

# Virtues, Skills, and Right Action

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**Abstract** According to Rosalind Hursthouse’s virtue based account of right action, an act is right if it is what a fully virtuous person would do in that situation. Robert Johnson has criticized the account on the grounds that the actions a non-virtuous person should take are often uncharacteristic of the virtuous person, and thus Hursthouse’s account of right action is too narrow. The non-virtuous need to take steps to improve themselves morally, and the fully virtuous person need not take these steps. So Johnson argues that any virtue based account of right action will have to find a way to ground a moral obligation to improve oneself. This paper argues that there is an account of virtue that can offer a partial solution to Johnson’s challenge, an account where virtue is a type of practical skill and in which the virtuous person is seen as having expertise. The paper references the account of skill acquisition developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus. Their research demonstrates that novices in a skill have to employ different strategies to act well than the strategies used by the experts, and so the ‘virtue as skill’ thesis provides support for Johnson’s claim that the actions of the non-virtuous will differ from the virtuous. On the other hand, their research suggests that there is no separating the commitment to improve yourself from the possession of expertise, and so the ‘virtue as skill’ thesis has the resources for grounding the obligation to improve oneself in an account of virtue.

**Keywords** Dreyfus · Ethics · Expertise · Hursthouse · Johnson · Right action · Skill · Virtue

## 1 Introduction

According to Rosalind Hursthouse’s virtue based account of right action, an action is right if and only if “it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances”. (Hursthouse 2000, p. 28) Robert Johnson has criticized the account on the grounds that the actions a non-virtuous person should take are often

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uncharacteristic of the virtuous person, and thus Hursthouse's account of right action is too narrow. The non-virtuous need to take steps to improve themselves morally, but the fully virtuous person need not take such steps. So Johnson argues that any virtue based account of right action will have to find a way to ground a moral obligation to improve oneself. This paper argues that while Johnson is correct in his criticisms of Hursthouse's account of right action, there is another account of virtue that can offer a partial solution to Johnson's challenge, according to which virtue is a type of practical skill. The model of practical skills used for this thesis is the one developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus. The paper concludes that the 'virtue as skill' thesis has the resources to recognize self-improving actions as right.

The first section of this paper lays out Johnson's critique of Hursthouse's account of right action, which sets up the challenge for virtue ethics to meet. The second section gives a brief overview of the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition, as well as some of the potential ethical implications of viewing moral behavior in terms of skillfulness. Since a thorough explanation and defense of a skill model of virtue is a paper in itself, the rest of the discussion will focus on the implications for right action if we assume that virtues are skills. The third section details the ways in which a skill model of virtue would reach many of the same conclusions that Johnson draws in his critique of Hursthouse. The skill model supports the idea that the strategies of the non-virtuous will differ significantly from that of the virtuous. The fourth section discusses how a skill model of virtue can meet the need for an account of virtue to ground an obligation to improve oneself. It is argued that a commitment to continual self-improvement is something that even an idealized virtuous person would maintain. The fifth section examines potential lines of response by Johnson to the preceding arguments about self-improvement. It is claimed that the arguments in this paper do not make use of any of the strategies that Johnson explicitly rules out for incorporating self-improvement into an account of the virtues. The final section explores some further implications of the virtue as skill thesis for developing a virtue based account of right action. Despite being able to incorporate self-improvement, thinking of virtues as skills does create some difficulties for defining right action in terms of what the virtuous person would do, as well as for providing action guidance to those who are not yet virtuous. It will be difficult for the non-virtuous to grasp what a virtuous person would do in a similar situation, and any rules that can be distilled from the experience of the virtuous are unlikely to fully capture the moral knowledge of the virtuous person.

### 1. *Johnson's Critique of Hursthouse*

Johnson's interpretation of Hursthouse's virtue-based account of right action (which he refers to as 'V') is as follows:

V: An action A is right for S in circumstances C if and only if a completely virtuous agent would characteristically A in C. (Johnson 2003, pp. 811–812)

It is important to point out for his critique that V has to refer to what a fully or completely virtuous person (i.e. someone who has all the virtues to the fullest extent) would do, because the absence of a virtue or the presence of a vice could lead someone to act wrongly. As Johnson notes, "the conception of complete virtue in V will be an idealization." (Johnson 2003, p. 812) Johnson's main criticism of this account of right action is that the actions that plausibly appear right for the non-virtuous person to take are actions that are not characteristic of the virtuous agent. Thus, contrary to Hursthouse's claim, a right action in any situation is not necessarily what a fully virtuous person would do in that situation.

