

**Phronesis as Ethical Expertise:
Naturalism of Second Nature and the Unity of Virtue**

1 Introduction

Whether human nature can (or should) orient action by providing the objective standard by which one measures morality, and by setting the constraints on what counts as virtuous, is a much-debated issue within virtue ethics, thanks to the seminal works of Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Julia Annas, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Michael Thompson. This discussion, however, is all but settled, since the advocates of a strict naturalism keep proposing reductive or eliminative views of moral phenomena, while the defenders of reason as the ultimate source of normativity deny that facts about human nature can pose any relevant constraint on it.

This paper has a twofold aim. On the one hand, we will discuss the much debated question of the source of normativity (which traditionally has nature and practical reason as the two main contenders to this role) and propose a new answer to it. Second, in answering this question, we will present a new account of practical wisdom, which conceives of the ethical virtues as ultimately unified in the chief virtue of *phronesis*, understood as ethical expertise. To do so, we will first criticize the main current view of *phronesis* and its bearer (the *phronimos*), then offer another view of the nature of *phronesis* and of its relation to the other ethical virtues. Our proposal should not be intended as an interpretation of Aristotle's own view; rather, it should be seen as a broadly Aristotelian theoretical proposal, which we believe can

¹ Università Roma Tre, Rome, Italy

² Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA

³ University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy

⁴ University of Florence, Florence, Italy

satisfyingly address most of the problems that afflict the more traditional accounts of practical wisdom.

In section 2 of this paper, after criticizing first-nature naturalistic views of moral virtue, we take practical reason to be the cornerstone of second-nature naturalistic views; in section 3, we will outline criticisms to which, in our view, the traditional views of phronesis are ill-suited to respond, and, in section 4, we will outline our view of phronesis as ethical expertise – a view which in our view is immune to the above-mentioned criticisms – by spelling out the three main tenets of phronesis as ethical expertise: a conceptual thesis, an epistemic thesis, and the educational implications of the two. Finally, we will support our proposal with some empirical evidence taken from cognitive science.

2 Practical Reason at the Cornerstone of Second Nature Ethical Naturalism

In the last few decades, a vast discussion has developed regarding philosophical naturalism. In general, two broad families of naturalistic conceptions have been competing with each other: one (called scientific naturalism) is reductionist/eliminationist in spirit; the other (liberal naturalism) is more inclusive and pluralistic.¹ One of the main issues at stake in this debate, which is still very alive, regards the epistemological and ontological status attributed to moral, and, more generally, normative phenomena. While scientific naturalists think that, in principle, the natural sciences can account for all genuine phenomena (an assumption that has given rise to a vast number of naturalization projects), liberal naturalists tend to think that moral and normative phenomena are based in, but not entirely reducible to, scientifically accountable phenomena. The latter approach has been explored, in particular, by the advocates of two families of views: *Naturalism of first nature* and *Naturalism of second nature*.²

Naturalism of first nature, which aims at grounding normativity in human nature, defends objectivity in the ethical domain by deriving a conception of human excellence directly from an account of human nature.³ In her book, *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot presented a classic example of this view by defending ethical objectivism against two of its main alternatives, emotivism and prescriptivism.⁴ However, while groundbreaking, Foot's proposal is also exposed to serious criticisms, and

¹ Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, *Naturalism and Normativity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

² We owe this useful label, as well as the following, to Irene Liu, "Elevating Human Being: Towards a New Sort of Naturalism," *Philosophy* 92 (2017): 597–622.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

similar criticisms affect the cognate proposals developed by Michael Thompson and Rosalind Hursthouse.⁵

The main criticisms against Naturalism of first nature came from Julia Annas and John McDowell, who defended two versions of Naturalism of second nature. When discussing Hursthouse's view in particular, Annas advocates the idea of a stronger relation between reason and biological nature.⁶ According to Hursthouse, when developing one's own account of the good life, one reflects on how to promote the four biological goods that are typical of humans as social animals.⁷ For Hursthouse, the relationship between reason and such goods is a weak one, since "the four ends form a robust constraint on the exercise of our rationality" and, therefore, "human nature provides a kind of barrier which rational thinking has to respect." However, Annas convincingly shows that we have two good motivations for doubting the correctness of this view. First, biological factors are not treated equally when it comes to reasoning out good ways of living. Some of them are counteracted (e.g. biological differences among the sexes: we don't think, anymore, that women should be constrained by reproduction, when reasoning out what is a good life for a man or for a woman), while others, are not (e.g. when denying the need for impersonal benevolence, we appeal to biological factors, such as the need for raising our own children in order to promote the continuance of our species). Second, if the weaker relation was all there was, virtue would not guarantee flourishing, because of "factors about human nature which our reason is powerless to alter."⁸

As shown by Annas, "Our human nature is simply the material that our rationality has to work with. [W]hat is distinctive about us is that our ways of living can be transformed as a whole by our rationality; we can choose and create new ways of living."⁹ This stronger picture of the relationship between nature and rationality

⁵ For criticisms to Foot, see, e.g., R.M. Hare, "Off on the Wrong Foot," in J. Couture and H. Nielsen, eds., *On the Relevance of Metaethics. New Essays on Metaethics* (Calgary: University Press of Calgary, 1995); R.M. Hare, *Sorting Out Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. Lenman, "The Saucer of Mud, The Kudzu Vine and The Uxorious Cheetah: Against Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism in Metaethics," *EUIJAP* 1(2005): 37–50; T. Chappell, "Virtue ethics in the twentieth century," in D.C. Russell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 149–171. See Michael Thompson "The Representation of Life," in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, W. Quinn, eds., *Virtues and Reasons. Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*: (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 247–296; Michael Thompson, "Three Degrees of Natural Goodness," *Iride* 38 (2003): 191–197; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). On a more refined reading of Foot's naturalistic proposal, "Aristotelian naturalism can vindicate the distinctive value of practical wisdom" by establishing a subtler connection between human nature and action. As Hacker-Wright puts it, "any candidate for practical wisdom must take into account very general facts about human beings; these facts shape what counts as good practical reflection, not because human nature is intrinsically normative, but because it is part of the inevitable background against which we understand ourselves" (John Hacker-Wright, "Skill, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Naturalism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18 (2015): 983–993; see p. 991.

