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Moral Worth and Skillful Action

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Abstract

Someone acts in a morally worthy way when they deserve credit for doing the morally right thing. But when and why do agents deserve credit for the success involved in doing the right thing? It is tempting to seek an answer to that question by drawing an analogy with creditworthy success in other domains of human agency, especially in sports, arts, and crafts. Accordingly, some authors have recently argued that, just like creditworthy success in, say, chess, playing the piano, or archery, creditworthy *moral* success is a matter of getting things right by way of manifesting a relevant skill. My main aim in this paper is to bring out an important *structural* difference between moral creditworthiness and creditworthiness in sports, arts, and craft, undermining attempts to use examples of the latter as a model for understanding the former. As an alternative, I propose an account of morally creditworthy action, according to which such action is a matter of manifesting virtue, not skill—a claim that's based on an important, but underappreciated, difference between the sorts of excellences constituting virtues and skills. The paper thus contributes to a more nuanced picture of normative achievements across different domains of

human agency, highlighting largely overlooked structural dissimilarities among them.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper's topic is morally worthy action. A person acts in a morally worthy way when they deserve credit for doing the morally right thing.[1] Famously, these things can come apart: you can do the right thing without being creditworthy for doing so, as when you do the right thing by mere accident. The central question in the debate on moral worth is thus: when and why is the success involved in doing the right thing not an accident?

The contrast at the heart of this debate—the contrast between *accidental* and *creditworthy success*—is arguably ubiquitous across various domains of human agency, in particular domains of sports, arts, and crafts.[2] For example, a chess player may deserve credit for performing a right chess-move (i.e., one that promotes checkmating their opponent), or they may do so by mere luck. Here a parallel question arises: when and why is the success involved in making the right chess-move not an accident? Given such apparent parallels, it is natural and tempting to try to shed light on moral creditworthiness by drawing an analogy with creditworthy success in sports, arts, and crafts. Doing so yields what I'm calling the *skill view* of moral worth. That's because creditworthy success in sports, arts, and crafts is plausibly a matter of *success through skill* (or competence, or know-how).[3] That is, it's no accident that a player is making the right chess-move just when and because they do so *as a manifestation* of their skillfulness at chess. The main move of the skill view is to extend this account to moral creditworthiness. Roughly, on this view, what renders the success involved in doing the morally right thing relevantly non-accidental is the fact that it manifests the agent's moral skill, where the relevant notion of skill is the one familiar from, say, chess, playing the piano, or cooking.

In effect, a view of this sort is suggested by some recent work on moral worth.[4] For example, Lord's (2017, 2018), Howard's (2021), and Cunningham's (2022) accounts of moral worth are all built around an important analogy with examples of skillful success from sports, arts, and crafts, intended to shed light on when and why *moral* success is relevantly non-accidental. They all claim, moreover, that a skill-based account is better suited to capture the non-accidentality condition on moral worth than its main competitors: views that seek to account for morally worthy action either in terms of responding to the features of one's action that make it right (Arpaly 2002, Markovits 2010, Schroeder 2021) or in terms of responding to moral rightness itself (Sliwa 2016, Johnson King 2020).

My overarching goal in this paper is to bring out an important *structural* difference between moral creditworthiness and creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts, undermining attempts to

[1] By glossing moral worth in terms of moral creditworthiness, I follow the recent literature on the topic. See, e.g., Cunningham (2022), Singh (2020), Way (2017), and Lord (2017, 2018).

[2] Compare Schroeder (2018, 2021: ch.10).

[3] I use these notions interchangeably; what matters is that they are meant to pick out the sorts of excellences characteristic of athletes, artists, and craftspersons.

[4] However, the more general idea that skillful action provides an illuminating model for understanding various moral statuses (e.g., virtuous action) is certainly much older, tracing back at least to Plato's early dialogues. For a contemporary defense of the skill-model of virtue, see Annas (2011) and Stichter (2018).

use examples of the latter as a model for understanding the former. More specifically, I pursue a negative and a positive aim. The negative aim is to show that the skill view's underlying analogy with skillful success is flawed because it delivers wrong verdicts as to when doing the morally right thing is relevantly non-accidental. The positive aim is to lay the groundwork for an alternative account of moral creditworthiness, one that builds on the insights of the skill view while avoiding its shortcomings. My chief claim here is that morally creditworthy action is best understood, not in terms of manifesting skill, but in terms of manifesting virtue—a claim that's based on an important, but underappreciated, difference between virtues and skills. I'll argue that this difference, properly understood, is the key to capturing the specific form of non-accidental success characteristic of moral achievements, and I'll defend the relevance of virtue for an account of moral worth against a familiar objection (i.e., that virtue isn't necessary for moral worth).

I proceed as follows. In § 2, I'll do some stage setting, further clarifying my target notion and my objectives in examining the skill view. In § 3, I'll flesh out the skill view. In § 4, I'll present my argument against the skill view. Finally, in § 5, I'll introduce and defend my alternative virtue-based account of moral creditworthiness.

2 | PRELIMINARIES

What is morally right action? In line with most participants in the debate, I assume that the morally *right* action in a given situation is the action that's favored by the balance of the morally relevant factors of that situation. For example, if I promised you to ϕ now, and there are no other morally relevant factors present that would outweigh the fact that I promised you to ϕ now, then ϕ-ing is the morally right thing for me to do now. The factors that ground my action's status as right—like the fact that I promised you to ϕ—are standardly referred to as "right-making". I'll follow this terminology. Of course, exactly which factors are relevant for grounding moral rightness, why they are relevant, and how much weight they possess are matters of much controversy in normative ethics. But this is something we can set aside here.[5]

Some right actions are such that their agents deserve credit for getting it right: i.e., for doing what is favored by the balance of the relevant right-making factors. But what makes for moral creditworthiness? Everyone agrees that *non-accidentality* is at least a necessary condition: when one deserves credit for doing the morally right thing, then it's not an accident that one is doing what is favored by the relevant right-making factors.[6] To illustrate, suppose that you have promised a student to meet them at 4pm in the campus coffee shop. At 4pm, you walk into the coffee shop, but you have forgotten all about the appointment—you just want to get a coffee. As you enter, you see your student and remember your promise. Arguably, in this case, you end up doing what you had promised to do. But you hardly deserve moral credit for doing so. That's because it was just an *accident* that you kept your promise.[7]

[5] Another controversial issue I set aside here is whether rightness is to be understood *subjectively* or *objectively*. Very roughly, this is the question of whether or not the factors that ground an action's status as right are in some way tied to the agent's perspective. Importantly, on either way of understanding rightness, it contrasts with creditworthiness. See Schroeder (2018) for discussion of this point.

