

Reason, Morality, and Skill¹

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ABSTRACT

Some economists argue that modern industrial societies must respond to ecological challenges by learning to live with diminishing economic growth. Yet it also seems that low growth societies are doomed to struggle with problems of social instability caused by economic recession, unemployment and a decline in social entitlements. In “Reason, Morality and Skill” John Stopford draws on Ancient Greek economic thought, including Aristotle’s views on the natural limitation of wealth, to discuss the problem of human flourishing in ecologically challenged societies. Economic capability theorists, influenced by the work of Sen and Nussbaum, have recently argued that the transition from a growth driven economy focused on consumption to a stable low growth economy requires us to redefine prosperity as capability development “within limits”. Stopford argues that to understand prosperity in this way we need to reexamine the role of skill in the development of capabilities. The marginalization of skill has become a systematic feature of modern industrial and consumer societies. Yet certain kinds of skill, exemplified in the work of the autonomously productive craftsman, are necessary to the development of the bounded capabilities that low growth societies need to foster.

KEYWORDS

Economics, growth, skill, capabilities, human flourishing

In this paper I discuss the relationship between reason, morality, and skill in a well-ordered liberal democracy.² I argue that while skill played an important role in the ethical life of the ancient world, the marginalization of skill and craftsmanship has blinded us to the importance of a public culture of skill in the modern world. This applies, in particular, to the public role of skill as one of the “cultural conditions of autonomy” (and *a fortiori* of political autonomy) in a liberal political regime

¹ An early version of this paper was read at the workshop on “Moral realism and political decisions: a new framework of practical rationality for contemporary multicultural Europe” organized by members of the Universities of Bamberg and Trieste in Bamberg, Germany, on 19 - 22 December 2013. I would like to thank the organizers, Professor Gabriele De Anna of the University of Bamberg, and Professor Riccardo Martinelli of the University of Trieste, for the opportunity to participate in the workshop. The methodological framework of my discussion is “political not metaphysical” in the sense of Rawls (1985; 1996, 10). For this reason I focus mainly on questions of practical rationality, leaving all but the most important metaphysical and epistemological issues to one side.

² I use “well-ordered” in the sense of Rawls (1971, 4-5) to refer to a society that is effectively regulated by a public conception of justice.

(Stopford 2009, 39-45). Not only do citizens need certain basic kinds of skill to express their autonomy. Such skills may also contribute to the capacity for “flourishing within limits” that some ecological economists regard as a key factor in the development of sustainable human societies.³

Skillful work shaped the cultural life of the archaic Greek world. The craft worker was an established figure in the community, honored for their contributions to a commodious life. The public craftsman or *demioergos* (δημιουργός - Homer’s word) was “a bringer of civilization,” distinguished by competence and know-how, the member of a community of skilled producers whose focus was on quality and doing good work (Sennett 2008, 25). Craft workers acquired their know-how in long and painstaking apprenticeships, developing and modifying their skills throughout their lives (25-26).

The work of the *demioergos* was more than a job. Someone who does a *job* does not produce a *work*. But what was the work of the public producer in Greece? Philosophical phrases such as “form-giving activity”, which we associate with the production of works, are not informative if we are interested in understanding how a work comes into existence (in German: *wie es entsteht*). How can we study “form-giving activity”? Producing things involves a number of related but distinct skills that even the producer may not always be aware of using. Sculpting, molding, weaving, embossing, and whittling engage maker and material in ways that are often inscrutable.

Skillful activity tends to be “transparent” (*durchsichtig*) in the sense of Heidegger (Heidegger 1927, 146; 1962, 187). The more competent we become in exercising a skill, the less we may notice ourselves as we exercise it. Skill may be all but invisible to an onlooker. Everyday language lacks words to describe the subtleties of skillful activity. The Latinized expressions “form,” “product,” “creation,” or “product” shed little light on the engaged material consciousness of the *demioergos*. Evocative expressions such as “the necessary poetry of things” (MacGregor 2010) work at the level of metaphor but may miss something that is important about crafting with one’s hands.

Although the public status of the *demioergoi* was in decline by the 4th century BCE, craftsmanship and skill still exercised a decisive influence on the philosophers of classical Greece: “[t]he craftsman lets *kosmos* appear through the artifact” (McEwen 1993, 73). Plato’s hierarchy of Reality pairs the various levels of being with different kinds and qualities of craftsmanship. “That which truly is” is the work of the World Craftsman (*demioergos*) of the *Timaeus* who endows the world with motion, order and beauty in order that it should thus participate in His goodness (Lavecchia 2012, 13). Plato, his criticisms of the poets notwithstanding, characterizes the true craftsman as someone who seeks the perfection of that which he creates.

