THE SKILL OF VIRTUE

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ABSTRACT

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The revival of virtue ethics brought the ancient Greek concepts of ‘virtue’ and ‘the virtuous person’ back into prominence. Contemporary virtue ethicists present an attractive picture of virtue, for the virtuous person knows how to act in a morally appropriate way and is reliable in acting accordingly. This portrait of the virtuous person appears to be the type of person one should aspire to be, but problems arise with many of the details. Often, only the end state of the virtuous person is described, and it is left mysterious how an average person could ever achieve such an idealized state. Accounts of virtue have left readers with the impression that the virtuous person is an unattainable ideal or psychologically implausible.

This dissertation argues that reviving the ancient Greek idea that virtues are like practical skills, which is rarely discussed in contemporary literature, can help provide a more plausible account of the virtuous person. The moral knowledge of the virtuous person is analogous to the practical knowledge of the expert in a skill. Learning a skill is a process of acquiring practical knowledge, that is, the knowledge of how to do something, like building a house or driving a car. With virtue, the practical knowledge is the knowledge of how to act well, like acting brave or just.

The few current discussions of the skill analogy rely on a reconstruction of the ancient account of skills for a comparison to virtue. There are advantages, however, to using a modern account of skill acquisition that has had the benefit of research and
application. This dissertation adapts an account of skills developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus in their research on artificial intelligence. The Dreyfus account displays the features of skills that were relevant in the ancient analogy to virtue: a progress from novice to expert, which begins with following rules and then progresses to being sensitive to the relevant features of particular situations. The skill model of virtue offers the most promising direction for contemporary virtue theory, because it can ground a plausible account of the moral knowledge of the virtuous person.
To Beth, who inspires me to be a better person
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CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

The revival of virtue ethics has brought the ancient Greek concepts of ‘virtue’ and the ‘virtuous person’ back into prominence in ethical discussion. According to Rosalind Hursthouse (2003), a virtue “is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should.” A person with the virtue of kindness, says John McDowell (1998), “can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires,” because “a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness” (p. 51). Hursthouse and McDowell present an attractive picture of virtue, for the virtuous person knows how to act in a morally appropriate way and is reliable in acting accordingly.

This portrait of the virtuous person appears to be the kind of person one should aspire to be, at least from the moral point of view. When one looks closer, however, problems arise with some of the details. Although passages like the ones quoted above give a good indication of what it would be like to possess a virtue like kindness, it is unclear how the kind person came to have knowledge about when a situation requires kindness. Often, only the end state of the virtuous person is described, and it is left mysterious how an average person could ever achieve such an idealized state. Accounts of the virtuous person have often left readers with the impression that the virtuous person is an unattainable ideal, a moral fanatic, or just psychologically implausible.

This dissertation argues that reviving the ancient Greek idea that virtues are like practical skills can help provide a more plausible account of the virtuous person. The moral knowledge of the virtuous person is analogous to the practical knowledge of the expert in a skill. Applying the
skill model to virtue is an attempt to take up Aristotle’s suggestion that “we should use as evidence what is apparent for the sake of what is obscure” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a14-15).\(^1\) Aristotle uses this methodology in the frequent analogies he draws between virtues and practical skills: “we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre. Similarly, we become just by doing what is just, temperate by doing what is temperate, and brave by doing brave deeds” (*NE* 1103b1-1103b3). Learning a skill is a process of acquiring practical knowledge, that is, the knowledge of how to do something, like building a house or driving a car. With virtue, the practical knowledge is the knowledge of how to act well, like acting brave or just. Virtues, like skills, require experience and practice to acquire. You cannot learn how to surf merely by reading a book about it, and likewise, you cannot acquire the virtue of temperance just by reading one of the current books on virtue. A closer examination of skills and virtues will reveal a number of similarities in their acquisition and development, although accounts of virtue will differ in regards to whether anything beyond skillfulness is required for acting virtuously, and if so what those additional elements turn out to be.

Although the skill analogy developed in ancient times, it is not necessary to rely on a reconstruction of the ancient account of skills for a comparison to virtue. There are advantages to using a modern account of skill acquisition that has had the benefit of research and application, such as the Dreyfus (1986, 1991) account of skill acquisition. While the Dreyfuses present a modern model of skill acquisition, it can serve the same role that the ancient model of skills served in the analogy to virtue. According to Julia Annas (2006):

In the classical tradition of virtue ethics, this is an important analogy, because ethical development displays something that we can see more clearly in these more limited contexts: there is a progress from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner

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\(^1\) From here on out, references to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* will be shortened to *NE*. 
to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the
particularities of situations as well as expressing learning and general reflection. (p. 518)
The Dreyfus account displays the features of skills that were relevant in the ancient analogy to
virtue: a progress from novice to expert, which begins with following rules and then progresses
to being sensitive to the relevant features of particular situations.

As it is part of the project of this dissertation to inquire into the nature of skills and
virtues, later chapters focus on explaining what it is to possess a skill or virtue. A few details at
the beginning, however, should prove helpful. A skill is the ability, acquired through training, to
perform some action or produce a solution in a problematic area. According to Dreyfus and
Dreyfus (1986), having a skill is a matter of knowing how to do something in areas that “contain
a potentially unlimited number of possibly relevant facts and features, and the ways those
elements interrelate and determine other events is unclear” (p. 20). Examples of skills include
driving a car, playing chess, nursing, teaching, economic forecasting, and most social
interactions. Skills are relatively complex abilities, and so something as simple as tying shoe
laces would not count as a skill.

A virtue is a character trait, acquired through habituation, which it is good for a person to
have. Why virtues are good to have is the subject of a lot of debate, but it is often claimed that
they enable a person to lead a good life. Which character traits turn out to be virtues will vary
from one ethicist to the next, but typical virtues include honesty, courage, and kindness. To
possess the virtue of kindness is to know how to act well in situations where kindness is
appropriate.

Virtues appear to be analogous to skills insofar as they involve an ability to know how to
act well that is acquired by experience. Despite this kind of similarity, there may be ways in
which virtues are not analogous to skills. For example, possessing the virtue of kindness also requires being disposed to act kindly, for virtues are deeply ingrained traits of one’s character. Insofar as virtues require being disposed to act well in addition to the knowledge of how to act well, this marks an important contrast between virtues and skills. Whether you possess a skill seems to depend on whether you are able to act well, and not whether you are disposed to act well. For this reason, it is misleading to say simply that “virtues are skills”, since it might imply that virtues are nothing more than skills. It is more accurate, on the account developed here, to claim that a key component of virtue is skillful activity. There is, of course, far more that needs to be said about the relationship between skills and virtues. The rest of this introductory chapter provides an overview of the following chapters in the dissertation, and highlights some of the key claims made about skills and virtues.

1.2 Chapter Summaries

The second chapter explains the role the skill analogy plays in Aristotle’s ethics. According to Aristotle, virtues are like skills in that they are acquired by performing the relevant activities. Hence, Aristotle says, “we become builders by building” and “we become just by doing what is just” (NE 1103a32-1103b3). Actions can be performed well or poorly, and it is through repeatedly performing the action well that excellence can be achieved. Virtues are also like skills, such as medicine and navigation, in that they concern matters of action and thus statements about them cannot be made with precision, although generalizations can be made. Despite these similarities, there are some key differences between skills and virtue. Virtuous action requires that the action be done for its own sake, rather than for some other end. This is not true of expertise in a skill, for one could be a highly skilled doctor even though one practices
medicine for the sake of wealth rather than for the sake of healing others. In addition, virtue requires acting from a stable character, whereas expertise has no such requirement. Beyond skillfulness, virtue requires acting from a proper set of motivations. Nonetheless, Aristotle found many similarities between virtues and skills, and the skill analogy played an important role in his account of virtue.

The third chapter presents a challenge to basing a modern model of virtue as a skill on an Aristotelian understanding of virtue. Julia Annas (1995, 2006) is one of the few modern writers on virtue that has attempted to recover the ancient idea that virtue is, or is structurally similar to, a skill. For Annas, this idea is to be found primarily in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues. Despite Aristotle’s frequent analogies between virtues and skills, Annas claims that Aristotle rejects the idea that virtue is like a skill. Thus, the model of virtue as a skill that she endorses for modern virtue theory is Socratic. This chapter argues that while Aristotle rejects the Socratic model of virtue as a skill, he does not reject the analogy of virtue as a skill altogether. Aristotle puts forth his own model of virtue as a skill, one that differs from the Socratic model with regard to both the descriptions of virtues and of skills. An ancient debate about the status of medicine as a skill reveals that Aristotle holds a more empirical and experientially based account of practical skills than either Plato or Socrates. This does not yet show, however, that Aristotle’s view of skills ought to be endorsed over the Socratic view.

The account of practical skills defended by Socrates is more rigorously intellectual. According to Annas, an expert must be able to explicitly justify and explain his actions, and to do so in a way that refers to general principles underlying the skill. Thus, someone who is unable to articulate the reasons why they acted, in the manner described by Annas, do not count as experts. Although Annas recognizes that this view clashes with an intuitive view of many
skills, say of plumbing or gardening, she holds that it is true of at least some skills. She does not argue, however, that any particular skill fits the Socratic model.

On an intuitive level, the empiricist account appears more accurate than the intellectualist does, for many commonly thought of skills, such as gardening or plumbing, count as genuine skills on the empiricist account. The empiricist account has more than that to recommend it, though, as at least one recent philosophical analysis of the acquisition of practical skills shows it to be very similar to the account developed by Aristotle. The Dreyfus account of the acquisition of practical skills shares the empirical understanding of skills. Their research on skilled experts, such as chess players and airline pilots, shows that the knowledge of the expert is mostly a matter of ‘knowing-how’ rather than ‘knowing-that.’ Even in a highly intellectual skill like playing chess, chess masters could usually articulate nothing more than ‘I saw it was the right move to make’ in attempting to justify and explain their actions. On the intellectualist account, this would be sufficient evidence to show that they lack expertise, yet their skill at winning games of chess proves otherwise. If this is indeed the case, then, contrary to Annas, the model of virtue as skill that should be endorsed for modern virtue theory is not Socratic but Aristotelian.

The fourth chapter provides an in-depth examination of the Dreyfus account of practical skills. Expertise in a practical skill is a type of knowledge, but knowledge in terms of knowing how to do something rather than merely having propositional knowledge. While knowing how to do something often involves knowledge of and about things, it cannot be completely reduced to knowing-that. Take, for example, riding a bike. Most of us know how to ride a bicycle, but are unable to formulate any specific rules about how to do so. This is true, not only for a simple skill like bike riding, but also true for such complex skills as playing chess and piloting an
You can know how to do something and even achieve expertise in a skill, without that knowledge being merely a matter of knowing the facts and which rules are applicable.

Since skills are learned, Dreyfus and Dreyfus present a model of how skills are acquired. The Dreyfus model divides skill acquisition into five stages, starting from the novice and ending with the expert. Familiar examples are used, like driving a car, as well as skills in the field of nursing. Skills vary in their complexity and with it the difficulty of achieving expertise. In addition, even among experts some are more skilled than others are. This applies to all stages of skill acquisition, in that not everyone at a certain skill level will perform as well as everyone else at that stage. There is, however, an approach to confronting situations that those at a particular skill level all share.

One of the hallmark features of expertise is an intuitive form of decision-making. By ‘intuition’, the Dreyfuses (1986) “are referring to the understanding that effortlessly occurs upon seeing similarities with previous experiences” (p. 28). Intuition develops out of repeated exposure to situations and the outcome of actions taken in those situations. It does not involve anything mysterious or supernatural. Intuition is characterized by its immediacy, and this feature accounts for the perceptual terms often used in describing intuition; ‘senses’, ‘perceives’, ‘sees that’, and so on. Intuition allows one to apprehend a situation immediately without having to engage in detached decision-making. Hence, chess masters describe themselves as just ‘seeing the correct move to make.’

The fifth chapter compares this understanding of expertise to virtue. The chapter argues that the Dreyfus account of skill acquisition is a useful model for understanding modern accounts of virtue given by neo-Aristotelians. The Dreyfus account provides a way of making sense of otherwise murky or problematic claims about the virtues. The chapter begins by describing
modern accounts of the virtuous person, taken mostly from John McDowell and Rosalind Hursthouse. Difficulties with these descriptions of the virtuous person are raised, followed by an explanation of how the Dreyfus account can handle the difficulties.

John McDowell describes the virtuous person as one who does not deliberate about what to do. The virtuous person just sees one aspect of the situation as relevant, and all other considerations are silenced. This single-mindedness of the virtuous person contrasts with the common view of moral judgment as requiring the weighing of reasons for and against taking a certain course of action. In addition, single-mindedness is something we often associate with fanaticism, and so it presents a troubling picture of the virtuous person. If virtues are analogous to practical skills, however, then the virtuous person can act well in the non-deliberative way McDowell describes, because the virtuous person has experience with that particular situation. Experts display the sort of non-deliberative, or intuitive, reactions that McDowell ascribes to the virtuous person, and experts possess this ability because of their experience. Although the skill analogy can support the claim that the virtuous person would act single-mindedly, the claim is not as illuminating as McDowell makes it out to be. According to the Dreyfus account, the ability to act well without deliberation only occurs in situations with which the expert has familiarity. McDowell does not present the virtuous person as being similarly limited in unfamiliar situations. Even the virtuous person will need to fall back on weighing competing reasons for and against actions when presented with a genuinely unfamiliar situation.

Rosalind Hursthouse argues that the knowledge of the virtuous person is not reducible to a set of principles or rules. This is a denial of the common claim that knowledge must be explicable in terms of principles; that it is codifiable into a set of rules. The problem with denying codifiability is that it undermines our confidence that the judgments of the virtuous
person count as genuine moral knowledge. When the virtuous person cannot articulate what he knows, or gives vague responses like ‘it was the honest thing to do’, doubts form as to whether the virtuous person really knows what he is doing. Another advantage of the skill model is that it provides a model showing how someone can have practical knowledge, without that knowledge being completely reducible to stateable propositional knowledge. Knowing how to do something often involves knowledge of and about things, but knowing how to do something cannot be completely reduced to knowing that such and such is the case. The Dreyfus research reveals that experts are able to know what to do without applying rules. While an appeal to the skill model will not solve all the issues surrounding codifiability, it at least provides an example of how the possession of practical knowledge need not be entirely reducible to propositional knowledge.

These are just a few of the examples of how the skill model can be put to work in support of various claims about virtue and the virtuous person. A close examination of skills and virtues reveals a number of similarities in their acquisition and development. One potential challenge, however, to the skill model of virtue is the possibility that virtues can conflict in certain cases, leaving the virtuous person with conflicting intuitions rather than an all-considered judgment about what to do. The next two chapters explore the concept of practical wisdom and the thesis of the unity of the virtues to see if they will resolve the difficulties posed by potentially conflicting virtues.

The sixth chapter examines the complex role that practical wisdom plays in virtue. This chapter explores the concept of practical wisdom and its connection to virtue, as well as the extent to which a skill model of virtue is compatible with practical wisdom. It begins with an in-depth look at Aristotle on practical wisdom, and then follows with some neo-Aristotelians on the
A skill model of virtue can account for some of the elements of practical wisdom, but not all.

Practical wisdom is knowledge of what is truly valuable in life. Those who are virtuous are supposed to know what is good and to seek it. Practical wisdom also involves knowing the appropriate means to achieving one’s ends. Expertise in a skill, however, does not seem to require having good ends, or using the skill only in situations that further some good end. A doctor is no less skilled when acting for the sake of bad ends as when acting for the sake of good ends, although we will only praise the latter. In some ways, this should not be an unexpected difference between virtues and skills, since virtues represent a subset of character traits that focus on being a morally good person. One should expect that there would be some requirements for virtues to be connected to goodness that are not requirements for skills in general.

Another key difference is in terms of motivation. An honest person is motivated to be honest whenever that virtue is relevant. If a person knows what honesty demands in a situation, but chooses to be dishonest, this undermines the claim to possess the virtue. This represents a difference between skills and virtues. Practical skills are usually thought of as a type of ability, rather than a disposition. If a chess player intentionally throws a game, this does not undermine his claim to be skilled at playing chess. Someone can be an expert in chess so long as one can reliably win chess games when one chooses to do so. If a soldier intentionally runs away on the battlefield, however, this does appear to undermine his claim to be courageous. Again, this difference is not a complete surprise, as virtues are usually thought of as character traits, which reflect the ways we are disposed to act, rather than merely ways we are able to act. Virtues require that one be reliably disposed to display the virtue whenever it is appropriate.
Practical wisdom leads to a discussion of the unity of the virtues, in chapter seven, for practical wisdom is thought to unify the virtues in such a way that if you have one virtue, then you have all of the virtues. To deny this view is to hold that the virtues are discrete and independent character traits, such that one could be courageous but completely lacking in charity. Most contemporary virtue ethicists endorse a version of the unity of the virtues thesis. The unity thesis traditionally holds that to some extent a person must have all the virtues in order to have any at all. This idea is very controversial, however, as it appears to make virtue psychologically implausible. Most of us struggle with trying to be honest and kind. To claim that in order to be genuinely honest or kind you would also have to have all the other virtues makes it seem like virtue is an unattainable state.

This chapter describes four different versions of the unity thesis: a strong, moderate, weak, and minimal thesis. It is argued that all four versions keep the central idea that practical wisdom plays a unifying role, but only the minimal version puts forth a plausible view about the implications of practical wisdom for the possession of virtue. On the minimal unity thesis, virtue requires more than just practical wisdom, and so even if one is practically wise, it does not follow that one has all the virtues. Virtues require skillfulness and motivational components as well. For example, a person may recognize that it would be a kind act to comfort a friend grieving over the death of a loved one. The person may still fail to be motivated by this recognition, or may not know how to comfort the friend.

The eighth chapter seeks to apply the skill model to a particular virtue – honesty. The chapter assumes that honesty will count as a virtue according to most any list of virtues. It is beyond the scope of the dissertation to argue for a particular list of virtues, but that does not mean that the skill model has nothing to contribute to such a list. One implication of the skill
model is that virtues are similar to complex practical skills that take experience and feedback to gain expertise. Thus, honesty, on the skill model, would not turn out to be as simple as always telling the truth. The chapter argues in favor of a complex view of honesty over a simple one. One of the complexities is that understanding the expectations of others is important in deciding whether there is an obligation to tell the truth, and if so, how much of the truth to tell. In addition, honesty also requires avoiding deceptive practices, even those that do not involve telling lies.

This understanding of honesty is then applied to the field of business ethics, and in particular, to two areas that might seem the most resistant to honesty – marketing and negotiation. The chapter assumes that sufficient arguments have been given for the need of honesty in business. One application of the skill model is to show that since virtues are acquired through practice and habituation, business practices need to be analyzed to see if they inculcate vice rather than virtue. If marketing strategies involve dishonest actions, then those involved are, to some degree, being habituated into vice.

The focus on business ethics also helps to support the view that honesty is a complex notion. For example, it is unclear what honesty requires in a negotiation. Too much of the truth can harm the company. In addition, honesty may not be required at all if both parties have the expectation that the other side will tell lies and withhold information. If this is an understood practice in negotiation, then perhaps there is no dishonesty in deceiving the other side. While companies are not required to reveal their bottom line in a negotiation, there is a stronger requirement to avoid deception than is generally recognized.

The concluding chapter summarizes the extent to which the skill model of virtue can capture a neo-Aristotelian model of virtue. The adoption of the skill model still leaves some
components of a complete account of virtue that need to be explained. Any complete account of virtue needs to specify how to distinguish between virtues and vices. The skill model is compatible with a variety of approaches, and so no attempt is made to endorse a particular list of virtues and vices. Finally, the chapter explores some promising areas for future research using the skill model of virtue.
CHAPTER 2: ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUE AND SKILL

2.1 Introduction

The idea that virtues are analogous to skills can be traced back to ancient Greek thought. Although skill analogies can be found in the writings of Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics, the focus will be on developing an Aristotelian skill model of virtue.\(^2\) This chapter provides an explanation of the main elements of Aristotle’s account of virtue, with specific attention being paid to the similarities and dissimilarities between virtues and skills.

Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual and ethical virtue, and this chapter will focus on the latter. The ethical virtues are what we have in mind when we speak about someone’s character. Examples of ethical virtues include generosity, temperance, and courage. According to Aristotle, the ethical virtues pertain to the part of the soul that is appetitive, while the intellectual virtues pertain to the part of the soul that is rational. While the appetitive part of the soul does not reason, it is capable of following the dictates of reason. Although little time will be spent here on intellectual virtues and the division of the soul that grounds the distinction between the two types of virtue, one contrast between intellectual and ethical virtue is relevant.

Intellectual and ethical virtues differ in their development, according to Aristotle, for “an intellectual virtue originates and grows mostly by teaching, and in view of this it requires experience and time, whereas an ethical virtue is acquired by habituation” (\textit{NE} 1103a14-18). This contrast appears to deny both that teaching and that experience play a role in acquiring ethical virtue, but this is misleading. Habits are built up by frequent repetition, which requires experience and time. Aristotle only meant to emphasize the role experience plays in acquiring intellectual virtue, rather than deny that it plays a role in ethical virtue. As for teaching, although

\(^2\) I view an Aristotelian skill model of virtue to be more plausible than the alternatives, but that point will not be argued until the next chapter where I consider a major challenge to the Aristotelian model.
it appears that Aristotle intends to contrast teaching and habituation in acquiring virtue, this conflicts with other statements Aristotle makes about acquiring ethical virtue. Conflicting statements will be pointed out throughout this chapter, so that the statements can be discussed in their proper context.

2.2 Virtues as Habits

Whatever role teaching plays in acquiring ethical virtue, habituation remains the foundation for the development of ethical virtue. In his discussion of habituation, Aristotle makes one of his first comparisons between the acquisition of virtues and skills:

In the case of the virtues, on the other hand, we acquire them as a result of prior activities; and this is like the case of the arts, for that which we are to perform by art after learning, we first learn by performing, e.g., we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre. Similarly, we become just by doing what is just, temperate by doing what is temperate, and brave by doing brave deeds. (NE 1103a32-1103b3)

Skills are learned by performing the relevant activities, hence, “we become builders by building.” You cannot learn a skill without having performed the activities associated with the skill. It might be thought that you could learn a skill simply from reading a book or watching someone else perform the skill. While gaining information ahead of time might be helpful or even necessary in learning a skill, it will never be sufficient. You learn how to ride a bike by getting on the bike and attempting to ride it. No amount of advice from parents can substitute for the actual experience of trying to ride the bike. In order to know how to do something, like building a house or playing an instrument, you have to practice doing it. For Aristotle, a similar

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3 Hereafter, I will use the term ‘virtue’ to refer to ‘ethical virtue’, unless I am drawing a contrast between ethical and intellectual virtue.
story is true for acquiring virtue, for “no one who is to become good will become good unless he
does good things. Yet most men do not do these; instead, they resort to merely talking about
them and think that they are philosophizing and that by so doing they will become virtuous” (NE
1105b11-15). We acquire virtues as the result of prior activities. In order to acquire the virtue of
courage, you must perform courageous acts.

Although practice is necessary for learning a skill, it is not by itself sufficient for
achieving excellence in a skill, because practice can lead to the formation of good or bad habits.
Aristotle points out that:

it is from the same actions and because of the same actions that every virtue comes into
being or is destroyed, and similarly with every art; for it is by playing the lyre well or
badly that men become good or bad lyre players, respectively. In the case of architects
and all the rest, too, the situation is analogous; for men become good architects by
building houses well, and bad architects by building houses badly. For if such were not
the case, there would have been no need for a teacher, but all would have become good or
bad artists. (NE 1103b7-14)

It is from the same action of building a house that both good and bad architects are produced. Of
course, the specific actions involved in building a house poorly differ from the actions involved
in building a house well, but in a more general sense both the good and bad architect are
involved in the activity of building a house. Practice is not by itself sufficient for excelling in a
skill, because you also need some sort of feedback about your performance in order to improve
your skill. Otherwise, repeated performance is likely to lead to bad habits. Actions can be
performed well or poorly, and it is through repeatedly performing the action well that excellence
can be achieved. The last line in the above passage suggests that a teacher is needed, at least
sometimes, to guide the student into performing well. A teacher can provide good feedback for the student. If repeated performance was not required for acquiring good or bad habits, then we would somehow automatically have the good or bad habits, and there would be no need for a teacher because there would be no process that the teacher can help guide. This also suggests that teaching does play a role in acquiring ethical virtue, since a similar story about the acquisition of habits is true for virtue.

