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# Practical Skills and Practical Wisdom in Virtue

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## ABSTRACT

This paper challenges a frequent objection to conceptualizing virtues as skills, which is that skills are merely capacities to act well, while virtues additionally require being properly motivated to act well. I discuss several cases that purport to show the supposed motivational difference by drawing our attention to the differing intuitions we have about virtues and skills. However, this putative difference between virtue and skill disappears when we switch our focus in the skill examples from the performance to the performer. The ends of a practice can be used to judge not only the skilfulness of a performance, but also the motivational commitment of the performer. Being virtuous requires both acting well and being properly motivated to do so, which can be captured by viewing virtues as the moral subset of skills. In claiming this, though, I resist the idea that there is no element in virtue that is not found in other skills. Virtue requires being practically wise about how practices fit into a conception of the good life, but other skills do not. I further argue that this difference doesn't undermine the 'virtue as skill' thesis, as it's the connection between virtues and morality that requires practical wisdom.

**KEYWORDS** ethics; expertise; moral psychology; practical wisdom; skill; virtue

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I challenge a long held objection to understanding virtues as practical skills (see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and more recently, for example, Zagzebski [1996] and Watson [2004]). The objection is that virtues involve dispositions to act well, while skills are mere capacities to act well and thus lack a key motivational element found in virtues.<sup>1</sup> This difference is cited as a reason why virtues cannot be understood as skills, despite their many similarities. I argue that this objection fails to undermine the 'virtue as skill' thesis, for the following two reasons. First, the psychological research on expertise shows that motivation is one of the most important factors in skill acquisition. Second, performers of a skill can be evaluated on the extent to which they are committed to achieving the ends of their practice. However, there is one element of virtue that is not commonly found in skills, which is the need for practical wisdom. Despite this difference, I argue that virtues can be understood as the moral subset of practical skills, as it's the connection between virtues and morality that requires practical wisdom.

<sup>1</sup> This critique may be somewhat blunted by the recent situationist challenge to virtue ethics, since it may not be possible to develop broad dispositions to act well in the way that is presupposed by virtue ethics.

In tackling the objection that skills are mere capacities, I briefly cover what the current psychological research on expertise reveals about the role of motivation in acquiring expertise. It's important in this debate to clear up any misconceptions about the acquisition of skills and expertise, and in so doing I show how similar skills are to virtues. Next, I reflect on three cases that have been used to illustrate the supposed motivational difference between virtues and skills. The cases draw our attention to the differing intuitions that we have about virtues and skills in cases where there's a failure to act wholeheartedly, where one acts well but for the wrong reason, or where one intentionally acts poorly. It is claimed that these cases involve behaviour that counts against the possession of virtue, but not against skill, owing to deficiencies in the motivations of the person acting. So, a chess player is no less skilled for throwing a chess game, but a person is less kind if she chooses to act cruelly on occasion. However, the putative difference between virtue and skill disappears when we switch our perspective from the performance to the performer. The end of a skill domain can be used to evaluate both the effectiveness of the performance and the commitment of the performer. For example, a doctor may perform an unnecessary medical procedure with a high level of skill, but nonetheless count as a bad doctor for having recommended the procedure merely to make more money. Virtue assessment involves an inquiry into both the actions and the motivations of a person. Skill assessment can, and frequently does, involve both of these kinds of inquiries. Thus, the kinds of evaluations that we make with respect to virtue can be captured on the skill model.

Nevertheless, I argue that there is an important aspect of virtue that is not captured by skills and expertise, although this aspect isn't revealed by the above cases. Virtues require being practically wise about what is good and bad for people, and about how various practices fit into an overall conception of the good life. In contrast, skills do not require making these kinds of value judgments. The end to be pursued in any particular skill is essentially fixed, as in chess it's winning the game; and even being a committed expert in a skill (such as chess playing) does not require reflection on how the practice of that skill integrates into a well-lived life. However, while I admit that virtues have an aspect that is not found in other skills, this does not necessarily undermine the skill model of virtue. Virtues can be understood as *specifically moral skills*, and it's this connection to morality that brings in the role of practical wisdom.

