically precise bit of sawing, when a friend walks up who mistakenly believes that Robin has no knowledge of carpentry. If the friend exclaims with surprise, “How is she doing that!” then I might explain “She is a skilled sawyer” to affirm that this particular bit of sawing is not the result of luck but Robin's skill. Such explicit appeals to skill to explain particular actions might be fairly rare. What is ubiquitous, however, is our implicit understanding that a person is, or is not, acting from skill or capable of doing so. If we hire a plumber or watch the Olympics, we assume that certain persons will be acting from skill. And our predictions about these people will correspond to this assumption. We expect that the plumber will be able properly fix the sink properly, and that the gymnasts will twist and turn brilliantly, and that they will all do these things *because* of their respective skills.

Of course, a characteristic way of acting might also imply a defect in one's skill – e.g. “He swings at pitches that are far too outside.” Identifying such characteristic deficiencies, as opposed to one-time errors, is important for knowing how to improve one's skill and what sort of practice to emphasize.

carpenter, this is consistent with saying that he saws this board in this way because he recognizes features in the grain of the wood, or in order to make the board ten feet long. Indeed, unless we had some understanding of Lee's perceptions and purposes, we could not be confident that his action was an expression of his skill. For his action expresses skill, and can be explained in terms of his skill, only if the action instantiates the sort of sensitivity and response characteristic of the skill of carpentry. Likewise, if we say that Drew helps his roommate *because* Drew is charitable, this is consistent with saying that Drew helps his roommate because he recognizes both his roommate's need and his own (Drew's) ability to meet that need. And if some such explanation was *not* available, we would have no basis to assert that Drew acted from charity. For the virtue of charity is (partly) defined by a disposition to engage in such kinds of practical reasoning, and without an instance of the relevant kind of practical reasoning, we would have no basis to assert an instance of charity.

Importantly, a model conception of a skill is not only a standard of evaluation for skilled persons, but also a *target* for learners and practitioners of the skill. The norms embodied in a model conception are norms that the skilled person recognizes as norms *for her* – as norms that ought to govern her action. Thus she seeks to bring her own activity *qua* skilled person into line with the model. And to the extent that she cannot do this, or decides not to attempt it, she must recognize her own activity *qua* skilled person as limited and less than perfect. This is perhaps easiest to see in the case of the learner. The learner acquires an (evolving) understanding of what the skill consists in – of what is true of “the shortstop” or “the carpenter” or “the guitarist.” And through teaching and practice, the learner tries to shape herself to *become like* that conception. The learner measures her progress (or lack of progress) in relation to the model conception, and she seeks to close the distance between her own level of skill and the model. In fact, even for the expert the model conception remains a goal of her craft activity, insofar as she sees her own activity as answerable to the norms of the model, and she strives to maintain or improve her level of skill in relation to the model.<sup>22</sup>

In this respect, practitioners of a skill differ from the “mere critic” who evaluates but is not a practitioner. The mere critic of carpentry must employ a conception of carpentry in judging the skilled activity of others. But as mere critic she does not have “the carpenter” as a target at which she aims to conform her own activity. And the mere critic (correctly) does not see her activity as lacking or deficient if she does not do the things the carpenter does. *Her* activity is not answerable to the model conception in the way that the activity of the practitioner *qua* practitioner is.

In the same way, the characteristic patterns of the virtues are not only standards but targets as well. If I am learning to be virtuous, or aspiring to improve, then the characteristic patterns of the virtues are norms *for me* and I hold myself to them (to the extent that I grasp them correctly). Thus I strive to bring my own activity in line with the virtues, and to become the kind of person who acts virtuously and *from*

<sup>22</sup> My point is not to explain the process of learning a skill, but to highlight certain aspects of it. And, I should add, a *conception* of a skill is certainly not fixed for all times, but is subject to dispute, revision, and innovation.

*virtue* – i.e. from virtuous dispositions. To the extent that I cannot do this, or decide that I should not attempt to do so, I must recognize myself as falling short.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, a conception of the virtues is a norm that *engages the will* of the learner or aspirant to virtue. For it articulates an ideal for activity in which I am engaged – living a human life.