⁶ Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?", in M. Gardiner, ed., *Virtue Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 11–29; see pp. 15–16.

⁷ The four biological goods singled out by Hursthouse are (a) individual survival; (b) continuance of the species; (c) characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain; (d) good functioning of the social group.

⁸ Annas, "Virtue Ethics," op. cit., p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

describes more convincingly how things effectively work in human experience, where there are no sheer natural data, and what is biological is often rationally interpreted and/or permeated by rationality, as becomes clear when thinking about apparently biological-only activities, such as satisfying the need for food or sex. Everything that seems natural is “an already socialized aspect of our life which is subject to negotiation.”¹⁰

Annas’s criticism fits Foot’s account as well, particularly her view on the so-called ‘Aristotelian categoricals’ and ‘Aristotelian necessities.’¹¹ Indeed, despite her attempts to illustrate the peculiarities of the human good caused by our possession of practical reason, Foot’s account is not successful because of her conviction that the good human life cannot be reasoned out, but only described by means of observing the kinds of living things humans are. To sum, first-nature naturalist proposals expect to recover objectivity at the expense of both the active role of practical reason in identifying moral goodness, and of the peculiarities of moral normativity compared with ontological normativity.

Another important aspect that differentiates Naturalism of first nature from Naturalism of second nature concerns the role that reason plays in the constitution of human nature. McDowell and Annas argue that what is essential in that respect is not our first (biological) nature, but the second one – that is, the nature that is shaped by the virtues and acquired through moral education.¹² As McDowell puts it in stressing the “deductive impotence of the ‘Aristotelian categorical’,” “reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question.” Thus, “the concept of nature figures here, without incoherence, in two quite different ways: as “mere” nature, and as something whose realization involves transcending that [i.e., as *logos*] [...] Reason enables a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements.” According to McDowell, therefore, we should stop supposing that the rationality of virtue needs a foundation outside the formed evaluative outlook of a virtuous person.¹³

We find Annas’s and McDowell’s defenses of Naturalism of second nature convincing – with an important proviso regarding how one should conceive of reason in this context. We agree that – notwithstanding the contemporary fortunes of emotivism, sentimentalism, and the other non-cognitivist views of morality – reason plays a crucial role in ethical life. However, we also think that this does not mean that one should accept the traditional pyramidal view of the mind according to which, in order to get rationality and morality, reason has to dictate to emotions, which are conceived of as a primitive psychic sphere that threatens the nobility of pure thought. In conceiving of wisdom as affectively engaged, on the contrary, we

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹ The first expression is borrowed from Michael Thompson, the second from Elizabeth Anscombe.

¹² John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹³ John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 71.

assume an integrative view of the emotions and reason that, are seen as working together synergistically – a view that is gaining traction in the cognitive sciences.¹⁴

In our view, the constitutive integration of reason and the emotions is visible in comprehensive ethical expertise, rather than in each single ethical virtue. More precisely, emotions enter the moral sphere exactly via the agent's ethical expertise, since it plays the fundamental role of integrating the different moral requirements of each situation with the agent's emotional and cognitive appreciation of the situation's features.

3 Against the Standard View

As we have just seen, naturalists of first nature claim, and naturalist of second nature deny, that our biological nature is the primary source and foundation of practical normativity. In our view, even if the latter view is more promising, it needs to be complemented with an adequate account of practical wisdom. In fact, what else, if not the excellence of practical reason, could be able to offer out a full-blown life plan when its grounding nature is conceived as irreducibly normative?

The Aristotelian tradition has provided us with a concept of normative nature, under the name of “phronesis.” However, as we will see, a number of reasons should prevent one from accepting the traditional account of phronesis as such. A more fruitful strategy, in our view, is that of trying to spell out a new account of practical wisdom, one capable of both providing an effective way of countering naturalism of first nature, and resisting the charges to which more traditional accounts of naturalism of second nature are liable. Such an attempt will be the primary focus of the following sections of this paper, where we will first offer a sketch of the standard view of phronesis, which we reject, and then spell out a new view of practical wisdom as ethical expertise.

Nowadays, most virtue ethicists hold what we might call the *Standard Aristotelian View* (SAV) on phronesis,¹⁵ according to which, (i) phronesis necessarily implies (and is implied by) the possession of ethical virtues that orient it towards the goods pertaining to the various areas of human experience; and (ii) phronesis and ethical virtues are genuinely distinct dispositions – the former being the condition of moral-cognitive excellence, and the latter being a set of emotional traits (or habitual states) shaped by phronesis itself.

Two main criticisms are frequently associated with SAV: (a) the *anti-localist criticism*, according to which SAV does nothing more than assume locally-based values

¹⁴ Mario De Caro and Massimo Marraffa, “Debunking the pyramidal mind: A plea for synergy between reason and emotion,” *The Journal of Comparative Neurology* 524 (2015): 1695–1698.

¹⁵ Dan Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) offers one of the most developed and nuanced versions of the Standard View, even if he is not committed to all the problematic issues we list below.

and goals, and pursue them via the development of means-directed rational habits; (b) *the situationist criticism*, which attacks both SAV's globalist account of ethical virtues and essentialism., which is an intrinsic feature of SAV. To put it briefly, SAV typically presupposes a cross-situational identity of all the acts falling under the scope of the same virtue (for example, all acts of courage are seen as identical in nature).¹⁶ According to situationists, however, empirical evidence suggests that there is no such thing as consistent, cross-situational and stable character traits, and thus SAV lacks empirical support to ground its view of ethical virtues. Besides taking these criticisms seriously – we believe that traditional SAV theories fail to acknowledge the radical novelty of every ethical situation –,¹⁷ we want to raise three more objections to SAV.

