The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Skill And Expertise

Ellen Fridland, Carlotta Pavese

Why Moral Philosophers are not the Most Virtuous People

Publication details
Bana Bashour
Published online on: 21 Aug 2020

How to cite :- Bana Bashour. 21 Aug 2020, Why Moral Philosophers are not the Most Virtuous People from: The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Skill And Expertise
Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Jun 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
37

WHY MORAL PHILOSOPHERS ARE NOT THE MOST VIRTUOUS PEOPLE

Bana Bashour

It's that time of the year again when philosophers get together at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (APA). George and Moe, two friendly departmental colleagues, walk into the annual smoker discussing moral philosophy. As always, George is finding it difficult to articulate his version of moral skepticism and Moe is running circles around him. As soon as they are in the room, as happens every year, Moe scans the room for a famous philosopher and darts over to introduce himself, but not before telling George: “Who knows what kind of doors this chance encounter will open up for me?” Moe walks over, chats with the famous philosopher, and impresses her with his clever interpretation and defense of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative and how well he can apply it to contemporary social and political issues. George, as is his habit, looks for nervous graduates of his department he knows to be on the job market. He finds a few of them and goes around to comfort them, give them advice and wish them the best. The graduate students, as always, are very grateful for this drop of kindness in a very harsh and competitive environment.

This is not an alien or unfamiliar scenario. Moe may be an excellent moral philosopher and George a mediocre one at best, but most of us would agree that George's actions are more virtuous than Moe's (in this scenario that is). In this chapter, I wish to argue that behaving virtuously requires having a set of skills that are separate from what is required for making moral judgments. In order to motivate the need to discuss virtuous behavior in terms of skills, I will rely on recent discussions of skill in the philosophical literature. Section 37.1 will focus on arguments partly motivated by some fleshed-out examples, such as that of Moe and George above, which serve to show that having an appropriate judgment is neither necessary nor sufficient for behaving virtuously. This suggests that we need to think of a new way of behaving virtuously that is distinct from making moral judgments, so I will put forth the alternative of thinking of virtuous behavior in terms of skills. In Section 37.2, I examine some contemporary accounts of skill as well as how they can be related to virtue. I will illustrate my preferred account with the case of musical performance and show how it can also be applied to virtuous action. Just as the best music critic need not be the best musician, the best moral philosopher (or anyone who is good at making moral judgments) may not be the most virtuous agent.
Before beginning the first section, I would like to emphasize the significance of discussing morality in terms of skills. Aristotle famously wrote:

Virtues, however, we acquire by first exercising them. The same is true with skills, since what we need to learn before doing, we learn by doing; for example, we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions.

_Aristotle 2005 1103b: 23_

Unlike other moral philosophers, specifically ones who believe moral behavior involves acting in line with a specific judgment informed by a principle or set of principles, virtue ethicists argue that the question we ought to be concerned with in morality is not what principle or set of principles we ought to follow, but what kind of a person we ought to be. In order to do that, we need to understand how to become the kind of person who behaves virtuously in a reliable manner, and that requires gaining a set of skills that can be improved by practice as Aristotle notes above.¹

### 37.1 Moral judgment and virtuous behavior

In this section I will give some arguments for why being a good moral judge is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a virtuous agent. The vignette at the beginning of this chapter waves in the direction of that argument. I will stipulate that the reason that our moral judgments and virtuous behaviors can come apart is that we need to think of virtuous behavior in terms of skills.

Before turning to these examples, it is important to understand the role they are playing in the argument. Since I would like to argue that being a good moral judge is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a virtuous moral agent I need to present two distinct kinds of examples: the first involving an agent who has made a good moral judgment but did not behave virtuously and the second involving an agent who behaves as a virtuous moral agent but is unable to make a good moral judgment.