One kind of action that a non-virtuous person may need to take to become more virtuous, but that is uncharacteristic of a virtuous person, is what Johnson describes as “self-monitoring”: “keeping track of one’s progress toward becoming a better person, trying to change one’s thinking about one’s situation and the consequences of one’s actions, enhancing one’s self-esteem, and so on.” (Johnson 2003, p. 818) For example, someone trying to break a habit of lying might need to write down all the lies he tells. This kind of self-monitoring behavior can help the person to become more aware of what he’s doing, and that can help him to change his behavior in the future. Psychological research on the development of expertise seems to support Johnson’s claim, for “Deliberate attention (i.e., strategic awareness) is believed to be necessary to overcome prior habits, to self-monitor accurately, and to determine necessary adjustments.” (Zimmerman 2006, p. 705)

The fully virtuous person, on the other hand, would not need to engage in this kind of self-monitoring behavior, given the idealized conception. The basic conflict stems from self-monitoring actions being the kinds of action one needs to engage in when one is not yet virtuous but is trying to improve, such that they are not actions any fully virtuous person would need to take. If right action is, on Hursthouse’s account, determined by what a fully virtuous person would do, then it seems to follow that self-monitoring actions would never qualify as right actions. That is, it wouldn’t be characteristic of the fully virtuous person to write down all the lies he tells, since he’s completely honest, and thus the act of writing down all the lies you tell can’t count as a right action. Johnson thinks this implication conflicts with our common intuitions about what people should do in order to improve themselves. So the main challenge, as Johnson sees it, is that any account of right action grounded in the virtues “must make room for a genuine moral obligation to improve your character and to act in other ways that are appropriate only because you could be a better person than you are.” (Johnson 2003, p. 811) The way in which Hursthouse develops her account of right action fails to make room for self-improving actions to count as morally right.

In defending his view, Johnson argues that one cannot expect that drawing on Aristotle’s account of virtue will rescue Hursthouse’s account of right action. Johnson references this famous passage from Aristotle, which is one of Aristotle’s first comparisons between the acquisition of virtues and skills:

In the case of the virtues, on the other hand, we acquire them as a result of prior activities; and this is like the case of the arts, for that which we are to perform by art after learning, we first learn by performing, e.g., we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre. Similarly, we become just by doing what is just, temperate by doing what is temperate, and brave by doing brave deeds. (Aristotle 1984 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a32–1103b3)

Learning a skill is a process of acquiring practical knowledge, that is, the knowledge of how to do something, like building a house or driving a car. With virtue, the practical knowledge is the knowledge of how to act well, like acting brave or just. Virtues, like skills, require experience and practice to acquire. You cannot learn how to surf merely by reading a book about it, and likewise, you cannot acquire the virtue of temperance just by reading one of the current books on virtue ethics. Although this provides support for the idea that the non-virtuous should act as the virtuous do in order to develop virtue, Johnson rightly points out that “V is vulnerable *merely if there are actions producing the virtues that one morally ought to perform, and these actions are not part of the characteristic behavior of virtuous persons.*” (Johnson 2003, p. 818) So all Johnson needs to show is that there are

some actions which the non-virtuous need to perform to become virtuous that are not actions we would expect the virtuous to take.

Furthermore, Johnson argues that Aristotle in fact makes claims that actually support his point of view rather than Hursthouse's. Aristotle recommends for the non-virtuous to recognize which vice they are drawn to and aim at the vice at the other extreme, as well as being wary of pleasure. The advice from Aristotle might be thought of as along the lines of aiming at the lesser evil, to which Johnson remarks:

Yet virtue does not, at least for Aristotle, consist of possessing the traits of taking the lesser evil, acting contrary to natural tendencies, and avoiding the pleasant. The virtuous take pleasure in doing what is best, from a settled disposition that is as if it were a second nature. Now given that Aristotle thought that these strategies would, rather than create dispositions at odds with virtue, help to promote it, then he himself also thought that simply acting as the virtuous act is not necessarily the only, or even best, way to acquire virtue. (Johnson 2003, p. 819)

Hursthouse's account of right action has a problem as long as there's a divergence between the actions of the virtuous person and the actions the non-virtuous person needs to take to become more virtuous. Insofar as we have a moral obligation to improve ourselves, Hursthouse's account of right action fails to declare actions necessary to improve ourselves as right, because they aren't actions that the fully virtuous person would need to take.