[6] See, e.g., Sliwa (2016: 394), Johnson King (2020: 191), Markovits (2010: 206), Arpaly (2002: 225), Cunningham (2022: 368), Lord (2017: 438), Howard (2021: 303), and Singh (2020: §2).

[7] This is inspired by an example from Johnson King (2020: 190).

Despite broad agreement that morally creditworthy action is subject to a non-accidentality condition, there is considerable controversy about what it takes to meet this condition: about when and why moral success is relevantly non-accidental—"relevant" for determining moral creditworthiness. That's where the skill view enters the picture. According to this view, we can understand when and why moral success is relevantly non-accidental by drawing an analogy with non-accidental success in domains of skillful agency, such as soccer, playing the piano, or hairdressing. Here are some examples from recent work on moral worth that suggest such an analogy:

> "[S]ome agents are the moral analogues of talented footballers. Talented footballers track [. . .] the [. . .] great-making features of their plays; because they do, it's no dumb luck when they play masterfully. Likewise, some good moral agents track the [. . .] moral sufficiency of their motives [. . .]; because they do, it's no dumb luck when they act rightly." (Howard 2021: 312)

> "It's no more an accident that the morally creditable agent does the right thing than it's an accident that the skilled pianist succeeds in playing the fugue the sheets for which they are following; the skilled hairdresser succeeds in cutting the customer's hair into the latest style; or [a skilled painter] succeeds in creating a beautiful portrait." (Cunningham 2022: 397)

Another example is Lord's (2017) account of moral creditworthiness. He uses examples from music and semantics to introduce a notion of non-accidental success—success through relevant musical and semantic competence—which then serves as a model for understanding the sort of non-accidental success involved in morally creditworthy action (Lord 2017: §§ 4 and 5). In fleshing out the skill view, however, I won't focus on any particular author. That's because, in the end, I'm not interested in raising objections against this or that view, but in bringing out a crucial difference between moral creditworthiness and creditworthiness in other domains of human agency. For this purpose, it is not essential that those who make use of the relevant analogy with skillful success agree with the details of my presentation of the skill view. To the extent that I object to the views of Howard, Cunningham, or Lord, my complaint is not that they unequivocally endorse a wrong view of moral creditworthiness. Rather, my complaint is that they do not unequivocally endorse a right view—one that's built on an explicit acknowledgement of the difference between moral creditworthiness and creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts. In any case, I take the skill view to offer an evidently attractive account of morally creditworthy action, one that clearly warrants examination in its own right. And I take the task of getting clear on how moral creditworthiness differs from creditworthy success in other domains of human agency to be of independent philosophical interest. It is crucial not only for a proper account of moral worth but also for developing a more nuanced picture of normative achievements across different domains of human agency.

3 | FLESHING OUT THE SKILL VIEW

The skill view, as I understand it, makes two main claims:

1. Creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts is a matter of *skillful success*.

2. Moral creditworthiness is just a *special case* of skillful success.

I'll flesh out each claim in turn. In doing so, I'll use *playing chess* as my primary example. But what I say about chess easily generalizes to other domains of skillful action.

3.1 | Creditworthiness as skillful success

To begin with, note that, by using "right" in a suitably broad sense, we can fix a notion of *right* chess-move that parallels the notion of morally right action. Thus, plausibly, the right chess-move in a given situation of the game is the move that's favored by the balance of the chess-relevant factors in that situation, where relevant factors are those that bear on which move best serves to checkmate one's opponent. Suppose, for example, that by moving your knight to c4 you could capture your opponent's bishop. Suppose further, however, that if you were to move your knight to c4, you would expose your king to check. Whether moving your knight to c4 is the right move to make is a matter of how these—and possibly further—factors weigh against one another.

But just like in the moral domain, it's one thing to make the right chess-move, it's another to be creditworthy for making the right move. A player might make a right chess-move by sheer luck. If so, we don't give them credit for performing the right move. Luck precludes creditworthiness in chess just as much as it does in the moral domain. So, here a parallel question arises: when and why is performing the move that's favored by the balance of the relevant right-making factors not an accident?

A natural first thought is that, to rule out mere accidental rightness, you must perform the right chess-move *in response to* the factors that make your move right. The factors grounding the rightness of your chess-move must also be the ones that *move* you to perform that move.[8] However, without further qualification, this proposal is insufficient to eliminate all forms of credit-undermining accidentality. It matters *how* you respond to relevant right-making factors, not just *any* old response will render the success of your performance relevantly non-accidental. To see this, consider an example:

> **Lucky Chess**: Bobby has the opportunity to capture his opponent's bishop, to which he responds by making the move required for the capture. As it happens, this is the right move to make in the situation of the game. However, Bobby is seriously confused about the merits of capturing bishops: he treats opportunities to do so as *always* trumping any other strategic considerations. Bobby's response thus manifests his disposition to capture an opponent's bishop *whenever* he is in a position to do so, even when doing so is clearly the *wrong* move (e.g., when it exposes him to being checkmated).

Bobby performs the right chess-move in response to the factors that make it right. Yet, intuitively, Bobby doesn't deserve credit for his performance. Plausibly, this is because it's still too much of an *accident* that he ends up making the right move. Given his confusion about the merits of capturing bishops, he could have easily gone *wrong* in capturing his opponent's bishop. What's missing?

[8] The corresponding proposal about non-accidental *moral* rightness is the motivating thought of Arpaly's (2002) and Markovits' (2010) views of moral worth.

A plausible answer is that Bobby *lacks* skillfulness at chess: his response fails to manifest sufficient competence with the significance and weight of the factors that determine rightness in chess. For, plausibly, when one responds to the situation of the game by exercising chess skill, one's response tends to be correct—one would not have easily played a move that wasn't supported by the balance of that situation's right-making factors. But Bobby fails this test: given his indiscriminate disposition to capture bishops, he could quite easily have made the *wrong* move in capturing his opponent's bishop. Hence, even though Bobby responds to the chess-relevant factors of his situation by performing the move they favor, he doesn't do so in a way that manifests skillfulness at chess. That's why the rightness of his performance is still too accidental to be creditworthy.

