Critical Reflection on a Flourishing Life

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Introduction

Like many virtue theorists, I consider virtues to be constitutive of living a flourishing life. But in this paper I draw on self-regulation theories in psychology (i.e. theories pertaining to goal setting and goal striving) to get a more in-depth perspective on the relationship between flourishing and the virtues that are constitutive of it. In terms of goal setting, presumably most people have some conception of a flourishing life, as the cultural and social environment in which we are raised already furnishes us with ideas about what it is to live well, as well as some conceptions about what counts as a virtues and vices. Virtues and vices give us more concrete goals to aim at in terms of how to behave (or how not to behave) in order to flourish, and this helps us in striving to be moral. A conception of flourishing also helps us to integrate the other non-moral goals and projects we might strive for, such that they are supportive of, or at least do not detract from, flourishing.

However, even if one reliably guides one's activities by this initial conception of a flourishing life, this is clearly not sufficient for flourishing or virtue, as one's inherited views of these may be mistaken and actually undermine one's attempt to flourish. Also, insofar as virtue theorists make the normative claim that people ought to acquire virtues, the virtues must be guided by a morally appropriate conception of living well – not just any conception will do. Otherwise one might be pursuing an overall corrupt conception of morality. Thus, I argue that we need to exercise practical wisdom (i.e. *phronesis*), in terms of making apt value judgments, in order to critically reflect on our conceptions of a flourishing life. In other words, I take the object of an exercise of practical wisdom to be one's current conception of a flourishing life, including the conceptions of virtues that are constitutive of it, and then by extension the compatibility of other goals with that conception. However, despite having argued for a fairly narrow conception of wisdom (relative to other wisdom constructs), the kinds of reflection wisdom requires may still be too varied to be the result of the exercise of a single skill, and may instead be the product of several interrelated skills.[1]

Before diving into wisdom, I begin with a brief overview of my framework drawing on self-regulation theory in psychology, which covers both the considerations involved with setting goals and striving to accomplish those goals.[2] I further connect this to skill acquisition, as improving one's skillfulness is essentially a complex form of self-regulation. As I defend elsewhere the "virtue as skill" thesis, this approach can shed further light on the nature of skill and thereby virtue (though technically my claims about the role of wisdom in flourishing does not require adopting the skill model).[3] Following that, I briefly describe how I conceptualize moral self-regulation, and then draw further connections between this account of self-regulation and the psychological research on goal pursuit and outcomes for well-being. All of these components I take to be relevant to gaining a better understanding of wisdom as a critical reflection on our conceptions of living a flourishing life.

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[1] While I do not assume that there is a single correct conception of flourishing, as flourishing depends on both subjective and objective features, critical reflection should still enable us to separate out better from worse conceptions. Furthermore, reflection on our conceptions of flourishing and virtues, and the value of the activities we are engaged with, cannot be carried out in complete isolation from the social, political, legal, and economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. These contexts play a role in shaping our views of flourishing and virtues, as well as having a material impact on our well-being, and so awareness of the impact of those social structures must also be part of our critical reflection. This more robust form of *phronesis* is of crucial importance given the social dimensions of any flourishing human life.

[2] Self-regulation is thus much broader in scope than the concept of 'self-control', which is merely one aspect of self-regulation that can occur during goal striving.

[3] For an overview, see Stichter, Matt, "Virtue as Skill", in Nancy Snow (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Virtue*. New York: Oxford University Press (2017).

Self-Regulation – Goal Setting[4]

Self-regulation can be broken down into two main phases of goal setting and goal striving, where a goal is a desired or valued state of affairs, which one works to achieve. Goals can also include adopting standards of behavior that one wants to live by.[5] As such, some goals may be temporary, while others are enduring (e.g. wanting to be a certain kind of person).[6] Crucially, goals have an important affective dimension, as psychologist Albert Bandura explains, because "self-regulatory control is achieved by creating incentives for one's own actions and by anticipative affective reactions to one's own behavior depending on how it measures up to personal standards."[7] In terms of self-reactions, achieving a goal is usually a source of self-satisfaction, while failing to do so can lead to self-censure. Furthermore, the strength of the self-reaction, in terms of the motivation it provides for self-regulation, depends in part on how the goal is valued. Goals that are highly valued can provide stronger affective self-reactions, and thus stronger motivation to self-regulate, compared to goals that are only minimally valued or valued for impersonal, externally imposed reasons.[8] As Sheldon and Elliott, in their research on goal striving and well-being, point out: "Goals are unique cognitive structures, in that they are invested with motivational energy and have a substantial degree of functional autonomy".[9]

The value that a goal has (i.e. its desirability), however, is not the only factor to affect motivation. The above assumes a situation where you believe that the desired outcome can be achieved by acting. If instead someone believes that they are not capable of achieving the desired outcome, she will have little motivation to self-regulate. As Bandura notes: "Among the self-referent thoughts that influence human motivation, affect and action, none is more central or pervasive than people's judgments of personal efficacy…Unless people believe that they can produce desired results by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of

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[4] This article draws from chapters in Stichter, Matt, *The Skillfulness of Virtue: Improving our Moral and Epistemic Lives*, Cambridge University Press (2018), reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press © Cambridge University Press.