One last strategy for rescuing Hursthouse's account would be to change it slightly to an ideal observer account of right action, where a right action is what a virtuous person would tell you to do in the situation. The ideal observer formulation of V could declare self-improving actions as right in the following way: the fully virtuous person could recognize the ways in which you are deficient in virtue and then recommend a course of action that will help you to become more virtuous. Such self-improving actions would count as morally right because they are what a fully virtuous person would counsel you to do, even though they are actions the virtuous person doesn't need to take.

The success of the ideal observer version of V appears to hinge on whether the fully virtuous person should be expected to be good at giving advice in this way, and Johnson finds such an idea to be quite implausible. The virtuous person may be in a good position to give you advice, but there are good reasons to believe that it won't always be the case. Johnson compares the virtuous person to a native speaker of a language, that is, someone who knows what sounds right but may have minimal knowledge about grammatical rules or how to teach someone to speak the language. It would be rather *ad hoc* to simply declare that you don't count as a fully virtuous person unless you can dole out this kind of advice, since there doesn't appear to be any other grounds for thinking the fully virtuous person would be good at this. Johnson points out that:

there is nothing in the idea of a virtuous person requiring her to have any explicit knowledge of moral rules (if there are any), much less of moral psychology or education. The virtuous, simply in virtue of their virtues, may be said to know how they are to respond, what they are to feel, what they are to look for, and what they are to do and why. To that limited extent, they may well have good, perhaps even principled and general, counsel to give. But a wide range of situations would remain in which you would have no reason at all to think that a virtuous person will have advice worth following, that she will be any better placed to give answers than are you. (Johnson 2003, p. 823)

Since virtue ethicists like Hursthouse deny that the moral knowledge of the virtuous person can be codified into a set of rules, there shouldn't be any expectation that the virtuous person has explicit knowledge of moral rules. The virtuous person is conceived of as an ideal actor, but it doesn't follow from this that the virtuous person is also an ideal observer or giver of advice.

## 2. *The Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition*

The idea that experts in a skill, like native speakers of a language, are not possessed of any special abilities when it comes to articulating rules or giving advice is supported by the model of practical skills developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus.<sup>1</sup> Dreyfus gives the following explanation of what is unique about the expert:

It seems that beginners make judgments using strict rules and features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experience the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively what to do without applying rules and making judgments at all. The intellectualist tradition has given an accurate description of the beginner and the expert facing an unfamiliar situation, but normally an expert does not *solve problems*. He does not *reason*. He does not even act deliberately. Rather he spontaneously does what has normally worked and, naturally, it normally works. (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1991, p. 235)

In his research on experts, Dreyfus found that experts frequently were not able to give an account of how they knew what to do. On the Dreyfus account, since experts generally act well without applying rules and principles, it is no surprise that experts often find it difficult to explain their actions by reference to principles. Of course some experts are articulate or are good at teaching others, but these abilities are not in any way necessary for expertise. In general, Dreyfus views the skill model as supporting much of what Aristotle had to say about skills:

Like a good phenomenologist dedicated to 'saving the phenomena', Aristotle stays close to normal everyday experience and sees the immediate, intuitive response precisely as characteristic of an expert. 'Know-how [*techne*] does not deliberate' he says in the *Physics*, (BK. II, Ch. 8). (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1991, p. 239)

While there are many instances where Dreyfus claims that his model supports an Aristotelian approach to skills and ethical expertise, a thorough examination of Aristotle on these matters is beyond the scope of this paper, and nothing in this paper ultimately hangs on whether Dreyfus is correct in his interpretations of Aristotle. What follows is a very brief outline of what Dreyfus discovered in his research on skill acquisition.

The Dreyfus model divides skill acquisition into five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, and expert. At the initial stages of skill acquisition, novices follow simple and context-free rules, such as, in cases of driving, "shift into second gear at ten m.p.h." or use the two-second rule in judging how much space to leave between you and the car in front of you. Since the rules at this stage are context-free, however, they are apt to fail in a variety of different circumstances, such as when driving in the rain or in heavy traffic. As the novice gains experience, he discovers new features of

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, and because most of the recent papers on this topic are written by just Hubert, I will refer to their view in the singular.

situations, or someone else points them out, as relevant. Instead of relying only upon rules, the advanced beginner starts using maxims, which are not context-free like rules, but rather take into account the new features of situations of which the advanced beginner is aware. A maxim for driving might be “when the engine sounds like its racing shift up in gear.” This maxim refers to the situational aspect of engine sounds, which it takes experience to recognize, and so this type of instruction is inappropriate for novices.