This suggests that creditworthy success in chess is a matter of success through skill:

> **Chess Creditworthiness**: You deserve credit for making the right chess-move just when and because (a) you do so in response to the factors that make your move right, where (b) your response to these factors is a manifestation of your chess skill (i.e., a skillful response).

On this view, what renders the success involved in making the right chess-move relevantly non-accidental is that it manifests one's chess skill. Of course, you need not be a chess master to perform a creditworthy chess-move. Possessing skill is a matter of degree, and the present claim is just that one has to manifest *some* degree of skillfulness to be creditworthy for making the right move—enough skill to render the success involved in making the right move non-accidental.[9] This view easily generalizes to other domains of skillful action. For instance, when a soccer player deserves credit for playing the right pass, this is because their pass is a *skillful response* to the various factors affecting the quality of their play, such as the position of the other players or the timing of the pass. For, when the player responds to these factors in a way that manifests their soccer skill, their success in playing the right pass is not an accident.

3.2 | Moral creditworthiness as skillful success

The main move of the skill view is to extend the account of creditworthiness in terms of skillful success—i.e., in terms of correctly responding through skill—to *moral* creditworthiness. Doing so yields the following account:

> **Moral Creditworthiness (Skill View)**: You deserve credit for doing the morally right thing just when and because (a) you do so in response to the factors that make your action right, where (b) your response to these factors is a manifestation of your moral skill (i.e., a skillful response).

On this view, morally creditworthy action is just a *special case* of skillful success (i.e., of correctly responding through skill). This means that creditworthy moral success stands to creditworthy success in chess as the latter stands to creditworthy success in, say, soccer, playing the piano, or archery. What sets these cases apart is that in each one the agent responds to a different range of facts—e.g., skilled chess players respond to facts that affect the quality of their chess-moves,

[9] A point emphasized by Cunningham (2022: 396).

skilled soccer players to facts that affect the quality of their soccer performance, and skilled moral agents to facts that affect the moral quality of their actions. But what it is for their responses to be non-accidentally right is the *same* across cases—it's a matter of *correctly responding through skill*.

This is a prima facie attractive account of moral creditworthiness. For, arguably, it does well where other accounts struggle. There are, in particular, two advantages that the skill view promises to have over rival accounts of moral worth.

The first advantage is that it correctly handles cases that are the moral analogue of Lucky Chess. These are cases in which, even though the agent acts in response to the factors that make their action right, they don't deserve credit for the rightness of their action because they respond to these factors in what is intuitively *the wrong way*. One such case is Kant's (1996 [1785]: 4:398) example of the "sympathetically attuned" person, who is naturally disposed to respond to other people's need for help by helping them but is completely *insensitive* to whether doing so is in fact the right thing to do in a given situation.[10] This disposition will often issue in right actions (i.e., when helping others is indeed the right thing to do), but when it does, this is intuitively still an *accident*. After all, given the person's insensitivity to whether another's need for help is the morally decisive factor in a particular situation, their sympathetic disposition could have easily led them to do the *wrong* thing (i.e., if the other's need for help had been outweighed by other moral factors).[11] The skill view correctly implies that the sympathetic person isn't creditworthy: their response *fails* to manifest moral skill.[12] For, just like in the case of chess skill, when one responds to a situation by manifesting moral skill, one's response tends to be correct—one would not have easily done the *wrong* thing. The sympathetic person's way of responding to the needs of others clearly fails to manifest such skillfulness. That's why, even when their response happens to be correct, its correctness is still too accidental to be creditworthy. So, the skill view offers a plausible account of responding to right-making factors *in the right way*. This gives the view the edge over accounts that do not include an explicit constraint on *how* one must respond to moral factors if one is to be creditworthy for so responding, making these accounts vulnerable to counterexamples of the sort provided by Kant's sympathetic person (such as, arguably, Markovits' 2010 and Schroeder's 2021 accounts).[13]

The second advantage of the skill view is that it avoids the alleged risk of *over-intellectualizing* moral worth, which is what (so-called) Kantian views (e.g., Herman 1981, Sliwa 2016, Johnson King 2020) are accused of doing. Very roughly, according to Kantian views, what goes wrong in examples such as Kant's sympathetic person is that the agent fails to do the right thing on the basis of their *correct belief* that their action is morally right. So, on such views, what's required for morally creditworthy action is that you respond to rightness *as such*, not (just) to the factors that *make* your action right. The sympathetic person clearly fails this condition: they aren't moved to help by their belief that doing so is the morally right thing to do. However, many find the requirement for explicit moral belief too demanding because they believe it leads to the wrong verdict on agents—such as, most famously, Huckleberry Finn—who correctly respond to the factors that make their action right but do not believe that their action is morally right.[14] The skill

[10] For similar examples, see Way (2017: §2), Mantel (2017: 566f.), Singh (2020: 164), and Cunningham (2022: 390).

[11] To make this more vivid, just imagine the sympathetic person rushing to help an assassin who is struggling to dig a hole deep enough to bury their victim. In this case, surely, the fact that the assassin is in need of help is outweighed by other moral considerations.

[12] To be sure, that the sympathetic person isn't creditworthy for having done the morally right thing doesn't mean that they might not be praiseworthy in other respects (e.g., for having been helpful).

