



Rehabilitating Theoretical Wisdom

Matthew D. Walker

Yale-NUS College
mattwalker2000@gmail.com

Abstract

Given the importance of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) in Aristotle's account of the human good, it is striking that contemporary virtue ethicists have been virtually silent about this intellectual virtue and what contribution (if any) it makes – or could make – toward human flourishing. In this paper, I examine, and respond to, two main worries that account for theoretical wisdom's current marginality. Along the way, I sketch a neo-Aristotelian conception of theoretical wisdom, and argue that this intellectual virtue is more central to the concerns of contemporary virtue ethicists than it has perhaps so far seemed.

Keywords

Wisdom; Virtue Ethics; Intellectual Virtue; Happiness; Virtue Epistemology; Aristotle

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*), Aristotle describes the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom (or *sophia*) as the most authoritative virtue, the virtue superior to practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) and, by extension, the various ethical virtues (*EN* VI.13). Thus, in *EN* X.7-8, Aristotle identifies the exercise of this virtue in the activity of philosophical contemplation as “complete flourishing” (*teleia eudaimonia*). Exactly what this claim means is the subject of a long-standing scholarly debate. What is not open to debate, however, is that Aristotle accords central importance to theoretical wisdom in the flourishing human life.¹

Given the significance of theoretical wisdom in Aristotle's ethics, it is striking that contemporary virtue ethicists influenced by Aristotle have been virtually silent about theoretical wisdom and what contribution (if any) it makes – or could make – toward our flourishing. For instance, in her major work, *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse accepts Aristotle's

¹ Although I have consulted various translations, translations in this paper are my own.

views that (i) the various ethical virtues (such as courage and moderation) are required for living well, and that (ii) one requires the intellectual virtue of *practical* wisdom to exercise the ethical virtues. Yet despite her multiple references to *phronêsis* as a virtue necessary for, and constitutive of, flourishing, Hursthouse makes no mention at all of theoretical wisdom. Nor is Hursthouse alone.² Contemporary analysis of *theoretical intellectual virtue*, to the extent that one finds the topic discussed, has been largely relegated to work in virtue epistemology. In that context, such virtue tends to be examined in relative isolation from its potential role in a flourishing life and in a fashion that tends to assimilate intellectual to ethical virtue. Thus, one observes the contemporary emphasis of such putative intellectual virtues as intellectual courage and fairness. Yet one finds virtually no references to anything like the virtue that Aristotle thinks central to the (most) flourishing life.³

In this paper, I take the preliminary step of showing how theoretical wisdom, when construed in broadly Aristotelian terms, is more central to the concerns of contemporary virtue ethicists than it has perhaps so far seemed. That is, I make a case for rehabilitating theoretical wisdom as a

² See the multiple listings for “moral wisdom (*phronesis*)” in Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 274–275. If one searches for “wisdom” in Hursthouse’s index, one encounters the listing “see moral wisdom.” The same holds for Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 311–312, as well as for Robert C. Roberts and Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 329. On the marginalization of theoretical wisdom (in favor of practical wisdom) elsewhere in philosophy, see David Conway, *The Rediscovery of Wisdom: From Here to Antiquity in Quest of Sophia* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 16–19. On Aristotle’s intellectualism as a feature that distinguishes his ethics from contemporary virtue ethics, see C.C.W. Taylor, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: Books II–IV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. xxii–xxiii.

³ Among contemporary virtue epistemologists, Linda Zagzebski notes the neglect of wisdom in contemporary philosophy. See her *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 22–23 and pp. 45–51. At pp. 197–202, she offers a sketch of how (theoretical) intellectual virtues might contribute to flourishing, though she does not commit herself to this view. Moreover, she tends to assimilate intellectual to ethical virtue in the manner I have indicated. Several papers on intellectual virtue appear in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski and Michael DePaul (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). The editors note (at pp. 2–3) (i) the almost exclusive focus among contemporary virtue ethicists on the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom and (ii) the lack of detailed treatment so far by virtue epistemologists of particular intellectual virtues. Among contemporary ethical theorists influenced by Aristotle, Richard Kraut offers a brief account of “cognitive flourishing,” though without reference to theoretical wisdom. See his *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 164–166.

virtue. In Part I, I provide a brief account of Aristotle's conception of theoretical wisdom and offer an explanation of why this virtue occupies its marginal status in contemporary virtue ethics. In Parts II-IV, I offer positive reasons why, contrary to initial appearances, theoretical wisdom is worth more attention from virtue ethicists. In Part V, I respond to the worries that theoretical wisdom cannot be widely cultivated, and that claims for its importance commit one to an invidious elitism in ethics.

I. Theoretical Wisdom: The Aristotelian Conception and Its Current Marginality

To set the stage, I offer a quick sketch of Aristotle's own views on the nature of theoretical wisdom. For Aristotle, the intellectual virtues are the excellences of the human soul's authoritatively rational element (*EN* I.13). Aristotle ultimately divides this element into two components on the basis of their respective proper objects of cognition. Whereas the *practical* intellect cognizes contingent, variable matters, i.e., matters about which agents engage in practical deliberation, the *theoretical* intellect cognizes eternal, unchanging objects (*EN* VI.1).

Aristotle goes on to identify multiple virtues of the theoretical intellect. For instance, he defines intellectual insight (*nous*) as that excellence in virtue of which one is capable of an intuitive and non-demonstrative grasp of first principles (*EN* VI.6). And he describes scientific understanding (*epistêmê*) as that excellence in virtue of which one is capable of systematically understanding the causes of things, viz., through explanatory demonstration (*EN* VI.3). Aristotle subsequently accounts for theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) as somehow comprising these two virtues. That is, he defines theoretical wisdom as intellectual insight and scientific understanding of the "most honorable" matters, viz., the first principles and causes of nature (*EN* VI.7, 1141a17-20; 1141b2-3). Thus, theoretical wisdom is the intellectual virtue by which we comprehend the ultimate explanations of things (cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 981b27-29, 982a1-2, 982b9-10). So construed, Aristotle describes theoretical wisdom as the virtue conducive to our understanding theology, which concerns the (divine) first cause and principle of the cosmos (*Metaphysics* A.2, 983a5-10; *EN* VI.7, 1141a35-b3) and metaphysics, which concerns the first causes and principles of being *qua* being (*Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a27-32). Theoretical wisdom is also conducive to our understanding at least certain aspects of natural science and mathematics (*Metaphysics* B.1, 995b12-13; G.3, 1005b2; E.1, 1026a13-18; K.4, 1061b33).

Aristotle ultimately designates practical wisdom as the ruling virtue of the practical intellect, and theoretical wisdom as the ruling virtue of the theoretical intellect (*EN* VI.11, 1143b14-17; VI.12, 1143b33-1144a3).

On Aristotle's account, theoretical wisdom is an interesting, multifaceted virtue by which cognitive agents attain philosophical understanding. How, then, can one explain the marginality of this virtue (or any analog) in contemporary virtue ethics?

