

Mendelssohn and Kant on Virtue as a Skill

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1. Introduction

The idea that virtue can be profitably conceived as a certain sort of skill goes back to the Socratic dialogues of Plato, was developed by competing schools in the Hellenistic era, and has recently attracted renewed attention from virtue theorists.¹ My aim in this chapter is to examine a neglected episode in the history of this idea — one that focuses on the pivotal role that Moses Mendelssohn played in rehabilitating the skill model of virtue for the German rationalist tradition, and Immanuel Kant's subsequent, yet significantly qualified, endorsement of the idea.

I begin with Mendelssohn's place as a critical developer of the German rationalist tradition. Although his rationalist predecessors frequently spoke of virtue as a skill or proficiency, they did so — Mendelssohn contends — without adequately considering what this notion might be good for, what philosophical problems it might help solve. Mendelssohn finds in the concept of skill the requisite resources to meet an objection that might be lodged against the perfectionist and agent-based ethics of his tradition: namely, that a virtuous person would seem to act for the sake of realising his own perfection in everything that he does, thereby taking a morally inappropriate interest in his own character. Since for Mendelssohn the hallmark of skilful activity is unselfconscious automatism, he argues that the expression of skill — and thus virtue, if it is a skill — does not involve thoughts about what one is doing, much less thoughts about one's own dispositions and capacities. The objection can be neutralised, he proposes, with renewed attention to the ancient thesis that virtue is itself a certain sort of skill.

I then turn to Kant, who rejects the automatism featured in Mendelssohn's account, on grounds that it renders virtue mindless and unreflective. But Kant does not reject the skill model wholesale. Rather, he indicates that any successful deployment of it calls for greater clarity about *which* skills can serve as apt models for virtue than Mendelssohn and his cohort offered. To this end, Kant distinguishes between “free” and “unfree” skills, and admits only the former as a possible guide for thinking about virtue as a skill. This move allows Kant to recognise how reflection can be embedded in the expression of free skills, which underwrites in turn his qualified endorsement of the skill model of virtue.

2. Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn discusses the concept of skill, and revives the skill model of virtue, in his *Philosophical Writings* (Mendelssohn 1971: 412-424 and 1997: 158-168).² This discussion kicks off with a recollection of the Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge (*epistēmē*) as this idea is explored in Plato's *Protagoras*, where it figures — together with the supposition that virtue is also some sort of skill (*technē*) — in a wider debate over whether virtue can be taught.³ But these Socratic ideas

¹ For a historical perspective on the skill model of virtue see e.g. Annas (1995 and 1993); for discussion of its philosophical resources from a contemporary point of view, consider Stichter (2018), Annas (2011), and Bloomfield (2000).

² The *Philosophical Writings* is a collection of Mendelssohn's earlier writings, which he revised for publication in 1761; in 1771, he produced an augmented “improved edition” of the entire text. The discussion of skill (*Fertigkeit*) is found in an essay newly written for the 1761 edition called “Rhapsody, or Addition to the Letters on Sentiments”; it follows up on the first piece in the *Philosophical Writings*, the “Letters on Sentiments”, which is styled as an epistolary debate between an Edmund Burke-type figure and a Stoic-influenced rationalist (Mendelssohn's mouthpiece) over recent developments in aesthetic theory.

³ See esp. *Protagoras* 357b and 361a-c.

appear to be incompatible with the common experience of knowing what would be good to do, but failing to do it because one has been “overcome” by pleasure or pain, “passion” (*thumos*), and the like.⁴ Socrates, however, rejects the psychological assumptions on which the common self-understanding is based, in which separate rational and non-rational powers vie for power over the whole soul and its expression in action. Socratic psychology is monistic: an adult human being is rational through and through — although this rationality is not, for that, very often in a state of excellence or perfection.⁵ Our downfall in such cases, Socrates argues, is not that we have been overcome by pleasure, since pleasure does not arise in us independently of our taking some view of what is good. Our error, rather, is originally and fundamentally epistemic.⁶