Even these maxims have their limitations, however, for the number of situational factors can become overwhelming. Moving beyond maxims requires making choices about what the most relevant factor is in a situation, and this is done by adopting a specific plan or perspective. According to the Dreyfus model, the competent performer feels responsible for both the choice of perspective and the outcome of that choice, and thus becomes emotionally involved in the experience of the outcome. “An outcome that is clearly successful is deeply satisfying and leaves a vivid memory of the plan chosen and of the situation as seen from the perspective of the plan. Disasters, likewise, are not easily forgotten.” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, p. 26) These outcomes provide the feedback that a person needs in order to improve her skill. The feedback, if positive, reinforces making that choice again in a similar situation. The feedback, if negative, prompts the person to make a different choice in that situation. The success conditions provide the necessary feedback. While the competent performer has to make up rules to help him decide what plan or perspective to adopt in order to focus in on the relevant features of a situation, the proficient performer no longer uses rules or even makes a choice about a plan. The proficient performer simply experiences the situation in the light of a certain perspective, without making a conscious decision about the most appropriate perspective to take in the situation.

The final stage is that of Expertise. Dreyfus discovered that one of the hallmark features of expertise is an intuitive form of decision-making. By ‘intuition’, he is “referring to the understanding that effortlessly occurs upon seeing similarities with previous experiences.” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, p. 28) The ability of the expert to act well intuitively is due to the expert’s experience and familiarity with the situation in which she acts. The immediacy of the expert’s judgment occurs because of repeated exposure to similar previous experiences, and the outcome of actions taken in those situations, so that:

With enough experience with a variety of situations, all seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the proficient performer seems gradually to decompose this class of situations into subclasses, each of which share the same decision, single action, or tactic. This allows an immediate intuitive response to each situation. (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1991, p. 235)

The expert knows what actions are required and how to perform them in that situation without detached calculation or having to weigh alternatives. An expert driver will shift gears when appropriate without even being aware of it. It is important to note, however, that the ability to act well without deliberation is restricted to situations the expert has experienced before. Unfamiliar situations will require the expert to deliberate about what to do, and as Dreyfus points out, “since principles are unable to produce expert behavior, it should be no surprise if falling back on them produces inferior responses.” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1991, p. 241)

Dreyfus has also discussed the possible ethical implications of the skill model. In his view, acting ethically is a type of skill, and “The skills model thus supports an ethics of situated involvement such as that of Aristotle, John Dewey, and Carol Gilligan.” (Dreyfus 2004, p. 251) They note the similarities between the expert and Aristotle’s practically wise person claiming “according to Aristotle, since there are no rules that dictate that what the

*phronemos* does is the correct thing to do in that *type* of situation, the *phronemos*, like any expert, cannot explain why he did what he did.”<sup>2</sup> (Dreyfus 2000, p. 162) While experts may be able to say something about why they did what they did, the (re)construction of their reasons for action may not be accurate, and in any event such a condition isn’t necessary for expertise.

### 3. *Skill Model’s Support for Johnson’s Criticisms of Hursthouse*

As the skill model makes clear, novices need to use different strategies than the expert, and the same would be true in the case of virtue. Although novices and advanced beginners guide their behavior by rules and more sophisticated maxims, expertise can only be achieved by moving beyond such guides. Stuart Dreyfus provides a good illustration of this point in recalling his own difficulties being stuck at the competent level of playing chess:

In college, where I captained the chess team, my players were mostly mathematicians and mostly, like me, at the competent level. At this point, a few of my teammates who were not mathematicians began to play fast chess at the rate of 5 or 10 min a game and [were] also eager to play over the great games of the grandmasters. I resisted. Fast chess was no fun for me, because it didn’t give me time to figure out what to do. I found grandmaster games inscrutable, and since the record of the game seldom if ever gave principles explaining the moves, I felt there was nothing I could learn from the games. Some of my teammates, who through fast chess and game studying acquired a great deal of concrete experience, have gone on to become masters. (Dreyfus 2004, p. 252)

It takes a great deal of experience to move beyond the use of rules and principles, and since novices by definition lack such experience, they will have to rely on strategies that the expert can do without. The non-virtuous person will likewise have to employ different strategies for acting well and avoiding vice. If the novice at virtue didn’t have to employ different strategies, as Johnson rightly points out, “he would already possess the kind of psychological makeup that would make virtuous action second nature. In other words, he would not be a novice at all.” (Johnson 2003, p. 821) In both the case of skills and virtues, novices cannot, and should not attempt, to act in exactly the way the expert acts.