#### 37.1.1 Good moral judges, non-virtuous agents

The case of George and Moe brings out these two kinds of examples. Moe is a talented Kantian scholar who argues for the immorality of treating another person as a mere means to one’s ends, yet at the APA and various other social situations, he violates this formulation and tries to get the most out of whomever he meets. Moe may be a brilliant moral philosopher and may be able to point out the features of an action that make it immoral, perhaps even recognizing that his actions violate the Kantian principle, but he is more concerned with his self-interest than he is with doing the right thing.² He may represent the virtuous behavior under the guise of the good (Smith 1994), perhaps even convincing others to follow it, but he does not feel the need to follow it himself.³ Perhaps the heart of such examples is captured by the mantra: “do as I say not as I do” which is repeated by parents and educators everywhere. They are explicitly stating that they are better at judging moral or other appropriate behavior than acting in line with such judgments. At this point, these kinds of cases should show that people can be good moral judges without behaving like virtuous agents.
37.1.2 Bad moral judges, virtuous agents

Now we can turn to the second set of examples, namely those of George above and the more popular example of Huckleberry Finn (Arpaly & Schroeder 1999). Starting with George, although he may not be a very good moral philosopher, and although he may have difficulty making moral judgments, he can still behave virtuously. He argues for an account of moral skepticism and insists that no behavior can be deemed more virtuous than another but still behaves in a kind and considerate fashion. He may be tuned to people’s feelings, his attention captured by another’s discomfort or pain and that attracts him to help. In other words, it may be the very same features of the action that make it virtuous that capture George’s attention and motivate him, though he does not recognize them as so doing, i.e. he does not represent it to himself under the guise of the good (Smith 1994; Railton 2014). He may, for instance, simply like the graduate students and enjoy helping them any chance he gets, and he does not see that as morally relevant but as a personal quirk of his: he thinks he is just a big softie and that’s his personality. He is motivated by what makes it virtuous but fails to recognize it as virtuous. This is very similar to the familiar example of Huckleberry Finn who refuses to turn in the slave Jim. Arpaly and Schroeder call this a case of “inverse akrasia” since Huck believes that, all things considered, the virtuous action is to turn Jim in but he fails to do so (Arpaly & Schroeder 1999). However, in reality, not turning him in is the right thing to do. Huck may not be good at making, arguing for or explaining his moral judgments, but he is able to be motivated by the same features that make an action a virtuous one. It is the fact that Jim seems to be no different from Huck and deserves respect and treatment as such, that motivated Huck, but he did not recognize these as features that make the behavior virtuous. Arpaly and Schroeder argue that because he was motivated by the right set of features, and although he fails to recognize his action as a virtuous one, he should still be said to have acted virtuously in this situation.  

In their later work, Arpaly and Schroeder present Spare Conativism as a theory of virtuous behavior that takes such cases into account (Arpaly & Schroeder 2013) The central thesis of Spare Conativism is that: “To be virtuous is to have significant good will and lack ill will. To be vicious is to have significant ill will or significant moral indifference” (Arpaly & Schroeder 2013: 203).

Good will is defined in terms of intrinsic desires for the right or good correctly conceptualized (Arpaly & Schroeder 2013: 162). This means that one is considered to be virtuous if one desires the very same feature that makes an action praiseworthy and represents it to oneself in the relevant way. So if what makes an action praiseworthy is the fact, for instance, that it generates the greatest amount of happiness, then what makes someone virtuous is the fact that she desires the greatest amount of happiness even if she does not recognize the fact that this has anything to do with virtue. This desire is not instrumental for other purposes, but one that the agent has for its own sake. For example, in the case of Huck Finn, he clearly has an intrinsic desire for the welfare of Jim and conceives of it as such. He does not have it so that people will look upon him favorably as the hero who saved Jim. He is simply concerned with the well-being of his friend and salvaging his friend’s freedom is all he aims at. While that is what makes his action virtuous, he need not conceive of it under the guise of the good for him to count as having acted virtuously. So what determines the quality of one’s will and thereby one’s virtue, is the content of one’s intrinsic desires and how this content is conceived.

I agree with Arpaly and Schroeder’s account in that it drives a wedge between our theoretical understanding of morality and the relevant practical features that allow people to behave virtuously. I do not see Arpaly and Schroeder’s account as conflicting with the thesis I wish to
Moral philosophers are not the most virtuous

argue for in this chapter. However, I do wish to argue for a different way of explaining this wedge by emphasizing the skillful nature of virtuous behavior and its sensitivities to features of the environment that allow a person to behave virtuously.

