

Is Epistemic Competence a Skill?

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Many virtue epistemologists conceive of epistemic competence on the model of skill—such as archery, playing baseball or chess. In this paper, I argue that this is a mistake: epistemic competences and skills are crucially and relevantly different kinds of capacities. This, I suggest, undermines the popular attempt to understand epistemic normativity as a mere special case of the sort of normativity familiar from skilful action. In fact, as I argue further, epistemic competences resemble virtues, rather than skills—a claim that is based on an important, but often overlooked, difference between virtue and skill. The upshot is that virtue epistemology should indeed be based on virtue, not on skill.

Keywords: virtue; skill; epistemic competence; epistemic normativity; virtue epistemology

1. Introduction

According to a popular view in contemporary epistemology, epistemic normativity is just a special case of a more familiar kind of normativity: the one we find in the domain of skilful action such as archery, playing baseball or chess. The basic idea is that evaluating believers and their beliefs is like evaluating skilled agents and their athletic, artistic, or technical performances. Most famously, Ernest Sosa [2007, 2011, 2015] compares the believer to a target-shooting archer. On his view, forming beliefs is, in all relevant respects, just like shooting arrows. In both cases, the normative status of the relevant performance—beliefs and shots—tracks the extent to which it exhibits the subject's pertinent skill: her cognitive skill in the one case, her archery skill in the other.¹ However, the relevant analogy is hardly unique to Sosa. The literature on reliabilist virtue epistemology is full of examples from the realm of skill: aside from Sosa's archer, we encounter basketball players, chess players, skiers, musicians, baseball players, golfers, carpenters, tennis players, and many more.² Despite significant differences among the views of those who appeal to such examples, there is, thus, a shared tendency to use ordinary skills as a model for understanding epistemic competences: our competences for forming and revising beliefs in response to, say, perception or

¹ Sosa's term for the sort of normativity familiar from skilful action is 'performance normativity'. On his view, epistemic normativity is just a 'special case' of performance normativity (see Sosa [2011: 1], and many other places). Similarly, Greco [2010: 7] claims that '[e]pistemic normativity is an instance of a more general, familiar kind'—one whose paradigm examples all come from the realm of skill (see, e.g., Greco [2010: 77–8 and 86–9]).

² Aside from Sosa and Greco, the appeal to examples of skill as a model for epistemic competences can be found in Turri [2010], Miracchi [2015], Kern [2017], Kelp [2017, 2019], and many others.

other beliefs. A fitting label for the tendency in question, then, is ‘skill epistemology’—more fitting, I shall suggest, than the commonly used ‘virtue epistemology’.

My main aim in this paper is to query skill epistemology’s driving idea: that we can understand epistemic normativity on the model of skill normativity. As I shall argue, epistemic competences are crucially and relevantly different from skills, so that, as long as we use the latter as a model for the former, we are bound to misconstrue central aspects of epistemic normativity. In fact, I shall argue that epistemic competences resemble virtues rather than skills. This claim rests on an important distinction between skill and virtue, one that Aristotle highlights in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but that hasn’t received the attention it deserves in the vast literature on virtue epistemology. Somewhat ironically, then, the upshot is that virtue epistemology should indeed be based on virtue, not on skill.³

I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will clarify my objectives and prepare the ground for the following discussion. After a brief survey of some general features shared by virtues, skills, and epistemic competences alike (section 3), I will proceed to distinguish virtues from skills in section 4. Subsequently, in section 5, I turn to my main claim arguing that epistemic competences differ from skills in much the same way as virtues do. In section 6, I use the example of epistemic rationality to illustrate how that difference undermines the claim that epistemic normativity is a mere special case of skill normativity. I conclude in section 7.

2. Skill Epistemology

To clarify my objectives, it is helpful to separate two claims that are often run together:

- (A) *Capacity Account of Epistemic Normativity*: Epistemic normativity is to be understood (at least in part) in terms of epistemic capacities (competences, powers).
- (B) *Skill Account of Epistemic Capacities*: Epistemic capacities are to be understood on the model of skills.

The basic idea behind (A) is that core epistemic evaluations track the proper workings of our epistemic competences. Roughly, on this view, what confers positive normative status upon a belief—what makes it *ex post* justified or rational, for example—is the fact that it manifests the believer’s epistemic competence. (B) builds on (A) but adds a significant twist. In effect, it maintains that epistemic competences are a certain kind of skill, which then, together with (A), yields the view

³ Reliance on the skill-model is most prominent among proponents of the *reliabilist* tradition in virtue epistemology; I clarify how my view relates to the *responsibilist* tradition in section 2.

that epistemic normativity is a mere special case of the sort of normativity familiar from archery and baseball.