³ See Jackson (2009), Chapter 9.

In the early dialogues Plato often identifies craft with knowledge (Parry 1996, 15). In the *Republic*, it can be argued (though it is not a matter of consensus) that Plato holds justice in its most developed form to be a craft (101), perhaps a “second-order craft” or “supercraft”.⁴ Surveying antiquity from a post-Cartesian perspective we sometimes suppose that representations and what they represent belong to discrete ontological orders. But for Plato, craftsmanship is the source of a seamless continuity between intellectual objects and the visible cosmos.

Aristotle’s distinction between *technê* as *poïesis* (ποίησις) and *praxis* (πραξις) seems to preclude the identification of virtue with craftsmanship. Craftsmanship involves the production of things --- bringing something forth --- rather than acting, far less acting rightly. And virtue produces not things but actions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that virtue is not a craft. Scholars have inferred from this that it is a mistake to focus on the role of craft in Aristotle’s ethical theory.⁵ This does not imply that Aristotle’s view of ethics and practical reasoning is not influenced by a craft model, however (Angier 2010, 36), or that his views on craft are without significance for ethical and political theory. This holds, in particular, of any approach that is not committed to a rigid dichotomization of production and action. Thus Murphy asks if it is “really plausible that there is no moral dimension to production or that there are no techniques of action?” (Murphy 1993, 92).

A craft and its products may be used for morally good or bad ends, and such ends are normally considered to be external to the craft. We do not charge a knife with a crime just because it is sharp. Skill and craftsmanship may be ethically significant in other ways, however. Murphy cites Rawls’s *Aristotelian Principle* (Rawls 1971, 426) to illustrate the importance of skill to human flourishing (*εὐδαιμονία*): “we are willing to undergo the stress of practice and learning [... because ...] we anticipate the rewards of mastering complex new skills” (Murphy 1993, 6). The ability to exercise skills, and in particular complex skills, is an important feature of a good life, even if attaining and maintaining them requires considerable effort.

At another level, skill might be said to play a structural role in the ability to produce things autonomously. In this respect, a morally autonomous person can be compared to the skilled craft worker who both conceives and executes a plan.

⁴ Plato uses both *demioergos* and various cognate forms of *technê* (variously translated as ‘craft,’ ‘skill,’ ‘expertise’ or ‘know-how’) in the *Republic* and elsewhere. On the translation of *technê* and the relation between *technê* and *epistêmê* see Parry (2014). Here I follow Parry (1996) in rejecting the view that craft is only instrumental in the *Republic*, and hence that virtue, which is desired for itself and not merely instrumentally, cannot be a craft. Angier, while concluding that Plato fails to develop the case for a “genuine virtue-*technê*,” thinks that Aristotle’s ethical views are nevertheless influenced by the craft model (Angier 2010, 1, 32).

⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the relation between craft (*technê*) and virtue (*aretê*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Parry 2014.

In such cases we can speak of *the unity of conception and production* (*νόησις* and *ποίησις*) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1032b15; Murphy, 8). The dignity of skilled work depends on the ability of the worker to execute a plan they have themselves conceived (8). The unskilled worker, by contrast, merely executes a plan that has been conceived by someone else.

Once immersed in the productive dialectic of conception and execution, the skilled worker draws on the principles of their craft to solve problems of execution while reciprocally deepening their grasp of those principles on the basis of their experiences with a particular material (8). Producing things according to a plan that is one's own not only leads to the development of more complex skills (8). When they work according to their *own* plan people learn to produce autonomously. "Through this dialectic of conception and execution we become autonomous subjects, rather than mere instruments, of labour" (8).

Perhaps we can draw on this image of the craft worker to model the role of cultural skills in liberal democracy (Stopford, 2009, 39-45). The cultural conditions of autonomy are the practices, traditions and ways of doing things that constitute a cultural context within which autonomous choice is possible. Such practices and traditions are not simply given: they have a history, vary from culture to culture, and must be learned. The *subjective* cultural conditions of autonomy are the competences and skills that are implicit in an understanding of its objective conditions (40-41). When we act autonomously and make choices about how to live we do not reflect theoretically on the practices and traditions that form the cultural context of our choices: we simply engage that context skillfully, making use of the tools and materials that our culture provides.