It is from the same actions that virtuous or vicious habits are developed as well. Repeated performance of the right kind of action develops a virtue, while repeated performance of the wrong kind of action develops a vice. Since virtue is acquired through habituation, and habits are acquired through actions, Aristotle says it always matters how we act:

for it is by our actions with other men in transactions that we are in the process of becoming just or unjust, and it is by our actions in dangerous situations in which we are in the process of acquiring the habit of being courageous or afraid that we become brave or cowardly, respectively. (NE 1103b14-17)

Courageous and cowardly habits are both developed out of actions in dangerous situations. In the passage above, Aristotle describes another implication of virtue being acquired through habituation. Acquiring a virtue requires actions that take place in a specific context. We are in the process of acquiring the habit of being courageous or cowardly only when we act in dangerous situations. Habits are built up by repeated performance, so in order to acquire a habit of being courageous or cowardly one must be repeatedly exposed to dangerous situations. If you have rarely faced dangerous situations, then you will not have had the necessary experiences to acquire courage.
2.3 Doing What is Virtuous

Aristotle draws another comparison between virtues and skills, when he discusses how statements about actions do not admit of precision. For Aristotle, the reason is that “in matters concerning action and expediency, as in those of health, there is no uniformity” (NE 1104a4-5). Matters concerning health lack uniformity, since you cannot come up with one diet or exercise routine that would meet everyone’s needs. Because of this, Aristotle claims, “those who are to act must always consider what is proper to the occasion, as in medical art and in navigation” (NE 1104a8-10). Virtues are like skills, such as medicine and navigation, in that they concern matters of action and thus statements about them must be made sketchily. What counts as being moderate with regard to drinking alcohol will vary from person to person, and will vary for the same person in different circumstances. Although there is no uniformity, Aristotle does not deny that it is still possible to generalize about how to act.

Aristotle sets up another comparison between virtues and skills, although in this case he does not explicitly draw the comparison. Virtues are not only built up by engaging in certain activities, but one’s performance of those activities depends upon the degree to which one possesses the relevant virtue. For example, Aristotle says “by abstaining from [excessive bodily] pleasures we become temperate, and, in turn, when we have become temperate we are most able to abstain from such pleasures” (NE 1104a34-36). Aristotle compares virtue to building up strength: strength is gained by lifting heavy weights, and the strong person is most able to lift heavy weights. A similar analogy can be drawn between virtues and skills. The skill of building a house is developed by building houses, and the expert builder is most able to build houses. Exercising the skill is easier for the expert than the beginner, and the same is true for virtue. It is
harder to act virtuously when one is in the process of acquiring the virtue than when one already possesses the virtue.

It might be objected that, despite the comparison with strength and skills, that there is something circular about Aristotle’s account of acting virtuously in order to become virtuous. Aristotle himself raises the problem:

How can we say that men should do what is just in order to become just, and act temperately in order to become temperate? For if they do what is just or temperate, they are already just or temperate. (*NE* 1105a18-21)

Aristotle’s answer to this question involves explaining the difference between doing what is virtuous and acting as a virtuous person would. Acting as a virtuous person involves more than just doing what is virtuous. Aristotle sets out the following conditions for acting as a virtuous person would:

1) Doing what is virtuous (doing the act considered honest, brave, moderate, etc.)

2) The agent who acts has a certain disposition:
   a) The agent knows what he does.
   b) The agent intends to do what he does and intends to do it for its own sake.
   c) The agent acts with certainty and firmness. (*NE* 1105a29-34)

An example of an agent who satisfies only condition (1) is someone who does what is virtuous only by luck. An example of an agent who satisfies only conditions (1) and (2a) is someone who does what is virtuous for the sake of some other end, such as honor or money. An example of an agent who satisfies all the conditions except (2c) is someone who is in the process of acquiring a virtue, but has not yet had the experience necessary to form a virtuous habit. Acting, as a virtuous person would, requires satisfying all of the above criteria. Doing what is virtuous
usually refers only to conditions (1) and (2a), since we generally assume that agents know what they are doing. Conditions (2b) and (2c) are necessary for acquiring virtue, and these conditions can only be met by repeatedly doing what is virtuous. The distinction between doing what is virtuous and acting as a virtuous person would enables Aristotle to overcome the circularity objection. Conditions (2b) and (2c) also mark a difference between virtues and skills, for Aristotle claims that these two conditions are not considered requirements for expertise in a skill. For example, one could be a highly skilled doctor even though one practices medicine for the sake of wealth rather than for the sake of healing others.

2.4 Virtue as a Mean

While the dispositions involved in acting virtuously have been made clear, it is not yet clear how one determines what counts as doing what is virtuous. Even if we know that courage is a virtue, we do not yet know what courage requires of us. Aristotle gives some idea of what counts as doing what is virtuous with the idea that virtue aims at the mean. Virtues represent a mean, or an intermediate point, between the extremes of excess and deficiency in action, as well as passion. Courage, for example, is the mean between the extremes of cowardice and rashness. A coward fears things that are not dangerous or is unwillingly to take risks even for things of great value, while a rash person does not fear what is genuinely dangerous or is willing to take great risks for trivial gains. These are extreme positions and courage lies between the two, but not at an exact middle point. Some vices are thought to be more contrary to the mean. For example, cowardice is more contrary to courage than rashness, because cowardice is more likely than rashness to prevent one from doing what is courageous. In addition, people differ in being drawn to the vice of excess or deficiency. For example, some people are more prone to being
cowardly, while others are more prone to being rash. Aristotle advises us to focus on resisting the vice we are more naturally drawn to, as well as the vices that are more contrary to the mean. Not every action for Aristotle admits of the mean. Adultery, theft, and murder are examples of actions that include the idea of wrongfulness and so there is no such thing as engaging in too little murder.

It is difficult to specify what the mean will be with regard to a virtue for a particular person. Finding the mean requires experience, and a kind of trial and error approach. On this view of the mean, acquiring virtue is difficult, for Aristotle states that:

a man may make an error in many ways, but he may succeed in one way only; and in view of this, one of them is easy but the other hard. It is easy to miss the mark but hard to hit it. (NE 1106b29-33)

The deviations from the mean are many, so hitting the mean is difficult. The metaphor of hitting a target suggests another comparison with skills, such as archery, where there are few ways to succeed, but many ways to fail. The metaphor also suggests that attaining the mean, and thus virtue, is a matter of degree. It may be difficult to hit the target, but some missed attempts are closer to the target than others are. Aristotle seems to have this in mind when he suggests, “since it is difficult to attain the mean exactly, we should choose as a second best, as the saying goes, that which has the least of what is bad” (NE 1109a34-35). While it is hard to hit the mean, those who deviate little from it are not considered blameworthy.

2.5 Acting for the Sake of the Noble

The idea that virtue aims at the mean helps to define what counts as doing what is virtuous. Acting as a virtuous person involves intending to do what is virtuous for its own sake.
It is important to understand what this intention involves, because for Aristotle some actions that appear virtuous will turn out not to be so, due to the agent having the wrong intention. Aristotle makes several remarks about having the right intention in his writings on bravery. In order to act as a brave person would, Aristotle says one must “act for the sake of what is noble” (NE 1116b31). If you act for the sake of something else, then, while you may do what is brave, you are not acting as a brave person. For example, acting for the sake of avoiding what is painful does not count as acting as a brave person would. Adulterers, who might be very daring, are not brave, because they act to satisfy their desire, rather than for the sake of something noble. This difference is sometimes described by Aristotle as the difference between natural virtue and genuine virtue:

> Now the most natural [courage] seems to be that which comes through spirit, and it is when right intention and right purpose are added to it that it becomes bravery. And so men, too, are pained when they are angry and are pleased when they take revenge; but if these are the reasons for which they fight, they are good fighters but not brave men, for they fight not for the sake of what is noble nor as reason dictates but because of their feelings, although they resemble the brave somewhat. (NE 1117a4-9)

Acting for the sake of what is noble is the necessary intention for acting as a brave person would. This shifts the question from what counts as the right intention to what counts as noble. The “noble” appears to involve an objective element that can be determined by reason, rather than a subjective element that is determined by one’s own preferences. Thus, even if the adulterer thinks of adultery as noble, the adulterer still does not count as acting as a brave person would. For Aristotle, there is a fact of the matter about what is truly noble, and virtue requires not just being motivated by acting for the sake of the noble but also having the correct views about what
is noble. The adulterer gets something wrong with the value he places on committing adultery. An adulterer that acted for the sake of love would presumably be closer to acting for the sake of the noble than an adulterer that acted for the sake of lust. However, for Aristotle, adultery is always wrong, and so to see adultery as having a value that should be pursued is to make a mistake.⁴ To determine what counts as noble, one has to understand what is truly valuable. Getting it wrong with respect to values may lead one to do what is vicious. A coward places too much value on his own life, and so runs from any danger.

Acting for the sake of what is noble is not limited just to cases of bravery, for references to acting for the sake of the noble appear in discussions of other virtues. Aristotle says that a munificent man will make large expenditures “for the sake of what is noble, for to do so is common to the virtues” (NE 1122b6-7). A self-indulgent person places too much value on bodily pleasures, and so indulges in these pleasures whenever possible. A temperate person, on the other hand, desires pleasures in accord with their value, and this value is something that reason can recognize.

Another way that Aristotle cashes out the idea of what is noble is what “reason dictates”. Elsewhere, Aristotle claims that one should “act according to right reason” (NE 1103b32), and that “right reason about such things is prudence” (NE 1144b27). It is only when Aristotle starts discussing intellectual virtues that he describes what is right reason, and how it is related to the ethical virtues. The reference to reason also appears in the definition of virtue, for Aristotle a virtue is “a habit, disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent man would define it” (NE 1107a1-2). Prudence, or practical wisdom, is an intellectual virtue, which involves excellence in deliberation. While a complete discussion of intellectual virtue is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the discussion.

⁴ See NE 1107a9-27
of what is noble should have brought out the essential point that acting as a virtuous person would requires getting it right with respect to the value one places on certain activities. According to Aristotle, “a virtuous man judges things rightly, and in each case what appears to be the case is truly the case; for there are noble and pleasant things which are proper to each disposition” (1113a30-32). Traits of character embody a view of what is valuable, and virtues embody a correct view of what is valuable.

2.6 Conclusion

Aristotle’s heavy use of skill analogies indicates that skillful activity is central to his notion of virtue. Virtues, however, are not merely skills for Aristotle, as virtues are deeply ingrained habits of one’s character. While most skills do not require being disposed to act well in the relevant area of expertise, the skill analogy is compatible with this dispositional element. The same is true for Aristotle’s requirement that a virtuous person acts for the sake of the noble. The next chapter will raise some challenges to the idea that a contemporary virtue as skill model should be based on an Aristotelian account of virtue.
CHAPTER 3: ANNAS ON VIRTUE AS A SKILL

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, an overview was provided of Aristotle’s account of virtue and of his frequent analogies between virtues and practical skills. In subsequent chapters, a skill model of virtue will be developed with a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue. Before proceeding any farther, however, the following challenge must be met. Julia Annas has argued that despite the analogies Aristotle draws between virtues and skills, he is best understood as having rejected the skill model of virtue. Instead, one should look to Socrates and the Stoics in developing a skill model of virtue. If she is right, then it appears that basing a skill model of virtue on an Aristotelian account of virtue is likely to prove unsuccessful. This chapter argues that Aristotle should not be viewed as having rejected the skill model of virtue. Annas has mischaracterized Aristotle’s position on the skill model, because she has not recognized that Aristotle endorses a different view of the nature of skills than Socrates and the Stoics. In addition, recent research on expertise provides an account of skills very much at odds with the description of skills offered by Annas, but similar to the account endorsed by Aristotle, and this more recent account of skills is developed in the following two chapters of the dissertation. Contrary to Annas, not only is the skill model of virtue compatible with a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue, but it also appears that basing a skill model of virtue on a Socratic account of virtue is likely to prove unsuccessful.

Julia Annas (1995) is one of the few modern writers on virtue that has attempted to recover the ancient idea that virtue is, or is structurally similar to, a skill. Annas argues for a particular account of virtue in which the intellectual structure of virtue is analogous to the intellectual structure of practical skills. According to Annas (1995), “The intuitive appeal of the ancient skill analogy for virtue rests on the idea that one practical activity – acting well – is like
another prominent practical activity, working well” (p. 229). One benefit of the skill analogy is that our familiarity with practical skills can give us insight into the development of virtue. Another benefit, which Paul Bloomfield points out in his discussion of the skill model (2000), is that the skill analogy can yield “a viable epistemology in which moral knowledge is shown to be a species of a general kind of knowledge that is not philosophically suspect” (p. 23). These potential benefits of the skill model should be of interest to anyone working in contemporary virtue ethics.

Although Annas endorses the skill model of virtue, she believes that only some accounts of virtue are compatible with the skill model, because not all of the ancient virtue ethicists appear to have embraced the idea that virtues are like skills. Surprisingly, Annas (2003) claims that “Aristotle rejects the idea that virtue is a skill” (p. 16), despite the frequent analogies that he draws between skills and virtues. One might assume that the majority of the ancient Greek philosophers followed Aristotle in rejecting the skill model, but Annas (2003) notes that:

> it is significant that Aristotle is a lone voice here. The ancient virtue ethics tradition followed Plato and the Stoics in holding that virtue is a skill. That is, it is a kind of skill, there being other kinds as well; virtue is, as the Stoics put it, the skill of living. The claim that we should follow the ancient tradition rather than Aristotle may at first sound rather academic, but this issue of whether virtue is or is not a skill is not merely of historical interest: it raises philosophically crucial issues about the intellectual structure of virtue. (p. 16-17)

For Annas, acceptance of the skill model of virtue is found primarily in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues.⁵ Annas is also not the only one to claim that Aristotle rejects the skill model.

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⁵ I will refer to this view of skills as Socratic throughout the chapter.
Bloomfield (2000) claims that “the dissenter to the thesis that virtues are skills among the ancient Greeks was Aristotle”⁶ (p. 24). Since Aristotle appears to reject the skill model of virtue, the model of virtue as a skill that Annas endorses for modern virtue theory is Socratic.

If Julia Annas is right, then it appears that basing a skill model of virtue on an Aristotelian account of virtue is likely to prove unsuccessful. This chapter puts forth the view that while Aristotle rejects the Socratic model of virtue as a skill, he does not reject the model of virtue as a skill altogether. Annas has mischaracterized Aristotle’s position on the skill model, because she has not recognized that Aristotle endorses a different view of the nature of skills than Socrates and the Stoics. Hence, she fails to recognize the way, according to Aristotle, that virtues turn out to be analogous to practical skills. In addition, recent research on expertise provides an account of skills very much at odds with the description of skills offered by Annas, but similar to the account endorsed by Aristotle. Contrary to Annas, not only is the skill model of virtue compatible with a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue, but it also appears that basing a skill model of virtue on a Socratic account of virtue is likely to prove unsuccessful.

3.2 Annas’s Account of Skills

Annas’s discussion of the skill analogy draws almost exclusively on Socratic ideas. She uses the Socratic dialogues as her source for what constitutes a skill. According to Annas, there are three necessary elements of a genuine skill: the skill must be teachable, there must be unifying principles underlying the skill that the expert can grasp, and that experts can give an account of skilled actions. These elements will be the focus of the analogy to virtue.

⁶ The first part of Bloomfield’s article puts forth the Socratic view of skills and virtues, and is thus similar to Annas’s view, which he cites at the beginning of his article.
The first element is that the skill is teachable. Since the expert has learned something, he should be able to teach what he has learned to someone else. The expert has learned the theory behind the skill. This contrasts with what Socrates refers to as a ‘knack’, which is something that can be picked up merely by trying to do it yourself, or by watching someone else do it. Knacks lack the intellectual component that is found in skills. Rhetoric and cooking are examples of mere knacks. While it may seem counterintuitive to think of cooking as merely a knack, given that there seem to be expert chefs, Bloomfield (2000) thinks that the following excerpt from an article about a well-respected chef “is a telling quote to support the thesis that cooking is merely a knack” (p. 26):

Gorski’s peripatetic maneuverings have been prompted by an appetite for learning and culinary adventure, a literal ‘feeling in the middle of your body that pulls you toward it’, he says, pointing to the space between his heart and his stomach. ‘You just follow it’, he says, shrugging amiably.⁷

Apparently, the fact that even a well-respected chef has not been prompted by any theoretical knowledge tells against cooking having any underlying theory. Genuine skills have a strong intellectual component, and this is what the expert is able to teach.

The second element expands upon the intellectual component found in teaching. To possess a skill requires what Annas (1995) refers to as having “a unified grasp of its field” (p. 231). This implies that there are principles that unify the field of a skill, and that the expert has a grasp of these principles. There is no such thing as having expert knowledge of only part of the field. One could not claim to be an expert at something as narrow as only being able to fix

⁷ The article is by Deborah Hornblow in the Hartford Courant (6/17/97), and Bloomfield quotes it in footnote 5, on page 26 of “Virtue Epistemology and the Epistemology of Virtue”.
Toyotas, or to claim, as Ion does, only to know Homer and not much of any other poet. Annas (1995) recognizes that:

This probably surprises us. Surely, we think, Ion does have expert knowledge, only not enough: he knows only part of the field. But Socrates does not accept this way of looking at it. If there is such a thing as the skill that consists in mastering poetry, then it consists in grasping the principles which apply over the whole field. To fail to do this in one area reveals that one cannot do it at all. . . In each case the skill in question is one that you do not have until you have mastered all the relevant elements in the field. (p. 231-232)

Expertise requires understanding the principles that govern the entire field, and not just some parts of it.8 This unified grasp is what allows experts to deal with unfamiliar situations in the way that someone who has simply memorized a set of rules cannot, since it enables them to act well with regard to all areas of the field.

The third element of a genuine skill further develops the previous intellectual components, by requiring that experts have the ability to ‘give an account’ of their actions. Giving an account, according to Annas (1995), requires “that the person with a skill be able explicitly to explain and justify her particular decisions and judgements, and to do so in terms of some general grasp of the principles which define that skill” (p. 233). The expert needs to be able to articulate the reasons for her actions, and this explanation should draw upon the expert’s grasp of the principles underlying the skill. Although this condition could be thought of as requiring merely that the principles are articulatable, rather than requiring that the expert can

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8 Daniel Jacobson, in personal communication, has given other examples that suggest that Annas has underestimated how counterintuitive the Socratic position sounds. Take, for example, a doctor who specializes in heart surgery. Presumably, there are many other types of surgeries that he is not qualified to perform. Is this sufficient to show that he is not an expert?
actually articulate the reasons herself, Annas explicitly describes this requirement in terms of the expert being able to articulate the reasons for her actions. In defending this stronger requirement, Annas (1993) admits that “intuitively many skills differ from virtue, for example in having an independently identifiable product, and do not require the level of articulate reflection that virtue requires” (p. 69).

Given the difficulties that will soon be raised about this articulation requirement, it will be helpful to try to understand why Annas believes this requirement is important. The importance of articulation and the skill analogy in general, according to Annas (1993) is revealed in the following passage:

The skill analogy requires that the agent reflect and achieve by reflection a unified grasp of the general principles underlying her patterns of action and decision. And thus the analogy marks a strong contrast with modern versions of virtue ethics which regard virtue as a matter of non-generalizable sensitivity; it brings ancient ethics closer to other modern theories which require that the moral agent reflect on, and try to achieve a theoretically unified basis for, her individual moral judgements. (p. 67-68)

These intellectual conditions are supposed to show that ancient virtue ethical theories are similar to modern ethical theories, and that she is not advancing a version of virtue ethics that understands virtue as a type of “non-generalizable sensitivity,” which presumably contrasts with other modern ethical theories. Although she does not mention who holds this latter view of virtue, John McDowell (1998) appears to be a likely candidate given what he says about the virtuous person:

Of course a kind person need not himself classify the behaviour he sees to be called for, on one of the relevant occasions, as kind. He need not be articulate enough to possess
concepts of the particular virtues; and even if he does, the concepts need not enter his reasons for the actions that manifest those particular virtues. It is enough if he thinks of what he does, when -as we put it- he shows himself to be kind, under some such description as ‘the thing to do’. The description need not differ from that under which he thinks of other actions of his, which we regard as manifesting different virtues; the division into actions that manifest kindness and actions that manifest other virtues can be imposed, not by the agent himself, but by a possibly more articulate, and more theoretically oriented observer. (p. 51)

What McDowell appears to be saying is a denial of just the kind of articulate understanding that Annas requires for virtue. She seems to hold that the genuine possession of virtue requires one to be a “more articulate, and more theoretically oriented” person than the person described by McDowell. Annas is arguing for a particular view of virtue, and the intellectual components of the skill analogy are playing a key role in her argument.

3.3 Is Annas’s account of skills counterintuitive?

One potential drawback of this account of skills, as Annas (1995) notes, is that the three essential elements form a high intellectual standard for skills that strikes people as counterintuitive:

For at this point someone will claim that he has learnt to be a plumber just by watching old Joe over there, without explicitly learning anything, and without working out any general principles unifying the field of practice. This kind of counter-example, however, misses the point. For what concerns Socrates is not the intuitive conception of skills, but the intellectual structure of cases which are admittedly cases of genuine skills. (p. 232)
Annas acknowledges that there seem to be cases of people who acquire a skill without perhaps explicitly learning anything, and even more likely without having some unified grasp of principles underlying the skill. These sorts of cases appear to be counter-examples to Annas’s account, since the high intellectual standards are not necessary for acquiring those skills.

Annas’s reply is that genuine skills do exhibit the intellectual structure described, and those are the skills to which Socrates refers. This response seems to imply that what is wrong with this type of example is that the putative skill is not a genuine skill, and hence does not represent a counter-example to her claims about the structure of skills. While this type of response may be appropriate with regard to some putative skills, it becomes problematic if every alleged counter-example is simply dismissed by definition as not a genuine skill if it lacks the proper intellectual requirements. Annas, however, does not respond in this way to all counter-examples. Annas (1995) allows there to be differences in the structure of genuine skills, which is a point especially relevant to the third intellectual element of skills, for:

Even more than the other conditions, it is clear that this idea – that a skill involve a rational ability to explain and defend one’s exercise of it – is likely to be quite false of a number of examples of actual skills. For this condition excludes an inarticulate ability from being a skill; and this certainly seems to flout our everyday intuitions about what is and what is not a skill. But once again we must ask, ‘Does this matter?’ It is clear that Socrates is not interested in skills for their own sake. He is concerned with the idea that virtue is, or is like, a skill, and so he is concerned with the intellectual structure that some skills, at any rate, display. (p. 233)

Annas admits that the requirement of giving an account is not true for a number of actual skills. This admission lessens the initial appeal of comparing virtues to skills, since this account of what
a skill is seems counterintuitive. In addition, it is not obvious why the kind of skill Annas is interested in deserves to receive the designation of “genuine”.

Our intuitive conception of skills might deserve to be thought of as genuine skills, insofar as the intellectual standards Annas discusses are counterintuitive. It is not clear that we can get a handle on what these intellectual requirements amount to by reflecting on our intuitions about practical skills. Annas does not try, however, to argue that our intuitions about what counts as a skill are wrong. For Annas, this counterintuitive result is not problematic, so long as there are some skills that do display these strong intellectual components.

That there are skills that display the three intellectual components, however, is something that Annas assumes, rather than argues. A comparison of virtues to skills will be illuminating only insofar as we are dealing with an accurate account of the acquisition of skills. Annas should be more concerned about the fact that she is advancing an account of skills that does not fit numerous examples of actual skills. If there are no skills that contain these strong intellectual components, then Socrates’ account of virtue ceases to be on a par with practical skills. Annas owes an argument for the claim that there are such skills, especially since she comes up with numerous examples of skills that do not fit the Socratic conception, but almost none that do fit the conception. The only skill that she mentions as a genuine skill that has the strong intellectual structure is medicine.

3.4 Intellectualist versus Empiricist view of Skills

It is revealing, however, that Annas does not argue that medicine should be considered to meet the intellectual requirements, but merely quotes Socrates’ (Gorgias) view that medicine “has enquired as to the nature of what it cares for and the explanation of the things it does, and

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9 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing this point.
can give a rational account (*logos*) of each of them” (501a). It is revealing because the Socratic view of medicine and of practical skills in general was a controversial view in ancient Greek thought, and it needed to be argued for rather than just assumed. As D.S. Hutchinson points out, the controversy over the status of medicine was part of a larger debate over the nature of practical skills, which itself was part of a larger debate over the nature of virtue.\(^{10}\) Annas’s discussion obscures this controversy. Hutchinson (1998) claims that “Plato is taking sides in a fourth-century debate about the nature of practical knowledge” (p. 26).

Hutchinson reconstructs the debate between Plato and Socrates, on the one hand, and Isocrates and other rhetoricians, on the other. Hutchinson refers to the model of skills endorsed by Plato and Socrates as “intellectualist” and this is the model Annas describes. Hutchinson refers to the model of skills defended by Isocrates and other rhetoricians as “empiricist”, because they think skills are gained by experience rather than by grasping universal principles. This alternative understanding of skills opens up the possibility, which Annas seems not to consider, that instead of just rejecting the skill model altogether, Aristotle is rejecting only the intellectualist view of skills. If Aristotle endorses the empiricist view of skills, then his heavy use of analogies between virtues and skills seems to indicate that he does endorse the idea that virtues are structurally similar to skills, but that he is offering an account of skills and virtues different from the Socratic model.