As understood here, proponents of skill epistemology embrace *both* claims. But it's important to see that this is optional: one may embrace (A) without (B). That is, one may adopt a capacity-theoretic approach to epistemic normativity without thereby being committed to assimilating epistemic normativity to skill normativity. After all, it may be that epistemic competences and skills are relevantly different kinds of capacities, such that what 'proper workings' amounts to in the one case is not the same as in the other. If so, and given (A), we should also expect a difference in the modes of evaluation characteristic of both domains (epistemology and archery, say). To illustrate, compare a broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics. Aristotelians embrace an analogue to claim (A): they seek to understand central ethical normative notions (moral worth, for example) in terms of virtue-constituting capacities. But this doesn't mean that they also embrace an analogue to claim (B): a skill-based conception of virtue. For example, on Aristotle's view, despite their many similarities, virtues and skills are relevantly different kinds of capacities, giving rise to important differences between the associated forms of normativity.⁴

What I want to recommend is that we take a similar approach to epistemic normativity: we should embrace (A) without (B). That is, we should adopt a broadly capacity-theoretic approach to epistemic normativity without trying to reduce all of epistemic normativity to skill normativity. In the present paper, I will not attempt to defend the capacity-theoretic approach as such. Instead, taking such an approach to be common ground among the parties involved, my main concern is with arguing that we should resist the move from (A) to (B). More specifically, I shall argue that skills and epistemic competences are different kinds of capacities, and that their difference matters for a proper understanding of epistemic normativity. In my view, epistemic competences differ from skills in much the same way as—according to Aristotle—virtues differ from skills. Thus, in contrast to skill epistemology, I maintain that epistemic competence should indeed be modelled on virtue, not on archery or baseball.

Before moving on, let me clarify how my concern in this paper relates to three important debates in the neighbourhood. First, so-called virtue *responsibilists* [Code 1987; Montmarquet 1987; Zagzebski 1996] have long complained that skill-based virtue epistemologists (like Sosa and Greco) neglect the importance of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness or intellectual courage for epistemology. It's important to stress that my complaint here is different. With respect to these responsibilist virtues, I agree with Sosa [2015: ch. 2]: they play at best an auxiliary, but not a

⁴ See Aristotle's discussion in II.4 and VI.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

constitutive role for knowledge and justification. After all, even narrow-minded people may know or justifiably believe things. Rather, what I want to suggest is that there is a striking *structural* similarity between the sorts of capacities constituting epistemic competences and virtues: as we will see, such capacities ‘work’ in importantly similar ways. This, however, is compatible with the possibility that competent believers lack responsibilist virtues such as open-mindedness or intellectual courage.

Second, some proponents of the capacity-theoretic approach use the notion of skill in an attempt to *analyse* knowledge [Sosa 2007, 2015]. Others object to this, either because they combine the capacity-theoretic approach with a knowledge-first view [Miracchi 2015; Kelp 2017; Kern 2017], or because they think skill in general (not just cognitive skills) must be understood in terms of knowledge [Stanley and Williamson 2017]. My concern is orthogonal to this debate. The appeal to skill as a model for epistemic competences is found on either side of the debate between knowledge-first and belief-first virtue epistemologists. Their concern is not with whether epistemic competences are skills, but rather with how to characterize the relevant sort of skill: whether it’s a capacity *to know* or one for something *less* than knowledge (like true belief).

Third, some authors object to skill epistemology on the grounds that such a view rests on a sort of category mistake: the evaluative pattern characteristic of skilful action applies only to performances, but beliefs are *states*, not performances [Chrisman 2012, Engel 2013]. Others respond by arguing that there is a suitably broad sense of ‘performance’ on which it is perfectly possible to conceive of beliefs as performances [Rohrbaugh 2015, Sosa 2015]. Again, my focus here is different. I am not concerned with whether or not beliefs can be understood as performances (for present purposes, we may grant that they can). My concern is with whether or not beliefs—conceived of as performances or not—should be understood as paradigmatically manifesting a certain kind of skill.

3. Common Features

Let me begin with a few common features. Virtues, skills, and epistemic competences are all certain kinds of *excellences*: these are capacities that dispose their possessors to *perform well* with respect to the fundamental objective of a certain domain. For instance, the fundamental objective of chess is to checkmate one’s opponent. Together with the rules defining permissible chess moves, this aim fixes norms for what counts as the *right* or *correct* move in a given situation of the game: namely, the permissible move that best serves the aim of checkmating. A skilled chess player is then someone who is capable of reliably performing well within the domain of chess, typically by responding to considerations that bear on what’s right to do relative to the norms of chess. Thus, when a skilled

chess player moves her bishop in a certain way, she typically does so in response to factors of her situation that bear on how to checkmate her opponent (the position of the pieces, the available moves, etc.). Our assessments of chess players reflect this: someone who performs the right move through an exercise of her skill deserves *credit* for getting it right, unlike someone who gets it right by mere luck. In this sense, evaluations of chess players and their performances track the extent to which they possess and exercise a skill-constituting capacity (see Sosa [2007: ch. 4]).