A first plausible explanation for theoretical wisdom's neglect is what I call *the scope of ethics worry*. Put simply, the concern is that theoretical wisdom lies outside the scope of normative *ethical* theory, which has *ethical* virtues and *ethically* virtuous actions for its proper subject matter. That is not to say that intellectual virtue is completely invisible in contemporary virtue ethics, for, as I have already noted, the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom receives fair attention from Hursthouse and others. But practical wisdom receives such attention given its tight relation to ethical virtue. Theoretical wisdom, by contrast, apparently lacks any such relation. Hence, theoretical wisdom drops off the agenda of contemporary virtue ethics – and perhaps, one might think, properly so.⁴

A second plausible explanation for theoretical wisdom's neglect is what I call *the elitism worry*. To paint in broad strokes, modern moral philosophers agree that an account of how one should live ought to be *egalitarian*, such that it shows equal concern for all people. Thus, Kant recommends that we see ourselves as free and equal members of a kingdom of ends governed by the categorical imperative as common law; likewise, Mill, following Bentham, emphasizes that the principle of utility counts each person's happiness as much as any other person's.⁵ Against the shared emphasis by deontologists and consequentialists on moral rules or principles, contemporary virtue ethicists propose that an account of how one should live need not emphasize law-like prescriptions: hence, their primary focus on virtues, as opposed to laws or rules. Nevertheless, contemporary virtue ethicists do accept that an account of how one should live ought to be egalitarian in spirit.

Now, the practical virtues, which govern our practical activities and affective/appetitive responses, are thought to be the sorts of states or dispositions that, in principle, all ordinary (or unmaimed) human beings can

⁴ Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, p. xiv, claims that moral philosophers have attended to the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis* “only because” of the explicit link Aristotle draws between this virtue and the traditional ethical virtues.

⁵ See *Groundwork* Ch. 2, Ak. 433-434; *Utilitarianism* Ch. 5.

possess and exercise. In principle, that is, we can all be temperate or courageous or generous or just or practically wise. The virtue of theoretical wisdom, by contrast, seems different in kind. On the face of it, theoretical wisdom seems available only to a tiny gifted elite with rare intellectual capacities that are not widely shared. Therefore, theoretical wisdom seems to fit uncomfortably within any virtue-ethical account of how to live that seeks to remain broadly egalitarian in its sympathies.⁶

II. A Preliminary Response to the Scope of Ethics Worry

Why, then, is a broadly Aristotelian conception of theoretical wisdom worth rehabilitating? While my answer to this question is clearly informed by Aristotle, my proposal is not necessarily committed to all of Aristotle's own views. For instance, my argument does not require Aristotle's assumption that the virtues form an ordered hierarchy. That is, I do not assume that (i) some forms of virtue (e.g., ethical virtue) are by nature subordinate to others (e.g., intellectual virtue), and that (ii) theoretical wisdom is the highest virtue, i.e., a virtue superior to practical wisdom and the various ethical virtues, but itself subordinate to no higher virtues (see, e.g., *EN* VI.13, 1145a6-11; *Magna Moralia* I.34, 1198b3-17).⁷ The short case that I present is consistent with this Aristotelian view, but it is also consistent with the claim that no one virtue is subordinate to any other.

Likewise, I also bracket the question of whether some of Aristotle's own views on the proper objects of theoretical wisdom are satisfactory. For example, my argument makes no commitments to the existence of an eternally self-contemplating mode of thought, a divine Prime Mover that serves as the first principle and final cause of the entire ordered cosmos, and hence, a fitting object of the most complete theoretical wisdom. My argument makes no assumptions one way or another about whether such a being exists, and it can proceed without taking a stand on this point.

On the Aristotelian conception, theoretical wisdom is the ruling virtue of theoretical rationality. How an updated neo-Aristotelian view might best define theoretical rationality is a matter for dispute, but as a first stab,

⁶ On the egalitarian tendencies of contemporary virtue ethics, see Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "From Exasperating Virtues to Civic Virtues," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1996), pp. 303-314, at 310.

⁷ I say more about Aristotle's subordinating practical to the theoretical virtue in "Aristotle on Activity 'According to the Best and Most Final' Virtue," *Apeiron* 44 (2011), pp. 91-110.

I propose that theoretical rationality is something like a capacity for understanding matters about which agents do not directly engage in practical deliberation. Thus, insofar as a botanist seeks scientific understanding of a tomato's biological development, the tomato is an object of the scientist's theoretical reasoning; insofar as the botanist (*qua* chef) deliberates about how best to make a salad for lunch, the tomato is an object of her practical reasoning. So construed, theoretical rationality can be exercised well or badly, i.e., virtuously or viciously: we can exercise theoretical rationality in ways that actually do conduce to sound theoretical understanding; yet we can exercise this capacity in ways that fail to conduce to, or even fracture, such understanding.

While there may exist many theoretical intellectual virtues (including, e.g., scientific understanding), my neo-Aristotelian account identifies theoretical *wisdom* as that virtue in respect of which we exercise theoretical rationality excellently and attain sound understanding concerning matters about which we raise fundamental, ultimate, or philosophic questions. For example, we raise fundamental questions about, e.g., the nature of infinity, the value of tragic dramas, the character of scientific explanation, the existence of God, etc. Thus, we exercise theoretical wisdom in order to – and insofar as we – actively (and soundly) comprehend the nature of infinity, the value of tragic dramas, the character of scientific explanation, the existential status of divine being, etc.

On my account, possession of theoretical wisdom need not imply omniscience. First, to possess – and to exercise – theoretical wisdom in attaining (and enjoying) a philosophical understanding of certain fundamental issues is not necessarily to possess a synoptic philosophical understanding of all such issues. Thus, one can exercise theoretical wisdom in attaining (and enjoying) a sound philosophical understanding of the nature of infinity, yet lack such understanding of the value of tragic drama. Second, one counts as theoretically wise insofar as one's understanding of certain fundamental issues is sufficiently deep and rich, and insofar as one is capable of defending one's understanding against external challenges. Certainly, more needs to be said on this point, and I am not sure what threshold degree of understanding one requires to count as theoretically wise in an absolute sense. But on my account, the theoretically wise agent can be (i) fallible, (ii) capable of sound philosophical understanding with respect to some aspects of certain fundamental issues, but possibly ignorant and mistaken about other aspects of those issues, (iii) open to further improvement, etc. In other words, just as even a fully virtuous agent can both make mistakes and develop further with respect to the practical

virtues, the same follows for the theoretical intellectual virtues, including theoretical wisdom.⁸

Given these points, one already has preliminary resources for responding to the scope of ethics worry. For contemporary (neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethicists allow that (i) human flourishing falls under the scope of ethics and that (ii) such flourishing consists in the virtuous exercise of capacities expressive of human nature. But (iii) theoretical rationality is one of those capacities. Unlike other forms of life, we read books and magazines, watch television shows, listen to the radio, surf the Internet, tell stories, and engage in conversation. We do so in order to attain increasingly greater – and deeper – understanding of the world that we inhabit and to work our way through the puzzles with which it confronts us. Aristotle's famous opening line of the *Metaphysics* thus seems largely unassailable: "Human beings by nature desire to understand."⁹ So, although these activities do not all necessarily exercise theoretical wisdom, they are plausibly construed as either aiming at it or approximating it in various ways. Therefore, contemporary virtue ethicists should accept that (iv) the virtuous exercise of theoretical rationality in the attainment and enjoyment of sound philosophical understanding about fundamental issues is a constituent of flourishing of concern to ethics. I call this sort of response to the scope of ethics worry a *formal reply* to the worry. For given certain formal features of human flourishing and of theoretical wisdom, this reply argues that theoretical wisdom is worth consideration by normative virtue ethics.