SAV, at least in most of its versions, seems to be committed to:

- i. *A fragmented account of value*, which fails to make sense of the unity and integration of moral agency. From the SAV's perspective, each virtue regulates and governs – under the guidance of the orchestrating master virtue of phronesis – a specific sphere of moral experience, which is conceptually distinct from every other sphere.¹⁸ This account, however, amounts to a fragmentation of moral experience that, in some extreme versions, can even lead to conceiving of each virtue as aiming at a conceptually distinct goal – to the point of generating conflicting commitments for the agent.¹⁹ Given such fragmentation, SAV faces the problem of how the unifying master virtue of phronesis can effectively reconcile the conflicting values and goals of the agent.
- ii. *A static unity of the virtues thesis* when it comes to the appreciation of the moral value of the phronimos. By “static unity of the virtues,” we mean a view that takes the actual co-implication of all the ethical virtues as an immediate

¹⁶ More empirically plausible accounts of virtue fare much better in this respect. See, e.g., N. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009); M. Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); C. Miller, “A New Approach to Character Traits in Light of Psychology,” in I. Fileva, ed., *Questions of Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 249–267; C. Miller, *The Character Gap. How Good Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Notably, J.M. Doris, “Persons, situations and virtue ethics,” *Nous* 32 (1998): 504–540; J.M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); G. Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series* 119 (1999): 316–331; G. Harman, “The Nonexistence of Character Traits,” in A. Byrne, R. Stalnaker, and R. Wedgwood, Eds., *Fact and Value* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 117–127.

¹⁸ A widely accepted version of this thesis can be found in M.C. Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 32–53.

¹⁹ A.D. Walker, “The incompatibility of the virtues,” *Ratio* 6 (1993): 44–60.

consequence of the possession of phronesis.²⁰ This, then, implies an implausible view of virtue development.

- iii. From the previous view, an *unrealistic* account of how the virtues should be acquired and developed in order to attain moral perfection follows – unrealistic to the point of portraying moral progress as unattainable and, consequently, as neither action-guiding nor explanatorily useful.

For these reasons, SAV is, in our view, inadequate both in itself and as a form of naturalism of second nature. Therefore, in the following, we will present an alternative proposal of how practical wisdom should be conceived in order to (1) make more sense of our ethical experience, (2) respond to the above-mentioned traditional criticisms of virtues ethics, and (3) offer a new, more promising approach for liberal naturalism in ethics.

A promising starting point for sketching out a new and more convincing theoretical picture of practical wisdom – one capable of both resisting the criticisms listed above, and grounding a satisfying version of naturalism of second nature – is offered by what one might call the *Socratic view*, i.e., the view expressed by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*, 356d–357b. There, Socrates claims that courage, temperance, and all the other virtues, are names (or branches, versions, or applications) of wisdom. In the contemporary debate on virtue ethics, such a view has been taken seriously by John McDowell. To distinguish the form of phronesis we defend from the others, we will label it “ethical expertise.” Phronesis as ethical expertise is Socratic in spirit and indebted to McDowell, in that it holds the unity of virtue; however, it does not equate virtue with knowledge (as both Socrates and McDowell claim), since it identifies virtue with an ethical *expertise*, conceived of as a master, global and unifying virtue, which is affective and rational at the same time.

Our view has three main tenets:

- (i) *Conceptual thesis*: what a virtuous agent really possesses is wisdom as ethical expertise, while the other virtues are just descriptions of wisdom within the specific moral fields;
- (ii) *Epistemic access thesis*: when we attribute some virtues to an agent, we do so because we preliminarily recognize that such agent is wise (in this light, admi-

²⁰ This is the standard unity of the virtues thesis, which is held, albeit in different versions, by most neo-Aristotelians. E.g., T.H. Irwin, “Disunity in the Aristotelian Virtues,” in J. Annas and R. H. Grimm, eds., *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (suppl. vol.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 61–90; J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); S. Wolf, “Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues,” in *Ratio* 20 (2007): 145–167; Russell, *Practical Intelligence*, op. cit. Other scholars, on the contrary, deny that such mutual correlation exists, and allow that one may possess a genuine virtue while lacking one or more other virtuous dispositions: see Philippa Foot, *Virtue and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in T. Nagel, ed., *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 128–141; Bernard Williams, “Conflicts of Values,” in B. Williams, ed., *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 71–82; Walker (1993); N.K. Badhwar, “The Limited Unity of Virtue,” *Nous* 30 (1996): 306–329.

ration is not elicited by an attribution of, say, courage, but by a *prima facie* attribution of wisdom, conceived as unified ethical expertise, which implies the recognition of a dynamic tendency to integrity, rather than of a static unity of the virtues);

- (iii) *Educational implications*: moral education should consist primarily in training an overall ethical expertise rather than habituating the young to the exercise of single specific virtues.

4 The Conceptual Thesis

As said, we see practical wisdom as a unified or general form of ethical expertise; therefore, our conceptual thesis could also be labelled *Unity of virtue thesis*. To repeat it, in our view, when one is virtuous, what one really possesses is the single virtue of practical wisdom, understood as ethical expertise, while the other virtues are descriptions of such expertise in each different moral field.²¹ In this section, we aim at defending this view, and at providing an overall characterization of what wisdom as ethical expertise consists in, by offering a list of traits that we take to be typical of its bearer, the sage or wise person. At the same time, such characterization will allow us to argue for wisdom's mediating role between nature and normativity, as well as to clarify our stance in the debate on ethical naturalism.