One of the consequences of the marginalization of skill is that public recognition of skill is reduced as the functions of conception and execution are distributed between different individuals and classes. Aristotle writes at a time when the publicly recognized skill of the *demioergos* was beginning to be marginalized, and the "hand" separated from the "head" (Sennett 2008, 23; Stopford 2011, 29). Aristotle sometimes replaces the traditional word for a craft worker, *demioergos*, with *cheirotechnon* ([χειροτεχνῶν](#)) --- "handworker" --- arguing in the *Metaphysics* that "the architects [*architektonikon*] in every profession are more estimable and know more and are wiser than the artisans because they know the reasons of the things which are done" (*Metaphysics*, 981a30-b2; Sennett 23).⁶ Such linguistic shifts not only confirm the division of intellectual and manual labour, but also the diminished public standing of the artisan:

[...] while the work of the artisan was admired, he was neglected or downgraded as a person [...]. And what is more important, there never was, except in

⁶ As quoted by Sennett 2008, 23. *ἀρχιτέκτονας* is translated by Tredennick (1933, 7) as "master craftsmen" rather than "architects".

the constructions of some theorists, like the town-planner and philosopher Hippodamus of Miletus, any such thing as a category of artisans” (Vidal-Naquet 1977, 12).

By the early 20th Century, proponents of scientific management recommended shifting all planning activities from workers to management (Taylor 1917, 38; Murphy, 8). For Taylor it is “clear that in most cases one type of man is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work” (Taylor, 38). Taylor may have believed that there are inherent differences between people that make some more suited for conceptual work than others, a view that Adam Smith might well have rejected. Smith acknowledges in *The Wealth of Nations* that the repetitive performance of a small number of simple tasks rather than innate deficiency is to blame for the mental and moral torpor of the “labouring poor”, arguing that government should provide education to counteract these effects.⁷

Here, as in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith accepts the human costs of the division of labour and commercial society as the price of economic growth and opulence, at least in its early stages. More recently, Rainer Marten has argued that the capacity for sympathetic identification married to the moral perspective of the “impartial spectator,” to which Smith appeals, is an unequal match for the disfiguring extremes of Schumpeterian capitalism.⁸ Disruptive entrepreneurship cannot be tamed by feelings of sympathy. When such feelings do perform a moral function it can only be from within a social scheme that has already been humanized in other ways (Marten 2009, 69).⁹

To understand the characteristics of such a scheme it is necessary to look deeper into our ideas about the relationship between skill and wealth. Both Xenophon and Aristotle view the wealth acquired and used by households as an instrument or tool (Booth 1993, 41).¹⁰ In *The Economist*, Xenophon’s Socrates refers to wealth as an “instrument” (*ὄργανα χρήματα*) that he has never possessed (Xenophon 1971, 13).¹¹ In the same passage he compares the art of using wealth

⁷ See Smith (1909), Book 5, especially Article II, “Of the Expense of the Institution for the Education of Youth” (485ff).

⁸ See e.g. Schumpeter 1994, 83: “This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in.”

⁹ But see Schumpeter 1954. The question of the “coherence” of Smith’s economic and moral theories is too complex to present in the space available here. For a recent informative discussion of these issues, see the introduction to Haakonssen 2006.

¹⁰ The fact that Aristotle sometimes treats *money* as conventional, and sometimes as a commodity like other commodities does not seem to detract from his underlying view that true wealth is “the knowledge how to use things rightly.” See Barker 1959, 380-381.

¹¹ On this interpretation of *organa chremata* see Booth (1993, 41). Booth notes that *chremata* is related to *chreia* suggesting “need” rather than demand, and cites Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a28 and *Politics* 1253b31-32 in support of this reading. Aristotle distinguishes *oikonomia*

to that of performing on a musical instrument. To own a flute is to be able to play it. Without being able to play it one cannot own it. There is also a second sense in which one may use a flute without being able to play it, for the purpose of exchange. “So it is clear to us that a flute in the hands of a man who does not know how to use it, is not property to him, unless he sell it” (4). Wealth, we might likewise say, is useful in its primary sense when we know how to “play” it.

While this may seem to involve a “high redefinition” of “wealth”, it is a view that flows directly into Aristotle’s autarkic theory of the household (Booth, 41). The needs of the household for wealth are intrinsically self-limiting since “[n]o tool of any art is without limit in either quantity or size, and wealth is a multitude of tools for the arts of ruling household and city” (Aristotle 1997, 1256b26).¹² The soul has its proper objects, with which recognizable limits are associated. Food, for example, is the proper object of the nutritive soul. Its acquisition and use are governed by ethical requirements involving balance, proportion and the avoidance of excess (Stopford 2011, 30). The modern “food system,” by contrast, decontextualizes food: as a vehicle for the delivery of nutrients to the body, on the one hand, and as a commodity with an exchange