Similarly for virtues and epistemic competences. A virtuous person is someone who is disposed to perform well with respect to the characteristic objectives of virtue (like helping others in need or distributing goods fairly). Again, these objectives can be seen to fix norms for what's *right* to do in some situation: providing help or fighting for fair wages, say. Exercising one's virtue is then typically a matter of acting in response to considerations that bear on what's right to do in light of these norms (in response to a needy child or unfair wages). Finally, a competent believer is someone who is disposed to perform well with respect to the fundamental aim of the epistemic domain, which I assume here is believing the truth. Exercising one's epistemic competence is then typically a matter of forming beliefs in response to considerations that bear on what's *correct* to believe in light of the truth-norm (in response to perceptual indicators of truth, for example). Here again, our evaluations of agents and believers reflect the extent to which they possess and exercise virtues and epistemic competences: *qua* manifestations of such capacities, actions and beliefs acquire normative statuses that they would otherwise lack. For instance, someone who believes the truth through an exercise of her epistemic competence deserves *credit* for getting it right and her belief qualifies as knowledge, unlike someone who believes the truth by mere accident.

Of course, at this level of generality, many important issues are glossed over. For instance, there is important controversy as to what the epistemic aim actually is: whether it's true belief [Sosa 2007; Greco 2010], knowledge [Miracchi 2015; Kelp 2017], or perhaps understanding [Schafer 2019]. Furthermore, there is the question of how such 'aim-talk' is to be understood (for my take, see Horst [2021]). Similar questions arise with respect to skills and virtues. For present purposes, however, we can set these questions aside. Our focus will be on a slightly different issue: the way in which skilled agents and competent believers are disposed to respond to considerations that bear on their respective aims.

4. Virtue and Skill

In this section, I will draw attention to an important difference between virtues and skills, one that can be traced back to Aristotle.⁵ While there are arguably several important differences between virtues and skills, the one I will focus on here is most relevant for bringing out the normative contrast between skills and epistemic competences.⁶ For, as I shall argue, in the relevant respect, epistemic competences differ from skills in much the same way as virtues do.

Consider an important fact about skills: there is no difficulty for a skilled agent to knowingly *disregard* what's right to do in light of the norms of a certain skill domain. For instance, while playing chess, you may recognize that moving your queen is the best way to avoid being checkmated. Still, you may not move your queen, perhaps making some other move instead. If you do, this doesn't automatically call into question your skilfulness as a chess player, nor does it imply that you somehow *failed* to exercise your skill. You might have simply lost any interest in playing and be eager to end this game as soon as possible. Now contrast this with virtue. Suppose you come across a person in need of your immediate assistance, you recognize the situation for what it is, and you are fully capable of providing relevant assistance. Other things equal, if you are a kind person, you will assist that person. If you do *not* provide assistance, this normally shows that you are not really a kind person. After all, acting kindly, when and where kindness is called for, simply is what being a kind person is all about. Hence, other things equal, someone's failing to act kindly in relevant situations immediately calls into question whether she is rightly credited with possessing the virtue of kindness. Unlike in the case of skill, knowing disregard for the norms of virtue is not really an option for a virtuous person.

This points to an important difference between the sorts of capacities constituting virtues and skills respectively. As noted, virtues and skills alike dispose their subjects to perform well within a certain domain, typically by responding to considerations that bear on what's right to do in that domain. As I want to suggest now, however, they differ in the way in which they dispose their subjects to respond to such considerations. Thus, roughly, a virtuous person is someone who is *unconditionally* responsive to considerations bearing on what's right to do relative to the norms of virtue. Given a situation where considerations of kindness are decisive and call for ϕ -ing, a kind person typically responds by ϕ -ing.⁷ This suggests something like the following schematic account:

⁵ Compare II.4 and VI.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For discussion, see, e.g., Foot [1978: 7–8], Zagzebski [1996: 106–16], and Angier (2011: ch. 2).

⁶ Aristotle mentions several features distinguishing virtue from skill (see II.4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). It's beyond the scope of this paper to consider the exact relation among the distinguishing features. I would argue, however, that what I shall call "unconditional responsiveness" is in fact a *fundamental* characteristic of virtue in that many of the other distinguishing features can be seen to derive from it (see Horst [MS]).

⁷ The qualification 'decisive' is important: a genuinely kind person is unconditionally disposed to act kindly in situations where kindness is actually called for, not where considerations of kindness are overridden by the demands of other virtues (e.g., demands of fairness). This is what distinguishes kindness as a *genuine* virtue from what Aristotle calls

Virtue: A virtue is a kind of capacity whose exercises are *unconditionally* responsive to considerations that bear on what's right to do in light of that capacity's norms (under appropriate conditions).

