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Absorbed Coping and Practical Wisdom

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1 Introduction

Hubert Dreyfus has recently taken the position that practical wisdom is not primarily an excellence of the intellect, or even of the mind. According to Dreyfus, *contra* the Aristotelian tradition from which the notion derives, true practical wisdom *supersedes* rationality, rather than perfecting it. Practical wisdom on his view is an absorbed or engaged way of 'coping' with the world; something that humans are capable of doing "without thinking at all." It is therefore best understood on the perceptual model of response to affordances.[1]

In what follows I will be concerned with two, related questions. First, can practical wisdom be understood in terms of response to affordances, as the latter idea is developed in the work of Dreyfus and of Sean Kelly? I will argue that the answer is no, because as it stands the model of response to affordances cannot account for the practical role of the agent in her own absorbed coping, including her absorbed acts of practical wisdom. Response to affordances is, as it were, too purely

[1] Hubert 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): p. 56. See also Dreyfus, "Response to McDowell," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2007): pp. 371–77; Dreyfus, "Return of the Myth of the Mental," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2007): pp. 352–65; and Dreyfus and Sean D. Kelly, "Heterophenomenology: Heavy-handed sleight-of-hand," *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* 6 (2007): pp. 45–55.

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responsive to permit agents to play the role that they are meant to play – and that they must play – in their own actions.

This difficulty with the affordances model naturally gives rise to a second question. If affordance won't work to characterize practical wisdom, is there another way to accommodate Dreyfus' insight that practically wise activities are characteristically absorbed? Here, I believe it would be open to Dreyfus to resort to a less purely responsive, yet still highly embodied and perceptual (i.e., non-conceptual), account of absorbed coping. However, I will not pursue this sort of possibility here. Instead, I will argue for a version of the claim that practical wisdom is absorbed, according to which practical wisdom is at the same time paradigmatically thoughtful and mindful.

On my account absorbed coping can be, and often is, a reason-involving activity. In particular, certain paradigmatically reason-involving activities such as deliberation, negotiation, and every day conversation may themselves be done in an absorbed fashion. But I do not claim that absorbed, practically wise actions are constitutively reason-involving. For whether practical wisdom is constitutively rational depends upon one's conception of practical rationality; and in my view Dreyfus' account presents some powerful reasons for taking a closer look at how we conceive of practical reason. In particular, the more one conceives of practical rationality as the practical application of theoretical rational capacities, the less it will be true that absorbed practically wise actions are constitutively reason-involving. To put this point another way: my focus here is on the essential role of *practical* intentionality in action, and the account leaves it open exactly how practical intentionality itself might be characterized; whether it is rational or perceptual or (my own view) a third basic species of intentionality altogether. To this extent the account remains agnostic on the question of non-conceptual content that was the subject of such lively debate between Dreyfus and John McDowell, and proponents of their respective views, following Dreyfus' 2005 Pacific APA address.[2]

I concur with Dreyfus and also with Julia Annas in conceiving of practical wisdom as a sort of skill, or learned expert ability.[3] In *Intelligent Virtue*, Annas conceives of certain skills, including wisdom or virtue, as inherently thoughtful and reason-involving activities which nonetheless have many of the same phenomenological qualities that Dreyfus attributes to absorbed coping. Just now I said that any account on which absorbed coping can be reason-involving faces an important question: how must we conceive of practical rationality if absorbed practical wisdom is rational? Reflecting on Annas' and Dreyfus' views together will not answer this question, but it will help us to make some progress towards an answer. I propose a middle ground between Annas' and Dreyfus' accounts of wisdom-as-skill: less reason-involving in some respects than Annas' conception, but with more room for mindful agency than Dreyfus' account permits. To this end, I distinguish two aspects of mindful, absorbed coping, having to do with *immediacy of attention*

[2] See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996). See also McDowell, "Response to Dreyfus," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2007): pp. 366–70; and McDowell, "What Myth?" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2007): pp. 338–51.

[3] Dreyfus, *op. cit*., and Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and *situational sensitivity*. I show that, while neither aspect is sufficient for practical wisdom, both are characteristic of it. And both, moreover, are compatible with practical wisdom's being an excellence of deliberate, thoughtful, purposive practical activity: what we might call practical rationality.