Mendelssohn explicitly endorses much of this picture. He applauds Socrates⁷ for recognising that we can never “want the bad *as* the bad, but only under the appearance of the good”, and thus that “the basis of moral evil must always be a lack of insight” (412/158).⁸ Passions and other affective states make proposals, Mendelssohn elaborates, that we are left to endorse or reject in action: “The passions [...] cannot conquer us: for they do not force, but rather persuade, us. They must get us to imagine that the place to which they want to seduce us is good” (412/158). He concludes his exposition by nodding to Socrates’s view that “virtue is a science” — a *Wissenschaft*, for Plato’s *epistēmē* — and thus can be taught (413/158). Here we come to a curious wrinkle in Mendelssohn’s quick account of the *Protagoras*. Despite his ensuing elaboration upon the skill model of virtue, he in fact pointedly fails to mention that Socrates spoke of virtue not only as *epistēmē*, but also indeed as *technē*. It is not entirely clear what we should make of this, but the silence may be the mark of a modestly lodged complaint: he will pass over in silence Socrates’s wisp of a suggestion that virtue must be some sort of skill or know-how, since he neither told us how it is constituted nor how it can develop in us. It is as if he says to his rationalist predecessors: we have already taken this idea on board as the modern inheritors of Socrates, but we have been left to work out our own account of it. For indeed Mendelssohn straightway asserts that “the moderns” have developed “their doctrine of skills” in response to Plato’s theory, as well as their division between “*effective* or pragmatic” and “*ineffective* or speculative” modes of cognition (413/159). Modern philosophical developments are required, Mendelssohn thereby implies, to answer the question that, by his lights, Plato’s dialogue presses most urgently upon us: how can the knowledge of the good be properly efficacious, expressing itself directly in action?

2.1 The “modern doctrine of skills”

Mendelssohn does not name the “moderns” at issue, but his ensuing exposition of their account of skill makes clear that he is thinking of the German rationalist tradition of Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), and Georg Meier (1718-1777).⁹ Mendelssohn himself worked in this tradition, but he had a unique perspective on it. First, he was not an

⁴ *Protagoras* 352b.

⁵ The Stoics were important developers not only of this psychology but also of the skill model of virtue; it accordingly bears mention that Mendelssohn’s discussion of skill concludes with a quotation from the Roman Stoic Seneca.

⁶ See *Protagoras* 352-357. I am entirely bracketing controversial issues around the proto-utilitarian interpretation of this part of the dialogue.

⁷ Actually he attributes this view to *Plato*, when it is more precisely attributed to Plato’s portrayal of *Socrates*.

⁸ Mendelssohn’s German rationalist predecessors also endorsed the guise of the good thesis of “the ancients”: see e.g. Wolff §§496-506.

⁹ Scholars debate the debt of these philosophers to Leibniz (with whom Wolff corresponded extensively), and their originality more generally; but the key pieces of what Mendelssohn has in mind as the “modern doctrine of skills” can be traced to their writings without taking up any of these questions.

academic philosopher, and even his collegial election to the Berlin Academy of Sciences was pointedly ignored by Frederick II, presumably because he was Jewish. Second, his remarkable literary prowess made him an important populariser of contemporary work in metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics from Britain and elsewhere in Europe.¹⁰

The notion at issue is *Fertigkeit*, which translates the Latin *habitus*, and is plausibly rendered in English as “skill” or “proficiency” — terms I will use interchangeably, depending on what is more suitable in a given context.¹¹ The notion is introduced in ontology, under the discussion of powers of substances (e.g. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* §219), and reappears in empirical psychology, in the elaboration of faculties of mind. Powers of understanding and judgment are presented as proficiencies in this sense, along with their specially cultivated attributes, such as wit, discrimination, and taste.¹² Baumgarten and Meier were particularly interested in the development of such proficiencies and their role in the constitution of epistemic character.¹³

The bare idea of a proficiency is evaluatively neutral: it is literally a “readiness” or habitual disposition to perform an action of a certain type, regardless of whether it is the sort of thing one has good reason to do. Thus virtue and vice are alike deemed acquired proficiencies.¹⁴ But the account of how proficiencies are acquired is not uniform across this tradition: Wolff emphasises that they are acquired through *practice* which he explains as “frequent repetition of a way of thinking, and indeed in frequent repetition of actions of a single kind” — so that the ensuing proficiency is a facility for “having these thoughts, or indeed carrying out those very actions” (*Verünftige Gedanken*, §525). Baumgarten and Meier, by contrast, lay greater emphasis on unconscious habit (*Gewohnheit*) in the expression of a proficiency: “Habit (*consuetudo*) is a proficiency so great that it reduces the need to pay attention to the particular actions by which one carries it out” (Baumgarten, G-Met §477, *Metaphysica* §650). Meier repeats the point, and intensifies the claim: “What flows from habit, flows without consciousness” (*Metaphysik* §646).

In order to follow Mendelssohn’s exposition of his immediate predecessors, it will help to return to the puzzle left from the *Protagoras*: how can the knowledge in which virtue consists be efficacious, or express itself in action? How could a merely theoretical or scientific grasp of moral principles become genuinely practical, and contribute to the development of good character or virtue? Mendelssohn does not think that his rationalist predecessors adequately confronted these questions, but he credits them with developing some of the resources needed to answer them.