As it turns out, the scope of ethics worry is not necessarily new, and one finds a similar formal reply in the Aristotelian corpus itself. For instance, the Aristotelian author of the *Magna Moralia* finds it necessary to justify the space that he devotes to theoretical wisdom.¹⁰ As he observes,

⁸ On the fallibility of the virtuous, see Shane Drefcinski, "Aristotle's Fallible *Phronimos*," *Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1995), pp. 139-154 and Howard J. Curzer, "How Good People Do Bad Things: Aristotle on the Misdeeds of the Virtuous," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2005), pp. 233-256. While the *realistic approach* that I adopt here avoids the worry that virtue can serve only as a utopian notion, one can, in principle, recast my view. One might hold, for instance, that an agent can approximate theoretical wisdom (without ever fully attaining it), just as one can approximate practical wisdom (without ever fully attaining it). In this way, one would preserve the notion of virtue as an ideal. So, on an *idealized approach*, theoretical wisdom need not be so different from practical wisdom: just as no one may be completely *phronimos*, so too no one is completely *sophos*, either. (I thank an anonymous referee for this point.)

⁹ This human desire to understand is usefully emphasized by Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Even if the *Magna Moralia* is not by Aristotle, I take it to present Aristotle's views.

“Someone might be puzzled and surprised that, when speaking about character and certain matters of politics, we speak about theoretical wisdom” (I.34, 1197b28–30). The author of the *Magna Moralia* offers two replies to such puzzlement. First, he points out that theoretical wisdom is a virtue, and so worth examination in an ethical treatise; second, he argues that the capacity for theoretical rationality *is*, in fact, a function of the soul constitutive of human nature, so that it is fitting to consider the virtuous exercise of this function, along with other functions of soul (1197b30–36).¹¹

Even if one does not accept Aristotle’s bolder claim that our “complete flourishing” consists in theoretical contemplation, such a formal reply shows that practical agents have good reason to cultivate – and to exercise – theoretical wisdom (concerning a range of objects) *for its own sake*, as part of a well-lived life. At the same time, given our various efforts to exercise theoretical rationality (both in our leisure time and in other domains), this formal reply shows that theoretical wisdom is a virtue relevant to a significant range of our conduct (i.e., as thinkers). For these reasons, such a formal reply largely suffices to defuse the scope of ethics worry: the reply shows the relevance of theoretical wisdom for ethics broadly construed.

Nevertheless, I believe that theoretical wisdom is relevant to the concerns of contemporary virtue ethics in another, less obvious way. Here, I defend a more controversial claim. I argue that just as one’s possession and exercise of ethical virtues such as courage and moderation benefit from one’s possession and exercise of practical wisdom, so too one’s possession and exercise of this latter virtue benefit from one’s possession and exercise of theoretical wisdom. That is, I argue that a philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good – attained and enjoyed through the cultivation and exercise of theoretical wisdom – specially conduces to one’s full development and exercise of the practical virtues, viz., practical wisdom and the ethical virtues. In other words, the same considerations that provide virtue ethicists reason to attend carefully to the intellectual virtue of *practical* wisdom (viz., that virtue’s role in ethically virtuous action) also provide them reason to devote similar attention to *theoretical* wisdom.

Before I continue, three points:

(i) By a “full development of the practical virtues” (or, as I often write, “fully developed practical virtue”), I do not necessarily mean a perfect or flawless development of such virtue(s). For space considerations, I do not address what standards for “full” development are most defensible. But

¹¹ Cf. Aristotle’s response to the worry that theoretical wisdom is useless: *EN* VI.12, 1143b18–20; 1144a1–5.

I assume neither excessively high, utopian standards that no agent can meet, nor excessively low, permissive standards that every agent already meets. Rather, I assume moderate, realistic standards, which most agents can meet, though only with adequate time, with appropriate effort, and without assured success.¹²

(ii) An interesting case, I believe, can be made for the fairly bold claim that one's possession of theoretical wisdom is actually necessary or required for fully developed practical virtue. But against this fairly bold claim, one might always identify ways in which one can fully develop practical virtue without exercising theoretical wisdom. Hence, I do not defend this fairly bold claim here. Nor do I have to. Rather, to respond completely to the scope of ethics worry, it suffices to show that theoretical wisdom is specially conducive to fully developed practical virtue. So, even if alternative possible means exist for developing full practical virtue, as I allow, one has further reason to abandon the scope of ethics worry if the exercise of theoretical wisdom can make a clear, reasonable, relevant, direct, and reliable contribution to fully developed practical virtue. By rough analogy, one can remove staples with one's teeth, but there are good reasons to use a staple remover. Similarly, even if other means provide the benefits for fully developed practical virtue that theoretical wisdom offers, there are good reasons to favor theoretical wisdom. This claim about theoretical wisdom, though more modest than the fairly bold claim, is bold enough.¹³

(iii) In responding completely to the scope of ethics worry, I appropriate some of Aristotle's own views. My readings of Aristotle, as interpretations, are open to challenge. Yet my focus is less on defending a certain reading of Aristotle than on using Aristotelian insights to derive interesting results. My arguments, then, seek to provide nothing more than a neo-Aristotelian response to the scope of ethics worry.

My additional reply to the scope of ethics worry takes its bearings from Aristotle's account of how one becomes a virtuous agent.¹⁴ Although

¹² On moderate/realistic standards of virtue, see Curzer, "How Good People Do Bad Things." On such standards for flourishing, cf. Stephen A. White, "Is Aristotelian Happiness a Good Life or the Best Life?" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990), pp. 97-137, at 103-107.

¹³ Cf. Aristotle's views on animal locomotion. While animals can direct their movement through space by reliance on the basic sense-modalities of touch and taste, they will encounter greater success by using other senses that enable them to perceive objects of avoidance and pursuit at a distance (*De Anima* III.12, esp. 434b24-27).