[13] See Cunningham (2022) for this claim.

view avoids this concern since it doesn't require morally creditworthy agents to believe that what they are doing is morally right. This is because, on this view, morally creditworthy action is just a special case of skillful success and, in general, skillful success doesn't turn on whether the agent holds normative beliefs about their performance.[15] The underlying thought here is that a skilled agent need not represent their performance *as* meeting a relevant performance standard for them to deserve credit for meeting that standard—perhaps they are too modest to think of their performance in these terms.[16] So, a chief motivation for exploring the analogy with creditworthy success in sports, arts, and crafts is that doing so promises an account of non-accidental *moral* success that can do without explicit moral beliefs.[17]

On the skill view, then, the key to understanding non-accidental moral success is the notion of *manifesting skill*. One might thus wonder precisely what it is for an agent's response to manifest skill—or, equivalently, to be a skillful, competent, or masterful response. In general, those who invoke the notion of manifesting skill (or similar notions) in their account of moral creditworthiness do not commit to an analysis of that notion. When Cunningham, Howard, and Lord introduce the relevant notion of a skillful (etc.) response, they do so on the basis of examples from sports, arts, and crafts; they don't offer a systematic account of that notion.[18] I take the basic idea to be that, for the purposes of doing moral psychology, we can rely on a sufficiently robust understanding of the notion of manifesting skill, and we can use that notion to cash out the non-accidentality condition on morally creditworthy action. This leaves open whether manifesting skill can ultimately be analyzed in other (e.g., modal) terms, or whether it should be taken as primitive, providing us with a distinctive sense of non-accidentality.[19]

In short, the skill view is indeed an intelligibly attractive account of morally worthy action. It promises to provide an elegant and illuminating account of when and why such action is relevantly non-accidental, and it does so while steering clear of the difficulties facing its main competitors. In particular, it rules out cases like Kant's sympathetic person without falling prey to concerns of over-intellectualization.

4 | AGAINST THE SKILL VIEW

Despite its promises, however, I think the skill view faces a crucial problem: its underlying analogy with skillful success is ultimately flawed. That's because, by using skillful success in sports, arts, and crafts as a model for moral creditworthiness, the skill view delivers wrong verdicts as to when moral success is relevantly non-accidental. Or so I will argue now.

[14] See Arpaly (2002), Markovits (2010), Lord (2017), and Cunningham (2022).

[15] For this point, see Howard (2021: 309), Cunningham (2022: 395), and Lord (2017: 456).

[16] Compare the example from Howard (2021: §4). I'm not taking a stand here on whether this assumption is correct. Others defend more "intellectualist" conceptions of skillfulness, see, e.g., Marcus (2012: ch.4) and Kern (2017: ch.6).

[17] This is evident in how Lord (2017), Howard (2021), and Cunningham (2022) motivate their views.

[18] Compare Cunningham (2022: 396, n. 20).

[19] For example, Beddor and Pavese (2020) offer a sophisticated modal analysis of what it is for a performance to be skillful, while Sosa (2015) treats the notion of manifesting skill (competence) as primitive. But even if we don't aim for a proper analysis of that notion, there are many informative things we can say about what it is to manifest skill. This will become evident below, when we distinguish manifesting skill from manifesting virtue.

4.1 | Skillfulness as conditional responsiveness

To work our way towards this conclusion, start with considering the following example of a successful chess performance:

> **Jenny**: Jenny is a professional chess player, competing at a local chess tournament. Her performance so far is flawless; every one of her moves has been a correct response to the state of play. However, her responsiveness to the factors grounding the rightness of her chess-moves is *conditional* on her desire to impress Magnus. That is, she is responsive to her move's right-making factors only *because* and *as long as* she believes she can impress Magnus with a winning performance. If it wasn't for her desire to impress Magnus, she wouldn't have played in the first place, and if Magnus were to stop watching her games, she would cease responding to the relevant right-making factors.

For our purposes, the crucial question here is this: does the fact that Jenny is only *conditionally* responsive to the relevant right-making factors preclude her responses from being *skillful* (i.e., from being manifestations of skill) and thus from being creditworthy? I think the answer is clearly "no". Conditional responsiveness is perfectly *compatible* with responding skillfully. Even if Jenny is only playing to impress Magnus, her performance might still be a display of supreme skillfulness at chess. In fact, far from being a defect, conditional responsiveness is exactly what we should expect from a skilled agent. That's because skilled agents may deliberately refrain from doing what counts as getting thing right within their skill domain. Thus, a skilled chess player may refrain from performing what they know to be the right move. This doesn't automatically call into question their skillfulness at chess—not if they forgo the right move *on purpose*. They might have accepted a bribe to let their opponent win; or they might be playing against their young grandson wanting to spare them a demoralizing defeat. Clearly, moreover, this is not an idiosyncratic feature of chess. A skilled pianist may know how to play the piece in the right tempo but decide to play it in the wrong tempo—perhaps for comical effect. Again, this wouldn't impugn their musical competence. A skilled car mechanic may very well know how to fix their client's car but refuse to do so, because they haven't been paid for their last job. Still, they might be the best car mechanic in town.

In general, we don't expect skilled agents to correctly respond to the right-making factors of their skill domain unless they possess some distinct motivation to do so (e.g., a desire to play chess competitively), but, simply *qua* possessors of skill, they need not possess any such motivation. It's only when and as long as such a motivation is present that skilled agents engage in tracking the factors that make their performance right. This yields the following (partial) account of skill:

> **Skill**: Manifesting skill is a matter of *conditional* responsiveness to the factors that determine what counts as getting things right within the relevant skill domain, conditional on a distinct motivation to engage in the characteristic activities of that domain.

This account explains and confirms our intuitive judgment about Jenny: that her successful chess performance is skillful and therefore creditworthy, albeit merely *conditionally* responsive to the factors that make her performance right.

To be sure, nothing I have said here rules out that we can also evaluate athletes, artists, and craftspersons in terms of their motivations. Arguably, for example, a professional soccer player is evaluable, not just in terms of how well they play, but also in terms of how *committed* they are to playing well. And being committed to playing well plausibly involves being *consistently motivated* to perform well on the pitch, as well as to do what's required for athletic success more generally (regular practice, a healthy diet, etc.).[20] Still, these are *distinct* forms of evaluation, which can—and often do—come apart. That is, some agents may possess a high level of skill, but lack commitment; others may be very committed, but lack skill. As a case in point, consider Diego Maradona. He was arguably one of the most skilled soccer players of all times, yet his commitment to the demands of his sport was famously erratic. Hence, and that's the important point, when we evaluate the skillfulness of an agent's performance, we ultimately set aside questions concerning the agent's motivation (e.g., how consistently they are motivated to perform well).[21]

4.2 | An argument against the skill view

Given these general observations about skill, I can now formulate my objection to the skill view in form of a simple argument:

1. Skillful success (i.e., correctly responding through skill) is perfectly compatible with mere *conditional* responsiveness to relevant right-making factors (as the Jenny case illustrates).
2. If morally creditworthy action is a special case of skillful success (i.e., of correctly responding through skill), then such action should be equally compatible with mere conditional responsiveness to relevant right-making factors (i.e., those that determine moral rightness).
3. But that's not the case: being merely conditionally responsive to the factors determining moral rightness is *incompatible* with moral creditworthiness.
4. So, contrary to the skill view, morally creditworthy action isn't just a special case of skillful success (i.e., of correctly responding through skill).