First, they recognise the problem that knowledge *might not* be effective: they distinguish “speculative” cognition from the “pragmatic” cognition that — if nothing else hinders it — expresses itself in action (413/159). Second, they recognise that effective cognition differs in quality depending on whether or not it is *distinct*. It is distinct if it involves an articulated view of

¹⁰ He learned German, Latin, French, English, and Greek within a few years of his arrival in Berlin, as a teenager accompanied by his rabbi from Dessau. The definitive biography of Mendelssohn is Altmann (1998 [1973]).

¹¹ Dahlstrom (Mendelssohn 1997) sometimes renders *Fertigkeit* with the full phrase “proficiencies or perfected habits”, sometimes just “proficiencies”. “Proficiency” provides a more apt rendering for the term in Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier’s writings; but it becomes more strained when Mendelssohn speaks in his own voice, since he is pointedly recalling the Socratic idea of virtue as a skill (*technē*) — which, he implies, his immediate rationalist predecessors have forgotten.

¹² On understanding and judgment as proficiencies, see Baumgarten *Metaphysica* §606; G-Met §§467, 473; and on wit, discrimination, and other cultivated proficiencies of judgment, see Baumgarten G-Met §426, §§452-3 and Meier *Metaphysik* §567, §570 (cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A654–5/B682–3).

¹³ See, e.g., Baumgarten *Metaphysica* §650 and G-Met §475; Meier, *Metaphysik* §644 and *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* §§527-63.

¹⁴ Note Meier’s usage, when he glosses vice as an “proficiency for sinning” and virtue as a “proficiency for free, lawful actions” (*Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, §147 and §150).

what one has reason to do — this is a motivating reason, or *Bewegungsgrund*; and *freedom* consists of the capacity to compare such reasons, and decide on the basis of this comparison (414/159). Third, they recognise that in most cases deliberation must contend with various kinds of indistinct impulses, which are often more powerful — more *effective* — than any distinctly grasped reason. Sensible affections and emotions are examples of such indistinct effective cognitions: they are “nothing other than an indistinct representation of some *considerable good or bad*”, which tend to be more effective because they are processed more quickly than their distinct counterparts (416/161).¹⁵ But if they are *clear* — directly present to consciousness — then we are in principle able to endorse or reject their suggestions about good and bad. However, action is often influenced by active impulses that are neither clear nor distinct, and thus not open to reflection: “obscure inclinations” (*dunkle Neigungen*, 414/159). Finally, the full range of active impulses interact quasi-mechanically, augmenting or lessening one another’s power, without the subject’s needing to be aware of any “calculation [Berechnung]” or comparison of their power (413-4/159).

Against this background, the unanswered question from the *Protagoras* becomes: how can clear and distinct knowledge of moral principles be effective, and shape character? Mendelssohn finds his answer in the modern account of skill (*Fertigkeit*), as “a capacity to perform a certain action so fast that we no longer remain conscious of all that we do in carrying it out” (417/162). Though he draws this conception of skill directly from Baumgarten and Meier, he stresses that its acquisition comes through *practice* (*Übung*) rather than mere habit. Practice is the intentional and diligent repetition of a certain action (417-8/162-3). Practice is conceptually guided, and thus essentially an expression of rationality — whereas habit is not necessarily either of these things. Yet practice, in Mendelssohn’s view, renders thinking automatic and unconscious. He finds his paradigmatic examples in a pianist and a typesetter. At first they must deliberately locate each key, each box of type, before striking or selecting. But eventually, with constant practice, their fingers are a blur and the pianist plays “the most splendid music almost without thinking about it” (419/163).

It is remarkable that Mendelssohn does not acknowledge how different these examples are from one another, at least if the pianist is to be considered as a musician, not a player-piano. In fact, this oversight turns out to be at odds with Mendelssohn’s actual development of the skill model of virtue, at least in the second (1771) edition of *Philosophical Writings*, as I will now explain.

2.2 Mendelssohn on virtue as a skill

Although Mendelssohn takes his own contribution to consist in a detail about the speed of cognitive processing involved in a skill,¹⁶ his recollection of the ancient conception of virtue as a skill or *technē* has more far-reaching significance. For while the modern rationalists speak of virtue as a *Fertigkeit*, they do so in passing — without considering what it might be good for, what philosophical problems it might help us to solve. “Let us apply these remarks [about proficiencies] to ethics generally where they actually belong, and where in fact they appear to have fruitful consequences” (419/164), suggests Mendelssohn. What does he think ethics stands to gain from the skill model of virtue? The automatism of skill enables virtue-based ethics to respond to the worry that a person must take an objectionable interest in her own ethical

¹⁵ Mendelssohn departs here from the classification offered by Wolff, who takes pleasure, pain, and affective states generally to be indistinct *Bewegungsgründe* (*Vernünfftige Gedanken* §506).