## 2. Expertise and Motivation

The most common objection to the idea that virtues are skills is based on the thought that skills are capacities that you have regardless of whether or not you are motivated to act skilfully, while virtues require that you are always (or at least usually) motivated to perform well. The psychological research on expertise, however, shows that virtues cannot be contrasted with skills merely on the ground that one requires that you be strongly motivated to act well while the other does not.<sup>2</sup> Such research reveals that we need first to understand what is required to achieve expertise, as it turns out to be a long and difficult path, which requires that one is persistently motivated to act well and overcome obstacles over extended periods of time. Expertise cannot be achieved without a serious commitment to high levels of performance. The expertise literature shows,

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, when I mention 'research' I'll be referring to the psychological research on expertise.

then, that skills and virtue are not as different as has been previously suggested, which sheds new light on the ‘virtue as skill’ thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Probably one of the most commonly understood aspects of skill acquisition is that acquiring a skill takes ‘practice, practice, practice’.<sup>4</sup> How much practice? Frequent estimates place the amount of experience necessary to achieve expertise in any field at 10 years or 10,000 hours [Horn and Masunaga 2006: 601]. However, mere experience isn’t sufficient for achieving expertise. People reach a certain level of acceptable performance, after which further experience does not lead to any improvement in performance. Additional experience may make performing at that level of skilfulness easier, but that is not the same as actually improving one’s performance. Thus, the number of years of experience one has is not a sufficient predictor of performance. While having 10 years of experience may be necessary for expertise, it is not sufficient.

What more is needed? Research indicates that a particular kind of practice is necessary for expertise, as it turns out that the quality of the practice matters just as much as the quantity. Improving your level of skill requires not the mere repetition of things that you already know how to do, but instead continually striving to do things that you currently cannot do. This kind of experience is referred to as ‘deliberate practice’, and it’s roughly 10,000 hours of deliberate practice that’s needed for expertise. Deliberate practice requires having specific goals in mind for improvement, rather than a more general goal of ‘getting better’. There need to be specific aspects of your performance that you go about planning how to improve, which then structures the kind of deliberate practice in which you engage [ibid.]. As you engage in deliberate practice you seek out feedback about your performance, in the hopes of identifying and correcting errors. You keep monitoring your progress as you practise. If you don’t seem to be progressing, you may need to redesign your practice sessions. If instead you keep up a steady progression, then at some point you reach your goal. At that point, it’s time to set out a new goal that you will strive to accomplish. This is how you improve upon your current level of performance. You need to be strongly motivated to push yourself towards ever-higher levels of performance.

Self-regulating behaviour is important in acquiring expertise because feedback cannot come merely from others, as crucial as that is in the early stages of skill acquisition. ‘Because high levels of skill must be practiced and adapted personally to dynamic contexts, aspiring experts need to develop a self-disciplined approach to learning and practice to gain consistency’ [Zimmerman 2006: 706]. Often there won’t be a coach around when you are exercising your skill, and so you need to learn how to provide feedback yourself on your performance. Therefore, it is important for deliberate practice that you are able to monitor your own behaviour during such sessions, so that you can provide feedback for yourself. You cannot merely leave it to others to push you and to provide feedback on your behaviour.

Experts need not only to monitor their own behaviour; they also must monitor for changes in the environment where they are working [Feltovich, Prietula, and Ericsson 2006: 56]:

<sup>3</sup> Expertise refers to the highest level of skill acquisition, for the possession of a skill is a matter of degree.

<sup>4</sup> A skill can roughly be defined as a learned or acquired ability to achieve a desired outcome. It’s important to note that a skill involves some flexibility in how one goes about achieving that outcome (to cope with changes in one’s environment), as well as a broad view of the outcome (as in learning how to speak a language, rather than a single phrase).

This kind of monitoring prevents blind alleys, errors, and the need for extensive back-up and retraction, thus ensuring overall progress to a goal. In addition, these same kinds of monitoring behaviors are critical throughout the process of acquiring knowledge and skills on which expertise depends.

This is especially relevant when experts face situations that contain features with which they have little prior experience. Because expertise develops out of concrete experience, experts will be at their best when facing relatively familiar situations. Thus, experts also need to be aware of when they are facing situations that include unique features, so as to adjust their performance. While they may not perform as well in truly unique situations, they will still fare better than novices. Furthermore, once expertise has been achieved in a skill, the same kind of deliberate practice and self-monitoring is necessary to retain expert performance. While everyday wisdom teaches us that once you achieve expertise you never really lose it, research on age and expertise shows that ‘maintaining skills is as effortful as acquiring them in the first place’ [Krampe and Charness 2006: 733]. Expertise requires some level of routine practice to maintain it; otherwise, the level of skill degrades over time.