Thus, the skill model of virtue can accommodate Johnson’s view that people who are not fully virtuous ought to engage in certain types of ‘self-monitoring’ actions in order to become more virtuous, even though these types of actions are “utterly uncharacteristic of completely virtuous agents.” (Johnson 2003, pp. 817–818) Novices start with following simple rules. As a novice gains experience in a skill, new features of the situation are discovered by, or pointed out to, the novice as relevant. Advanced beginners are able to follow guidelines, given to them by more experienced practitioners, based on these newly discovered features. This is all part of developing expertise, even though such guidelines aren’t followed by the expert, and similar practices would be found in the development of virtue.

### 4. *Virtue as Skill and Johnson’s Challenge of Self-improvement*

While the skill model of virtue supports some of Johnson’s criticisms of V, it can also be used to meet one of Johnson’s main challenges to building a virtue based account of right

<sup>2</sup> Although the traditional spelling is ‘*phronimos*’ rather than ‘*phronemos*’, for the sake of consistency Dreyfus’s spelling will be used throughout the remaining sections. Also, the claim that the expert “cannot” explain is too strong.

action. Johnson's challenge is for such accounts to "make room for a genuine moral obligation to improve your character and to act in other ways that are appropriate only because you could be a better person than you are." (Johnson 2003, p. 811) In order to meet this challenge, another important aspect of skills must be discussed. Dreyfus claims that we should distinguish between two kinds of skills:

Simple skills, like crossing the street and driving, and subtle skills like music, sports and subtle social interaction. It makes little sense to speak of a virtuoso everyday driver, whereas one can be a virtuoso musician or a champion in some sport. Acquiring simple skills requires only that one face risks and uncertainty without falling back on rules or fleeing into detachment, whereas acquiring hard skills requires, in addition, a motivation continually to improve—then, one needs both the willingness to take risks and a commitment to excellence that manifests itself in persistence and in high standards for what counts as having done something right. (Dreyfus 2000, p. 24)

Dreyfus is claiming that there's a distinction between two categories of skills based on the necessity of a particular kind of motivation for achieving expertise (or being a 'virtuoso'), which is the motivation to continually improve. Recent psychological research on expertise lends support to Dreyfus's claim about the importance of the motivation to improve in the development of expertise. "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 et al. 1993, pp. 31–32) Barry Zimmerman, while summarizing some of the research on expertise, notes that "coaches and expert performers have ranked desire to succeed as the most important factor for eventual success in a domain." (Zimmerman 2006, p. 709) One of the key areas this research is still attempting to address is understanding "how some people manage to persevere through the very long periods of practice and experience, involving both successes and inevitably many failures, that we now know are so essential to the development of expert levels of skill." (Feltovich et al. 2006, p. 45)

Of particular importance for the virtue as skill thesis is that the motivation necessary for expertise in a 'subtle' or 'hard'<sup>3</sup> skill is also thought to be necessary for the cultivation of virtue. If virtues are skills, they are definitely difficult skills to acquire. Furthermore, that the virtues involve a higher motivational component, when compared to some examples of practical skills, would not serve to undermine the constitutive claim that virtues are skills. In other words, if practical skills can already be divided into two categories based on motivational considerations, then it is unlikely that any special motivational elements of virtue would constitute a sufficient reason for thinking that virtues cannot be skills. Linda Zagzebski uses a similar line of argument in response to James Wallace's argument that virtues are not skills because all virtues are valuable but not all skills are valuable. As Zagzebski points out:

This 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. (Zagzebski 1996, p. 107)

<sup>3</sup> The two categories of skills hereafter will be referred to as simple and difficult.



The virtues are valuable because of their connection to morality and living well. Therefore, not every skill is a virtue because not every skill deals with matters of morality.