By contrast, when a skilled agent realizes that ϕ -ing is the right thing to do in light of the skill's norms, this by itself doesn't settle whether she will actually ϕ . In fact, the very same considerations may very well move her to *refrain* from ϕ -ing—as when this is the best option to end a game that one is tired of playing. Whether or not she will actually ϕ ultimately depends on an *independent* motivational condition—'independent' in the sense that this motivational condition isn't itself provided for by the relevant skill. In particular, it depends on whether she continues to desire to engage in the relevant activity and pursue its characteristic aim. Skills just don't come with a built-in motivation to engage them, much less to do so in compliance with their norms. In this sense, a skilled agent is someone who is only *conditionally* responsive to considerations that bear on what's right to do within the domain of the relevant skill. This suggests the following:

Skill: A skill is a kind of capacity whose exercises are *conditionally* responsive to considerations that bear on what's right to do in light of that capacity's norms (under appropriate conditions).

These accounts are schematic in that they allow for elaboration in various ways. For instance, they leave open various details regarding the responsiveness in question. On some views, virtuous action requires representing one's action in explicitly normative terms (*as* virtuous, called for, right, or some such). Others find this too demanding, arguing that virtuous agents may simply react to first-order considerations about the world, such as 'This man is drowning' or 'He needs help' (see, for example, Setiya [2007: 71–3]). Similar questions arise with respect to skills (see Sosa [2007: 84–5]). Fortunately, we can remain neutral on this and related issues here, as the relevant contrast between virtue and skill doesn't depend on resolving them.

What matters for our purposes is that these accounts yield very different predictions about the behaviour of virtuous and skilled agents. When a virtuous person realizes that ϕ -ing is the right thing to do in light of the norms of virtue, we can expect that this is *motivationally sufficient* for her to actually ϕ (in normal circumstances). It's part of the possession conditions of virtue that one is moved by considerations that bear on the rightness of one's acts. No independent source of motivation is needed. Of course, this doesn't mean that, in acting virtuously, you do not desire to

'natural virtue': e.g., a natural inclination to be nice to others, which might exist in a person who remains completely unmoved by demands of fairness. The same goes for the other virtues (see VI.13 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). For a defence of this view, see, e.g., McDowell [1979] and Müller [2004].

act in that way. It means that the relevant desire (to help this person, say) is itself a *manifestation* of your virtuousness, not a *condition* for manifesting virtuousness: it's a proper part of your response to perceiving someone in need of your help.

No similar predictions hold in the case of skill. When a skilled person realizes that ϕ -ing is the right thing to do relative to the skill's norms, she doesn't necessarily respond by ϕ -ing. The relevant exercise of her skill requires a *distinct* source of motivation: an independently given desire to pursue the skill's characteristic aim. In themselves such considerations are *motivationally neutral*: realizing that ϕ -ing would be an excellent chess move won't move you to ϕ unless you continue to desire to engage your chess skills in pursuit of checkmating your opponent. If your desires or intentions change, the motivational force of any considerations as to what's right to do in light of the skill's norms will change accordingly.

Recently, Matt Stichter [2018] has challenged the view that virtues differ from skills on account of their motivational structure. He offers two arguments in support of his challenge. Neither one, however, undermines the present view. First, Stichter observes that acquiring and maintaining a skill requires regular practice, and regular practice in turn requires a 'high level of motivation' to act skilfully. From this, he concludes 'that virtues cannot be contrasted with skills merely on the ground that virtue requires that you be strongly motivated to act well while skill does not.' [Stichter 2018: 97]. I think Stichter is right to point out that acquiring and maintaining a skill typically requires regular practice. However, it doesn't follow that, say, simply *qua* skilled chess player, one is motivated to play chess. At best, it follows that one is so motivated *if and as long as* one wants to retain one's skill. But one may not want to retain it. Hence, possessing a skill and being motivated to exercise it remain separate conditions. Second, Stichter [2018: 105–07] argues that we can evaluate skilled agents, not just in terms of their skilfulness, but also in terms of their *commitment* to the demands of their skill, where such commitment is a matter of being reliably responsive to these demands. For instance, chess players are evaluable, not just in terms of how well they play, but also in terms of how committed they are to playing well and winning. Again, however, even if correct, this doesn't undermine the present view. 'Being evaluable for X' and 'being X' are certainly two different things. So, even if there is a sense in which skilled agents are evaluable in terms of their commitment to the demands of their skill, it doesn't follow that, simply *qua* skilled agents, they

actually are thus committed.⁸ Some skilled agents may lack the relevant commitment and, thus, may not be reliably disposed to comply with the demands of their skill.^{9 10}