¹⁴ My account generally follows Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 67-68; M.F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 69-92. The role of corrective punishment in eliciting awareness

Aristotle denies that virtue is, strictly speaking, an art or skill (*technê*), Aristotle nevertheless compares learning to be good to learning a skill. In particular, becoming virtuous, like becoming skilled, requires practice (*EN* II.1, 1103a31-b2). Through practice in performing virtuous deeds – a practice aided by the corrective influence of parents and the law, which instill a sense of shame at performing vicious actions – an agent learning to be good attains certain insights into virtuous action. Specifically, the learner attains a grasp of “the that” (*to hoti*), an awareness *that* certain deeds and qualities of character are virtuous, noble, and choiceworthy for themselves. Possessing this grasp of the “that,” the young learner attains a state of *basic decency*. He performs certain kinds of actions because he can see *that* they are called for and *that* they are worth performing. Nevertheless, the young learner is still prone to error, for he lacks sufficient life experience (*EN* I.3, 1095a4-9). Hence, there is room for him to make further progress through further practice. As he grows older, and gains additional experience and maturity, he will (all things remaining equal) become *reliably decent*.

But reliable decency, as good a state as it is, does not constitute virtue. To see why, consider the similarities between skill and virtue. Skill requires more than an experienced grasp of the “that,” i.e., a disposition for reliably producing certain results within skill-relative parameters of excess and deficiency. On the contrary, skill requires a reasoned understanding of the “why” (*to dioti*), i.e., an awareness of *why* certain actions are to be done and *why* certain products are good (see, e.g., *Metaphysics* A.1, 981a24-26; *Posterior Analytics* II.19, 100a6-9). To be skilled, as opposed to decently competent, the practitioner must understand what he is doing and why he does it. Such an understanding is internal to the skilled performer. *Qua* skilled, he does not depend on others to provide it.

On the skill analogy, the same general points apply to ethical virtue. Ethical excellence – excellence in action and passion – also requires a grasp of the “why,” i.e., an understanding of why certain actions and character-traits are good, noble, and choiceworthy for themselves. Thus, when Aristotle describes the conditions that a virtuous agent must meet, he denies that even reliable dispositions to intermediate actions, i.e., actions that happen to attain the mean between excess and deficiency in action

of the “that” is emphasized by Howard J. Curzer, “Aristotle’s Painful Path to Virtue,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002), pp. 141-162. On decency, see John M. Cooper, “Political Community and the Highest Good,” in *Being, Nature, and Life in Aristotle: Essays in Honor of Allan Gotthelf*, ed. James G. Lennox and Robert Bolton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 212-264, at 218-220.

and passion, suffice for ethical virtue. Instead, ethical virtue requires one to be disposed to perform the relevant actions in the way that a virtuous agent would perform them (*EN* II.4, 1105b5-9). To be ethically virtuous, one must not only decide on certain actions for themselves and perform those actions from a steady state of character; rather, one must perform those actions *knowingly* (*eidôs*) (*EN* II.4, 1105a26-33). Again, virtuous agency requires one to act on the basis of one's own internalized understanding of why certain actions are choiceworthy. To rely on the understanding of others who provide counsel is to remain in the position of a learner.¹⁵

As noted earlier, the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom can be exercised in various ways. It can conduce to philosophical understanding in, e.g., theology, metaphysics, natural science, and mathematics. Even if, as I have argued, the exercise of theoretical wisdom in these domains is choiceworthy for its own sake as part of a well-lived human life, I do not claim that all such exercises of theoretical wisdom are directly relevant to cultivating practical virtue. A sound understanding of, e.g., the ontological status of imaginary numbers is apt to be useful for practical virtue, at best, in an extremely indirect way. But given what I call *the understanding requirement* for ethical virtue, a clear and direct role for theoretical wisdom in perfecting practical virtue arises naturally. Theoretical wisdom can provide cognitive access to a philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good. And an agent with such an understanding is capable of the deepest and richest understanding of why certain actions and traits of character are choiceworthy. So, for the sake of such understanding, at least, a practical agent has reason to cultivate (and exercise) theoretical wisdom.

In various passages that draw an analogy between practical wisdom and the art of medicine, Aristotle himself offers reasons to think that a philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good contributes to a suitably robust grasp of the “why” in the exercise of ethical virtue.¹⁶

¹⁵ To be sure, Aristotle writes that “with respect to the virtues, knowing (*to eidenai*) is of little or no power,” whereas (i) choosing actions for their own sake and (ii) acting from a steady state of character are crucial (*EN* II.4, 1105a34-b5). I take Aristotle to suggest that understanding is of little or no importance to virtuous agency *relatively speaking*. Agents with experience *and* a grasp of the “why” will presumably perform best: Aristotle recognizes them as more honorable and more authoritative than other agents (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981a24-b10; A.2, 982a17-19).

¹⁶ Cf. *Eudemian Ethics* I.6, 1216b36-39. In *Protrepticus* 10 (54.22-55.7 Pistelli/B46-B51 Düring), Aristotle's extended argument for the usefulness of philosophy, Aristotle explicitly defends something like the general view that I am proposing. I discuss this argument in “The Utility of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2010),

For example, in *EN* I.7, Aristotle offers a preliminary sketch of the human good by reference to human nature, i.e., the human being's organized system of functional capacities. And in *EN* I.13, Aristotle explicitly compares (i) the theoretical understanding to be possessed by one sort of practically wise agent, viz., the practically wise legislator and (ii) the scientific understanding of bodily health to be possessed by the skilled doctor.

In this latter passage, Aristotle suggests that the good doctor benefits from a scientific understanding of the virtue of the body, viz., health. Such an understanding is not some "rationalistic" imposition onto whatever medical skill that the doctor independently attains through practical experience. On the contrary, such an understanding is especially beneficial to the doctor's practice *qua* doctor. The doctor practices medicine best when guided by a scientific understanding of the body itself, its component parts, and the ordering of these parts that conduces to the body's good functioning, a functioning that can be disrupted by excess and deficiency, i.e., disease. Similarly, the practically wise legislator, who deliberates over the good of the city and its citizens, benefits from a philosophical understanding of the virtue of the human soul. This understanding is not an imposition onto the legislator's early ethical education; on the contrary, it completes that education. The practically wise legislator thus benefits from understanding the soul itself, its component elements, and the ordering of these elements conducive to the soul's excellent functioning, a functioning that can also be disrupted by excess and deficiency, i.e., vice (1102a15-23; cf. *Politics* VII.14, 1333a36-39).¹⁷ (One might worry that Aristotle here speaks only about the sort of understanding that will be required by

pp. 135-153. For a related discussion of how theoretical wisdom might guide practical virtue, see the brief remarks of Joseph Owens, "Aristotle's Notion of Wisdom," *Apeiron* 20 (1987), pp. 1-16, at 9, 11. Cf. Thomas Sherman, "Human Happiness and the Role of Philosophical Wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (2002), pp. 467-492 and "Wisdom and Action-Guidance in the Agent-Based Virtue Ethics of Aristotle," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (2006), pp. 481-506.