The new claim here is (3)—that mere conditional responsiveness is incompatible with moral creditworthiness. In support of this claim, consider a case that's *structurally parallel* to Jenny's:

> **Benny**: Benny has a recent track record of correctly responding to the morally relevant factors of his situation. However, his responsiveness to these factors is *conditional* on his desire to impress Lucy, whom he believes to be impressed by morally right actions. Thus, if he were to lose interest in Lucy, or if he were to find out that Lucy actually has a thing for the wicked, moral considerations would lose their grip on him and he would cease responding to them.

[20] A point rightly emphasized by Stichter (2018). Stichter, however, goes on to argue that proper attention to this point allows us to conceive of virtue as a kind of skill. I think this is wrong, as I have argued in Horst (2022a: §4).

[21] I say "ultimately" to leave room for cases where the ability to adopt certain motivations is itself part of some skill (think of a coach who advises their players to think less about winning and focus more on the game as such). But, of course, the exercise of such skill is still conditional on the agent's distinct motivation to engage in the relevant sport, art, or craft (which they might often lack, despite being quite skilled at the relevant activity).

Like Jenny, Benny is only *conditionally* responsive to the relevant right-making factors. But unlike Jenny, Benny intuitively *doesn't* deserve credit for doing what's right. The moral rightness of his actions seems *accidental* in a way that precludes moral creditworthiness. And it does seem that way precisely because he is only conditionally responsive. Plausibly, what we expect from a creditable moral agent is not only that they correctly respond to the factors that make their action right, but that they do so *unconditionally*—not just when and as long as they happen to have an independent motivation to heed these factors. If so, then, unlike creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts, moral creditworthiness is indeed *incompatible* with mere conditional responsiveness. And so, morally creditworthy action isn't just a special case of skillful success.

This means that the analogy with creditworthy success in sports, arts, and crafts breaks down at the crucial point: when it comes to explaining when and why moral success is relevantly non-accidental. Given how skills work in general, it's hard to see why Benny's case—just like Jenny's—shouldn't count as one of skillful success. But then, assuming the skill view—which ties credit to skillful success—we should give Benny moral credit for his right actions. This, however, is the *wrong* verdict. Hence, using skillful success as a model for moral creditworthiness delivers wrong verdicts as to when moral success is relevantly non-accidental. The lesson to be learnt here, I think, is that moral creditworthiness differs *structurally* from creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts: while the latter requires only *conditional* responsiveness to relevant right-making factors, moral creditworthiness plausibly requires *unconditional* responsiveness to such factors. (I say "*structural* difference" because it's a difference in the *way* in which responses relate to their right-making factors, not just a difference in the elements thus related.)

We can further clarify and consolidate this conclusion by considering how proponents of the skill view might respond to the foregoing argument. First, one might argue that the problem with Benny is not conditional responsiveness per se, but responsiveness conditional on *instrumental* desire—in this case, the desire to do what's morally right for the purpose of impressing Lucy. If Benny were *non*-instrumentally motivated to heed the relevant right-making factors—if he were moved to respond to these factors by a desire to do what's morally right for its own sake—then there would be no reason to deny him credit for doing the morally right things. If so, one might try to salvage the skill view by adding a further requirement: that credit-conferring manifestations of moral skill be conditional on *non*-instrumental desire.

The most obvious problem with this response is that imposing such a restriction seems completely *ad hoc*. In general, skillful success doesn't turn on whether the agent had a *non*-instrumental motivation for their performance. Surely, plumbers rarely (if ever) engage in fixing leaks for its own sake; rather, they do so to earn a living. But this doesn't make their work less skillful, nor does it make the successful exercises of their skills less creditworthy. Whether a skilled agent is motivated by an instrumental or a non-instrumental desire simply makes no difference as to whether they deserve credit for their performance. Hence, given how skills work in general, imposing a motivational restriction on credit-conferring instances of skillful success looks entirely arbitrary.

A second line of response is to dispute that Benny is genuinely responsive to the relevant moral factors *at all*. In the example, there is a mismatch between the support that the moral factors lend to Benny's actions and his disposition to act on these factors: the latter, but not the former, depends on the perceived effect that his actions have on Lucy's feelings for him. But such mismatch, one might claim, is incompatible with genuine responsiveness to moral considerations. To count as "genuinely responding" to moral right-making factors, one's responsiveness to these factors can't hinge on one's contingent desires or interests. Hence, one might claim that, contrary to what my

depiction of the case suggests, Benny isn't really responsive to the relevant right-making factors *at all*.

I don't disagree with the substance of this response. The problem, however, is that it trades on smuggling in a different notion of responsiveness—different from the notion familiar from examples of skillful success in sports, arts, and crafts. To see this, consider that there is a similar mismatch in Jenny's case. Whether or not one of Jenny's chess-moves is the *right* one to perform doesn't depend on how its performance would affect Magnus' feelings for her. But Jenny's responsiveness to the factors grounding the rightness of these moves *is* so dependent—she wouldn't have responded to these factors if she had not expected that doing so makes a positive impression on Magnus. Yet, and that's the important point, this sort of mismatch is fully *compatible* with Jenny being genuinely responsive to the relevant factors. This is simply how skills work: skillfully performing agents respond to the right-making features of their performance only *when* and *as long as* they are independently motivated to do so. So, by claiming that, on account of the relevant sort of mismatch, Benny lacks genuine responsiveness to relevant right-making factors, one is in fact moving beyond the skill model. One is tacitly introducing a notion of responsiveness that has no analogue in the realm of skillful action. In the end, I think this is the right move to make—or so I'll argue below. But for now, the important point is that the present response isn't so much a defense of the skill view but a renouncement of its core analogy.