[5] Control theory, or cybernetics, has long studied the processes involved with goal-oriented systems, including in machines and in animals (as goals can be the result of programming or instinct, as well as choice). The basic stages to any form of regulation involve having: (1) a goal; (2) a representation of the current state affairs; (3) a way to compare (1) and (2) to see if the goal is currently being met; and (4) if the goal is not being met, there is an action the system can take to bring the current state of affairs closer to the goal (and the system must also repeat stages [2] and [3] to know when the goal has been achieved). Of course, those are just the most basic elements of a goal-directed system, and more complex goals and systems will add additional layers of processes to this initial picture, as I will go on to describe.

[6] Valerie Tiberius, in her account of well-being, refers to such enduring goals as 'values'. Tiberius, Valerie (2018) *Well-Being as Value Fulfillment* (Oxford University Press).

[7] Bandura, Albert, "Social Cognitive Theory of Personality", in Pervin, Lawrence A. and John, Oliver P. (eds.) *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 154-196, 176.

[8] It's worth noting that the affective reactions are a form of information about whether you are maintaining your standards, and can help guide action in at least two important ways. First, anticipation of violating a personal standard can trigger feelings of self-censure ahead of time, like in feeling a guilty conscience when contemplating an act that would violate a moral standard, which can then help us to regulate our actions by both alerting us to the violation and giving us a disincentive to go through with that action. Second, the feelings of self-censure after we have acted in violation of a standard (i.e. guilt or shame) can also bring the violation to our attention, and motivate us to do better in the future. Of course, it doesn't always work out this way in practice, as there are many cognitive mechanisms that interfere with these processes.

[9] Sheldon, K. M., and Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: the self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(3), 482-97, 495.

difficulties."[10] 'Perceived self-efficacy' then refers to people's beliefs about what they think they are capable of achieving, and self-efficacy beliefs can strengthen or undermine one's motivation to engage in self-regulation. Thus, goal setting is both a matter of perceived desirability and feasibility.

It's also important to note that many of our goals are highly complex or fairly abstract, i.e., superordinate (for instance, "become a philosopher"), such that it will be difficult to strive for them without having more context-specific, subordinate goals to aim at (for instance, "apply to graduate school"), and this gives rise to a hierarchical organization of these connected goals.[11] This could happen because the goal is complex and requires many intermediary steps to accomplish (as is common when trying to master a skill, for example), or because the goal is abstract and thus requires a more concrete specification to act on.[12] Furthermore, the relationship between these different levels on a goal hierarchy need not be merely one of means to an end, as sometimes the lower order goals provide the constitutive elements of a higher order goal. For example, this is the way many virtue theorists view the relationship between virtues and living well. Virtues are not merely means to the end of living well, but rather they are constitutive of what it is to live well. Finally, it should be noted that many of our goals are shared with others, such that our striving is done in concert with others.[13] This is true of many non-moral goals (e.g. goals of an organization) and moral goals (e.g. achieving the demands of justice).

Self-Regulation – Goal Striving

Once you have committed yourself to realizing a goal, this marks a transition from goal setting to goal striving. This distinction is important as deciding whether to commit to a goal in the first place, or later whether to maintain commitment to that goal, requires a consideration of somewhat distinct factors from the activities associated with striving to achieve a goal (e.g., planning and acting). In short, in phases of goal setting you are undecided about your goal commitments, whereas phases of goal striving assume a decided goal commitment that you are now trying to realize. In goal striving, you'll likely start planning what steps to take to achieve that goal, whether this means trying to figure out what needs to be done, how you are going to do it, when and where you will take action, etc.

Switching from the setting of a specific goal into striving to achieve it, takes us from the vertical hierarchy of goal organization into a horizontal (or temporal) perspective on action, which is represented by the Rubicon model of action phases. Action phase theory separates goal setting and striving into four distinct phases: 1) choosing a goal to commit to; 2) planning how to achieve the goal; 3) taking action to implement the plan; and 4) evaluating one's progress with respect to the goal (and, if need-be, the appropriateness of the goal itself) in light of incoming feedback. Phases 1

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[10] Bandura, A., "Social Cognitive Theory of Personality", in *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 154-196, 180-181.

[11] This is different from a consideration of how valued the goal is (which involves a comparison between goals on different goal hierarchies – for example, goals involving academic success might clash with goals of having fun).

[12] In this sense, you want to be looking at subgoals that are more concrete for feedback, rather than trying to see how the act you're about to take contributes to the most abstract level on the goal hierarchy. For example, you should think in terms of whether telling a hard truth to your friend is compatible with honesty and kindness, rather than thinking in terms of whether doing so would allow you to judge that you had lived well when you're on your death bed. Or to use a skill example, a player in a game who is trying to decide what move to make next is probably not going to be well served by thinking in terms of which move right now will most contribute to her eventually getting inducted into the hall of fame.

[13] Thanks to Blaine Fowers for pushing this point.

and 4 are concerned with goal setting (or 'motivation'), whereas phases 2 and 3 are concerned with goal striving (or 'volition').

The first phase involves what I've already discussed regarding the initial setting of goals. It matters here how the goals are spelled out, as more specific and proximate goals (as compared to vague or distant goals) allow for better planning before acting, and better feedback after acting. The second phase is essentially a planning phase, wherein you are trying to figure out what needs to be done to achieve the goal, how you are going to do it, when and where you will take action, etc.

The third phase is that of taking action. In this phase, one of the things you have to deal with are potential conflicts with other goal commitments that you have. Situations can afford opportunities to advance more than one of our goals, and often it will be the case that promotion of one goal requires bypassing opportunities to pursue another goal. This can give rise to the need for self-control, in terms of not getting derailed from a more valued goal (e.g., "apply to graduate school") when it conflicts with a less valued but more immediately rewarding or easy-to-execute goal (e.g., "watching another show on Netflix").

