Introduction to Special Edition on “Annas on Virtue and Skill”

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Accepted: 22 March 2021 / Published online: 23 April 2021
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In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously drew a connection between the development of the moral virtues and the acquisition of various skills, such as archery and playing the lute. Since that time there has been substantial debate on how seriously one should take that analogy. Most recently, in *Intelligent Virtue* (2011) Julia Annas has made a powerful case for taking that analogy very seriously. In the summer of 2017, Richard Hamilton and Tom Angier hosted a conference at the University of Cape Town in honor of Professor Annas’ work, bringing together the scholars in the virtue ethics tradition, Ancient and Contemporary under the heading of virtue, skill, and practical reason. Professor Annas was unfortunately forced to cancel at the last minute for personal reasons but she generously offered to respond to the papers on her work. The collected volume was selected from papers presented at this conference. The papers within the Ancient Stream can be found in the collection edited by Tom Angier,

The first paper in this edition, by Tiger Zheng, takes inspiration from the debate between Jason Swartwood and John Hacker-Wright. While the former suggests that practical wisdom is similar to complex skills such as firefighting, the latter pinpoints a deficiency of this view in the form of 1) the lack of an antecedent end in practical wisdom; and 2) a dispositional component. Zheng picks up where Hacker-Wright leaves off: his concluding suggestion that there may yet still be shared psychological capabilities between the two. Developing an account of how we come to deliberate about what sort of life to pursue, Zheng argues that the development of deliberative excellence (*euboulia*) bears many striking similarities to the skill analogy as construed by Annas, and, in the process, clarifies the role of two other intellectual virtues: experience (*empeiria*) and discernment (*gnome*). He stops short of endorsing

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the skill analogy wholesale, however, instead, suggesting that there may remain a motivational gap between cleverness (*deinotes*) and full-blooded good deliberation.

Will Small's contribution focuses on the relation between virtues and actions and, in particular, that the possessor of virtue is said to be able to act with immediacy from the virtues themselves. Small juxtaposes this immediacy requirement with Annas' account of skills as articulable: that skills require a "productive, rationally-articulated understanding of the skill's domain". On Small's analysis, these two features pull in opposite directions and that while Annas attempts to reconcile this tension through a consideration of a perfected skill as opposed to a knack in how the former comes to be acquired, her attempt to do so does not vindicate the apparent tension at the moment of exercising the skill. Small suggests that we can overcome this by abandoning Annas' commitment to the idea that rational action is construed as conscious thought in the moment of exercise; but ultimately concludes that this resolves the tension at the cost of the shared intellectual structure of skill and virtue. Instead, Small suggests that, unlike the intelligence of skills which consist of knowing how to do something, the intelligence of virtues consists of knowing whether to do things.

Denise Vigani locates an underexplored avenue in the Annas' skill analogy concerning what sort of skills are up for comparison. On her view, open embodied skills are the most fitting point of comparison—that is, skills that both exhibit reason in the actual physical activity and whose proper exercise depends upon features external to the agent. Casting the skill analogy in this light has many payoffs and implications. For instance, while she agrees with Annas that virtuous activity is subject to the requirement of articulable explanation, viewing the virtues as analogous to embodied skills highlights the demandingness of pedagogical articulacy. Further, such a refined analogy allows the research on embodied skills to shed more light on puzzles that have plagued virtue ethicists: she suggests that we can fruitfully recast spontaneous actions as improvisational as a novel way of thinking about such actions.

Matthew Sharpe's contribution brings Annas' insights to bear on a criticism of Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy as "spiritual exercises" as not intellectualist enough. As Sharpe points out, Annas' own work has often come under fire from the opposite direction: interlocutors have frequently complained that her work proffers an account of the virtues as too intellectualist and underemphasizes the role of habituation in virtue acquisition. Sharpe takes lessons from Annas' modifications to her view in light of these concerns as indicative of how Hadot's account of "spiritual exercises" likewise circumvents the charge of anti-intellectualism. Where Annas integrates habituation into her account of skill development, these arguments, for Sharpe, show that habituation itself is also an intellectual affair. For example, spiritual exercises still require, behind them, an application of reasoned thought; and, likewise, devote practitioners of such spiritual exercises—Sharpe, here, takes the stoics as an example—likewise require a drive to aspire. In short, where Annas connects the intellect to quotidian skillful and virtuous practices, Sharpe exploits this connection to show that the relation runs the other way as well: ancient philosophy construed as spiritual exercises, far from being anti-intellectual, is likewise a philosophical project.