¹⁷ On the legislator as akin to a doctor, see also *Eudemian Ethics* VIII.3, 1249a22-b5 and the remarks of Anthony Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics: A Study of the Relationship Between the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 181. On Aristotle's medical analogy, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On Stoic and Buddhist developments of the analogy, see Christopher W. Gowans, "Medical Analogies in Buddhist and Hellenistic Thought: Tranquility and Anger," in *Philosophy as Therapeia* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 66), ed. Claire Carlisle and Jonardon Ganeri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 11-33.

legislators, agents who exercise the virtue of *phronêsis* on behalf of the city's well-being. Yet both the legislator and the individual agent would stand to benefit from a theoretical understanding of the good, insofar as both are to possess practical wisdom [*EN* I.2, 1094a22–24]. Since, on Aristotle's view, practical wisdom and political science are the same in kind [*EN* VI.8], I take it that Aristotle's point applies to individual agents, too.)

To be sure, Aristotle himself does not explicitly say in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that theoretical wisdom is the virtue required to attain a philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good. And he may have special reasons of clarity to avoid doing so, for he suggests that the best or paradigmatic objects of theoretical wisdom are divine and somehow above humanity (*EN* VI.7). Aristotle's own views aside, however, it is reasonable for the *Aristotelian* to identify theoretical wisdom as the intellectual virtue that conduces to the relevant understanding. For unlike particular human actions or historical events (and bracketing issues about genetic engineering), human nature is not itself a matter over which one deliberates. On the contrary, human nature is a relatively unchanging object of philosophical investigation and puzzlement, and an issue of fundamental questioning, at least for human beings. The same, I take it, follows for the human good, i.e., human nature in its flourishing condition.¹⁸

Before moving on, I address three questions that my proposal immediately raises.

(i) If theoretical wisdom conduces to fully developed practical virtue in the manner that I propose, can my account still distinguish theoretical reasoning from practical reasoning? Do I not suggest that practical reasoning absorbs theoretical reasoning? In response, I see no problem. To say that virtuous theoretical reasoning is conducive to virtuous practical reasoning does not imply that elucidating and comprehending the human good is, by itself, an exercise of virtuous practical reasoning. My account distinguishes between theoretical and practical reasoning by reference to their respective objects. Yet it holds that (a) virtuous theoretical reasoning

¹⁸ Aristotle does think that the theoretically wise agent will be apt to know the good of each thing, since the good is one of the primary causes (*Metaphysics* A.2, 982b4–10). Even if one allows that one can deliberate practically *about* "what pertains to the end" of a good life by deliberating *about* what subordinate ends to pursue as constitutive parts of a good life, my proposal maintains that the human good can still be an object of theoretical understanding, just as the health of the body can be, and that this theoretical understanding of the human good can and should inform any deliberation *about* what subordinate ends to pursue as part of a good life.

is instrumentally beneficial for virtuous practical reasoning, and that (b) the latter has a basis in the former.¹⁹

(ii) Why think that there exists a determinate, objective account of the human good that (a) theoretical wisdom can uncover and that (b) can be useful for all human agents, given their vast diversity? In response, an objective account of flourishing need not be *uniquely specifiable* for all human agents, any more than an objective account of health must be *uniquely specifiable* for all human bodies. Although the same general account of health (based on the nature of the human body) may pertain to all human beings, we should expect this account to admit of *plural specification* to apply to the full range of human body types, physiologies, etc. Similarly, although the same general account of flourishing (based on human nature) may pertain to all human beings, we should expect this account to admit of *plural specification* to apply to the full range of human personalities, backgrounds, talents, etc.²⁰ Human diversity does not undermine my core proposal.

(iii) I have said that it is possible (in principle) to attain a certain understanding required for fully developed practical virtue through other means, but that theoretical wisdom is specially conducive to that understanding. Is my claim, however, really defensible? For instance, if one can attain a non-theoretically mediated grasp of the “why,” on what basis is one better off pursuing theoretical wisdom? In response, there are good reasons to think that a theoretically mediated, philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good will possess an explicitness and articulacy lacking in non-theoretically mediated understanding. And there are two special benefits that such explicitness and articulacy can provide.

The first key benefit is a special attunement to salient detail in one’s varied circumstances. Just like Aristotle’s archer, who possesses a clear

¹⁹ On this point, see Lloyd Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 66. Cf. Owens, “Aristotle’s Notion of Wisdom,” p. 9. While, e.g., D.J. Allan (*The Philosophy of Aristotle*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970], pp. 123–124) rightly holds that the practically wise agent will possess a philosophical understanding of human nature and the place of human beings in the cosmos, I see no reason to think that the practically wise agent obtains this understanding through the exercise of *practical* wisdom.

²⁰ On plural specification of the human good, see, e.g., Martha C. Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), pp. 32–53. Similarly, Hursthouse (*On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 212–213) argues that even if “all good human beings are the same at least in so far as they all possess and exercise the virtues,” we should still expect a great diversity among flourishing human lives.

view of the target, one possessing a theoretically articulate understanding of one's nature and one's good would stand the best chance of hitting the mark (see *EN* I.2, 1094a22-24). An experienced doctor with a scientific understanding of the human body and human health is capable of sharper discernment than a practitioner without such understanding. Similarly, an experienced agent guided by a sound philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good would be capable of sharper discernment than an agent without such understanding when confronted with the ever-changing circumstances of life. As Aristotle observes in *EE* VIII.2's discussion of good fortune, it is not a matter of luck that those with practical wisdom do well; for, like the skilled practitioner, they can give an account of why they do what they do (1247a12-16).²¹ It is not clear that an agent who lacks theoretical wisdom will be in as good a position to do this.

The second key benefit is a fortification of one's virtue. The enhanced understanding that theoretical wisdom makes possible confirms to the virtuous agent her sense of what really is choiceworthy. Hence, it provides additional, sustaining motivation for her to pursue the good.²² By the same token, the agent with a sound and articulate philosophical understanding of her nature and her good finds diminished attraction to defective conceptions of the good life. She can explicitly identify and explain (to herself, to others) what is wrong with those conceptions. In (i) environments where one is apt to receive bad ethical advice from others and in (ii) ethically risky circumstances (i.e., those in which it might be difficult for even the best agent to resist the pull of temptation), the theoretically wise agent can explicitly reaffirm (to herself, to others) the reasons for which she pursues the conception of the good life that she does. By contrast, the virtuous agent without such understanding has a less stable and less thought-through understanding of what really is good. Accordingly, his virtuous agency is apt to be impeded in ways that the theoretically wise agent's is not.²³

²¹ For a related view, see Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 71. (Nussbaum nevertheless identifies the understanding that provides the relevant clarity about the human good as practical, not theoretical.)

²² On how an understanding of the "why" provides enhanced motivation, see Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," p. 81. Burnyeat does not explicitly attribute this understanding to the exercise of theoretical wisdom.

²³ Cf. Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 405. I have benefited from discussing these arguments with Brad Cokelet.