The fourth phase is a consideration of feedback on both your goal commitment and on the strategies you took to realize that goal. While this phase has potential implications for future planning, as success supports taking the same strategy in the future while failure will require some re-planning, what is primary in this phase is a return to concerns about motivation and goal setting. Having taken action to implement your goal provides you with new information to consider, in terms of feedback on both the desirability and feasibility of the goal. So in this phase you will be questioning whether to maintain your goal commitment, based on whether you achieved it and, if so, whether it had the outcome you hoped for (i.e. desirability), or if not, whether you could do things differently next time (i.e. feasibility). Finally, if you have accomplished a sub-goal, it may be time to replace it with a new (and likely more difficult) sub-goal that gets you closer to achieving a desired superordinate goal.[14]

With this overview of self-regulation in place, we can see how skill acquisition is a sophisticated form of self-regulation, as skills enable us to achieve desired goals in domains of high complexity.[15] Skills not only help us in goal striving, but often skill development becomes a constitutive goal in itself (e.g. aspiring to be a great writer, musician, or chess grandmaster).[16] In committing yourself to acquiring a skill, you begin internalizing standards about what counts as a

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[14] The presentation of these phases in temporal order, where one sets goals and then strives for them (and where that's divided into 4 distinct phases), is just frequently how things work out. One can jump around between the phases in a different order. Furthermore, we can sometimes strive towards imprecise goals, where the striving actually helps us to get clearer on our goals.

[15] It is important to note that a skill necessarily involves some flexibility in how one goes about achieving the outcome to cope with changes in one's environment (which is part of what makes the domain complex), as well as a broad view of the outcome (such as in learning how to speak a language, rather than memorizing a single phrase). So not all acquired abilities are necessarily skills (e.g. learning to tie your shoes). The need to acquire sophisticated competencies such as skills arises when dealing with complex issues, since the skills enable one to handle the complexity by progressively developing one's abilities (via deliberate practice). As such, my view is similar to that of Ellen Fridland, as she claims that "skills as the subclass of abilities, which are characterized by the fact that they are refined or developed as a result of effortful attention and control to the skill itself." Fridland, Ellen, (2014) "Skill Learning and Conceptual Thought: Making a Way through the Wilderness", in Bashour, B. and Muller, H. (eds.) *Philosophical Naturalism and its Implications* (Routledge).

[16] So skills can be sources of intrinsic, rather than merely instrumental, value. Also, setting out to behave skillfully as a goal will, like all goals, furnish motivation to achieve and maintain that goal. This is relevant to those who might see skills as lacking a motivational component, which is sometimes cited by those who reject the idea that virtues can be conceptualized as skills.

good performance, which then guide your ongoing efforts to learn the skill. Improving your level of skill requires not the mere repetition of things you already know how to do, but continually striving to do things that you currently cannot do, and this is referred to as 'deliberate practice'. Deliberate practice requires having specific goals in mind for improvement, rather than the vaguer goal of 'getting better'. There need to be specific aspects of your performance that you go about planning how to improve, which then structures the kind of practice in which you engage.[17] As you engage in deliberate practice, you seek out feedback about your performance, in the hopes of identifying and correcting errors. You keep monitoring your progress as you practice. If you do not seem to be progressing, you may need to redesign your practice sessions. If instead you keep up a steady progression, then at some point you achieve your current sub-goal. At that point it is time to set out to strive to accomplish the next, more difficult sub-goal. This is how you incrementally improve your current level of skillfulness, such that you can gradually master a domain of great complexity.

Moral Self-Regulation

The self-regulation framework described above also applies to specifically moral goals and standards.[18] People have moral standards (justified or not) that they have internalized while growing up, and which to some extent now guide their self-regulation.[19] How well such standards can guide us depends on a variety of factors. One such factor is the activation of self-sanctioning processes: insofar as we feel that an action violates our moral standards, this will trigger self-sanctions – either helping to deter the action ahead of time, or triggering feelings of guilt or shame about it after the fact (and presumably a different course of action in the future). Likewise, when we feel that we are keeping to our moral standards, our actions can provide us with a positive self-evaluation. These positive or negative self-evaluations provide further motivation to engage in future acts of self-regulation.

In addition, how well such standards can guide us also depends on how those moral values rank relative to one's other goals. For example, one would expect problems to arise if moral standards are viewed as merely externally imposed standards, for which failure to comply is punished. As Daniel Batson points out: "Learned in this way, such standards are apt to create obligations rather than desires – oughts rather than wants . . . They are accepted as self-standards but not as part of the core sense of self."[20] This sort of approach is unlikely to lead people to place much desirability on the maintenance of moral standards. This problem can also arise due to inaccurate self-knowledge regarding one's own values and interests, wherein instead of adopting goals that match up well to these, as Sheldon points out, one "may instead choose goals dictated by

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[17] Horn, J. and Masunaga, H., (2006) "A Merging Theory of Expertise and Intelligence", in K. Anders Ericsson (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 587-612, 601.

[18] I resist postulating new types of competencies for specifically moral self-regulation whenever possible.