Given the overall difficulty of achieving expertise, one of the most important factors for determining whether someone can attain that level of performance is motivation. ‘Unless a person wants to pursue the difficult path that leads to the development of talent, neither innate potential nor all the knowledge in the world will suffice’ [Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen 1993: 31–2]. Not only does an aspiring expert need to be strongly motivated to perform well in the face of adversity and over a long period of time; even after achieving expertise, a high level of motivation is still required to maintain one’s expertise. Thus, skills are not accurately characterized as capacities that one could have regardless of whether one is motivated to act skilfully.<sup>5</sup> Similar to our expectations for acquiring virtue, achieving expertise and maintaining it requires being consistently motivated to act well.

However, it might be objected at this point that it’s not clear that virtue actually requires motivation in the sense that is displayed in expertise—namely, of having a drive to improve one’s performance and to continue to engage in practice.<sup>6</sup> A defence of the skill model on this point can be found in Julia Annas’s [2011] recent treatment of this subject, where she argues that what she terms ‘the drive to aspire’ is fundamental to both skill and virtue.<sup>7</sup> Both skills and virtues are teachable, and Annas points out that ‘aspiration leads the learner to strive to *improve*, to do what he is doing better rather than taking it over by rote from the teacher. This is what a lot of practice is about’ [ibid.: 18]. Virtue, while considered to involve habitual actions, is not mere mindless or rote repetition. It takes purposeful effort and experience to acquire virtue. As Annas argues [ibid.: 25],

<sup>5</sup> As one anonymous reviewer noted, though, not all goals necessarily require this kind of motivation if they are to be achieved. Frequently, it takes a lot of commitment to become wealthy or to stay thin, for example. However, some people can achieve and maintain goals of getting rich or being thin without even trying—say, because of an inheritance or by happening to have a high metabolism. Such people would not have then developed the same kind of commitment. But expertise is not like this, since even those who seem to have a natural talent in an area still require lots of experience and practice (and thus commitment) if they are to acquire expertise in that area.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to an *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* associate editor for raising this objection.

<sup>7</sup> While my account of virtue as a skill differs in some important respects from her account, on this point we are in agreement.

[t]he drive to aspire stresses the equally important aspect of coming to understand what we are learning, the move to self-direction, and the point that we are always improving (or at least sustaining) virtue. Virtue is not a state you achieve and then sit back, with nothing further to do.

The possession of virtue is considered to be a matter of degree, and so for anyone there is always the possibility of improvement.

It could be argued in response that a perfectly virtuous person would over time gradually lose the motivation to improve, given the attainment of perfect virtue. But there are reasons for doubting that this will be true of even the perfectly virtuous ideal. It's not obvious that a fully virtuous person necessarily recognizes that she has no need for improvement, and thus she may always operate under the motivation to improve herself whenever possible. It's also plausible that thoughts like 'I'm perfect' or 'I have no need of improvement' are just the thoughts one would have to learn to avoid on the path to developing virtue. In order to become fully virtuous, one would need to be motivated by self-improvement and a commitment to excellence; and, given that these are dispositions cultivated over decades, they would not immediately vanish as soon as a person achieves complete virtue. Finally, virtue, like expertise, still needs to be maintained over time. As Annas notes, 'virtue is a dynamic, rather than a static, disposition' [ibid.].<sup>8</sup>

## 2.1 Case 1 – *Less Than Wholehearted Performances*

Despite the importance of being motivated to act well in the acquisition and maintenance of expertise, motivation does not seem to play a role in evaluating performances in quite the same way as it would do for evaluating virtue. As Abrol Fairweather remarks [2012: 678], 'To have an excellence of character requires a normative commitment to the end one reliably attains, whereas to have a skill simply requires that the end attained is due to a competence involving training, understanding and discipline.' When assessing one's level of skill, all that seems to matter is whether one is able to act effectively. Certainly the performance of a skilled act will be judged according to whether it meets the end pursued—for example, in tennis, whether you won the game. But, when assessing one's level of virtue (unlike one's skills), it also seems to matter to what extent a person is motivated or committed to act effectively. For example, Gary Watson [2004: 287] suggests something along these lines when he claims this:

Indifference in a performance doesn't count against one's skill, whereas a less than wholehearted effort to save someone's life does impugn my moral character. Talent and skill are fully displayed only in wholehearted performances, whereas the aretaic perspective is also concerned with the 'will,' that is, with one's purposes, ends, choices, concerns, cares, attachments, and commitments. Not trying can be a failure of virtue but not of skill.