As said, among contemporary virtue-ethicists the idea of the unity of virtue has been taken seriously by John McDowell, who has revived two key Socratic theses: the *Virtue as knowledge thesis* and the *Unity of virtue thesis*. According to McDowell's interpretation of the latter thesis (which is the most relevant here), each virtue is a form of "reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behavior," and consists in "a sort of perceptual capacity."²² Moreover, "the specialized sensitivities that are to be equated with particular virtues [...] are actually not available one by one for a series of separate identifications."²³ While we do not accept McDowell's view regarding the nature of virtue as knowledge, we do accept his Unity of virtue thesis, which we aim to develop in a new direction.

In our view, when we label someone as, say, courageous, what we really admire is one's being wise (i.e., ethically expert) in the field of danger and fear, broadly conceived; therefore, courage is the name of wisdom in that particular domain. This wisdom, in turn, can be better understood as an overall ethical expertise, i.e., as a unified skill, which, although being general in scope, improves gradually. Two key-points of the general idea of expertise, in our view, apply to the ethical domain: (i)

²¹ Which stand Aristotle took over such problems, is a much-disputed issue; however, even if it is quite likely that he wouldn't have shared our view, it lies far beyond our scope to discuss the genuine Aristotelian account of *phronesis* historically.

²² McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, op. cit., p. 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 52. Support for this thesis may come also from a view rival to McDowell's, i.e., the *virtue as a skill* view put forward by Julia Annas (esp. *Intelligent Virtue*, op. cit.), if extended to a general expertise rather than confined to a single-domain grasp. However, in the next section we will criticize this view as for its way of accounting for habituation to virtue.

unreflective skilful action plays a relevant (although not exhaustive) role in displaying ethical behaviour and (ii) becoming an expert involve a progression from a narrow and procedural practice toward a distinctive openness and flexibility.²⁴ In this perspective, we are committed, *contra* Jacobson, to “the idea that moral learning can transcend local expertise.”²⁵

It is obvious that characterizing wisdom as a unified ethical expertise, as we do, presupposes the controversial idea that virtues can be seen as skills. This is not the place to adequately defend this idea²⁶; however, we can at least notice that – contrary to Stichter, who embraces an empiricist interpretation of the skill model, and concedes that moral expertise does not need any kind of generalization and knowledge – we sympathize with Hacker-Wright’s view that the skill model of virtue should be able to account for the unifying cognitive role of practical wisdom, which orients the virtues to the right general ends.²⁷ In this light, being wise does not mean that one possess *all* the virtues (who does?), but rather being open to the overall good and attentive to each situation. Furthermore, integrity becomes the regulative ideal of moral agency. In other words, we can deem as wise not only the agents who actually display an utterly virtuous character, but also (and this is a much more frequent situation) those who (i) are oriented – both affectively and cognitively – to an overall good life and *fare well* in at least some moral domains, but also (ii) acknowledge their shortcomings in other domains and try to improve there. More analytically, when we judge that an agent is wise, we attribute to them the following features of wisdom:

- a. *Expertise* within a specific moral domain, which consists of:
 - i. An orientation to the good, aimed at achieving it within that domain;
 - ii. Fine-tuned perception of the moral requirements imposed by the situation;
 - iii. Acknowledgement of one’s lacks within other domains.

- b. *Openness to new domains and situations*, by means of attention and the exercise of moral perception, with the will to improve oneself in those new domains and situations, so as to obtain an overall virtuous character.

²⁴ H.L. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the myth of the mental: How philosophers can profit from the phenomenology of everyday expertise,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79 (2005): 47–65; E. Rietveld, “McDowell and Dreyfus on Unreflective Action,” *Inquiry*, 53 (2010): 183–207.

²⁵ D. Jacobson, “Seeing by Feeling. Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005): 387–409; see p. 401.

²⁶ Two main problems that one should discuss in detail regarding this issue are the articulation problem (concerning the deliberative dimension of ethical expertise) and the domain-specificity problem.

²⁷ M. Stichter, “Ethical Expertise: The Skill Model of Virtue,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2007): 183–194; Hacker-Wright, “Skill, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Naturalism,” *op. cit.*

If these features of the ethical expert are important for characterizing an adequate notion of practical wisdom, still they are not sufficient for supporting our view, since we also have to show whether, and how, such view can respond to, or at least resist, the above-mentioned six criticisms of traditional SAV views. In our view, however, this can be done.

First, by gathering all moral excellences in the single virtue of wisdom as ethical expertise, our position appears better equipped than the traditional views against the charge of localism, according to which *phronesis* does nothing more than assume locally-based values and goals, fixed by means of the virtuous habits instilled in an agent with education. Unlike the various ethical virtues – which, by being tied to the specific goals they tend to promote, may lack an adequate openness to new situations – wisdom, as we conceive of it, is being able to hit the mark in each field, while at the same time remaining flexible to novelty, and radically open to new domains and/or goals. Something along the same lines holds for what concerns the situationist criticism, according to which there are no such things as character traits. In our view, situationism is right in opposing the implausible globalist view of every specific character trait. However, besides opposing the situationists' claim that it is not character, but the concrete situations that determine most of our predictable behavior,²⁸ we address the situationist challenge by stressing that we need a more flexible notion of character – one that is not limited to the possession of a set of skills, but is constituted by a unified ethical expertise that enables the agent to face specific (and especially new) situations.

Our proposal avoids the risk of the fragmentation of value in a straightforward way. The unity and integration of moral agency are preserved both by the unification of all virtues under the single master virtue of wisdom, and the peculiar orientation that the latter has toward the overall good of the agent. Moreover, getting rid of the various virtuous traits defends our view from the charge of essentialism as well. By claiming that acting well in a given circumstance requires the possession of a form of wisdom that is sensitive to the particularity of the situation's moral requirements, we are open to the idea that each situation is partly novel, and, consequently, cannot be addressed as if it were a mere token of a general type.