Finally, one might argue that skills come in different kinds, and that moral skill is simply a very *special kind* of skill, one that differs from skillfulness at chess, plumbing, or playing the piano in that it equips its possessor with an *unconditional* responsiveness to relevant right-making factors. Obviously, though, this response concedes my main negative point: that the sorts of skills familiar from sports, arts, and crafts are the *wrong* model for understanding moral creditworthiness. Moreover, by continuing to treat moral excellence as a special case of skill, the response obscures the difference that separates moral excellence from the aforementioned skills. If moral excellence was really just a kind of skill, we should expect that it doesn't differ from paradigmatic skills any more than one skill differs from another. Yet, while athletic, artistic, and craft skills are *all* forms of conditional responsiveness, moral excellence presumably is not. This suggests that the difference runs deeper, and that moral excellence is in fact a distinctive kind of excellence—at least that's what I'll argue in the next section.

5 | OUTLINING A VIRTUE-BASED ACCOUNT OF MORAL CREDITWORTHINESS

In this last section, I'll begin to sketch an alternative account of moral creditworthiness, one that grounds such creditworthiness in virtue, not skill. A full defense of this account would require several more papers. Here, I'll focus on explaining how this account builds on the insights of the skill view while avoiding its difficulties.

5.1 | Varieties of excellence

To prepare the ground for this alternative, it's helpful to situate the skill view within a more general philosophical tendency, popular not just in moral psychology, but also in epistemology. According to this tendency, we can use *notions of excellence*—such as competence, skill, or virtue—to shed light on various important normative statuses of actions and beliefs (e.g., moral worth, knowledge, doxastic justification). Roughly, the unifying thought of this tendency is that what confers a

certain positive normative status upon an action or belief—e.g., what makes a right action morally worthy, or a true belief knowledge—is the fact that the relevant action or belief manifests an agent's pertinent practical or epistemic excellence. In each case, moreover, the appeal to excellence is (partly) motivated by an attempt to capture the sort of non-accidentality required for attaining the relevant normative status.[22]

In fact, I'm very sympathetic to this excellence-based approach. My complaint is just that the sorts of skills familiar from sports, arts, and crafts are the *wrong model* for understanding the sorts of excellences at work in moral and—as I've argued in Horst (2022a, 2022b)—epistemic achievements. I think that, to make good on the promises of the excellence-based approach, we need to recognize *different kinds* of excellences, and the *right* kind of excellence to understand moral (as well as epistemic) creditworthiness is virtue, not skill—at least, that's what I'm going to suggest in the remainder of this paper.

To begin with, consider how virtue differs from skill. While playing chess, you may deliberately refrain from performing what you know to be the right chess-move. As we saw, this doesn't count against your skillfulness at chess. You might just want to spare your young grandson the disappointment of defeat, or you might have accepted a bribe to let your opponent win. Now contrast this with virtue. Suppose you come across someone in need of your immediate help, there are no countervailing moral factors present, you recognize the situation for what it is, and you are perfectly capable of helping. If nonetheless you decide *not* to help, then this *does* raise questions about your virtuousness. At least, you won't restore our faith in your virtuousness by declaring that you refused to help *on purpose*—unlike in the case of skill, where you can rebut an accusation of lacking chess skill by pointing out that you refrained from performing the right chess move *on purpose*.[23]

I think that what best explains such observations is the following (partial) account of virtue:

> **Virtue**: Manifesting virtue is a matter of *unconditional* responsiveness to the factors that determine what counts as getting things right within the relevant normative domain, "unconditional" in the sense that one's responsiveness to these factors doesn't depend on a distinct motivation to heed them.

In a bit more detail: when and to the extent that an agent possesses a virtue, they are disposed to correctly respond to the balance of their situation's relevant right-making factors, and neither their being so disposed nor the manifestation of that disposition depends on a further desire to heed these factors. (In this sense, their responsiveness qualifies as "unconditional".) Thus, roughly, what we expect from a possessor of virtue is that they correctly respond to the right-making factors of their situation, and that they do so *unconditionally*—not just when and because they happen to have a distinct motivation to do so. Hence, unlike manifesting skill, manifesting virtue is incompatible with mere *conditional* responsiveness to relevant right-making factors. If an agent's responsiveness to moral considerations was conditional on, say, their desire to impress

[22] The most prominent example of this approach in epistemology is surely Ernest Sosa's work. But variants of the excellence-based approach have recently been applied to a wide range of normative phenomena beyond the traditional focus of virtue epistemology. See, e.g., Lord (2018), Lord and Sylvan (2020), Mantel (2017), Wedgwood (2017: ch.6), Schafer (2019), and Tenenbaum (2021).

[23] In putting the contrast between skill and virtue in this way, I follow Foot (1978). Foot, in turn, attributes this rendering of the contrast to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5).

their current love interest, this would disqualify their actions from counting as *manifestations* of virtue.

To be sure, possessors of virtue aren't invariably responsive to relevant moral factors. Just like possessing a skill, possessing a virtue is a matter of *degree*. (I take the degree of a virtue to be, roughly, a function of its strength and scope.) Thus, plausibly, even fairly virtuous agents have their blind spots—situations in which they are prone to stray from the balance of the relevant right-making factors. For example, you may regularly fail to do the right thing in certain situations because of a misguided desire to protect a friend.[24] Such failure will *reduce the degree* to which you can be considered to possess relevant virtue, especially if the failure is indeed systematic.[25] But it doesn't mean that you are *altogether* lacking in that virtue.[26]

Thus, it's important to note that virtue doesn't differ from skill in that possessors of virtue are necessarily more *reliable* in correctly responding to relevant right-making factors than possessors of skill. ("More reliable" in the sense of having a higher rate of correctly responding to relevant right-making factors across a range of actual and/or counterfactual situations.) Rather, the crucial difference lies in *how* they respond to these factors when they do—either conditional or not conditional on the presence of a distinct motivation to heed these factors. To illustrate, imagine a chess player who's not only supremely skilled, but also extremely competitive: they love winning at chess, and they love this more than anything else. We may then stipulate that, whenever the balance of the relevant right-making factors recommends a certain chess-move, this player responds by performing the recommended move. In this sense, the player is *extremely* reliable in tracking these factors across a vast range of (actual and counterfactual) situations. Still, this wouldn't make the player's performance an exercise of the kind of excellence I am calling "virtue". That's because their responsiveness to the relevant factors is still *conditional*—conditional on their love for success in chess. It's just that, in the imagined scenario, the relevant motivational condition is always met. By contrast, when an agent's ϕ-ing manifests their virtue, their ϕ-ing is an unconditional response to the factors that make ϕ-ing the right thing to do, in the sense that these factors are *motivationally sufficient* for the agent's response. Unlike in the case of skill, there's neither need nor room for a distinct motivation to heed these factors.