Judgments of skilfulness are based only on 'wholehearted performances', and not on the degree to which one is motivated to give such performances. As Watson points out, my failure to achieve the end of a skill does not necessarily count against my being skilled. For example, let's say that I'm an expert tennis player but that today I'm just not

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<sup>8</sup> This also helps to address concerns about whether one could, at least conceptually, possess skill or virtue without needing experience, practice, and the commitment that goes along with them. Neither expertise nor virtue is a static condition for which one need not possess the 'drive to aspire'. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

motivated to ‘give it my all’. Today, on the court, I do not perform at the level of expertise. What can you infer about my level of skill from this performance? You can’t infer that I’m not an expert, since my performance itself is consistent both with being a merely competent player giving a wholehearted performance and with being an expert giving a half-hearted performance. Of course, without evidence to the contrary, it would be reasonable for you to assume from this performance that I’m not an expert. If I want to prove to you that I am an expert, I have to deliver an expert-level performance. What matters for assessing my actual level of skill is what I can do when I’m giving a wholehearted performance. Choosing to give a half-hearted performance doesn’t make me any less of an expert. The same goes for my not trying at all.<sup>9</sup>

As Watson points out, the same is not true of our assessments of virtue. Half-hearted attempts at kindness, or not even attempting to be honest, indicate some failure to possess those virtues. The choice not to give a wholehearted performance with respect to virtue shows that one is not fully virtuous. Furthermore, if you are not convinced that I am fully kind, because of a half-hearted attempt by me at kindness today, then I am unlikely to convince you otherwise with a wholehearted attempt at kindness tomorrow. My lack of commitment to being kind seems to undermine my claim to being kind, in a way in which my lack of commitment to playing tennis well does not undermine my claim to being skilled. Assessments of level of skill depend on what you do when you give a wholehearted performance, and not directly on the extent to which you are motivated to give such performances. Of course, you won’t be able to attain expertise without being strongly motivated to act well in the face of difficult challenges over a long duration of time. But the half-hearted performances won’t count as evidence of a lack of skill, in the way that such performances would count as evidence of a lack of virtue.

## 2.2 Case 2 – *Acting for Some Other End*

Given what was said above, will our intuitions about virtues and skills coincide in cases where people are giving wholehearted performances? Not necessarily. Consider, for example, a highly skilled doctor who practices medicine primarily for the sake of wealth, rather than for the sake of healing others. Medicine has as its aim healing patients, and presumably most doctors practise medicine for this reason. But doctors are also paid a lot of money, and surely some of them entered the profession in order to become wealthy. Of course, such doctors will only become wealthy if they become experts at healing patients, and so will need to be focused on the welfare of their patients (especially in the middle of surgery). But it does not appear to count against the surgeon’s level of expertise if we discover that she is motivated ultimately by wealth, so that improving the welfare of the patient is for her only a means to an end, rather than the end itself.

However, it would count against someone’s possession of kindness if we were to find out that all of the putatively kind acts were motivated out of some selfish desire, even if the person was reliable at performing kind acts. This point marks this concern with acting for specific ends as being different from the earlier kind of example with which

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, one could not become an expert without ‘giving it one’s all’ consistently over many years. But that’s compatible with choosing not to do so on some occasions. But if one chooses too frequently not to try hard, then one would start to lose one’s expertise.

Watson was concerned, where there was a failure to try hard enough (or to try at all). That is, there could be a concern with the ends that motivate the action, even if there is no failure to be motivated to do one's best. This appears to have been one of the reasons why Aristotle thought that virtues were not skills, despite the numerous analogies that he drew between these two. He argues that acting virtuously requires having specific ends that motivate the action. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out the following conditions for acting as a virtuous person would act [1105a29–34]:

1. Doing what is virtuous (doing the act that is considered honest, brave, moderate, etc.).
2. The agent who acts has a certain disposition:
  - (a) the agent knows what s/he does;
  - (b) the agent intends to do what s/he does and intends to do it for its own sake;
  - (c) the agent acts with certainty and firmness.

