11
SKILL AND KNOWLEDGE

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11.1 Knowledge

1. Knowledge is a form of action, to know is to act, and knowledge is hence subject to a normativity distinctive of action, including intentional action. Some basic elements of this account will be sketched here in part 11.1, setting the stage for a complementary account of justification in the following section.

It may be thought obvious that belief and knowledge are states, and not actions. But, first, we recognize not only consciously intentional judgments, but also functional representations, which are “actions” or “acts” in the extended sense that they are teleological aimings, or dispositions to so aim. Moreover, second, let us focus on the realm of consciously intentional judgments, and dispositions to judge. These dispositions to judge can take the form of policies, which reside in the will, and are thus extended actions, or anyhow actional. Compare one’s policies to signal one’s turns and to stop at yellow lights, as one drives a car. These are willful extended actions, or anyhow actional states that are sustained by the will.¹

2. Concerning attempts (whether consciously intentional or functional/teleological), virtue theory distinguishes (a) accuracy or success, where the aim of the attempt is attained, (b) adroitness or competence, and (c) aptness, where the accuracy manifests the adroitness. This is thus an AAA (Accuracy, Adroitness, Aptness) account of performance normativity, as well as an AAA account of knowledge in particular. In identifying knowledge with apt belief, we understand knowledge in terms of skill.² A competence is a disposition to succeed when one tries. Whether one is competent to perform on a certain occasion depends not only on one’s pertinent skill but also on the shape one is in and on how favorable is one’s relevant situation, which gives competences a triple-S (Skill, Shape, Situation) structure.³ We will return to the relation between skill and competence below.

Functional aims are not consciously intentional, as when our perceptual systems aim to represent our surroundings correctly. Compare the biological function-derived aim of the heart to circulate the blood. Consciously intentional aims can be derived from outright choices or decisions, but might also be acquired without much benefit of deliberation, just through normal human emotions or desires, such as irresistible fear, hunger, thirst, lust, etc. Even if that is its origin, an intention and its corresponding attempts might still be rationally controllable to a
great extent, so as to make it rationally assessable. And this would seem prima facie applicable to attempts that are epistemic rather than practical, such as the attempt to get it right on a certain question.

3. Surprisingly, aptness depends not at all on the safety of one’s attempt. How apt one’s performance is does not depend, without qualification, on how likely one is to succeed if one tries. Suppose an archer in a windy environment retains her high level of skill and good shape. Suppose her arrow in fact goes straight to the bullseye. However likely a gust may have been, none in fact intervenes. In that case, the archer does deserve credit for that shot’s success, surely, no matter how likely a spoiler gust may have been.

At no point in the arrow’s actual trajectory from bow to target does a gust impinge. And this is a non-modal property of the trajectory. However, at many points, maybe at all points, it may still be very likely that a gust would take the arrow off course. Yet the pervasive danger of diversion by a gust – that modal property – is irrelevant to the evaluation of the shot. The shot is apt, no matter how unsafe. What is relevant is only that no gust in fact intervenes, so that the speed and direction of the arrow can fully enough manifest archery competence, without intervening luck.

So, safety of situation is inessential for aptness of performance. Neither safety of skill nor safety of shape is essential, either. What matters for aptness is that the relevant skill, shape, and situation be actually in place, no matter how safely or unsafely.

11.2 Justification: the thinker with an envatted brain

1. In what follows we argue for a knowledge-friendly epistemology: not knowledge-first, but knowledge-friendly. Our aim is a theory of knowledge that will fit a unified and wide-scope epistemology. The account to be offered is meant to cover not only knowledge and belief but also epistemic justification, without disjoining knowledge from justification.

What, then, is the place of epistemic justification in the constitution of human knowledge? How do knowledge and justification join together for an overall virtue theory?

In order to answer these questions, we will need to understand – not just how competence can be manifest in the success of a performance – but also how skill is manifest in a skillful performance. And in order to gain this understanding it will be helpful to consider a familiar thought experiment. We mean the envatted brain experiment, which we next try to accommodate within our virtue framework. In the example, a subject’s brain is envatted while his course of experience is seamless, since his brain is then stimulated directly, yielding a stream of experience of a sort that one might naturally have. First, however, let us return to our archery example.