Moreover, the traditional Unity of the virtues thesis becomes less static and unrealistic when rooted in our concept of wisdom as a form of ethical expertise that improves in depth and breadth, since it is progressively improving, covering all moral domains by means of its overall orientation to the good. Said differently: in our view, the sage is someone whose ethical expertise is directed towards achieving an ideal perfection by extending its scope to an increasing number of domains – though this perfection may not be actual, and probably will never be attained.

According to SAV, in order to be wise, one needs to possess all the single ethical virtues. According to our view, instead, ethical expertise improves as wisdom itself extends to an increasing number of domains: that is, in order to be wise, one is not supposed to possess all the virtues actually, but only be oriented towards the good

²⁸ See footnotes 7 and 8 for a list of the main voices on the situationist side and the most influential virtue-ethical responses.

and have the will to improve morally in the domains in which one fares badly. This, in turn, amounts to an idea of moral progress which, contrary to SAV's unattainable view, is conceived both as a feasible moral task, and as an attainable educational ideal (as we will show in more detail in Section 6 below). Its feasibility, in particular, lies in the idea of a cross-domain extension of affective wisdom, as opposed to the habituation to different virtuous skills envisioned by most versions of SAV. In our view, a reconceptualization of the Unity of the virtues thesis along the lines suggested above would make it easier to conceive of moral progress in more realistic terms, that is, not as a matter of acquiring a long list of traits, but as refining a virtuous orientation that is in place from the beginning.

5 Epistemic Access Thesis

As anticipated above, the epistemic thesis has it that the genuine reason why we attribute the virtues to someone is that we recognize that that person is wise. In this light, the attributions of specific virtues to that person only come afterwards. In the following, we will support this thesis with two different strategies. The first will be an empirical argument, based on some recent psychological research regarding the moral emotion of admiration for morally exemplary individuals. The second will be an a priori argument, inspired by Donald Davidson's discussion on the principle of charity.

As said, our first argument is grounded on some recent empirical research on admiration, whose philosophical relevance has been increasingly appreciated because of the recent return of interest in the role played by exemplars and role models in morality and moral education.²⁹ Admiration is the emotion traditionally associated with virtue assessment and appreciation. As shown by many empirical studies on the appraisal patterns of admiration, admiration is a response to the witnessing of a person's excellence, accompanied by the idea that such excellence has been caused by the intentions of the person.³⁰ In Haidt's classification, unlike gratitude, which is elicited by deeds that benefit the self, admiration (which Haidt calls elevation) is a state that arises in the presence of a moral exemplar and/or a moral deed that does not benefit the self and is elicited by the morality of the deeds in themselves.³¹

Even if, as argued by Haidt, moral admiration may be triggered by both people and deeds, it is debated what primarily triggers it. Is the admired moral value mostly attributed to the single action, to the supposed underlying trait, or to the global moral orientation of the person? In our view, moral admiration, unlike admiration

²⁹ L. Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010): 41–57; L. Zagzebski, "Admiration and the Admirable," *Aristotelian Society* 89 (2015): 205–221; L. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁰ I. Schindler, V. Zink, J. Windrich, and W. Menninghaus, "Admiration and adoration: their different ways of showing and shaping who we are," *Cognition and Emotion* 27 (2013): 85–118, see p. 95.

³¹ J. Haidt, "Elevation and the positive psychology of morality," in C.L.M. Keyes and J. Haidt, eds., *Flourishing: positive psychology and the life well-lived* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), pp. 275–289.

within other domains, should be taken as a globalist way of regarding someone else. If I admire someone for her striking reasoning skills in mathematics, but later find she's very poor at learning chess, I may be surprised, but I will continue admiring her excellence in mathematics. On the other hand, if I admire someone for, say, her patience and tolerance, and I find her lying to her boss in order to achieve a benefit over a colleague, it is quite likely that this will cast at least some doubt on my admiration for her altogether.

Moral admiration, like other relevant moral attitudes, can convincingly be characterized as a globalist attitude, i.e., as an attitude directed towards a person as such, rather than towards her actions.³² Like all affective attitudes, admiration can be seen as a “form of regard” or a “mode of seeing as,” whose intentional object is “some-what more general than that of their corresponding emotion.”³³ However, unlike other affective attitudes, globalist attitudes (including admiration) “take whole persons as their object,” since they are person-focused, rather than act-focused – i.e. they “present the target, *qua* person, in a certain light.”³⁴ However, in this way, *pace* social psychologists like Doris, one does not ignore the fact that frequently people's behavior displays cross-situational inconsistency – in fact, globalist attitudes, “are in an important sense comparative,” in that they “take the whole person as their target, since they treat the prioritized traits as more important than the target's other traits.”³⁵

Such reflections suggest that, contrary to a naïve view, moral admiration – whose primary object is, by definition, the morally exemplary individual – is elicited by the attribution of a fully virtuous character, not by the attribution of a single, specific trait (like, say, courage), as is commonly held. At this point, some may object that we are merely supporting the traditional version of the Unity of the virtues thesis, since we rule out the possibility that one can be recognized as genuinely virtuous only if one displays all the virtues. In our view, however, the prioritized traits argument shows that an admiring attitude towards someone is elicited by a *prima facie* attribution of wisdom – that is, a *prima facie* attribution of a global master virtue that is able to direct one's moral life as a whole and establish priorities – rather than by the appreciation of a specific trait one displays.

Another criticism is worth mentioning. Earlier, we relied on empirical research regarding admiration in order to argue that, when facing exemplary individuals, an

³² See M. Bell, “Globalist Attitudes and the Fittingness Objection,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011): 449–472.

