

Ethical Expertise: The Skill Model of Virtue

Matt Stichter

Accepted: 30 October 2006 / Published online: 2 December 2006
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2006

Abstract Julia Annas is one of the few modern writers on virtue that has attempted to recover the ancient idea that virtues are similar to skills. In doing so, she is arguing for a particular account of virtue, one in which the intellectual structure of virtue is analogous to the intellectual structure of practical skills. The main benefit of this skill model of virtue is that it can ground a plausible account of the moral epistemology of virtue. This benefit, though, is only available to some accounts of virtue. Annas claims that Aristotle rejects this skill model of virtue, and so the model of virtues as a skill that Annas endorses for the modern virtue theory is Socratic. This paper argues that while Aristotle rejects the Socratic model of virtue as a skill, he does not reject the model of virtue as a skill altogether. Annas has mischaracterized Aristotle's position on the skill model, because she has not recognized that Aristotle endorses a different account of the structure of skill than the one put forth by Socrates. In addition, recent research on expertise provides an account of skills very much at odds with the description of skills offered by Annas, but similar to the account endorsed by Aristotle. Contrary to Annas, not only is the skill model of virtue compatible with a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue, but it also appears that basing a skill model of virtue on a Socratic account of virtue is likely to prove unsuccessful.

Key words Annas · Aristotle · moral epistemology · skill · virtue

1 Introduction

Julia Annas (1995) is one of the few modern writers on virtue that has attempted to recover the ancient idea that virtue is, or is structurally similar to, a skill. Annas argues for a particular account of virtue in which the intellectual structure of virtue is analogous to the intellectual structure of practical skills. According to Annas (1995, p.229), “The intuitive appeal of the ancient skill analogy for virtue rests on the idea that one practical activity – acting well – is like another prominent practical activity, working well.” One benefit of the skill analogy is

M. Stichter (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Bowling Green State University, 305 Shatzel Hall,
Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA
e-mail: msticht@bgsu.edu

that our familiarity with practical skills can give us insight into the development of virtue. Another benefit, which Paul Bloomfield (2000, p. 23) points out in his discussion of the skill model, is that the skill analogy can yield “a viable epistemology in which moral knowledge is shown to be a species of a general kind of knowledge that is not philosophically suspect.” These potential benefits of the skill model should be of interest to anyone working in contemporary virtue ethics.

Although Annas endorses the skill model of virtue, she believes that only some accounts of virtue are compatible with the skill model, because not all of the ancient virtue ethicists appear to have embraced the idea that virtues are like skills. Surprisingly, Annas (2003, p. 16) claims that “Aristotle rejects the idea that virtue is a skill,” despite the frequent analogies that he draws between skills and virtues. One might assume that the majority of the ancient Greek philosophers followed Aristotle in rejecting the skill model, but Annas (2003, p. 16–17) notes that:

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

For Annas, acceptance of the skill model of virtue is found primarily in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues.¹ Annas is also not the only one to claim that Aristotle rejects the skill model. Bloomfield (2000, p.24) claims “the dissenter to the thesis that virtues are skills among the ancient Greeks was Aristotle.”² Since Aristotle appears to reject the skill model of virtue, the model of virtue as a skill that Annas endorses for modern virtue theory is Socratic.

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

2 Annas’s Account of Skills

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

¹ I will refer to this view of skills as Socratic throughout the paper.

² The first part of Bloomfield’s article puts forth the Socratic view of skills and virtues, and is thus similar to Annas’s view, which he cites at the beginning of his article.

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

Gorski’s peripatetic maneuverings have been prompted by an appetite for learning and culinary adventure, a literal ‘feeling in the middle of your body that pulls you toward it’, he says, pointing to the space between his heart and his stomach. ‘You just follow it’, he says, shrugging amiably.³

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

The second element expands upon the intellectual component found in teaching. To possess a skill requires what Annas (1995, p. 231) refers to as having “a unified grasp of its field.” This implies that there are principles that unify the field of a skill, and that the expert has a grasp of these principles. There is no such thing as having expert knowledge of only part of the field. One could not claim to be an expert at something as narrow as only being able to fix Toyotas, or to claim, as Ion does, only to know Homer and not much of any other poet. Annas (1995, p. 231–232) recognizes that:

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

Expertise requires understanding the principles that govern the entire field, and not just some parts of it.⁴ This unified grasp is what allows experts to deal with unfamiliar situations in the way that someone who has simply memorized a set of rules cannot, since it enables them to act well with regard to all areas of the field.