2. Our archer’s shot can be skillful (or adroit) without being apt. The shot is skillful if and only if it manifests skill. When the shot is also apt, then its success manifests skill (and also competence). But a shot can manifest skill without its success doing so.

Indeed, a shot can manifest skill even when it is not successful at all. The arrow might leave the bow headed straight to the bullseye but be blown off course by a gust of wind. Alternatively, in another shot, the arrow might leave the bow headed straight to the bullseye and go on to hit the target despite being blown about by gusts of wind, because these spoiler gusts combine so as to yield success anyhow, if only by luck. Despite the skill that each shot manifests because of its initial orientation, the success of the second shot might fail to manifest skill nonetheless because of the spoiler gusts.
It is by manifesting a skill that a shot gets to be “a skillful shot,” because some quality of it manifests that skill. But this is clearly insufficient for an apt or even successful shot.

3. Take next an archer who not only wishes or hopes but tries to release her arrow here and now. The trying might be constituted by, or might directly yield, a certain brain state that satisfies the following condition: If the subject were in good shape, that state would reliably and generally enough lead to good orientation and speed for the arrow leaving the bow.

Something accidental (gust-like) might intervene within the archer’s efferent nerves, however, affecting the outcome at her limbs, so that the shot fails. That subject then manifests her skill in a certain feature of her attempt, despite the lapse in her inner shape. The relevant feature of her attempt is that it is constituted by a certain brain state, which would normally yield success.

4. Suppose a subject with his brain in a vat (a BIV) wishes or hopes to raise an arm here and now, and even decides to do so forthwith, yet akratically fails to try. Of two BIVs, if one tries while the other does not, that can matter for responsibility and proper blame.

When an agent performs a physical act by intentional design, there is an initial physical state (however complex) that would normally bring about the intended outcome. And that brain-involving state is something the agent brings about. She does not bring it about intentionally as such, by design. She is unlikely to be able to specify that particular brain state. But an agent can bring about something attributable to her as her doing even without bringing it about by intentional design. That doing is then a deed. A “deed” is a doing attributable to the agent as her own doing.

For example, when signing a form at a government office, I may bear down so as to sign in one doing a carbon copy of the form. I do not know that I am signing a third copy, as I think there are only two. So, I may take myself not to sign a third copy, and yet may do so anyhow, as my own doing, attributable to me. I sign that third copy even if I do so unintentionally (not by design), unaccompanied by any corresponding intention, either concurrent or aforethought. That doing of mine is then an attributable doing, despite being unintentional (not by design). It is not a mere “doing,” as is my squashing of a rabbit by falling on it when pushed unconscious off a cliff.

5. I can bring about a certain brain state, one normally sufficient for the rising of my arm, even if I do not bring it about by intentional design, either concurrent or aforethought. What is more, my doing so may be a deed, an attributable exercise of competence and skill, despite not being an intentional doing (by design).

Exercise of skill requires only that one manifest a disposition to succeed, which one might do through a deed, even one that is not intentional (by design). Here is another example. A pianist in performance may press a certain key with the third finger of her right hand. She does not pick out that particular action as such for that very instant. So, she does not press that key with that finger at that moment by intentional design, either concurrent or aforethought. And yet it is something she does, the doing of which is attributable to her as her deed. Moreover, that deed of hers manifests her skill as a great pianist.

Similarly, we might manifest our competence to raise our arm, and indeed our skill for so doing, when we try to do so through a certain brain state whereby one normally brings about the rising of one’s arm. And that is then a way in which a BIV might manifest the skill of a great pianist, even if she fails to exercise the fuller pianistic competence that requires flesh and bone fingers hitting a physical keyboard.
6. An analogy to the BIV who manifests virtuosity in her perceptual judgments is now attractive. That believer seems “justified” in so believing, even if her belief is radically false. She still believes in an epistemically appropriate way, and the belief is still recognizably skillful.

Consider a competence to perceive that one faces something red and round. A certain visual impact on one’s eyes leads through the afferent nerves to a corresponding brain-involving state that grounds its visually seeming to the subject as if he faces something red and round. Brain states in a certain range respond respectively to the relevant range of inputs from the vision-involving afferent nerves. Entering such a state is then something agents do as their own attributable doing, even though this outcome is not consciously intentional. That is an essential component of the agent’s exercise of competence, and it is something the agent “does” with a teleological purpose, that of correct perceptual representation. That is a performance by that brain and indirectly by that agent. It is not just something that happens to them.