¹⁶ Mendelssohn endorses the received rationalist view that the efficacy of a cognition will be proportional to the perfection of its object and to the degree of the knowledge of it; he adds that it will also be inversely proportional to the time it takes to consider the perfection thus presented (414/160).

perfection in order to acquire, and exercise, virtue at all.¹⁷ For if skilful action is performed without consciousness of what one is doing in the process, then virtue — as a skill — is exercised without needing to think *I want to be virtuous* and *this is what the virtuous person would do*.

Virtue is indeed a science [Wissenschaft], and can be learned; however, it requires not merely scientific conviction if it is to be exercised, but also artful practice and skill. [...] He must continue practicing until he is no longer conscious of his rules in the midst of the exercise, until his principles have transformed into inclinations and his virtue appears to be more natural instinct than reason. Then he has attained the heroic greatness that is far beyond the battle of common passions, and exercises the most admirable virtue without vanity. (422/166)

We first have to make a judgment about appropriate action through deliberate application of principles — the efficacy of this judgment is precisely what remains open to question. However, through practice it becomes one we make without conscious effort, and expresses itself directly in action of the appropriate sort. Mendelssohn's proposal is, in effect, to get principled ethical knowledge down on all fours with obscure inclinations, to meet their force on their own terms. This happens with sufficient practice in making the judgments in question, so that one no longer needs to think about the principles of one's actions and their application: the principles *become* inclinations. This, by corollary, frees one of any need to think of oneself as an agent. Virtue, Mendelssohn concludes, is shown to be something greater than the skill of self-management needed to deal with wayward inclinations, and valuable for more than the tranquillity that comes with it.

Mendelssohn leaves it to his reader to fill in this sketch. The virtuous person must have commitments to something other than his own tranquillity: but to what? Here we need to take up additional clues in the text — clues that, however, cast the automatism that Mendelssohn seems to celebrate in an uncertain light. The first is a footnote that Mendelssohn inserts in the passage just quoted, right at the point where he stresses the unconscious automatism of skilful activity. The note refers the reader back to the beginning of the fourth of the “Letters on Sentiments”, where Theocles — Mendelssohn's own mouthpiece in the epistolary exchange — presents his maxims for the cultivation of taste.¹⁸ Among other things, these maxims acknowledge that deliberate reflection on principles and their correct application is requisite for the cultivation of good taste; but they also insist that we need to go beyond deliberate reflection in order to “direct [...] attention to the object itself” (246/18) — and *enjoy* the beauty. The footnote directing us to this passage implies that something similar should hold for the cultivation of virtue, the object of which is *action* of the appropriate sort. The upshot is an early modern version of recent discussions of “flow”, where the skilled person is freed from the need to think deliberately about what she is doing, and is fully absorbed in the activity itself.¹⁹

Of course, the bare idea that virtuous activity “flows” does not *ipso facto* support Mendelssohn's apparent readiness to treat the typesetter and the pianist as equally apt guides for elaborating the skill model of virtue. The one suggests a skill that is simply dependent upon brute habit (you can reach, without deliberate thought, for the box that contains the letter you

¹⁷ Mendelssohn first raises the concern earlier in “Rhapsody”, where he gestures towards a somewhat different solution in Stoic cosmopolitanism (405-6/151-2). The complaint that virtue-based moral theories are implicitly egoistic, or call for the wrong sort of attention to be drawn to oneself, has been lodged against contemporary virtue ethics — see e.g. the final chapter of Hurka (2001), and Annas (2008) for a response.

¹⁸ Dahlstrom's translation incorrectly interpolates the reference as harking back to the “end of the Third Letter”; as the Jubiläumausgabe (and earlier editions) show, it refers to the beginning of the Fourth.