It might be objected at this point that the “virtue as skill” model won’t be of much assistance to neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue like Hursthouse’s, since it seems like Aristotle gave reasons to reject the skill model of virtue, while Socrates and the Stoics embraced the idea that virtues are skills. This is an objection I’ve dealt with at length elsewhere, so I’ll merely summarize my response to it here.<sup>4</sup> In response to these claims, I argued that while Aristotle rejects the Socratic model of virtue as skill, he does not necessarily reject the model altogether. Aristotle’s position has been to some extent mischaracterized, because it isn’t recognized that Aristotle endorses a different view of the nature of skills than the one embraced by Socrates and the Stoics. D.S. Hutchinson (1988) describes in great detail the controversy over the nature of practical skills in Ancient Greek thought, and the different conceptions of skill being debated. If there are different conceptions of practical skills, then there can also be different conceptions of the “virtue as skill” thesis. So it’s not as simple of a matter as thinking that there is just one skill model of virtue, and that Aristotle rejects it while Socrates and the Stoics accept it. Hutchinson (1998, p. 40) argues that “when Aristotle takes a stand on what sort of knowledge skill is, and what sort of skill virtue is, we regularly find that Aristotle turns Plato upside down and chooses the Isocratean alternative which Plato had rejected.” Furthermore, I claimed that the most plausible conception of the virtue as skill model will be based on contemporary research on skills and expertise. Recent research on expertise provides an account of skills very much at odds with the description offered by Socrates and the Stoics, but similar to the account endorsed by Aristotle. So I concluded that the skill model of virtue is likely to be compatible with a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue. I should also point out that it’s unlikely that our current conception of skills will exactly match any of the conceptions found in Ancient Greek thought. So in questioning the possibility of a neo-Aristotelian skill model of virtue, what we really want to know is whether a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue is compatible with our current understanding of skills, which is of course something Aristotle couldn’t have addressed directly. If Dreyfus is correct about the parallels between experts and those who are practically wise, then there’s reason to expect compatibility. If not, then the skill model of virtue will turn out to be a rival, rather than a friendly amendment, to Hursthouse’s account of virtue.

We’re now in a position to see how the skill model of virtue can answer Johnson’s main challenge that any plausible account of virtue ethics can make room for a moral obligation to improve yourself. If virtues are difficult skills to acquire, then virtues also require the “motivation continually to improve” and the “commitment to excellence that manifests itself in persistence and in high standards for what counts as having done something right” that Dreyfus argues are necessary for expertise. On this account of virtue, there is no separating these dispositions from the possession of virtue itself. 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. If you just look at the end result, i.e. the perfectly virtuous person, then it appears there’s no need for a motivation for self-improvement, but the mistake is to ignore how one gets to perfect virtue, and on this view of virtue it requires cultivating a disposition for continual improvement.

<sup>4</sup> See Stichter (2007) for the details.

It could be argued, on the other hand, that over time a perfectly virtuous person would gradually lose the motivation to improve given the attainment of perfect virtue, or that the idealized conception of the virtuous person just is conceived as having no possible reason or motive to improve.<sup>5</sup> There are a few possible reasons for doubting that this will be true of the virtuous person. First, 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 kinds of thoughts one would have to learn to avoid on the path to expertise. Second, even once virtue has been acquired, it's still possible for that virtue to be lost. Although it might be thought that once you achieve expertise you never really lose it, "the available evidence suggests that maintaining skills is as effortful as acquiring them in the first place, and benefits become increasingly more specific, that is, limited to those skills that are actively practiced and maintained." (Krampe and Charness 2006, p. 733) Expertise, once achieved, requires some level of routine practice to maintain it or the level of skill degrades over time. The fully virtuous person would still have to work to maintain her virtue, and so she still needs to retain that "commitment to excellence that manifests itself in persistence and in high standards for what counts as having done something right". Part of that commitment to excellence must be the motivation for self-improvement. There is little sense in committing yourself to self-improvement but not to maintaining those improvements that you make, and likewise there's little sense in committing yourself to maintaining excellence while not committing yourself to achieving excellence in the first place.

Even though the conception of the fully virtuous person is an idealization, it's important that the process of becoming virtuous is not forgotten when thinking about what the fully virtuous person is like, for what's ideal about the virtuous person is not how the virtuous person acquired her virtues but rather that she has managed to acquire all the virtues. The virtuous person should not be conceptualized as never having had a background, like Athena who was born fully formed from the head of Zeus. An account of right action based on a skill model of virtue has the resources to recognize self-improving actions as right, while maintaining that Johnson is correct in pointing out that right actions are not limited to what a fully virtuous person would do in the situation.

### 5. *Potential Responses by Johnson*

Johnson does recognize some potential strategies for incorporating self-improvement into an account of virtue. Since he thinks these strategies ultimately fail, it will be worth seeing whether what has been said so far about the skill model of virtue encounters any of the same difficulties. One strategy is to argue that there is a specific virtue that aims at self-improvement. Another strategy is to argue that the target of every virtue includes acquisition of the virtue itself, such that every virtue ultimately aims at self-improvement, rather than there being just one virtue that is concerned with self-improvement.

