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## Skill, Practice, and Virtue: Some Questions and Objections for Stalnaker

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Press, 1985), chap. 10; Kristján Kristjánsson, “Habituated Reason: Aristotle and the ‘Paradox of Moral Education’,” *Theory and Research in Education* 4, no. 1 (2006): 101–122; Alistair Miller, *A New Vision of Liberal Education: The Good of the Unexamined Life* (New York: Routledge, 2016), chap. 2.

6 – See, esp., Stalnaker, pp. 135–136.

## Skill, Practice, and Virtue: Some Questions and Objections for Aaron Stalnaker



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It is a pleasure to be a part of such great intellectual company in discussing Professor Stalnaker’s very rich and insightful book. It is practically impossible not to be impressed (and a bit intimidated) by Stalnaker’s breadth of knowledge, deep understanding of early Chinese texts, and keen observations about how the early Chinese philosophers offer intellectual resources still very much relevant to us today. My comments will focus on the relationship between skill and virtue. I’ll ask one clarificatory question and offer two potential objections to Stalnaker’s account.

### *1. The Connection between Skill and Virtue*

Let me begin with my clarificatory question: Stalnaker presents the early Confucian thinkers as drawing a tight connection between skill and virtue. I found this discussion both fascinating and important, but I was hoping to get a bit clearer on just what the connection was meant to be. To ask this question more crisply, I think it might be helpful to draw on Matt Stichter’s recent discussion of three different ways of thinking about the relation between skill and virtue. He categorizes the three kinds of connections as weak, moderate, and strong. In the weak view virtues are connected to skills but should not be understood along the lines of skills. The moderate view, which Stichter claims is Aristotle’s view, “claims that there are structural similarities between virtue and skill, such that we can gain insight into how virtues are developed by looking at how skills are acquired.”<sup>1</sup> Finally, the strong view claims that virtues are a kind of skill, a view held by Julia Annas.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that Stalnaker would endorse the strong connection, but this is not entirely clear from the text.

## II. Alasdair MacIntyre and Early Confucian Accounts of Virtue

In his discussion of virtue, Stalnaker argues that the way that Alasdair MacIntyre separates virtue from skill is problematic and that the early Confucians would have accepted virtue and skill as more interconnected. One question I have is whether Stalnaker offers a correct account of MacIntyre's view about virtue. To be sure, Stalnaker does portray MacIntyre's account in a sympathetic light, but re-reading MacIntyre's account of virtue in *After Virtue* made me think that there was quite a bit of overlap between MacIntyre's account and the early Confucian account. For in developing his account of virtue, MacIntyre explicitly argues that practices such as chess, painting, or playing a musical instrument (the sorts of activities that Stalnaker would acknowledge as paradigmatically skillful activities) are internally connected to virtues.

Here is the definition of virtue MacIntyre offers in the context of his discussion of practices (note that he refines this definition later in his book):

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.<sup>3</sup>

So it seems like the very concept of virtue involves goods internal to practices. As MacIntyre notes, the practices provide the virtues with their point and purpose. A virtue, in this picture, is not some kind of moral value hanging out there, but is closely connected to those all-too-familiar practices that human beings engage in: "arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, one of the most illuminating discussions by MacIntyre is that of the chess-playing child who begins to play chess for purely extrinsic rewards (money), but then gradually comes to appreciate the goods internal to chess that MacIntyre suggests will require the cultivation of certain virtues such as fairness, patience, and truthfulness. I think this example captures the way that ordinary practices provide us with the proper occasions for developing a variety of virtues that are necessary to realize these internal goods. We can identify in our own lives the achievement of certain internal goods and how the gaining of these goods required the development of certain virtues. Even if practices do not exhaust the circumstances under which we cultivate the virtues (as MacIntyre himself would say), MacIntyre seems exactly right that to a substantial extent the virtues are cultivated within the context of various socially embedded practices. My impression is that Stalnaker would not disagree with any of this. And so it is not entirely clear to me what Stalnaker finds problematic about MacIntyre's account of the relationship between practice and virtue.

Moreover, MacIntyre's account of virtue also seems to agree with at least two substantial features of Stalnaker's discussion of the early Confucian account of virtue: (1) the need to cultivate virtues through the guidance of good teachers, and (2) the social context and relationships necessary for the cultivation of virtues. Both points are developed at great length in the book, and Stalnaker provides a masterful defense of why they are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of virtue.

I think that MacIntyre also supports both views explicitly in his discussion of the virtues. In saying this I do not mean that all the points Stalnaker makes about virtue are already contained in MacIntyre's account, which is clearly not true. But I think there is a much deeper resonance between MacIntyre's view and the early Confucian view of virtue than Stalnaker seems to think. Consider the following passages from *After Virtue*:

A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices of course, as I have just noticed, have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far. If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok's last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fastball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch.<sup>5</sup>

It belongs to the concept of a practice as I have outlined it—and as we are all familiar with it already in our actual lives, whether we are painters or physicists or quarterbacks or indeed just lovers of good painting or first-rate experiments or a well-thrown pass—that its goods can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners. We have to learn to recognize what is due to whom; we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies and to reply with the same carefulness for the facts.<sup>6</sup>

These passages, together with the definition of virtue as intimately tied to the achievement of goods internal to practices, gives rise to a picture that I think connects substantially with the way Stalnaker portrays the early Confucian account of virtue as requiring submission to teachers and authoritative standards, as well as practice within a socially embedded context of ongoing human relationships.