from chrematistics. *Oikonomia*, in the words of Daly and Cobb (1994, 138-139) deals with “the management of the household so as to increase its use value to all members of the household over the long run;” chrematistics concerns the “manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize short-term monetary exchange value to the owner.” See also Anielski (2007, 23). Aristotle distinguishes at least two kinds of chrematistics, one of which uses money as a means of exchange for the sake of the goals of the household, while the other makes the acquisition of money an end in itself: “[t]hat is why it appears on the one hand that all wealth must have a limit and yet why on the other hand we see the opposite happening in fact. For all those engaged in business increase money without limit. The reason is the closeness between them. For the two uses of business, being of the same thing, overlap, since property has the same use in both cases but not in the same respect: while of the one use, something else is the end; of the other, the end is increase. As a result, it seems to some that increase is the work of the science of household management, and they end up thinking they must either preserve or increase their substance of money without limit.” People confuse the two kinds of business “because they are more serious about life than about good life (...). And if they cannot get what they want through business itself, they pervert everything else into business instead.” (Aristotle, 1997 1257b-1258a).

¹² See Aristotle (1997, 1256b26): “So, one kind of the science of property is naturally part of the science of household management, and this property must either be present or the science must provide it so that it is present. It consists in a store of things necessary for life and useful to the community of city or household. And true wealth at any rate would seem to be made up of these things. For self-sufficiency in this sort of property with a view to good life is not unlimited, contrary to what Solon says in the line: ‘to wealth no limit has been laid down for human beings.’ For such a limit has been laid down, just as it has in the case of the other arts. No tool of any art is without limit in either quantity or size, and wealth is a multitude of tools for the arts of ruling household and city.” On the relation between Aristotle’s theory of the “natural limit” and his ethical views see Finley (1970).

value on the other.¹³ Here there is no room for skillful activity. The activities of production, storage and preparation, which were the focus of the traditional household economy, are not essentially connected with consumption, which has become an abstract function without ethical constraints. Consumption and convenience, which formerly signified “fittedness” to the natural order, come to signify the kind of ethically neutral ease of use and access which makes skill disappear altogether (Stopford 2011, 30).

Marx writes in his remarks on Xenophon (1843-45) that useful is “everything which one knows how to use” (Marx 1971, 391).¹⁴ Usefulness is not a natural or “real” property of things, but a relational property that holds of persons and things. A complete analysis of the commodity in terms of use and exchange values would have to take into account the skills and abilities involved in both types of value. Smith had originally discussed exchange value in the context of his theory of growth, tracing it back to a human “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange” (Smith, 1909, 19). His account inaugurates what Graeber calls the “founding myth of economics” according to which money is introduced to replace barter. A successful barter system presupposes a “double coincidence of wants” between parties.¹⁵ This occurs rarely enough to make the use of money, which does not depend on such coincidences, an improvement. The “founding myth” thus provides a plausible explanation of how money and subsequently credit arise out of an original human propensity to barter and exchange (Graeber 2011, 22-24).

Graeber questions the historical accuracy of this account, since the balance of anthropological evidence suggests that barter-based economies of this kind have never existed. Our familiarity with the distinction between exchange value and use value makes it easy to forget that to say something has a “use value” is also to say that someone knows how to use it. Here it is “knowing how to use” that is primary and “use value” that is secondary. Just as Smith’s idea of a “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange” may be more retrospective reconstruction than anthropological fact, so also our ideas about use value. To understand the meaning of “use” we need to know more about the structure of the skillful activities on which it is based.¹⁶

Even Marx, who may have accepted some version of the founding myth of barter, does not offer his followers an account of the relationship between use and skill.¹⁷ The managers of “real existing socialism” thus followed Western capitalism in regarding a certain fragmentation of the labour process as a inevitable (Murphy

¹³ On the sociology of food, the “food system,” and “the world ‘behind’ our food” see Carolan 2013, especially Introduction and Chapter 3.

¹⁴ The translation of Marx is from Booth 1993, 250.

¹⁵ A “double coincidence of wants” exists if and only if each party happens to be able to offer in exchange exactly what the other party wants to acquire.

¹⁶ See Stopford 2009, 115-123, 148-60.

¹⁷ On Marx’s view of barter in precapitalist economies see Booth 1993, 189-91.

1993, 10). The marginalization of skillful activity thus gains momentum with industrialization. Deskilling and the disaggregation of skills became pervasive, leading to a loss of synergies between different kinds of skillful activity (Stopford 2011, 31). Economic policy divorces labour from its foundations in skill when it “fetishizes” macro-economic labour productivity as a criterion of economic success (Jackson, 131-132).¹⁸

This encourages the ongoing replacement of human labour by machinery and “labour saving devices.” Even in societies that guarantee a reasonable social minimum, such arrangements deprive people of a key opportunity for the development and exercise of important skills (Stopford 2009, 120-123).¹⁹ The alternative to fetishizing labour productivity may not be inefficiency, however, but the discovery of alternative configurations of skill and particular technologies that allow people to engage in meaningful forms of work (Jackson 2009, 132; Stopford 2009, 129-132).²⁰ As Jackson notes, this does not mean that policies to enhance labour productivity must be abandoned under all circumstances. But focusing on macroeconomic labour productivity without reevaluating the traditional functions of investment is “a recipe for undermining work, community and environment” (Jackson 2009, 132, 138).