2 Absorbed Coping as Response to Affordances

Let us begin with a brief account of Dreyfus' view of absorbed coping. In general, one is able to cope in an absorbed fashion when one has *mastered* a given activity or skill. For example, someone who has mastered whatever method she was taught for getting food into her mouth will be able to do so successfully in a fluid, self-forgetful way. She does not have to concentrate or engage in deliberation, in order to avoid stabbing herself in the cheek with fork or chopsticks or fingers. The same sort of self-forgetful, easy fluidity characterizes absorbed coping in any area of life, including the paradigm case of practical wisdom.

In attaining this level of expertise in a given domain, Dreyfus claims that a person leaves behind the mental apparatus of reasons, concepts, and explicit rules altogether. To be sure, reasons, concepts and rules do often play an important role in skill-*acquisition*. But they function rather like training wheels on a bicycle: once a skill is mastered, they fall away and are no longer part of how a person engages in the skilled activity.[4] In support of this claim, Dreyfus points out, first, that it certainly doesn't follow from the fact that reasons and rules are present in the learning phase, that "these reasons in the form of habits still influence our wise actions"[5] once expertise is acquired. What's more, with respect to a wide range of practical skills, Dreyfus finds that resorting to explicit conceptual thought or acting out of a habit that is based on implicit reasons or rules is always a mark of *in*expertise. For example, an amateur plays chess 'by the book', whereas a grandmaster chess player often cannot reconstruct the reasons behind her decisions and movements, and may even use a different part of the brain than the amateur player.[6]

Getting beyond rules, concepts, and reasons is not only compatible with absorbed coping in Dreyfus' view, it is constitutive of it. Thus leaving rationality behind is, on his view, at least partly constitutive of practical wisdom. The practically wise person's absorbed responsiveness to the full, nuanced particularity of each situation she confronts is far more fine-tuned than reasons, rules, and concepts would allow. Therefore, the practically wise person "isn't even *implicitly* rational in the sense of being responsive to reasons that have become habitual but could be reconstructed."[7]

Given his view that practical wisdom isn't even implicitly rational, Dreyfus proposes to explain it instead as a special sort of perceptual ability. To this end, he

[4] Dreyfus 2005, p. 52.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

turns to the notion of response to affordances. Sean Kelly explains absorbed coping as response to affordances in this way:

> [S]killful, absorbed coping is what one is engaged in when one performs activities without paying attention to the fact that one is performing them. So for instance, when I'm walking along with a friend, lost in a philosophical conversation, I nevertheless am able skillfully to reach out, grasp the doorknob, and open the door…[8]

Kelly says that "in such an unreflective activity, although I do not explicitly notice the doorknob (*ex hypothesi*), it nevertheless *directs* or *leads* my grasp."[9] When someone responds to affordances in her environment, the world leads her to respond to it; affordances "solicit one to act."[10] Dreyfus notes that, not only does responding to affordances "not require noticing them," but "to best respond to affordances… one must not notice them as affordances, but rather, as Heidegger says, they 'withdraw' and we simply 'press into' them."[11]

In the same way, a practically wise person does not hesitate to act when, for instance, kindness or bravery is called for. She already knows what to do, and, like the person who opens the door without breaking his stride or losing the thread of the conversation, she does just the right thing to suit the particular situation, in a beautifully apt gesture of (e.g.) kindness, without having to stop and deliberate, calculate, justify, or decide. In doing so she responds in an immediate and wholly absorbed way to whatever affords kindness in her situation. The opportunity to be kind 'solicits her to act' kindly, just as the doorknob solicits the grasp of the absorbed philosopher. The world leads and directs her actions so that she is simply drawn to respond fittingly.

It is clear that, for Dreyfus, true practical wisdom does not and *cannot* involve rationality or conceptual capacities. But he sometimes seems committed to an even stronger view: namely, that practical wisdom doesn't involve the mind at all; that it is, as it were, *purely* embodied. Indeed, when pushed to clarify his view on this point, Dreyfus insists that "mindedness is the enemy of absorbed coping,"[12] and reaffirms his claim that the features of the environment to which an expert's action responds may be "available to the perceptual system, [but] needn't be available to the mind."[13] This makes it sounds as if perhaps truly absorbed coping, in virtue of

[8] Sean Dorrance Kelly, "Closing the Gap: Phenomenology and Logical Analysis," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13 (2005): pp. 4–24. Compare Charles Taylor: "As I navigate my way along the path up the hill, my mind totally absorbed in anticipating the difficult conversation I'm going to have at my destination, I treat the different features of the terrain as obstacles, supports, openings, invitations, to tread more warily, or run freely, and so on. Even when I'm not thinking of them these things have those relevancies for me." From "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 34.

[9] Kelly, p. 16.