Hutchinson presents a picture of the empiricist view of skills that shows it to be a genuine rival to the intellectualist view, and does so in a way that sheds light on the intellectual requirements that Annas describes. The intellectual requirements represent a denial that genuine

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\(^{10}\) The discussion that follows about the debate over medicine and other practical skills is indebted to a paper by D.S. Hutchinson (1998).
skills can be merely a matter of experience or rules of thumb. Genuine skills, on the intellectualist view, require a profound understanding of their subject matter and of the underlying principles of the skill. A profound understanding allows for exactness and precision in one’s views, whereas experience only generates approximations and rules of thumb. In ancient medicine, according to Hutchinson (1998), this profound understanding would have been one in which “a comprehensive and analytic knowledge of the universe was necessary to prescribe for a man’s body what was his own good”\(^{11}\) (p. 24). This Hippocratic account of medicine, which was endorsed by Plato, is opposed to the view advanced by the author of *On Ancient Medicine*. According to Hutchinson (1998), the author of *On Ancient Medicine* believes that:

> medicine has advanced as far as it has simply by experience, by trial and error, without the use of deep theories or hypotheses, and that, given sufficient time of adhering to this non-theoretical, and, we may as well say, empiricist approach, medical science will in due course find its perfection. (p. 27)

Hutchinson notes that this view of medicine is very similar to the general view of skills presented by Polus, who is Socrates’ opponent in the *Gorgias*. The empiricist view of skills is one in which experience, rather than grasping universal principles, is the source of expert knowledge.

The empiricist view of skills seems best represented by Isocrates’ three-part doctrine of the acquisition of practical skills. The three main elements in the acquisition of practical skills were natural talent, training by experience, and education or instruction. The element of

\(^{11}\) The view seems to be that one had to understand the guiding principles that govern the cosmos in order to know what was going on in the human body. Hutchinson notes that this is similar to Plato’s own view about the good of the soul.
education or instruction is not as strong of an intellectual component as the Socratic emphasis on teaching and learning. Socrates dismissed the instructional part of Isocrates’ doctrine as merely rules of thumb. It was the element of training by experience, though, that provided the main contrast to the Socratic emphasis on profound understanding, and this is the core of the disagreement between Plato and his rivals. In Hutchinson’s (1998) view:

All the evidence on our topic points to the fact that Plato’s main purpose in contrasting the Hippocratic style of medicine with skills derived from mere experience, is to do battle with his rival educationalists and define the distinctively Platonic approach to education in practical skills. (p. 33-34)

3.5 Which account of skills does Aristotle endorse?

With the differences between the intellectual and empirical views of skills before us, we turn to Aristotle to see which side of the debate he endorses. Initially, it might appear that Aristotle sides with Plato, for Aristotle also makes analogies between virtues and skills, in particular with medicine. This appears to be Annas’s view, as her discussions of Aristotle and Plato on virtue as a skill reveal only a difference in their accounts of virtue. However, the textual evidence supports Hutchinson’s (1998) view that “when Aristotle takes a stand on what sort of knowledge skill is, and what sort of skill virtue is, we regularly find that Aristotle turns Plato upside down and chooses the Isocratean alternative which Plato had rejected” (p. 40).

Aristotle begins his discussion of virtue by claiming that ethical virtue is acquired by habituation. Habits are built up by frequent repetition of actions, which requires experience and time. Recall that for Aristotle, virtues are like skills in this respect. Skills are learned by performing the relevant activities, hence, “we become builders by building.” You cannot learn a
skill without having performed the activities associated with that skill. The emphasis on habituation and experience echoes Isocrates’ view that practical skills are acquired by training and experience. Contrary to the Socratic emphasis on intellectual learning in acquiring skills, Aristotle claims that we learn by doing. In order to know how to do something, like building a house or playing an instrument, you have to practice doing it. For Aristotle, a similar story is true for acquiring virtue, hence, “we become just by doing what is just” (NE 1103a32-1103b3).

Aristotle draws another comparison between virtues and skills, when he discusses how statements about actions do not admit of precision:

all statements concerning matters of action should be made sketchily and not with precision, for, as we said at first, our demands of statements should be in accordance with the subject-matter of those statements; in matters concerning action and expediency, as in those of health, there is no uniformity. And if such is the universal statement, a statement concerning particulars will be even less precise; for these do not come under any art or precept, but those who are to act must always consider what is proper to the occasion, as in medical art and navigation. (NE 1104a1-10)

Virtues are like skills, such as medicine and navigation, in that they concern matters of action and thus statements about them must be made sketchily. Aristotle denies that the kind of precision Plato is looking for can be found in matters of action. In addition, Aristotle denies that virtues and skills require a unified grasp of the principles of the field, for he denies both uniformity and that statements concerning particular actions will fall under some universal principle.

Aristotle does not deny that there are general truths that can be learned from experience, but they do not amount to unifying principles, because matters concerning action lack that kind
of uniformity. The grasp of general truths, while something more than mere experience, still
does not rise to the level of the profound understanding of universal principles advocated by both
Plato and Annas. General truths still represent a piecemeal knowledge of what Annas regards as
a unified field. According to Aristotle (Metaphysics), for a doctor:

   to judge that it [some cure] has done good to all persons of a certain constitution marked
   off in one class, when they were ill of this disease, e.g., to phlegmatic or bilious people
   when burning with fever – this is a matter of skill. (981a5-12)

This kind of knowledge is gained from experience with particular cases, and it does not require
any greater understanding of unified principles. The doctor in this example shows no greater
knowledge than the mechanic who has learned some general truths about fixing Toyotas, and
neither would count as having a genuine skill on Annas’s account. It should be clear by now that
Aristotle endorses the empiricist view of skills that Plato rejected, and that he views virtue as
structurally similar to practical skills.

3.6 Which account of skills is best?

At this point we have two competing accounts of the nature of a skill, which, when
combined with an analogy to virtue, produces competing accounts of the nature of virtue. One’s
preference between these two models could depend on which account of virtue seems more
plausible. Determining this, however, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Another strategy
for deciding between these two accounts is based on what would seem to be the main reason for
drawing analogies between skills and virtues, for as Aristotle suggests, “we should use as
evidence what is apparent for the sake of what is obscure” (NE 1104a14-15). In trying to
understand the concept of virtue, it is helpful to compare it to something that we are more
familiar with, such as practical skills. The usefulness of such a comparison depends not only on how similar the two are, but also on the accuracy of the account of practical skills. Few, if any, will find an analogy between virtue and skill illuminating if one holds that skills are acquired by luck and not by any conscious effort. Thus, one could look into recent research about how practical skills are acquired, and determine whether the intellectual or empirical account of skills most correctly describes the acquisition of skills.

Although it is also beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide an in-depth review of such research, a brief look at the studies will give an indication of how such an endeavor is likely to turn out. The intellectual view is already faced with the problem noted by Annas that it conflicts with our understanding of numerous actual skills. One of the main problems with Annas’s account of skills is that if you replace her claims about virtue with almost any skill, she would declare that many putative experts really are not experts because of their lack of articulateness and having a grasp of universal principles. The main skill that Annas cited as fitting the intellectual view was medicine, but that claim is far from uncontroversial. In addition, as Hutchinson (1998) notices, Plato’s views of medicine change from the early Socratic dialogues that Annas references:

So, early in Plato’s writing career, he held medicine up as a sort of ideal of profound knowledge, but later its status fell as he became enamoured of a precise and mathematical approach to reality, while at the same time it began to seem that medicine was really an imprecise skill derived from experience.¹² (p. 48)

¹² Fred Miller, in personal communication, has pointed out that Plato’s Statesman is a good example of the shift in Plato’s own thinking about skills, as statesmanship is considered to be a skill, and the knowledge of the statesman is not something that can be fully codified into law.
On an intuitive level, the empiricist account appears to describe more accurately practical skills and their acquisition.

The empiricist account has more than intuitive appeal to recommend it, though, as research on expertise tends to undermine Annas’s account of skills. A recent philosophical analysis of the acquisition of practical skills, developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1986, 1991), shows it to be very similar to the accounts developed by Isocrates and Aristotle.¹³ Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) give the following explanation of what is unique about the expert:

It seems that beginners make judgments using strict rules and features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experience the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively what to do without applying rules and making judgments at all. The intellectualist tradition has given an accurate description of the beginner and the expert facing an unfamiliar situation, but normally an expert does not solve problems. He does not reason. He does not even act deliberately. Rather he spontaneously does what has normally worked and, naturally, it normally works. (p. 235)

In their research on experts, Dreyfus and Dreyfus found that experts often were not able to give an account of how they knew what to do. On the Dreyfus account, since experts generally act well without applying rules and principles, it is no surprise that experts often find it difficult to explain their actions by reference to principles. These results lead them to be skeptical that there is necessarily a unifying set of principles or a theory that underlies each skill, as Annas has claimed. On their view (2004), “it is an unsubstantiated assumption of philosophers since

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¹³ As far as I can tell, Daniel Jacobson (2005) is the first to bring the Dreyfus skill model to bear on questions of modern virtue theory. Although Dreyfus and Dreyfus discuss the ethical implications of their skill model, including the affinities with an Aristotelian ethical approach, they do not discuss the idea that virtues are analogous to skills.
Socrates that there must be a theory underlying every skill domain” (p. 255). In general, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) view their skill model as vindicating the type of approach to ethics taken by Aristotle: “Like a good phenomenologist dedicated to ‘saving the phenomena’, Aristotle stays close to normal everyday experience and sees the immediate, intuitive response precisely as characteristic of an expert. ‘Know-how [techne] does not deliberate’ he says in the Physics, (BK. II, Ch. 8)” (p. 239).

In the field of medicine, Patricia Benner (1984) has successfully applied the Dreyfus skill model to the field of nursing. Her findings support the Dreyfus skill model in general and the inarticulateness of experts specifically. Benner (1984) quotes an expert psychiatric nurse clinician who is talking about her clinical judgments:

When I say to a doctor, “the patient is psychotic,” I don’t always know how to legitimize that statement. But I am never wrong. Because I know psychosis from inside out. And I feel that, and I know it, and I trust it . . . One of the things that I am doing now is getting some in-service in to talk to us about language. But all I am really trying to do is find words within the jargon to talk about something that I don’t think is particularly describable. (p. 32)

On Annas’s account, this nurse would not count as an expert because she is not able to give an articulate justification for her clinical judgment. Annas appears to reach the wrong conclusion, though, because Benner informs us that this is a nurse who has over 15 years experience in the field, who is well respected by nurses and physicians for her clinical judgments, and who is reliably (though probably not always) correct. Besides being reliable at acting well, experts are identified by their intuitive responses, not by their articulate justifications.
Recent psychological research gives support to the conclusions drawn by Dreyfus and Benner. Bloomfield discusses some of this research on expertise that highlights the importance of intuition rather than articulation in expert performance.\textsuperscript{14} According to Bloomfield (2000):

psychological research has centered on how master chess players often just ‘see’ what the right move is and how medical doctors make their diagnoses automatically. . . . Research shows that the process she articulates [post facto] is very often not the one actually used; experts are often less able to give an account of the justification of the decision making process they actually use than are beginners.\textsuperscript{15} (p. 39)

One unusual part of Bloomfield’s discussion is that despite the evidence he provides for experts not necessarily being able to articulate their knowledge, he does not seem to recognize that this is in tension with his prior statements about skills, such as when he claims that the inarticulateness of the chef supports the idea that cooking is not a skill. While he seems to be in agreement with Annas and Socrates concerning the nature of skills, this psychological research undermines their claims that experts must be able to give an account of their actions. If this research is accurate, then, contrary to Annas, the model of virtue as skill that should be endorsed is not the one given by Socrates and Plato, but rather the one endorsed by Isocrates and Aristotle. On this skill model of virtue, virtue turns out to be a kind of non-generalizable sensitivity.

\section{3.7 Is the skill model still suitable for virtue?}

\textsuperscript{14} Bloomfield (2000) helpfully points out that “The sense of ‘intuition’ here is quite different from the \textit{a priori} intuitions posited by moral intuitions like Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, and Prichard. The relevant intuitions for virtue epistemology and moral epistemology are \textit{a posteriori}” (p. 39).

There is at least one problematic implication of favoring the empiricist account of skills. Recall that part of Annas’s motivation in endorsing the intellectualist account of skills was to show how skills are relevant for understanding virtue. Annas (1993) voices a concern that the lack of articulateness in skills might make the skill model unsuitable for an account of virtue:

Gardeners can and do have expertise without being able explicitly to articulate it and state the principles on which it rests. Does this not imply that skill is an unsuitable model for virtue? But it is clear by now that what matters for ethics in the skill analogy is the point that virtue shares the intellectual structure of a skill, something accessible only to the critically reflective agent. Thus, examples of skills which do not require this are simply examples of skills which are in this respect not like virtue. (p. 73)

In arguing that skills are best understood as not requiring the intellectual structure that Annas describes, this might appear to imply that skills are not like virtues. Annas might respond to the empiricist account by arguing that it makes skills an unsuitable model for virtue, because it does away with the requirement of being articulate and having a grasp of underlying principles, and that this is undesirable in an account of virtue.

While this is certainly a valid concern, it can be addressed by keeping in mind that being virtuous is centrally a matter of acting well. There may be many good reasons to want a virtuous person to be able to articulate her reasons for actions in terms of general principles, but the skill analogy rejects the idea that these intellectual requirements are necessary for acting virtuously. There are many experts in every field, while being able to act well within their discipline, who are not necessarily good at teaching other people this information. Demands for a greater theoretical understanding will have their source in something more than just our demand that
people act well, since on this skill model, one can act well without having knowledge of unifying principles.

This is not an attempt to downplay the importance of articulation and principles in giving justifications for one’s actions in moral discourse. It seems that the demands for ‘giving an account’ are much higher in morality than when compared to skills. This is partly due to the seriousness of the subject matter, partly because there are usually less concrete success conditions for acting well, and since there is less agreement as to who are the ethical experts. If a chess master can not give much more of an explanation for making certain moves than ‘I saw that it was the right move to make’, it does not by itself serve to undermine any claim to expertise so long as the chess master keeps winning games. In morality, there is not such a simple success condition for acting well, and moral disagreement seems to fuel demands for articulate justifications of one’s actions. In chess, while we may have reasons for trying to find out if the moves can be understood in terms of rules or principles, in general we do not have broader concerns that make it important for us to play chess or to be able to play it well. On the other hand, it seems that we as human beings have very important needs in being able to give an account of what morality requires of us, such as in drafting laws and making social policy, which need to be formulated in explicit rules and principles.

3.8 Conclusion

While we have good reasons for asking putative moral experts to give an account of or to justify their actions, it is important to realize that, according to the skill model, such a demand is not itself a requirement for knowing how to do something, even at the level of expertise. A person’s ability to explain herself can be less than the person’s ability to know how to act in the
situation. The intellectual requirements that Annas discusses are relevant to any social discourse we have about morality, but they are not necessary for achieving expertise. It is important to keep these points separate when discussing virtue and in trying to understand what is involved in acquiring virtue. The skill model of virtue has the potential to ground a plausible account of the moral epistemology of virtue. This model is something that anyone who is attracted to a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue can, and should, take seriously.
CHAPTER 4: THE DREYFUS SKILL MODEL

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a defense was given of an Aristotelian, or empiricist, skill model of virtue. One reason in favor of this approach is that contemporary accounts of skills and expertise support the empiricist rather than intellectual account of skills. The focus of this chapter is to explain the Dreyfus skill model in detail. The next chapter will apply this skill model to problems in contemporary accounts of virtue.

Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1986, 1991) have developed an account of skill acquisition, in which the practical knowledge of an expert in a skill is a matter of knowing how to do something rather than merely propositional knowledge. They cite John Dewey as having introduced the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that as two different forms of knowledge.\(^\text{16}\) They quote Dewey (1922) on the distinction as follows:

> We may . . . be said to know how by means of our habits . . . We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them . . . [I]f we choose to call [this] knowledge . . . then other things also called knowledge, knowledge of and about things, knowledge that things are thus and so, knowledge that involves reflection and conscious appreciation, remains of a different sort . . . (p. 177-178)

Knowing how to do something often, if not necessarily, involves some knowledge of and about things, but knowing-how cannot be completely reduced to knowing-that. Take, for example, riding a bike. Most of us know how to ride a bicycle, but are unable to formulate any specific rules about how to do so. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) point out, the difficulty of formulating simple rules for something as basic as riding a bicycle is revealed with questions like “How

\(^{16}\) Gilbert Ryle (1949) is often credited for introducing this distinction in *The Concept of Mind.*
would you explain the difference between the feeling of falling over and the perfectly normal sense of being slightly off balance when turning? And do you really know, until it happens, just what you would do in response to a certain unbalanced feeling?” (p. 16) In short, we rarely have answers to questions like these, yet that does not prevent us from learning how to ride a bicycle. According to the Dreyfuses (1986), the “fact that you can’t put what you have learned into words means that know-how is not accessible to you in the form of facts and rules” (p. 16). You can know how to do something and even achieve expertise in a skill, without that knowledge being merely a matter of knowing the facts and which rules are applicable.17

A skill is the ability, acquired through training, to perform some action or produce a solution in a problem area. There are many types of skills, but the Dreyfus model focuses on unstructured problem areas. By “unstructured”, the Dreyfuses (1986) are referring to areas that “contain a potentially unlimited number of possibly relevant facts and features, and the ways those elements interrelate and determine other events is unclear” (p. 20). Examples of skills in “unstructured areas” are driving a car, playing chess, nursing, teaching, economic forecasting, and most social interactions. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) contrast this with “structured areas”:

Examples of “structured areas” of decision-making, on the other hand, are mathematical manipulations, puzzles, and, in the real world, delivery truck routing and petroleum blending. Here the goal and what information is relevant are clear, the effects of decisions are known, and verifiable solutions can be reasoned out. (p. 20)

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The Dreyfus model focuses on skills that deal with “unstructured areas”. These skills essentially involve knowing how to do something, and they cannot be reduced to merely knowing-that. In structured areas like mathematics, the knowledge of the expert appears reducible to propositional knowledge. You can know that $9 \times 9 = 81$ without ever having nine piles of nine objects in front of you and proceeding to count all the objects. One potential problem with this classification is that playing chess is an ability that in principle should be able to be reduced to a matter of knowing-that. Given that there is a finite, although quite large, number of moves to be made in the game, it appears that the game could be reduced to propositional knowledge, even though this has yet to be done. This is not problematic, however, for several reasons. Even if it can be done, it may be such a complicated system of rules that only an advanced computer could use it to play chess. More importantly, though, while a complete rulebook is perhaps sufficient for expertise in chess, it is not necessary, for there are already experts in chess without such a rulebook. A complete set of rules for how to play chess may enable a computer to play chess at an expert level, but this is an ability that expert chess players have learned through know-how. Thus, playing chess is still an example of knowing-how rather than knowing-that, as long as we are discussing how human beings play chess.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus provide a model of how humans acquire skills, starting from the novice and ending with the expert. The Dreyfus model divides skill acquisition into five stages, based on studies of experts such as airplane pilots, automobile drivers, chess players, learners of second languages, and nurses. A few remarks are in order before exploring each stage. Skills vary in their complexity and with it the difficulty of achieving expertise. One of the hallmark features of expertise is an intuitive form of decision-making. By “intuition”, the Dreyfuses (1986) “are referring to the understanding that effortlessly occurs upon seeing similarities with
previous experiences” (p. 28). As will become clear, intuition develops from experience, and it involves nothing mysterious or supernatural. In addition, even among experts, some are more skilled than others are. This applies to all stages of skill acquisition, in that not everyone at a certain skill level will perform as well as everyone else at that stage. There is, however, an approach to confronting situations that those at a particular skill level all share. The following sections provide a brief explanation of each stage in the acquisition of skills.

This chapter follows the Dreyfuses in using examples of learning how to drive to explain the skill model. In addition, examples will be used from another area of expertise in which the Dreyfus model has been put to the test. Patricia Benner’s (1982, 1984, 1996) work is well known for adapting the model of skill acquisition of Dreyfus and Dreyfus and applying it to expertise in nursing. In so doing, she has argued persuasively for recognizing the importance of clinical knowledge, knowledge that stems from intuition. The difference between experts and non-experts is thought to be the experts’ use of intuition as a model of decision-making.

4.2 The First Stage - Novice

The novice is a person who is trying to learn a skill with which he has no previous experience. Instruction in the skill begins with focusing on features of the skill that do not require previous experience to recognize. Simple rules are developed for deciding what to do, and the rules are based on these simplified features. In driving, the novice focuses on such features as turning, speeding up, and slowing down – all of which are already familiar features of movement. The novice is given context-free rules to follow in driving, such as “shift into second gear at ten M.P.H.” or use the two-second rule in judging how much space to leave between you
and the car in front of you. However, since the rules at this stage are context-free, they are apt to fail in a variety of different circumstances, such as when driving in the rain or in heavy traffic.

Novice nurses will be taught to focus on objective attributes that do not require situational experience to recognize, such as weight, temperature, pulse, and blood pressure. Benner (1984) gives the following example of context-free rules that might be taught to novice nurses:

To determine fluid balance, check the patient’s morning weights and daily intake and output for the past three days. Weight gain and an intake that is consistently higher than output by greater than 500 cc. could indicate water retention, in which case fluid restriction should be started until the cause of the imbalance can be determined. (p. 21)

4.3 The Second Stage – Advanced Beginner

As the novice gains experience in using the skill, new features of the situation are discovered by, or pointed out to, the novice as relevant. After a sufficient number of exposures to these situations and features, the novice begins to recognize them. Because of this recognition, the Dreyfuses (1991) claim the advanced beginner has a different form of instruction:

Instructional maxims now can refer to these new situational aspects. We use the terms maxims and aspects here to differentiate this form of instruction from the first, where strict rules were given as to how to respond to context-free features. Since maxims are phrased in terms of aspects they already presuppose experience in the skill domain. (p. 233)

Instead of relying only upon rules, the advanced beginner starts using maxims, which are not context-free like rules, but rather take into account the new features of situations that the
advanced beginner is aware. In driving, such additional situational aspects could be driving up a hill while carrying a heavy load, or noticing engine sounds as being relevant to changing gears. A maxim for the latter might be “when the engine sounds like its racing shift up in gear”. This maxim refers to the situational aspect of engine sounds, which it takes experience to recognize. This is why this type of instruction, while more useful than the context-free rules, is inappropriate for the novice.

Nurses in the advanced beginner stage are able to have new features of a situation pointed out to them as relevant, and can follow guidelines based on these new features. These nurses are able to carry out tasks that the novice could not, but the advanced beginner nurse is not able to see the situation in a holistic manner, which would allow them to pick out some features of the situation as being more relevant. Benner (1984) uses the following example of an expert nurse commenting upon the instructions given to nurses at the advanced beginner level, highlighting what advanced beginners can and cannot do:

I give instructions to the new graduate, very detailed and explicit instructions: When you come in and first see the baby, you take the baby’s vital signs and make the physical examination, and you check the I.V. sites, and the ventilator and make sure that it works, and you check the monitors and alarms. When I would say this to them, they would do exactly what I told them to do, no matter what else was going on . . . they couldn’t choose one to leave out. They couldn’t choose which was the most important . . . They couldn’t do for one baby the things that were most important and then go to the other baby and do the things that were most important, and leave out the things that weren’t as important until later on. (p. 23-24)
4.4 The Third Stage – Competent Performer

As the advanced beginner progresses, the number of situational aspects and maxims encountered becomes overwhelming. In order to cope with this, a hierarchical decision-making process is used to rank the aspects and maxims relative to some chosen plan or perspective. This organizes the situation and allows the competent person to focus in on only those features relevant to that plan. For example, a competent driver may decide that he is going too fast when leaving the freeway on a curved off-ramp, based on features like present speed, the sharpness of the curve, and weather conditions such as rain. The driver then needs to decide whether to lift his foot off the accelerator, pump the brakes a bit, or slam on the brakes. If all goes well the driver feels a sense of relief, or the driver is shaken up as he begins to skid.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) find the following pattern in such cases: “detached planning, conscious assessment of elements that are salient with respect to the plan, and analytical rule-guided choice of action, followed by an emotionally involved experience of the outcome” (p. 234). The competent performer has to choose the plan or perspective, and this is not easy to do because there are not any rules governing the choice. Because of this, the competent performer feels responsible for both the choice and the outcome of that choice, and thus becomes emotionally involved in the experience of the outcome. The Dreyfuses (1986) found that:

An outcome that is clearly successful is deeply satisfying and leaves a vivid memory of the plan chosen and of the situation as seen from the perspective of the plan. Disasters, likewise, are not easily forgotten. (p. 26)

The competent nurse will be able to recognize many more situational aspects than the advanced beginner, but trying to respond to them all will get overwhelming. The competent nurse will develop a plan that allows her to organize and prioritize what needs to be done, in order to deal
with all of the different situational aspects. Benner (1984) offers an example of a competent nurse who is explaining how she used to respond to each situational aspect as she recognized it, but now prepares a plan ahead of time:

When I went out there, instead of thinking before I went in the room . . . you get caught up . . . someone’s I.V. stops, and you get caught up working on that. And then you forget to give someone their meds, and so you have to rush around and do that. . . And all of a sudden the morning’s gone and no one’s gotten a bed bath. . . I would just walk in there and get caught up with all their complaints, with no organization at all to what was going on. So now I come out of report and I know what their I.V.s are basically, and I have a couple of things that I know that I have to do. Before I go into the room, I write down what med I’m supposed to give for that day, and then I’ll walk in there and make sure that everybody’s I.V. is fine. . . And then I feel fine. . . I am much more organized. I know what I have to do, and I arrange it with them and find out what they want to do. (p. 26-27)

4.5 The Fourth Stage – Proficient Performer

This stage is attained when the competent person stops reflecting on problems as a detached observer, and stops looking for rules to guide choices about plans and perspectives. According to the Dreyfuses (1991), “Having experienced many emotion-laden situations, chosen plans in each, and having obtained vivid, emotional demonstrations of the adequacy or inadequacy of the plan, the performer involved in the world of the skill, ‘notices,’ or ‘is struck by’ a certain plan, goal or perspective” (p. 234). Although the person is able to understand what is going on without conscious effort, the proficient performer still has to decide what course of action to take. Rules and maxims are still needed in order to produce a decision. In the case of
the driver on the off ramp used above, the proficient driver senses that he is going too fast. Then, based on factors that were used by the competent driver to decide he was going too fast, the proficient driver decides how to respond to the situation.