Having entered that afferent state, suppose the agent then tries to get it right on the question whether he faces something red and round. The agent might try judgmentally (intentionally) to get it right on that question. Alternatively, the agent might aim to get it right just functionally through psychological teleology, with no conscious intention. Let us focus, in any case, on the brain state that constitutes visual experience as if one faces something red and round. On the basis of such visual experience, one can then properly try to get it right, which trying might take either a functional (teleological) form or a consciously intentional form. And this attempt (functional or judgmental) can then be justified by being skillfully truth-conducive.

Such “skillful justification” is hence compatible with failure, since one can exercise one’s skill while in poor shape or in a poor situation. Clearly, such skillful justification might be attained by a BIV. It is required only that the given perceptual brain state lead competently to the relevant judgmental brain state, the one that underlies the judgment, the attempt to get it right. When normally occurrent in a properly encased brain, such a performance leads reliably enough to true belief.

In suggesting that the BIV has a competence to succeed if they try, we are abstracting from the complete competence. An athletic competence, for example, would require that the BIV’s brain be encased in a skull, and properly connected to efferent and afferent nerves, etc. These shape and situation factors are absent when the BIV’s brain lies in a vat and is not thus encased. But we assume that there is a deep seat of the disposition nonetheless, something that resides in the brain itself, and lies there when a normal person is even just asleep.

7. In our proposal there is thus a way for a BIV to be epistemically justified. What is that way? It is for his belief to constitute a skillful attempt to get it right, one that can fail miserably to be right while still being a highly skilled attempt. This is because the attempt resides in a deed that is normally very likely to ensure success but fails to have its expected effect only because of the agent’s defective shape or situation.

Here we have worked with a broad sense of epistemic justification so as to make room for externalist epistemologies that require no strict deontic sense applicable only to free and voluntary agency. In our broader understanding, a belief can be epistemically justified even if it is not an exercise of free agency, so that it attains no deontic status. Our acceptation is in line with a conception of competence that is, of course, applicable to free attempts but also to deeds. A deed is, again, a doing attributable to a subject as his own doing, one that may or may not manifest competence, despite falling short of free, active agency. Our perceptual competence, for example, resides largely in perceptual mechanisms whose exercise yields passive functionings rather than free actions.
In a narrower sense, only free actions can be justified or unjustified. This, too, can be understood in terms of competence. But now the competence would involve a disposition to succeed when one freely tries intentionally (by design, perhaps consciously so).

Our account of skillful justification is meant to be compatible with the broad sense of justification that admits passive functionings within its scope, and compatible also with the narrower sense restricted to a deontic status that applies only to free actions.

So far, we have discussed central epistemological concepts and corresponding phenomena – knowledge (in part 11.1) and justification (in part 11.2) – employing both the concepts of skill and competence. Next, we turn to considering the implications and commitments of our epistemological account, with respect to understanding skill and competence more generally. We begin in part 11.3 by considering in greater detail the relationship between skill and competence.

11.3 Skill and competence

1. Our epistemological account links knowledge to complete SkShSi (skill, shape, situation) competence and also links justification to skill or Sk competence. Understanding the relationship between complete competence and skill, then, would seem crucial to a proper understanding of our view, and also potentially important for a general understanding of skill. The relationship between skill and competence is our topic for this third section.

2. We begin by noting that skills and competences always co-occur. Any person who has a skill has some competence. That is to say, she has a disposition to succeed when she tries, which is relative to some class of shapes and situations. And any person who has a competence has a skill. She has not only a disposition to succeed relative to certain shapes and situations but also an innermost capacity for performing the quality of actions or deeds that enable her success in such conditions.

Yet, it would be misleading to think of a skill as identical to a complete, SkShSi competence on our account, since as we saw above skill can be manifest in a successful performance when no complete competence is manifest in the success of that performance.

The primary difference between skills and competences is that competences come in three sorts: the complete SkShSi competence, the inner SkSh competence, and the innermost Sk competence, only the last of which plausibly counts as a skill. So, an agent can have and manifest a skill, i.e., an innermost competence, even while being in bad shape and in a bad situation, so as to lack both the corresponding complete competence, and even the innermost competence.