[10] Dreyfus 2005, p. 56.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Dreyfus 2007b, p. 353.

[13] Dreyfus 2005, p. 54. Sentence italicized in original.

being absorbed, has no dimension of conscious awareness and is not an intentional state at all.

But Dreyfus says explicitly that absorbed coping (and practical wisdom in particular) *ar*e intentional in some sense:

> a 'bare Given' and the 'thinkable' are not our only alternatives. We must accept the possibility that our ground-level coping opens up the world by opening us to a *meaningful* Given – a Given that is *nonconceptual* but not *bare*.[14]

Perhaps, then, Dreyfus' stronger formulations of his view should be bracketed, and we should focus on the notion of 'a Given that is nonconceptual but not bare' as the core of his account? In keeping with this thought, the debate since Dreyfus' 2005 address has focused on whether the contents of experience are conceptual 'all the way out' (in McDowell's phrase), taking Dreyfus to be principally concerned to defend the possibility of nonconceptual (i.e. purely perceptual) content. In this spirit McDowell, for example, has suggested that Dreyfus overstates the differences between their accounts of practical wisdom, arguing that his (McDowell's) expansive and flexible form of conceptualism can accommodate the absorbed phenomenology of expertise without falling prey to 'The Myth of the Mental', and taking his arguments against the intelligibility of non-conceptual content in *Mind and World* to support his view over Dreyfus'.[15]

But it would be a mistake to dismiss or downplay those of Dreyfus' remarks that seem to suggest that the mind is not involved in absorbed coping. After all, Dreyfus claims to be debunking 'The Myth of the *Mental*', not the myth of rationality alone. Instead, if we wish to understand the sense in which Dreyfus rejects a 'mental' conception of practical wisdom, we must attend, not to Dreyfus' views on the nature of experience, but rather to his views on the nature of *agency*.

The notion that an expert agent is ideally responsive, because she relates to her world in such a deeply connected or embedded way that she is effectively not separated from it, is a broadly Heideggerian notion. As Dreyfus says,

> Heidegger describes *phronesis* as a kind of understanding that makes possible an immediate response to the full concrete situation: "[The *phronimos*] …is determined by his situation in the largest sense. …"[16]

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[15] See especially McDowell, "Reply to Dreyfus," *op. cit.* For further discussion of the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell construed as about the nature and contents of experience, see *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, Joseph K. Schear (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2013). For a different account of embodied perception according to which action and agency are central to perception, see Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

[16] There are many interesting ideas here that it is beyond the scope of this paper to address, including an implicit challenge to the individualistic theories of selfhood that ground standard philosophical theories of agency and action. For a pertinent and interesting discussion see Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess.* Alan Drengson and Bill Deval (eds.) (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008), pp. 81–98.

Here the wise person, unlike the more alienated, less wise or less expert person, is so wholly bound up in and so wholly attuned to his circumstances that he recedes *qua* self; he is *determined* by the world, not determiner of it. And this idea – the idea that practical wisdom is responsive – can be distinguished from the Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian thesis that practical wisdom is perceptual. I suggest that it is the former thesis that is most centrally at issue in absorbed coping: we should be focusing on the question of the practical, active, *guiding* involvement – or rather, lack thereof – of the agent as such.

From this angle, the pertinent question is not, what constitutes the experiences of the absorbed coper, but rather, what *practical* role does the absorbed agent play in her own absorbed, skillful coping? And if we take response to affordances at face value, then the answer to this question appears to be: ideally, none at all. For in responding to affordances, an agent is entirely passive, not active; responsive, not guiding. Indeed, her passive responsiveness is precisely what her expertise consists in. An ideally absorbed agent does not exert mental guidance or control over her expert actions; instead, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, she is "'given over to the object and [merges] into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal.'"[17]

We can see the marked passivity of response to affordances in another of Kelly's illustrations:

> In engaged, skillful activity there is a 'mode of presentation' of objects that is genuinely intentional but is not equivalent to any conceptually articulated understanding of them. When the rabbit is running away from the fox, for example, he does not experience the rabbit hole into which he runs as a hole, or as of a certain size … neither is it right to say, however, that the activity of running into the hole is a mere non-intentional motor reflex on the rabbit's part. … [Rather,] the rabbit experiences the rabbit hole, in the context of escaping the fox, as something that pulls him immediately into a certain kind of activity – namely, the activity of running into it.[18]

In a footnote, Kelly adds, "Better: the rabbit's experience of the hole consists entirely of being drawn to escape into it."