Finally, note that my account of virtue is perfectly *general*. This means that, depending on how we cash out the account's details (e.g., on how we specify the relevant right-making factors), we can arrive at different species of virtue, doing explanatory work in different normative domains. A *moral* virtue is one whose exercises are responses to specifically moral considerations, where the relevant responses paradigmatically consist in actions and intentions. But by substituting, say, *evidential* considerations for moral considerations and *beliefs* for actions and intentions, we can arrive at a specifically *epistemic* virtue—roughly, a kind of excellence whose possessor is *unconditionally* disposed to correctly respond to the balance of their evidential considerations by forming

[24] See Hursthouse (1999: ch.7) for extensive discussion of similar cases.

[25] Here virtue differs from skill: while deliberately refraining from making right chess-moves doesn't reduce the degree of one's skillfulness at chess, deliberately refraining from doing the morally right things surely does negatively affect the degree of one's virtuousness.

[26] In principle, I think, virtuous dispositions can be quite frail and narrow. This is controversial. But the important point is that the present view doesn't assume a conception of virtue that rules out the possibility of frail and narrow virtuous dispositions. More on this in §5.3.

the beliefs that these considerations support. The generality of the account will become relevant below.[27]

5.2 | A virtue-based account of moral creditworthiness

If this account of virtue is on the right track, we are in a position to propose the following virtue-based view of moral worth:

> **Moral Creditworthiness (Virtue View)**: You deserve moral credit for doing the morally right thing just when and because (a) you do so in response to the factors that make your action right, where (b) your response to these factors is a manifestation of a moral virtue.

This view resembles the skill view in that it, too, imposes a constraint on *how* one must respond to the relevant right-making factors if one is to be morally creditworthy: namely, by way of manifesting a certain kind of excellence. This sets these views apart from accounts of moral worth which do not include an explicit constraint of this sort (arguably, Markovits' 2010 and Schroeder's 2021 views). Moreover, the virtue view, too, avoids the Kantian's trouble with over-intellectualization. On the virtue view, non-accidental rightness is grounded in manifesting a certain kind of excellence, and manifesting that excellence is a matter of responding to the factors that *make* one's action right, not to rightness *itself*.[28] The crucial difference with the skill view lies in how the virtue view conceives of the relevant kind of excellence—in terms of virtue, not skill. And I think that, on account of this difference, the virtue view has two crucial advantages over the skill view: (1) it delivers (and explains) the correct verdict on cases like Benny, and (2) it plausibly generalizes to epistemic creditworthiness. Let me briefly comment on each point.

Regarding the first advantage, note that the virtue view provides us with another answer to the question of when and why doing the morally right thing is relevantly *non-accidental*: an agent's doing what is favored by the relevant right-making factors is relevantly non-accidental just when and because they respond to these factors by way of manifesting their moral virtue. Unlike the skill view, this view accounts for our intuitive verdict about Benny: that Benny is only *accidentally* doing the morally right thing(s). That's because Benny fails to manifest moral virtue: as we saw, he is only *conditionally* responsive to the relevant right-making factors, but manifesting virtue requires *unconditional* responsiveness to such factors. Hence, the virtue view captures the non-accidentality condition on morally creditworthy action better than the skill view.

To appreciate the second advantage, note first that, as many have argued, the notion of creditworthiness plausibly extends to belief.[29] As in the moral case, we can distinguish between

[27] Here it's also important to emphasize that I do *not* identify virtues with (intrinsic) desires, as do, e.g., Arpaly and Schroeder (2014). On my view, virtues are certain kinds of dispositions, some of which (i.e., *moral* virtues) can *manifest* in desires, but are not themselves desires. Bearing this in mind is crucial to see how my view can generalize to *epistemic* creditworthiness.

[28] That said, I take the virtue view to allow for various "intellectual" conditions on what it is to manifest virtue. For example, compatibly with rejecting the Kantian view, one might argue that, for an agent's response to relevant right-making factors to manifest (full) virtue, they must understand why their action is right, such that they are able to explain their action in terms of its right-making factors ("I stopped because they needed help"). For relevant discussion, see Hills (2015).

[29] See, e.g., Markovits (2010: 214), Way (2017: §1), Cunningham (2022: 388), and Schroeder (2021: 37).

believing what is right to believe (e.g., what the balance of one's evidence supports) and being creditworthy for so believing. Here a similar dialectic ensues. To be creditworthy for believing what your evidence supports, you must not only believe in response to the evidence that makes your belief epistemically right but do so *in the right way*.[30] And in epistemology, too, a prominent account of what it is to respond to one's evidence in the right way appeals to the notion of manifesting skill (competence, know-how).[31] This gets us the epistemic analogue of the skill view: an account of epistemically creditworthy belief according to which such belief is just a special case of skillful success. But this view faces the same problem as its moral counterpart. Given how skills work in general, the view cannot explain why we should withhold epistemic credit from a believer who is only *conditionally* responsive to their evidence. Nor can it explain why refraining to conform to one's evidence—as, say, in cases of wishful thinking—should count as an epistemic failure in the first place. Arguably, however, what we expect from an epistemically creditworthy believer is that they are *unconditionally* responsive to their evidence, not just *when* and *because* they happen to have a distinct motivation to heed their evidence (e.g., a desire to find out the truth about a given subject matter). And that's exactly what we get from an account of epistemically creditworthy belief, according to which such belief is a manifestation of one's *epistemic virtue*.[32] Hence, the virtue view delivers a plausible account, not just of moral creditworthiness, but also of epistemic creditworthiness.[33]

5.3 | Is the virtue view too demanding?