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

³ The article is by Deborah Hornblow in the Hartford Courant (6/17/97), and Bloomfield quotes it in footnote 5, on page 26 of “Virtue Epistemology and the Epistemology of Virtue”.

⁴ Daniel Jacobson, in personal communication, has given other examples that suggest that Annas has underestimated how counterintuitive the Socratic position sounds. Take, for example, a doctor who specializes in heart surgery. Presumably, there are many other types of surgeries that he is not qualified to perform. Is this sufficient to show that he is not an expert?

thought of as requiring merely that the principles are articulatable, rather than requiring that the expert can actually articulate the reasons herself, Annas explicitly describes this requirement in terms of the expert being able to articulate the reasons for her actions. In defending this stronger requirement, Annas (1993, p. 69) admits that “intuitively many skills differ from virtue, for example in having an independently identifiable product, and do not require the level of articulate reflection that virtue requires.”

Given the difficulties that will soon be raised about this articulation requirement, it will be helpful to try to understand why Annas believes this requirement is important. The importance of articulation, and the skill analogy in general, according to Annas (1993, p. 67–68) is revealed in the following passage:

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

These intellectual conditions are supposed to show that ancient virtue ethical theories are similar to modern ethical theories, and that she is not advancing a version of virtue ethics that understands virtue as a type of “non-generalizable sensitivity,” which presumably contrasts with other modern ethical theories. Although she does not mention who holds this latter view of virtue, John McDowell (1998, p. 51) appears to be a likely candidate given what he says about the virtuous person:

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

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

3 Is Annas’s Account of Skills Counterintuitive?

One potential drawback of this account of skills, as Annas (1995, p. 232) herself notes, is that the three essential elements form a high intellectual standard for skills that strikes people as counterintuitive:

For at this point someone will claim that he has learnt to be a plumber just by watching old Joe over there, without explicitly learning anything, and without

working out any general principles unifying the field of practice. This kind of counter-example, however, misses the point. For what concerns Socrates is not the intuitive conception of skills, but the intellectual structure of cases which are admittedly cases of genuine skills.

Annas acknowledges that there seem to be cases of people who acquire a skill without perhaps explicitly learning anything, and even more likely without having some unified grasp of principles underlying the skill. These sorts of cases appear to be counter-examples to Annas's account, since the high intellectual standards are not necessary for acquiring those skills.

Annas's reply is that genuine skills do exhibit the intellectual structure described, and those are the skills to which Socrates refers. This response seems to imply that what is wrong with this type of example is that the putative skill is not a genuine skill, and hence does not represent a counter-example to her claims about the structure of skills. While this type of response may be appropriate with regard to some putative skills, it becomes problematic if every alleged counter-example is simply dismissed by definition as not a genuine skill if it lacks the proper intellectual requirements. Annas, however, does not respond in this way to all counter-examples. Annas (1995, p. 233) allows there to be differences in the structure of genuine skills, which is a point especially relevant to the third intellectual element of skills, for:

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

Annas admits that the requirement of giving an account is not true for a number of actual skills. This admission lessens the initial appeal of comparing virtues to skills, since this account of what a skill is seems counterintuitive. In addition, it is not obvious why the kind of skill Annas is interested in deserves to receive the designation of "genuine."⁵ Our intuitive conception of skills might deserve to be thought of as genuine skills, insofar as the intellectual standards Annas discusses are counterintuitive. It is not clear that we can get a handle on what these intellectual requirements amount to by reflecting on our intuitions about practical skills. Annas does not try, however, to argue that our intuitions about what counts as a skill are wrong. For Annas, this counterintuitive result is not problematic, so long as there are some skills that do display these strong intellectual components.

That there are skills that display the three intellectual components, however, is something that Annas assumes, rather than argues. A comparison of virtues to skills will be illuminating only insofar as we are dealing with an accurate account of the acquisition of skills. Annas should be more concerned about the fact that she is advancing an account of skills that does not fit numerous examples of actual skills. If there are no skills that contain these strong intellectual components, then Socrates' account of virtue ceases to be on a par with practical skills. Annas owes an argument for the claim that there are such skills, especially since she comes up with numerous examples of skills that do not fit the Socratic

⁵ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing this point.

conception, but almost none that do fit the conception. The only skill that she mentions as a genuine skill that has the strong intellectual structure is medicine.

