Introduction

In the past forty years, the concept of virtue has risen to prominence within ethics, and with that has come a renewed interest in moral development. The reason for the connection between virtue and moral development is that acquiring a virtue is thought to shape a person's thoughts, emotions, intentions, and behavior. That is, coming to possess a virtue is supposed to alter how we perceive and react to situations of moral import, for we are cultivating new habits or dispositions. A similar trend has occurred within epistemology over the last thirty years, with the rise of virtue epistemology. The interest in virtue there has led to a focus on the characteristics that are important for achieving knowledge, understanding, and other epistemic goods.

However, in the past two decades, there has also been much skepticism about what virtue theorists tend to envision that we are acquiring when we acquire a virtue, namely a well-entrenched global character trait. Research from the field of social psychology has cast doubt on the plausibility of acquiring cross-situationally consistent character traits that will lead us to act appropriately across a variety of contexts. Virtue theorists have since been put on the defensive, and this has brought the experimental results of moral psychology to the forefront of discussions of virtue, both for critics and defenders. However, the topic of virtue in general (in contrast to specific applications of it to virtue ethics or virtue epistemology) has always been connected with psychology, because acquiring a virtue is understood as a process of psychological development. So figuring out what virtue is and how to acquire it is then inseparable from views about human psychology and questions about how people can alter patterns of behavior.

This book contributes to virtue theory and the ongoing exchange between philosophers and psychologists by defending the idea that the

acquisition of a virtue is a process of acquiring a skill.[1] Expertise in a skill enables us to be reliably responsive to reasons and to act well in demanding situations, and acquiring expertise requires the motivation to hold oneself to high standards – all of which are elements we typically associate with possessing a virtue. This 'virtue as skill' thesis has an ancient pedigree, though it has really only been developed in detail within the last twenty years.[2] The idea originates in ancient Greek discussions of virtue.[3] Aristotle, for example, in his account of virtue frequently invoked comparisons to skills, in an effort to illuminate the process by which virtue would be acquired. In a well-known discussion of virtue, Aristotle claims that:

> 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.[4]

Acquiring virtue for Aristotle involves a process of learning by doing, which should be familiar to us from our own experiences of acquiring skills. 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 honestly or kindly. 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 kindness just by reading one of the current books on virtue. You need to learn by doing – to get good at surfing you need to surf, and acquiring kindness requires doing kind acts.

Such structural similarities between virtues and skills have been noted by others in the virtue literature, both in virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, but often it is taken to be merely a helpful analogy. Rarely is it

[1] This is to be distinguished from a weaker claim that virtues are merely associated with skills, such that people who have certain virtues tend to have related skills as well (for example, if self-control were merely a skill we would expect a virtuous person to have acquired).

[2] I should note that sometimes I refer to the 'virtue as skill' thesis as the 'skill model of virtue'.

[3] Despite the influence of the ancient Greeks on contemporary discussions of virtue as skill, I will not be giving an historical reconstruction of their views. But for differing perspectives on the virtue as skill thesis in Ancient Greek thought, see Angier, Tom, *Techne in Aristotle's Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010); Annas, Julia, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Hutchinson, D.S., "Doctrines of the Mean and the Debate Concerning Skills in Fourth-Century Medicine, Rhetoric, and Ethics," *Apeiron*, 21 (1988), 17–52; Stichter, Matt, "Ethical Expertise," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 10 (2007), 183–194.

[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Grinnell: The Peripatetic Press, 1984), 1103a32–1103b3.

thought that the reason why people find so many similarities is simply because *virtues are skills*, which is the position this book defends. Certainly one of the advantages of the 'virtue as skill' thesis is that given the vast research done on skills and expertise by psychologists, there is no psychological skepticism about the ability of people to acquire skills (in contrast to being able to acquire global character traits). Of course, it will still take the rest of this book to argue that we should not be skeptical of people being able to acquire virtues as skills, but I suspect that some of the resistance to conceiving of virtues as skills is due to an underappreciation of the complexity of skill acquisition and skillful performances.