### III. The Internal Connection between Skill and Moral Virtue

To support the view that there is an internal connection between skill and moral virtue, Stalnaker draws on a very interesting passage from *Mengzi* 4B24. Let me reproduce it here in full (using Stalnaker's own translation):

Peng Meng learned archery from Yi. When he had fully mastered Yi's way, he thought in the whole world only Yi himself was superior to him. So he killed Yi.

Mengzi said, "In this case Yi was at fault. [Although] Gongming Yi [a previous Confucian whom Mengzi respects] said that it seems as if he is without fault in the matter, all he meant was that his fault was slight. But how could he be blameless?

[The Duke of] Zheng ordered Master Zhuo Ru to raid the state of Wei. [The Duke of] Wei ordered Yugong Si to pursue him. Master Zhuo Ru said, 'I'm so sick today I cannot pick up my bow. I'm as good as dead.' He asked his chariot driver, 'Who is pursuing me?' His driver replied, 'Yugong Si.' Zhuo Ru exclaimed, 'I shall live!' His driver said, 'Yugong Si is the best archer in Wei. Why, sir, do you say you will live?' He answered, 'Yugong Si studied archery with Yingong Tuo. Yingong Tuo studied archery with me. Yingong Tuo was an upright person. His chosen friends must be upright as well.' When Yugong Si caught up to them, he asked, 'Why do you not hold your bow, master?' He replied, 'I'm so sick today I cannot pick up my bow.' Yugong Si replied, 'I learned archery from Yingong Tuo, who learned it from you, master. I cannot bear to use your way by turning it against you to harm you. Nevertheless, I am here today doing my lord's business, which I dare not abandon.' He drew out some arrows and knocked off their heads against his chariot's wheel, then fired off four of them, after which he returned [to his home territory]."<sup>7</sup>

The key conclusion Stalnaker draws from these two stories is that "Mengzi thinks archery is a *dao* that involves a considerable portfolio of commitments, skills, and virtues, which cannot be separated from each other."<sup>8</sup>

But I'm not sure if we can draw this conclusion from either of the stories. First, take the story of Peng Meng and Yi. What is clear is that Peng Meng fully mastered or "fully fathomed" Yi's *dao* (盡羿之道). Moreover, Yi, according to Mengzi, was blameworthy (at least partially) for Peng Meng's immoral act. But it's not clear why Mengzi still couldn't fully accept that Yi was a master archer *qua* archer but not a fully virtuous or upright person. Insofar as archery is considered, Mengzi could still claim that Yi was a true master, but that doesn't mean that Yi was a truly virtuous person or a *junzi*. In fact, it seems that the *dao* of Yi that was transmitted to Peng Meng was really just the *dao* of archery or the skillfulness of this particular craft. (We'll see a reason to think this below.) But it seems plausible to think that Yi was less than a fully virtuous person and lacked certain virtuous qualities. It might be either that Yi had certain vices himself, or that he lacked sound judgment about the character of others.

It seems to me even less clear that the second story is suggesting that archery and virtue are closely connected. First of all, Master Zhuo Ru comments that Yingong Tuo was an upright person (端人) and therefore his chosen friends must also be upright. Of course, Master Zhuo Ru turns out to be correct and that Yugong Si really is upright. But there is no suggestion here that the skill of archery itself is at all connected to the upright characters of either Yingong Tuo or Yugong Si. There is first of all the very natural reading of this passage in which Yingong Tuo seems to have chosen Yugong Si as a friend and taught him archery because he was already an upright person. (Stalnaker concedes that this is a real possibility.) Perhaps even more significant is the comment by Yugong Si when he decides not to kill Master Zhuo Ru: “I cannot bear to use your way (我不忍以夫子之道) by turning it against you to harm you.” But this comment suggests that the way or *dao* of Master Zhuo Ru refers strictly to the skill of archery, and that it is *this* particular skill that Yugong Si cannot bear to use against Master Zhuo Ru. This also seems to imply that the skill itself *could* have been used to kill Master Zhuo Ru, and therefore perform a bad act. What impeded Yugong Si from doing this, of course, is that he is upright, not that he is a master archer. To connect this point to the early story of Peng Meng and Yi, since the way (*dao*) in this second story is only referring to the particular technical skill of archery, it seems that we ought also to interpret the *dao* of Yi in this way as well.

Of course, what I have said doesn't show that Mengzi or other early Confucians did not see a tight link between skill and virtue. All I'm suggesting is that we do not get that view from these passages.

#### Notes

- 1 – Matt Stichter, “Virtue as a Skill,” in *Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 58.
- 2 – Julia Annas, “Virtue as a Skill,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 227–243.
- 3 – Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 191.
- 4 – *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 5 – *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 6 – *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 7 – Here I am working with Aaron Stalnaker's own translation of the *Mengzi* in *Mastery, Dependence, and the Ethics of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 135–136.
- 8 – *Ibid.*, p. 137.