Now, as it is described, in this scenario the mode of rabbit-action that is characterized as responding to affordances is 'genuinely intentional' in the sense that the rabbit has an *experience* of the hole as an affordance. But the rabbit's movements are *not* intentional in the practical sense that has to do with purposiveness – not because rabbits are incapable of the relevant sort of purposive guidance of their own movements, but rather because in general, whenever an agent responds to affordances, her actions are normatively constrained by the world in a *very* strong sense. In Dreyfus' words, the absorbed coper's body "*is drawn* to get a maximum grip on its environment."[19] In Kelly's words, affordances *direct*, they

[17] Dreyfus 2005, pp. 56–7. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 238.

[18] Kelly, p. 11.

[19] Dreyfus 2005, p. 3, my emphasis.

lead; they *solicit*. But unlike verbal solicitations and directions, the call of an affordance cannot be ignored or resisted by someone in the mode of absorbed coping. Kelly explicitly rejects the possibility that we could see (for example) a doorknob directing someone's grasp as an instance of the world 'performing a speech act that is like a command'. For one can register a command and then choose to obey or defy it; whereas there is no possibility "of a mismatch between what activity is afforded and what activity is performed" in the case of absorbed coping.[20] Instead, affordances' solicitations to act are 'intrinsically motivating'; "there is no room for slippage between the affordance and activity" at all.[21] Therefore, "the subject is in no position to resist the pull of an affordance unless he explicitly *notices* the effect it is having on him."[22]

To perceive an affordance *qua* affordance (absorbedly), then, *just is* to be responsive to its normative pull. And in order to resist the pull of an affordance, an agent must leave her absorbed state, and switch into a detached, calculative or explicitly self-aware (Dreyfus would say, thereby inferior or inexpert) mode of interaction with the world. That is why, although the rabbit's activity is intentional in the sense that it has experiential content, the agential credit, so to speak, for its movements is due entirely to the inexorable pull of the hole in the wall through which it darts. And if we are to understand absorbed coping (including practical wisdom) on the model of response to affordances, the same will be true of human copers, including the practically wise.

The impossibility of slippage between affordance and response is the root of the problem with response to affordances, considered as a model for both absorbed coping in general, and practical wisdom in particular. For on this model, the initiative and the control that intuitively constitute purposiveness or agency belong entirely to the environment, and not to the agent who moves in it. As a result, the affordances model is unable to account for the way in which agents, even absorbed ones, are in some sense always active, not merely passive, in their own doings – *intending* to open the door, walking through it for a *purpose*, etc. In virtue of the fact that there is no possibility of resisting the pull of an affordance while absorbed, there is no room for even the most minimal kind of agency to be constitutively involved in this sort of coping.

The inability of the affordances model to account for agency in expertise is brought out by the fact that it cannot explain why absorbed copers do not take advantage of all affordances the world presents them with at any given time. This problem can be sketched in relation to a problem that Warren Quinn raises for subjectivism about rationality in "Putting Rationality in Its Place."[23] There, Quinn uses the example of a person who goes around continually turning on every single

[20] Kelly, p. 17.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Warren Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 181–208. Quinn says, "Given the perception that a radio in [his] vicinity is off," this man tries, "all other things being equal, to get it turned on." 189–90.

radio he encounters, in order to illustrate his claim that having a pro-attitude towards doing something is neither necessary nor sufficient for that thing's being rational. I want to set aside Quinn's use of his own example in the present context, and focus on the image of the radio man as an illustration of what it would be like to be intrinsically motivated by affordances, in a way as unreflective and passively responsive as the one Kelly and Dreyfus describe.

To that end, let us suppose that when the radio man turns on the radios he encounters, he usually does so in an absorbed fashion. He is able to turn on radios without interrupting the flow of his conversation, without fumbling with the various types of dials and switches, and so on. And yet in doing so, he is doing something 'genuinely intentional' in the sense that he experiences the radios as affording turning-on, just as the rabbit experiences the hole through which it darts in Kelly's example above. When the case is fleshed out in this way, Quinn's radio man can be described as responding to the affordances offered by the 'on' buttons of the radios he encounters, whenever he turns on the radios, just as I can be described as responding to an affordance when I turn on a radio in an act of absorbed coping.