So why is it that making moral judgments can be separated from performing virtuous action? I would like to propose that virtuous behavior requires a set of skills while making moral judgments does not, or if it does, it requires a different set. The rest of the chapter will be an attempt to motivate this proposal by appealing to contemporary theories of skill acquisition in general as well as ones relevant to virtue.

37.2 Virtuous behavior as skilled action

In order to motivate the account that virtue and virtuous behavior can be thought of in terms of skills, it is necessary to delve into the literature on the matter. I will first look at some prominent accounts of skill and skill acquisition most notably by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus as well as the intellectualist account of Jason Stanley. I will then turn to what can be called the intellectualist and anti-intellectualist accounts of skill and virtue, namely those of Julia Annas and Matt Stichter. I will argue that all these accounts are problematic. I finally turn to the account of skill that seems promising, that of Ellen Fridland. I will illustrate her account with the example of musical skills rather than the traditional example of sports because it is closer to moral skills. Finally, I will apply her account to virtue.

37.2.1 Different accounts of skill

There have been surprisingly few detailed accounts of skill in contemporary analytic philosophy. Perhaps the two most prominent ones are the anti-intellectualist account of Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986; 2004; Dreyfus 2007) and the intellectualist account of Jason Stanley (Stanley 2011; Stanley & Krakauer 2013; Stanley & Williamson 2017). Space does not allow me to discuss these accounts in detail, but a brief summary may be helpful.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986, 2004) argue that there are five stages for skill development. It is only in the earlier stages that the novice needs to rely on rules. As the learner gains expertise, she relies more on her holistic intuition that is formed through her experiences over time. This enables her to pick out relevant features of a situation and behave appropriately. By the time someone becomes an expert, she need not be able to verbally articulate her skills or tell you how she is doing what she is doing. She will rely heavily on the phenomenology of expertise in order to make her case, and argue that an expert does not consult rules or follow directions, she just does. In fact, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) argue that a significant difference between computing machines and humans is that the former can only function in response to explicit rules, whereas the latter give them up when they gain expertise. This, according to them, rules out the possibility of Artificial Intelligence taking over some tasks requiring skill (e.g. being a teacher or a manager). It is, therefore, clear why their account can be considered an anti-intellectualist one. However, this account leaves a lot to be desired. For instance, many have argued that instead of this being an account that explains the nature of skill, this account leaves us wondering if there is anything else to be learned about skill. In other words, just stating that the skilled expert performs her task intuitively is uninformative. One may still ask what this intuitive ability consists in, how it is formed, how it is improved and what features of the environment it picks out. One can also raise a whole slew of questions regarding the relation between the sub-personal non-cognitive mechanisms involved in the expert’s intuitive skilled performance and the plans and goals of that expert (e.g. planning a specific performance at
a specific time). If these mechanisms have no content as Dreyfus (2007) argues, then it may be impossible to explain how linguistically represented plans and goals can have an effect on a skilled performance (Fridland 2014a). These problems make this account of skill deeply unsatisfactory.

The intellectualist account of skill presented by Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2017) suggests that to have a skill is to have a disposition to know or to acquire knowledge states including knowledge-how. In previous works, Stanley (2011) had argued that know-how is just like any knowledge-wh (know what, where, when, whom . . . ) and so can be expressed as propositional knowledge. Knowledge-how is not strictly declarative but has a practical component, so the agent may not be able to verbally articulate this knowledge despite possessing it. This allows one to see how knowledge can generate behavior. On that view, knowing how to play the guitar involves the agent’s standing in a knowledge relation to some way w to play the guitar that is contextually relevant to the context she is in and she represents this way w in a practical mode. However, though his account of skill is strongly connected to knowledge, he does not believe that this knowledge needs to be explicitly formulated by the skillful agent. Note that this knowledge is what constitutes having a skill, but performing a skillful action also requires unintelligent, non-cognitive, sub-personal motor routines, like the specific nuanced differences in the movements of fingers of an amateur guitarist and those of a professional (Stanley & Krakauer 2013). But a major problem arises for Stanley’s account, namely that he makes such a sharp distinction between the knowledge a skilled agent has and the unintelligent, mechanical, sub-personal motor acuity, and though these are meant to work in tandem in the cases of skillful action, it is unclear how this can work. In other words, how can knowledge that is contentful and cognitive allow for non-contentful non-cognitive motor acuity to give rise to the intended performance of skill? (Fridland 2014a).