5. Epistemic Competence

If epistemic competences were like skills, we should expect that they work in fundamentally similar ways. In particular, then, we should expect that there is no difficulty in knowingly disregarding epistemic norms (like the truth-norm), just as there is no difficulty in disregarding, say, the norms of chess. For example, there should be no difficulty for a competent believer to *not* believe P or to *abandon* believing P in the face of considerations that clearly show P to be true. Just as there is no difficulty for a skilled chess player to refrain from making a certain chess move in the face of considerations that clearly show this move to be good in light of chess' norms. But this seems wrong: competent belief-formation is commonly thought to be robustly responsive to consideration bearing on the correctness of one's beliefs. To illustrate, consider an example from Sosa [2015: 73]:

Aims external to the [skill] domain might, of course, properly motivate a performer to take an outrageous risk. [...] Thus, a basketball player might be offered a vast sum for taking a shot from across the full length of the court and might thus act quite rationally and appropriately in taking that shot, all things considered [...] But the shot is then still bad as a basketball shot because of how poorly selected or negligent it is.

Presumably, this is a case where a skilled basketball player deliberately disregards what taking a *good* shot—one that's likely successful—would require in his situation. He does so in the pursuit of an 'external aim': to gain the vast sum he has been offered. Now, if epistemic competences were anything like skills, we should expect that something similar is possible in the epistemic domain. An analogous situation, I take it, would be one where you are offered a vast sum for forming an outrageously risky belief: a belief that, given your evidence, will most likely miss the mark of truth. However, as is widely recognized, this isn't something you can pull off. If you possess strong evidence that P is false, you cannot simply go ahead and believe P nonetheless on the grounds that doing so will earn you a lot of money. Thus, your situation seems importantly different from the one of Sosa's basketball player: as a competent believer, you cannot simply ignore your truth-related considerations and embark on the pursuit of some 'external aim'. It's not just that this would result in a *bad* belief—as taking too much risk in basketball results in a *bad* shot. It's rather that, under

⁸ I take this objection from Dougherty [2020: 83]. I discuss Stichter's and Dougherty's defence of the skill analogy in more detail in Horst (MS).

⁹ A case in point: arguably, there has never been a soccer player more skilled than Diego Maradona, yet his commitment to the demands of his sport was famously erratic. By contrast, it would make little sense to consider someone the world's most virtuous person, while acknowledging that they often lacked the motivation to live up to the demands of virtue.

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to address Stichter's view here.

normal circumstances, your competence as a believer tends to *preclude* you from knowingly forming a *bad* belief. By contrast, your skill as a basketball player clearly doesn't stand in the way of knowingly taking a *bad* shot, especially not on an occasion where there is much to gain from doing so. What accounts for this asymmetry?

A good place to start is what Joseph Raz [2011: 28] calls the *No Gap Principle*:

There is no gap, no extra step [...] between [recognizing] that the case for the truth of a proposition is [sufficient] and believing the proposition. Similarly, there is no gap between [recognizing] that the case for the truth of a proposition is inadequate and withholding belief in it. Call this the No Gap Principle.

That there is no 'gap' means: normally, given a consideration that you recognize to bear on what's correct to believe in light of the truth-norm, this by itself is *sufficient* for you to believe accordingly. Hence, more precisely, if you possess sufficient evidence for P, then you will normally believe P. If you recognize that the evidence for P is insufficient, then you will normally withhold belief in P. And, as we may add, if you possess sufficient evidence against P, then you will normally disbelieve P. In each case, there is *no need* for the motivational work of an independent desire—a desire to pursue the aim of truth—to get you from the relevant consideration to actually believing P, suspending belief in P, or disbelieving P. Accordingly, since the relevant evidential considerations are typically sufficient to compel you to adopt one of these attitudes, there is also typically *no room* for non-truth related considerations to make a difference. For instance, there is typically no room for non-evidential considerations to move you to *refrain* from believing P once you are in possession of sufficient evidence for P. That's why, unlike in the analogous situation of Sosa's basketball player, you cannot simply set aside the considerations that bear on the correctness of your beliefs in order to pursue some non-truth-related aim.

I take Raz' principle to capture what *competent* believers do when nothing interferes with the proper workings of their epistemic competences. So, if something like this principle is correct, this suggests the following account (for the sake of simplicity I set aside the case of withholding belief):

Epistemic Competence (EC): If nothing interferes with their proper workings, exercises of epistemic competences are *unconditionally responsive* to considerations that bear on what's correct to believe in light of the truth-norm, such that, if and to the extent that you possess such competences: (a) if you possess sufficient evidence for P, this is typically *sufficient* for believing P, and (b) if you possess sufficient evidence against P, this is typically *sufficient* for disbelieving P.