The problem for the affordances model is that it cannot distinguish me from Quinn's radio man, when I come home and turn on the radio in an act of absorbed coping. Specifically, it cannot explain why I do not act like him, albeit in a completely generalized way. For what keeps me from turning on, not only any other radios in the house, but also the oven, and the bathroom light, and the coffee pot, and the TV and the vacuum cleaner? The fact that I regularly *refrain* from doing all of these things when I come home cannot be explained solely by the normative constraints imposed by the affordances themselves. For the normative constraints of all of the familiar affordances in my home are consistently in place, and yet unlike the radio man I do not find myself being continually lured by the solicitations of irresistible, 'intrinsically motivating' affordances into grabbing doorknobs, flicking on lights, sitting in chairs, and turning on radios. And yet given that there is 'no room for slippage' between 'intrinsically motivating' affordances and the elicited response, as long as I remain absorbed the difference between me and the radio man cannot be explained by differences in, for instance, our aims, dispositions or attitudes. For these things have no practical role when someone is coping in an absorbed, purely responsive fashion. Therefore, if affordances really are intrinsically motivating; that is, if the agent's mind is not in any practical way involved in absorbed coping, then we should expect to see the radio man's kind of behavior, and worse, whenever someone slips into that absorbed mode of interacting with the world.

Clearly, however, this is not what happens. What, then, explains an individual's responsiveness, in a given context, to some affordances and not others? Surely it is something about the agent herself; specifically, something she is *doing*. The rabbit fleeing the fox is *trying to escape*; when I come home and turn on the radio I *intend* to put my feet up and listen to the news. It is only in the context of these kinds of agent-initiated and agent-guided projects, intentions, priorities, values, goals, and so forth that it makes sense for an agent to respond to certain affordances and not others. It would be at odds with the rabbit's attempt to escape if it stopped to nibble some nearby clover; I would thwart my own intention to relax if I wandered around turning things on and off and getting up and down. And so on.

It seems that both Dreyfus and Kelly mean to allow practical intentionality to play some role in relation to absorbed coping. For example, consider this passage from Kelly, which Dreyfus quotes:

> it is part of my visual experience that *my body is drawn to move*… these are inherently normative, rather than descriptive, features of visual experience. They don't represent… the way the world *is*, they say something about how the world *ought to be* for me to see it better.[24]

Here, though it is not his focus, Kelly implicitly makes use of the idea of the seeing agent having a *project* of seeing a given thing better, to explain why a particular person is drawn to move one way as opposed to another in a certain context. And, for his part, at one point Dreyfus explicitly allows for the possibility of a form of absorbed deliberation. He says, in absorbed deliberation,

> the expert stays involved and tests and refines her intuition. For example, if the situation does not solicit an immediate intuitive response because certain aspects of the situation are slightly, yet disturbingly, different from what would make one completely comfortable with a specific move, the master chess player contemplates the differences, looking for a move that keeps all intuitively desirable options open while reducing his sense of uneasiness. This type of deliberation … is useful precisely because it clears the way for an immediate intuitive response.[25]

Here, we find the absorbed chess player described as very active – I would say, very thoughtfully involved – in her absorbed activities. She contemplates and weighs alternatives, she hesitates; she searches for the best course of action.

The question now is, how are we to reconcile the above remarks with the claim that there is no possibility of resisting the pull of an affordance's solicitations without explicitly noticing that pull, and stepping back? One option might be to stipulate that the requisite agential guidance comes in in the absorbed coper's overarching or surrounding projects. For example: *qua* rational, deliberate agent I walk up the hill; *qua* non-rational absorbed coper I am solicited to walk around the rock; the latter is a purely responsive, absorbed behavior which I do passively and without the possibility of slippage because I am actively pursuing another overt goal – namely, getting up the hill. But this overt goal is always held, *qua* goal, as part of my conscious experience. I keep it in mind, so to speak; I do not become absorbed with respect to it.

This suggestion is *prima facie* plausible, but it faces two difficulties. First, it is incompatible with the phenomenology of absorbed coping, because it still requires one to leave the absorbed mode of coping in order to *resist* an affordance. When, upon arriving home, I resist the pull of the oven's solicitations, and the coffee pot's, and so on, I do not do so by being jolted out of the mode of absorbed coping each time, and 'explicitly noticing' the sway these affordances are attempting to have over me. I do not keep it always in mind that I am not to turn on (or off) all of the

[24] Kelly, p. 14.

[25] Dreyfus 2005, pp. 57–8.

things that I perceive which afford so doing. All of my time would be spent fighting off the waylaying solicitations of affordances, if this sort of stepping back and keeping-in-mind were really required in order for me to assert my influence as a purposeful agent in the course of going about living my life. This is manifestly not how we live; in this Dreyfus is absolutely correct.