### 3 Why Rarity is Not a (Theoretical) Problem for Virtue Ethics

#### 3.1 Doris and Stich

Keeping in mind these parallels between skills and virtues, we are now in a position to see why the Rarity Thesis poses no (theoretical) problem for virtue ethics. To begin, consider a case in which, for a given skill, we find very few practitioners who are sufficiently excellent to be described as masters or virtuosos. This widespread lack of skill-knowledge could have a number of causes – e.g. a sharp decline in the quality of musical education due to economic distress, or a mad scientist’s program to exterminate carpenters. But such a lack does not, on its own, reveal a problem in our *conception* of the “the violinist” or “the carpenter” or whatever skill we are considering. Nor does it undermine the legitimacy of evaluating individual bearers of the skill according to that conception. On the contrary, that model conception is what gives meaning to the very evaluation that there are no masters or virtuosos to be found. In the same way, if it turns out that few or none of the population crosses the threshold of excellence for *virtue*, this does not, on its own, pose a problem for evaluating people according to “the virtuous person.”<sup>24</sup>

What, then, about the problems that rarity is thought to pose? Doris and Stich argue that if the Rarity Thesis is true, then virtue ethics will lose one of its chief attractions and its main competitive advantage over other theories, which is “the promise of a lifelike moral psychology – a less wooden depiction of moral affect, cognition, motivation, and education than that offered by competing approaches such as Kantianism and utilitarianism.”<sup>25</sup> Their thought, I take it, is that virtue ethicists encourage us to focus our attention on rich, textured descriptions of the

<sup>23</sup> See Russell, *Practical Intelligence*, 123–130, for helpful discussion of the point that having an ideal as one’s goal is not the same as, and does not require, striving to be as much like the ideal as possible.

<sup>24</sup> I have said that a widespread lack of skill-knowledge does not *on its own* reveal a problem in our conception of a skill. But matters are slightly more complicated. For in some cases, the best *explanation* of rarity is that the supposed “skill” is actually impossible for human beings, and thus we have reason to reject the claim that it is a genuine skill. Consider the rarity of the “skill” of telekinesis. The best explanation of this rarity is that telekinesis is impossible for human beings, and hence it cannot be taught or learned. There is simply no skill-knowledge to be acquired in this case; telekinesis is not an actual skill. Analogously, if the rarity of the virtues is best explained by the *impossibility* of acquiring virtue, this would spell trouble for the Aristotelian account of practical wisdom and moral virtue. But the claim that acquiring virtue is impossible is much stronger than the Rarity Thesis, and hence goes beyond the focus of this paper. Moreover, I take it that the best interpretation of the empirical evidence does not support the conclusion that pursuing virtue is as misguided as attempting to learn telekinesis. On this point, see Miller *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). I thank an anonymous reviewer for *The Journal of Value Inquiry* for encouraging me to consider this point.

<sup>25</sup> Doris and Stich, “As a Matter of Fact,” 122.

psychology of the virtuous person. But if few people have the virtues, then these textured descriptions are not relevant to real life; they apply only to idealized agents, not flesh-and-blood human beings.

What would an analogous complaint look like in the case of skill? A theory of “the shortstop” will describe the thoughts, feelings, and actions of an excellent shortstop. These descriptions can be highly “lifelike” with much “realism and texture.” (Imagine all the advice a coach might give a shortstop about how to think/feel/act in various situations.) Suppose, then, that we go out looking for shortstops, and all we can find are Bush-Leaguers and no All-Stars. This would not reveal the irrelevance or “empirical inadequacy” of our descriptions of “the shortstop.” While these descriptions are *not true* of the actual shortstops we find, in the sense that they fall short of the model, these descriptions are no less *relevant* to them as the criteria for evaluation. We judge the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the Bush-Leaguers and middling players according to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of “the shortstop.” Moreover, a full theory of shortstops will have something to say about *everything* in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a person *qua* shortstop – whether it be good, bad, or neutral. Thus *anything* we encounter in the activity of an individual flesh-and-blood shortstop will be *evaluable* according to the descriptions contained in our theory of the excellent shortstop.