³³ Quotations are respectively from: L. Allais, “Wiping the Slate Clean,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 33–68; M. Mason, “Contempt as a Moral Attitude,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 234–272; A. Benz'e'v, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 82.

³⁴ M. Bell, M. *Hard Feelings. The Moral Psychology of Contempt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp 451–452.

³⁵ Social psychologists have often claimed that the idea of globalist attitudes is empirically inadequate, in that it can never fit its target (Doris 2002: 23). From this perspective, the so-called fittingness objection has it that “globalist attitudes present their objects as manifesting globalist character and personality traits. The evidence from social psychology demonstrates that persons' behavior displays cross-situational inconsistency. Therefore, globalist attitudes do not present their targets correctly” (Bell, *Hard Feelings*, op. cit., p. 454). The last quotation in the text is from *ibid.*, p. 460.

agent's moral admiration implies a globalist attribution of wisdom. In this regard, someone may argue that, even if this is the case with exemplary individuals, when dealing with ordinarily virtuous people, agents tend to attribute to them single virtuous traits, rather than a unified, general form of wisdom, and this would prove that our Unity of virtue thesis is wrong. Our second argument (the a priori one) is aimed at addressing this potential criticism, by extending the globalist attribution of wisdom to the case of non-exceptional moral agents.

This argument is an extension of Donald Davidson's thesis, according to which any act of interpretation presupposes the application of the so-called "Principle of charity" (PoC), sometimes referred to also as the Principle of rational accommodation. This principle entails the "necessary attribution to the speaker of both a certain degree of logical consistency and a large amount of true beliefs."³⁶ The principle of charity suggests the interpreter interprets speakers as holding true beliefs insofar as it is at least plausible to do it.³⁷ In other words, for the interpretive process to begin at all, "the interpreter cannot help assuming that the speaker is respondent to the same features of the world to which the interpreter herself would respond in similar circumstances."³⁸ Charity, in this view, is first and foremost a presupposition, or enabling principle, of the interpretive process. From this angle, it can be seen as a preliminary hypothesis that enables an interpreter to interpret both (i) a speaker as prima facie rational and (ii) her utterances as prima facie true. However, such preliminary interpretation needs to be tested and rationally adjusted against further linguistic behavior on the speaker's part, so as to generate further interpretation, which will, in turn, need to be rationally adjusted. The whole process can be summarized as follows:

- Application of PoC1: the speaker is prima facie interpreted as rational & her utterances as true → Preliminary interpretation
- PoC2: rational adjustment against further linguistic behavior
- PoC3: new interpretive hypothesis → Attribution of rationality 1
- PoC4: rational adjustment of Attribution of rationality 1
- PoC5: new interpretive hypothesis → Attribution of rationality 2
- ...

To show what bearing this interpretive principle can have on the present matter, let's rename it *Principle of phronetic charity* (PoPC).³⁹ Our idea is that, when

³⁶ Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," *Philosophy* 66 (1991): 156–166; see p. 158; Mario De Caro, "Davidson in Focus," in M. De Caro, ed., *Interpretations and Causes. New Perspective on Donald Davidson's Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), pp. 1–29, see p. 16.

³⁷ Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," *Dialectica* 27 (1973): 313–328.

³⁸ Mario De Caro, "Davidson's Naturalism," in M.C. Amoretti and N. Vassallo, eds., *Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation. On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 183–202; see p. 189.

³⁹ The same Donald Davidson approved the idea that the principle of charity plays a role in one's interpretations of other agents as moral (personal communication to Mario De Caro, March 1992).

moving from the epistemic to the moral field, an analogous principle is at work, and a similar interpretive process takes place.

We take it that, when Agent 1 relates to Agent 2, she needs, as a preliminary condition for interpreting Agent 2 as an agent at all, to attribute some basic degree of ethical decency to her. This attribution, we claim, is not confined to a particular virtue, or set of virtues; on the contrary, it is a global, master trait, that makes it possible for A1 to take A2 as a rational and decent moral agent overall. Thus, in order to start dealing morally with A2, A1 has to attribute *prima facie* to A2 – out of a charitable interpretation – not only some single virtue, but the possession of a minimum level of general moral competence. Let us call this deflationary, basic concept of wisdom W1. The attribution of W1, in turn, needs to be assessed and rationally adjusted via the actual engagement with A2. In light of such engagement, A1 may end up with different scenarios. First, she may upgrade her *prima facie* hypothesis, and find out that A2 possesses wisdom in a strong, normative sense (W2), i.e., cross-situational moral excellence; or, else, she may conclude that A2 displays only a standard degree of morality, which amounts to a minimum moral threshold of decency, corresponding to W1. Finally, she can find out that she needs to withdraw her charitable presupposition, and conclude that A2 does not even attain such a partial phronetic level, i.e. A2 is severely morally flawed. No matter which of these conclusions is reached – just like in the application of the regular Principle of Charity – the Principle of Phronetic Charity generates a new interpretive hypothesis, which in turn stands in need to be tested against further evidence.

- PoPC1: A2 is *prima facie* interpreted as morally decent overall (possessing W1) & her actions are interpreted as virtuous → Preliminary interpretation
- PoPC2: rational adjustment against further moral behavior
- PoPC3: new interpretive hypothesis → Attribution of basic wisdom (W1)/proper wisdom (W2)/no wisdom (Interpretation 1)
- PoPC4: rational adjustment of Interpretation 1
- PoPC: new interpretive hypothesis → Interpretation 2
- ...