[19] It is important to note that moral self-regulation only requires having some moral standards or other to conform to, rather than necessarily having the correct moral standards. So, by 'moral standards' we do not intend to set up a contrast here with 'immoral standards'. In this sense, everybody has some moral standards that guide self-regulation, even if they are corrupt or unjustifiable. It would then be part of the role of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to help guide reflection on what moral standards we ought to be adopting as goals (or in other words, helping to shape our conception of a flourishing life and the virtues that are constitutive of it).

[20] Batson, C. D. (2017). Getting Cynical about Character: A Social-Psychological Perspective. in Miller, C. B., and Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (eds.) *Moral Psychology: Virtue and Character*, *5*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 11-44, 35.

others, by transient impulses or incentives, or by introjected "shoulds" or "oughts.""[21] The consequence of this, he argues, is that "Because external and introjected goals tend to be less representative of enduring interests and values, the volitional strength (Gollwitzer, 1990) behind them is likely to fade when obstacles are encountered."[22] Usually, a highly desirable goal can sustain goal striving even when feasibility is low, but the less desirable the goal, the more likely obstacles will derail goal striving.

Goals and Well-Being

Much work has been done in psychology to highlight the connections between goal pursuit and well-being. This research shows that goal progress and goal attainment promote well-being, but also, importantly, that some goals have much stronger associations with well-being than others. This often has to do with the different factors affecting the desirability of goals. For example, goals that one pursues autonomously, wherein one endorses the goal internally rather than feeling it to be imposed by some external authority, are viewed as more desirable. In addition, some goals seem directly related to satisfying important human needs, such that their satisfaction brings greater well-being.[23] Moreover, goals that represent enduring values with which we identify, such as important personal or social projects, produce more well-being in their attainment due to their high desirability.[24] Relatedly, Fowers et al. distinguish between a goal for which the means to achieving it are separable from the goal itself (i.e. an instrumental relationship between means and goal), such as having multiple means to get to a specific destination in the city where what matters primarily is efficiency (e.g. walking, bus, subway, taxi, etc.); versus goals for which the actions taken to achieve them are inseparable from the goals themselves (i.e. a constitutive relationship). A paradigm case of this is how many virtue ethicists typically see virtuous activity as partially constituting what it is to live well.[25]

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[21] Sheldon, K. M., and Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: the self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(3), 482-97, 483.

[22] Sheldon, K. M., and Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: the self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(3), 482-97, 484.

[23] On this point, Fowers et al. state that "Of particular interest, Self-Determination Theory differentiates between the intrinsic and extrinsic content of goals. SDT investigators have consistently found that stronger endorsement of extrinsic goals (usually stipulated as financial success, social recognition, and physical attractiveness) is negatively related to well-being and positively associated with anxiety, depression, narcissism, and symptoms of physical illness. In contrast, the more participants espoused intrinsic goals (usually stipulated as personal growth, interpersonal intimacy, and societal contribution), the greater their subjective well-being." Fowers, B. J., Mollica, C. O., & Procacci, E. N. (2010). Constitutive and instrumental goal orientations and their relations with eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *5*(2), 139-153, 141.

[24] Bedford-Petersen et al. propose that "most conceptions of well-being can agree that well-being involves success in one's personal projects and that personal projects should be a central construct for well-being assessments". They also found that "Success in current personal projects predicted not only the most commonly considered types of well-being in psychology, satisfaction with life and lack of negative affect (though not presence of positive affect); it also predicted the subjective sense of flourishing, meaning in life and purpose in life." Bedford-Petersen, Cianna, DeYoung, Colin G., Tiberius, Valerie, & Syed, Moin (2018): Integrating philosophical and psychological approaches to well-being: The role of success in personal projects, *Journal of Moral Education*, DOI: 10.1080/03057240.2018.1463203

[25] Fowers et. al. draw on Aristotle's notion of Eudaimonia in connection with constitutive goal activity. They claim that "Aristotle suggested that constitutive activity is necessary for eudaimonic well-being, but that both instrumental and constitutive activity can contribute to hedonic well-being. This suggests a model in which eudaimonic and hedonic well-being form two different aspects of living well. Several studies have

Some of these factors are also accounted for in Sheldon's work on the self-concordance of goal-systems, wherein concordance is "the degree to which stated goals express enduring interests and values."[26] When goals are not concordant, this affects both goal striving (i.e reducing goal motivation and thus progress) and the outcomes of goal attainment (i.e. not as fulfilling). By contrast, there's a potentially self-reinforcing cycle in adopting more 'concordant' goals. Sheldon explains that "Because the developing interests and deep-seated values that such goals express are relatively enduring facets of personality, self-concordant goals are likely to receive sustained effort over time."[27] So self-concordant goals are more desirable, providing more sustained motivation, leading one to put more effort into striving for such goals, and this leads to higher rates of goal progress and attainment. Thus, self-concordant goals provide higher well-being outcomes both because that cycle leads to higher rates of progress and attainment, and because there's a more substantial contribution to well-being from having a more desirable goal satisfied. Questions of self-concordance, and the other distinctions in goal adoption, would then be of great relevance with respect to how people internalize moral goals, and to whether they are likely to be motivated to follow through on them.

Wisdom and Flourishing[28]

Within this framework of self-regulation, there are two important roles for wisdom. First, we need a critical reflection on our inherited moral standards, to try to ensure that we're being guided by justified moral standards. That is, by the time we reach adulthood and are cognitively developed enough to engage in reflection, we have already inherited moral standards and conceptions of living well from our cultural and social context (e.g. including parents, religion, community, friends, social media, cultural norms, etc.), which guide us to some extent. However, we will have to critically reflect on them to know whether we ought to be guided by these standards and conceptions, or whether they stand in need of revision. Furthermore, insofar as our conceptions of living well are socially embedded, this would be a reflection carried out with others. For example, revising conceptions of justice or fairness would be a topic for communities, not just individuals.