Consider again our skilled archer, who enters a proper brain state as she takes her shot and manages to hit the target, despite mutually cancelling interventions in the efferent nerves (or, despite intervening gusts that cancel each other out). The archer’s shot does manifest skill insofar as she does perform an attributable deed in entering the proper brain state, whereby she functions properly. Indeed, the success of her shot does seem to depend causally on her skill. After all, given that the interventions in the efferent nerves or the gusts of wind perfectly cancel each other out, she needs to enter a proper brain state in order to hit the target. But the success of her shot does not strictly manifest her skill and does not manifest her competence. Her success does not manifest any competence on her part, whether complete, inner, or innermost.

3. Performance that manifests full SkShSi competence – rather than merely skill – is the more normatively important phenomenon in epistemology. Epistemic success that manifests such
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competence is what corresponds to knowledge. One knows if and only if one has a true belief in virtue of one's having exercised skill in an appropriate shape and situation.

On the other hand, as we saw in section 11.2, epistemic performances that manifest skill without aptness are mere justified beliefs, which fall short of knowledge.

It is through our account of knowledge that we attempt to understand epistemic justification. This is an asymmetric explanatory relationship. We do not try to understand or explain knowledge in terms of an independent concept of justification. This approach commits us to thinking that, at least in epistemology, the concept of knowledge has the more basic significance for conceptual explanation. And the concept of skill emerges as that of a disposition to succeed in attaining a given sort of success in the pertinent domain of performance, when one is in a certain range of shapes and in a certain range of situations (ones preselected as the relevant ones in the given domain of performance).

4. It is an interesting question whether the subtle differences between skill and full SkShSi competence might also help in explicating the normativity of performances generally. There seems reason to expect that apt performances – or successes due to competence – are more normatively significant than actions whose quality is due to skill (despite potentially being unsuccessful, or being successful despite the agent's shape or situation).\(^{10}\)

5. However, we should also consider the possibility that factors are at work in this ordering (of full competence and aptness over skill) that are distinctive of the epistemic domain.

For example, consider two cases of a successful improvisational jazz solo. In each case, the musician brings off the break beautifully, displaying high levels of musical skill. But in the first case, let's suppose, the musician manages to do all this despite being tipsy, and despite the piece being somewhat different from those she normally plays. She could very easily have messed up the piece badly. In contrast, suppose that the musician in the second case was alert and well-rested, and commonly plays similar pieces.

Question: is the first solo worse than the second, as a performance? Not necessarily. We can explain how the first performance may be at least as good as the second (at least in part) within our virtue framework. For, if the first performer retains a reliability of success above the relevant threshold even in her more challenging conditions – i.e., the threshold set in that domain for performances to be competent at all, and not too much due to luck – then her performance too will count as apt and admirable as such.

On the other hand, the tipsy musician's performance may have a standing that depends on respects other than that of its attributability to the agency (functional or intentional) of the agent. The attributability of the performance to the agent is directly proportional to the degree to which it manifests the agent's competence and not sheer luck.Compatibly with this, there may still be other respects in which the performance may gain value and admirability. For example, it may be appropriately risky to make an attempt even if the situation and shape of the agent are abysmal. You may do well to try to jump across a crevasse even if you are tipsy and the distance seems clearly beyond you, so that if you succeed it will be a near-miracle. If you succeed, your success will be minimally creditable to your competence, and yet it might be on the whole an admirable and creditable performance nonetheless. That performance may be admirable and creditable even if it is not apt, even if it is by all accounts really a matter of relevant luck that you succeed. Your jump may miraculously enable you to escape immediate trampling by an elephant.

Similarly, perhaps, even if we imagine that the first jazz performer was not in a shape or situation that her competence included – even if it were a near-miracle that she was able to pull
off the break – we might think her pulling it off anyway was rather exciting and even laudable. When the spotlight is on and there’s no getting out of an attempt, succeeding beyond one’s competences can seem, in its own way, admirable.

Epistemology may be an outlier among domains of performance, if it is less amenable to forms of credit and admirability outside of attributability. We are less inclined to praise one who forms a belief or judgment beyond her competence, even if that belief happens to be true and even if forming such a belief was pragmatically required or appropriate. And in any case, even if a lucky guess attains some such pragmatic success, it would never count as knowledge, so that the virtue-epistemological account of knowledge as apt belief would remain unaffected. So, there is a distinction between judgments and jumps or jazz solos, one important for epistemology.