Let's illustrate this by imagining a fictional case. Mary and Henry meet, on a warm summer night, at a party on a beach, and they start talking. In order to take Henry seriously and listen to his words, Mary needs to interpret Henry as *prima facie* morally decent; that is, she needs to assume that H will not harass her, not hurt her in any way, etc. Even more, Mary needs to assume that Henry knows the basic moral rules: rules about keeping a certain distance, being polite with strangers, being kind, helpful, etc. In other words, Mary assigns to Henry a basic moral competence, and this implicit attribution enables her to start conversing and dealing with Henry (who will do something similar).

After a while, we can imagine the night continue in three possible ways:

- S1. Mary and Henry keep talking for a couple hours, and they quite enjoy it, even if nothing special happens.

→ Mary confirms her first interpretation of Henry: “He is ok, and I might think about seeing him again.”

S2. A young and clearly drunk boy, faints in the middle of the dance floor. His friends, who are equally drunk, watch him fainting and find the situation quite funny. Henry, on the contrary, interrupts the conversation with Mary right away, asks the bartender a glass of water, and takes care of the boy until he feels better. This means renouncing talking (and flirting) with Mary, but Henry does not seem too sorry about this, since he seems to think he is doing the only reasonable thing.

→ Mary upgrades her prima facie judgment to W2, and interprets Henry’s behavior under this new (explicit) interpretation: “He is a very good person. I’d like to see him again.”

S3. At some point in the night, after having too much to drink, Henry starts bothering Mary and being annoying.

→ Mary downgrades Henry morally: “He misbehaved, and I will not see him anymore.”

So far, it may seem that we have only reached the point where an agent is entitled to evaluate her interlocutor from a moral standpoint, in light of a rational adjustment of a prima facie attribution of moral decency. Why, it might be argued, should we think of W2 as the ethical expertise we have been characterizing? After all, it would be unlikely for Mary to think, in S2, “Henry is simply altruistic.” As soon as she witnesses Henry’s altruistic behavior, her judgment is better explained as a globalist one, leading to an overall judgment and a desire to deal with him again. This may be better seen by considering the opposite case, as exemplified in S3, where Henry’s annoying behavior makes Mary reasonably want to avoid having to do with Henry again. It would be weird if Mary thought, in S3, “Henry is simply intemperate,” and kept on seeing him by simply avoiding situations where temperance is at stake. It is much more realistic for her to judge him as morally flawed *overall*, and not simply lacking some particular virtue, and, consequently, deciding to avoid any further interaction with him. Note that interpreting Mary as issuing an overall judgment of Henry does not imply that she sees Henry as either fully virtuous or completely wicked. This would contradict the everyday experience of seeing someone who is, say, brave but intemperate, or generous but fearful, and so on. What we want to stress is rather that,

- (i) When we deal with someone, we tend to unify our epistemic access to his/her moral character;
- (ii) Witnessing good/bad deeds may lead us to attribute/withdraw the attribution of a more general moral competence (rather than discrete ethical virtues) to somebody;
- (iii) In normal conditions, when we observe somebody’s specific moral behavior, we tend to think that we can discriminate whether that person is committed to overall moral improvement, or is instead stuck in his/her actual moral flaws

(and therefore neither acknowledges the need for moral progress nor possesses the will to pursue it).⁴⁰

In other words, the phenomenology of real life relationships seems to support the intuition that our epistemic access to morality is a globalist one, which consists in the attribution of a master, cross-domain trait, rather than of distinct, domain-confined ones.

6 Against the Piecemeal Account of Virtue Acquisition: Some Educational Implications

How, then, should moral education be conceived in light of our account of ethical expertise?

In the previous two sections, when defending the conceptual and epistemic access theses, we claimed that (i) ethical expertise is a unified virtue, while the single virtues are descriptions of its unfolding across a variety of moral fields and situations, and that (ii) our attribution of virtuousness, rather than depending on the attribution of single virtuous traits, is grounded in an attribution of a putative global moral decency, open to being developed into an attribution of a full-fledged ethical expertise. Such claims entail an educational perspective that highlights the priority of a globalist moral commitment (via the training of practical reason) over the exercise of the single virtues. We therefore think that the piecemeal account of virtue acquisition can have negative consequences for a proper moral education, and that this should be directly engaged with a nuanced and unified idea of global ethical expertise.

These remarks are relevant for the much-discussed issue of how to conceive of virtue cultivation, and, in particular, the developmental path from the habituation of discrete traits to a mature, autonomous and comprehensive moral agency based on a well-formed practical reason. A well-known difficulty in this respect concerns the progression from the training of discrete virtues through habituation (which requires domain-specific situations, affordances and reasons) to the possession of wisdom, such that its bearer is expected to be reliably virtuous in a cross-situational way. One may ask, when and how is practical reason to be added on to, say, the repeated acts of facing danger, in order to give rise to genuine and cross-situational courage, and, ultimately, to practical wisdom?

Our claim is that habituation under the guide of the wise should be constituted, from the very beginning, as habituation towards ethical expertise. In this regard, consider the prominent account of virtue acquisition based on the skill analogy,

⁴⁰ This natural tendency is exploited by professional cheaters, who are able to produce in their interlocutors the impression that they seriously desire to be virtuous in general and that, consequently, they are trustworthy (films such as *House of games* and *American Hustle* expose such moral-psychological dynamics in brilliant ways).

which was originally put forward by Julia Annas and then developed by many others.⁴¹ The *Skill model of virtue* considers the novice-expert relation as the paradigmatic relation regarding virtue acquisition.⁴² Roughly, the skill analogy holds that virtue acquisition can be fruitfully modeled on the acquisition of a practical skill in a field involving complex decision-making, such as firefighting, medicine, or even craftsmanship. Developing a practical skill involves a gradual refinement and adjustment of ingredients – such as following rules, discerning exceptions, incorporating new patterns of action, applying knowledge – until a certain degree of fast and quasi-automatic activation emerges. A similar set of abilities and developmental patterns seem suitable, in our view, for modeling virtue acquisition.