Second, as noted previously in the discussion of well-being, it will be important that we reflect on the goals we've set for ourselves (including our constitutive goals, such as virtues), and the activities we're engaged in, to see if they reflect (or are at least are consistent with) our values. In other words, it is important that our values and activities are integrated, both for reasons of consistency and for well-being outcomes.

Furthermore, I will argue that many aspects traditionally associated with wisdom can already be found in the workings of self-regulation and the exercise of skill. I suggest that we ought to take a "bottom up" approach to conceptualizing wisdom, such that we see what generic knowledge, basic

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documented a two-dimensional structure of well-being comprised of a meaning or growth dimension and a positive affect dimension". Fowers, B. J., Mollica, C. O., & Procacci, E. N. (2010). Constitutive and instrumental goal orientations and their relations with eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *5*(2), 139-153, 143.

[26] Sheldon, K. M., and Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: the self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(3), 482-97, 482.

[27] Sheldon, K. M., and Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: the self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(3), 482-97, 483-484.

[28] With kind permission from the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, this chapter draws on my article: Stichter, Matt, "Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 94:3 (2016), 435-448, copyright © Australasian Association of Philosophy, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com on behalf of Australasian Association of Philosophy.

self-regulatory abilities, and virtuous skills each contribute to living well, such that we can see what specific role is left for wisdom to play.[29] What I take to be unique to exercises of wisdom is this reflection on one's current conception of what it is to live well (i.e. flourishing), which includes the goals that are constitutive of living well (i.e. the virtues), and by extension the compatibility of other goals with that conception.

I suggest this approach in contrast to starting with the concept of a wise person in a "top down" fashion, insofar as it incorporates too wide of an array of characteristics (knowledge, capacities, attitudes, skills, dispositions, strategies, etc.) in a conceptualization of wisdom, such that it will make it difficult to isolate what contribution wisdom specifically makes to living well. A related problem is that a top down approach can bring with it a tendency to postulate new competencies for achieving wise behavior, and this risks obscuring existing psychological mechanisms that may already account for what is being attributed to wisdom.[30] Instead we need a conception of wisdom that is specific enough so we know how to train it, how to engage in deliberate practice with it, and when someone is failing to live well then we can more easily identify whether it's actually a problem with someone's wisdom development, rather than with their self-regulatory abilities, their knowledge base, or skill development, etc.

For example, to some extent, I agree with Stephen Grimm's approach in defining wisdom in terms of knowing how to live well.[31] He further breaks down this knowledge into three components:

(1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.
(2) Knowledge of one's standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being.
(3) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.[32]

In one sense, I'm in complete agreement, as all of these would be necessary for someone to be wise in practice. However, these represent merely the three basic functions of any goal-directed system – including a system as simple as a thermostat (which has a goal, a mechanism to check for discrepancies between the goal state and the current state, and a mechanism to move towards the goal state). Of course, I don't think there are wise thermostats, but what we have here is a difference in the content of the goal, and as a result far greater complexity in achieving each of three conditions. So this 3-fold distinction, while relevant, does not focus on wisdom's specific contribution to living well.

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[29] For example, I am tempted to think that there's actually no role leftover for a putative virtue like integrity to play, once we understand self-regulation, even though I think it still makes sense to talk of people having or lacking integrity – but as a commentary on their ability to self-regulate.

[30] Daniel Lapsley recently made this kind of critique about Darnell et. al's recent claim that a neo-Aristotelian understanding of *phronesis* (i.e. practical wisdom) can overcome the knowledge-action gap and furthermore can likely be operationalized as a multicomponent construct. Lapsley argues that they mostly ignore the contributions of social cognitive theory (and other psychological theories) to this endeavor, and in reply Lapsley argues that "For *phronesis* to be treated seriously as a psychological construct it will need to show that what it explains (and how it does so) has advantages over extant psychological theory." Lapsley, Daniel (2019) "Phronesis, Virtues and the Developmental Science of Character", *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019. See Catharine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, Panos Paris (2019) "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?". *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019.

[31] As such, I also agree with Grimm that there's not a different form of 'theoretical' wisdom – though I would resist his move to say that there is a derivative form of wisdom present in other skill domains, as this is just a matter of having expertise. Stephen R. Grimm (2015) Wisdom, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93:1, 139-154.

[32] Stephen R. Grimm (2015) Wisdom, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93:1, 139-154, 140.

Grimm's second condition, as he puts it, "helps to explain the significance of the Delphic admonition to 'Know Thyself'".[33] Self-inquisitiveness, in particular, could be an especially important epistemic virtue. The reason for this is its fundamental role in self-regulation broadly. In order to self-regulate effectively, you need to know a fair amount about yourself (strengths, weaknesses, preferences, biases, goals, limitations, etc.), for what one often has to regulate are one's own thoughts, feelings, responses, etc. Furthermore, accurate self-knowledge helps one address questions of desirability (given one's preferences) and feasibility (given one's abilities and limitations) with respect to goals. However, a virtue of self-inquisitiveness would still be distinct in its operation from wisdom.