6. Distinguishing as we do between skill and competence seems clearly valuable in theorizing about performances generally. However, we have noted respects in which domains may differ concerning the place and normative importance of aptness vs. skillful performance.

In the next section, we consider a further question about the relationship between the role of skill in knowledge and its role more generally.

11.4 Possessing vs. manifesting skill (competence)

1. Our account of knowledge and justification is committed to the strong dependence of skillful epistemic performances on the possession of underlying epistemic skills. Crucial to the accounts of knowledge and justification in sections 11.1 and 11.2 was the notion of underlying, dispositional states – epistemic competences, or skills. The possession of these underlying states is, on our account, necessary for knowledge or justification. Here again, it will be interesting to consider the question whether in general, outside of epistemology, we should also think of skillful performances as depending on the possession of an underlying skill.

2. Suppose, for example, one takes a facing bird to be a duck, while lacking the perceptual competence to sort ducks, distinguishing them from the equally numerous geese in that neighborhood. And suppose more specifically that the specific look of the facing bird as often leads one to say goose as duck. In that case, even if one happens to arrive at a true conclusion by basing one’s judgment on the bird’s duckish look (while in good shape and a friendly situation), our account denies to one’s performance the title of knowledge.

3. Similarly, possessing epistemic skill is a necessary condition on performing a skillful epistemic deed. One must have the inner state of skill if this is to be manifest in a particular performance. And, on our account, in order for a belief to be justified, one’s performance in having that belief must manifest skill (whether or not one’s performance is ultimately successful).

4. These necessary conditions might seem counterintuitive, either as claims about knowledge or justification, or as conflicting with a general principle about skill or competence.

For example, one might think that all that is required for a particular instance of knowledge is that one’s attaining a true belief is due to the manner in which one has formed the belief on that occasion, and not also due to the manner in which one is generally disposed to form similar beliefs. Or perhaps all that is required for a particular justified belief is that it be formed some good way (such as being appropriately based on good evidence, or acquired via a reliable method), regardless of whether one generally can form beliefs in good ways.
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Considering skill more generally, outside of epistemology: one might also insist that it is not generally true that skills are necessary for skillful performances. After all, it may seem that a poor student can occasionally write a skillful essay, or that a lousy basketball player might occasionally make a skillful pass.

5. However, we can explain the appeal of many such intuitions without admitting their truth. One plausible suggestion is that in such cases truly skillful action is mimicked. The unskilled agent acts much as the skilled agent would. There is in virtue theory a tradition of seeing such actions as good or valuable, despite not being as good as actions manifesting inner virtue.11

Another possible explanation: sometimes we praise performances as skillful when it would be accurate (using the terms of our virtue account) to say that they are especially successful. So, we can admit that although a tennis ace served by a lucky novice is not exactly skillful, it is skill-level excellent and to be praised as such. (Interestingly, this possibility seems less relevant in epistemology, for reasons we will discuss in the next section.)

6. With respect to epistemology, it is an interesting upshot of our virtue account, that the person without competences cannot have knowledge. This may at first seem a counterintuitive result, but on reflection it seems to resonate with common claims about knowledge and safety. Recall our subject who says duck on the basis of a paradigmatic duck appearance, although he might as easily have said goose. He does base his duck-sorting judgment on a proper perceptual basis, but he still does not know, since his judgment does not manifest a real competence, given how accidental his success turns out to be, despite having the right basis on that occasion.

One reason in favor of evaluating acts of knowing this way is that it allows us to rescue a certain kind of “safety,” as a necessary condition on knowledge. In section 11.1, we rejected modal safety as commonly construed as a necessary condition on knowledge. But our position there is a controversial one. There is a deep attraction to the idea that when one knows, one couldn’t easily have believed falsely.

We now wish to show how we can partly honor this intuition, in virtue of our commitment to the necessity of underlying dispositional states of competence, for competent performance. Our account guarantees something similar to safety, in virtue of requiring knowers to have broader dispositions to succeed when they try (in situations and shapes similar to those in which they know). For when one knows, our account allows us to say that it is not the case that one easily would go wrong on the question, assuming one were in a similar shape and situation.