Johnson declares that neither of these strategies is all that plausible, at least for a broadly Aristotelian account of virtue. While the strategies might solve the problem, "On the Aristotelian theory of how traits get on the list of virtues, however, the target of any virtue does not include the acquisition of those self-same virtues, self-control, or the improvement in one's moral perception, nor could there be a special virtue of self-improvement."

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Harry Silverstein for pushing this type of objection.

(Johnson 2003, p. 833) The reason is that the virtues are supposed to represent excellences, and 'needs improvement' is not exactly an excellence. It appears true that the end target of any virtue is not the acquisition of the virtue itself, and nor is it the case that there is a special virtue aimed just at self-improvement, which would likely pose some sort of regress problem.

The skill model of virtue does not take either of these two strategies. It does not claim that there is a separate skill that aims at self-improvement. While it does claim that the motivation for self-improvement is part of every virtue, it's not that the motive of self-improvement is the end of each virtue, but rather that it's a necessary means to achieving the end of each virtue. Furthermore, this isn't a merely *ad hoc* addition to what's required to possess virtue, as practical skills also require this kind of dedication to continual self-improvement.

Despite the potential advantages of pursuing the skill model of virtue for virtue based accounts of right action, there isn't an obvious way to reconfigure V such that it accounts for the actions of both the virtuous and non-virtuous person. It does put us in a better position for a virtue based account of right action because it coheres with Johnson's main conclusions from his criticism of V:

If self-improvement and other actions of the sort that I have discussed are genuinely morally right, then no ethical theory should accept V, whether to generate a theory of right action out of an account of the virtues or, indeed, to generate a theory of the virtues out of a theory of right action. Further, any alternative virtue-oriented theory of right action must take account of the fact that many actions are morally required of us only because we fail to possess the character traits or motives that we ought to possess. (Johnson 2003, p. 834)

If we agree with Johnson that self-improving actions are morally required of us, and that such actions can differ from the actions a more virtuous person would take, then we are left with a picture of morality where being moral requires that we develop abilities that take effort and experience to acquire. Implicit here is the idea that these actions are morally required as a necessary means to the end of acting virtuously, where acting virtuously is what morality requires of us. The picture being laid out about virtue follows skill acquisition. The beginner literally cannot do what the expert does, except by sheer luck. So the appropriate thing for a novice to do differs from the expert, and since both have differing abilities, there are different expectations. It's not the case that the differing standards means that there's no right answer about what to do, but rather the appropriate thing to do is to some degree relative to what you can do. If a better response in a situation requires that you're sensitive to some specific feature of the situation, and that feature takes a lot of experience to recognize, then it can't be a response we legitimately expect the novice to make.

We're used to holding differing standards of what novices and experts in a skill can do, but not so in morality, unless we're referring to the difference between children and adults. In the latter case, we recognize that due to differences in the development of rationality, children cannot be expected to behave morally in the same ways we expect adults to behave. While we don't hold infants to any moral standard, children might be rightly expected to be novices when it comes to morality, and perhaps entering the advanced beginner level in their teens. What we're not used to thinking is in terms of differences amongst normal adults in what they can do morally. We might legitimately expect all adults to be competent with respect to morality, but expertise may be expecting too much.

## 6. Further Implications of 'Virtue as Skill' for Right Action

There are a few more implications of this account of virtue for right action that are worth exploring. Dreyfus describes a specific implication of the skill model for ethical expertise when he points out in regards to the expert's or virtuoso's ability to respond appropriately to a variety of situations that:

This is obviously Aristotle's *phronemos*. Of course, there may be several wise responses. Indeed, on my account, the idea of a *single* correct response makes no sense since other virtuosi with different funds of experiences would see the matter differently, and even the same *phronemos* would presumably respond differently once he had had more experience and therefore could discriminate a richer repertoire of situations. (Dreyfus 2000, pp. 8–9)

It's important to note that Dreyfus here is not discussing the fully idealized conception of the virtuous person or *phronemos*, given that he assumes the *phronemos* to be capable of further improvement in his responses. There are several instances of the idea that there may be room for more than one response to be right on a virtue based approach to right action. Hursthouse argues for this claim based on the possibility of irresolvable dilemmas, where two virtuous persons might take two different courses of action without it being the case that one acted rightly and the other wrongly. Johnson gives a different example of two virtuous persons acting differently while both still correctly: "An introvert and an extrovert, for instance, might both be equally charitable, yet quietly washing dishes at the soup kitchen would be characteristic of the introvert while throwing parties for charitable causes would not." (Johnson 2003, p. 815) Admitting the possibility of multiple right actions does not, however, require thinking that the idea of a single right action "makes no sense", since there is bound to be some situations where there is just one right action.<sup>6</sup>