Economic institutions are a *cultural* force and culture is an *economic* force. If the fetishization of labour productivity undermines the development of skill it also detracts from the cultural conditions of autonomy. The “social logic that locks people into materialistic consumerism as the basis for participating in the life of society” (180) also affects their abilities to grasp and use the tools that their culture offers. Wealth is not an end in itself, but a means that we must know how to use. It is for this reason that “the art of using” (Booth 1993, 48) forms the core of Aristotle’s theory of the household: “knowing how to use suggests the art of acquiring and employing with a view to the right end” (49). Since true wealth is acquired and used skillfully for a purpose it also has a natural limit which derives from that purpose. To acquire more than the natural limit prescribes is pointless. The art of using wealth thus leads naturally to the idea of a limit to the acquisition of wealth and of economic growth.

Smith’s model of economic growth, centered on the rational self-interested economic agent, the division of labour, specialization, technological development and the extension of markets, is viewed by many economists as unsustainable. Smith himself acknowledges that economic growth will eventually end in a “stationary state”.²¹ Both Mill (1902, 334-340) and Keynes (1972, 326) believe

¹⁸ For further discussion of a “low growth” approach to labour productivity see Jackson 2011, 101.

¹⁹ On the “skillful self” see Stopford 2009, 45.

²⁰ On factors affecting the unity of conception and execution, including aptitudes, technology, worker expectations, and government policy see Murphy, 227-228.

²¹ Smith 1909, 99-100.

that a society without economic growth is inevitable “in the long run.” Neither author views this prospect pessimistically. Such a society need not be dismal and may even hold out the prospect of social, cultural, and moral progress.

Jackson argues, however, that industrial nations face a “dilemma of growth” that cannot be left to take care of itself in the long run. On the one hand economic expansion at present rates is unsustainable and modern industrial economies must learn to live with diminishing economic growth (Jackson 2009, 14-15). On the other hand, “de-growth” is socially and political unstable. Societies that cannot maintain economic growth face the evils of social instability associated “with declining consumer demand [...] rising unemployment, falling competitiveness and a spiral of recession” (65).

Jackson suggests that the systematic bias towards macro-economic labour productivity in mature economies can be addressed by encouraging structural shifts in economic organization towards a “Cinderella economy” that is less material intensive and more labour intensive than economies that strive for a high labour productivity (130-132, 154, 194-197). Such shifts to a low- or post-growth economy can be politically stable and ecologically sustainable if they are wedded to a conception of human prosperity that acknowledges limits. The conception of prosperity that Jackson proposes is based on a set of central capabilities like that proposed by Martha Nussbaum, with the significant limitation that the goal of securing the central capabilities for each citizen must be compatible with economic and ecological criteria of sustainability (45-47).

Jackson follows Sen in rejecting theories that interpret the “living standard” in terms of commodity command (opulence), utility, and blunt proxies such as gross domestic product: “Commodity command is a *means* to the end of well-being, but can scarcely be the end itself [. . .]” (Sen 1985, 19).²² Sen argues that well-being is a matter of how well someone is able to function rather than of what commodities they command. Human functioning with a given commodity bundle depends on a person’s ability to convert commodities into functioning, and this in turn may depend on a variety of physiological, social, biographical, geographical and cultural factors (70-71). Seemingly egalitarian distributions of resources may be unjust because they fail to capture the injustices that arise out of such conversion inequalities. Nutritional policy, for example, should focus not on income or food as a commodity, but on the individual’s ability to be well-nourished.

While Sen goes on to develop this line of argument in a way that emphasizes

²² The limitations of GDP as a measure of prosperity seem obvious when it is pointed out that a large prison population will increase it, whereas efficient and effective healthcare will tend to reduce it. The existence of economically unnecessary malnutrition in Western populations is an example of the way in which the affluence of a society tends to undermine assumptions on which welfarism is based. For discussion of the logic of abundance, the diminishing marginal utility of extra commodities, and the “life satisfaction paradox” see Jackson, Chapter 3, 40-41.

freedom, interpreted as capability to function rather than actual functioning, Nussbaum specifies a concrete list of central human capabilities owed to each citizen of a constitutional democracy. This list emphasizes both the broad range of human capabilities and the material conditions for their development through legislation and social policy (Nussbaum 2000, 78-70; Stopford 2009, 133-134). One reason for drawing up such a detailed list may be practical: political theories should be concrete enough to make it possible to operationalize the idea of development. They must specify important functions in a way that facilitates practical applications (Jackson 2009, 44).