Somewhat more carefully: on our account, knowing requires having exercised an underlying skill in an appropriate shape and situation. Whenever one knows, it follows that one would be disposed to believe truly if exercising the same epistemic skill(s) in some similar shapes and situations. So whenever one knows, there will be a modal fact, that not easily could one have gone astray by trying, given the shape and situation one was in. More generally, whenever one performs aptly, one could not too easily have failed, given the shape and situation one was in.

If one removes the condition that skill is necessary for skillful (and competent) epistemic performances and instead says that epistemic performances can be competent and apt in isolation from underlying skillful dispositions, then knowledge loses even this kind of “safety.” One might know \( p \) and yet fail to know any of \( q, r, s, \) etc., despite any amount of similarity between the propositions and any amount of similarity between the shapes and situations in which one attempts to form beliefs. Since our account can avoid this unseemly conclusion and rescue some very modified form of a “safety” requirement, in virtue of requiring skill for skillful performance, we take the requirement to be well-motivated.
11.5 Gradability

1. In this final section, we wish to reflect on the way that our epistemological account can illuminate the gradability of skills (or competences).

In general, one can be more or less competent, more or less skillful. This is also true in epistemology, with respect to epistemic skills and competences. One’s memory can be more or less reliable and extensive, one’s sensory perception can be more or less accurate and fine-grained, and one’s reasoning can be more or less careful and conscientious.

2. Although our epistemological account relies most explicitly on outright labels such as “competent” and “apt,” our approach is compatible with underlying degreed notions. For we can say that there are underlying facts about just how competent or apt a performance is, while also holding that there is some important threshold, determining the answer to the yes/no questions: Is this performance competent? Is it apt? (Justification is another example of a concept like this. Beliefs are either justified or not. But they can also be more or less justified.) So, we can acknowledge that, alongside the yes/no question about whether some agent is competent, there are also important questions about just how competent they are.

3. Moreover, our virtue account can help illuminate some possible dimensions underlying this variability. First, one can be more or less likely to succeed when one tries (relative to the appropriate set of shapes and situations).

Second, one can be likely to succeed when one tries, relative to a wider or narrower set of shapes and situations.

4. There is a third possibility for variation in competence, which interestingly seems different in epistemology compared to other domains of performance. This is the possibility that one can be likely to achieve greater or lesser success.

In epistemology, it is tempting to think that there are no degrees of the “success” one can achieve, with a belief: one’s belief is successful if and only if it is true, or “accurate.”

On the other hand, in many other domains in which skill is exercised, success is not so seemingly easy to define, and it does plausibly come in degrees. For example, I can “succeed” in pie baking by baking a good apple pie. Or I might succeed by making an even better apple pie, or by making a more creative pear-and-black-walnut pie, etc.

The idea under consideration is that epistemology may be a domain in which skill or competence is less variable in this way.

5. However, we note first that there are competences relevant to inquiry, defined broadly, which do exhibit the kind of variability found in other domains, such as baking. One could be competent in gathering evidence, or selecting research questions. These are not strictly epistemic competences of the sort knowledge constitutively involves, but these auxiliary epistemic competences might help us begin to understand how success in inquiry can be of variable quality.

6. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we have seen that falsehood is not the only kind of “error” or non-success a belief may exhibit, since a judgmental belief fails to succeed if it fails to be apt.

Unlike a guess, a judgment requires aptness and not just truth of affirmation. And the same goes for the dispositional state of judgmental belief. A judgmental belief is apt if and only if the
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aptness (and not just the truth) of its pertinent (first-order) affirmations would be due to the believer’s relevant (second-order) competences. One of the present authors has defended such distinctions among higher grades or kinds of knowledge extensively.\(^\text{12}\)

If we accept the general possibility of higher grades of knowledge accompanying higher orders of aptness, then this seems to be a dimension along which the success of epistemic performances may vary. And just as there may be no in-principle limitation on the goodness of pies one might bake, there may be no in-principle limitation on the quality of an epistemic performance. For one thing, it may be aptly, aptly, aptly, ... apt.

Moreover, although truth does not come in degrees, aptness does; accordingly, the objective attained by a judgment itself comes in degrees, since that objective is (gradable) aptness. Aptness can vary according to the degree to which the success of a performance is due to the competence of the performer.