Some comments and clarifications of EC are in order:

First, as with any capacity, various shortcomings are possible. For one thing, interfering factors (being drunk or distracted, say) may on occasion prevent one from (properly) exercising one's epistemic competence. Moreover, as with skills and virtues, possession of epistemic competence is a matter of degree. Thus, even generally competent believers may still have their blind spots: specific topics on which they are prone to stray away from the evidence, for example. EC therefore doesn't rule out that non-evidential factors may influence the way in which competent believers respond to their evidence. EC only predicts that, in such cases, they display or possess less than full epistemic competence.¹¹

Second, EC doesn't imply that, necessarily, competent beliefs are formed on the basis of one's evidence. It only implies that, *if* a competent believer possesses sufficient evidence for or against P, she will normally believe accordingly. So, for example, EC is silent on how we should rule on a case like Norman the clairvoyant [BonJour 1980]. For, this is a case where Norman doesn't possess any evidence for or against the reliability of his clairvoyant power, nor does he possess any evidence for or against the truth of his clairvoyant beliefs. EC would predict a deficit of competence on Norman's part only if he were to stick to his clairvoyant beliefs in the face of clear counterevidence.¹²

Third, some have argued that, sometimes, when your evidence for P is sufficient, but not conclusive, you can properly exercise your epistemic competences in either of two ways: by believing P or by withholding belief in P (see, for example, Nickel [2010] and McHugh [2012]). As it stands, EC is incompatible with this form of intrapersonal epistemic permissivism. Since I am not convinced by the arguments in favour of this view, I don't regard this as a weakness.¹³ For present purposes, however, we could easily modify the formulation of EC so as to make room for such a form of permissivism. Even so, this doesn't undermine the contrast with skills: there will be considerations as to the correctness of some belief the recognition of which won't give you any options (conclusive evidence, say). By contrast, in the realm of skill, there are no consideration as to the correctness of some chess move that couldn't potentially be discarded.

Fourth, EC itself is neutral on how to understand the relevant notions of evidence and evidence-possession. In particular, I take EC to be compatible with both internalist and externalist views of these notions.¹⁴ While internalists conceive of evidence as being fixed by one's *non*-factive mental

¹¹ For relevant discussion, see, e.g., Sosa [2015: 94–106].

¹² Reliabilists who adopt some sort of 'no defeater' condition for justified belief would seem to accept that (see, e.g., Goldman [1986]). EC, I take it, is also compatible with Sosa's view [2015: 77–83] on full competence on the human level.

¹³ See Archer [2017] and Sylvan [2015a] for objections to intrapersonal permissivism.

¹⁴ 'Evidential internalists' include Audi [2001] and BonJour [1999], 'evidential externalists' include Williamson [2000] and McDowell [1995]. The terminology is due to Silnis [2005].

states, externalists view evidence as consisting in facts or true propositions. As a result, each of these views, when combined with EC, is likely to deliver different verdicts on when subjects count as exhibiting full epistemic competence.¹⁵ Arguably, moreover, possessing evidence E for P requires more than just *access* to E (for example, seeing that E); one must also somehow *recognize* that E is evidence for P. Yet, it's controversial how to flesh this out (see Lord [2018: ch. 4]). Again, EC itself is neutral on this issue. In particular, it doesn't commit one to understanding such recognition in terms of a further doxastic attitude (a belief that E is evidence for P, for example). Such recognition may simply consist in being *sensitive* to the relevant evidential support relation (see Sylvan [2015b] and Lord [2018: ch. 4]). In short, then, EC is amendable to both internalist and externalist views of our epistemic competences. My main concern is with the contrast between epistemic competences and skills, and this concern is somewhat orthogonal to the issues opposing internalists and externalists. The relevant contrast has to do with the way in which a subject is disposed to respond to certain consideration—either conditionally or unconditionally—not with the nature of these considerations, nor with the nature their possession.

Now, if something like EC is correct, then I think it is clear that our epistemic competences resemble virtues rather than skills. That is, a competent believer—unlike a skilled agent, but much like a virtuous person—is someone who is *unconditionally* responsive to certain considerations: namely those that bear on what's correct to believe in light of the truth-norm. If a competent believer recognizes that P is correct to believe—if she possesses sufficient evidence for P—then she will normally believe P. There is neither need nor room for, say, an independent desire to believe the truth. Thus, epistemic competences and virtues can be seen to exemplify the same *general kind* of responsiveness: they both dispose their subjects to be *unconditionally* responsive to considerations bearing on what counts as getting things right in their domains. In this regard, they both differ from skills. Skills need not be exercised: a skilled basketball player may choose not to take a shot, even though she is in an excellent position to score. Epistemic competences and virtues, on the other hand, are such that their possessors are disposed to exercise them whenever the situation calls for their exercise.