While the competent performer has to make up rules to help him decide what plan or perspective to adopt in order to focus in on the relevant features of a situation, the proficient performer no longer uses rules or even makes a choice about a plan, but instead is struck by a certain plan or perspective. In the case of a proficient nurse, maxims will be used to decide what to do in a situation, but knowing which maxims are relevant depends upon the nurse’s ability to grasp the situation in a way a competent nurse cannot. Benner (1984) uses the example of a proficient nurse who senses that the patient is anxious about being weaned from a respirator:

Well, you look at their vital signs to see if there is anything significant . . . But even here you need to do a little guessing, in terms of whether the patient is just anxious because he’s so used to the machine breathing for him . . . If they get a little anxious, you don’t really want to medicate them, because you are afraid they will quit breathing, but on the other hand they may really need to calm down a bit, so it just depends on the situation. It is a real experiment. You have your groundwork, from what you have done in the past, and you know when you are going to get into trouble. (p. 29-30)

4.6 The Fifth Stage - Expert

The expert sees both what needs to be done in a situation and sees how to do it, without needing a decision about how to do it like the proficient person. The Dreyfuses (1991) found:

With enough experience with a variety of situations, all seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the proficient performer seems gradually to decompose
this class of situations into subclasses, each of which share the same decision, single action, or tactic. This allows an immediate intuitive response to each situation. (p. 235)

The expert driver knows what actions are required and how to perform them without detached calculation or comparing alternatives. An expert driver would shift gears when appropriate without even being aware of it. Expert nurses have developed intuitive responses to situations that can be lifesaving, because of their ability to immediately see what needs to be done and how to do it. Benner’s (1996) example of an expert nurse shows how the expert’s anticipation of likely future events can be lifesaving:

Actually [this 4-month-old infant had an episode of bradycardia] and we did this little tiny code where we did chest compressions for a few minutes, and then right after he did that, this is where my expert clinical judgment came into practice – I said I need to get an IV in him just in case he does this again. And two people said “No, you don’t need to do that, he’s O.K.” So I slipped an IV in, which is no mean feat on a kid that’s 4 months old, in our unit, their veins are trashed anyway, I got an IV into him and within 20 minutes I needed that because he really went into a full code and needed drugs. (p. 153)

The following table, created by the Dreyfuses (1986), summarizes the important elements that change from a novice to an expert in the acquisition of a skill (p.50).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Level</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Novice</td>
<td>Context-free</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Advanced Beginner</td>
<td>Context-free and situational</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Expert</td>
<td>Context-free and situational</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>Involved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While that suffices for an overview of the five stages of skill acquisition, more still needs to be said about the decision-making of the expert, or ‘intuition’. There are several important features of intuition that have been marked by Benner and others studying the use of intuition in nursing. The number of key features varies from author to author, and often there is some overlap in the features, so the focus will be on some of the most prominent features, but the following list of characteristics is not exhaustive.

First, intuition is characterized by its immediacy. For nurses, an intuitive judgment involves the immediate apprehension of a clinical situation. This feature accounts for the perceptual terms often used in describing intuition; ‘senses’, ‘perceives’, ‘sees that’, and so on. Perception has an immediacy that is analogous to the immediacy of intuition. Intuition allows one to apprehend a situation immediately without having to engage in calculative rationality. Calculative rationality is meant to refer to thinking through the various options one has, and weighing the pros and cons of each to come to a decision about what to do. Engaging in calculative rationality takes time, as one has to analyze the situation and weigh different alternatives of action, and this delays one’s response to the situation, and sometimes, especially for critical care nurses, the time saved by intuition could make the difference between life and death.

Second, this immediacy is a function of a repeated exposure to similar past experiences. Without this kind of experience, intuition will not develop. Intuition, on this account, does not come from out of nowhere, but instead develops out of repeated exposure to situations and the outcome of actions taken in those situations. This is what Benner (1996) is referring to when she describes intuition as “born of experience” (p. 8). This feature can be further distinguished into
pattern recognition and similarity recognition. Easen and Wilcockson (1996) describe the
difference between the two as follows:

Pattern recognition is described as the ability to ‘recognise relationships without pre-
specifying the components of the situation’, while similarity recognition is the ability to
recognize the similarities or dissimilarities of these particular circumstances with the
circumstances of past patients. (p. 671)

An important implication of this point is that the expert will not be able to act well in an intuitive
way when facing genuinely unfamiliar situations.

Third, despite bypassing a direct reasoning process, intuition can still be subject to
validation. Such validation can be done prior to taking the intuitive action, if time permits, by
analytically reviewing the data available. This kind of validation is important if one is to
distinguish intuition from guessing. Easen and Wilcockson (1996) summarize the Dreyfus view
of guessing as:

occurring as a result of inferences being drawn from an insufficient base of knowledge and
experience. To avoid the possibility of guessing, validating intuitive thinking is crucial and
requires this sound base (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, Rew 1986). Knowledge and experience,
therefore, being essential to the validation process, are at the heart of intuition. (p. 670)

Validating intuitive thinking on the Dreyfus (1986) model involves “considering the relevance
and adequacy of past experiences that seem to underlie a current intuition” (p. 39).

The final issue is whether this intuitive form of judgment should be seen solely as the
province of the expert. At the novice stage, one should expect to find no use of intuition in
decision-making, as intuition draws on previous experience, and the novice is one who has no
previous experience with this particular skill. Already at the level of the advanced beginner,
intuitions start to arise. What sets the advanced beginner apart from the novice is the advanced beginner’s experience in coping with real situations. According to Benner (1996), “Through practical experience in concrete situations with meaningful elements which neither the instructor nor student can define in terms of objective features, the advanced beginner starts intuitively to recognize these elements when they are present” (p. 38). Although intuition is present, it is limited to recognizing situational elements that are relevant to the skill. These situational elements are not something that can be recognized by the novice, and are gained only through repeated experience in concrete situations.

The competent performer recognizes more situational elements than the advanced beginner does, and so this intuitive recognition factors more often in the decision-making of the competent performer. As mentioned in the Logan & Boss (1993) study, the competent nurse starts to develop the ability to see the clinical situation as a whole. The holistic aspect of intuitive judgment begins to develop at this stage, as competent performers must try to adopt a perspective that picks out only certain features of the situation as relevant.

The stage of proficiency also represents an increase in the development of intuition. This development can be seen by contrasting the proficient performer with the competent performer. The competent performer recognizes an overwhelming number of situational elements, and so chooses a plan or perspective in order to focus only on particular elements. No rules are given for choosing amongst different plans, so the competent performer must create rules that are kept or discarded based on the outcomes of experience. Benner (1996) suggests that the increase of intuition at the level of proficiency relates to this selection of plans or perspectives:

As the brain of the performer acquires the ability to discriminate between a variety of situations entered into with concern and involvement, plans are intuitively evoked and certain
aspects stand out as important without the learner standing back and choosing those plans or deciding to adopt that perspective. (p. 41)

Once intuition has developed this far, what distinguishes the proficient performer from the expert in terms of intuition? While the proficient performer intuitively recognizes what needs to be done in a situation, she still needs rules and maxims to arrive at a decision about how to achieve what needs to be done. For a proficient driver to recognize intuitively that he is going too fast on a turn, a number of repeated experiences of this happening are required. What still needs to be decided is what to do in response, and there are a variety of responses. In order to intuitively recognize what to do, a driver needs repeated experiences of each type of response in that situation, which requires experiencing that situation far more times than is necessary to intuitively recognize being in that situation.

4.7 Conclusion

The Dreyfus and Dreyfus model does have room in it for allowing for a developmental account of intuition beginning at the stage of the advanced beginner, rather than it being an all-or-nothing for experts or non-experts. Expert practice can continue to be characterized as centrally involving a certain level of intuition, without which such expert practice would not be possible, even when one still has intuitive feelings at the earlier stages of proficiency. This account of skills will be the basis for the analogy to virtue in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5: NEO-ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE

5.1 Introduction

Modern accounts of the virtuous person have often left readers with the impression that the virtuous person is an unattainable ideal, a moral fanatic, or just psychologically implausible. This chapter argues that the idea that virtues are like practical skills can help provide a more plausible account of the virtuous person for contemporary virtue theory. On the skill model, the moral knowledge of the virtuous person is analogous to the practical knowledge of the expert in a skill. Learning a skill is a process of acquiring practical knowledge, that is, the knowledge of how to do something, like building a house or driving a car. With virtue, the practical knowledge is the knowledge of how to act well, like acting brave or just. Virtues, like skills, require experience and practice to acquire. The focus of this chapter is to show how the Dreyfus skill model can be used to support some controversial claims made by contemporary virtue theorists.

A closer examination of skills and virtues will reveal a number of similarities in their acquisition and development, although accounts of virtue will differ in regards to whether anything beyond skillfulness is required for acting virtuously, and if so what those additional elements turn out to be. The rest of this chapter is divided into two main sections, each of which discusses the application of the skill model to virtue. The first section is a comparison of the Dreyfus skill model and Aristotle’s account of virtue, while the second section applies the skill model to neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue. Both the benefits and the limitations of the application of the skill model are discussed.18

18 This chapter focuses on neo-Aristotelian descriptions of the virtuous person because of their similarities to the expert in a skill. This is not to suggest, however, that the skill model of virtue cannot be of use to other ethical theories, such as in a consequentialist account of virtue. The focus here is on developing a more plausible account of virtue, rather than defending a particular form of virtue ethics.
5.2 The Dreyfus Skill Model and Aristotle’s Account of Virtue

Dreyfus and Dreyfus have discussed the possible ethical implications of the skill model. In their (2004) view, acting ethically is a type of skill, and “The skills model thus supports an ethics of situated involvement such as that of Aristotle, John Dewey, and Carol Gilligan” (p. 251). Aristotle made many comparisons between virtues and skills in the NE, and so it should be no surprise that there are at least some affinities between the Dreyfus skill model and Aristotle’s approach to ethics. In regards to an ethics of situated involvement, Aristotle thinks matters concerning action always admit of variability, and so “those who are to act must always consider what is proper to the occasion, as in medical art and in navigation” (NE 1104a8-10). Like the expert, a virtuous person develops the ability to act well by experience and the formation of good habits. While some philosophers are tempted to think of a rational deduction from principles as characteristic of the expert, the Dreyfuses (2004) suggest that:

Like a good phenomenologist dedicated to saving the phenomena, Aristotle stays close to normal everyday experience and sees the immediate, intuitive response precisely as characteristic of an expert. “Know-how [techne] does not deliberate,” he says in the Physics (Trans., 1909 Bk. II, Ch. 8). (p. 255)

The Dreyfuses and Aristotle have a similar view of the expert, and since they both view ethical action as skillful, there are similarities in their accounts of ethical expertise.

Despite these affinities between the Dreyfus skill model and Aristotle’s account of virtue, there appears to be a divergence when it comes to the question as to whether acting virtuously has any additional requirements beyond acting skillfully. Aristotle seems to add other conditions to acting virtuously, while Dreyfus and Dreyfus want to deny that anything beyond skillfulness is
required for acting well. Before discussing this difference, it is important to note at this point that the Dreyfus skill model will be useful to apply to an account of virtue as long as it illuminates at least some aspects of virtue. The skill model need not capture all the aspects of an account of virtue; rather, it only needs to explain the skillfulness that is involved in possessing virtue. The skill model does not cease to be useful if acting virtuously requires something in addition to skillful activity. Of course, the more aspects of virtue the skill model can illuminate, the more useful the model becomes, and this is a good reason to see how much the skill model can cover.

Recall that Aristotle sets out the following conditions for acting as a virtuous person:

1) Doing what is virtuous (doing the act considered honest, brave, moderate, etc.)

2) The agent who acts has a certain disposition:
   a) The agent knows what he does.
   b) The agent intends to do what he does and intends to do it for its own sake.
   c) The agent acts with certainty and firmness. \( (NE \ 1105a29-34) \)

An example of an agent who satisfies only condition (1) is someone who does what is virtuous but only accidentally, that is, the action is accordance with virtue but the agent lacks other elements of virtue. An example of an agent who satisfies only conditions (1) and (2a) is someone who does what is virtuous for the sake of some other end, such as honor or money. An example of an agent who satisfies all the conditions except (2c) is someone who is in the process of acquiring a virtue, but has not yet had the experience necessary to form a virtuous habit.

Acting, as a virtuous person would, requires satisfying all of the above criteria. Doing what is virtuous usually refers only to conditions (1) and (2a), since we generally assume that agents know what they are doing. Conditions (2b) and (2c) are necessary for acquiring virtue, and these
conditions can only be met by repeatedly doing what is virtuous. According to Aristotle, conditions (2b) and (2c) also mark a difference between virtues and skills, because these two conditions are not considered requirements for expertise in a skill.

The skill model of virtue can explain (1) and (2a), but it may have trouble with conditions (2b) and (2c), if Aristotle is correct. Dreyfus and Dreyfus appear, however, to endorse condition (2c) as a requirement for skills. They (2004) quote Dewey to remind us “As Aristotle pointed out . . . it takes a fine and well-grounded character to react immediately with the right approvals and condemnations” (p. 255). The immediate and intuitive response of the expert is possible because of the habitual responses the expert has developed, and these habits give the actions of the expert a degree of firmness. If they are right that condition (2c) is necessary for skills, than it is really only condition (2b) which is in dispute, as evidenced by their (2004) remark that this “still leaves the troubling claim that the action must be done for its own sake” (p. 255). They reject this requirement as adding a type of deliberative intention that is at odds with the intuitive response of the expert.

At this point, one could side with Dreyfus and Dreyfus in rejecting this condition. Alternatively, one could side with Aristotle and think that this is a necessary condition for acting virtuously, and that it marks a genuine difference between skills and virtues. As an example of this, one could be a highly skilled doctor even though one practices medicine for the sake of wealth rather than for the sake of healing others, whereas for Aristotle virtue requires acting for the sake of the noble. As another example, a chess master can throw games without undermining his claim to be an expert, but acting dishonestly does seem to undermine claims about the possession of the virtue of honesty. Even if one endorses the claim that acting ethically involves skillfulness, one need not claim, as Dreyfus and Dreyfus do, that nothing more is involved.
Despite this disagreement, there is some common ground between Aristotle and the Dreyfuses on the issue of choosing actions for their own sake. Aristotle claims that a virtuous action must be done for its own sake, and that the virtuous person should act for the sake of the noble. Having an understanding of what is noble informs one about what things are considered valuable and what is considered to be acting well. For Aristotle, there should be some degree of consensus in the community as to what the noble is, in order that young people can be taught how to act virtuously. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2004) appear to be in agreement with this idea, with respect to both acting skillfully and ethically, given their claim that “without a shared ethical sensibility to what is laudable and what is condemnable, one would go on doing what the experts in the community found inappropriate, develop bad habits, and become what Aristotle calls an unjust person” (p. 263 fn. 3). They give an example of a driver who finds skidding to be really enjoyable and valuable, and how this would lead the driver to develop bad driving habits. Similarly, if someone enjoyed something ignoble, this would lead the person to develop bad ethical habits, namely vices. Thus, there is some motivational component not only to virtue but also to the skill model. The skill model cannot do without some motivational component like choosing actions for their own sake, but it will remain the case that choosing actions for their own sake is not always necessary for expertise as it is for virtue.

5.3 The Dreyfus Skill Model and Neo-Aristotelian Accounts of Virtue

Although Dreyfus and Dreyfus make some comparisons between their model and Aristotle, they do not directly discuss the idea that virtues are analogous to skills. If the skill model helps to support an Aristotelian approach to ethics, then it should also provide some support for neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, such as those developed by Rosalind Hursthouse
and John McDowell.\textsuperscript{19} There are a number of troubling questions that arise from the details of these accounts of virtue: the use of perceptual metaphors, the silencing of reasons, suggestions that the non-virtuous should imitate the virtuous, and the uncodifiability of moral knowledge. The following sub-sections describe these difficulties for neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue. In response, similarities between virtue and expertise are developed, and the skill model is employed to help to explain these otherwise murky or problematic claims about virtue.

5.4  Are perceptual metaphors a sign of a bogus epistemology?

Perceptual metaphors occur frequently in descriptions of how the virtuous person comes to have knowledge about what to do. McDowell (1998) informs us that “Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way” (p. 73). This kind of perceptual metaphor need not be taken literally to perceive moral qualities in objects. Rather, the virtuous person’s judgment is supposed to be the result of exercising a sensitivity in which some aspect of the situation is seen as relevant while others are silenced. According to McDowell (1998), “The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity” (p. 51). Rosalind Hursthouse (2003) also refers to a perceptual capacity to recognize the most relevant features of any particular situation. She calls this ‘situational appreciation’, which is the “practically wise agent’s capacity to recognise some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones. Perceptual metaphors are often motivated by the idea that the ethical judgments of the virtuous person cannot be reduced to a set of rules;

\textsuperscript{19}This section is indebted to Daniel Jacobson’s discussion in “Seeing by Feeling”, \textit{Ethical Theory and Moral Practice} 8, 2005, 387-409. Details of his discussion will emerge throughout the rest of this chapter.
hence, the virtuous person sees what to do rather than deducing it from principles. This description of the virtue can be problematic, since it can give the impression that the judgments of the virtuous person are no more than groundless intuitions, for although the virtuous person is supposed to see what the right thing to do is, it cannot be justified by an appeal to principles.

Talk of “seeing the right thing to do” is often associated with a form of ethical intuitionism, like the views of Moore and Prichard. While McDowell (1998) claims that the virtuous person knows what to do by seeing situations in a certain way, he does not want this perceptual metaphor to amount to “a vague attempt to borrow the epistemological credentials of the idea of perception” (p. 162), for this is his own criticism of ethical intuitionism. The perceptual talk of intuitionism requires postulating a quasi-perceptual faculty that allows one to see what to do, but McDowell (1998) raises the concern that “the model itself ensures that there is nothing helpful to say about how such a faculty might work, or why its deliverances might deserve to count as knowledge” (p. 133). Without an explanation of how such a perceptual faculty might work, talk of “seeing the right thing to do” is just an empty metaphor. In addition, as Daniel Jacobson (2005) points out, “Even if the phenomenology of moral judgment is as peremptory and non-inferential as the perceptual metaphor suggests, it will not suffice simply to declare that some people can see what to do” (p. 388). The judgments of a virtuous person may be reached in a non-inferential way, but that does not show why they should count as knowledge. To avoid this, McDowell needs a plausible moral epistemology. As McDowell (1998) puts it, he needs to earn talk of truth, and:

Earning truth is a matter of supplying something that really does what is merely pretended by the bogus epistemology of intuitionism. Instead of a vague attempt to borrow the

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20 The subject of codifiability is dealt with later on in this chapter.
epistemological credentials of the idea of perception, the position I am describing aims, quite
differently, at an epistemology that centers on the notion of susceptibility to reasons. (p. 162)
Jacobson (2005) alerts us that the difficulty with this is that the “talk of susceptibility to reasons
does not in itself improve matters, since the notion of a metaphorically perceptible ‘space of
reasons’ makes no advance on the mysterious epistemology of intuitionism and the obscurity of
its talk of moral perception” (p. 389). What is needed is a way to explain the perceptual
metaphors without invoking an equally mysterious perceptual faculty or space of reasons.

Fortunately, the skill model can explain these kinds of perceptual metaphors. The
knowledge that experts have in a skill is often couched in perceptual metaphors, such as how a
skilled chess player simply ‘sees’ what move to make, in much the same way that the virtuous
person is said to simply see what virtue demands in a situation. Even if an expert player is
unable to articulate how he was able to determine the correct move, which Dreyfus and Dreyfus
found often to be the case, the possession of that knowledge is not mysterious. A skilled chess
player can know which moves to make because of his experiences in playing the game: being in
a variety of situations, seeing the possible moves, and knowing which moves worked and which
did not. What the player has learned to do is to recognize a variety of different situations that
arise in chess, and to make connections between those situations and the right course of action to
take. As described in the Dreyfus model, this is a form of pattern recognition.

The expert recognizes the relevant features of the situation and this allows him to have an
immediate intuitive response to the situation. The talk of intuition may appear to bring the
account right back to the problematic area of ethical intuitionism, but there is a key difference.
When Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) use the term ‘intuition’, they “are referring to the
understanding that effortlessly occurs upon seeing similarities with previous experiences” (p.
28). The intuitive response only arises when one recognizes a pattern from a previous experience. As Paul Bloomfield (2000) helpfully notes, “The sense of ‘intuition’ here is quite different from the *a priori* intuitions posited by moral intuitionists like Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, and Prichard. The relevant intuitions for virtue epistemology and moral epistemology are *a posteriori*” (p. 39). Both senses of intuition capture the idea that knowledge can be gained through a non-inferential process, but they diverge when it comes to the role of experience in gaining knowledge. Although the skill model describes a form of intuitive judgment, it can alleviate McDowell’s concerns about ethical intuitionism because the skill model does have something “helpful to say about how such a faculty might work” and can provide an explanation for “why its deliverances might deserve to count as knowledge.”

5.5 Does the silencing of reasons make the virtuous person a moral fanatic?

A related concern to the use of perceptual metaphors is the idea that in coming to see what to do, the virtuous person does not actually deliberate about what course of action to take. For example, consider McDowell’s (1998) claim that:

we should stop assuming that the virtuous person’s judgement is a result of balancing reasons for and against. The view of a situation that he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation (the present danger, say), but as silencing them. (p. 55)

Essentially, the virtuous person does not deliberate about what to do, that is, he does not reach a moral judgment by weighing reasons for and against a course of action. Instead, the virtuous
person reaches a judgment by seeing only one aspect of the situation as relevant while all other considerations are silenced. There is no need to weigh competing reasons when only a single reason is seen as relevant to the judgment of how to act.

A critic might object that silencing is actually something negative, a form of single-mindedness. Single-mindedness represents a type of tunnel vision, whereas the consideration of competing reasons for action helps one to avoid overlooking relevant moral factors. The problem with single-mindedness as an ideal is that it is usually associated with a moral fanatic, someone who is unwilling to consider any other relevant factors. Insofar as the virtuous person appears to share this characteristic of single-mindedness with the moral fanatic, the virtuous person is less attractive as a moral exemplar.