In regards to his 3rd condition, we can again draw on the distinction between goal setting and goal striving. In discussing conditions 1 and 3, Grimm claims that "a wise person knows, not just which possibilities are especially good or valuable, but also how to realize these possibilities. A wise person has effective strategies, at least of a general kind, for achieving his or her ends."[34] While I agree on this characterization of a wise person, it doesn't follow that knowing what is good and having effective strategies are both the result of exercising wisdom. In other words, what I want to draw attention to in Grimm's distinguishing of these two components is that the former (i.e. knowing the ends) is a matter of goal setting, whereas the latter (i.e. knowing effective means) is a matter of goal striving. These phases then involve two very different sorts of concerns (despite some overlap in content), and each will require different types of knowledge and skills to do well. Thus, I do not think it is the work of a singular capacity (that is, to both know what is good and to know effective strategies). As a result, I would reserve the term 'wisdom' for Grimm's first component of knowing what is good. I view knowing how to achieve such goods as skillfulness in the moral virtues, as becoming skillful is a process of acquiring the knowledge of how to achieve a desired goal in a complex domain.[35]

The relevance of the distinction between goal setting and goal striving with respect to wisdom is also important for Jason Swartwood's argument that wisdom is an expert skill.[36] Swartwood characterizes wisdom generically as a kind of understanding, specifically understanding how one should act all things considered. Swartwood defines this kind of 'understanding' in terms of abilities to identify what features of the situation are most relevant to respond to, knowing what response is then called for, and knowing strategies for overcoming obstacles.[37] Skill acquisition also involves this kind of learning how to act well, and in practice requires a lot of self-regulating abilities. So here we agree at least that knowing how to act well in a domain requires these abilities, and that we should expect acting well in the moral domain to require the same.[38] However, all of this is captured already by self-regulation and skill, so we're not yet describing anything unique to wisdom.

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[33] Stephen R. Grimm (2015) Wisdom, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93:1, 139-154, 145.

[34] Stephen R. Grimm (2015) Wisdom, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93:1, 139-154, 145.

[35] Furthermore, I think this approach also preserves an important distinction for Aristotle between two types of intellectual virtues – *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (cleverness, or expertise).

[36] See Swartwood, Jason (2013) "Wisdom as an Expert Skill," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 511-528. Also see De Caro, Caccarezza, and Niccol have also made a similar argument. De Caro, M., Vaccarezza, M.S. & Niccoli, A. (2018). *Phronesis* as ethical expertise: Naturalism of second-nature and the unity of virtue. *Journal of Value Inquiry, 52,* 287-305.

[37] Swartwood, Jason (2013), "Wisdom as an Expert Skill," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 511-528, 515.

[38] According to Darnell et. al., this seems to be represented by the: "*Constitutive function*: this is the ability, and eventually cognitive excellence, which enables an agent to perceive what the salient features of a given situation are from an ethical perspective, and to see what is required in a given situation as reason(s) for responding in certain ways. In the phronimoi this means that, after having noted a salient moral feature of a concrete situation calling for a response, they will be able to weigh different considerations and see that, say,

Swartwood further draws on the recognition-primed model of decision making, which tries to explain how extensive past experience allows skilled decision makers to recognize "the type of situation this is, what to expect from the situation (expectancies), suitable goals, typical courses of action (COAs), and relevant cues."[39] Swartwood draws on an example of firefighters to illustrate how this works in practice, given that firefighters have to balance multiple goals (such as putting out fires, rescuing people, preventing property damage, etc.), stating that:

> Some of these more specific goals compete with each other: a firefighter will sometimes have to decide, qua firefighter, between securing someone's safety and getting the fire under control. Thus expert decision makers in areas of complex choice and challenging performance (including both firefighting and all-things-considered decisions) will often have to specify which particular goal in a situation constitutes the supreme end of their domain.[40]

This response does show that much of what has been attributed to wisdom can be found in skill, insofar as some skills involve an attempt to balance multiple goals.

However, what's being described here is all taking place in the context of goal striving. Firefighters have a superordinate goal of 'combating fires well', and in the goal hierarchy there will be multiple goals that constitute what it is to fight fires well (such as those mentioned by Swartwood – stop the fire from spreading, save innocent lives, prevent property damage, etc.). The challenge posed to firefighters (and of course others working in complex domains) is that these subordinate goals have to be balanced against one another relative to the particular context at the time of action. You are going to have to, at the very least, prioritize which goals to accomplish first or to devote more resources to achieving. This contextual decision to "specify which particular goal in a situation constitutes the supreme end" takes place during the action phase (phase 3), and is a volitional concern about how best to adhere to one's preexisting goal commitments in the situation. It does not involve a re-examination of one's goal commitments, as it is still a question of how best to achieve one's existing goals in the moment. In other words, in specifying the particular goal to pursue in a situation qua the practice of firefighting, the firefighter is not wondering 'do firefighters really need to save lives', or 'do I really want to be a firefighter?'[41]

Wisdom, by contrast, requires reflection on our values, goals, and practices; not on how to balance existing goals in particular situations (which is going to be the work of other virtuous skills). Wisdom as I am describing it here is a matter of goal setting in the first action phase, as well as the fourth phase of reflection after acting – the two phases concerned with goal commitment and motivation. You are determining what goals to set for yourself, what those goals consist in (such as setting more proximal subgoals that, for example, determine what living well more specifically consists in), and how valued those goals are relative to your other goal commitments.[42]

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courage is required when the risk to one's life is not overwhelming but the object at stake is extremely valuable, or that honesty is required when one has wronged a friend". Catharine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, Panos Paris (2019) "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?". *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019. This does sound like it takes place in the goal striving phase, so in that respect I would not label it as wisdom. Furthermore, it's ambiguous as to whether the 'constitutive' function applies only when there's only one salient feature of a situation – such that you see the "salient moral feature" and then respond to it.