An example of an agent who satisfies only condition (1) is someone who, only by luck, does something that is virtuous. An example of an agent who satisfies only conditions (1) and (2a) is someone who does what is virtuous—but for the sake of some other end, such as honour or money. An example of an agent who satisfies all of the conditions except (2c) is someone who is in the process of acquiring a virtue but who has not yet had the experience necessary to form a virtuous habit. To act as a virtuous person would act requires one to satisfy all of the above criteria.

It is condition (2b) that appears to mark an important difference between virtues and skills, for that condition is not considered a requirement for expertise in a skill. Again, a doctor can achieve expertise in medicine, and can perform well, even though she does so for the end of wealth rather than the end of promoting the patient's welfare. We need not inquire into whether the doctor is practising medicine for its own sake in order to assess whether she is an expert. On the other hand, we do need to inquire about the ends being pursued when assessing a putatively virtuous act. If it is revealed that the action was motivated by a selfish end, then this undermines the claim that it was a virtuous act.

### 2.3 Case 3 – *Intentionally Acting Wrongly*

This consideration of the ends of action connects to the last example that was used in order to illustrate differences between virtues and skills. The example concerns our differing intuitions about a case where someone intentionally does wrong. It seems as though doing something wrong would count against one's level of skill, unless we discover that the person did wrong intentionally. For example, a chess master might make a wrong move that causes her to lose a game. Normally, this would signal that she is less skilled than her opponent, unless you were to find out that she intentionally made the wrong move (say, because she was throwing the game for the purposes of illegal betting).<sup>10</sup> However, the same isn't true of virtue—say, when someone intentionally acts

<sup>10</sup>In fact, it might take a high level of skill to bring this about—ending the game in a particular way without this being too obvious.



cruelly. As with the other examples, when it comes to assessing one's level of virtue it matters that you're motivated in the right way.

Bob Roberts considers this argument, and tries to claim that virtues and skills are actually on a par here. He thinks that the intuitions about virtue that are described above are mistaken [1984: 241]:

It is of course true that an action does not become any the less immoral by being intentional; and so where doing the moral thing (say, being compassionate) requires the exercise of a skill virtue (say, patience), the fact that one's failure of patience was intentional is no moral exculpation. But claiming that the failure to exercise patience was intentional would defend against the accusation of lacking patience.

While you may still have done wrong by failing to be compassionate, Roberts is claiming that it was due, not to a lack of patience, but rather to the failure to choose to exercise patience. However, it's not clear why this would be so. The virtues are concerned with motivation, and the choice not to exercise patience—when it is required for acting morally—seems like a failure actually to be patient.<sup>11</sup> Choosing to act cruelly, for example, undermines the claim to have the virtue of kindness, perhaps even more so if the cruelty was intentional rather than accidental. Aristotle noted this difference between virtues and skills (or *techné*, in his terms) when he argued that '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' [1140b23–24].<sup>12</sup> With respect to skills, if two people make the same mistake, but one did so intentionally and the other did so without knowing how to act better, then the latter looks less skilled than the former.

### 3. Responsiveness to the Distinctive Demands of a Skill

Although these three cases point to an important distinction between virtues and skills, there is a way to bring our views about skills more in line with those of virtues. If we switch our evaluations from the performance to the performer, then it looks like we can evaluate the performer in a way that brings in concerns about motivational commitments. Returning to the example of less-than-wholehearted performances, Watson suggests the following [2004: 287]:

My half-hearted effort on the tennis court would not support a negative evaluation of my proficiencies at that sport. Nevertheless, it might bear negatively on me as a tennis player. One can be 'good at' playing tennis without being overall a good tennis player. A good tennis player, overall, possesses not only a high level of skill but, among other things, a commitment to the game, a responsibility to its distinctive demands. (In this way, 'good tennis player' functions rather like 'good human being'.)

A good performer, as distinguished from a good performance, displays not only a 'feel for the game' but also a 'commitment to the game'. As another example of criticizing less-than-wholehearted performances, we would likely regard a doctor who gives half-hearted attempts at surgery as being a bad doctor, even if she can wholeheartedly perform surgery with expertise. Likewise for a doctor in an emergency room who doesn't treat a patient, simply because she doesn't feel like doing so. These doctors are not

<sup>11</sup> While you might have the capacity to be patient in some sense, in so far as patience is a virtue your demonstrating that you have it requires more than mere capacity.