Second, even if certain sorts of simple everyday perceptual absorbed activities might be construed in this way, this solution is absolutely unavailable to a view which aims to characterize practical wisdom as a response to affordances. For if practical wisdom is the summit of expert coping for a human agent, and if it is absorbed, then there is nowhere else we can reasonably say agency *resides* other than with the absorbed, engaged actions of the practically wise person.

We can put this problem in terms of a dilemma. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that agency is external to absorbed forms of coping, in the sense that it is always a matter of rationality or explicit keeping-in-mind. On this assumption we face a choice between two equally unacceptable alternatives. The first option is to leave explicit conceptual thought *as Dreyfus characterizes it* at the summit of human action- and activity-related capacities, making it the paradigm of human practical excellence. Then practical wisdom would be a matter of the kind of crude, alienated, detached conceptual thought that Dreyfus thinks all rational activity must be. This is explicitly incompatible with Dreyfus's project of characterizing practical expertise (including practical wisdom) as absorbed coping. Even if it were not, it is generally unpalatable insofar as we are inclined to accept, as I think we should be, that this sort of reasoning is not the most sophisticated form that rational coping can take.

On the other hand, if agency is external to absorbed coping and a matter of explicit rational thought, the other alternative is to depose explicit conceptual thought from its position at the summit of human ways of coping, and construe it as inferior to absorbed coping. But in doing so, we would be relegating all agency, and hence all truly goal-oriented, agent-originating *actions* to an intrinsically inferior, inexpert realm of human coping. Again this does not seem to be consonant with Dreyfus' picture of things overall.[26] But even if it were, this position too has unacceptable implications. For on this picture, those who can do evil or ineffectual or nonsensical things in an absorbed fashion would count as possessing a greater measure of practical wisdom than those who do good or effective or intelligent things in a less absorbed fashion. And that would be absurd. We would not want to say that, for instance, an absorbed but *incompetent* mechanic, or manager, or an evil political mastermind, is superior in practical excellence to an innovating and thereby less absorbed mechanic (or a self-aware supervisor, or a very careful, expert hostage negotiator). The greater mastery of the relevant skill by the latter sort of people over the former sort of people is not captured by the notion of absorbed coping on this alternative. And this makes absorbed coping a dubious candidate for being the most sophisticated form of human coping, and the one most worth striving towards or emulating.

[26] See Dreyfus' "A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition," with Stuart Dreyfus, *Operations Research Center Report* (1980).

3 Absorbed Coping and Virtue as Intelligent Skill

So far, I have argued that, because it depicts expertise as a matter of being 'intrinsically motivated' by affordances that the expert perceives in the world, the model of response to affordances denies agency any role in expertise. And yet, we need some notion of absorbed but active, purposive human agency – absorbed intentionality in the practical sense of 'intentional' – in order to explain the fact that absorbed copers are evidently *not* vulnerable to being waylaid, willy-nilly, by affordances in the world around them. In particular, whatever allows someone to take advantage of certain affordances and pass over others cannot be the kind of interrupting, disruptive acts of noticing or attention-paying that, constitutively, are not going on in absorbed coping. And while both Dreyfus and Kelly insist that absorbed coping is intentional (albeit not rational or conceptual), merely having *experiential* content is not enough to make something an intelligibly *practical* form of interaction between a conscious being and her world. Therefore, as it stands, the model of response to affordances cannot account for practical wisdom's being the kind of excellence it must be on anyone's view: namely, the most sophisticated, most successful exercise of practical agency for human beings.

What is needed instead is an account of practical wisdom that can do justice to Dreyfus' insight into the 'absorbed' quality of both normally-successful and practically wise actions, while also respecting the active, guiding role of the absorbed agent in her own expert actions. In principle, such an account might be developed in different ways. For example, as I mentioned above it would be open to Dreyfus to resort to a less purely *responsive* understanding of response to affordances (so to speak); one that takes into account practical as well as experiential intentionality. That is, he could take on board the idea that response to affordances does not account for the range of action types that it is meant to explain, *without* also taking on board the alternative model that I propose below, which is no doubt far more reason- and mind-involving than anything he would espouse. In that case, what would be needed from him would be an account of practical intentionality that is analogous to non-conceptual content: a conception of absorbed agency analogous to "a meaningful Given – a given that is *non-conceptual* but not *bare*."[27]

Alternatively, one could embrace a more traditionally rationalist account of practical wisdom, but (where possible) attribute to reason-involving activities the same phenomenological qualities that Dreyfus attributes to response to affordances. Julia Annas' account of virtue in *Intelligent Virtue* exemplifies this sort of approach. Although she is squarely in the rationalist camp when it comes to conceiving of skilled and wise actions, her account nonetheless bears many strong similarities to Dreyfus'. Most importantly, like Dreyfus, Annas presents virtue as a sort of skill, or a learned expert ability: "the acquisition and exercise of virtue can be seen to be in many ways like the acquisition and exercise of more mundane activities, such as farming, building, or playing the piano."[28]

[27] Dreyfus 2005, p. 55. Again here, for an alternative account of perception as a mindful, but still embodied human activity that depends on human practical capacities, see Noë, *op. cit.*

[28] Annas, p. 1.