If the thesis that a virtue is a skill is correct, then it will have a significant impact on our conceptions of virtue development. Determining whether this is plausible requires answering several questions. First, what is the nature of skills and expertise? Second, what characteristics would virtues and the virtuous person have if they are modeled on skills and expertise? Third, do we have evidence that virtue development tracks skill acquisition? There are two related difficulties in answering these questions. First, the comparison of the virtuous person to experts in a skill is what matters most for the 'virtue as skill' thesis. However, although most of us have acquired several skills, few of us have achieved the level of expertise with regard to those skills. Since research shows that those with expertise approach problems in a qualitatively different way than those less skilled, our own experiences may thus mislead us about the nature of skill.

Second, this potential for misleading characterizations of skills and expertise leads to philosophers implicitly working with different conceptions of skills. Furthermore, if there are different conceptions of skills, then there can also be different conceptions of the 'virtue as skill' thesis. Thus, an apparent agreement between philosophers that virtues are skills can mask serious underlying disagreement, if they are operating with fundamentally different conceptions of skills. Progress on this issue will be next to impossible without some general agreement amongst philosophers as to the nature of skills. Furthermore, the usefulness of any comparison of virtues to skills depends upon the accuracy of the account of skills being referenced.

This book addresses these questions by grounding an account of skill in the recent psychological research on self-regulation and expertise, as well as in recent advances in cognitive science. I then explore the philosophical implications of that research for the 'virtue as skill' thesis. While I am constructing a general account of virtue, I tend to focus on cases of moral

virtues, given that my primary area of interest and background is in ethics.[5] But I also devote some time to discussing epistemic virtues, especially since there is starting to be more work done in virtue epistemology on the connection between virtues and skills than in virtue ethics.[6] However, I do not attempt to provide a full taxonomy of these categories of virtues, as that requires further empirical work (rather than mere philosophical reflection) to be carried out.

Chapter Outline

The explication of the 'virtue as skill' thesis, and a look at its implications in different fields of virtue theory, is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an extensive overview of the psychological theories relevant to developing my virtue as skill thesis. Instead of diving straight away into the literature on skills and expertise, I begin with theories of self-regulation. The reason for this is that they provide the foundation for understanding how we set goals and standards for ourselves, along with strategies for reaching those goals and upholding those standards. In order to reach more complicated goals you will often need to acquire skills, as skill development allows us to handle that complexity in stages. The chapter then covers the essential elements of skill acquisition and expert performance, which provides the building blocks for the development of a skill-based account of virtue in the next chapter. In addition, these elements are further explained by reference to 'dual-process' theories in cognitive science. After detailing the process of skill acquisition and expert performance, I then show some of the problems with two prominent philosophical accounts of skill that have been used recently to build skill models of virtue. These two accounts give a very incomplete picture of skillfulness, and are not based in the framework of self-regulation.

Chapter 2 begins the process of building my virtue as skill account, based on the framework from the previous chapter. I say 'begins the process', as this chapter provides the bare bones of the account, which

[5] In brief, virtues can be broadly grouped together by the kind of ends at which they aim. So moral virtues aim at moral ends (usually determined in reference to living a flourishing life), epistemic virtues aim at epistemic goods (like truth, knowledge, understanding, etc.), aesthetic virtues aim at securing aesthetic goods like beauty, and prudential virtues are generally useful to securing any kind of good (which could encompass virtues such as courage, patience, or integrity), etc. I will be concerned in this book only with moral, epistemic, and prudential virtues.