Nussbaum's list of capabilities belongs to a "political" conception of the person that excludes metaphysical pleading and seeks to achieve (taking Rawls's political liberalism as its model) an "overlapping consensus" through cross-cultural dialogue and democratic consultation (Nussbaum 2000, 74-75).²³ The central capabilities embody what she calls "a partial ideal" of truly human functioning, inspired by Aristotle and Marx, and by the idea that governments should not seek to shape citizens but rather put them in a position to shape their own lives (72).²⁴ An important aim, which Nussbaum shares with Sen, is to overcome structural sources of disempowerment such as adaptive preference to which welfarist and resourcist views are insensitive (114-115, 136-141).²⁵

The proposal to focus government and constitutional policy around a normative view of political personhood exposes Nussbaum's view to the charges of perfectionism and paternalism (Stopford 2009, 133, 135-137).²⁶ In addition, her *prima facie* prioritization of individual functioning raises problems of distributive justice that she cannot easily address (136, 146-148). In a move that Pogge characterizes as "inverted Aristotelianism" Nussbaum claims extra social resources not for the better but for the worse endowed, since the worse endowed will be entitled to an increased share of resources as part of the adjustment for conversion inequality. The limits of this redistributive project are unclear, since neither Nussbaum nor Sen proposes a metric for balancing claims across the entire social scheme. This in turn raises questions of feasibility and social stability

²³ On the idea of an "overlapping consensus" see Rawls 1996, 133-172.

²⁴ Nussbaum's list (78-80) embraces a broad range of physical, intellectual, practical, emotional and imaginative capabilities that are central to our relationship to ourselves, to others, to animals, and to the natural world.

²⁵ For further discussions of resourcism and welfarism, and the sense in which Rawls is a resourcist, see Pogge 2002, 176f. and Stopford 2009, 21-2, 140-142.

²⁶ Nussbaum responds to such criticisms by arguing that the list of central capabilities specifies a "partial" rather than a full conception of the good for persons, and that functioning need be supported only up to a threshold below which truly human functioning is not available (2000, 75, 211-212). But the *level* of functioning is not at what is at stake. It is the legitimacy of the use of state resources to impose or enable human functioning at any level that is in question. In *The Skillful Self* I take the view that the role of the central capabilities in questions of distributive justice can only be heuristic (Stopford 2009, 141-142).

(Pogge 2002, 206-209; Stopford 2009, 137-138). Such concerns are likely to be aggravated if the ecological and economic constraints of a low growth economy have to be taken into account.

As we have seen, Aristotle's theory of the household implies that the acquisition of wealth is circumscribed by a natural limit. Household wealth is not an end in itself but a means to a certain kind of life that is self-sufficient.²⁷ It provides a model for flourishing within limits that distinguishes between life and the "good life," treating the acquisition of household wealth as a means to the latter. Aristotle believes that people grow "acquisitive" when they lose sight of their original reasons for acquiring wealth and, having failed to discover the good life, allow the pursuit of wealth to become their ruling activity.

The resourcist's view of the basis of social expectations echoes the view of wealth as an instrument. "Primary goods," as Rawls calls them, are goods (obviously different in kind and scope from Aristotle's conception of household wealth) that people know how to make use of in pursuing their conceptions of the good (Rawls 1971, 90-95). The capability approach, however, goes a step further than Aristotle or Rawls – perhaps a step too far – if it makes functioning the basis of social expectations (Stopford 2009, 138). This "step too far" diverts attention from a third factor relevant to the way human beings function, alongside resources and capabilities, namely the *nonrepresentable skills* (177-179).

Skills are "representable" if they can be delegated to a third party without loss of function (for example when we pay a doctor to look after our health). There are, however, other cases in which skillful activity cannot be delegated without a loss of function (177). Capabilities can only be said to be "truly human" if they are grounded in skills that are nonrepresentable in this sense: that each person must acquire and cultivate them for themselves.²⁸ It is by conceiving and executing a plan of our own making that we take the first and most important step towards acting in a truly human way.

Because it is skillful, this first step is also already a step towards the capacity for rationality that is prefigured in what Kant calls the human "technical predisposition" (Kant 1978, 240; Sennett, 150).²⁹ Both Kant and Aristotle, from

²⁷ The word "wealth" here denotes the generic objects of a household economy in the sense of Aristotle, not money, riches or "net worth" in the modern sense. On the translation and interpretation of ἀυτάρκης see Meikle 1995, 44-45.