And the same is true of our conception of the virtuous person. Everything we find in flesh-and-blood human being will be *evaluable* according to our account of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the virtuous person. The standard of the virtues is relevant and applicable just as much when people fall far below that standard as when they come close to satisfying it. And there is not a loss of “realism” or “texture” in our *theory* of the virtues if individuals turn out one way rather than another – i.e. if most people are virtuous, or vicious, or neither. For they can be virtuous or vicious or neither in highly realistic and textured ways. The complaint of Doris and Stich appears to rest on a confusion between an account of the virtues being *true* of a person and it being *relevant* to our description and evaluation of the person. Virtue ethics holds the latter, not the former.<sup>26</sup>

Doris and Stich also claim that if we accept rarity, this raises a problem for the place of the virtues in moral education:

[I]f virtue is *expected* to be rare, it is not obvious what role virtue theory could have in a (generally applicable) programme of moral education. This rings a bit odd, given that moral education – construed as aiming for the development of the good character necessary for a good life – has traditionally been a distinctive emphasis in writing on virtue, from Aristotle (1984: 1099b9–32, 1103b3–26) to Bennett (1993:11–16; cf. Williams 1985:10).

This remark is puzzling. On the one hand, in recognizing that virtue is rare, the virtue ethicist is not arguing that virtue will be rare *no matter what we do* – no matter what social conditions are in place, no matter what sort of upbringing we receive, no matter what our individual efforts. That virtue is now rare is consistent

<sup>26</sup> What I say here is consistent, I believe, with much of Sreenivasan, “The Situationist Critique” (2013), esp. 295–313, although Sreenivasan does not explore any analogies between virtue and skill.

with holding that it might be otherwise. So given the fact of rarity, the suggestion of the virtue ethicist will be that we attempt to discover and implement the kinds of social arrangements, upbringings, and individual efforts that foster the virtues. On the other hand, the *role* that virtue theory will have in such a program is to help us articulate the *target* at which our program of education ought to aim. Moreover, articulating our target includes criticizing received understandings of what the target should be, and hence our articulation need not be a conservative enterprise. And throughout any program of education, that target should guide our understanding of how well we are progressing, and exactly how and why we are succeeding or failing with respect to virtue.

Consider again the analogy with skill. Suppose I am working to become an excellent potter, and you tell me that of all the people who possess the skill of pottery only a few are excellent. I will not thereby become confused about the relevance of “the potter” for my learning process. A conception of excellent pottery guides my actions as the goal at which I aim, and it serves as a standard for understanding how I need to improve to reach that goal. Moreover, if I remain committed to my goal, then I will want to invest time in learning and implementing the best strategies for becoming an excellent potter, and I will approach pottery with a care and persistence that I would not bring to a goal I assumed to be easily achievable. Similarly, if I aim to become virtuous, or to help my children become virtuous, then learning that virtue is rare ought to inspire me to invest time in learning and implementing the best strategies for fostering virtue in oneself and others. Indeed, the same psychological studies that suggest the rarity of the virtues might be helpful for understanding how best to avoid vicious actions and attitudes, and how to cultivate virtue.<sup>27</sup>

But might the rarity of virtue undermine (some) people’s *motivation* to become virtuous? Suppose I am aspiring to be a concert pianist, and I realize how rare it is for someone to become a truly great pianist. I might then become discouraged, lose my desire to practice, and decide to focus my energies on a goal I am more likely to achieve. Could not the same thing happen with our aspirations to virtue, given its rarity?<sup>28</sup>

Of course, the issue of our motivation(s) to be virtuous is a deep and difficult one, and I cannot address it in detail here. But it is at least possible to identify some of the reasons that virtue ethicists might offer to show that giving up on the pursuit of virtue would be a mistake. For there are three dis-analogies between virtue and skill that are relevant at this point. First, virtue is essential for living well in a way that any particular skill, such as piano-playing or pottery, is not. Virtue makes one good *qua* human being. A vicious or less-than-virtuous individual thereby *lacks* something that is proper to her *qua* human being. But the same is not true for a given skill: if it happens that I am not a carpenter or a pianist or a potter, I am not *thereby* a defective human being! Thus it can make sense for a person to change course and pursue a different skill – e.g. swapping out piano for pottery or physics.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion, see Christian Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, esp. part four. See also Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 31–38.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to John Hacker-Wright for encouraging me to consider this point.