4 The Ancient Debate About Skills

It is revealing, however, that Annas does not argue that medicine should be considered to meet the intellectual requirements, but merely quotes Socrates' (*Gorgias*, 501a) view that medicine "has enquired as to the nature of what it cares for and the explanation of the things it does, and can give a rational account (logos) of each of them." It is revealing because the Socratic view of medicine and of practical skills in general was a controversial view in ancient Greek thought, and it needed to be argued for rather than just assumed. As D.S. Hutchinson points out, the controversy over the status of medicine was part of a larger debate over the nature of practical skills, which itself was part of a larger debate over the nature of virtue.⁶ Annas's discussion obscures this controversy. Hutchinson (1988, p. 26) claims that "Plato is taking sides in a fourth-century debate about the nature of practical knowledge."

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

5 Empiricist Versus Intellectualist View of Skills

Hutchinson presents a picture of the empiricist view of skills that shows it to be a genuine rival to the intellectualist view, and does so in a way that sheds light on the intellectual requirements that Annas describes. The intellectual requirements represent a denial that genuine skills can be merely a matter of experience or rules of thumb. Genuine skills, on the intellectualist view, require a profound understanding of their subject matter and of the underlying principles of the skill. A profound understanding allows for exactness and precision in one's views, whereas experience only generates approximations and rules of thumb. In ancient medicine, according to Hutchinson (1988, p. 24), this profound understanding would have been one in which "a comprehensive and analytic knowledge of the universe was necessary to prescribe for a man's body what was his own good."⁷ This

⁶ The discussion that follows about the debate over medicine and other practical skills is indebted to a paper by D.S. Hutchinson (1988).

⁷ The view seems to be that one had to understand the guiding principles that govern the cosmos in order to know what was going on in the human body. Hutchinson notes that this is similar to Plato's own view about the good of the soul.

Hippocratic account of medicine, which was endorsed by Plato, is opposed to the view advanced by the author of *On Ancient Medicine*. According to Hutchinson (1988, p. 27), the author of *On Ancient Medicine* believes that:

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

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

The empiricist view of skills seems best represented by Isocrates' three-part doctrine of the acquisition of practical skills. The three main elements in the acquisition of practical skills were natural talent, training by experience, and education or instruction. The element of education or instruction is not as strong of an intellectual component as the Socratic emphasis on teaching and learning. Socrates dismissed the instructional part of Isocrates' doctrine as merely rules of thumb. It was the element of training by experience, though, that provided the main contrast to the Socratic emphasis on profound understanding, and this is the core of the disagreement between Plato and his rivals. In Hutchinson's (1988, p. 33–34) view:

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

6 Which Account of Skills Does Aristotle Endorse?

With the differences between the intellectual and empirical views of skills before us, we turn to Aristotle to see which side of the debate he endorses. Initially, it might appear that Aristotle sides with Plato, for Aristotle also makes analogies between virtues and skills, and in particular with medicine. This appears to be Annas's view, as her discussions of Aristotle and Plato on virtue as a skill reveal only a difference in their accounts of virtue. However, the textual evidence supports Hutchinson's (1988, p. 40) view that "when Aristotle takes a stand on what sort of knowledge skill is, and what sort of skill virtue is, we regularly find that Aristotle turns Plato upside down and chooses the Isocratean alternative which Plato had rejected."

Aristotle begins his discussion of virtue by claiming that ethical virtue is acquired by habituation. Habits are built up by frequent repetition of actions, which requires experience and time. It is in his discussion of habituation, that Aristotle (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1103a32–1103b3) makes one of his first comparisons between the acquisition of virtues and skills:

In the case of the virtues, on the other hand, we acquire them as a result of prior activities; and this is like the case of the arts, for that which we are to perform by art after learning, we first learn by performing, e.g., we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre.

Skills are learned by performing the relevant activities, hence, “we become builders by building.” You cannot learn a skill without having performed the activities associated with that skill. The emphasis on habituation and experience echoes Isocrates’ view that practical skills are acquired by training and experience. Contrary to the Socratic emphasis on intellectual learning in acquiring skills, Aristotle claims that we learn by doing. In order to know how to do something, like building a house or playing an instrument, you have to practice doing it. For Aristotle (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1103a32–1103b3), a similar story is true for acquiring virtue, hence, “we become just by doing what is just.”