¹⁹ This idea is associated with the psychological research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and others; for its deployment in a recent account of virtue as skill, see Annas (2011: 70-82).

need next). The typesetter might do this with “flow”, but it does not seem to be a skill that is indefinitely, or richly, perfectible: he may get faster over time, but the progress will develop mostly along that one track until it reaches a plateau. But the skill of a pianist is multifaceted, and stands to develop in complex ways. There is no reason to suppose that such a skill ever reaches a point beyond which it can develop no further. Aspiration to an ever-receding ideal of perfection seems rather to be part and parcel of what it is to cultivate and express the sort of skill in question — at least at any reasonably high level. Thus the typesetter and the pianist provide quite different examples of skilful activity; and Mendelssohn appears to have eventually recognised as much. For he added a passage to the second (1771) edition of *Philosophical Writings* that elaborates on the skill model of virtue in ways that would allow the musician, but not the typesetter, to serve as his guide.²⁰

In that passage, Mendelssohn begins by asking what composition (*Beschaffenheit*) the principles of virtue must have if they are “to work effectively on the inclinations” (420/164). The principle governing such a skill must enable one to sustain one’s attention on a worthy object, somewhat as the principles governing harmony might direct one’s attention to the notes with which beautiful music can be composed. For virtue, this worthy object is “the true dignity of the human being” (420/165). What it is to recognise or be acquainted with this object will take indefinitely many concrete forms: *kennen* is Mendelssohn’s verb, implying here a recognition of this dignity in an intuitive judgment of the particulars, rather than a speculative grasp of abstract principle.²¹ One must engage with others in a manner that acknowledges their true dignity. The knowledge this involves will naturally admit of degrees of adequacy, inasmuch as it is expressed in what one does and how one is motivated. Further, Mendelssohn continues, one must “regard the sublimity of the human being’s ethical nature in the appropriate light” (420/165). The human being possesses an *ethical* nature as properly free and self-determined; this nature is “sublime” because it exalts the human being over the rest of creation. One must regard this nature with “true humility”, appreciating it as the source of a standard of perfection that is both graspable by us and yet from which we always fall short (420-1/165). This constellation of concerns, Mendelssohn contends, needs to be “before one’s eyes in every act that one performs” in order to cultivate a “wholesome enthusiasm for virtue” — that is to say, to develop a more vibrant and effective cognition of the good (421/165). Since this cognition is “effective” and properly expresses itself in action, the development of this skill will call for a multifaceted refinement of affective dispositions and perceptual capacities, so that one’s attention to what is relevant to acting in the interest of this dignity becomes ever more keen.

This picture of the skill model of virtue does not sit well with the unreflective automatism that Mendelssohn seems initially to celebrate, when he takes the movements of a typesetter to provide an apt example of skilful action for his explanatory purposes. In reaching this conclusion, I have anticipated and partly defended Mendelssohn against Kant’s criticisms, to which we turn next.

3. Kant²²

Kant’s discussion of the skill model of virtue is not a well-known feature of his ethics. The lack of attention it has received might be attributed to two facts. First, it only comes up in the later works, rather than the more frequently studied *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and

²⁰ Cf. Mendelssohn (1761) against (1771); the *Jubiläumausgabe* and the Cambridge edition follow the 1771 text.

²¹ Mendelssohn elaborates on speed that “intuitive cognition [anschauende Erkenntniß]” brings to the execution of a skill at the very end of “Rhapsody” (422-3/167-8).

²² My account of Kant’s qualified endorsement of the skill model of virtue offered in this section is developed and defended more fully in Merritt (2018).

Critique of Practical Reason (1788). Second, his endorsement of the model is highly qualified and, on a superficial reading, the relevant passages may appear to dismiss the idea outright.

The passages on the skill model of virtue that I will focus on here come from the substantial Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue of the 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals* (6:379-413), where Kant explains the role of the concept of virtue in a broader moral philosophy, and outlines the account of virtue that is developed further in the main text (6:417-474).²³ Kant makes something of (what he takes to be) the etymological roots of the German word for virtue, *Tugend*, in the verb *taugen*, “to be fit for” (6:390), which as we will see is conceptually tied to the skill model of virtue. But his initial remarks indicate a departure from his German rationalist predecessors on the matter of virtue as a skill:

But virtue is not to be explained and valued merely as a *skill* [*Fertigkeit*] and (as the prize essay of Cochius, the court-chaplain, puts it) a longstanding *habit* [*Gewohnheit*] of morally good actions acquired through practice. For if this skill is not the effect of principles that are reflected upon, firm, and continually purified, then it is like any other mechanism of technically practical reason and is neither equipped for all situations, nor sufficiently secure for the altered circumstances that new enticements could bring about. (6:383-4)

Here Kant tacitly distinguishes two kinds of skill. One is merely a matter of habit, while the other is the result of some kind of ever-developing critical intelligence. Note that he does not reject the skill model outright: rather he says that virtue is not to be understood and valued *merely* as a *Fertigkeit*. A skill that is the effect of mere habit cannot provide a viable model for virtue. But he allows that virtue could indeed be a *Fertigkeit*, if appropriately qualified: the skill must itself be the “effect” (*Wirkung*) of continually strengthened commitment to, and continually refined grasp of, certain principles. Thus Kant tacitly distinguishes between two kinds of skill, one that is merely a matter of habit, and one that is the result of some kind of ongoing critical intelligence. Only the latter provides a plausible model for virtue.