But one cannot drop the pursuit of virtue for something else without thereby facing the different (and deeper) loss of some goodness *qua* human being. Second, achieving excellence in a skill may require some special talent, not available to normal human beings – e.g. exceptional eye-hand coordination, or perfect pitch. Thus attaining excellence in a given skill might be difficult, even impossible, for those who do not possess special talent. Therefore those without the necessary talent might be well-advised to pursue different skills. However, the virtues do not require special talents like exceptional eye-hand coordination or perfect pitch, and hence it would be a misleading to think of them as something available only to the lucky few with exceptional natural gifts. Third, and perhaps most important, virtuous activity possesses a worth and nobility that is distinct from skillful activity. This makes virtue worthy of pursuit in a special and irreplaceable way, and gives us reason not to abandon the pursuit of virtue, even if we are realistic about how difficult it is to achieve this goal.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 Mark Alfano

According to Mark Alfano, the Rarity Thesis is incompatible with three claims that belong to the core of virtue ethics.<sup>30</sup> Two of these claims are closely related, and I will consider them first. “Explanatory power” is the claim that “If someone possesses a virtue, then reference to that virtue will sometimes help to explain her behavior.”<sup>31</sup> “Predictive power” is the claim that “If someone possesses a high-fidelity virtue, then reference to that virtue will enable nearly certain predictions of her behavior; if someone possesses a low-fidelity virtue, then reference to that virtue will enable weak predictions of her behavior.”<sup>32</sup> However, if most people lack the virtues, then “the virtues are loose cogs in our motivational machinery, reliably licensing neither the explanation nor the prediction of behavior.”<sup>33</sup>

If virtue ethicists wish to maintain the Rarity Thesis, they can respond to Alfano’s worry in one of two ways: Either deny that rarity is actually incompatible with these aspects of the core of virtue ethics, or admit incompatibility but reject Alfano’s account of the core worth defending. Oddly, Alfano does not identify an actual conflict between the Rarity Thesis and his *own* articulation of the core of virtue ethics. For Alfano’s claims about explanation and prediction are *conditional*

<sup>29</sup> Of course, each of these three points invites a host of further questions – e.g. why should I care about being good *qua* human being? In what does the “moral worth” of virtuous activity consist? These are questions far beyond the scope of this paper. My goal is only to sketch some lines of reply available to Aristotelian virtue ethics, in response to the worry about a loss of motivation to pursue virtue, in light of rarity.

<sup>30</sup> To be clear, Alfano considers much besides the Rarity Thesis in spelling out empirical challenges to virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. This section is not intended as a systematic evaluation of Alfano’s position, but a specific response to his claims about the rarity of virtue.

<sup>31</sup> Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Alfano’s distinction between “high-fidelity” and “low-fidelity” virtues is related to the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Examples of high-fidelity virtues include fairness, fidelity, honesty. Examples of low-fidelity virtues include charity, diligence, and generosity (31–32).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

*claims* about what is true *if* a person possesses a virtue. Those claims are fully consistent with the position that most of us lack the virtues, and hence the virtues will not explain or predict much in *our* motivation machinery.

However, perhaps we can preserve the spirit of Alfano's idea and formulate a new claim: "If appeal to the virtues serves to explain and predict behavior for only a small number of people, then the concept of virtue is relatively unimportant for explaining and predicting human behavior, and *that* is a problem for virtue ethics." How should virtue ethicists respond? Consider the most straightforward kinds of explanation and prediction involving the virtues, such as "She did X because she is generous" or "He will do Y because he is just." If the virtues are rare, then there will indeed be few legitimate occasions for such straightforward claims. But virtue ethics need not be committed to the claim that we do, or should, make such straightforward claims on a regular basis. Of course it may be that, in fact, we make such claims more often than we should.<sup>34</sup> Virtue ethics can readily accept this point. Indeed, if we wrongly explain action in terms of virtues or vices that do not exist, then correcting our habits of judgment in this area might be part of becoming more virtuous – perhaps, for instance, becoming more honest about ourselves, or more charitable to others.