Aristotle (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1104a1–10) draws another comparison between virtues and skills, when he discusses how statements about actions do not admit of precision:

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

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

Aristotle does not deny that there are general truths that can be learned from experience, but they do not amount to unifying principles, because matters concerning action lack that kind of uniformity. The grasp of general truths, while something more than mere experience, still does not rise to the level of the profound understanding of universal principles advocated by both Plato and Annas. General truths still represent a piecemeal knowledge of what Annas regards as a unified field. According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 981a5–12), for a doctor:

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

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

7 Which Account of Skills is Best?

At this point we have two competing accounts of the nature of a skill, which, when combined with an analogy to virtue, produces competing accounts of the nature of virtue. One’s preference between these two models could depend on which account of virtue seems

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

Although it also beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth review of such research, a brief look at the studies will give an indication of how such an endeavor is likely to turn out. The intellectual view is already faced with the problem noted by Annas that it conflicts with our understanding of numerous actual skills. One of the main problems with Annas’s account of skills is that if you replace her claims about virtue with most any skill, she would declare that many putative experts really are not experts because of their lack of articulateness and having a grasp of universal principles. The main skill that Annas cited as fitting the intellectual view was medicine, but that claim is far from uncontroversial. In addition, as Hutchinson (1998, p. 48) notices, Plato’s views of medicine change from the early Socratic dialogues that Annas references:

So, early in Plato’s writing career, he held medicine up as a sort of ideal of profound knowledge, but later its status fell as he became enamoured of a precise and mathematical approach to reality, while at the same time it began to seem that medicine was really an imprecise skill derived from experience.⁸

On an intuitive level, the empiricist account appears to describe more accurately practical skills and their acquisition.

The empiricist account has more than intuitive appeal to recommend it, though, as research on expertise tends to undermine Annas’s account of skills. A recent philosophical analysis of the acquisition of practical skills, developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1986, 1991), shows it to be very similar to the accounts developed by Isocrates and Aristotle.⁹ Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991, p. 235) give the following explanation of what is unique about the expert:

It seems that beginners make judgments using strict rules and features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experience the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively what to do without applying rules and making judgments at all. The intellectualist tradition has given an accurate description of the beginner and the expert facing an unfamiliar situation, but normally an expert does not *solve problems*.

⁸ Fred Miller, in personal communication, has pointed out that Plato’s *Statesman* is a good example of the shift in Plato’s own thinking about skills, as statesmanship is considered to be a skill, and the knowledge of the statesman is not something that can be fully codified into law.

⁹ Because of space limitations, I do not try to explicate the Dreyfus model here. As far as I can tell, Daniel Jacobson (2005) is the first to bring the Dreyfus skill model to bear on questions of modern virtue theory. Although Dreyfus and Dreyfus discuss the ethical implications of their skill model, including the affinities with an Aristotelian ethical approach, they do not discuss the idea that virtues are analogous to skills.

He does not *reason*. He does not even act deliberately. Rather he spontaneously does what has normally worked and, naturally, it normally works.

In their research on experts, Dreyfus and Dreyfus found that experts often were not able to give an account of how they knew what to do. On the Dreyfus account, since experts generally act well without applying rules and principles, it is no surprise that experts often find it difficult to explain their actions by reference to principles. These results lead them to be skeptical that there is necessarily a unifying set of principles or a theory that underlies each skill, as Annas has claimed. On their view Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2004, p. 255), “it is an unsubstantiated assumption of philosophers since Socrates that there must be a theory underlying every skill domain.” In general, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991, p. 239) view their skill model as basically vindicating the type of approach to ethics taken by Aristotle: “Like a good phenomenologist dedicated to ‘saving the phenomena’, Aristotle stays close to normal everyday experience and sees the immediate, intuitive response precisely as characteristic of an expert. ‘Know-how [*techne*] does not deliberate’ he says in the *Physics*, (BK. II, Ch. 8).”

In the field of medicine, Patricia Benner (2001) has successfully applied the Dreyfus skill model to the field of nursing. Her findings support the Dreyfus skill model in general and the inarticulateness of experts specifically. Benner (2001, p. 32) quotes an expert psychiatric nurse clinician who is talking about her clinical judgments:

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

On Annas’s account, this nurse would not count as an expert because she is not able to give an articulate justification for her clinical judgment. Her account appears to reach the wrong conclusion, though, because Benner informs us that this is a nurse who has over 15 years experience in the field, who is well respected by nurses and physicians for her clinical judgments, and who is reliably (though probably not always) correct. Besides being reliable at acting well, experts are identified by their intuitive responses and not by their articulate justifications.