We can now turn to accounts of skill as it is related to virtue. Julia Annas argues on the side of the intellectualist view, albeit a different one from Stanley’s, and Matt Stichter follows Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s model of the anti-intellectualists.

### 37.2.2 Virtue and skill

Julia Annas (1995, 2008, 2011) argues in support of an intellectualist view of skill (and of virtue as skill) that she inherits from Plato. Note that Annas is not interested in spelling out an account of skills in general, but only interested in skills as they are relevant to virtues. According to this view, there are three elements that are necessary for a skill. The first is that the skill is teachable, in other words the one who has it can, to some degree, teach it to others. Second, there are some unifying principles underlying the whole field that the skillful person is able to grasp and that allow for flexibility when applying the skill in unfamiliar situations. Finally, the skilled person is able to give an account of this skill. It is impossible, on this view, for someone to have a skill and yet be unable to explain how it is that they rely on this skill. On this account, a virtue is a skill, and that involves an intellectual structure that the virtuous person is able to grasp, and that makes it a matter of explicit knowledge that the agent possesses. One can see that this account is quite different from that of Stanley discussed above, but they are both dubbed “intellectualist” because of their reliance on the necessity of knowledge for skill. For Annas it needs to be explicit though not so for Stanley.

On the other hand, Matt Stichter (2007, 2011, 2013, 2016) argues against Annas’s overly intellectual account and in support of an Aristotelian anti-intellectualist or empiricist position. He argues that if one were to take an account of virtue as skill seriously, then one ought to rely on a strong and flesheout account of skill and not simply discuss skills only as they are related.
Moral philosophers are not the most virtuous

to virtues as Annas does. He believes that Dreyfus and Dreyfus provide us with the most promising account of skills and so relies on it to flesh out how he sees virtues as skills. On his account one can have a skill without being able to explain what one is doing when performing skillful actions. Stichter agrees with Dreyfus and Dreyfus that skills are perfected through experience and therefore need not have intellectual representations or explicit knowledge. Even if an agent were to apply rules at the beginning stages of acquiring a skill, she ceases to do so when she becomes an expert since her experience would have provided her with the necessary intuitions to skillfully perform her tasks. On this view, one can become a skillful expert who consistently makes the right call without being able to say anything about one’s skill. Stichter agrees with Annas that virtue should be thought of as a skill, but with this understanding of skill rather than the intellectualist one presented by her.

One implication of the claim I defended in the first section of this chapter is that one can behave virtuously without recognizing oneself to be doing so, and without being able to explain how one is doing so. Julia Annas (2011) argues that this cannot be true. In fact, she argues in support of a distinction between having a knack for something, which means picking it up without telling you how and why, and being skilled at it. This distinction lies at the heart of the disagreement between intellectualist and anti-intellectualist accounts of virtue as a skill. Annas adds that one difference between a knack and a skill is that a skill is consistent because the skilled person can give an account of what principles or rules she is following, and can hence apply them in a variety of different cases. But one who has a knack for something may not be able to do so, and therefore is not as reliable.

There are several ways of responding to her claim. First, the first part of this chapter argues for the dissociation of virtuous behavior and making moral judgments. Annas’s view does not account for this dissociation as she believes that for skillful performance of a virtuous act to be distinguished from a knack, the agent must appeal to moral judgments that explain the virtue of the behavior. Earlier in the chapter, I argued in support of this dissociation by showing that one can do one without the other, so an agent can behave virtuously without being able to explain her behavior. Annas seems to take the opposite for granted and that is unwarranted and clearly problematic.