Silencing, however, does not need to be viewed in such a negative light. The developmental account of skill acquisition can explain where the ‘single-mindedness’ comes from, and in so doing remove the concerns about fanaticism. Dreyfus and Dreyfus found that when people are learning a skill, with increasing experience there is an overwhelming increase in the number of potentially relevant factors that the learner needed to deal with. In response to this, proficient performers adopted a plan that would help them to cope with all the potentially relevant information. The Dreyfuses (2004) found that “By first choosing a plan, goal, or perspective that organizes the situation, and by then examining only the small set of features and aspects that he or she has learned are relevant given that plan, the performer can simplify and improve his or her performance” (p. 252). On the skill model, a type of silencing is required in order to become more skillful.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) also found that beginners in a skill, such as chess, deliberate about what move to make next, weighing reasons for and against a move, or employing other

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21 The example comes from a discussion with Daniel Jacobson.
problem solving methods, “but normally an expert does not solve problems. He does not reason. He does not even act deliberately. Rather he spontaneously does what has normally worked and, naturally, it normally works” (p. 235). The lack of deliberation on the part of the expert is not problematic when viewed in the light of the process of skill acquisition. The immediacy of the expert’s judgment is a function of a repeated exposure to similar past experiences, and the outcome of actions taken in those situations. The expert driver knows what actions are required and how to perform them without detached calculation or comparing alternatives. An expert driver would shift gears when appropriate without even being aware of it. When you recognize that you have been in this situation before, and you have acted successfully in those past situations, you do not need to stop and deliberate about what to do. As the Dreyfus model points out, you spontaneously do what has normally worked in the past, and, naturally, it normally works. It is important to note, however, that the spontaneous action only holds true for situations the expert has experienced before. Unfamiliar situations will require the expert to deliberate about what to do, because the expert is unable to recognize the pattern or set of relevant features in the situation.

If virtues are analogous to practical skills in this regard, then the virtuous person can act well in the non-deliberative way McDowell describes, because the virtuous person has experience with that particular situation. Experience has taught the virtuous person which factors are relevant in the situation he is facing, and so other factors of the situation do not need to be considered. Although the skill analogy can support the claim that the virtuous person can act well without deliberation, the claim is not as illuminating as McDowell makes it out to be. According to the Dreyfus account, experts are only able to act well without deliberation in situations with which the expert has familiarity. McDowell does not present the virtuous person
as being similarly limited in unfamiliar situations. Even the virtuous person will need to fall back on weighing competing reasons for and against actions when presented with a genuinely unfamiliar situation.

5.6 Should a non-virtuous person always try to act as the virtuous person acts?

Since McDowell describes the virtuous person as ‘single-minded’, apart from a detailed account of how one becomes virtuous, he can leave the reader with the impression that if one wanted to become virtuous, one should try to become ‘single-minded’. After all, one of the ways to develop virtue is by imitating the acts of the virtuous person, and that could be seen to include imitating the lack of deliberation. This concern is along the same lines as the one voiced by Robert Johnson (2003) in his critique of McDowell and Hursthouse: “simply acting as the virtuous act is not necessarily the only, or even best, way to acquire virtue” (p. 819).

As the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition shows, however, one does not aim at acting without deliberation. One develops the ability to act well without deliberation only after repeated exposure to a situation and the consequences of different types of action that one can take in that situation. If you are aspiring to virtue, you should not avoid deliberation as a means to becoming virtuous. As the skill model makes clear, novices need to use different strategies than the expert, and the same would be true in the case of virtue. Although novices and advanced beginners guide their behavior by rules and sophisticated maxims, expertise can only be achieved by moving beyond such guides. Stuart Dreyfus (2004) provides a good illustration of this point in recalling his own difficulties being stuck at the competent level of playing chess:

In college, where I captained the chess team, my players were mostly mathematicians and mostly, like me, at the competent level. At this point, a few of my teammates who were
not mathematicians began to play fast chess at the rate of 5 or 10 minutes a game and [were] also eager to play over the great games of the grandmasters. I resisted. Fast chess was no fun for me, because it didn’t give me time to figure out what to do. I found grandmaster games inscrutable, and since the record of the game seldom if ever gave principles explaining the moves, I felt there was nothing I could learn from the games. Some of my teammates, who through fast chess and game studying acquired a great deal of concrete experience, have gone on to become masters. (p. 252)

It takes a great deal of experience to move beyond the use of rules and principles, and since novices by definition lack such experience, they will have to rely on strategies that the expert no longer uses. The non-virtuous person will likewise have to employ different strategies for acting well and avoiding vices. If the novice at virtue did not have to employ different strategies, as Johnson (2003) rightly points out, “he would already possess the kind of psychological makeup that would make virtuous action second nature. In other words, he would not be a novice at all” (p. 821). In both the case of skills and virtues, novices cannot, and should not attempt to, act in exactly the way the expert acts.

Thus, the skill model of virtue can accommodate Johnson’s (2003) view that people who are not fully virtuous ought to engage in certain types of ‘self-monitoring’ actions in order to become more virtuous, even though these types of actions are “utterly uncharacteristic of completely virtuous agents” (p. 817-818).22 As a novice gains experience in a skill, new features of the situation are discovered by, or pointed out to, the novice as relevant. Advanced beginners are able to follow guidelines, given to them by more experienced practitioners, based on these newly discovered features. This is all part of developing expertise, even though such guidelines

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22 This does not address the main argument of Johnson’s paper, which is aimed at those who are trying to give a virtue-oriented theory of right action. Since the skill model of virtue does not provide an account of right action by itself, I do not seek here to respond to Johnson’s main concern.
are not followed by the expert. Similar practices would be found in the development of virtue, and are not something external to developing virtue, as Johnson (2003) seems to suggest: “One can and should do many things, things other than simply developing virtues, given that one’s moral perception is imperfect. One is to seek counsel” (p. 822). The strategies of the novice and advanced beginner are necessary steps on the way to developing expertise or virtue, and should not be regarded as something other than the development of skillfulness.

5.7  Can the knowledge of the virtuous person be codified?

One of the distinctive features of the virtue ethics approach endorsed by Hursthouse and McDowell is rejecting the idea that the ethical judgments of the virtuous person can be codified into a set of rules. On this, McDowell (1998) reminds us:

As Aristotle consistently says, the best generalizations about how one should behave hold only for the most part. If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one’s mind; rather, one’s mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula.

(p. 58)

While it is possible to come up with some general principles about acting well, many virtue ethicists resist the thought that moral knowledge can be codified into some type of algorithm or decision procedure, or reduced to an overriding principle like the categorical imperative or principle of utility. According to McDowell, it is a rejection of the idea that all “knowledge must have a stateable propositional content” (p. 57). The trouble with denying codifiability is that it
undermines our confidence that the judgments of the virtuous person count as genuine moral knowledge. An unprincipled approach appears to be a potentially inconsistent approach to making moral judgments. If one could explicate one’s judgments in terms of principles, then the principles could be tested for consistency and applicability to a wide variety of cases. When the virtuous person cannot describe what he knows, or gives vague responses like ‘it was the honest thing to do’, we are left wondering whether the virtuous person really knows what he is doing.

The skill model can at least demonstrate how someone can have practical knowledge, without that knowledge being completely reducible to stateable propositional knowledge. Knowing how to do something often involves knowledge of and about things, but knowing how to do something cannot be completely reduced to propositional knowledge. Remember the example of riding a bike. Most of us know how to ride a bike, but are unable to formulate any specific rules about how to do so. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) point out, the “fact that you can’t put what you have learned into words means that know-how is not accessible to you in the form of facts and rules” (p. 16). You can know how to do something and even achieve expertise in a skill, without that knowledge being merely a matter of knowing the facts and which rules are applicable.

While the knowledge of the expert may not be a matter of applying principles, it is still left open whether the knowledge in a particular skill domain could be codified into a set of principles. Chess, for instance, has a finite (though very large) set of moves that could be made in the game. It seems safe to assume that chess could be reduced to a very large and complicated set of rules and principles that cover every possible move to make in the game. Even if the chess master does not need to rely on any such set to achieve expertise, there could still be such an underlying theory. Could morality turn out to be like chess in this way? It is very unlikely,
given that life lacks the formal constraints of a game of chess. On this question, however, the
skill model can remain neutral. One need not take the stand Dreyfus and Dreyfus are inclined to
take. They (2004) seem to reject the idea that morality or even chess could turn out to be
codifiable into principles:

as we have seen in the case of chess, in the next situation, when one applies the principle, one
may well lose the game or, in the case of ethical action, still feel regret. This is not because it
is difficult to determine those features that define membership in the right similarity set nor
because it is hard to find the principles that lead to expert action. Rather, as far as anyone
knows, there just are not any such features and principles. It is an unsubstantiated
assumption of philosophers since Socrates that there must be a theory underlying every skill
domain. The failure of expert systems based on the assumption that expertise is produced by
principles and inferences suggest that there is no such theory. (p. 254-255)

While expertise is not produced by principles, it is still possible that there is an underlying
theory. Endorsing the skill model does not require one to take a stand on this issue, as Dreyfus
and Dreyfus do. The main point of the skill model is to show that expert behavior is not
produced by trying to apply principles thought to underlie the domain of the skill. Even if chess
could be codified into a set of rules, the rules would be so complicated that it would be of little or
no use in acquiring expertise. Morality, were it to turn out to be codifiable, would be even
messier. Regardless of whether there is or is not an underlying theory, the point of the skill
model is to show how actual people go about acquiring expertise, and they do so without needing
access to an underlying theory. Endorsing the skill model does not require one to make the
further claim that there is not any underlying theory.
5.8 Limits of the skill model of virtue

One limitation of the skill model in providing a full account of moral knowledge is that it cannot offer criteria to distinguish between virtues and vices. Being a convincing liar takes skill, as opposed to merely saying something that is not true regardless of whether the person to whom you tell the lie believes you. That something takes skill, while necessary for virtue is surely not sufficient. This is one reason why the skill model of virtue cannot be a complete story about virtue. Daniel Jacobson (2005) presses the point further:

This poses a dilemma for any form of virtue ethics that attempts to utilize the skill model to bolster its perceptual epistemology. To do so, it must either embrace the faux virtues or find some way of distinguishing the genuine article. (p. 395)

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) appear to embrace the former, a type of cultural relativism: “One must relativize one’s admiration and imitation to one’s sub-culture” (p. 261 fn. 16). In general, virtue ethicists do not endorse cultural relativism, and so must find a way of distinguishing between skills that are virtuous, vicious, or morally neutral. This is, however, not a new problem for virtue ethicists to handle, as any virtue ethical theory must justify its particular list of virtues. The skill model is compatible with a variety of accounts about which traits count as virtues.

Another limitation develops because the virtue as skill model has treated the virtues as if they were each independent skills. This leaves open the possibility that the virtues could conflict and pull one in different directions. Jacobson (2005) argues that this possibility leaves the skill model falling short of a full account of moral knowledge:

For moral knowledge requires not merely that the virtuous person sees the demands of kindness, courage, and the like, but that he can see what to do, all things considered – that is, what he has most reason to do. If the discrete virtues can pull in different directions,
then moral knowledge requires the ability to arbitrate between them. Only then will we be able to say that the virtuous person knows what to do, on some occasion; and only if this ability is itself a skill can we say that he knows what to do by seeing the situation in a distinctive way. (p. 397)

There is a strategy open to the virtue ethicist to achieve a full account of moral knowledge using the skill model, and this strategy involves two components. The first component is to argue that there is a supreme virtue, like practical wisdom, that allows one to resolve any potential conflicts between virtues. The second component is to argue that the virtues cannot in fact conflict, because there is a unity to the virtues. The two components are part of a single strategy, because it takes the virtue of practical wisdom to recognize the unity of the virtues. There is, however, the possibility that just one of the components will be enough to solve the problem. The real difficulty will be to make the concept of practical wisdom or unity of the virtues both plausible and compatible with the skill model. This task will occupy the next two chapters.

5.9 Conclusion

There are significant similarities between descriptions of virtue and expertise. The Dreyfus account of skill acquisition provides a model for developing an account of the knowledge of the virtuous person, and this can help clear up some confusing aspects of the possession of virtue. Modern virtue ethicists, especially those working in the neo-Aristotelian tradition, should take a closer look at what the skill analogy has to offer.
CHAPTER 6: PRACTICAL WISDOM

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on understanding the concept of practical wisdom, in order to provide part of a solution to the problem raised at the end of the last chapter. This problem arose because the virtue as skill model treats the virtues as if they were each independent skills. This leaves open the possibility that the virtues could conflict and pull one in different directions. Daniel Jacobson (2005) argues that this possibility leaves the skill model falling short of a full account of moral knowledge.23 Virtue ethicists have traditionally relied on the concepts of practical wisdom and the unity of the virtues to give a full account of moral knowledge. The real difficulty is to make the concept of practical wisdom and the unity of the virtues both plausible and compatible with the skill model.

This chapter explores the concept of practical wisdom, while the next chapter discusses the implications of this concept for the unity of the virtues thesis. Since many contemporary virtue ethicists take their view of practical wisdom from Aristotle, it will be useful to take an in-depth look at Aristotle on practical wisdom, before moving to what neo-Aristotelians have said about practical wisdom. It will be argued that there is a plausible notion of practical wisdom as knowledge of what is valuable, which is required by all the virtues. Furthermore, practical wisdom provides a unifying element to all the virtues, which will help provide an answer to the problem of potentially conflicting virtues. Although expertise seems to capture some aspects of being practically wise, other aspects of it mark a difference between virtues and skills. Practical wisdom, while perhaps not necessary for skills, is at least compatible with the skill model of virtue.

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23 This challenge was described at the end of the previous chapter.
6.2 Practical Wisdom as an Intellectual Excellence

For Aristotle, practical wisdom is an intellectual quality that aims at truth, but it is not the only one. Aristotle distinguishes between five types of intellectual excellences that are concerned with reaching truth: scientific knowledge (episteme), art (techne), practical wisdom (phronesis), theoretical wisdom (sophia), and the comprehension of first principles (nous).

Practical wisdom will become clearer when contrasted with the other qualities. The qualities are concerned with either things that are invariable or things that are variable, but not both. Scientific knowledge and theoretical wisdom are concerned with things that do not vary. Art, on the other hand, is concerned with things that can vary. Art is concerned specifically with making. For example, Aristotle says the “ability to build houses can be truly defined as an intellectual quality concerned with making, and it is a kind of art” (NE 1140a6-7). For Aristotle, all art is concerned with making. Practical wisdom is concerned with doing rather than making. It is different from both scientific knowledge and art. According to Aristotle, practical wisdom:

\[ \text{cannot be the same as scientific knowledge, because what is done can vary: nor the same as art, because there is a generic difference between doing and making. It therefore follows that it is a truth-attaining intellectual quality concerned with doing and with things that are good and bad for human beings. For in making the end is other than the making itself: but the end of doing cannot be other than the doing itself: for doing well is itself the end. (NE 1140b4-8)} \]

Practical wisdom concerns things that can vary, unlike scientific knowledge. It is different from art, however, because of the difference in ends between making and doing.\(^{24}\) The end of building a house is the house itself and not the activity of constructing it. For Aristotle, practical wisdom

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\(^{24}\) It is not clear that this distinction will hold up in many cases. Dancing is considered a performance art, but the art is in the dancing itself, and not some finished product as the end result of a process.
wisdom seems least like scientific knowledge, but there are still relevant comparisons and contrasts to be drawn between the other intellectual excellences.

According to Aristotle, another way in which art and practical wisdom differ is the idea that “in art the man who goes wrong intentionally is better than the man who goes wrong unintentionally, but in the sphere of practical wisdom he is worse, just as he is worse in the sphere of moral goodness” (NE 1140b23-24). An honest person is motivated to be honest whenever that virtue is relevant. If a person knows what honesty demands in a situation, but chooses to be dishonest, this undermines the claim to possess the virtue. This represents a difference between skills and virtues. Practical skills are usually thought to be a type of ability, rather than a type of disposition. If a chess player intentionally throws a game, this does not undermine his claim to be skilled at playing chess. Someone can be an expert in chess so long as one can reliably win chess games when one chooses to do so. If a soldier intentionally runs away on the battlefield, however, this does appear to undermine his claim to be courageous. There is a stronger dispositional or motivational component to virtue in comparison with practical skills. Virtues require that one be reliably disposed to display the virtue whenever it is appropriate.

Practical wisdom also needs to be distinguished from theoretical wisdom. Aristotle says that theoretical wisdom “concerns those things whose nature is most exalted” (NE 1141b3). Geometry and mathematics are examples of subjects in which one can become theoretically

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25 There may be skills, however, that blur even this contrast. Martial arts, for example, represent a skill that disposes you to react in certain ways in response to being attacked, i.e., blocking an incoming strike without having to think about it.

26 The contrast between virtues and skills here is not quite as stark as it has been presented. With regard to some skills, like martial arts, there is a closer connection. One could choose not to block an incoming strike, but if this choice is made too often, it will start to undermine one’s skill at blocking incoming strikes, as one starts forming the habit of not blocking. Ultimately, though, the element of disposition does show a genuine contrast between virtues and skills.
wise. Practical and theoretical wisdom correspond to different parts of the soul. For Aristotle, theoretical wisdom also differs from practical wisdom in terms of subject matter:

Now if it is true that the wholesome and the good are one thing for human beings and another thing for fish, while the white and the straight are the same thing for all: all must agree that the philosophically wise also is the same thing for all, but the practically wise one thing for one and another thing for another. For men give the name of ‘practically wise’ to what can discern properly the various affairs that concern itself, and it is to such a creature that they are ready to entrust the conduct of those affairs. (*NE* 1141a22-26)

Theoretical wisdom concerns subjects that are the same for all creatures, while practical wisdom focuses on the good for a particular type of creature, such as the good for human beings. Aristotle claims that theoretical and practical wisdom contrast not only in their subject matter, but also in terms of how one becomes wise:

young men may become good at geometry and mathematics and in such matters philosophically wise, but do not seem to become practically wise. The reason is that practical wisdom is concerned with particular facts, which become known through experience, whereas a young man has no great experience, since it is only the progress of time that can produce experience. (*NE* 1142a12-16)

The subject matter of theoretical wisdom does not require experience to learn; hence, even the young can become theoretically wise about certain subjects. Practical wisdom, however, requires experience to learn, because knowledge of practical facts is gained through experience. Hence, for Aristotle, moral knowledge is not *a priori* knowledge, that is to say it must be learned from experience. On the Dreyfus skill model, the same is true for the practical knowledge of an expert in a skill.
Practical wisdom also differs from theoretical wisdom because practical wisdom is not a purely intellectual quality. According to Aristotle, “a proof of this is the fact that a purely intellectual quality may be said to be ‘forgotten,’ while practical wisdom cannot be said to be forgotten” (1140b29-30). This might be taken as another difference between virtues and skills. Skills might be forgotten if not exercised over time, whereas virtues are more firmly entrenched and are in no danger of being forgotten if a person does not exercise the virtue over time. On this subject, Gilbert Ryle (1958) claims that:

We do not keep up our honesty by giving ourselves regular exercises in it. Nor do we excuse a malicious action by saying that we have recently been short in fair-mindedness and generosity.

According to this line of thought, skills have to be practiced in order to keep expertise, but not so with virtues. If somebody is honest, he does not need to practice at being honest in order to remain so. In this way, virtue is unlike a skill, and may represent a departure from the type of practical knowledge that skills represent. There are, however, at least two problems with this line of reasoning. First, at least some skills stay with you for quite a long time even when you have not used them. Even when someone has gone several years without driving a car with a manual transmission, he can pick it up again in mere minutes, as if he had never gone back to driving automatics. The same goes for skills like scuba diving that can take months to learn. Consider also, the popular cliché of “It’s like riding a bike” to describe something which is never truly forgotten.

Second, virtues are not as immune to lack of exercise as is suggested. The suggestion that once you have a virtue, you do not need to exercise it, comes from a view of virtues where the knowledge involved is more propositional than practical. On this view, once you know that
torture is wrong, you don’t need any exercises in avoiding it to remember that it is wrong, anymore than you need to keep practicing doing the math of $2 + 2$ to make sure it still ends up being 4. An honest person knows not to lie. Even if an honest person were shipwrecked alone on an island for five years, he would not end up forgetting that it is wrong to lie even though there were no opportunities to lie to anyone (setting aside cases of self-deception).

However, these intuitions seem to stem from equating the possession of a virtue with the possession of knowledge in a form that can be easily put into propositional form, i.e., honesty = not lying. Virtues, for Aristotle, are not reducible to such simple propositions. There are situations where not telling the truth is called for, and it represents no failure of honesty to do so. For example, a Nazi asking for the whereabouts of hidden Jews, or a stranger asking a child where he or she lives. Beyond that, there is the matter of how much truth to reveal, and in what manner. The social situations can become quite complex, and navigating your way around the different demands is a skill, and one that can get rusty with disuse. Someone shipwrecked on an island for five years is likely to be quite awkward for a time in anything other than simple social situations. Like other skills, one does not necessarily have to start over learning the skill from scratch, and the initial period of rustiness will fade. Simple tasks like riding a bike may not fade much over time, but complex tasks like riding up and down mountain trails may require regular exercise. It is far from obvious that there is much of a difference here between virtues and skills, and even if there is, it looks to be more of a matter of a difference in degree rather than in kind.

Theoretical wisdom, on the other hand, does represent propositional knowledge, such as mathematical knowledge, that is gained by deductions from fundamental principles. Practical wisdom, unlike theoretical wisdom, does not require deductions from fundamental principles. In this way, Aristotle says it is like nous, which is the comprehension of “axioms of which no
demonstration is possible, while practical wisdom deals with particulars, of which there can be no scientific knowledge, but only sense-perception” (*NE* 1142a26-28). Practical wisdom is an apprehension of general principles, but that is not the only, nor the most important, type of knowledge associated with practical wisdom for Aristotle:

> Practical wisdom does not lead to the knowledge of general principles only: it is necessary to know particular facts also [in order to be practically wise]: for practical wisdom is concerned with action, and action depends upon particular facts. Hence some men without knowledge [of general principles] can act more effectively than others with knowledge [of general principles], especially those who have experience. If a man knows that light meat is digestible and wholesome, but does not know what kind of meats are light, he will not restore one’s health; it is the man who knows that poultry is digestible who is more likely to do this. But practical wisdom is concerned with action: we ought therefore [in order to be practically wise], if we cannot have both kinds of knowledge, to have the latter rather than the former [i.e. the knowledge of particular facts rather than that of general principles]. (*NE* 1141b15-23)

Knowledge of general principles is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to act effectively. Knowledge of particular facts is necessary in order to act effectively, and can sometimes be sufficient to act effectively. Hence, knowledge only of particular facts is to be preferred to knowledge only of general principles, although it is clearly best to have both. Another reason for Aristotle’s emphasis on knowledge of particular facts is that “universals are constructed out of particulars: therefore we must have perception of these particulars” (*NE* 1143b5). Knowledge of particular facts is gained through experience, and so experience is necessary to develop practical wisdom. Thus, for Aristotle, “it is necessary to give heed to the undemonstrable statements and
opinions of experienced and elderly or practically wise men no less than to their demonstrations: for they see correctly, because they have acquired the power of vision through experience” (*NE* 1143b11-14).

The perceptual metaphors contained in the above paragraph appear in neo-Aristotelian descriptions of practical wisdom as well. According to John McDowell (1998), “practical wisdom, the intellectual excellence operative in behaviour that manifests good character, is a perceptual capacity” (p. 28). What is it that practical wisdom perceives? According to McDowell (1998), “Practical wisdom is a capacity to discern which of the potentially action-inviting features of a situation is the one that should be allowed to engage with one of the standing concerns of a virtuous person, so as to induce an action” (p. 46). McDowell views the appeal to perception as signaling that the virtuous person’s knowledge is not something that can be reduced to universal principles. The virtuous person does not apply a principle to determine the relevant factors of a situation; it is instead something that the virtuous person perceives. The moral knowledge of the virtuous person is not purely propositional.

As was detailed in chapter five, the skill model can show how someone can have practical knowledge, without that knowledge being completely reducible to a stateable propositional knowledge. Knowing how to do something, like driving a car, clearly involves propositional knowledge, and skills vary in how much propositional knowledge might be needed. Although a good chess player knows how to win, the expertise is not something that can be reduced to merely following rules, principles, or maxims. What the expert knows cannot be explained in terms of rules, because expertise is something beyond simple rule following that is found at the earlier stages of skill acquisition. Dreyfus and Dreyfus reject the idea of codifiability, that the knowledge can be codified in a set of rules, at least for the expert. In addition, the Dreyfuses
(1991) give a similar warning about trying to reduce such knowledge to rules, “since principles are unable to produce expert behavior, it should be no surprise if falling back on them produces inferior responses” (p. 241). For both the expert and the virtuous person, their knowledge cannot be reduced to rules, and any attempt to do so will lead to poorer performance.

6.3 Practical Wisdom and Deliberation

Practical wisdom is not merely the possession of knowledge, it also requires being skilled in deliberation. According to Aristotle, “it is held to be the mark of the practically wise man to be able to deliberate well about the things that are good and useful for himself: not what is useful for some special purpose, not, for instance, what is good for his health or his strength: but what is useful to him for a good life as a whole” (NE 1140a25-28). In addition, Aristotle claims that “no one deliberates about things that cannot vary, nor about things that are not the means to some end, and that end a good that can be achieved: and the good deliberator in general is the man who can in his calculation reach the best of achievable goods for man” (NE 1141b10-14). Knowledge of particular facts, and general principles, can help one deliberate about the most effective means to reach some end. This should not suggest that there is no deliberation about ends whatsoever, because some ends are merely means to achieving a greater end. No one would deliberate about whether to be happy, since happiness is supposed to be our final end, but how best to achieve the good life still requires deliberation, and this is the hallmark of the practically wise person.