<sup>12</sup> My quotations from Aristotle are from Aristotle [1984].

being responsive to the distinctive demands of medicine, and so we could criticize them for their lack of commitment, as we would do if someone was to act half-heartedly with respect to a virtue like kindness. Watson's approach closes the initial gap between judgments of expertise and virtue, as the expert can also be assessed in aretaic terms, where a failure of motivation does count against one being a good performer.

This approach also appears to work for the cases of acting for some other end and of intentionally acting wrongly. In regard to the case of performing well but for some other end, consider again the doctor who practices medicine to gain wealth. If such a doctor were more likely to recommend expensive but unnecessary medical procedures, we would likely think that she was not a good doctor, even though we would not deny her expertise at performing those procedures. Being responsive to the distinctive demands of your practice requires more than just giving wholehearted performances. The case of intentionally acting wrongly—such as a chess master throwing a game—can also be handled by this approach. Aristotle is right that there is something better about, for example, the chess master who goes wrong intentionally than about the chess player who is trying hard but goes wrong unintentionally, in that the former is more skilled than the latter. But the latter is better in the sense of displaying a commitment to the game. The judgments we have with respect to the cases of virtue can be duplicated in the cases of skill if we evaluate the performer and not just the performance.

In taking this step, we need to reject both the viewing of skills as mere capacities and the viewing of virtues as merely motivational states. Being virtuous requires both knowing how to act well and being motivated to do so,<sup>13</sup> and this can be captured on the skill model of virtue. The ends of a practice can be used to judge not only the effectiveness of a performance, but also the commitment of the performer. In exercising a skill, one is already subject to being evaluated as to whether one has the proper motivations, as in the case of the doctor recommending unnecessary medical procedures. While these three cases capture the importance of being motivated in the right way, this does not require us to give up on the skill model altogether, even though that is the conclusion usually drawn from these cases. We do not need to reach beyond a discussion of skills and expertise to incorporate a concern for the responsiveness to the demands of a practice.

#### 4. Practical Wisdom and Practical Skills

Despite the arguments given above for treating judgments about expertise as on a par with ones about virtue, there is another important feature of virtue that may not be so easily captured on the skill model. All virtues are said to require practical wisdom, where practical wisdom concerns what is good and what is bad for human beings. Practical wisdom, it must be admitted, is at times a rather unwieldy concept, since it often has so many distinct elements associated with it. As I will argue, some of these elements are explicable on a skill model, while one important element is not. To get clearer on what's involved with practical wisdom, it will be helpful to explore first the ways in which expertise already captures some elements of what is traditionally associated with practical wisdom. These elements are well-described in what Rosalind Hursthouse [2006] calls her 'mundane' account of practical wisdom, where she focuses on the more general knowledge and capacities that are necessary for being practically wise. Her

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<sup>13</sup>This isn't to deny that we can assess whether an act is virtuous or instead vicious without knowing the actor's motivations (e.g. whether she is doing the right thing but for the wrong reason).

account involves reconstructing some of Aristotle's arguments about the different elements in practical wisdom. Points of comparison and contrast come out in Aristotle's distinction between two types of intellectual virtue—*techne* (expertise) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). One obvious overlap is that both require experience to develop. How is *phronesis* shaped by experience? Hursthouse suggests that [ibid.: 292]

[i]t seems plausible to suppose the well-brought-up but inexperienced tend to think about what the virtues require and the vices rule out in terms of rather conventional generalizations or paradigms. It is only with the experience of exceptions—when an admired figure does what you thought only a pusillanimous coward would do and is widely praised, when the action of someone you respect surprises you until she explains why she did it, when you hear accounts of such examples—that you come to the more sophisticated understanding—the discernment—that the *phronimos* has ... So there is our first bit of help about how to get closer to full virtue—briefly, don't rely unthinkingly on generalizations about, and paradigms of, the virtues and vices, take good note of the exceptions when you come across them, and watch out for others.

This bears a striking resemblance to moving through the earliest stages of skill acquisition—starting with simple generalizations, and then being brought to see the exceptions through experience [Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004].

Further parallels to expertise emerge when Hursthouse discusses how experience also shapes our capacity to 'see' a situation correctly. This perceptual capacity is [2006: 299]

absolutely requisite for finding out what 'the situation' is in many central cases in which action is called for. It is needed when the situation is right in front of us, in all its detail, and if we fail to perceive, or misperceive, one of the details, as the inexperienced do, we will make the insensitive blunders that the inexperienced, with natural virtue, typically make.