Another critique of Annas’s distinction between a knack and a skill, and one that is specific to virtue as a skill. She relies on a false dilemma between skills requiring either explicit knowledge or no knowledge at all. An agent can have knowledge related to a skill without being able to verbalize what it is that she is doing and why. Even Jason Stanley, the other intellectualist about skills discussed above, gives an account of skill that makes a distinction between knowing something and knowing something explicitly. For Stanley, the knowledge—how that is required for skillful performance is propositional but is represented in a practical mode. Another ingenious model of implicit competence and one that is relevant to virtue is fleshed out by Peter Railton in which he argues that our intuitions and affective reactions generally may be based on experience and knowledge we may not know that we possess. In fact, he also gives a detailed account about how this implicit moral knowledge, or moral intuitions are learned in developing children (Railton 2017). In addition, if what I have argued for above is true, namely that one can behave virtuously without being able to explain or justify her behavior, someone who is skilled at performing virtuous actions also need not have any way of explaining or justifying his actions. Aside from insisting on the account that skilled virtuous behavior requires giving an account, which I have argued above is not supported either by accounts of skills or any account of virtue, there is no reason to think that John, an extremely thoughtful and kind man consistently helping others and always sensitive to their plights, does not have a skill because he is unable to give you an account of how and why he is so acting.
In this case, saying of John that he simply has a knack for doing the right thing but is not virtuous seems odd. After all, what is virtue if not having the right set of attitudes that allow one to behave reliably in a morally praiseworthy way?

Given the problems raised for Annas’s account as well as those raised earlier for Dreyfus and Dreyfus (and therefore for Matt Stichter), one is left with no satisfactory account of virtue as a skill. In the next section, I will look into one possible avenue for such a view, though there remains much work to be done on that front.

### 37.2.3 Promising avenue

Ellen Fridland (2014a, 2014b, 2017) argues that none of the contemporary accounts mentioned above can explain the central role control plays in skill, and so she begins to formulate such an account (see Fridland, Chapter 19 in this volume). It is early days yet for this research project, but it seems quite promising. I will now turn to spelling out Fridland’s account, but instead of illustrating the various levels of control with examples from sports psychology, I will do so with examples from music learning and the psychology of music.

### 37.2.4 Why music?

People often think of skills in terms of competitive sports, and most of the philosophers mentioned in this chapter do so as well. Although learning about sports psychology may be helpful in explaining the nature of skill in general, a more appropriate analogy if we are interested in virtue and skill is that of music. I believe that is the case for several reasons that highlight similar features between the virtuous behavior and musical performance, and these help us understand virtue as a skill: First, music, like virtue, necessarily involves an affective as well as cognitive component. Affective feedback may directly alter a musical performance, as both the cognitive and affective elements are essential to it. This makes it more similar to virtues. Second, just like virtue or pro-sociality, most of us have a natural propensity for music that we simply fine tune over time. Infants respond to music quite early on in life, as they do for pro-social behavior (Railton 2017). Third, music, like virtue, is accessible to everyone. Though some may consider themselves tonally deaf, anyone can learn music with enough practice (Lehman et al. 2007). Finally, music, like virtue, is a universal phenomenon despite there being some nuanced differences across cultures. String instruments take different forms (guitar, violin, oud, sitar, etc.) as does vocalization, but the overarching system is to some degree overlapping (e.g. music is ritualistic, is sometimes meant to evoke emotions, different instruments are meant to simulate the different vocal ranges, etc.) This seems to suggest that these similar features between skillful performance of music and skillful performance of virtuous action may shed light on the latter.

### 37.2.5 Fridland’s three levels of control

Now we can turn to Fridland’s three levels of control required for skill: strategic control, selective, top-down attention and motor control. Note that these are meant to be found in all cases of skilled embodied action.

An essential feature of any skilled performance is the employment of strategic control. Fridland writes: “Strategic control ought to be identified with the goals, plans, and strategies that the agent uses in order to guide various instantiations of motor skill” (Fridland 2014a: 2744). This means that the agent must consciously select how the skill should be instantiated to serve
Moral philosophers are not the most virtuous

the specific purpose of the performance. I will use the example of choral singing throughout as this is a hobby I practice and so am quite familiar with it. In order to perform a piece, a singer needs to understand the message being relayed and therefore the style, mood, and method she ought to use when performing it. You cannot, for instance, sing the Lacrimosa movement of Mozart’s Requiem from the throat or in a cheerful manner. Similarly, Handel’s Hallelujah movement from The Messiah sung in a slow gloomy tempo will completely defeat its purpose.