Now let’s consider how Kant positions himself against the rationalist tradition in this passage. Kant takes aim at a particular way of working with the skill model of virtue — one that he suggests is exemplified in the prize-winning essay of Leonhard Cochius (1769). The reference is curious for several reasons. First, Cochius’s essay does not, in fact, explicitly take up questions about the nature of virtue.²⁴ But the particular passage that Kant appears to have in mind concerns efforts to cultivate character through the habitual imitation of moral exemplars: “By these means the way of thinking [Denkungsart] of such persons sneaks unnoticed into the minds of others, and gradually becomes a proficiency [*Fertigkeit*] that adheres there” (Cochius 1769: 85). Kant abhors the suggestion that an unreflective transmission of a “way of thinking” could

²³ For reasons of space, I will not consider the companion passage in the *Anthropology* (7:147), which I acknowledge appears rather less open to the skill model of virtue: “one cannot explain *virtue* as the *skill* [*Fertigkeit*] in free lawful actions, for then it would be a mere mechanism of the application of power” (7:147; see also 7:400, from the handwritten manuscript of the *Anthropology*). In Merritt (2008) I argue that this passage is compatible with the *Metaphysics of Morals* passages, which, as we are about to see, identify two possible kinds of skill or *Fertigkeit* — rejecting one, and accepting the other, as a plausible model of virtue. Another noteworthy passage is found in the records of Kant’s lectures on ethics from around this same time (Vigilantius): “one can find enjoyment in virtue [...] but only when and for the reason that the fulfilling of duty has become a skill [*Fertigkeit*], so that it becomes easy to follow the prescriptions of reason; from this one attains a contentment about one’s actions and about the strengthening of one’s will for the prescriptions of reason” (27:490-1).

²⁴ Cochius (1769) offers an empirical psychological account of the nature of “inclinations” (*Neigungen*) in the early modern rationalist tradition, and takes up the practical problem (set by the Academy of Sciences) of how to alter a person’s inclinations, strengthening the good ones and weakening the bad ones.

form genuine character, much less *good* character.²⁵ Second, if my arguments in the previous section are sound, it was Mendelssohn — and certainly not Cochius — who was chiefly responsible for rehabilitating the skill model of virtue in the German rationalist tradition. Although Wolff and the others spoke of virtue as a *Fertigkeit*, they did not assign particular value to virtue on this basis: after all, Meier spoke of vice as no less a *Fertigkeit* than virtue. Why not pick on Mendelssohn, then, as the chief proximate source of the skill model of virtue? By citing Cochius, Kant indicates a specific target: a conception of virtue as a skill developed through unreflective imitation of exemplars.²⁶ This is not how Mendelssohn invokes the skill model of virtue — and Kant, who deeply respected Mendelssohn,²⁷ must have recognised as much. Mendelssohn indicates that the effort to bring oneself closer to the standard of virtue must be grounded in concrete, situation-specific, attention to the “true dignity of the human being” in everything that one does. Although Mendelssohn’s remarks are by no means as detailed and explicit as one might like, the result is hardly the virtue-by-osmosis picture that Kant rightly abhors in Cochius.

Kant returns to the skill model later in the Introduction, where he distinguishes between two kinds of skill (*Fertigkeit*) — free and unfree — and indicates that only the former provides a plausible model for virtue. Let’s first consider how Kant draws that distinction in the first part of the passage:

Skill [*Fertigkeit*](*habitus*) is a facility for action and a subjective perfection of choice. But not every such *facility* [*Leichtigkeit*] is a *free* skill (*habitus libertatis*); for if it is a *habit* [*Angewohnheit*] (*assuetudo*), that is, a uniformity in action that has become a *necessity* through frequent repetition, it is not one that proceeds from freedom, and therefore also not a moral skill. (6:407)

Unfree skills are expressions of *necessitating* habit (*Angewohnheit*, not *Gewohnheit*):²⁸ given the appropriate stimuli, a certain determinate way of going on has become “a *necessity*” owing to prior repetition. Examples of this sort of skill, which can be cultivated without genuine thought, can be found among the myriad skills of movement and bodily control acquired in the normal course of a young child’s development — like standing, or walking, or being able to grasp objects of a certain size. A one-year-old child who stands has cultivated the requisite resources at great effort, though she never deliberately set herself the task of learning how to stand. And she constantly makes minute adjustments that keep her upright, though she neither has determinate thought about standing as such, nor does she register any explicit attention to the countless little moves that sustain it. This is not, or not simply, because she is an infant: standing adults don’t typically consider these constant adjustments either.²⁹ When I shift my body weight in response

²⁵ There is more to say about the operative term *Denkungsart*, which for Kant is the core element of *character* — where individual character is something for which a person can be held responsible. Especially relevant here is especially *Anthropology* (7:293): “The *imitator* (in moral matters) is without character; for character consists precisely in originality in the way of thinking. He who has character draws his conduct from a source that he has opened himself.”