Also like Dreyfus, Annas sharply contrasts the phenomenology of virtuous activity (and all other skilled actions) with the phenomenology of the learner's actions, as well as with that of the person for whom something is easy only because it is rote, or routinized. A *learner's* actions in a given domain will be characterized by hesitancy, the need to "work out consciously what is the right thing to do," and a tendency to imitate one's role model, or obey one's teacher, without the full, independent mastery of the skill that is required for autonomous practice.[29] In contrast, when one becomes skilled in a given domain,

> [t]he result is a speed and directness of response comparable to that of mere habit, but unlike it in that the lessons learned have informed it and rendered it flexible and innovative. The conscious thoughts seem to have disappeared; they are not taking up psychological room, or we would never see learners speed up as they become experts. The thoughts have … effaced themselves.[30]

For example, if someone learns how to play the piano and attains a measure of real skill, her playing "proceeds without conscious thinking … without anything like a decision or conscious thought before each action of striking the keys."[31]

In all of the respects thus-far described, Annas' account of virtue as skill echoes Dreyfus' notion of absorbed, skilled coping. But it is central to Annas' view that virtues and other skills are intelligent dispositions. She says, "The virtuous person's response is immediate, but it is an *intelligent* response, not a rote one. We can now see why it is intelligent; it is an *educated* response."[32] No doubt Dreyfus would agree with this thought in some sense; clearly the grandmaster chess player is doing something intelligent when she plays in an absorbed fashion, and absorbed coping is not rote or habitual. Where Dreyfus and Annas diverge is in their conception of what it takes for something to count as an intelligent response. For according to Annas, something's being an 'intelligent response' requires the continued, constitutive involvement of rational capacities. In the case of the skilled piano player, for example, although her playing "proceeds … without anything like a decision or conscious thought before each action of striking the keys," her playing is nonetheless "infused with and expressing [her] thoughts about the piece;" and "the ability, though a habituated one, is constantly informed by the way the person is thinking," such that "the practical mastery is at the service of conscious thought, not at odds with it."[33] Thus, in contrast to the deeply *responsive* affordances model, on Annas' picture the wise or skilled agent ideally plays an active practical role in her own skilled actions. She is fully aware, and continually exerting purposeful, creative, guiding control over what she does.

Annas' account of skilled actions is, in the respects mentioned so far, precisely the sort of account that is needed if we wish to see absorbed coping as actively thoughtful and mind-involving. But in one important respect, Dreyfus' view hits

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

closer to the mark. Annas claims that skills, including virtues, require more than the capacity to engage in the relevant activity *itself* in a mindful but absorbed fashion. To be truly skilled, on her view, one must also be able to articulately give and accept reasons for actions, and one must, moreover, be able to *teach* others how to do what one is skilled at doing. For example, "[i]f asked how she produced a certain effect, the pianist would have something to say about how it was done; just as she was taught, she can go on to teach others."[34] Annas argues that the skill of virtue constitutively involves being able to give and accept reasons for action because she takes it that this is what it is for "such a person [to] understand what he is doing."[35] And virtue – indeed any skill – must involve genuine understanding. The alternative, she thinks, would be to treat practical wisdom and other skills as nothing more than a sort of 'sub-rational knack'. And treating skills as mere knacks is incompatible with a widely shared intuitive understanding of what skills (including virtues) are like: in thinking about virtue, she says, "we reject the idea that the virtues … are nothing more than subrational knacks that can just be picked up independently of reason-giving."[36]

In this respect, Annas' view stands in sharp contrast to Dreyfus' observation that a grandmaster chess player may not even be able to give reasons retrospectively for the moves she makes. And on this point, Dreyfus has the phenomenology of agency firmly on his side. Experts often cannot give particularly good or accurate justifications for their actions, and not every expert is a competent teacher. We see this gap between practical ability and articulacy in many areas of life. Painters and musicians may or may not be able to give giving prosaic verbal translations of what they have already expressed in a quite different medium. Professional basketball players may go on to be excellent coaches, or terrible ones. In general, the insight and skill that constitute a given kind of expertise, and the skills of teaching, verbal explanation, and rational argument, are distinct practical capacities which need not always co-occur.