[39] Ross, Karol, Shafer, Jennifer, and Klein, Gary (2006) "Professional Judgments and "Naturalistic Decision Making," in Ericsson, K. Anders (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 403-419, 406.

[40] Swartwood, Jason (2013) "Wisdom as an Expert Skill," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 511-528, 525.

[41] Though they might engage in this kind of reflection after a difficult day on the job.

[42] According to Darnell et al., the "integrative" function appears to operate in goal setting: "*Integrative function*: this component of phronesis involves integrating different components of a good life, especially in

Daniel Russell makes a similar claim as Swartwood, in that wisdom is about making indeterminate ends determinant in specific situations, such as "What would be benevolent in this case?"[43] Or in other words, wisdom is about specifying the goal in a particular situation (as in 'this is what counts as benevolent'), rather than the details of how to achieve the goal (such as figuring out how one can best go about doing the act that counts as benevolent). This way of putting it sounds like Swartwood's two aspects of understanding, so in the firefighter example, it is one thing to decide that securing someone's safety takes highest priority in the situation, and another to figure out how best to go about securing that person's safety. Russell seems to be suggesting as much when he claims that an exercise of wisdom is one that "specifies the hitting of that goal in a way that takes the various goals or 'targets' of the other virtues into account in an overall way," which is similar to how the firefighter has to take into account the other goals of controlling the fire and reducing property damage.[44] In addition, when referencing Aristotle, Russell says that "the physician does not deliberate (obviously) about whether her mark is to heal her patient, nor, yet, about what medicines or procedures to use, but first about what constitutes healing in the case at hand."[45] So we see with these examples that skills can also involve making judgments about what counts as the determinant end in a specific situation, in the way described by Russell and Swartwood.

But again, this is different from the distinction I am defending here, where what is unique about wisdom is that it involves identifying which ends constitute living well, rather than what constitutes achieving those ends in specific situations. With the latter, you are trying to apply the conceptions of virtue you already have and if necessary to make them more determinant to the specific circumstances you are acting in now (during goal striving). But with wisdom, it is a reflection that takes place during goal setting (before or after action). Granted, Russell in his overall account does make a place for getting the right goals and separates this from specifying goals in particular situations. He notes that there is another sense in which we construct ends besides making indeterminate ends determinant in particular contexts, which is that we can choose to adopt certain ends through reflection on what living well consists in.[46] It is this latter sense that I'm arguing characterizes the specific role of wisdom, whereas the previous sense of making ends more determinant in particular contexts is part of skillfulness in general (and thus the function of moral virtues with respect to the moral domain).

Finally, the exercise of wisdom should presumably also be accompanied by changing one's behavior or practices to be consistent with revisions in one's goals. This is a challenge in itself, and is related to a problem referred to as the "knowledge-action gap" with respect to acting morally, and

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dilemmatic situations where different ethically salient considerations or virtues appear to be in conflict. . . it is *she* who will be best-placed to weigh such considerations in a way that manifests due concern for all of them and to integrate them alongside everything else that she deems valuable in life overall. This is what the integrative function of phronesis enables one to do". Catharine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, Panos Paris (2019) "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?". *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019. Integration appears to involve a refinement of what one's goals are – say with respect to what conception of honesty (or compassion) one is trying to live up to, in order to settle a conflict between goals. But the situation-specific aspect of it is then misplaced, because that would be operative in the moment of dealing with some concrete situation. Situations may be complex and throw a curveball into one's attempt to balance goals, such as with Swartwood's firefighter example, but that takes a different skill set to address than refining one's conceptions of virtues and living well.

[43] Russell, Daniel C. (2009) *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press), 80.

[44] Russell, Daniel C. (2009) *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press), 329.

[45] Russell, Daniel C. (2009) *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press), 79.

[46] Russell, Daniel C. (2009) *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press), 375.

has been discussed by a number of researchers in moral psychology.[47] However, this form of personal transformation will require abilities beyond that of wisdom, such has having effective self-regulation skills, as well as some degree of the relevant intellectual and moral skills. In other words, what is important to emphasize here is that those other elements of self-regulation and skill are not part of the exercise of wisdom itself. While those other elements are needed to act in accordance with wisdom, they also have separate functions independent of the exercise of wisdom.[48]

The Skill(s) of Wisdom

So far my main goal has been to get clearer about what essentially characterizes wisdom. But I'm leaving it open exactly what skills might be needed for people to be able to express wisdom – that is, to aptly reflect on their conception of living well, the constitutive ends of it, and whether one's other goals are consistent with it. I take it that until we're able to get a more concrete understanding of what mechanisms actually help to shape the kind of reflection and integration needed for living well, we may have to withhold judgment for now as to whether wisdom is a singular skill or instead requires a set of interrelated skills.

However, one concern I have with conceptualizing wisdom as a singular skill is whether it is specific enough to generate the kind of feedback one would need in order to improve one's skillfulness in it. In other words, even narrowing the scope of wisdom as I have done so far, having the target of wisdom being knowing how to live well is still fairly abstract, and it won't necessarily be easy to get feedback as to whether your reflections on living well have led you to change in ways that actually get you closer to your goal. Feedback from changing your priorities in life may be a long time in coming. Just as we need to think in terms of moral virtues as constitutive ends of living well, so too we may need to think in terms of there being a set of intellectual virtues that are constitutive of expressing wisdom. This is, I take it, at the very least a concern we need to take seriously when thinking of skillfulness in expressing wisdom.