I want to end the sketch of the virtue view by briefly addressing a common objection to the relevance of virtue for an account of moral worth. The objection is that possessing virtue isn't *necessary* for acting with moral worth.[34] In support of this claim it is typically argued that one can be creditworthy for doing the morally right thing even when acting *out of character*.[35] For example, it seems possible that, on some occasion, a normally selfish person may perform a benevolent act (e.g., provide help in response to another person's needs) and be morally creditworthy for doing so. If so, this seems to show that, contrary to the virtue view, one need not possess—much less manifest—the virtue of benevolence in order to be morally creditworthy for performing a benevolent act.

[30] See Turri (2010) for many famous examples of responding to one's evidence in the wrong way—i.e., in such a way that one doesn't deserve credit for believing what one's evidence supports.

[31] For example, to rule out examples of responding to epistemic reasons in the wrong way, Sylvan and Sosa (2018) invoke the notion of manifesting epistemic competence, and they take the relevant notion of competence to be the one familiar from domains of skillful action: "examples of competences outside epistemology include the competence to hit archery targets, the competence to draw likenesses of faces, and the competence to navigate the New York City subway system" (Sylvan and Sosa 2018: 20, n. 6). Plausibly, manifesting each one of these competences is a matter of *conditional* responsiveness to a relevant range of facts (facts affecting the quality of one's archery shots, etc.)

[32] I develop and defend a virtue-based account of epistemic creditworthiness in Horst (2022a).

[33] On account of its generalizability to epistemic creditworthiness, the virtue view also enjoys a crucial advantage over the various *desire*-based accounts of moral worth in the literature, such as Sliwa (2016), Markovits (2010), or Arpaly and Schroeder (2014). That's because it's very implausible to assume that epistemic creditworthiness (e.g., doxastically justified belief) turns on a *desire* to believe what's epistemically right to believe, no matter whether we construe this as a *de dicto* or a *de re* desire. On this point, see also Schroeder (2021: 216-18).

[34] See, e.g., Markovits (2010: 240) and Hills (2009: 113).

[35] See, e.g., Hurka (2006) and Crisp (2015).

In response, I want to grant that, in principle, it is possible to be morally creditworthy when acting out of character. But, properly understood, this possibility doesn't undermine the virtue view. That's because the view assumes only a very modest conception of virtue, one that is independently defensible and compatible with (at least some cases of) creditworthy but out-of-character action. To bring this out, consider first an analogous objection to the skill view of chess credit. Even a generally lousy chess player may, on occasion, deserve credit for performing a right chess-move. Does this show that skillfulness at chess isn't necessary for creditworthy chess performance? No, not necessarily. Rather, such cases can be taken to highlight that, as noted before, skillfulness comes in *degrees*.[36] Players are more or less competent at playing chess: Magnus Carlsen marks one extreme of this range, the chess novice who is just getting a hang of the game marks the other. But players on this continuum all possess the same kind of skill, just to differing degrees. If so, we need not think of the lousy but creditworthy player as someone who is *completely* lacking in skillfulness. Rather, they may simply possess (and manifest) a very low degree of skillfulness (e.g., they tend to get it right only when it's obvious what the right move is), just enough skill to render the rightness of their present performance relevantly non-accidental, but far less than would be expected of a good or even average player.

I think a similar response is available to proponents of the virtue view. Recall that virtues, just like skills, come in *degrees*. This means not only that there are degrees of possessing virtue, but also that there are degrees (i.e., no sharp boundaries) between lacking and possessing virtue.[37] This makes room for the idea that agents can possess virtues to a degree that falls *far short* of the degree required for possessing good character traits. We may be reluctant to *call* such agents (or their dispositions) "virtuous", but the important point is that they possess flawed versions of the very same dispositions that those we consider truly virtuous possess. If so, the virtue view can allow for—and, indeed, explain what's going on in—cases of creditworthy but out-of-character action. In such cases, the agent's response to their situation manifests *some*—perhaps minimal—degree of virtuousness, enough virtue to explain why their response isn't just accidentally right, but far less than would be required for possessing a good character trait. Given this picture, we can think of the normally selfish but creditworthy agent, not as someone who is *completely* lacking in sensitivity to considerations of benevolence, but as someone whose responsiveness to the needs of others is severely limited by their far stronger concern for their own well-being. As a result, when their own well-being is at stake, their disposition to respond to the needs of others is regularly blocked from manifesting. On other occasions, however, they may well manifest this disposition in responding to someone else's needs, and when they do, they deserve moral credit for their right action.[38] After all, if they didn't manifest *any* dispositional sensitivity to whether the factors on which they act make their action right, then it *does* look like a mere accident that they are responding to factors that make their action right. And if this were just an accident, then they wouldn't deserve moral credit for doing the right thing.

I don't mean to suggest that friends and foes of the virtue view will no longer disagree about particular cases—about whether or not the rightness of some agent's morally right action is too fluky to be creditworthy. Nor, of course, am I denying that many virtue theorists endorse a more demanding conception of virtue, one that identifies virtuous dispositions with good

[36] Cunningham (2022: 396) can be understood to take this line.

[37] See Russell (2009: §4.2) for a helpful discussion and defense of this claim.

[38] For this point and further helpful discussion of how an agent's moral dispositions can be impaired, see Mantel (2017) and Way (2017).

character-traits.[39] But the crucial fact, for us, is that neither the contrast with skill nor the present virtue-based proposal of creditworthiness depends on assuming such a demanding conception. Thus, I think that the virtue view is in fact well-placed to strike the right balance between accounting for the non-accidentality condition on moral creditworthiness, while leaving room for the possibility of morally flawed but occasionally creditworthy agents.

To sum up, I've argued for two main claims: (1) that modeling moral creditworthiness on the sort of skillful success familiar from sports, arts, and crafts delivers wrong verdicts as to when moral success is relevantly non-accidental, and (2)—more tentatively—that morally creditworthy action is best understood in terms of manifesting virtue, not skill. Thus, what I hope to have achieved in this paper is to bring out an important structural difference between moral creditworthiness and creditworthiness in sports, arts, and crafts—a difference that has been insufficiently appreciated in recent discussions of moral worth and normative achievements more generally.[40]

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[39] But see, e.g., Setiya (2007: 74-77) and Sosa (2017: ch. 11) for defending similarly modest conceptions of virtue.

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