Recent psychological research gives support to the conclusions drawn by Dreyfus and Benner. Bloomfield discusses some of this research on expertise that highlights the importance of intuition rather than articulation in expert performance.¹⁰ According to Bloomfield (2000, p. 39):

psychological research has centered on how master chess players often just ‘see’ what the right move is and how medical doctors make their diagnoses automatically. . . . Research shows that the process she articulates [post facto] is very often not the one actually used; experts are often less able to give an account of the justification of the decision making process they actually use than are beginners.¹¹

¹⁰ Bloomfield (2000, p. 39) helpfully points out that “The sense of ‘intuition’ here is quite different from the a priori intuitions posited by moral intuitions like Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, and Prichard. The relevant intuitions for virtue epistemology and moral epistemology are a posteriori.”

¹¹ Bloomfield cites research done by Chi et al (1981), Larkin et al (1980), Chase and Simon (1973).

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

8 Is the Skill Model Still Suitable for Virtue?

There is at least one problematic implication of favoring the empiricist account of skills. Recall that part of Annas's motivation in endorsing the intellectualist account of skills was to show how skills are relevant for understanding virtue. Annas (1993, p. 73) voices a concern that the lack of articulateness in skills might make the skill model unsuitable for an account of virtue:

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

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

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

This is not an attempt to downplay the importance of articulation and principles in giving justifications for one's actions in moral discourse. It seems that the demands for 'giving an account' are much higher in morality than when compared to skills. This is partly due to the seriousness of the subject matter, partly because there are usually less concrete success conditions for acting well, and since there is less agreement as to who are the ethical experts. If a chess master cannot give much more of an explanation for making certain moves than 'I saw that it was the right move to make,' it does not by itself serve to undermine any claim to expertise so long as the chess master keeps winning games. In

morality, there is not such a simple success condition for acting well, and moral disagreement seems to fuel demands for articulate justifications of one's actions. In chess, while we may have reasons for trying to find out if the moves can be understood in terms of rules or principles, in general we do not have broader concerns that make it important for us to play chess or to be able to play it well. On the other hand, it seems that we as human beings have very important needs in being able to give an account of what morality requires of us, such as in drafting laws and making social policy, which need to be formulated in explicit rules and principles.

9 Conclusion

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

References

- Annas J (1993) *The morality of happiness*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK
- Annas J (1995) Virtue as a skill. *Int J Philos Stud* 3(2):227–243
- Annas J (2003) The structure of virtue. In: DePaul M, Zagzebski L (eds) *Intellectual virtue*. Clarendon, Oxford, UK pp15–33
- Aristotle (1984) *Nicomachean ethics*, H. Apostle (trans.). Periapetic, Grinnell, IA
- Benner P (2001) *From novice to expert*. Prentice Hall Health, New Jersey
- Bloomfield P (2000) Virtue epistemology and the epistemology of virtue. *Philos Phenomenol Res* 60(1):23–43
- Chase WG, Simon HA (1973) Perception in chess. *Cogn Psychol* 4:55–81
- Chi MTH et al. (1981) Categorization and representation of physics problems by experts and novices. *Cogn Sci* 5:121–152
- Dreyfus H, Dreyfus S (1986) *Mind over machine: the power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK
- Dreyfus H, Dreyfus S (1991) Towards a phenomenology of ethical expertise. *Hum Stud* 14:229–250
- Dreyfus H, Dreyfus S (2004) The ethical implications of the five-stage skill-acquisition model. *Bull Sci Technol Soc* 24(3):251–264
- Hutchinson DS (1988) Doctrines of the mean and the debate concerning skills in fourth-century medicine, rhetoric, and ethics. *Apeiron* 21:17–52
- Jacobson D (2005) Seeing by feeling. *Ethical Theory Moral Pract* 8:387–409
- Larkin JH et al. (1980) Expert and novice performance in solving physics problems. *Science* 208:1135–1142
- McDowell J (1998) *Virtue and reason, in mind, value & reality*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp50–73
- Plato G (1997) *Gorgias*. In: Cooper J (ed.) *Plato – Complete Works*. Hackett, Cambridge, MA, pp791–869

Copyright of *Ethical Theory & Moral Practice* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.