²⁶ Kant made this complaint often against received programs for moral pedagogy, although he allowed exemplars a qualified role; for discussion see Loudon (1992) and Merritt (2011).

²⁷ As partial evidence of this, consider Kant’s 16 August 1783 letter to Mendelssohn (10:345).

²⁸ *Gewohnheit* in Kant’s usage is evaluatively neutral: it is simply a given fact about how our minds work, that habit plays a role in the animation of thought. This is neither good nor bad; nor is it anything for which we can be held responsible. By contrast, Kant claims that “all habit [*Angewohnheit*] is reprehensible” (*Anthropology* 7:149). *Angewohnheit* in Kant’s usage consistently implies physical necessitation through the force of habit, that is, as such, at odds with freedom.

²⁹ Of course, one might aim to manifest a certain standard in one’s standing — e.g. when adopting *tadasana* in hatha yoga — but then we are no longer talking about an unfree skill in Kant’s sense.

to a change in the surface on which I am standing, I am acting on a certain cue: reliably taking perfectly adequate means, in response to this cue, to a certain end (staying upright). What I am *not* doing is considering how I should respond to what I am thereby conditioned to register as a cue, or even whether I should respond: this is the necessitation that Kant takes to be characteristic of an unfree skill.

Since the exercise of any skill has some basis in habit, there is always some way in which one is mechanically disposed to go on, given a certain stimulus. Kant does not spell out exactly how he understands the notion of “a *free* skill (*habitus libertatis*)”; he only says, rather unhelpfully, that it “proceeds from freedom”. However, we can suppose that someone exercising such a skill must have something against which to assess the promptings of habit. I take this other thing to be a standard of goodness. A good pianist does not simply hit the right notes, but interprets the score and expresses the music. She wants to play *well*, and both her grasp of what constitutes good playing, and the readiness of her respect for this standard, become more fine-grained, concretely action-guiding, and demanding as she develops greater skill over time.³⁰

We can briefly recapitulate Kant’s relation to Mendelssohn in light of this distinction between unfree and free skills. Mendelssohn’s celebration of automatism in the exercise of a skill only conceivably accords with Kant’s notion of an unfree skill. And if a *free* skill can only be “the effect of principles that are reflected upon, firm, and continually purified” as Kant indicates (6:383), then it is presumably a highly refined, and indefinitely perfectible, power of judgment — not an automatism that releases one from any need to think about what one is doing. And since Mendelssohn was the key developer of the skill model of virtue among Kant’s immediate predecessors, it is plausible that Kant was thinking of Mendelssohn when he rejected the idea that virtue could be modelled on unfree skill. Yet as we saw, Mendelssohn elaborates his account in the second edition of the *Philosophical Writings* along lines that stand at odds with his initial celebration of automatism. Mendelssohn’s account is rich, but muddled — and perhaps for this reason Kant could neither single it out as his target, nor credit it as his inspiration.

But what exactly *does* Kant have in mind when he claims that such a skill “proceeds from freedom”? There is a hint of an answer in the wider context of this passage, where Kant distinguishes duties of right and virtue in a wider moral philosophy. Duties of right are coercively enforceable requirements of conduct, so that one acts in ways that are compatible with “outer freedom” in a political community. These requirements can be met irrespective of one’s motivations. Duties of virtue, by contrast, call for the cultivation of a certain mindedness from the free adoption of the morally obligatory ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others (6:385-8).³¹ Resources of attention, judgment, and temperament are the cultivated means to these ends. Virtuous action expresses an intelligent commitment to these ends, and virtue itself must incorporate a readiness to be appropriately motivated.³² Since no one can be made to adopt an end (6:385), virtue must be the expression of the “inner freedom” of a human being (6:406-7).

When Kant returns to the skill model of virtue in this context, it is to rule out a particular way of taking it up — modelling virtue on unfree skills, which commits one to a conception of virtue as a mechanistic impulse to perform certain actions given the appropriate stimulus. Presumably virtue is like any free skill in being a mindedness that follows from the free adoption of ends. But since ends can only be freely adopted, this does not tell us much. It also seems to

³⁰ See Montero (2013) on how certain sorts of skills (e.g. dance) embed such reflective assessment.