It should be noticed that the skill analogy has to deal with the problem that skills are domain-specific and closely situation-driven. Thus, they do not necessarily involve a (more or less) explicit knowledge of the principles that unify and structure the characteristic field of that skill. This problem is pointed out, e.g., by the Aristotelian educational philosopher David Carr, who states that according to the skill model “becoming virtuous resembles training oneself in separate and distinct dispositions for different circumstances or occasions of moral need,” while “it is the mark of virtuous agents that their practical deliberations are informed by considerations of what conduces to a good or flourishing human life as a whole, rather than merely focused on the resolution of this or that particular moral problem.”⁴³ A problematic feature of the skill approach is that it conceives of practical reason as a discrete and distinct disposition that, at some point, intervenes from above, by regulating and unifying the virtues, and progressively transforms mere habituation and domain-specific skill training into a full-fledged moral character.

In our view, however, an early-stage ethical expertise is precisely what is activated in the novice-expert relation within the moral domain, even in the case of some simple instructions about the repetition of a specific action. What is the difference between repeatedly instructing a child to ask for things kindly, so as to instill some kind of mechanical routine in her, and allowing her to experience genuinely what it is like to be kind? In our view, the difference does not amount to failing to add on – at some mysterious point in the training process – practical wisdom to a habituated trait. Rather the difference consists in an orientation towards a global ethical expertise *from the beginning* of the virtue acquisition process. This means that the educational process entails, from the start, the seeds of the two features of ethical expertise listed above: (a) moral competence within a given domain and (b) openness to new domains and situations.

To this, a critic could object that such integrated sensitivities and abilities are too demanding for ordinary moral education, and that they could hardly be at play

⁴¹ See, e.g., Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, op. cit.; P. Bloomfield, “Eudaimonia and Practical Rationality,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 2012: 265–286; Stichter, “Ethical Expertise,” op. cit.; J.D. Swartwood, “Wisdom as an Expert Skill,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 511–528.

⁴² This is not to say that other kinds of relations (e.g., peer-to-peer instead of asymmetric one) are not relevant at all for virtue acquisition.

⁴³ D. Carr, “Educating for the Wisdom of Virtue,” in D. Carr, J. Arthur, K. Kristjánsson, eds., *Varieties of Virtue Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 319–335; see p. 326.

in such basic moral interactions as, say, exhortations to fairness during a competition, or blaming somebody for an offensive remark. To address this objection, it is important to remember that the core of moral education, as we see it, is the novice-expert relation, in which one or more genuine moral exemplars are the objects of admiration, emulation and sustained exploration by the moral learner.⁴⁴ Within such a model, a concrete moral role model embodies – at least to a certain degree – global ethical expertise, thus fostering the novice’s rational and emotional engagement. In sum, we claim that for a genuine educational process to even get started, a global ethical expertise embodied by an admirable educator needs to be already in place, so as to activate and gradually develop the novice’s emotional and rational skills all at once. Referring to exemplars seems to be a promising perspective from which to understand the activation of a unified moral educational process.

This educational account, it is to be noted, both strengthens and follows from the previous theses. In fact, this account of moral education directly follows from a view that equates wisdom with a global rational-affective ethical expertise (our conceptual thesis), which enables the educator to arise globalist admiration in the novice (as implied by our epistemic access thesis). On the other hand, our educational account is not exposed to the charges of automaticity, heteronomy and fragmentation to which the competing accounts are liable, and could therefore bolster our case regarding the conceptual thesis as well.

7 Conclusion: Ethical Expertise and Second-Nature Naturalism

In this paper, we have defended a novel understanding of practical wisdom, in which it is equated to a rational-affective master virtue that encompasses an orientation towards the various goods that, according to the standard views, are the objects of the discrete ethical virtues. In this way, our view implies an understanding of the integration of reason and emotions, which locates their interaction in a comprehensive ethical expertise, rather than in each single ethical virtue. Emotions enter the moral sphere via ethical expertise, which plays the fundamental role of integrating both the different moral requirements of each situation, and the emotional and cognitive appreciation of its features.⁴⁵ By doing so, our novel account also has the advantage of preserving the agent from the potential risk of disintegration, which is intrinsic to any fragmented view of how the virtues interact and operate.

Finally, and most importantly for the purpose of the present paper, our view of how ethical expertise works may give important hints on how its relation to nature should be conceived. Against Naturalism of the first nature, and in line with Naturalism of the second nature, we propose a kind of ethical naturalism that places

⁴⁴ See Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, op. cit.; M. Croce and M.S. Vaccarezza, “Educating through exemplars: Alternative paths to virtue,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695903>.

⁴⁵ In conceiving of wisdom as affectively engaged, we assume an integrative view of emotions and reasons, which are seen as working synergistically – a view that is gaining traction in the cognitive sciences (De Caro & Marraffa, “Debunking the Pyramidal Mind,” op. cit.).

normativity at the level of the second nature, and assigns to ethical expertise the strong role in stepping back from first nature in order to respond to the moral demands of each situation. By possessing affective wisdom, one is endowed with the ability to shape one's first nature, so as to develop an ethical outlook that amounts to a second nature. Following McDowell, nature cannot be confined to what is subject to causal laws, and must be conceived as inclusive also of the broader space of reasons, to whose normative significance we have to be responsive. And this is precisely the role played by our global ethical expertise, conceived as the master virtue responsible for cross-domain moral discernment.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Although the paper is the result of the common work of all authors, Mario De Caro is the author of the Introduction and of sections 4, 5; Maria Silvia Vaccarezza of sections 2, 3 and the Conclusion; and Ariele Niccoli of section 6. We thank Robert Audi, Angelo Campodonico, Gabriele De Anna, Irene Liu and Anselm Müller, for their useful comments on previous versions of this article or on the talks from which it derives.