²⁸ On the semantics of "capability" and "skill" see Stopford 2009, 146.

²⁹ The technical predisposition of mankind is illustrated by the capacity of the human hand to manipulate any object whatsoever. The hand is not confined to holding a particular kind of object or grasping a particular type of tool. Its freedom consists in the predisposition by which it can adapt to any object whatsoever. In this respect the human hand anticipates the flexibility of reason itself. Thus Kant writes in the *Anthropology* that "the characterization of man as a rational animal is found in the form and organization of the human hand, its fingers, and fingertips. Nature has made them partly through their construction, and partly through

their different perspectives, recognize that the human mind is formally flexible with regard to its objects. In the words of Aristotle: *ἡ ψυχή τα ὄντα πῶς ἐστίν* (Aristotle, 1907 III, 8, 431b20) - “Man’s soul is, in a certain way, entities.”³⁰ While for Aristotle this is an ontological fact, for Kant it is a state of affairs that that can only be conceived in conjunction with the historical process by which humankind emerges from its roots in the animal world and develops the technical predisposition for realizing freely chosen ends (Allison 2012, 239, 250; Louden 2011, xxv-xxvi). Culture is not the site of a battle between bestializing and humanizing tendencies (Sloterdijk 2009, 15) but a gradual process by which a capacity for reason that is already prefigured in the manipulative abilities of the human hand unfolds.³¹ Skill itself is not moral, and the cultural, industrial and scientific achievements that it makes possible may embody both progressive and regressive elements.³² But a society that undermines the very feature of culture that prefigures the human predisposition to reason can never be moral.

Understanding the relationship between resources, capabilities and the nonrepresentable skills can throw light on the transition from a growth driven economy focused on consumption to a low growth economy which focuses on capability development “within limits.” Such a transition calls for a conception of prosperity that is consistent with sustainable levels of economic activity and thus presupposes an acceptance and understanding of limits. While the list of capabilities proposed by Nussbaum might provide a starting point for such a conception, Jackson argues that the capability approach must be “bounded” – that is to say that only ecological and economic resources consistent with a low or no economic growth scenario should be devoted to the development of the core capabilities (Jackson 2000, 45). But what would it mean to promote human capabilities under such circumstances? How can we make sense of the transition to a society that is no longer wedded to economic growth and is nevertheless prosperous?

One clue to such a transition may be sought in the craft worker’s approach to

their sensitivity, not only for manipulating objects in one particular way, but also in an open-ended way. Nature has made them, therefore, fit to be used by reason, and thereby Nature has indicated the technological gift, or the gift for skill, of this species as that of a rational animal” (Kant 1978, 240).

³⁰ Quoted with this English translation in Heidegger 1962, 34.

³¹ See Sloterdijk 2009, 15-16. Sloterdijk argues that the humanistic “taming of man” has failed. But the humanism he describes - one that involves initiation into an “intimate society of letters” as the key to the “calming of the inner beast” - is perfectionist. Sloterdijk does not consider the possibility of a – to paraphrase Rawls – “political not metaphysical” conception of education which, rather than dramatizing the contest of culture and barbarism, focuses on the cultivation of the raw materials of human nature, recognizing that the growth of culture is slow and its progress uneven.

³² See, for example, Kant’s account of the “shining misery” to which the culture of skill leads (Kant 1987, §83).

resistances and limits. What Sennett calls the “material consciousness” of the craftsman involves a kind of “dialogue” through which the skilled worker voluntarily submits to the constraints of their material (Sennett 2008, 168). Learning and applying a craft involves learning to deal with limits. Progress in skillful activity involves dealing with obstacles and material resistances that the craftsman must address and devise strategies to address. “Skill builds by moving irregularly, and sometimes by taking detours” (238). Sometimes the least obvious course or strategy is the right one, and sometimes the craft worker confronts obstacles that they have themselves introduced. (220-222). Dealing with resistances requires the craftsman to develop secondary skills such as patience and self-discipline (Stopford 2009, 176).

Skills acquired in this way are nonrepresentable because each person must acquire and exercise them for themselves and one person cannot exercise them on behalf of another. “Thinking as making” and the “material consciousness” of the craft worker involve the development of nonrepresentable skills in a specific medium.³³ To learn to overcome such obstacles through these and other strategies may involve a slow and continuous process of development over many years. “Thinking as making”, as Aristotle would agree, is not the same as “thinking as doing.” To succeed the craft worker must learn to flourish within the limits of the available.