III. The Medical Analogy in Question

At this point, one might have worries about the analogy between practical wisdom and medicine. A first worry: one might think that the analogy is bad. For instance, one might argue that there is wide agreement about what constitutes physical health, yet relative disagreement about what constitutes human flourishing.²⁴ A second worry: one might accept the analogy, but argue that it actually confirms the marginality of theoretical wisdom to normative virtue ethics. Thus, one might argue, just as there is no reason for us each to become a doctor (and so, no corresponding reason for us each to pursue a robust scientific understanding of the human body), there is, similarly, no reason for us each to develop practical wisdom (and so, no reason for us each to pursue theoretical wisdom). On the contrary, one might think, whether one has reason to develop practical wisdom (and, by extension, theoretical wisdom) will be a function of one's particular tastes, i.e., of whether one has a certain proclivity for exercising excellent practical (and theoretical) reasoning.

My response to the first worry (concerning disagreements about human flourishing) will be brief. I concede the existence of these disagreements, yet question whether anything interesting follows. Mere disagreement about flourishing does not, by itself, show that flourishing is somehow different in kind from health, and that an objective account of flourishing (akin to an objective account of health) is impossible.

In response to the second worry, viz., that the medical analogy inadvertently confirms theoretical wisdom's marginality to normative virtue ethics: I note that Aristotle himself recognizes the imperfections of the analogy between medicine and practical wisdom. Indeed, he observes that one key difference between medicine and practical wisdom is that each of us does have reason to cultivate practical wisdom, but not medical skill (*EN* VI.12, 1143b32-33). Three differences between medicine and practical wisdom are especially salient.²⁵ First, one can intentionally misuse a skill, whereas one cannot intentionally misuse practical wisdom (*EN* VI.5, 1140b20-24). Second, whereas skills concern some limited domain within human life, e.g., health, practical wisdom concerns the direction of human life as a whole (*EN* VI.5, 1140a28-31). Third, and most importantly, while it is not

²⁴ See, e.g., Gowans, "Medical Analogies in Buddhist and Hellenistic Thought," pp. 26-27.

²⁵ For other disanalogies between practical wisdom and skill, see Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 154. Cf. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, pp. 69-75.

constitutive of one's human nature to be a doctor, it *is* so constitutive that one is a practical reasoner, i.e., an agent capable of directing one's life and action and pursuing one's good on the basis of reasoned judgment. Indeed, Aristotle reasonably thinks that one is "most of all" identifiable with one's capacities for practical reasoning and judgment (*EN* IX.4; IX.8); such capacities play a special role in manifesting who and what one is. But the virtues are those states that develop our capacities for rational agency and through which we exercise these capacities well. Thus, even if we are necessarily embodied and face the prospect of injury and disease, we do not yet each have reason to cultivate medical skill. Likewise, if an agent does not cultivate the art of medicine himself, but rather, delegates that art to his doctor, that agent does not necessarily suffer any loss to his flourishing.

By contrast, one cannot delegate one's ongoing exercise of the "art" of practical wisdom to another agent without impairment to one's flourishing, viz., an important loss of self-direction. True, some people (e.g., the severely disabled) may be substantially dependent on the judgment of others for planning their lives, and they might benefit from such reliance in a qualified way. Yet there is no reason to think that such people truly flourish in such conditions. For *they* do not exercise their capacities for rational agency well.²⁶ Each of us, then, is condemned, so to speak, to exercise the "art" of practical wisdom – and not necessarily such specialized skills as medicine.

But does it follow that we each have reason to cultivate theoretical wisdom? Against my affirmative proposal, one might object that it is possible for an agent simply to rely on the excellent theoretical reasoning of others. Thus, one might argue, just as we each have reason to hope only that at least someone in our community is expert at medical science, so too we each have reason to hope only that at least someone in our community possesses theoretical wisdom. At best, just as we perhaps each have reason to pursue only a basic understanding of medical science's results, not expertise in medical science as such, so too perhaps we each have reason to pursue only a basic understanding of theoretical wisdom's results, not theoretical wisdom as such.²⁷

In reply, if opponents of my full proposal are willing to concede these latter points, then they effectively concede that theoretical wisdom is worth the renewed attention of contemporary virtue ethicists. True, the issues of (i) how broadly this virtue should be distributed and (ii) whether every

²⁶ On the importance of self-direction to flourishing, cf. Jennifer Whiting, "Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense," *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988), pp. 33-48, at 42-43.

²⁷ I thank Howard Curzer for raising this worry.

individual has (at least *prima facie*) reason to cultivate this virtue would remain open for debate. Yet there would be room for consensus on the point that practical agents have reason to care that theoretical wisdom is cultivated in their communities (so that the members of those communities develop ethically). And since the issue of how our communities promote our ethical development is important to virtue ethicists, even an opponent of my full proposal has further reason at this point to abandon the scope of ethics worry.

But there will be still more compelling reasons to abandon this worry if theoretical wisdom turns out to be like any of the other virtues, i.e., if each of us has reason to cultivate it. To argue for this stronger claim, consider the doctor. To be skilled in medicine, it is useful for her to be broadly informed in several areas (e.g., dietetics, exercise science, etc.). The doctor benefits from knowing the results of such fields, which might be relevant, but not central, to her practice as a doctor. Yet in addition to being broadly informed, it is important for the aspiring doctor (*qua* doctor) to cultivate a fairly expert scientific understanding in areas central to her practice. *Qua* doctor, for instance, it is important for her to possess a fairly expert scientific understanding of the body (and thus to master, e.g., biology and anatomy). In virtue of her robust scientific understanding of the body, the practicing doctor is in a good position to evaluate the claims of various medical researchers with respect to various regimens, prescriptions, etc. She is unlike the medical student, who has not become an autonomous practitioner, and who still principally depends on the judgment of other doctors. On the contrary, the scientifically educated doctor is in a position most fully to exercise her skill *as* a doctor.

A similar pattern, I suggest, stands to hold with respect to practical wisdom. As with the doctor, the practically wise agent benefits from being broadly informed about the results of various arts and sciences. He benefits from being, in Aristotle's terms, "generally educated" (*holôs pepaideumenos*: *On the Parts of Animals* I.1, 639a9–11). For instance, familiarity with the results of economics enables him to be prudent with his wealth (cf. *Politics* I.11, 1258b9–11; 33–35). Likewise, he gains from grasping the results of medical science, and not necessarily from pursuing expertise in the art of medicine (*Politics* III.11, 1282a3–7). For the practically wise agent must exercise prudent judgment with respect to (i) his own diet and exercise and to (ii) the prescriptions and advice of his doctor.²⁸

²⁸ See C.D.C. Reeve, "Aristotelian Education," in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 49–63, at 56–57.