Moreover, our main interest in the idea of acting from virtue is not limited to such straightforward claims. Consider again the analogy with skill. If it turns out that carpentry-excellence is rare, then we will rarely be justified in making judgments like "She did X because she is a master carpenter" or "He will do Y because he is an excellent carpenter." But the idea of "the carpenter" is no less important as both criterion and target for individual carpenters, and the idea of acting from excellence *belongs to* the conception of "the carpenter." That is, a state in which one's skill *does* reliability enable explanation and prediction is *as part of* both the standard and the goal for all carpenters. In that way, the notion of acting from virtue is relevant even to those carpenters whose low level of skill does not reliably enable prediction and explanation of the straightforward kinds. Likewise, explanation and prediction in terms of virtue is relevant even to those of us who do not reliably act from virtue, for the state of character that *would* enable such explanations and predictions is *part of* our conception of the virtuous person.

What, then, about Alfano's concern over egalitarianism? Alfano's egalitarian claim is that "Almost anyone can reliably act in accordance with virtue."<sup>35</sup> However, if full virtue is rare and difficult to attain – perhaps "a rare last fruit of a lifelong project" – then "most people could not be brought up to behave in accordance with virtue, let alone be virtuous."<sup>36</sup> Thus the Rarity Thesis requires abandoning virtue ethics' commitment to egalitarianism.

How are we to interpret the claim that "Almost anyone can reliably act in accordance with virtue?" Alfano explains that this claim "does not go so far as to require that everyone can be virtuous, just that almost anyone can be brought reliably to do what the virtuous person would do what the virtuous would do."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Russell, *Practical Intelligence*, 307–313.

<sup>35</sup> Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Now, the idea of acting “in accordance with virtue” – or, equivalently, doing “what the virtuous would do” – contrasts with acting *from virtue*, since the latter implies the possession of a virtue but the former does not. In addition, acting “in accordance with virtue” might be taken to contrast with *acting virtuously*. For acting virtuously implies a particular kind of motivation and reasoning, but a person might be thought to act “in accordance with virtue” even without virtuous motivation. Someone might do “what the virtuous would do” – e.g. give correct change to an unsuspecting customer – but act entirely from the fear of being caught, or the desire to avoid social stigma.

However, if we interpret Alfano’s egalitarian claim in this way, there is little reason to suppose that the egalitarian claim conflicts with the Rarity Thesis. Even if virtue is very rare, it is possible that almost anyone can act in accordance with virtue, so long as people are susceptible to motivations that lead them to do what the virtuous would do, even though they lack virtuous motivations. Sensitivity to reproach, praise, and embarrassment might suffice for widespread action in accordance with virtue, lack of virtue not withstanding.

So it seems that we need a stronger interpretation of “in accordance with virtue” if the egalitarian claim is to conflict with the Rarity Thesis. Since the egalitarian claim does not require that almost anyone can act from virtue, the stronger interpretation must be that almost anyone can *act virtuously*, which includes acting with the motivations that are characteristic of a virtue. However, even if we adopt this stronger interpretation, ambiguities surround the sense of “can” in the egalitarian claim. One of these ambiguities concerns whether we are speaking about what is possible for people as they are *right now*, or instead about what is possible for people *given certain influences and effort*. To see the difference between these senses of “can,” consider a piano teacher who tells a group of new students, “Almost anyone can play the piano.” While it is false of people as they are *right now* that almost anyone has the ability to play the piano, it might be true that almost anyone has the ability to *learn* to play the piano, and to play once they have learned, given the proper teaching and practice. Presumably the piano teacher has the second idea in mind, which is a point about almost anyone’s potential to play the piano, not their current, actual ability to play.

If the egalitarian claim is intended to describe people as they now are, it is not clear why virtue ethicists should accept it. Alfano suggests that a non-egalitarian attitude in virtue ethics “rubs our democratic ethos the wrong way.” But claiming that people *at present* can reliably act virtuously is not so much democratic as it is *optimistic*, perhaps naïvely so. And there is no reason to suppose that this sort of optimism, as opposed to egalitarianism, belongs to the core of virtue ethics. However, if the egalitarian claim is about what people can *become*, or how they can be *brought* to act, then it does not conflict with the Rarity Thesis. The Rarity Thesis claims simply that virtue is rare. It does not claim that possessing virtue or acting virtuously must always remain rare, or that nothing could be done to *bring* people to become virtuous or act virtuously. Virtue ethics requires neither naïve optimism about the current state of virtue, nor undue pessimism about virtue’s future prospects.