Deliberation is about discovering the means to an end, and one can deliberate well or badly. The practically wise person is able to deliberate well. According to Aristotle, “Practical wisdom gives commands; its conclusion is the statement of what we ought or ought not to do” (NE 1143a9-10). Although the practically wise person comes to the right conclusion about what
ought to be done, for Aristotle, it is not sufficient for deliberative excellence merely to arrive at the right conclusion about what to do, since “the reason which led to the conclusion may be wrong” \( (NE\ 1142b25) \). Someone who has reached the right conclusion but for the wrong reason has not deliberated well, since the person makes a mistake. According to Aristotle, a similar error occurs in regards to moral excellence:

\[
\text{We say that some of those persons who do just acts are still not just persons: for example those who do what is commanded by law either unwillingly, or in ignorance, or for some other reason than for the sake of the action itself: and this in spite of the fact that they do the things which they ought to do and which the good man is bound to do.} \quad (NE\ 1144a11-17)
\]

In order for someone to have deliberated well, the reason that led to the conclusion must be the right reason. Another source of error in deliberation can occur in regards to the end being sought. While a wicked person can be said to deliberate rightly, for Aristotle, this is not the same as the excellence of deliberation of the practically wise person:

\[
\text{For the man without self-control, or the wicked man, will reach through his calculation the conclusion which it lies before him to discover, so that he will have deliberated rightly, but will have procured himself a great evil: but to have deliberated well is evidently something good, for deliberative excellence is that sort of rightness in deliberating which leads to the gaining of some good.} \quad (NE\ 1142b19-23)
\]

Deliberating well involves the gaining of some good. If the end you seek is bad, although you may calculate the best means to achieve that end, you cannot be said to have deliberated well, at least not in the sense that the practically wise person is able to deliberate well. The wicked person comes up with the wrong conclusion about what ought to be done.
There is still, however, a sense in which both the virtuous and the wicked can reason well about the means to an end, and Aristotle refers to this as a faculty that is necessary for practical wisdom, but not identical to it:

There is a faculty which is called Ability, which is such as to be able to put into practice the means to any proposed end in view, and to discover what those means are. Now if the end in view is a noble one, the ability is praiseworthy; but if the end in view is bad, the ability is villainy. Hence we call able men practically wise or villainous. (NE 1144a24-27)\(^{27}\)

Although practical wisdom refers to this ability to discover the means, it does not follow that an able person is a practically wise person. Having this ability is itself morally neutral. Only the able person whose ends are noble counts as a practically wise person. Having a practical skill is like having this kind of “Ability”. On an Aristotelian model, however, for a skill to count as a virtue, it must have an end that would be considered noble. Being a very good liar certainly requires a lot of skill, but since the end of lying is bad, it is considered a vice rather than a virtue or a morally neutral skill.\(^{28}\)

### 6.4 Natural Virtue versus Genuine Virtue

According to Aristotle, a similar relationship, to that of ability and practical wisdom, holds true for natural moral excellence (or natural virtue) and true moral excellence (or genuine virtue):

just as in the case of the intellectual part of the soul that deals with the contingent there are two kinds of quality, ability and practical wisdom, so also there are two kinds in the

\(^{27}\) “Ability” is commonly translated as “cleverness”.

\(^{28}\) This will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter.
case of the moral part, the one natural and the other true excellence; and of these it is the true excellence which cannot be produced without practical wisdom. \((NE\ 1142b14-16)\)

True moral excellence is similar to, but not identical with, natural moral excellence. Children are often chosen as examples of those who might have natural moral excellence. A child might show a habit of telling the truth, but this does not amount to having the virtue of honesty. True moral excellence requires practical wisdom, and it takes experience to develop practical wisdom, for children are often ignorant about the consequences of their actions. Children do not have enough experience on which to draw in order to discover the best means to their ends. Rosalind Hursthouse (2003) makes this point when explaining practical wisdom:

\[\text{Aristotle makes a number of specific remarks about } phronesis \text{ that are the subject of much scholarly debate, but the (related) modern concept is best understood by thinking of what the virtuous morally mature adult has that nice children, including nice adolescents, lack. Both the virtuous adult and the nice child have good intentions, but the child is much more prone to mess things up because he is ignorant of what he needs to know in order to do what he intends.}\]

This passage reinforces the connection between experiences and the ability to identify morally relevant features of a situation. Practical wisdom must be gained through experience. Typically, adults have experienced a greater variety of situations from which to draw upon in order to assess, for example, the likely consequences of actions. Knowing the consequences of past actions in similar situations can help one to determine what ought to be done in the present situation. A virtuous person not only intends to act well, but also reliably succeeds. When a person acquires the intellectual quality of practical wisdom in addition to natural moral excellence, Aristotle then claims “he acts particularly well: and his moral character, though it
will be much what it was before, will then be moral excellence truly so called” (*NE* 1142b12-13). The developmental account begins with having the right ends, due to natural moral excellence, and then developing, with experience, the knowledge about how best to achieve those ends. Thus, McDowell (1998) concludes that “Practical wisdom is the properly moulded state of the motivational propensities, in a reflectively adjusted form” (p. 40).

According to Aristotle, moral excellence is conjoined with practical wisdom in such a way that “it is not possible without practical wisdom to be really good morally, nor without moral excellence to be practically wise” (*NE* 1142b31-32). There is a worry here that Aristotle’s account is circular, since it appears that you need to have practical wisdom to have moral excellence, but that you also have to have moral excellence to have practical wisdom. There is a developmental progression, however, that dispels this circularity. According to Aristotle, “Moral excellence makes the end in view right, practical wisdom makes the means to it right” (*NE* 1144a8-9). In a proper moral education, children are raised to love noble actions, and so they have natural moral excellence that directs them to seek noble ends. McDowell (1998) draws the connection between having right ends and the motivational component of virtue:

> Having the right conception of the end, is, at least, a state of one’s motivational propensities. It involves having a number of concerns: that is, motivational susceptibilities, for instance to opportunities to help others. (p. 28-29)

As was pointed out in the distinction between ability and practical wisdom, practical wisdom requires that the ends being sought are noble, and in this way, practical wisdom requires moral excellence. One can have the ability to discover the best means to an end, however, without having natural moral excellence. The problem for those who have this ability, but lack natural moral excellence, is that they will effectively seek bad ends, and hence will act wickedly.
Children, while they can have natural moral excellence, lack the experience to understand fully the consequences of their actions, and the actions of others, and this will hinder their ability to discover the best means to an end. True moral excellence requires that one is able to act effectively, and children are often too inexperienced to act well with any reliability. Since developing this ability is necessary for practical wisdom, and practical wisdom is necessary for true virtue, children cannot be said to have true moral excellence. As children become adults, they gain experience and insight into actions and behavior, and their ability to discover the best means improves. At this point, given a proper upbringing and enough experience, a person has the two ingredients necessary for virtuous action: having the right ends, and being able to discover and bring about the means to those ends.

When a person reaches a wrong conclusion about what ought to be done, there are two potential sources of error. One is that the person has noble ends, or good intentions, but makes a mistake in determining how to achieve that end or act on that intention. This mistake is made by those who have natural moral excellence, but lack the ability that is necessary for practical wisdom. The other is that the person starts with bad ends, but is able to act effectively in carrying out those bad ends. This mistake is made by those who have the ability to determine how best to reach their ends, but lack the natural moral excellence that guides them towards good ends. These are the two sources of error, and someone may err in both ways as well.

Expertise in a skill, on the other hand, does not require having good ends, or using the skill only in situations that further some good end. Having a skill is like having what Aristotle called “Ability”, insofar as it is morally neutral. According to Aristotle, a skilled doctor is “able to put into practice the means to any proposed [medical] end in view, and to discover what those means are” (NE 1144a24-25). A doctor is no less skilled when acting for the sake of bad ends as
when acting for the sake of good ends, although we will only praise the latter. In some ways, this should not be an unexpected difference between virtues and skills, since virtues represent a subset of character traits that focus on being a morally good person. One should expect that there would be some requirements for virtues to be connected to goodness that are not requirements for skills in general.

6.5 Eudaimonia and the Unity of the Virtues

This contrast between skills and virtues in terms of good ends becomes even more apparent when a connection is drawn between practical wisdom and eudaimonia. According to Hursthouse (2003), those who are practically wise:

understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well. In the Aristotelian "eudaimonist" tradition, this is expressed in the claim that they have a true grasp of eudaimonia.²⁹

There are various accounts of eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is usually translated as “flourishing”, and less often as “happiness”. While all living creatures can flourish, eudaimonia is possible only for rational beings. It is a specification of what it is to live well as a human being. Many practical skills may have no necessary connection to what it is to live well as a human being. Living a life in accordance with virtue is usually taken to be necessary for eudaimonia, because virtue is at least partially constitutive of eudaimonia. What counts as flourishing cannot be specified independently of virtue. Hursthouse (2003) points out how different views on virtue make further connections between the concepts of virtue and eudaimonia:

²⁹ An account of virtue need not be eudaimonistic. This is just a typically Aristotelian explanation of which character traits turn out to be virtues.
For Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient – what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck. For Plato, and the Stoics, it is both (Anna 1993), and modern versions of virtue ethics disagree further about the link between *eudaimonia* and what gives a character trait the status of being a virtue.

Which idea of *eudaimonia* you accept, if any at all, will influence which character traits count as virtues, even though different accounts of virtue can agree that leading a good life involves the virtues. It is for this reason that questions about which conception of *eudaimonia* is best will be set aside. Any further discussion of *eudaimonia* will involve particular conceptions of which traits should count as virtues, which is outside the scope of this project.

Although the topic of *eudaimonia* is being set aside, there is an important related point that Hursthouse makes about practical wisdom, which has to do with the unifying role that practical wisdom has for the virtues. According to Hursthouse (1999):

> each of the virtues involves practical wisdom, the ability to reason correctly about practical matters. . . this ability does not exist in discrete, independent packages, peculiar to each virtue, allowing again for the possibility that someone might be, for example, courageous but totally lacking in temperance. The same sorts of judgements about goods and evils, benefits and harms, what is worthwhile and what is relatively unimportant crop up across the ranges.  

(p. 154)

Practical wisdom helps one to discern which features of a situation are morally relevant, because it involves the knowledge of what is good and bad in life, and there is not a separate type of
practical wisdom for each virtue.\textsuperscript{30} Susan Wolf (forthcoming) defends this unifying claim by pointing out that:

knowledge of the value of one item is necessarily knowledge of that item’s value *relative to* the values of everything else. Knowing the value of physical safety means knowing what’s worth fighting for and what’s not; knowing the value of money means knowing when it is and when it is not worth spending it or giving it away. This suggests that perfect and complete knowledge of the importance of, say, physical safety, may require knowledge of the importance of wealth, and vice versa. For one may need to know when a certain amount of wealth is worth fighting for, or when giving money to assure another person’s physical safety is appropriate. (p. 7-8)

Each virtue involves this evaluative knowledge. This knowledge is a single, comprehensive knowledge about what is valuable in life. This practical wisdom provides a unifying element to the virtues. A failure of practical wisdom in understanding what is valuable can be problematic not just for one virtue, but any of them. For example, suppose a person does not see the suffering of others as bad, and thus does not see the relief of the suffering of others as a good to be pursued. When a situation calls for charity, as an opportunity for the relief of the suffering of others, this person will not discern that, and so will not act charitably. Likewise, when a situation calls for courage, to face danger in order to keep others from suffering, this person will not discern that, and so will not act courageously. Other virtues can be affected in a similar way, and this is supposed to show how there is some form of unity to the virtues that follows from the need for practical wisdom. It should also be noted that on this understanding of practical wisdom, it is a body of knowledge that each virtue draws upon, and is not itself a separate virtue.

\textsuperscript{30} The next chapter will raise criticisms about Hurthouse’s move from the claim that practical wisdom provides a unity to the virtues to the claim that someone could not be, for example, “courageous but totally lacking in temperance”.

6.6 Conclusion

The evaluative knowledge of practical wisdom illustrates a contrast between skills and virtues, since no similar unifying element is apparent for other skills. To the extent that the skill model can account for the knowledge that is part of virtue, it appears that what it is to be knowledgeable in a given skill varies from skill to skill. A doctor, in trying to be honest with a patient, can face difficulties in knowing how much information to tell the patient. This is not the same knowledge that a doctor would need to figure out how to determine fairly who receives access to some scarce medical resource, like a dialysis machine. The variance in this kind of knowledge is even greater if you compare two skills that are not shared by a single profession, like driving a car and playing chess. There is not a single body of knowledge that is shared by all practical skills. Although the skill model can account for features such as the relevance of experience and the perceptual nature of practical wisdom, these are not features that necessarily carry over from one skill to the next.

This difference raises the question of whether these claims about the knowledge of what is valuable in life are compatible with the skill model of virtue. It may appear, on first glance, that skills never require this kind of knowledge about what is valuable in life. Driving a car, for instance, seems mundane enough not to require anything other than the skillful knowledge of how to drive. Even with this mundane example, however, there is a role to play for knowledge about what is valuable, albeit in a limited fashion. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2004) point out about expertise, “without a shared ethical sensibility to what is laudable and what is condemnable, one would go on doing what the experts in the community found inappropriate, develop bad habits, and become what Aristotle calls an unjust person” (p. 263 fn. 3.). Recall the
example of a driver who finds skidding to be valuable. If someone valued something ignoble, this would lead the person to develop bad ethical habits, namely vices.

Thus, expertise in a skill requires some knowledge about what is valuable, in order for the expert to be acting well. Usually, this kind of skillful knowledge varies from skill to skill, such as what constitutes acting well in driving versus playing poker. Hence, the possession of one skill usually has no implications for the possession of any other skill. Some skills, however, are closely related and may reference the same knowledge of what is valuable, such as in the different skills required for writing a piece of music. Although knowledge about what is valuable may have only a very limited role when it comes to skills, unlike in virtues, this kind of knowledge is at least compatible with a skill model of virtue.

Being practically wise is a matter of having knowledge about what is valuable in human life, and this kind of knowledge is compatible with the skill model of virtue. Practical wisdom can provide a unifying element to virtues that can help to deal with the challenge of conflicting virtues, although this challenge cannot be fully met without an account of eudaimonia (or some equivalent) that would explain what is valuable in life and would specify which character traits count as virtues. What remains to be seen is whether the unifying power of practical wisdom will lead to implausible implications in the possession of virtue. This is the focus of the next chapter on the unity of the virtues.
CHAPTER 7: THE UNITY OF THE VIRTUES

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the controversial claim that the virtues form a unity, which John Cooper (1998) explains as the view that “to have any one of the human virtues, where the term ‘virtue’ is carefully and strictly applied, means that you have to have all the rest as well” (p. 233). The claim that there is a unity to the virtues seems to have caught virtue ethicists in a dilemma. Virtue ethicists run into a problem if they try to deny that there is any unity for the virtues. If there is no unity to the virtues, then virtues could pull us in conflicting directions. If this is the case, then while the virtuous person may have all the virtues, it is not clear that the virtuous person really has moral knowledge. Daniel Jacobson presses the point that “moral knowledge requires not merely that the virtuous person sees the demands of kindness, courage, and the like, but that he can see what to do, all things considered – that is, what he has most reason to do” (p. 397). If there were a unity to the virtues, then the virtues would not conflict in such a way to prevent the virtuous person from reaching a conclusion about what to do all things considered.

Virtue ethicists, however, run into a problem if they try to defend the unity of the virtues. The idea that the virtues form a unity has been strongly resisted, mainly on the grounds that it conflicts with the common sense view that people usually have a mix of virtues and vice. If having one virtue means you have them all, nobody could have the virtue of kindness while failing to have the virtue of courage. It seems as if, though, most of us know someone like that. It would also appear that nobody has any virtues, since having a single virtue entails having all the virtues, and it is hard to imagine that anyone has achieved that level of moral perfection.

31 The first part of this chapter is indebted to Cooper’s discussion of the ancient Greek accounts of the unity of virtue.
Not only is the unity thesis controversial in its own right, but there are several versions of it, each with different implications for an account of virtue. Furthermore, the unity thesis might come into conflict with a skill model account of virtue. On the skill analogy, virtues are like skills, and there does not seem to be any unity amongst different skills. A doctor might be very skilled when it comes to diagnostics, but be a poor surgeon. A profession, like being a doctor, requires a complex set of skills, and expertise with one skill does not necessarily translate to expertise with all the skills within the profession. When it comes to virtues, though, according to John McDowell (1998), “the specialized sensitivities that are to be equated with particular virtues, according to the argument I have considered so far, are actually not available one by one for a series of separate identifications” (p. 52).

The first section of the chapter identifies practical wisdom as bringing unity to the virtues. Despite agreement on the unifying role of practical wisdom, virtue ethicists have put forward several different versions of the unity thesis: strong, moderate, weak, and minimal.\(^\text{32}\) The second section of the chapter discusses the strong and moderate unity theses, and raises objections to them. The third section discusses the weak unity thesis and objections to it. The fourth section deals with the minimal unity thesis. It will be argued that only the minimal unity thesis is defensible. In addition, the minimal thesis is compatible with the skill model of virtue.

All the different unity theses appear to have one important claim in common, and that is the claim about what unifies the virtues. What brings unity to the virtues is a certain type of knowledge that is necessary for the possession of any virtue. The necessary knowledge is knowledge about what is valuable in life, which is often referred to as practical wisdom. Recall that for Hursthouse (1999) “The same sorts of judgements about goods and evils, benefits and harms, what is worthwile and what is relatively unimportant crop up across the ranges” (p. 154).

\(^{32}\) This is meant to include the most common unity claims, but it is not claimed to be exhaustive.
Having practical wisdom is a matter of having knowledge about what is valuable in life: what is good, bad, beneficial, harmful, important, trivial, etc. Virtues require at least some knowledge of this kind; else, they would not help people to live well.

The knowledge of what is valuable in life will not be different for each virtue, and so this common element unifies the virtues. Recall that Susan Wolf (forthcoming) defends this unifying claim by pointing out that “knowledge of the value of one item is necessarily knowledge of that item’s value relative to the values of everything else” (p. 7-8). Each virtue involves this evaluative knowledge. This knowledge is a single, comprehensive knowledge about what is valuable in life. This practical wisdom provides a unifying element to the virtues. A failure of practical wisdom in understanding what is valuable can be problematic not just for one virtue, but any of them. Remember the example of a person who does not see the suffering of others as bad, and thus does not see the relief of the suffering of others as a good to be pursued. When a situation calls for charity, as an opportunity for the relief of the suffering of others, this person will not discern that, and so will not act charitably. Other virtues can be affected in a similar way, and this is shows how there is some form of unity to the virtues that follows from the need for practical wisdom.

These claims about the knowledge of what is valuable in life are compatible with the skill model of virtue. It may appear, on first glance, that skills never require this kind of knowledge about what is valuable. Driving a car, for instance, seems mundane enough not to require anything other than the skillful knowledge of how to drive. Even with this mundane example, however, there is a role to play for knowledge about what is valuable, albeit in a limited fashion. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2004) point out about expertise, “without a shared ethical sensibility to what is laudable and what is condemnable, one would go on doing what the experts in the

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33 This was defended in the previous chapter. What follows is just a brief recap of one of the arguments.
community found inappropriate, develop bad habits, and become what Aristotle calls an unjust person” (p. 263 fn. 3). They give an example of a driver who finds skidding to be valuable, and how this would lead the driver to develop bad driving habits. Similarly, if someone valued something ignoble, this would lead the person to develop bad ethical habits, namely vices.

Thus, expertise in a skill requires some knowledge about what is valuable, in order for the expert to be acting well. Usually, this kind of skillful knowledge varies from skill to skill, such as what constitutes acting well in driving versus playing poker. Hence, the possession of one skill usually has no implication for the possession of any other skill. Some skills, however, are closely related and may reference the same knowledge of what is valuable, such as in the different skills required for writing a piece of music. Although knowledge about what is valuable may have only a very limited role when it comes to skills, unlike in virtues, this kind of knowledge is at least compatible with a skill model of virtue.

Despite the agreement among the various unity theses on the unifying role of the practical wisdom, and the compatibility of this with the skill model, several difficult issues remain. The first is whether practical wisdom is sufficient for virtue. If not, then what else is part of the sufficient condition for virtue? The second is what implications the unity thesis has for the actual possession of virtue. If you have one virtue, then must you have them all? The final issue deals with how the skill model of virtue interacts with the various unity theses once the first two questions have been answered. Is the skill model of virtue compatible with any of the existing unity theses or does it require a rejection of all unity claims? These questions will be explored as the four versions of the unity thesis are discussed. While all of the following unity theses incorporate the claim that practical wisdom unifies the virtues, it will be argued that only one of
them can avoid the implausible implications for the possession of virtue that have plagued
attempts to defend the unity thesis.

7.2 The Strong Unity Thesis

On the strong unity thesis, nothing other than the knowledge of what is valuable is
required for the possession of virtue. According to Cooper (1998), Socrates and the Stoics agree
“that knowledge – specifically, the single, unified, comprehensive knowledge of what is good
and bad for human beings, or in a human life – is not only sufficient for, but actually constitutes
virtue” (p. 263). To possess that comprehensive knowledge just is what it is to be a virtuous
person. That knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for being a virtuous person. On the
strong unity thesis, it is actually misleading to talk about the unity of *the virtues*, because there is
really only one virtue. According to Cooper (1998), Socrates and the Stoics “insisted that really
there was only a single unified condition, virtue itself, of which the particular virtues that we
normally distinguish from one another are (in one way or another) actually only aspects” (p.
233). If you have the comprehensive knowledge of what is valuable, then you have virtue,
otherwise you do not. Talking about different virtues is just a matter of convenience. Given that
there is really only one true virtue, it easily follows that if you have one virtue, then you have
them all.

For many virtue ethicists, the strong unity thesis presents an over intellectualized account
of virtue. If virtues require having the right emotional responses as well, then intellectual
knowledge is not sufficient for virtue. The strong unity thesis also appears to leave no room for
*akrasia*, or weakness of will. If someone does not do what is virtuous, the only explanation
according to the strong unity thesis seems to be that the person really does not know what is
valuable in life. This eliminates the possibility that a person knows what virtue requires, but fails to be motivated by that knowledge. Weakness of will is a plausible phenomenon, and so it is problematic that the strong unity thesis is unable to account for it. These difficulties motivate the move to a more moderate version of the unity thesis. Although the strong and moderate unity theses differ on their accounts of what is required for virtue, both make the claim that to have one virtue is to have them all. As this particular claim is problematic for both theses, a brief discussion of the moderate unity thesis will precede further objections.

7.3 The Moderate Unity Thesis

On the moderate unity thesis, the motivation to act virtuously is an additional requirement that is necessary for the possession of virtue. Plato and Aristotle agree with Socrates and the Stoics that such comprehensive knowledge is necessary for virtue, but they disagree about that knowledge being sufficient for virtue. Plato and Aristotle require more than just this cognitive aspect, for they believe that a virtuous person must also have appropriate emotional responses and the right motivation. Thus, they endorse a more moderate unity claim, because virtue involves a set of different conditions, rather than being constituted only by a single body of knowledge. Despite the addition of a second necessary condition for virtue, the moderate unity thesis still has the implication that if you have one virtue then you have them all. Cooper (1998) explains that for Plato and Aristotle:

virtue is a complex of separate conditions, some of them conditions of the mind, others conditions of the emotions and feelings. Nonetheless, both Plato in the Republic and Aristotle maintain that these virtues constitute a unified condition, such that no person could have any one virtue without all the rest. (p. 273-274)
Although virtue involves separate conditions, the conditions are unified, such that you cannot have the knowledge without also having the correct emotional responses. For Aristotle, someone might have “natural” rather than “full” virtue, if that person is motivated to do the virtuous act, but lacks practical wisdom (the knowledge of what is valuable). However, Aristotle denies that someone could have practical wisdom without the proper motivations, for “it is not possible without practical wisdom to be really good morally, nor without moral excellence to be practically wise” (NE 1142b31-32). Cooper (1998) explains that “(it is assumed) wisdom must be so solid and steady an understanding of the truth that its knowledge can never be dislodged: with it, one can never even be tempted to change one’s mind, not even for a second, about what the right thing to do and the right way to feel are” (p. 266).

7.4 Objections to the Strong and Moderate Unity Theses

The main difficulty with both the strong and the moderate unity theses is that they appear to conflict with a realistic picture of how virtues are acquired. These unity theses clash with the common view that people can have a mixture of virtues and vices, because they insist that to have one virtue is to have them all. A police officer could act very courageously in the line of duty, but could also be a racist. If these unity theses are correct, such cases are ruled out, because if the officer had courage, then he would have all the virtues, and presumably, this would be incompatible with discrimination. It turns out that many people whom we thought possessed certain virtues do not.