Yet beyond general educatedness, the practically wise agent (*qua* practically wise) stands to benefit from an expert understanding of certain areas of central relevance to his practical agency. Thus, it is important for the practically wise agent to possess a well-developed philosophical understanding of his nature and his good (and not simply a memorized set of views from Philosophy 101). For in possessing this understanding, he is in the best position to evaluate various proposals concerning how he should understand himself and how he should live. He is unlike other agents, who, at best, are substantially dependent on the judgment of others concerning various conceptions of human nature and the human good. The theoretically wise agent with an expert understanding of his nature and his good is thus in a position most fully to exercise his practical wisdom.

Moreover, the practically virtuous agent has at least some ongoing reason to exercise theoretical wisdom throughout his life. For the ongoing exercise of theoretical wisdom allows an agent to sharpen, to refine, and to clarify his understanding of himself and his good in the light of his ongoing experience as a practical and theoretical agent. As such an agent continues to develop in theoretical wisdom, his capacity to pick out salient features of his circumstances will continue to improve, as will his confidence in, and commitment to, the understanding of himself and his good that guides his actions.²⁹

IV. The “Platonic Fantasy” Worry

Here, my proposal faces the worry that it assumes an excessively intellectualist model of practical reasoning, which Sarah Broadie labels the “Grand End” theory, and which John McDowell calls “the blueprint picture.”³⁰

²⁹ Cf. the interesting remarks (with reference to Socrates) in John M. Cooper, “Socrates and Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Maieusis: Essays on Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 20–43, at 30–31. Here, I am not committed to the view that each of us has reason to pursue the maximally demanding pursuit of wisdom that Socrates recommends in, say, the *Apology of Socrates*.

³⁰ See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 198–202; John McDowell, “Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 21–34. Cf. Michael Oakshott, “The Tower of Babel,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1962), pp. 465–487. Some of Broadie’s specific criticisms of the Grand End theory are met by Richard Kraut, “In Defense of the Grand End,” *Ethics* 103 (1993), pp. 361–374.

Rosalind Hursthouse presents this sort of worry succinctly when she argues against the thought that disciplined theoretical reflection is required for virtuous agency:

When philosophers start to imply that it is a necessary condition of virtue that the virtuous have reflected long and hard about what *eudaimonia* consists in and worked out a picture of what is involved in acting well so comprehensive and substantial that it can be applied and its application justified in every suitable case, we may be sure that they are falling victim to what could be called ‘the Platonic fantasy’. This is the fantasy that it is only through the study of philosophy that one can become virtuous (or really virtuous), and, as soon as it is stated explicitly, it is revealed to be a fantasy that must be most strenuously resisted.³¹

According to Hursthouse, Brodie, and McDowell, then, we should reject a model of practical reasoning according to which the practically wise agent must be (i) a philosopher (ii) in possession of a comprehensive blueprint of the human good (iii) from which he or she can (or must) read off the right actions to perform. I grant to Hursthouse, Brodie, and McDowell the absurdity of this model of practical reasoning. But my case for rehabilitating theoretical wisdom does not assume such a model.

Concerning feature (i): My proposal accepts that cultivating the virtue of theoretical wisdom – like cultivating any virtue – requires one to devote time and effort and interest, i.e., love, to that cultivation. Hence, my proposal does imply that fully developed practical virtue is promoted by being a lover of theoretical wisdom – and so, a philosopher – in a minimal or colloquial sense. But my proposal denies that cultivating theoretical wisdom requires one to be a philosopher in the stronger sense of granting supremacy to theoretical wisdom in one’s life, viz., by organizing one’s activities around that virtue as the dominant end of one’s life, or by seeking to maximize that virtue’s exercise. (Moreover, to be entirely clear, my proposal denies that one must be a *professional* philosopher to possess fully developed practical virtue.)

Concerning features (ii) and (iii): My proposal assumes that the practically wise agent will possess a sound philosophical understanding of human nature and the human good. But it is a further question whether this substantive conception is best described as a “blueprint” of the good. For a “blueprint” seems to be just the sort of substantive conception of the

³¹ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 137. I take it that Aristotle himself is open to this “Platonic fantasy” charge as well, insofar as (i) he remains, in deep respects, a Platonist who (ii) accepts that theoretical understanding serves as a basis for practical reasoning. Again, see Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, p. 66.

good from which one *can* read off the right actions, just as an architect's blueprint is the sort of substantive conception of a building from which a contractor can read off what features of a building to construct. My proposal, however, does not assume that one, while acting, can or should "read off" what actions to perform from one's philosophical understanding of one's nature and one's good. Hence, my proposal does not assume a "blueprint picture" of practical reasoning.

Once again, the medical analogy is useful for articulating the role that theoretical wisdom plays in the conception of practical reasoning that I defend. The doctor's scientific understanding of medicine and the health of the body does not serve as a "blueprint" admitting of direct and ready application, i.e., a constant, explicit reference point for every medical decision (e.g., about what to do with this particular coronary patient in surgery *now*). On the contrary, the doctor's scientific understanding informs and perfects the doctor's judgment at a dispositional level. Theoretical wisdom, I suggest, can do the same for the practically wise agent. While the practically wise agent's philosophical understanding of the human good informs and perfects his judgment – again, it directs him to salient features of situations and enables him to make more reliable decisions – the practically wise agent need not appeal explicitly to this understanding at any and every moment in his decision-making. Contrary to the "Platonic fantasy" worry, then, the thought that theoretical insight plays a special role in the full development of practical virtue does not require one also to accept an unpromising mechanical model of practical reasoning.³²

V. Responding to the Elitism Worry

The issues that I have just addressed naturally lead one to the elitism worry. Again, according to this worry, theoretical wisdom, whether enjoyed for its own sake or for its guidance of practical judgment, lies beyond most people's capacities. It requires intellectual talents and gifts that cannot (in principle) be widely shared. And since theoretical wisdom is therefore not a virtue that human beings (in general) have reason to cultivate, it is sensible for a contemporary virtue ethics to leave it alone.

In response, one might perhaps admit that the virtue of theoretical wisdom is not widely cultivated. But does it follow that theoretical wisdom

³² Cf. Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 135-142.

cannot be widely cultivated? It is a familiar point from Plato and Aristotle that the virtues that agents cultivate, or take special care to develop, are inevitably influenced by what the dominant institutions of their societies prize and value. And it is plausible to think that our currently dominant set of political, economic, and educational institutions do not necessarily prioritize the cultivation of theoretical wisdom. But before one concludes that certain kinds of human excellence are closed off to human beings in general and in principle, one should not overlook the role of such institutions in influencing the modes of human excellence that we tend to develop.

Moreover, one should be careful about too quickly assuming a certain innatist conception of human intellectual capacity. According to this conception, (i) one's intellectual capacity ("intelligence") is predetermined and limited by one's genetic endowment, and (ii) the distribution of intellectual capacity in a population falls along a bell curve, with small numbers of the population naturally falling into either the very low or very high range. Much current empirical research, however, challenges this innatist conception.³³ Further, a subject's score on traditional IQ tests is largely a function of that subject's speed at analytical problem-solving tasks. I see no reason to think, however, that the capacity for philosophical understanding requires *that* precise sort of intellectual ability.