[6] This is due to the influence of Ernest Sosa's approach to virtue epistemology, which I discuss in Chapter 3, which likens cognitive performances to skilled performances.

then continues to be fleshed out throughout the rest of the chapters. I begin this chapter with a discussion of self-regulation with respect to moral goals and standards, before moving on to discuss how virtue development can be understood as a process of skill acquisition. I address topics familiar to the virtue literature, such as the role of experience in acquiring moral knowledge, moral judgments being arrived at in an intuitive way, debates as whether we should expect those with virtue to be able to articulate their knowledge, etc. Finally, I begin the work of individuating the moral virtues, as a skill model of virtue will require rethinking some of the traditional virtue categories. As I build this account, I also respond to various objections that have been posed to conceptualizing virtues as skills. Overall my account turns out to have many affinities with a neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue, as neo-Aristotelian accounts of the virtuous person often bear a striking resemblance to descriptions of experts.

Chapter 3 tackles the most prominent objection to virtue as skill, namely that virtues involve an essential element of motivation that is lacking in skill. This objection surfaces both in the context of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. I try to tease out the core of the objection through a discussion of several cases, before arguing in reply that we can capture concerns about people's motivations even in the context of skill. Given the substantial effort that goes into acquiring skills and expertise, one needs to be strongly motivated to act well in order to improve one's skillfulness. Furthermore, we frequently make evaluations of skilled performers based on their motivations, and in ways that mirror the evaluations we make with virtue. Having established this line of response, I look more in depth at this issue as it arises in virtue epistemology, as it divides the two main camps of virtue epistemologists – reliabilists and responsibilists. I defend a reliabilist account of epistemic virtue as skill from some objections from responsibilists. In so doing, I continue the work of individuating the virtues, both in separating those virtues aimed at achieving moral versus epistemic goals, and also from those prudential virtues that are broadly supportive of the achievement of any kind of goal.

Chapter 4 finally brings out an element of virtue that I think is not found in skill development – practical wisdom. Getting clear, though, on what practical wisdom amounts to is not easy. There are competing conceptions of practical wisdom, which makes it difficult to determine whether practical wisdom has an analogue in expertise, or whether it is unique to virtue. I argue that while several important aspects of practical wisdom are already captured by the notion of expertise, the core idea of being knowledgeable about which ends are worth pursuing is unique to virtue. Practical wisdom

requires thinking about your goals and actions relative to an overall conception of what it is to live well as a person, such that you are considering what makes people's lives go better or worse. Acquiring a skill never requires this kind of reflection, but virtue does. However, although I think this kind of reflection involves skillfulness, I express skepticism that the work of practical wisdom can be reduced to the work of a single reflective skill. Nevertheless, I claim that part of the role of practical wisdom in an account of virtue is that it brings some unity to (at least) the moral virtues. I end the chapter with the suggestion that our conception of practical wisdom has to also incorporate reflections on relations of power in society, for there is a need to be aware of the dynamics of power as it shapes our views about what ends are worth pursuing in life.

Chapter 5 address the most significant challenge to emerge recently to virtue theory both in virtue ethics and virtue epistemology – the 'situationist' challenge that arises from experimental results in social psychology. In short, the experiments show that our actions are far more influenced by situational variables than we previously thought, thus throwing into question how much personal characteristics can explain or predict what we do. My account of virtue as skill has the advantage of being able to draw on numerous resources from the framework of self-regulation and skill acquisition to show how we can counter some of these situational influences. In turn, this bolsters the argument for seeing virtue development as requiring the kind of practice and training that goes into skill acquisition. Beyond the situationist critique, I address the troubling moral phenomenon of 'moral disengagement', which receives little to no attention in virtue theory let alone ethical theory more broadly, which is all the more surprising given its substantial negative influence on moral behavior. Disengagement from our moral standards is something that can become a habit, and it can threaten the exercise of any moral virtue. A discussion of the causes of moral disengagement, as well as ways to resist it, highlights the ways that social discourse and power structures can impact the cultivation of virtue and vice.