This difficulty can be pushed further when one looks at what else is required to possess even a single virtue. According to Aristotle, it is from actions in a similar context that virtuous

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34 Natural virtues and vices, according to Aristotle, are unreflective habits that children can develop. The difference between natural courage and genuine courage is that the former lacks any practical wisdom.
or vicious habits are developed. One’s actions in a dangerous situation will shape the
development of courage or cowardice, for example. Repeated performance of the right kind of
action develops virtue, while repeated performance of the wrong kind of action develops vices.
Virtue is acquired through habituation, and habits are acquired through actions, so for Aristotle it
always matters how we act:

  for it is by our actions with other men in transactions that we are in the process of
  becoming just or unjust, and it is by our actions in dangerous situations in which we are
  in the process of acquiring the habit of being courageous or afraid that we become brave
  or cowardly, respectively. (NE 1103b14-17)

Aristotle’s claim is quite plausible, as habits require repeated experiences, and this fits in with
the skill models emphasize on practice. Courageous and cowardly habits are both developed out
of actions in dangerous situations. We are in the process of acquiring the habit of being
courageous or cowardly only when we act in dangerous situations. Habits are built up by
repeated performance, so in order to acquire a habit of being courageous or cowardly one must
be repeatedly exposed to dangerous situations. If you have rarely faced dangerous situations,
then you will not have had the necessary experiences to acquire courage. From this, we can lay
out the following argument:

  P1: If you have a single virtue, then you must have all the virtues. (Unity thesis)

  P2: Courage is one of the virtues.

  P3: If you have courage, then you have faced many dangerous situations.

  P4: I have not faced many dangerous situations.

  C1: Therefore, I do not have courage. (From P3 & P4)

  C2: Therefore, I do not have all the virtues. (From P2 & C1)
C3: Therefore, I do not have a single virtue. (From P1 & C2)

One cannot acquire the virtue of courage without having repeatedly acted courageously in dangerous situations. However, how many of us have truly faced dangerous situations very often? For most of us academics, the answer is probably rarely, in which case we lack the necessary experiences for acquiring the virtue of courage. The obstacles to possessing even a single virtue, let alone all of them, are numerous.\(^{35}\)

These unity theses make virtue so difficult to achieve, that the virtuous person appears to be an unattainable ideal. Nobody is actually virtuous. Is this a problem? Not according to Julia Annas (1993):

Once we accept the need to take the structure of a virtue seriously, it points us towards an ideal of the fully virtuous person, which functions as a normative ideal even if never met with in real life. Thus it is not surprising that the fully virtuous person, with complete possession of *phronesis*, is an ideal, and functions as such. (p. 83)

In assessing the unity thesis, it matters whether you think the virtuous person should be unattainable or realizable. If you think that the virtuous person should function only as a normative ideal, then examples of the kind mentioned above cease to be counter-examples to the strong and moderate unity theses. It is important to note, however, that on these accounts, not only is the virtuous person an ideal, but even the possession of a single virtue is itself an unattainable ideal. It is not obvious that this ideal will be at all useful, when we cannot acquire a single virtue, let alone all the virtues like the virtuous person.

In addition, the skill model implies that virtue is realizable, for attaining virtue is like attaining expertise, and expertise is realizable. There are skilled experts, even if the experts are

\(^{35}\) This gets even more problematic if magnificence counts as an ethical virtue, for only those with great wealth can display this virtue.
not perfect. There could be an ideal expert, but this is compatible with actual experts. The possession of skills is a matter of degree, and is not an all or nothing matter. While the skill model of virtue is inconsistent with the unattainable ideal of virtue, this does not constitute a decisive argument against such a view. The point is merely that the focus for the rest of the chapter will be whether there is a version of the unity thesis that allows virtue to be a genuine possibility and is compatible with the skill model of virtue.

7.5 The Weak Unity Thesis

This version of the unity thesis presents a weaker connection between practical wisdom and virtue. According to Hursthouse (1999):

it seems that what we believe in is what Neera Badhwar calls ‘the limited unity’ of the virtues and Gary Watson ‘the weak unity thesis’. This is a view that simultaneously recognizes the fact that practical wisdom cannot occur in discrete packages, limited in its area of competence to just this virtue or that, and also the fact that it is not an all-or-nothing matter. According to this thesis, anyone who possesses one virtue will have all the others to some degree, albeit, in some cases, a pretty limited one. (p. 156)

The weak unity thesis does not require that you fully possess all the virtues in order to have any virtue. This version can get around the counter-example of courage requiring repeated exposure to danger. It is probably safe to assume that everyone has faced at least a little danger in his or her life, and so has had the necessary experience to attain some degree of courage, even if only just a little bit. This is all that the weaker unity thesis requires in order to count as obtaining a minimal amount of virtue, such that one can possess another virtue to a much greater degree.
It will be difficult, if not impossible, to state exactly what is required to possess a virtue to a minimal degree. The possession of virtue would be a matter of passing a certain threshold of reliability when it comes to acting virtuous. Nobody is perfect, so everyone will on occasion fail to do the virtuous action. If one is reliable at doing the kind action, then one can be said to possess the virtue of kindness. Different accounts of virtue will differ as to their standards of reliability. Falling short of virtue does not necessarily require acting viciously, as one may act as the virtuous person does but without the right motive or emotional response. On the skill model, the possession of a skill is also a matter of degree, and depends on both how well someone acts and the way in which he accomplished the action (intuitively or not). The idea that possessing virtue is a matter of degree is at least plausible enough to support the weak unity thesis.

7.6 Objections to the Weak Unity Thesis

While this is a weaker thesis, it still has problematic results. First, this thesis prevents there from being anyone who has a virtue and a vice. If you are identified as having a vice, such as cowardice, it follows that you cannot have any virtues at all. To have a virtue, even to a small degree, means that you do not have the corresponding vice. Therefore, anyone with a virtue has no vices, even if they are not fully virtuous and always act well, and anyone with a vice has no virtues. If this is true, then according to Hursthouse (1999) when you say of people that they acted from virtue:

this means that we believe that we have thereby identified them as being a certain sort of person all round – that we have seen, manifested in just this one action, what they are like, pretty much ‘all the way through’, ‘deep down’. (p. 156)
Even this limited unity thesis presents people as if they are all round good or bad, with no in
between. What happens if we find someone acting from virtue and then he does something
vicious? Hursthouse’s response is that either the first act really was not virtuous, or the second
act really was not vicious. There must be some other explanation for why the person acted as he
did. The one response that is ruled out by even the weak unity thesis is that people can have both
virtues and vices, in the sense that they have developed dispositions to do both types of actions.

It is not clear how practical wisdom, as merely knowledge, can bring about this kind of
holistic change in a person. Presumably, as we are growing up, we pick up some good and bad
habits. As children, these are not yet virtues or vices, because they do not involve any
knowledge or reflection. As we become adults, and our rationality develops, we can begin
acquiring practical wisdom. Our natural virtues can change into ethical virtues when we acquire
some practical wisdom. Once we have an ethical virtue, then on the weak unity thesis, we have
all the virtues to some extent. However, what happens to our bad habits? Mere knowledge of
what is good and bad is not sufficient for virtue, and so gaining practical wisdom does not erase
bad habits. Do we have to get rid of our bad habits before we can be said to have any virtue?
The weak unity thesis must require that we get rid of any natural vice, since such vice is
inconsistent with having virtue. It appears that the weak unity thesis is inconsistent with the
view that practical wisdom is not sufficient for virtue. One could respond by relying on
Aristotle’s view that in order to have practical wisdom one must have the ethical virtues as well.
This response, however, makes the weak unity thesis trivially true and circular. You guarantee
that practical wisdom can give you all the virtues to some degree, but only because you have
made having all the virtues to some degree a requirement for having practical wisdom.
The problem case for the weak unity of virtues is this: imagine a child who grows up with some natural virtues, but also some natural vices. That is, a child who might be motivated to be kind and fair, but not to be courageous. This version of the unity thesis allows for this kind of example, because it allows natural virtues to be separable. What happens when the child becomes an adult, and starts to acquire practical wisdom? The natural virtues would become genuine virtues, and according to the weak unity thesis, the person would have all the virtues to some degree. The problem with this is that the natural vices apparently disappear without explanation. If practical wisdom was sufficient for virtue, this would not be problematic, but the weak unity thesis claims that the mere knowledge of what is good and bad is not sufficient for virtue. Virtue also requires the appropriate emotional responses. If the natural vices cannot disappear then without some serious re-habituation, then the unity claim will turn out to be either false or trivially true. If the person has both a virtue and a vice, then even the weak unity claim is false, since it does not permit such a case. To avoid this, the defender of the unity claim may say that the person does not really have practical wisdom. The defender could stipulate that practical wisdom requires having all the ethical virtues. This response, however, makes the weak unity thesis circular, and thus, trivially true.

7.7 The Minimal Unity Thesis

So far, all three versions of the unity thesis have had the implication that possessing a virtue necessarily means that you have all the other virtues, at least to some extent. Several problems have been raised about any such claim. It may be the case, however, that although there is a unity to the virtues, it does not necessarily follow that possessing one virtue requires possession of any other virtue, to any degree. Susan Wolf argues that the core claim that the

36 The person may feel the conflict between practical wisdom and natural vice, but bad habits can be hard to break.
virtues are unified is plausible, but that it does not follow from that claim that the possession of one virtue requires possessing any other virtue.\(^37\) According to Wolf (forthcoming), from the claims that all virtues involve knowledge of what is valuable, and this knowledge is a single comprehensive body of knowledge:

The conclusion that follows is that *virtue is unified*, in the sense that the perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires at least the knowledge that is needed for the possession of every other . . . the conclusion does not require that even perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires the actual possession of all the other virtues. Rather, the claim is that perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires the evaluative knowledge involved in the possession of the other virtues. Thus it leaves open the question of whether a person may have all the evaluative knowledge relevant to, say, the virtue of honesty, but still fail to possess the virtue of honesty itself. (p. 8-9)

This view of the unity of the virtues combines aspects from all the different versions of the unity thesis discussed so far. It keeps intact the central claims of all the unity theses that virtue involves the knowledge of what is valuable, and that this knowledge is a comprehensive body of knowledge. As on the moderate view, the knowledge is not sufficient for virtue, but also requires having the right motivation. This view also includes the idea, found in the weak view, that the possession of virtue is not an all or nothing matter. Contrary to all three of the unity theses, however, it does not follow that possessing one virtue entails the actual possession of any other virtue, even to a small degree. What follows from these claims is that possessing a virtue entails possessing one necessary but not sufficient condition for possessing all the other virtues. Wolf (forthcoming) points out, as an example, that “One may know that one should risk one’s

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\(^37\) In her article, Wolf describes this as the weak view of virtue. I refer to it here as the minimal thesis.
life for a certain cause, or that one should give a large percentage of one’s money to help others, but still be unable or unwilling or strongly reluctant to do so” (p. 25).

One other important aspect to this reconsideration of the unity thesis is that the entailment claim only holds for the possession of perfect virtue. If your knowledge of what is valuable in life is incomplete, then you cannot be said to possess a virtue perfectly and completely. In addition, you do not necessarily have all the knowledge needed for any of the other virtues either. Presumably, the possession of virtue is a matter of degree. One could pass the threshold for having courage, for example, without necessarily having any of the other virtues.

7.8 Objections to the Minimal Unity Thesis

Some virtue ethicists might see this view of the unity thesis as having undesirable implications. If virtues are separable, then one could possess courage but be completely lacking in kindness, for example. It seems as if enemy soldiers can display courage just as well as any other soldier, regardless of whether the cause they fight for is just or not. Thus, a loyal German soldier in the 1940’s could display courage even though he would be in fighting in defense of the Nazi party and their system of values. However, this has struck some virtue ethicists as a controversial claim. Hursthouse (2003) points out a similar example, and the conclusions that seem to follow if such examples are genuine cases of possessing virtue:

It is also said that courage, in a desperado, enables him to do far more wicked things than he would have been able to do if he were timid. So it would appear that generosity, honesty, compassion and courage despite being virtues, are sometimes faults. Someone who is

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38 Given the Nazi system of values, a Nazi soldier would not have complete practical wisdom, and so could not display perfect courage. The presence of vice, or at least the absence of virtue, would prevent the Nazi soldier from always recognizing the demands of courage. There are also more simple cases of people being a mix of virtue and vice, such as a courageous police officer who is also a bigot.
generous, honest, compassionate, and courageous might not be a morally good, admirable person -- or, if it is still held to be a truism that they are, then morally good people may be led by what makes them morally good to act wrongly! How have we arrived at such an odd conclusion?

Whether you find this conclusion odd will depend upon your intuitions about virtues. If you think that virtue guarantees right action, then you will likely agree with most virtue ethicists that the conclusion Hursthouse alludes to would be an odd conclusion about the virtues. Virtue ethicists would most likely want to deny that the Nazi soldier could genuinely possess the virtue of courage because possessing a virtue, such as courage, would be incompatible with defending Nazism, for their actions were so morally wrong. Therefore, a soldier would not be exhibiting courage, even if he took some great risk to save the lives of his fellow soldiers.

Hursthouse’s (2003) explanation of our intuitions that a Nazi soldier could genuinely possess courage is that they depend upon “a modern readiness to suppose that the virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or inclination, not by rational choice”. What the Nazi soldier possesses is “natural virtue” – a proto version of genuine virtue. The element that the Nazi soldier lacks is practical wisdom, which would shape his rational choice presumably in such a way that he would not defend the Nazi system. The practically wise person understands what is truly valuable in life, and it certainly is not what the Nazis thought was valuable. Because the Nazi soldier lacks practical wisdom, he necessarily is unable to possess any genuine virtue. At best, he has a proto version of virtue, at worst he is just reckless in putting his life on the line to save something that really has no worth.
What should we say about such a case? The central question here is whether the Nazi soldier possesses the virtue of courage.\textsuperscript{39} Does the fact that these seemingly courageous acts are carried out in defense of a clearly corrupt system of moral values undermine this person’s claim to possess the virtue of courage, to the extent that the soldier could never truly have courage so long as he defended the Nazi system? Undoubtedly, there are moral reasons to criticize the actions of the Nazi soldier; after all, he defends Nazism instead of removing it. Is this a failure of courage? The Nazi soldier could be perfectly rational in his assessment on the battlefield of what objectives need to be achieved, what actions are likely to achieve those objectives, that the risks undertaken are outweighed by the potential benefits, and so on. He need not be reckless or irrational in any decision to expose himself to danger for the sake of accomplishing some goal. He can be rational in determining how much risk is warranted in the situation, and have the resolve to carry through with it despite the danger to himself. In every way, he could act as a soldier who genuinely possessed the virtue of courage would act, save one – his actions further an evil cause rather than a good cause. Is that singular difference enough to deny that the Nazi soldier possesses courage? For Hursthouse and other virtue ethicists it is, since virtues do not lead people to act wrongly, and what the Nazi soldier did is definitely wrong.\textsuperscript{40}

Whatever the Nazi soldier has done wrong, and we can all agree he is guilty of some moral transgression, it is not obvious that he lacks courage. We could claim that he is not perfectly courageous, for the perfect possession of courage would imply that he has perfect knowledge of what is valuable in life, which would not be the case given his discriminatory views. As Wolf (forthcoming) points out, though:

\textsuperscript{39} Of course, for the sake of the example, one would have to have observed the soldier in many different situations over an extended period of time doing acts that appear to take courage.

\textsuperscript{40} In contemporary times, similar sentiments are voiced about whether the terrorists involved in 9/11 displayed courage.
we rarely worry about whether a person is fully, completely and perfectly virtuous, as opposed to just (plain old, or pretty) virtuous. Indeed, in most contexts, the question of whether a person whom we have reason to regard as courageous (or just or generous) is perfectly and completely courageous (or just or generous) will seem to be pedantic if not downright churlish. (p. 26)

Virtue ethicists like Hursthouse appear to want to resist the suggestion that the Nazi soldier would even be partially courageous. There does seem to be some reason to regard the soldier as partially courageous, though. He does not run away whenever he thinks enemy soldiers might be near, and he would not risk himself on an action that had no potential gain to it, but would risk his life to save the lives of his fellow soldiers.\textsuperscript{41} We could find him morally lacking in a variety of ways, but it does not follow that he is lacking in courage. Now, what of the immediate objection that admitting this leads one to the conclusion that the virtues might lead one to do something morally wrong? The worry here is that this conclusion would not only run contrary to the concept of virtue, but that it becomes difficult to recommend the virtues when they can also lead people to act morally wrong.

This is not obviously a fatal sort of objection to virtue as some view it. The admission that the Nazi soldier was courageous need not undermine courage’s status as a virtue or lessen the recommendation that people ought to strive to be courageous. Of course, when it comes to pointing out moral exemplars, we will not want to use the courageous Nazi soldier as an exemplar, but that has to do with the other values defended by the soldier and not because of any lack of courage in the soldier. In addition, we probably do not want to say anything complimentary about the Nazis, but that does not settle whether there could be courageous Nazi

\textsuperscript{41} Fred Miller, in personal communication, has pointed out that he might display qualities that Rommel did in World War 2, such as defying orders to mistreat or execute allied or Jewish POWs. Rommel is often considered to have been courageous or chivalrous despite his fighting in defense of Nazi Germany.
soldiers. If we could change one thing about the Nazi soldier, it would be to change his adherence to Nazi values, and not to remove his courage. Better to change the Nazi soldier into a courageous defender of democracy then to change him into a cowardly Nazi. Of course, one can imagine that soldiers on the battlefield are often hoping the enemy soldiers are cowardly. I do not think this is a counterexample to the earlier point, for soldiers will inevitably face soldiers that are not on their side, and in hoping to survive and triumph, one would wish that their opponents aren’t capable, intelligent, or courageous.

There are deeper reasons why the admission of a courageous Nazi does not undermine the status of value of courage. Virtues are sensitivities to morally relevant features of the world. Different virtues notice different issues; courage deals with fear and risk, honesty deals with information and truth, kindness deals with the feelings and interests of other people, etc. If you lack any of the virtues, then you could possibly end up doing wrong, because you would be insensitive to some morally relevant feature of your situation. Admittedly, if a Nazi soldier is engaged in morally wrong actions, such as fighting to defend a concentration camp, having courage could help him be more effective in attaining his morally wrong ends. However, the root cause of the moral failure on the part of the Nazi soldier is not the possession of the virtue of courage, but rather his failure to possess other virtues that he ought to have, kindness for example. The fault for the wrongdoing is not due to one of the other virtues that the person possesses. The correct place to locate the fault is with the lack of some virtue, or the presence of some vice, in the person. The Nazi values are cruel and unjust, and that is the main problem. You could say of the Nazi soldier that he is not perfectly courageous, for, as Wolf (forthcoming) points out, “if one’s views about value are seriously mistaken (if, say, one radically overvalues

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42 Daniel Jacobson remarked, in personal communication, that it would have been better if the Nazis were like those in Hogan’s Heroes rather than those in Auschwitz.
material wealth or undervalues friendship) it will infect the content of one’s other values, marring them to some degree” (p. 23). If you take this view, then you cannot claim that necessarily the possession of a virtue will make a person act more appropriately in every situation. Perhaps some virtue ethicists want to claim this, but the virtues do not require this strong of an endorsement in order to make them worthy of recommendation.

7.9 Conclusion

The minimal unity thesis is the only defensible unity thesis because it does not make claims about the actual possession of virtue that are counter-intuitive, yet it still maintains that there is an essential element in each virtue that unifies all the virtues. On the skill model of virtue, there is a third requirement for the possession of virtue, which has not been discussed so far. The skill in virtue requires a specific type of knowledge, but it is different from the knowledge of what is valuable in life. It is the knowledge of how to act well. It is not enough to know that in your present situation you should act with kindness and be motivated to do so as well. You must also know how to act kindly, for example, knowing how one should comfort a grieving friend. What exactly would you say to comfort your friend? This is the skillful component of virtue. This knowledge, unlike practical wisdom, is different from virtue to virtue, even if there is some overlap. In trying to be honest with a patient, a doctor can face difficulties in knowing how much information to tell the patient. This is not the same knowledge that a doctor would need to figure out how to determine fairly who receives access to some scarce medical resource, like a dialysis machine. Even if someone had complete knowledge of what is valuable, and had the proper motivation to act well, it still takes an additional type of skillful
knowledge in order to know how to act well in particular situations. This requirement is one more reason why someone might possess one virtue while failing to possess another virtue.

This chapter began with the problematic dilemma that the unity of the virtues poses for virtue ethicists. Virtue ethicists need to defend some version of the claim that there is a unity to the virtues, in order to maintain that the virtuous person knows what to do, all things considered. All of the unity theses defend the same idea that practical wisdom serves to unify the virtues. By embracing the unity thesis, they avoid one horn of the dilemma, but face the challenge of avoiding implausible claims about the possession of actual virtue. Only the minimal unity of the virtues thesis is not subject to the kinds of counterexamples that plague the other unity theses. The minimal unity thesis still holds on to the core idea that the knowledge of what is valuable in life serves to unify the discrete virtues. Since this knowledge is only one of a few necessary conditions for the possession of virtue, someone may possess a virtue without necessarily possessing all the other virtues. The minimal unity thesis is also compatible with the skill model of virtue, and the thesis is expanded by including the role of skillful knowledge in virtue.
CHAPTER 8: HONESTY AS A SKILL

8.1 Introduction

This chapter defends the idea that the virtue of honesty is a complex skill, rather than the view that being honest requires only abstaining from lying. It is assumed that on any standard list of virtues you will find honesty listed. Although the skill model does not provide a method for declaring which character traits are virtues and which are not, it does put some constraints on what can count as a virtue. Practical skills are complex, and cannot be reduced to mere rules or principles. If a putative virtue is to fit the skill model, then it must demonstrate this kind of complexity. It is easy to imagine that honesty does not have such complexity. Honesty seems to require only that we tell the truth, and thus, we act dishonestly whenever, and only when, we tell a lie. This chapter argues against such a view of honesty. There are two strategies for arguing against this view of honesty. The first involves asking about the importance of truth telling; that is, why it is deemed important to tell the truth. This will place truth telling within the larger scope of avoiding deception. One can deceive even when one tells the truth. The other strategy is to point out some of the complicating factors in situations when it is unclear to what extent the truth should be told, such as in the context of business negotiations.

8.2 The Simple View of Honesty

At first glance, honesty appears to have little of the complexity found in skills. According to Hartman and Beck-Dudley (1999), “The first individual virtue, honesty, is simply truth telling” (p. 257). In order to be honest, you must tell the truth. It does not take any skill to do so, for you know what you believe to be true, and that is what you are required to tell. It should not take much time or experience to understand what honesty requires. It is so simple
that it is virtually impossible to forget what honesty requires of us, and one would not need any regular practice with honesty to remember what to do. Furthermore, honesty can be reduced to a single principle – tell the truth. If so, then honesty does not fit the skill model.

One need not have quite such a narrow view of honesty. We also tend to think of people who steal as dishonest. Therefore, honesty may not be reducible to a single principle, but this is still compatible with the general view, put forth by Ewin (1995), that “honesty is basically a matter of following the rules, returning what I might have grabbed and kept for myself with nobody knowing about it” (p. 841). Honesty can still be thought of as reducible to a small set of rules, such as tell the truth and do not steal. On this view, honesty is still simple enough that it does not fit the skill model. The rules are few and easy to follow, requiring little in the way of experience to understand what to do.

While a simple version of telling the truth may sound easy, some have argued that telling the truth may not even be possible in principle. This difficulty with telling the truth arises from the view that when you are asked to tell the truth that you need to be supplying the whole truth, that is, to refrain from leaving out any information related to what you are talking about. In many contexts, such as a doctor telling a patient about his condition, this could potentially involve too much information and information too technical for the person listening to understand. Thus, Mack Lipkin (2004) approvingly quotes L. J. Henderson that in the context of medicine, “To speak of telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to a patient is absurd” (p. 154). Lipkin believes that because of this difficulty the physician is free to withhold information or even lie to his patient, if the physician thinks that in so doing the patient will be better off. Even a simple view of honesty, as only involving telling the truth, can be subject to objections.
8.3 Rejecting the Simple View of Honesty

There seem to be, however, many reasons for rejecting the simple views of honesty and telling the truth. In regard to the view that telling the truth is practically impossible, Cullen and Klein (2004) argue that:

Critics have pointed out that this argument that physicians are not able even in principle to tell patients “the truth” rests on a confusion between “whole truth” and “wholly true.” Physicians, we can agree, cannot tell patients the “whole truth,” meaning that no patient is going to be able to understand all the known details of a disease process as it affects him. (p. 161)

While physicians cannot tell patients the “whole truth”, for that requires too much technical information, this is not what is expected of physicians. Even on the witness stand, we do not literally expect people to tell us everything that they think is true that it is in any way related to the topic. The expectation is that what the person does tell us is “wholly true”, that is, is not a lie. In addition, instead of expecting a person to tell us everything that is true, there is the expectation that the person will tell us what is relevant. Every known detail of a disease process is not relevant to a patient who is considering what sort of treatment option to choose, and so does not need to be mentioned, unless the patient specifically asks about it. More will be said later about the importance of expectations. Already, this picture of honesty has started to get complicated, as it is not always obvious which information is relevant and which is not. A strategy of “tell everything” is usually either not possible or a great waste of time.