Ikbal Bozkaya's paper examines the thorny issue of action-guidance in virtue ethics: a topic about which much ink has been spilled by both those seeking to show how it satisfies the traditional desiderata of ethical theory as well as those who resist such a move. On Bozkaya's view, so long as we can avoid the mistaken assumption that action guidance must be in the form of a top-down hierarchal theory with a single evaluative criterion, eudaimonistic virtue ethics provides us a conceptual structure to generate action-guidance. Against this idea, the skill analogy offers a salve in the form of highlighting the importance of the development of the agent, whether it be on the matter of skills or virtues and offers action guidance of another sort: namely, how one is to become virtuous. From these observations, Bozkaya argues that *eudaimonia* is of central importance for the action-guidance of virtue because, much like skills, there must be something to which such development aims at; though she denies that it is (or should be) a hierarchically superior or complete principle.

Following Annas' lead in recognizing the dynamic quality of virtue, Kristina Gehrman's paper offers a thorough discussion of the concept of character as, to use her words, persistently developmental as opposed to a static dispositional state. Gehrman, here, distinguishes between two sorts of development: the first of which is a matter of habituation; and the second of which is a result of habituation but continues to persistently and develop as, to use her analogy, a mature, rooted, and slow-growing fruit tree. The former sets out the trajectory for the latter. On such a view, discussions of character ought not to focus on reliability or consistency of action but rather continuity—a term which Gehrman goes on to show captures the insights of the two alternatives in a way more commensurate with what we mean by them, while, at the same time, ruling out some other modes of thinking about character. Her account of character, as such, makes room for and recognizes the importance of first personal experience and what has often been unjustifiably derided as folk psychology in our thinking about moral agents.

Similarly focused on Annas' emphasis of the development of the agent, S. Stewart Braun considers, whether a developmental account of the virtue can overcome the dilemma of modesty: that to be truly modest, one ought not to act out of modesty. Most generally, this tension highlights a question of how modesty can be developed altogether, but this dilemma is of special interest to Annas' developmental account of virtues given her insistence that, like skill acquisition, coming to be virtuous requires conscious cultivation. Braun identifies how the three main understandings of modesty—the ignorance, perspectival, and de-emphasis accounts—and articulates how each of these, while avoiding the paradox of modesty, are incompatible with an account modesty as cultivated. Contra these approaches, he proposes the egalitarian account, on which modesty consists of a commitment to equal social standing and demonstrates its compatibility with Annas' view on virtue development.

With Amichai Amit's paper, we are treated to another application of Annas' work to a longstanding challenge for virtue ethics. In this case, Amit takes aim at those who seek to assimilate the approach under a deontological or consequentialist banner. What sets virtue ethics proper apart from these alternative normative ethical theories is an account of how virtue is the primary evaluative standard. Here, he sees

Annas' work as providing the foundations for the view that virtue and goodness are mutually determinative, and so both primary. Like skills, he argues, the evaluative standard of virtue is the end—namely, goodness or a good life; however, the value of virtue is not wholly derivative from this end, rather, drawing from Annas, Amit argues that the virtues narrow down what can be the end. In this sense, virtues determine the end. Neither virtue nor goodness is reducible to the other.

Matthew Stichter's work seeks to ameliorate and support Annas' skill analogy by grounding it in psychological research. To do this, he seeks to draw parallels between skill acquisition and self-regulation theories in psychology which have, as their subject matter, the idea that certain sorts of actions and standards of behaviour in service to a commitment to a goal. Stichter provides an in-depth account of what steps this involves and suggests that skill acquisition is a particularly sophisticated version of self-regulation. If this is right, then, correspondingly, the literature on self-regulation will have much to say about the virtues. Stichter focuses on two of these. In the first place, he applies lessons gleaned from research on domain-specificity to undercut the idea, proposed by Neera Badhwar, that virtues are united within domains; and, in the second place, Stichter argues for the need to identify virtues associated with self-regulation.

A contribution from Richard Hamilton rounds out the selection. He suggests that a consideration of the relationship between skill development and character building in the traditional martial arts may provide a way to navigate between extreme intellectualist and naïve accounts of the virtues since the traditional martial sit neatly in neither paradigm. Proponents of the traditional martial arts have long considered that, provided that they are acquired for the proper end, namely self-defence and the avoidance of aggression, these arts are an excellent way of developing virtue. At the same time, teachers of these arts have tended to downplay the importance of overt explanation in favour of learning while doing. In particular, the almost obsessive focus on training and self-perfection go far beyond the requirement of learning how to fight. It is the self-discipline and diminution of egoism in these practices that provide the key to their relationship to virtue.

These papers are supplemented with comments provided graciously from a response from Annas herself. Taken together these papers and Annas' response suggest that we may be only at the beginning of a very interesting and fruitful debate.

The editors would like to thank the contributors for their work in commenting on their peers' work and to John Hacker-Wright for his guidance and friendship throughout this process. We would also like to thank Tom Angier for his work in setting up the conference and making sure that it ran so smoothly.