Experience teaches us which factors of a situation are relevant for action, and this is clearly true in the case of expertise. Importantly, reading a situation correctly is not meant to be cast here in strictly moral terms, since this includes picking up on generic details such as what people seem to be thinking or feeling—for example, knowing when somebody is 'putting on a brave face'. In short, one needs to be good at reading other people's reactions correctly, and this takes experience. Furthermore, this capacity is useful for everyone, no matter whether their ends are morally good or instead morally bad. Hursthouse notes that [ibid.: 299–300]

once we recognize the fact that the *phronimos* and some of the wicked may share this perceptual capacity, we should find it unproblematic that there are other sorts of 'non-moral' details that experience will enable the *phronimos* to perceive which the inexperienced fail to perceive, and thereby blunder.

Thus, much of the knowledge necessary for correct moral action is itself non-moral, and could also be put to use in the service of immoral ends. For example, a generous person should be able to perceive people's needs, in order to know what kind of help they could most use. However, there are also psychopaths who share a similar ability to anticipate people's needs but who put that ability to use in taking advantage of people's vulnerabilities.<sup>14</sup> That ability to anticipate needs by itself is not morally valuable, and so the psychopath does not count as partially virtuous for possessing it.

<sup>14</sup>My thanks to an anonymous reviewer who raised this helpful example. It also illustrates how there is more to generosity than just a motivational component. Correctly recognizing people's needs is crucial in being generous, since one could err in trying to be generous by focusing on far less important needs, or by underestimating or overestimating what it takes to meet those needs. Furthermore, for example, it would not count as generous to give the aforementioned psychopaths weapons, even if that's what they want or value most.

Recognition of the non-moral details can be the difference between successful action and well-intentioned but unsuccessful action. Hursthouse points out that the kind of case that shows this side of practical wisdom is one in which the person with practical wisdom succeeds where a merely well-intentioned person fails. Take the classic case of rescuing a child from drowning, this time in a rushing river. The difference would not show if we compared a person willing to jump in to rescue the child with one who is not willing. Rather, the merely well-intentioned person immediately jumps into the water and starts swimming after the child (but can't keep up with the speed of the current); whereas the practically wise person runs along the river bank in order to get far ahead of the child before jumping into the water. Hursthouse's point is that the merely well-intentioned person does not know how best to save the child. Both persons share the same goal and the motivation to achieve that goal, but the person with practical wisdom knows best how to go about achieving that goal. In this respect, the overlap between being skilled and being practically wise should be readily apparent, as acquiring skills is just a process of acquiring knowledge how to achieve a desired goal. So, Hursthouse raises our awareness of the more technical aspects of practical wisdom and virtue, which are more familiar to us in the examples of skill.

At this point, there may be so much overlap that it seems like there isn't a *techné-phronesis* distinction *per se*, but rather that *phronesis* just is *techné* geared towards moral conduct. Aristotle seems to suggest as much when he describes being clever [1144a24–7],

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.

Hursthouse raises this concern about the *techné-phronesis* line being blurred, as she notes that practical wisdom may seem to reduce to 'expertise in 'technical' deliberation gained from experience, which in the virtuous happens to be directed to the right end' [2006: 305]. This issue also arises in the Dreyfus account of skill acquisition [Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990; Flyvbjerg 1991], since they view ethical expertise as a matter of *techné* applied to human affairs. On this, Bent Flyvbjerg [2004: 288] cautions that

[s]ome interpretations of Aristotle's intellectual virtues leave doubt as to whether *phronesis* and *techné* are distinct categories, or whether *phronesis* is just a higher form of *techné* or know-how (for such an interpretation and its problematization, see Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1990 and [Flyvbjerg] 1991, pp. 102–107). Aristotle is clear on this point, however. Even if both *phronesis* and *techné* involve skill and judgement, one type of intellectual virtue cannot be reduced to the other; *phronesis* is about value judgement in specific situations.

Flyvbjerg is arguing here that skills are properly classified as mere expressions of instrumental rationality, while practical wisdom requires value rationality—not just selecting the correct means, but reasoning correctly about what ends to follow. So, while there is a lot of overlap between expertise and what is attributed to practical wisdom, such as those elements found in Hursthouse's 'mundane' account of practical wisdom, there remains the crucial difference that expertise does not involve making value judgments about the end being pursued.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>It should be noted that Hursthouse is not claiming that the mundane aspects are all there is to practical wisdom, as she also believes that practical wisdom involves making value judgments.