CHAPTER 1

Self-Regulation and Expertise

Virtue theory has been around for about twenty-five hundred years, but in the last twenty-five years the role of virtue has come into serious dispute. Owen Flanagan (1991) was among the first to note that current psychological research was calling the possession of traditional conceptions of virtue into question. This turned into serious skepticism about virtue with Gilbert Harman (1999) and John Doris's (2002) "situationist" critiques on the instantiation of virtue presumed by contemporary virtue ethical theories, due to experimental results in social psychology that seemingly showed moral behavior to often be largely a result of situational variables rather than personality traits or moral reasoning.[1] This initiated a vast new literature within virtue theory, with adherents and opponents scouring the psychological literature to see whether virtue could be given an empirically adequate grounding. The most important realization of this debate has been that for those who are concerned with moral development, as are most virtue theorists, attention must be paid to the psychological research on personality, situational influence, and behavior. Recommendations for moral development cannot be done merely from the philosophical armchair anymore, as theorists need to be aware of the psychological mechanisms that affect how people actually behave. This idea is neatly summarized by Flanagan's "Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism," which states that any prescription of a moral ideal should involve only those processes or behaviors that we have reason to believe are possible for humans.

In recognition of the importance of this principle, this chapter provides an overview of the general psychological mechanisms underlying human agency in the form of self-regulation, and the more specific mechanisms involved with skill acquisition, before I move on in the following chapters

[1] Also, this critique has been recently extended to virtue theory in other areas of philosophy, such as virtue epistemology. I will take up this issue at length in Chapter 5.

to explore how we might reconceive of virtue given the psychological mechanisms for improving our behavior that we know are available to us. In the process of summarizing these various mechanisms, I will also be synthesizing numerous psychological theories that are usually discussed in isolation from each other, in order to provide a broader psychological framework.[2] I caution the reader that there is a fair amount of ground to cover before I start discussing the philosophical implications of this research, but it will prove important to present an overall framework at the outset.

I begin with social cognitive theories of human agency, which understand the exercise of agency primarily in terms of self-regulation. In understanding self-regulation, I divide the discussion into two sections that explain the connected activities of goal setting and goal striving. This will provide a starting foundation for understanding skill acquisition more specifically, as skill acquisition is a complex form of self-regulation. The next two sections discuss key elements in skill acquisition. The first covers the role of deliberate practice in improving one's level of skillfulness, while the second draws on dual-process theories of cognition to explain how, in practicing, we can make initially effortful tasks in skilled performance become effortless. In the two sections that follow, I discuss important aspects of the knowledge that people gain when acquiring a skill, first in terms of schemas and mental models, and second in terms of the limitations in articulating and codifying that skillful knowledge.

Finally, having presented the overall framework, I am then in a position to critique the two main philosophical accounts of expertise that appear in the virtue as skill literature. The work of both Julia Annas and Hubert Dreyfus have made significant contributions to the 'virtue as skill' thesis. However, each has also made some unwarranted assumptions about skills and expertise, and neither of their accounts is grounded in an understanding of self-regulation more broadly.

Self-Regulation: Goal Setting

According to social cognitive theories of agency, human functioning is the result of a triadic interaction between the environment, the intrapersonal

[2] While my goal is not to provide new psychological theories for either self-regulation or skill, as the main aim of this chapter is to provide an accurate and in-depth account of skill to provide the foundation for virtue as a skill in the next chapter, nevertheless the integration of these psychological theories is new.

(cognitive and affective) features of a person, and the behavior of that person.[3] First, human behavior is not a product solely of one's intrapersonal features, independent of the environment in which one acts. Second, behavior is also not a product solely of one's environment. Instead, behavior is the result of the interaction between the environment and the person, where it matters how someone construes their situation in determining their response to it. Third, behavior is not merely a passive by-product of the interaction between environment and person, as behavior can lead to changes in both environmental and intrapersonal factors. The current social environment, for example, is the product of previous human behavior, as is the current natural environment, say, with respect to global climate change. With regard to one's own intrapersonal features, behaving in a way that successfully achieves a goal, for example, is likely to produce a feeling of self-satisfaction, and encourages the actions that brought about the achievement. Failure, on the other hand, often prompts feelings of disappointment, which could go along with either thinking about how to do better in the future or giving up on the goal altogether.