One thing to keep in mind is that strategic control is not the same as conscious theoretical knowledge. First off, this kind of control may be exerted intuitively without having the ability to give any explicit justification, which is different from cases of explicit theoretical knowledge. Second, it is a practical kind of decision based exclusively on practical considerations which may become automated with practice, and that also marks a difference with theoretical knowledge. So one can clearly distinguish between strategic control and theoretical knowledge, and although it may be the case that some cases of the former involve the latter (e.g. learning some music theory may help one make a strategic decision to play a piece one way rather than another), it is not necessarily the case.

The next level of control is that of attention. She writes: “[Selective, top-down, automatic attention] is responsible for selecting the relevant features in an environmental array that a skilled agent should gather information about and respond to, given her goals, plans, and strategies” (Fridland 2014a: 2746).

There are many different things happening whenever someone is performing a skilled action, and one of the differences between the novice and expert is that the former does not know what to pay attention to, whereas this comes quite naturally to the expert. Some features of a situation are essential for the skilled behavior to be successful, and an expert selectively pays attention to those features (Fridland 2017). To go back to choral singing, a novice often concentrates on her score, trying to ensure that she gets all the notes right, whereas an expert pays attention to many significant features of a performance to sing masterfully as part of a collective, for instance not only does she need to be aware of the notes but she also needs to pay attention to the conductor as well as the entrances of all other singers and instruments. You need to train yourself to be attentive to the right elements of the performance and sometimes adjust it so you are in sync with others who may slow down or speed up. Selective attention is crucial in the development of any skill, be it a musical one, an athletic one, or as I will argue next, the skill of virtue.

Finally, on motor control, Fridland writes: “Motor control is constituted by the automatized motor routines that are learned through practice and training” (Fridland 2014a: 2748). This is the kind of control most people usually associate with skill, as it involves the nuanced changes in one’s motor routines that people seek to make when continuing to practice. In the case of musical instruments, such as playing the guitar or piano, these are the fine and fast movements of the fingers as they seamlessly slide from note to chord. As for choral singing, it involves changes in stomach muscles, changes in breathing techniques, finding and perfecting one’s mouth resonance and other such examples. In the case of virtue, an agent may mimic a victim’s physical cues in an attempt to express empathy, or she may speak in a tone that is comforting for someone in a state of panic, which comes naturally and without forethought from the training she has had as a clinical psychologist. Many skilled jazz improvisers perform their acts intuitively by suddenly moving their fingers in a way that somehow meshes with the rest of the instrument to make a familiar pattern generate a whole new rhythm. This is another example of how nuanced motor routines may effect a performance but not in the traditional way we think of.”
If one were to take the analogy between virtues and musical skills seriously, one may see another parallel, namely that despite the presence of all three levels of control in the case of a musical performance, none of this is happening in a similar way in cases of evaluating a musical performance. Starting with strategic control, while a critic may note the strategic decision that the performer made, her skill does not require that she make the right choice herself, only that she is able to evaluate the performer’s decision. As for having selective attention, the requirement for a critic is to be able to see how the different elements of a performance mesh together without being an active participant trying to fit in, thereby requiring a different kind of attention. Finally, in the case of musical performance, motor skill is key, and the mouth resonance or quick movements of the fingers are fundamental for a good performance, but they are wholly absent in the case of musical evaluation. You may be a fantastic music critic without having mastered any instrument. Just as in the case of virtue mentioned above, in which one can drive a wedge between moral judgment and virtuous behavior, so too can one see it in the case of music critics and musical performers. The best music critics are not the best musicians, and the best musicians are not the best critics. Similarly, the best moral judges may not be the most virtuous agents and the most virtuous agents may not be great moral judges. Evaluation and performance are separate in both cases.

If we want to see how this new account of skills fares when applied to virtue, we need to see if these three levels of control are found in cases of virtuous behavior. This is what we will turn to next.

### 37.2.6 Virtue and skill

In Section 37.1, I argued in support of driving a wedge between moral judgments and virtuous behavior. In order to explain this divergence, I have hypothesized that while virtuous behavior involves skilled performance, making moral judgments involves a different process. In this final section I wish to illustrate how virtuous behavior can be seen as skilled performance by two morally relevant though somewhat commonplace examples.