With skills, the end being pursued is essentially fixed—in chess, it’s winning the game. Skills involve knowing how to achieve the end of the skill, but this doesn’t involve making value judgments about the end being pursued (say, about the worth of playing chess)—which is part of *phronesis*. Even if we can evaluate an expert qua performer, being a good performer doesn’t require *phronesis*, since it doesn’t involve making value judgments about the end being pursued. It is still limited to Watson’s idea of being responsive to the distinctive demands of the practice. While nobody will be able to acquire expertise without this responsiveness, it does not require making value judgments with respect to the ends of the practice. For example, suppose that on the way to a tennis match the expert tennis player comes across the scene of an automobile accident, and that she decides to help the accident victims even though she knows that she will miss her match. This involves her making a value judgment about the relative worth of playing tennis versus saving lives—placing that activity within broader concerns of living well—and so draws on *phronesis*. Presumably, though, we wouldn’t think that this makes her any better qua tennis player; and so that element of *phronesis* is not part of being an expert performer, even in the robust sense described by Watson. Virtues, unlike skills, do require value judgments about the ends that are being pursued in action for their exercise and possession.

Furthermore, this kind of value judgment about the relative worth of playing tennis is not involved when the question before the tennis player is merely whether to give a wholehearted or instead a halfhearted performance on the court today. That’s a matter of being responsive to the distinctive demands of the practice, without making any value judgments about the worth of the practice. To give another example, there seem to be skills that on the whole are morally vicious, like torture. One could become an expert at torturing, and remain responsive to the distinctive demands of the practice, without having *phronesis*. If you added *phronesis* as part of the expert level of skill you would then realize that you ought not to be doing it all—that is, you ought not to be responsive to the distinctive demands of the practice of torture. In sum, while expertise involves knowing how to act well, and we can evaluate experts with respect to their commitments to their skill domain, this still falls short of exhibiting *phronesis*. This is the distinctive difference that remains between virtues and skills, even though the initial three types of case that were used in objecting to the ‘virtue as skill’ thesis can be handled by Watson’s suggestion of evaluating performers on their commitments to their skill domain.

## 5. Retaining the ‘Virtue as Skill’ Thesis

The final point is that this one crucial difference between virtues and skills—namely, the role of practical wisdom—does not constitute an objection to the claim that virtues are skills. The response I’m giving here is along the same lines that Linda Zagzebski uses in her response to James Wallace’s argument that virtues are not skills because all virtues are valuable while not all skills are valuable. As Zagzebski points out [1996: 107],

[t]his argument does not support the conclusion that virtues are not skills, however, but only that the class of virtues is not coextensive with the class of skills. On Wallace’s reasoning it might be the case that every virtue is a skill, although not every skill is a virtue.

So, consistently with Zagzebski’s response to Wallace, I claim that not every skill is a virtue, because not every skill deals with matters of morality. Virtues are those skills

that deal with matters of morality;<sup>16</sup> and, because of that, there is the need for practical wisdom.

In sum, the initial concern about there being a crucial motivational difference between virtues and skills is misplaced. Achieving and maintaining expertise requires not only extensive practical know-how, but also a very strong commitment to acting well according to the ends that define the particular skill domain. This shows that the three cases described do not reveal a significant difference between virtues and skills; and, as a result, we see how similar the two really are. However, what expertise actually lacks is the need for practical wisdom, in evaluating the ends being pursued with respect to living well and other ends worthy of pursuit. This insight shows us that some aspects traditionally associated with practical wisdom also appear in expertise, such as having practical know-how and a strong commitment to the ends being pursued. It's the element of evaluating the worth of those ends, in view of what it means to live well, that's crucial to practical wisdom and to the possession of virtue. So, virtue—on the 'virtue as skill' model—amounts to skilful behaviour that is guided by practical wisdom. So, while not every skill involves practical wisdom, that still allows us to understand virtues to be practical skills with the additional element of practical wisdom, owing to the connection between virtues and morality that other skills lack.

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<sup>16</sup>No attempt is made here to determine what criteria should be used to determine which skills count as moral skills. This account is compatible with a variety of criteria for picking out the virtues, though some conceptions of virtues are ruled out if they don't exhibit the complexity found in skills.

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