Another reason fueling this suspicion comes from a further distinction in how I've characterized exercises of wisdom so far. There are a couple of aspects of exercising wisdom that look like they can be done even when one keeps one's conception of living well fixed. Both fleshing out the constitutive ends of living well (in terms of shaping your conceptions of the moral virtues), as well as testing your other goals and projects for consistency with these ends, involve holding (temporarily) your conception of living well as fixed. That's not to deny that the flow of feedback can go the other way, as a kind of 'reflective equilibrium'. It's just that someone can be reflective in

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[47] See Catharine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, Panos Paris (2019) "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?". *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019.

[48] It's worth noting again here that it's part of self-regulation in general to be motivated to take steps to get closer to a goal (or desired state of affairs). Factors of desirability and feasibility affect the motivation to self-regulate with respect to a particular goal, including moral goals. These considerations should be central for addressing the so called "knowledge-action gap" with respect to acting morally. But in that sense, I suspect that there isn't actually a unique gap with respect to acting morally. That is, there's nothing special about moral self-regulation that should cause a knowledge-action gap that couldn't also occur with respect to non-moral goals. Any gap is likely the result of a failure of more basic self-regulatory factors, rather than the lack of a special moral capacity for acting on moral knowledge. Perhaps I'm a bit cynical, but I suspect that part of the problem here is that while people seem to set moral goals for themselves (e.g. 'be honest'), they are likely to leave it at having set a mere goal intention, without further setting implementation intentions on how best to achieve that goal, or otherwise treating the goal as complex enough to require skill acquisition and thus practice. Or worse, moral goals may be viewed as external obligations to fulfill, rather than desired for themselves, in the way Batson suggested.

the sense of actively trying to figure out how to better live up to their conception of living well, and striving to integrate their other goals and projects with this conception, without actually questioning their received view of living well.[49] This exercise of wisdom is still crucial for living well, and is still a matter of goal setting, but lacks the aspect of critical reflection on one's inherited moral values and beliefs about living well.

In terms of goal setting, presumably most people already have 'living well' as a superordinate goal, and the social environment in which you are raised likely furnishes you with one or more conceptions of what it is to live well. In that sense, some of the subordinate goals on that goal hierarchy are also already fleshed out. However, consistently applying this inherited conception of living well is clearly not sufficient for virtue, as one could be an exemplar with respect to an overall corrupt conception of morality. This is why virtue has to incorporate wisdom, so that there is some critical reflection on one's moral standards.[50] Otherwise we could not make the normative claim that people ought to acquire virtues, as there would be no constraint on what conception of morality those moral skills would be realizing. So a central (though different) role of wisdom must be a critical reflection and revision of one's current conception of living well.[51] Thus, I suspect that there might be at least two distinct skills required for expressing wisdom.[52]

Another example of thinking of wisdom as involving multiple intellectual skills comes from Valerie Tiberius's account of what she calls "wise reflection," which is a form of reflection that helps us solve questions of value in an appropriate way.[53] Two methods she recommends for wise reflection are "imagination and perspective taking, whereby we can try to picture what things will be like for us if we choose one way or another or put ourselves in the shoes of other people to see what things are like from their perspective."[54] I take it that critical reflection on an existing conception of living well and perspective taking (perhaps also imagination) in regards to other ways of living are separate skills, such that we might need multiple intellectual skills to reflect on our conceptions of living well.[55] While I have ended with a more speculative discussion, hopefully in highlighting what is unique to wisdom, I have drawn attention to that which requires more research.

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[49] I wouldn't be surprised if people are more resistant to revising their conception of living well than the other two related aspects, as this may be more threatening to their identity.

[50] Even if there is not one singular correct set of moral standards, critical reflection should enable us to separate out better from worse standards.

[51] I say 'part' because wisdom also has a role to play in evaluating the ends of various non-moral practices, to see if they are ends worth pursuing given one's conception of living well.

[52] Darnell et al. discuss a conception of living well as a "blueprint", and make a similar point about not raising the standards too high for wisdom: "*Blueprint*: by a blueprint, we have in mind more what one might call moral identity, on the earlier-explained accounts, than a full-blown grand-end outline of the good life. Phronetic persons possess a general conception of the good life (eudaimonia) and adjust their moral identity to that blueprint, thus furnishing it with motivational force.". Catharine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, Panos Paris (2019) "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?". *Human Development*, Published online: January 30, 2019. However, their account is ambiguous as to whether a blueprint needs to meet a certain threshold of justification to count. Furthermore, their attempt to fit moral identity here is puzzling, as that's different from both having a conception of living well (which presumably anyone has) and being motivated to act morally (which depends on one's ability to self-regulate).

[53] Tiberius, Valerie (2013) "In Defense of Reflection," *Philosophical Issues*, 23: Epistemic Agency, 232-243.

[54] Tiberius, Valerie (2013) "In Defense of Reflection," *Philosophical Issues*, 23: Epistemic Agency, 232-243, 233.

[55] This is an area in moral psychology that needs more research, to better understand the mechanisms by which people can effectively and accurately reflect on, and change, conceptions of living well. Likely these conceptions are often strongly rooted in one's self-identity, such that they can be hard to revise.