Perhaps there are still simple rules one can use to determine when the truth is called for and how much needs to be said. The usefulness of rules and maxims is noticed by virtue
ethicists. Rosalind Hursthouse claims that there are rules that can be derived from virtues (v-rules as she calls them), such as “Do what is honest”, and that these rules are useful for guiding action. Although the v-rules are couched in virtue and vice terms, Hursthouse (1999) says it does not follow that simpler rules, like “Never lie”, have no use:

why should a proponent of virtue ethics deny the significance of such mother’s-knee rules as ‘Don’t lie’, ‘Keep promises’, ‘Help others’? . . . Virtue ethicists want to emphasize the fact that, if children are to be taught to be honest, they must be taught to love and prize the truth, and that merely teaching them not to lie will not achieve this end. But they need not deny that, to achieve this end, teaching them not to lie is useful, or even indispensable. (p. 39)

In both acquiring a skill and learning virtue, rules can be useful in the initial stages, but for both accounts, there is a limit to that usefulness. Take, for example, a child trying to learn the virtue of honesty. A parent might teach her child the rule “Never lie” in order to help the child learn how to be honest.

The lessons in honesty, hopefully, do not end here. As the child gains experience, new aspects of a situation come to be seen as relevant. Children are taught not to tell the truth to strangers asking where they live. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) give the following, avowedly dramatic, example of a new situation the child might encounter.

Faced with the dilemma posed by Kant – an avowed killer asking the whereabouts of the child’s friend – the child might tell the truth. After experiencing regret and guilt over the death of the friend, however, the child would move toward the realization that the rule, “Never lie,” like the rule, “Shift at ten miles per hour,” needs to be contextualized, and would seek maxims to turn to in different typical situations. Such a maxim might be, “Never lie
except when someone might be seriously hurt by telling the truth.” Of course, this maxim too would, under some circumstances lead to regret. (p. 237)

The child, after learning to recognize this new situational aspect, learns new maxims that refer to this aspect. This is the stage characterized as the advanced beginner. Other new situations will be encountered, and new maxims developed, but no single maxim or set of maxims will keep the child from committing regrettable actions. Hursthouse (1999) gives voice to similar thoughts about the move from context-free rules to maxims, and the limitations of maxims:

We can say, ‘Do not lie, do not cheat.’ But that still allows being ‘economical with the truth’ in the way that dishonest, cunning people are; we have set the standards too low. So should we add, ‘Do not be economical with the truth, always tell it”? But now we have gone too far, specifying not honesty, but brutal frankness or candour or ingenuousness . . . So should we say, ‘Eschew being economical with the truth, tell it not always but when . . .’? But when what? (p. 58)

Despite the initial usefulness of rules and maxims, one must move beyond them in order to possess expertise or virtue. It appears that merely following a set of rules will not be sufficient for honesty.

8.4 What Might Honesty Require?

Honesty is not best understood as simply telling the truth. As Hursthouse noted above, one can avoid lying while still being ‘economical with the truth’ in a way that is still dishonest. A more solid foundation for honesty, according to Chris Provis (2000) is the view that “other things being equal it is wrong to deceive others or conceal information from them if doing so is likely to affect their actions and harm their interests” (p. 146). Deception is the attempt to
produce false beliefs in another person. One can deceive even without telling a lie, such as by withholding important information. One might even deceive by telling the truth, but selectively. As an example of saying something true but with the deliberate intention of producing false beliefs, consider Peter Geach’s (1977) story about Saint Athanasius, who “was rowing on a river when the persecutors came rowing in the opposite direction: ‘Where is the traitor Athanasius?’ ‘Not far away,’ the Saint gaily replied, and rowed past them unsuspected”. The honest person seeks to avoid deception when communicating with others.

This explanation, however, is a bit too simple, for sometimes it seems like deception is the appropriate response. If you were hiding Jews from the Nazis during World War II, it seems that the most appropriate thing to do when the Nazis come knocking at your door is to convince them that you don’t know the whereabouts of any Jewish refugees, even if you need to say something untruthful to convince them. One way of explaining this intuition about this case is to say that there is a _prima facie_ obligation to tell the truth, but that there are various circumstances where that obligation is dissolved, such as if the person requesting information will use it to do something vicious. Therefore, an honest person strives to avoid deception in situations where that _prima facie_ obligation holds.

Even this more sophisticated explanation is still a bit too simple, since it is not clear that we think of ourselves as exactly under a _prima facie_ obligation to tell the truth at all times. If a stranger comes up to you and asks you “What is your most humiliating experience?”, do you think you are obligated to tell this stranger the truth? Even if the stranger promised not to tell anyone, or use the information for any malicious purpose, there does not seem to be any reason why you would have to tell the truth. The stranger does not have any ‘need to know’. When other people pry into your private life, it seems perfectly permissible to tell them ‘none of your
business.’ Merely wanting to know something does not necessarily generate any responsibility for you to tell the truth. Although you do not need to tell the stranger the truth, it does not follow that it would be permissible to lie to the stranger either. Situations where you have an obligation to tell the truth and situations where you have an obligation to avoid deception are not necessarily co-extensive. Honesty appears to require both being able to determine when someone has a ‘need to know’ and when the use of deception is permissible. This description of honesty is unlikely to cover all of what honesty requires, especially since stealing is often thought to be dishonest, but it should suffice to show how complicated it is to be honest.

8.5 Honesty in Business Practices

Another aspect of virtue being a complex skill is that feedback mechanisms are important to improving your skill. If honesty only amounted to “tell the truth”, then there would not be much of a need for feedback mechanisms to know whether what you are doing is right. After all, you say whatever you know to be the truth, and that is all there is to it. Situations involving communication, however, are often much more complicated than this simple picture. For example, is honesty required in business negotiations? Simply telling the truth in such a situation can pose a great risk for the company. In addition, there seem to be different expectations of how you behave in a negotiation, and it is not as clear to what extent exaggeration and withholding of information is acceptable or unacceptable. Hence, with complicated skills, more feedback is required.

In this way, paying attention to virtue requires paying attention to how it is acquired, and that puts more of an emphasis on discovering environmental feedback mechanisms. It might have seemed that paying attention to virtue required ignoring such external factors, that we only
focus on the individual, his character, choices, and use of reason. That is important, but we cannot assume that the individual should easily be able to identify the right course of action by mere self-reflection. The feedback that a person receives from his or her environment is important, and the feedback one receives may not always be trustworthy. This is the case even with skills like playing chess. If you only ever faced opponents with little skill, the feedback you receive from games may be unreliable. You can be making moves that allow you to win against other novices, but would cost you the game against a better player who knows how to counter your moves.

Feedback ties into the Aristotelian idea that we become virtuous by doing virtuous actions, and likewise, we become vicious by doing vicious actions. If certain practices involve dishonest actions, then those involved are, to some degree, being habituated into vice. The skill model backs up this Aristotelian idea, because of the importance of feedback mechanisms to the acquisition of skill. Our practices and institutions, because they produce positive or negative feedback for behavior, can influence the development of virtue and vice. Since most everyone is in some way involved with business, either as a producer or consumer, business practices can shape people’s character. Ian Maitland (1997) points out that “Economists are often charged with neglecting the fact that economic arrangements not only produce goods and services; they also produce certain types of people” (p. 17). In marketing, for example, the feedback for marketers will come mainly from their superiors, rather than from the people who are directly affected by their marketing. Actions, and the feedback received from those actions, shape our characters, and this is no less true when those actions take place in a business setting.

It is not that the focus for virtue ethicists is just on the individual character of the person acting, and so whenever something goes wrong we being the hunt for vice, and exclude all other
considerations. We must also be sensitive to the ways in which virtue and vice are inculcated, and that means paying attention to the feedback structures in place. That too must be dealt with; otherwise, we are sending people mixed messages and misleading feedback about their behavior. This is not to say that we do not continue to hold people accountable for their actions, as people are still making a choice. But for virtue, unlike many skills, the success conditions are not so obvious, and people have to rely more on feedback from others, as well as self-reflection, to improve their behavior. There are many types of difficult cases, though, that can make it difficult to assess the feedback one is receiving, and such cases will be discussed in the following sections.

### 8.6 Complex Cases - Not wanting to be told the Truth

If business practices can shape our character, then it is important to look at specific business practices to see whether they foster virtue or vice. For the purposes of this chapter, the examples of business practices will be limited to those that have a strong element of honesty or dishonesty. The examples that follow delve into some of the complexities of communication and truth telling in situations where it might appear that the truth does not need to be told. The simple view of honesty as merely telling the truth will be a poor guide to determining what should be done in these situations.

One of the potentially obvious cases in business where the truth does not need to be told is if your boss does not want to hear the truth. After all, if someone is explicit that he does not want to be told the truth, then that seems sufficient to dissolve you of any obligation you might have had to tell the truth. Perhaps this may strike you as an odd case, but it has been pointed out by Kevin Quinn (1997) that bosses “say they don’t want a yes man, but, in fact, most bosses
don’t want to hear the truth. And this is particularly true if it disagrees with what they want to do” (p. 1427). While it probably is not the case all the time that “most bosses don’t want to hear the truth”, it is a situation that can happen, and is more likely to happen if the truth disagrees with what the boss wants to do. Is this a situation where you, as an employee, do not need to tell the truth to your boss?

The answer to this question will probably vary depending upon the situation. Assuming that your boss is explicit about what he does not want to hear, then it may be permissible to withhold the truth, but there may also be overriding considerations that need to be taken into account. An analogous situation can happen with patients who tell their doctors that they do not want to hear the truth about their medical condition. Cullen and Klein (2004) argue that while normally a doctor would respect the wish of the patient not to know, if the lives of others are at risk, then this would provide an overriding consideration:

The physician has an obligation to a particular patient, but she also has an obligation to prevent harm to others who may come into contact with that patient. Failing to tell a patient he is HIV-positive, even if he has requested not to know, makes her complicitous in the spread of the disease. She is not responsible for her patient’s actions, but she is responsible for making sure he has information relevant to decisions affecting others. Violating his autonomy to the extent needed to inform him is justified by the possibility that it may save the lives of others. (If she discovered an airline pilot suffered from a seizure disorder, it would be morally wrong for her not to make sure the airline was informed.) (p. 160)

It appears that a request not to know is not always a deciding factor, if the well-being of others is at stake, which it might be in the context of business. Imagine a case of a manager not wanting
to know if the chemicals his workers are using are dangerous. If you had the report on the
toxicity of the chemicals, then you ought to inform your manager, despite any explicit request to
be kept ignorant of the information. The desire on the part of the listener to know information is
relevant, but it is certainly not the only relevant factor.

8.7 Complex Cases – Negotiation

While the previous example focused on a situation where withholding the truth could
cause harm to others in the company, in the context of business negotiations, too much truth
telling can be harmful to the company. The more a party in the negotiation tells the truth up
front about information such as reservation prices, the more vulnerable they become to being
exploited by the other party. Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie (1991) note that
“integrative bargaining depends on high levels of information sharing but is then vulnerable to
subsequent or parallel distributive tactics in which the shared information may be used to gain a
power advantage” (p. 356). Thus, some have argued that in negotiations, in order for both
parties to protect themselves against exploitation, they must engage in deceptive tactics. If this is
true, then this might seem to be a situation in which ethics and business practices part ways.

Not everyone, however, has seen it this way. It has been argued that the deception
involved in negotiations is ethically permissible, and not because it is necessary, but rather
because deception is expected in negotiation. Deceptive tactics in business negotiations have
gone on for so long that Friedman and Shapiro (1995) claim that “some statements are expected
to be untrue while others are not” (p. 248). Carr even suggests that it is a mistake to call the
tactics deceptive. Carr (1968) quotes Henry Taylor’s comment that “falsehood ceases to be
falsehood when it is understood on all sides that the truth is not expected to be spoken” (p. 143).
What we might think of as deceptive tactics might not only be ethically permissible, they might not even be deceptive at all.

These views about deception are premised on the idea that honesty is somehow related to the expectations of the listener. This idea is present in the previous case of the person who does not want to be told the truth. Since the listener makes it explicit that he neither wants nor expects the truth, then it is permissible to cover up the truth, at least so long as there are no overriding considerations. The importance of expectation can also be seen in telling jokes, where everyone involved does not expect truth. Chris Provis (2000) points out those defenders of deception in negotiation also use the example of playing a game:

Carr rests his argument on the analogy with games like poker, where bluffing and deception are sanctioned by the rules of the game. The implication is that even though each party may really be trying to deceive the other, each also knows that the other party is trying to do that. On this view, bluffing and similar tactics are genuine efforts to mislead, but they are not unethical since other negotiators can be expected to anticipate them and will be on their guard accordingly. (p. 150)

All of the examples show situations in which the expectations of the people involved can make a difference as to whether the truth needs to be told. Although poker players may intentionally deceive their opponents, nobody faults the players for being dishonest.

As a rule of thumb, honesty seems to require telling the truth when the truth is expected. Even a simple rule like that is open to counterexample, however, such as in the case of the inquiring murderer. Even though the inquiring murderer explicitly tells you that he expects you to tell the truth, it seems that you ought not to tell him. The intuition is that if you withhold information or lie to the inquiring murderer it does not reflect dishonesty on your part. Perhaps
the reason is due to the bad consequences of lying in this situation, or maybe just wanting to be
told the truth is not sufficient for you to be obligated to tell the truth. In either case, the point
remains that expectations do play an important part in determinations of honesty and truth
telling.

Despite the analogies that can be drawn between business negotiations and games like
poker, there are other ways in which the situations are disanalogous. Provis (2000) remarks, “in
many bargaining situations there are none of the explicit rules or express consent which sanction
the use of deception in games or sports” (p. 153). If there are explicit rules that sanction
deception, and everyone gives express consent to play by these rules, then there is no problem
with the use of deception. If one of those elements is missing, however, then one should not
assume it is permissible to be deceptive. Provis (2000) points out a number of features that make
poker a poor analogy to negotiations:

Haggling and bluffing in some voluntary bargaining over the price of a carpet in an
oriental bazaar may be enjoyable and satisfying for both parties, particularly if they do
have a shared understanding of what they are about, but the situation is different if they
have no choice but to participate, if they are bargaining over their livelihood, and if one
party has more skill or power than the other. In that situation, tactics of bluffing and
deception may be quite unfair. (p. 154)

It may be the case that both parties in a negotiation want to treat the negotiation as if it were a
game of poker, where each party expects the other to be deceptive and each consents to negotiate
in that way. What Provis is drawing attention to is that negotiations often do not take place with
this kind of shared understanding or voluntary consent, and so one should not assume that
deception in negotiation is permissible. The view that people like Carr defend is that deception
is permissible, regardless of the specific expectations or consent of the other party in the negotiation.

8.8 Conclusion

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide anything like a comprehensive guide to when to tell the truth and when not to, the aim has been to show that honesty is not best understood as simply telling the truth. There are times when not telling the truth is permissible, and perhaps even the right thing to do, as in the case of the inquiring murderer. A skill model of honesty makes better sense of honesty than the simpler views. In the process of arguing for this view, some limited applications of the skill model have been made to the area of business ethics.\footnote{Since the skill model of virtue is not meant to be an ethical theory unto itself, it will necessarily be limited in its direct application to ethical cases.}
CHAPTER 9: EPILOGUE

9.1 Incompleteness of the Skill Model of Virtue

The skill model of virtue offers a plausible account of the moral knowledge of the virtuous person. It provides an explanation of how this moral knowledge is acquired. It can explain the appeals to perception and intuition in descriptions of the virtuous person, while still recognizing the importance of rules and principles to morally good behavior. Contemporary accounts of virtue have much to gain by adopting the skill model of virtue. The model, unfortunately, is not a full account of virtue. As the preceding chapters have pointed out, some important questions about virtue remain even after the skill model has been adopted.

Any account of virtue will need to be able to distinguish which particular character traits count as virtues, as opposed to vices or morally neutral traits. As pointed out earlier, the skill model does not possess the resources to accomplish this, although it does require that virtues are complex enough to involve skillfulness. Neo-Aristotelians usually give a eudaimonistic account of virtue, where eudaimonia is a specification of what it is to live well, or flourish, as a human being. Living a life in accordance with virtue is usually taken to be necessary for eudaimonia, because virtue is at least partially constitutive of eudaimonia. What counts as flourishing cannot be specified independently of virtue.

One potential advantage of a eudaimonistic account is that it can support a view of virtues that is not relative to particular cultures. An example of this approach can be found in the work of Martha Nussbaum (1990), in particular her article on non-relative virtues. Nussbaum draws on the work of Aristotle in attempting to show how the list of virtues is not culturally relative. Nussbaum (1990) explains Aristotle’s approach in introducing his list of virtues:
What he does, in each case, is to isolate a sphere of human experience that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make some choices rather than others, and act in some way rather than some other. The introductory chapter enumerating the virtues and vices begins with an enumeration of these spheres; and each chapter on a virtue in the more detailed account that follows begins with ‘Concerning X . . .’, or words to this effect, where X names a sphere of life with which all human beings regularly and more or less necessarily have dealings. Aristotle, then asks, what is it to choose and respond well within that sphere? And what is it to choose defectively? (p. 245)

Each sphere of experience has a corresponding virtue. For instance, justice is the virtue that corresponds to the distribution of limited resources, and moderation is the virtue for the bodily appetites and their pleasures. Being virtuous is constitutive of the good life, and so these virtues need to be developed in order for a human being to flourish. It is not enough for just some of these virtues to be developed. All the virtues need to be developed, at least to some degree, since they deal with choosing well in a sphere of action that every human has to deal with, and integrated into a whole, through practical wisdom, in order for the life to count as flourishing.

It is important to remember that eudaimonia is also an account of what the practically wise person knows. Recall that for Hursthouse (2003), those who are practically wise “understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well . . . this is expressed in the claim that they have a true grasp of eudaimonia.” The connection between practical wisdom and eudaimonia is important, because it is this comprehensive knowledge of what is truly valuable in life that unifies the virtues. Each of the virtues involves this body of knowledge because the virtues have a role to
play in leading a good life. Without that unifying aspect of the virtues, the virtues may pull in conflicting directions and the virtuous person may be unable to reach an all things considered judgment.

An account of virtue need not be *eudaimonistic*, and there are a few problems with that type of approach to virtue.⁴⁴ Some account, however, needs to fill the role played by *eudaimonia*. There must be some account of what makes a character trait a virtue, and this account should explain what unifies the virtues. Christine Swanton (2003), for example, rejects *eudaimonia* in favor of a more pluralistic view of the good life. In addition, one need not be restricted to virtue ethics in arriving at a complete account of virtue. Julia Driver (2001) argues in favor of a consequentialist account of virtue, “which would define moral virtues as character traits that systematically produce more actual good than not” (p. 68). It is an advantage of the skill model of virtue that it is compatible with a variety of approaches to incorporating virtue into ethical theory.

### 9.2 Further Applications of the Skill Model of Virtue

This project has focused only on arriving at a more plausible account of virtue and the virtuous person. Obviously, one further application of the skill model is to see how fits into an overall ethical theory. One of the advantages of the skill model is that it could be adopted by a variety of ethical theories. It would be ideal if there were more consensus about the nature of virtue, while leaving it open as to what role virtue played in an overall ethical theory. Naturally, the most likely ethical theory to adopt the skill model of virtue is a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. In what ways would a theory of virtue ethics change if it adopted the skill model of virtue?

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Rosalind Hursthouse’s (1991) book on virtue ethics is arguably the most sophisticated development of virtue ethics as a rival alternative to utilitarianism and deontology, but her account faces serious difficulties in responding to Robert Johnson’s (2003) critique. Since the skill model of virtue can accommodate many of Johnson’s points about virtue, it may hold the key for recasting a virtue ethical account of right action that overcomes his objections. On the other hand, since the skill model sometimes supports only more modest claims about virtue, perhaps it would not support virtue ethics as a rival ethical theory. In that case, the burden would be on those who want virtue ethics to be a rival theory to come up with an equally plausible account of virtue that would support a more ambitious approach.

The skill model of virtue might also be used to help defend virtue theory from another recent criticism. Both the status of virtues as character traits and the existence of traits of character are taken as a given by most virtue ethicists. In recent years, however, a few people have challenged this view of virtue by calling into question the status, if not the existence, of character traits. Gilbert Harman (1999, 2000) and John Doris (2002), amongst others, have criticized the concept of character traits by relying on studies done in the field of social psychology. Gilbert Harman (1999) has argued that research in social psychology shows that much of our ordinary moral thought commits “the fundamental attribution error” (p. 315). This error is committed when someone assumes that behavior patterns are due to the character traits of an agent, rather than to situational factors. Harman (2000) believes that experiments in social psychology have shown that there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits, and thus “we need to abandon all talk of virtue and character” (p. 224). John Doris has drawn similar conclusions from the ‘situationist’ experimental tradition in social psychology. Although Doris stops short of claiming the need to abandon all talk of character, he does claim that the
situationist research has shown that the concept of virtue assumes a problematic moral psychology.

Although many lines of response have been developed to this skepticism about virtue, the skill model might offer another line of defense. One of the advantages of the skill model is that it grounds the moral knowledge of the virtuous person in practical skills, which are not viewed as philosophically suspect. If virtues involve skillfulness, and skills are not psychologically problematic, then an important component of virtue evades the social psychology criticism. It would still be an open question, though, if any of the other components of virtue, such as the need to be disposed to act well, would introduce any psychologically problematic features into the account of virtue. Doris (2002) is particularly skeptical of the claim that “people typically have highly general personality traits that effect behavior manifesting a high degree of cross-situational consistency” (p. 38-39), which is to say that he is skeptical that traits, like honesty, would manifest itself across a variety of situations. Doris finds it more plausible to think that such traits are situation specific, such as being honest at school but being dishonest in relationships. The skill model of virtue at least incorporates some limitations on the cross-situational consistency of virtue, in that even the virtuous person will not be able to act as well when facing unfamiliar situations. The skill model can acknowledge the point that people’s character traits are typically more situation specific than is generally recognized.

Another promising area for the development of the skill model of virtue is in virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemology focuses on the intellectual virtues of a person in understanding whether a person has knowledge. If the skill model can be applied to moral virtues, can it be applied to the intellectual virtues as well? In contrast to some other forms of virtue epistemology, Linda Zagzebski (1996) argues for intellectual virtues to be seen as
analogous to moral virtues in ethics. Zagzebski (1996) defines a virtue as “a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end” (p. 137). She believes that this definition is broad enough to include both moral and intellectual virtues.

Julia Annas (2003), however, believes that there are important disanalogies between moral and intellectual virtue. Annas uses her Socratic skill model of virtue to criticize Zagzebski’s account of intellectual virtues. Insofar as Annas relies on an implausible account of skills, as argued in chapter three, this leaves open the possibility that an Aristotelian skill model of virtue could be used to support intellectual virtues as well. On the other hand, it may not provide any support, if intellectual virtues such as thoroughness or open-mindedness cannot be understood as involving skillfulness. It will partially depend on whether there are success conditions for being thorough or open-minded that could provide feedback for the development of these intellectual skills.

One last area of application worth mentioning is in applied ethics, and in particular business ethics. The skill model can illuminate how business practices help or hinder the development of virtue. As unusual as it may sound to discuss how businesses can help to inculcate virtues in their employees, businesses are surely familiar with training employees to have the skills necessary to perform their jobs in the company. As part of their job, employees should to know how to deal effectively with the specific ethical issues that arise in their area of expertise. In addition to the focus on business practices, it could also be valuable to determine the extent to which the skill model supports existing virtue theoretic approaches to business, such as Robert Solomon’s (1992) Aristotelian approach.
9.3 Conclusion

Despite being able to trace the ethical importance of the concept of virtue all the way back to the ancient Greeks, contemporary virtue theory is still in an early stage of development. In perhaps too much of a rush to present virtue ethics as rival theory to consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethicists have presented inspiring but not always well-supported accounts of virtue and the virtuous person. Virtue theorists need to take a step back, and develop accounts of virtue with greater plausibility, before moving forward with their plans to highlight the role of virtue in ethical theory. The skill model of virtue offers the most promising direction for contemporary virtue theory.
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