We thus wish partially to resist the appearance that epistemic success and hence also epistemic skill or competence are less gradable than success and skill in other domains. In pie baking and in belief-forming both, it is important that one do well enough. But it may also be desirable to do well indeed, and there may be no in-principle maximum of quality for performances in these domains. In many domains, the objective of a performance is itself gradable. And it turns out that epistemology is not exceptional in this respect.

However, there is something right about the idea that epistemology is a domain where success is rather more limited than in many other domains. Whereas pies (or jazz solos, or thoughtful birthday presents) come in a dizzying variety of successful forms, successful epistemic performances can be arranged in a more regimented hierarchy. It may be that the gradability of epistemic skill or competence is itself, therefore, somewhat more restricted or regimented than the gradability of many other kinds of skills or competences.\(^\text{13}\) At the same time, epistemic skill may not be highly exceptional in this respect, when we compare athletic domains generally, especially those that are highly formalized, such as competitive archery.

11.6 Conclusion

Competence and skill are fundamental to understanding how knowledge and justification are acquired and sustained. Knowledge is fully competent, apt belief; justified belief is skillful belief. We understand both claims within a conception of knowledge and belief as action — not necessarily conscious, intentional action, but action more broadly conceived to include not only intentional action but also functional action.

In turn, reflecting on virtue accounts in epistemology can reveal features of skill and competence generally, or else reveal respects in which performances and skills may vary across domains.

Notes

1 See, e.g., Sosa (2015) for a defense of the view that knowledge is a form of action. One might argue instead, e.g., that actions are events, whereas knowledge or a disposition to judge is not an event but rather a mental state. Both claims are controversial, and rejecting their conjunction would take us too far afield here. See Hyman (2015, pp. 54–74) for an overview of the debate whether actions are events and an argument for a negative conclusion.

2 For views on which we must understand skill itself in terms of knowledge, see, e.g., Stanley and Williamson (2017), Millar (2009).
3 See Sosa (forthcoming, 2017) for extensive recent discussion of the structure of competence in epistemology.

4 Example adapted from Davidson (1978).

5 But the skill exercised need not be the skill to bring about that particular brain state. We need not commit at all on that. The skill exercised may be, e.g., the skill to play a certain concerto, or to tie a knot.

6 Many authors are committed – whether explicitly or tacitly – to the idea that characteristic manifestations of skill are intentional actions. See, e.g., Ryle (1949). Pavese (2016). Pavese (2016, p. 657) argues that since a certain perceptual activity “is not something that a subject can intentionally do or abstain from doing,” it cannot therefore be the characteristic manifestation of a skill rather than some other sort of ability. Our account may seem to be at odds with this commitment. But the two are broadly compatible, once one makes a distinction between consciously intentional actions and merely intentional actions, and perhaps also between “characteristic manifestations” and deeds that do somehow manifest one’s skill. We claim that not every deed that manifests skill is consciously intentional; it may nonetheless be that every characteristic manifestation of a skill is intentional in some sense.

7 The case of the pianist and that of the brain performance reveal a distinction between intentional and ontological “by” relations. Once the pianist knows that in playing a certain phrase she will be hitting a certain key with a certain finger, she can intentionally, by design, bring it about that she does hit that key with that finger. She brings that about intentionally by intentionally playing the relevant phrase. But ontology reverses the “by” direction. It is in part by hitting that key with that finger that the pianist ontologically brings about her intentional playing of that phrase. This seems also relevant to the whole “X first” controversy. X could be “first” in ways that do not affect the ontological order of the relevant domain and so do not affect proper metaphysical explanation in that domain.

8 In this chapter we consider justification as requiring only the manifestation of innermost competence or skill. See Sosa (forthcoming) for a longer treatment of justification that suggests we may also admit a more demanding form of justification that requires good shape in addition to skill.

9 Parts 11.1 and 11.2 above are largely drawn from Sosa (2017), by permission of Princeton University Press, which holds the copyright.

10 Aristotle arguably valued aptness quite broadly, for example, and saw apt performances as central to human flourishing.

11 For a contemporary, albeit Aristotelian, discussion of the value of acting as the virtuous person does, see Hursthouse (2002).


13 Skills relevant to knowledge-how (as opposed to the propositional knowledge that has been our concern) may require a separate treatment; and, as Pavese (2017) has recently argued, they may exhibit the capacity for much less regimented gradability.

References