A related implication of this approach is that it can make it difficult to grasp what a virtuous person would do in a situation. Since the virtuous person is drawing specifically on past experience which we the non-virtuous do not share, we aren't necessarily in a good position to specify ahead of time what a virtuous person (or even a virtuous version of ourselves) would do in such a situation. Those who raise the objection—how am I supposed to know what the virtuous person would do in this situation?—are rightly concerned. That doesn't mean, however, that we have no idea of what the virtuous person would do. Although the virtuous person sees situations in a different way from the non-virtuous, because past experience has made certain factors come to light that the less experienced haven't had enough exposure to recognize, it isn't an entirely alien perspective. That is, it's not as if any action the virtuous person could take in the situation would be appropriate. We have some insight, assuming we are roughly competent with respect to areas of morality, because of the overlap in our understanding of the situation. As Dreyfus points out the expert's actions are a refinement of the responses of those less experienced, and hence less skilled.

On this account of virtue, virtue ethics can still provide some action guidance for the novice and advanced beginner, although it won't come so explicitly in the form of "what a virtuous person would do". Hursthouse refers to action guiding rules as 'v-rules', though it's not necessary that such rules are always envisioned as being derived from particular virtues. For example, there's no reason why the virtue ethicist shouldn't recommend that

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to Harry Silverstein for pressing this point.

people follow the ‘golden rule’, as long as it’s understood that following such a rule does not exhaust the scope of morality, and that there’s no guarantee of it providing the best response in every situation. A similar situation occurs with regard to other practical skills. We can try to learn from experts, and generalize their experiences in the forms of rules, with the understanding that this (re)construction of the decision making process of the expert only gives us some insight into expertise. “Consequently, if one followed the reconstructed rules articulated by an expert, one would not exhibit expertise but mere competence, and that is exactly what has happened. “Expert Systems” based on the rules so-called knowledge engineers elicited from experts were at best competent.” (Dreyfus 2005, p. 54) Virtue ethicists can fully support the use of principles and rules for novice through competent stages, while consistently arguing that the knowledge of the virtuous person cannot be completely codified in a set of rules.

Given this, it does turn out that there is something a bit misleading about thinking that we can get a traditional account of right action from what a virtuous person would do. At best, we can get an account of ‘competent’ action from considerations of what a virtuous person would do. You’d actually have to be a virtuous person to recognize what better responses there might be relative to the competent response. Of course, some situations may be straightforward enough that there isn’t a better response available than the competent response, and thus some moral knowledge could be codifiable. Some moral situations can be fairly ‘black and white’, and presumably not every moral situation has the same number of morally relevant features. Situations can vary in their complexity, and the less complex a situation is, the closer the response of the competent person will be to the expert.

It’s important to note here that since gaining expertise requires going through the earlier stages of development, having an account of ‘competent action’ is very helpful, just as having books and manuals is helpful for acquiring skills. Although this account of virtue as skill may seem in some sense hostile to the use of rules and principles, this thesis doesn’t really diminish our need for rules and principles. As the model of skill acquisition shows, improvement in the initial stages of skillfulness requires the use of rules and maxims. In other areas of our lives, we also need issues to be framed in terms of rules. For example, laws and social policy need to be framed in general terms. We want a ‘rule of law and not of men’, even if we’re convinced that some people can rise to the level of experts in public policy or morality. Expertise in most skills is rather rare, and given the complex nature of morality, it really shouldn’t come as any surprise that ethical expertise will also be relatively rare. Being an ethical expert is something we should all be striving for, but it’s not something we can all be expected to achieve. The stage of competence is a much more realistic expectation for normal adults.

## 2 Conclusion

Morality requires that we acquire certain moral skills, i.e. the virtues. Acquiring any particular skill requires a genuine commitment to self-improvement with respect to the skill domain. There’s no separating the two as Johnson seems to suggest. It is still the case, as he claims, that V as it stands fails to describe the actions we need to take as less than fully virtuous people as right actions. Although the virtue as skill account sketched here does not provide a full account of right action, it does point the way towards a solution, as it is an account of virtue that supports Johnson’s criticisms of V while also supplying the key element of self-improvement.

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