³¹ From this Kant distinguishes duties of virtue to oneself and duties of virtue to others: but he takes the entire package to be united in the idea of making “the human being as such one’s end” (6:395). Kant’s argument in this context against making the *perfection* of others one’s own end (6:386) marks another departure from the rationalist tradition of Wolff and his followers (including Mendelssohn).

³² This is why Kant’s own deployment of the skill model of virtue in the main text of the Doctrine of Virtue focuses on the cultivation of moral feeling (a readiness to be moved by one’s recognition of moral requirement), as I explain in Chapter 7 of Merritt (2018).

be too thin a notion of the relevant sort of skill: toothbrushing, and myriad other forms of cultivated know-how, fit this description as well. When Kant says that the relevant sort of skill must itself be the effect of “continually purified principles”, he suggests that the relevant sort of skill — the one that could provide a model for virtue — is indefinitely perfectible. There is no point at which someone has arrived at a complete and fully adequate grasp of what counts as good piano playing. Likewise there is no reason to suppose that a person’s grasp of the value of humanity — the intelligence of a person’s commitment to “the human being as such” that unites duties of virtue to self and to others (6:395) — can in principle reach a terminus, a point beyond which it admits of no further augmentation or development.

With this in mind let’s consider the qualification under which Kant is prepared to endorse the skill model of virtue:

Hence one cannot *define* virtue as skill [Fertigkeit] in free action in conformity with law unless one adds “to determine oneself through the representation of the law in action”, and then this skill is not a property of choice, but rather of *will*, which is a faculty of desire that, in adopting a rule, is at once universally legislative. Only such a skill can be counted as virtue. (6:407)

A typical free skill is a cultivated fitness for a *discretionary* end, and is thereby deemed “a property of choice”. Moral virtue is a perfection of the will, or practical reason. The relevant notion of perfection in this context is the “harmony of a thing’s properties with an *end*” (6:386). Kant belongs to a long, and broadly rationalist, tradition that takes reason to be the source of substantive ends. For Kant, the moral law, the constitutive principle of practical reason, yields claims about what we categorically ought to care about: namely, the two morally obligatory ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. Therefore, moral virtue *as a skill*, as an acquired perfection of practical reason, can only be a harmony of a person’s “properties” with these ends. Like any ends, these ends can only be freely adopted. Thus what marks the difference between virtue and standard free skills is not so much that virtue requires appropriately motivated action and the skill of a musician (*say*) does not, as it is about the substantive content of the practical commitment in question.³³

4 Conclusion

Let me conclude by acknowledging some of the many questions left open. In the second edition of the *Philosophical Writings*, Mendelssohn revises his account of skill in ways that cast doubt upon his original invocation of the typesetter and the pianist as equally apt guides for thinking about virtue as a skill. But he did not take that opportunity to remove the typesetter example, or otherwise indicate any new preference for the pianist. Thus it remains unclear whether or not Mendelssohn anticipated the problem that Kant later raised when he rejected “unfree” skills — the sort that admit of blind, unreflective automatism — as a guide for thinking about virtue as a skill. One can only speculate about whether the awkward juxtaposition of Mendelssohn’s two examples spurred Kant to appreciate the importance of fixing on the right *sort* of skill in the first place. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s quite different ways of taking up the skill model of virtue each merit further attention, and interpretive reconstruction, from philosophers. Such work might allow us to make better sense of Socrates’s puzzling but intuitively appealing suggestion that a good human being must be skilled in living.³⁴

³³ Stichter (2016) defends the skill model of virtue against the criticism that skills do not require appropriately motivated action, whereas virtue does; his conclusion is similar to mine here.

³⁴ I would like to thank Michael Kremer and Markos Valaris for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, and Ursula Goldenbaum for discussion about Mendelssohn and early German rationalism.

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Note on citation of primary texts:

The works of Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier are cited by section (§). Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* went through multiple editions, with significant changes in the divisions of the text into sections particularly with the second and third editions. I cite here both Fugate and Hymer's 2014 English translation, which follows the fourth (1757) edition of the text, as well as Meier's 1766 German translation (abbreviated G-Met) which follows an earlier edition with different section numbering. Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Schriften* is cited according to page in the standard German edition, followed by a slash, and then the corresponding pagination of the English translation. Kant's texts are cited, according to custom, by volume and page of the German Academy edition, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is cited according to the first (A) and second (B) editions of the text. Translations of all of these texts are my own, though I have consulted the English translations listed below.

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