As noted, it's important to distinguish the present view from the conception of intellectual virtues familiar from virtue responsibilism. Responsibilists tend to conceive of intellectual virtues—such as open-mindedness or intellectual courage—as 'a subset of the moral virtues' [Zagzebski 1996: 139]. Like the latter, intellectual virtues dispose their subjects to perform well within a certain domain of human action: the domain of *inquiry*-related action. Exercising such virtues is thus,

¹⁵ For relevant discussion, compare the vast literature on the so-called new evil demon problem (originally from Cohen [1984]).

primarily, a matter of conducting one's scientific or other research in a way that's sensitive to the moral and prudential demands on one's inquiry.¹⁶ By contrast, on the present view, epistemic competences are understood, not as *instances* of moral virtue, but as *structurally* parallel to such virtues, in that they exhibit the same *modality* of responsiveness. But they don't manifest in action, nor are they responsive to any considerations other than those related to truth. As understood here, then, it's not itself part of being a competent believer that one is (say) an intellectually courageous inquirer.¹⁷

6. Epistemic Rationality

According to the general capacity-theoretic approach to epistemic normativity, epistemic evaluations of believers reflect the proper workings of their epistemic competences. Now we have seen that epistemic competences and skills work in importantly different ways: whereas competent believers are *unconditionally* responsive to correctness-relevant considerations, skilled agents are only *conditionally* responsive to such considerations. Hence, contrary to what skill epistemologists claim, it's hard to see how epistemic evaluation *could* be a mere special case of skill evaluation. If anything, we should expect the opposite: a difference in evaluative patterns corresponding to the difference in how skills and epistemic competences work. I will use evaluations of epistemic rationality as an example to bring this out.

Roughly, an epistemically rational believer is one who is responsive to her evidence and an epistemically rational belief is one that reflects such responsiveness.¹⁸ Of course, there are numerous ways of fleshing this out, possibly yielding different verdicts on a range of important cases. For example, depending on whether one conceives of evidence along internalist or externalist lines, one may arrive at different assessments regarding the epistemic rationality of subjects in scenarios of systematic deception. Again, I think we can sidestep such issues here and focus on an aspect of epistemic rationality which is plausibly shared by either of these views: namely that epistemic rationality is a matter of *unconditional*—not merely *conditional*—responsiveness to one's evidence. Thus, for instance, what we expect from an epistemically rational believer is that she responds to her compelling evidence for P by believing P and that she does so unconditionally—not just when and as long as she has some independent motivation to do so. This raises a problem for skill epistemology. For, if we conceive of epistemic competences on the model of skill, it's hard to see why there should be anything *wrong* with a competent believer who was only *conditionally*

¹⁶ Compare the examples in Baehr [2011: 17–22].

¹⁷ Here I agree with Sosa [2015: ch. 2].

¹⁸ I don't mean to suggest that this is the *only* way in which the notion of rationality is used in epistemology. But tying rationality to evidence-responsiveness is certainly the orthodox view (see Kelly [2016]). A dissenting voice is Rinard [2017].

responsive to her evidence. After all, as we have seen, this is just how skills work: you respond to considerations bearing on your skill's characteristic aim only when and as long as you desire to pursue this aim. Consequently, assuming the skill model, conditional responsiveness to one's evidence, far from being a defect, is exactly what we should expect from a competent believer. But this is plainly the wrong prediction.

To illustrate, think back to election night 2016. Going into the night, you are confident that Hillary Clinton will be the next US president. As the results come in, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Donald Trump has won the election. At some point during the night, there is only one *epistemically rational* thing for you to do: to believe that Trump has won—regardless of how discomfoting adopting this belief might be. And this is exactly what EC predicts: given your evidential situation, anything short of accepting the painful truth would imply a major *defect* of your epistemic competence. Hence, given the general capacity-theoretic approach, this would entail a correspondingly negative assessment of your epistemic standing: a charge of severe epistemic irrationality.

Now consider a parallel case from the realm of skill. Suppose you are playing chess against someone who, as it turns out, is a really sore loser. At some point, you decide that beating him at chess isn't worth the drama and you refrain from making a move that would have led to his certain defeat. Here, you forego what you know would be an excellent chess move, and you do so on the grounds that avoiding your opponent's short-temperedness is more desirable than winning. Yet, doing so surely doesn't impugn your skilfulness as a chess player, nor does it imply any failure to properly exercise your skill.

With that in mind, return to the election night example. If we conceive of epistemic competences on the model of skill, it's hard to see why you couldn't simply refrain from believing that Trump has won—at least until the next morning, since holding this belief would cause you serious discomfort and there is little harm in spending one last night in blissful ignorance. Moreover, and more to the point, it wouldn't be clear why *not* forming this belief should imply any *failure* or *defect* of epistemic competence on your part. After all, as we have seen, none of this is true in the parallel chess case. Consequently, it's hard to see how the skill conception of epistemic competences could underwrite what seems intuitively clear: that, given your evidential situation, if you didn't believe in Trump's electoral victory, this would seriously compromise your epistemic standing.