The craft worker’s encounter with obstacles and resistances has parallels in other kinds of skillful activity that do not yield products and artifacts but are nevertheless skillful (175-84). Health, bodily integrity, the capacity for affiliation, and many other capabilities depend on forms of skillful activity that are liable to run into obstacles and resistances in much the way craft work does (148-60). Skills do not exist in isolation from one other but form networks. Skills acquired in one area of a network may be transferred and adopted in others. Each type of skillful activity may break down, whether occasionally or systematically. When a skill breaks down, the entire network of mutually supporting skills connected with it is likely to be affected. We can think of each human being as the custodian of such a network of nonrepresentable skills that is theirs and theirs alone (177).

What we discern here are the outlines of a culture of skill in which the craftsman’s slow, sometimes awkward, unpredictable and painstaking encounters with obstacles, resistances and limits provide a pattern for human flourishing within limits. Cultural progress is neither fast nor instinctive. Were it so, we would not enjoy the flexibility that allows us to interact with the world in an “open-ended” way. Instead, human culture depends on a slow process of “trial, practice

³³ Sennett’s account of “material consciousness” might be seen as an elaboration of Heidegger’s (1927, §15) account of *Zuhandensein*, though Sennett’s method is not phenomenological. Sennett uses the term “material consciousness” to signify not a “thematic” consciousness of an object, but rather a “productive awareness” that is disclosed by dealing with a material and expressed through phrases such as “thinking with one’s hands” (Sennett 2008, 149-155).

and instruction” (Kant 1991, 42). The skillful self does not respond to a problem by giving up, but by trying a different approach or looking at a difficulty in a different light. Rather than abandoning its goals, it seeks new ways and means to achieve them. “Skillpower is not willpower, and in craft as in art it often takes a long time to get from A to B.”³⁴

In a culture of skill people are concerned not with what they have but with what they have to do or what needs to be done. Such a culture is less susceptible than consumer culture to positional or “status goods” and unproductive status competition (Jackson 2009, 154-156) that adds “little or nothing to the levels of well-being” (53) and acts as a “material ‘ratchet’ that drives resources through the economy” (181).³⁵ When the skillful self is engaged with the task at hand it may not even notice other selves, far less compare itself with them. To understand others as skillful selves is itself a form of skillful activity (Stopford 2009, 155). The others are encountered not as isolated individuals but in the context of activities in which we notice them because they too are engaged in doing something skillfully.

The other is not someone who occupies the median position in a distribution or a consumer whose choices are mapped using demand curves, but a person who, like ourselves, has a task to do and does it more or less well. Rather than seeing others as economic agents whose material status we compare with our own, we see them in terms of what they can do and be. When citizens develop a skillful understanding of their own activities and have understood that others are also skillful selves who, like themselves, have their problems and obstacles to deal with, they are less likely to base their choices about how to live on the symbolic status of material commodities to which they lack a skillful relationship. Status syndrome and status anxiety are signs that the skillful self has lost touch with the essential context of everyday skillful activity.³⁶ The less dependent we are on status goods and unproductive status competition the more our participation in society can focus on needs that are “truly human.”

A culture of skill thus furnishes a framework of less “materialistic” ways for people to participate in the life of society, reducing our dependency on material growth and preparing the way for a readjustment of the balance between investment, labour productivity and consumption (Jackson, 133-136).³⁷ The restoration of a public culture of skill cannot by itself resolve questions of distributive justice and basic entitlements. Such issues remain on the day to day political agenda. But such a culture is necessary to sustain the kind of framework

³⁴ Stopford 2011, 37 (author’s translation). The German text reads: „Die Kraft der Fähigkeiten ist keine Willenskraft, und im Handwerk wie in der Kunst braucht es oft eine lange Zeit, um von A nach B zu kommen.“

³⁵ On consumer culture and the “iron cage” of consumerism see Jackson 2009, 87-102.

³⁶ On the essential role of contexts of purposes in use see Stopford 2009, 116-117.

³⁷ On the dimensions of globalization see e.g. Shaw (1999).

within which fairness is possible, holding bargaining and agreement about distributive shares and entitlements to within a manageable range, and laying the foundation for the reasonable management of social expectations.

Political communities that wish to encourage the development of a culture of skill must thus seek ways to resist the marginalization of skill that has become a systematic feature of modern civilization. This does not require us to oppose the “chief dimensions of globalization,” but it does involve the search for configurations of economic and technological development that are consistent with a culture of skill and grounded in a democratic critique of technological rationality (Stopford 2009, 7-8, 123-132). This may, in turn, lead to a political conception of prosperity that reflects a skillful understanding of what it means to flourish within limits, and from this position begin to address the dilemma of growth with which ecologically challenged societies are faced.

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