In the first, a friend of yours is suicidal and she is confiding exclusively in you, putting you in a unique position to help. You need to approach the situation very carefully and in a way not to lose that friend’s trust. However, circumstances vary and it is not the case that there is a one-size-fits-all solution. Imagine, for instance, being in the United States where a professional can be of help. One can say that in this case the strategic decision should be to encourage your friend to seek the help of professionals. Unfortunately, if you are in a place where the professionals are not as reliable or even non-existent, you may need to think twice about that and try to find an alternate method. In any case, a strategic decision needs to be made about how to deal with it. You need to also deploy selective top-down attention as you should be aware of some warning signs or cries for help. Finally, motor control is necessary for continuing to put your distressed friend at ease. You need to be in tune with her and ensure that no subtle movement you make or remark you utter will be perceived as threatening.

Second, you are at a dinner, and one of the guests makes a rape joke. This guest is unaware that one of his audience was a rape victim, but you are aware of that fact. Again, here you are in a unique position to either let it pass or do something to alleviate your friend’s distress, and thus a strategic decision needs to be made. You need to non-verbally gauge how the friend prefers this to be handled, but also how the other audience members, including the joker, will react. If, for instance, they are deeply insensitive to rape victims or will react by looking down on your friend for her sexual activities (imagine being in an extremely conservative society that lays blame on rape victims), then it may be a good idea to let it go. However, all these nuanced differences
Moral philosophers are not the most virtuous

need to be weighed carefully before making the strategic decision, and once again, the selective top-down attention is crucial for recognizing all the different features of the situation. Finally, motor control, though it seems uninteresting in this case, is utilized even in the non-verbal communication you have with your friend, assuring her that you are there to be supportive. That involves nuanced bodily movements to relay this detailed information.

Those are some illustrations of how different levels of control may be at play in virtuous behavior, but I would go even further in claiming that they are likely to be present in most cases of virtuous behavior.

37.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued for conceiving of virtue in terms of skill. In the first part I did so by driving a wedge between the ability to make moral judgments and the ability to behave virtuously. In the second part I explored some accounts of skills in the contemporary literature and finally relied on one that seems to have a promising future. So to answer the question posed by the title of this chapter, why moral philosophers are not the most virtuous people, I can say that it is because virtue requires a set of skills different from those found in making moral judgments. So just like watching sports does not make you a good athlete or listening to music does not make you a good performer, learning moral philosophy does not make you behave virtuously. But I want to end on a positive note for moral philosophy and speculate that if you do it right, in tandem with practicing virtue, then just like in sports and music, it may help.

Notes

2 Note that this is a case in which an agent comes to his judgment through reason, but the same can apply if he had come to his judgment through affect, for instance one's affinity toward someone because of historical familiarity may allow one to be more lenient in one's judgment of that person and that is not based on reason but affect.
3 Some may say that these are similar to examples of weakness of will, in which someone judges that, all things considered, she should perform some action X, but still fails to do so. However, the reason my examples are more commonplace is that I do not want to focus on one case in which there is a divergence between a judgment and an action, because I want to emphasize a pattern. One slip-up does not suggest anything about the presence or absence of some skill, but a pattern does.
4 See Arpaly and Schroeder (1999, 2013) and Arpaly (2002) for good examples of such cases.
5 Although Matt Stichter has developed a more recent account, I will only discuss his earlier work in this chapter. I plan on discussing his later work in detail elsewhere.
6 For a more detailed rejection of Dreyfus and Dreyfus's account of skill, see Fridland (2014a) or Stanley and Williamson (2017).
7 Railton (2014) gives some neuro-scientific justifications for his claims and illustrates them with a detailed example of a litigator.
8 For example, Railton (2014), Haidt (2001).
9 Buskell (2015) argues that Fridland's account is incomplete since her focus on motor control is too focused on athletic skills and does not make room for semantic skills (such as comedians, story-tellers, writers). In an amendment to her account he suggests that instead of the three levels of control one can see control as an instantiation of two features: normative sensitivity and opportunistic robustness. I will not address his account here, but I believe it to fit as well with the account of virtue as skill as Fridland's, if not more so.
10 Some, following Haidt (2001), may argue that learning moral philosophy will not even improve making moral judgments as those are based on affect rather than reason. That may be the case, but my claim about learning moral philosophy stands either way.
References