Such matters aside, one might worry that the cultivation of theoretical wisdom still requires a certain motivation and temperament that is not widely shared.³⁴ In reply, however, I am not sure why this should be the case. As I suggested earlier, we have a false conception of ourselves if we ignore our status as agents who actually *enjoy* exercising our capacities to understand the world in increasingly deeper and more comprehensive ways. Moreover, recent work on "philosophy for children" shows how open and excited children are to develop their philosophical understanding about the world in which they live.³⁵

³³ For an accessible, and heavily documented, overview, see David Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ Is Wrong* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

³⁴ For a related worry, see Francis Sparshott, *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 345. At *Politics* VII.14, 1333a27–30, Aristotle maintains that theoretical activities are choiceworthy for those (few) who are able to engage in them. Aristotle also makes various disparaging remarks about "the many." While such passages may suggest that Aristotle believes that theoretical wisdom is unavailable to all, they do not make clear whether this unavailability is (i) essential and in-principle or (ii) contingent and remediable.

³⁵ For an overview, see Michael Pritchard, "Philosophy for Children," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/children/>.

Again, practical virtue might be developed more or less completely: the excellence of practical agents can range from (i) basic decency to (ii) reliable decency to (iii) fully developed virtue. Agents who pursue vocations in, e.g., firefighting, might well have the opportunity to devote special devotion and energy to exercising the virtue of courage. Nevertheless, the set of fully courageous agents need not be restricted to the set of those whose vocations provide special opportunities for exercising that virtue. The same holds, I propose, for theoretical wisdom. Thus, theoretical wisdom might well be exercised on a grand scale and with special energy only by certain cognitive agents whose peculiar interests lead them to pay extra attention to exercising it (e.g., philosophers or physicists who devote their lives to understanding the fundamental structure of reality, or of certain of its domains). Yet this set of cognitive agents need not constitute (anything like) the totality of theoretically wise agents. Once more, if one assumes realistic, but still demanding, standards for theoretical wisdom, it seems reasonable to think that any unmaimed cognitive agent can (ultimately) cultivate theoretical wisdom, even if many (or even the majority of) such agents, in fact, do not.

How best to determine what degree of intellectual cultivation is required for theoretical wisdom is, of course, a matter that requires further discussion. On the one hand, if standards for theoretical wisdom are too low, then we lose sense of theoretical wisdom as an *excellence*. Moreover, if standards for theoretical wisdom are satisfied by what most people already know and understand about the world, then my thesis risks triviality. On the other hand, if standards are too high, then my thesis risks corresponding implausibility.

On my realistic approach, I take it that theoretical wisdom requires habits of mind that stretch beyond certain basic and reliable dispositions for the relevant sort of theoretical understanding. Here, I mean those dispositions that most people are apt to attain as a matter of course in the ordinary pursuit of a decent primary and secondary education (of the sort offered by existing educational institutions). For assuming that one cultivates virtue through practice, theoretical wisdom would presumably require (i) sustained practice in thinking hard about, and grappling with, a broad range of fundamental questions, and thereby (ii) attaining intellectual resources for independently pursuing problems further. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, the cultivation of theoretical wisdom would benefit from (a) a certain higher education that emphasizes engagement with such fundamental questions and from (b) ongoing self-education and reflection throughout the course of one's mature adulthood. In the abstract, one cannot dictate what course of intellectual education will best cultivate theoretical wisdom

in each cognitive agent. But lest there be any doubt, I do not propose that theoretical wisdom, as I describe it in this paper, can be secured only in some *narrow way*, only by the *very best* cognitive agents, and only in a course of a *maximally demanding* higher education (including, say, a complete curriculum of *post-graduate* study).³⁶

In short, the elitism worry can be largely defanged. At any rate, it will do no good for contemporary virtue ethicists to sweep theoretical wisdom under the rug on the grounds that theoretical wisdom is not the sort of virtue that is widely available. If I am wrong, and it turns out that theoretical wisdom actually requires rare intellectual gifts, then presumably so should the practical intellectual virtue of *phronêsis*; yet, as with courage, practical wisdom does not seem to be restricted in principle only to a very few. Or at least neo-Aristotelians hope.³⁷

In closing, Aristotle himself sometimes suggests that theoretical wisdom is apt – in some sense – to be rare. He insists that the person who possesses theoretical wisdom understands difficult matters (*EN* VI.7, 1141b6-7; *Metaphysics* A.2, 982a10-11). On this basis, one might conclude that Aristotle himself agrees that theoretical wisdom must necessarily be the reserve of a small coterie of geniuses. Yet there is another dimension to Aristotle's thinking that is most manifest in remaining fragments of his exhortation to philosophy, the *Protrepticus*, which, I note, Aristotle intends for a broad and popular audience. In these passages, Aristotle suggests that the exercise of something like theoretical wisdom is actually easy, at least compared to other pursuits. First, such wisdom is pleasant in itself and requires no external rewards to spur us on to pursue it; on the contrary, it provides its own incentives to be cultivated further (*Protrepticus* 6 40.20-24 Pistelli/B55 Düring; cf. *EN* X.4 1175a30-36; X.7, 1177a22-27). Second, such wisdom does not require special tools or workspace, but rather, can be enjoyed wherever and whenever one wishes (40.24-41.2 Pistelli/B56 Düring; cf. *EN* X.7, 1177a27-b1). I cannot address the adequacy of these arguments here, but they are worth considering if we are inclined to think that developing theoretical

³⁶ For a different response to the elitism worry (which proposes that most agents can enjoy something like philosophical contemplation while viewing tragic dramas), see Ralph McInerny, "Some Reflections on Aristotle and Elitism," *The Review of Metaphysics* 61 (2008), pp. 489-502, esp. 500-502.

³⁷ For the worry that even the virtue ethicist's requirement of practical wisdom is elitist (because practical wisdom is not available to most people), see Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 53-54. Her objections are met by Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 29-30 and Frans Svensson, "Virtue Ethics and Elitism," *Philosophical Papers* 37 (2008), pp. 131-155, at 133-140.

wisdom is necessarily beyond the ken of ordinary humanity, or excessively burdensome compared to the myriad other projects that human beings pursue in their personal and professional lives. At the very least, I hope to have shown in this paper that theoretical wisdom and the questions it raises – including questions about its relative difficulty – are worth investigating anew.³⁸

³⁸ For comments and discussion of earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to audiences at “New Perspectives on Virtue and Vice” (a conference organized by Julia Peters at the Center for Advanced Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians University), “Eudaimonia and Virtue: Rethinking the Good Life” (a conference organized by Brad Cokelet, Blaine Fowers, and Veronika Huta at the University of Miami), and the Yale Working Group in Ancient Philosophy. For helpful written comments, I offer special thanks to Brad Cokelet, Howard Curzer, and a referee for this journal. Finally, I am grateful for support from the American Council of Learned Societies, and to Rutgers University, New Brunswick, where I worked on this paper as a New Faculty Fellow.