To be sure, even on the skill model, we can say that, if you didn't believe in Trump's electoral victory, you would be violating epistemic norms: you wouldn't do what's *correct* to do from the epistemic point of view. What is not clear, however, is why violating such norms should necessarily

entail any *failure* or *defect* of epistemic competence and, thus, a negative assessment of your standing *qua* believer. For, as we have seen, no such entailment holds in the domain of skill. Take a different example: if you spell ‘skill’ with only one ‘l’, you are violating norms of orthography—you are not doing what would be *correct* to do from the point of view of orthography.¹⁹ But violating such norms doesn’t necessarily amount to any *failure* or *lack* of orthographical skilfulness on your part—not if you are not even *trying* to spell that word correctly. As a teacher you might be misspelling words on purpose in order to quiz your students. Certainly, this wouldn’t undermine your standing as a skilled speller. Nor would it show that you somehow *failed* to exercise your spelling skills. Any suggestion to the contrary would risk collapsing the distinction between cases of misspellings that are genuine mistakes and those that are deliberate. By contrast, in our example, if you didn’t believe in Trump’s electoral victory, this would certainly show a serious failure of epistemic competence on your part.

One may want to object that the engagement of at least *some* of our epistemic competences is in fact a matter of decision—just like the engagement of our ordinary skills. Thus, for example, you can decide to make up your mind about whether P and, as a result, engage in doxastic deliberation about whether P. How is that different from deciding to play chess and, as a result, engaging your chess skills for the purpose of checkmating your opponent? In both cases, your responsiveness to considerations bearing on the characteristic aim of the relevant capacity—believing the truth and checkmating—seems conditional on a prior decision to pursue that aim.

Granted you can decide to make up your mind about whether P. It doesn’t follow that, in the relevant sense, your responsiveness to your evidence for or against P is conditional on that decision. If it were, we should expect that you can also refrain from believing P in the face of conclusive evidence for P, simply because you decide to abandon the aim of finding out whether P—just like you can refrain from responding to considerations bearing on the aim of chess simply by abandoning the pursuit of that aim. Yet, this isn’t something you can do (see, for example, Shah [2013]). If, in the course of your deliberation, you encounter sufficient evidence for P, you will normally believe P—regardless of whether or not you continue to desire finding out whether P. Of course, you can suspend your inquiry into whether P *before* you have gathered sufficient evidence for or against P. But this doesn’t show that it’s open to you how to respond to your evidence. If you stumbled upon sufficient evidence for P *after* having suspended your inquiry, most likely, you would still respond by believing P.

¹⁹ Norms of orthography are arguably *constitutive* for a language. However, this doesn’t mean that they cannot be violated. It means that, for something to be a token of that language, it must be assessable as correct/incorrect in light of these norms. Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this.

In short, then, the trouble for skill epistemology is this. If we were to conceive of epistemic competences on the model of skill, we should expect competent believers to be merely *conditionally* responsive to their evidence. Yet, plausibly, epistemic rationality requires *unconditional* responsiveness to one's evidence. Hence, there is a dimension of epistemic evaluation—assessments of epistemic rationality—that cannot be understood as a mere special case of skill normativity. Such assessments have no structural analogue in the realm of skill.

7. Conclusion

I have defended three main claims. First, I have argued that, unlike skill, virtue is a capacity that equips its possessor with an *unconditional* responsiveness to considerations bearing on the norms of virtue. This means that, if you fully possess a virtue, you are disposed to exercise it whenever the situation calls for its exercise. By contrast, there is no difficulty in both being a world class chess player *and* refraining from making an excellent chess move. Again, this is simply a consequence of the fact that, as a skilled agent, you are only *conditionally* responsive to considerations bearing on your skill's characteristic aim.

Second, I have argued that, in this regard, epistemic competences resemble virtues, rather than skills. Like virtues, such competences dispose their possessor to be *unconditionally* responsive to considerations bearing on the competence's characteristic aim. Hence, *qua* fully competent believer, you are disposed to exercise your competence whenever your evidential situation calls for it. If you disregard your evidence, this reveals a *defect* or *failure* of epistemic competence on your part. No analogous entailment holds in the realm of skill.

Third, I have argued that the relevant difference between skills and epistemic competences undermines skill epistemology's attempt to understand epistemic normativity as a mere special case of skill normativity. What connects the normative issue with the reflections on skill and epistemic competence is the general capacity-theoretic approach to epistemic normativity: that evaluations of believers and their beliefs track the proper workings of their epistemic competences. Thus, given how differently skills and epistemic competences operate, it's hard to see how epistemic evaluation *could* be a mere special case of skill evaluation. Assessments of epistemic rationality provide a case in point: such assessments have no structural analogue in the realm of skill.

The upshot is that proponents of the capacity-theoretic approach to epistemic normativity should resist construing epistemic competences on the model of archery, baseball, or playing chess. Virtue epistemology should indeed be based on virtue, not on skill.²⁰

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