As another kind of example of this triadic relationship, you can also take steps to mediate the potentially negative effects that an external environment or your own intrapersonal features may be having on your behavior. If you are trying to study in a noisy environment, you may not be able to stop that noise from distracting you from focusing on your studies. In response, you can try to block out the noise via headphones, or move to some quieter location, in effect changing the environment so that you can effectively study.[4] With regard to our own intrapersonal features, if a

[3] Virtue theorists may already be familiar with some aspects of social cognitive theory through the work of Mischel and Shoda, which Daniel Russell and Nancy Snow have recently incorporated into their accounts of virtue. Bandura's work on social cognitive theory is both earlier and broader than Mischel and Shoda's work that followed on the cognitive-affective personality system (where they basically go into more detail on the personality aspect of the triad). However, it should also be noted that their approach has been critiqued as being unable to account for some broad personality regularities, such as the Big Five personality traits (DeYoung and Weisberg), as well as being unable to account for virtues (Miller). See Mischel, W. and Shoda, Y., "A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality: Reconceptualizing Situations, Dispositions, Dynamics, and Invariance in Personality Structure," *Psychological Review*, 102: (1995), 246–268; Russell, Daniel C., *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Snow, Nancy E., *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010); DeYoung, Colin G. and Weisberg, Yanna J., "Cybernetic Approaches to Personality and Social Behavior," in Snyder, M. and Deaux, K. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, Second Edition, in press (New York: Oxford University Press); Miller, Christian, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[4] Zimmerman gives an example of a golfer having trouble with her swing because the sun is blinding her. By putting on sunglasses, she is changing the effect her current environment has on her, and this will enable her to have a better swing. Zimmerman, Barry J., "Development and Adaptation of

basketball player feels that she is in a high-pressure situation, it may produce internal stress that negatively affects her behavior – 'choking'. She can then attempt to change her construal of the situation, thinking about just playing well in general and not obsessing about the details of a maneuver, so that it prompts different behavior. Because of the interactive framework, in order to pursue our goals, we may first need to alter our intrapersonal processes or the environment, before we can act effectively.

Social cognitive theory locates agency in our attempts to self-regulate, where self-regulation is a matter of having a goal that one is trying to achieve. Control theory, or cybernetics, has long studied the processes involved with goal-oriented systems, both in machines and in animals. The basic stages to any form of regulation involve having: (1) a goal (or desired state of affairs); (2) a representation of the current state affairs; (3) a way to compare (1) and (2) to see if the goal is currently being met; and (4) if the goal is not being met, an action available within the system that can change the current state of affairs to meet the goal (and the system must then go through stages [2] and [3] again in order to know when the goal has been achieved).[5] A simple example of this is a thermostat that is set to keep a room at a minimum level of warmth. The thermostat has: (1) a set temperature goal; (2) a way to check the current status of the ambient temperature; and (3) the ability to compare the goal temperature with the current temperature. What it does in response to the comparison depends on whether there is a discrepancy between the goal and current temperatures. If there is no discrepancy, it does nothing. If instead the status of the temperature is below the goal, then the thermostat has (4) a method for triggering the heater to turn on. Furthermore, the thermostat keeps checking the current temperature, so that it can turn off the heater when the goal temperature is reached.

Of course, that is just the most basic picture of a goal-directed system, and more complex systems will add additional layers of processes to this initial picture. For example, if the system has multiple means of achieving the goal, then there needs to be an additional process for selecting a particular means. In addition, if a system has multiple goals, and a situation affords opportunities to pursue multiple mutually exclusive goals,

Expertise: The Role of Self-Regulatory Processes and Beliefs," in Ericsson, K. Anders (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 705–722.

[5] It is important to note that these stages need not be strictly speaking sequential, as these processes might be going on in parallel. DeYoung, Colin G., "Cybernetic Big Five Theory," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 56 (2015), 33–58.