Things are no different when it comes to practical wisdom. Consider the case of kindness. A kind person, asked why he did something kind, might be able to say only, 'It looked like you could use a boost', or 'I know what that feels like'. These kinds of responses do not give an account of what it is that the kind person understood about the situation; they do not describe what he saw that elicited empathy, or explain why he took a 'boost' to be called for in response. And in fact in a given instance, and against the backdrop of a wise person's acquired life experiences, the grounds of a particular person's kind gesture might be little more than the glimpse he caught of a slumped shoulder, and the emotional recognition of the humiliation that that particular posture signifies. But not being able to describe what he understood does not mean that understanding was absent.

Nor does it necessarily mean that others cannot *learn* kindness from him, even if he may not be a particularly good teacher in one sense of the word. Children, for example, learn virtues – and vices – from taciturn parents just as much as from

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

talkative ones, by learning to notice what their elders are noticing. A younger child may see a parent put a hand on the slumped shoulder of a teenage sibling, and watch the discouraged posture dissolve into relaxation, thereby coming to understand the significance of both the slumped shoulder and the gentle gesture. In that sort of experience, the child learns and in an important sense the parent teaches, though the parent has not exercised certain kinds of rational capacities at all (such as the capacity for lucid verbal instruction). Here, noticing what a kind person notices when he acts kindly *is* a way of understanding the 'reason' why he acted, if by reason is just meant the fact or consideration that he was responding to in acting as he did.

The lesson to draw from these observations is not necessarily that practical wisdom does not involve rationality. Rather, the suggestion is that if we follow Annas in developing a more mindful conception of absorbed expertise (including practical wisdom), then we must think carefully, and in fresh ways, about precisely what *kinds* of rational activities expertise involves. In particular, we must be sensitive to the phenomenology of expertise where it suggests that the expert need not excel at the canonically reason-involving activities of justification, explanation, description, and verbal instruction. Juxtaposing Dreyfus' and Annas' views on expertise and wisdom invites us to ask: what are the particular, defining traits of (mindful) *practical* wisdom, and practical skills more generally? Let us now turn to that task.

4 Immediacy of Attention and Situational Sensitivity

We can begin by reconsidering the role of perception in Aristotle's account of practical wisdom. Dreyfus quotes Aristotle as saying that practical wisdom "involves knowledge of the ultimate particular thing, which cannot be attained by systematic knowledge but only by 'perception'."[37] But the sense in which Aristotle's idea here can meaningfully be translated as 'perception' is not a sense of the word which can appropriately be contrasted with what is rational. Aristotle says,

> But it is evident that [practical] wisdom is not systematic knowledge, since it has for its object what comes last in the process of deliberation… So wisdom is antithetical to intelligence, for intelligence has as its objects the definitions for which there is no account, whereas wisdom has as its object what comes last, and this is not an object of systematic knowledge, but of perception – *not perception of the sensibles special to each sense*, but like that by which we grasp that the last element in mathematical analysis is the triangle; for things will come to a halt in that case too.[38]

[37] Dreyfus 2005.

[38] Aristotle, p. 183, 1142a22–30, my emphasis. Note that the phrase Dreyfus quotes is translated slightly differently here: "wisdom has as its object what comes last, and this is not an object of systematic knowledge, but of perception."

Here Aristotle is *contrasting* sensory perception with the kind of 'perception' that practical wisdom involves. He does not mean to contrast 'sensory perception' with 'rational understanding'; rather, both systematic knowledge and practical wisdom involve rational correctness in the sense that they both originate with the intellect. Both are among "the states by which the soul has truth through affirmation and denial."[39] That is, both pertain to human beings' general capacity to get things right or wrong; to hit or miss the mark. The difference that Aristotle's talk of 'perception' picks out lies in the fact that systematic knowledge is concerned with what is true by necessity, without qualification, and universally; whereas practical wisdom is concerned with "what can be otherwise… in the sphere of action."[40] Practical wisdom for Aristotle is goodness (or soundness) with respect to deliberation and decision – excellence of rationality as it pertains to action – and is simply not sense-perceptual in nature.

Now, just because Aristotle located practical wisdom in the sphere of rationality does not mean that we ought to do so, especially given the tradition we inherit (thanks in no small part to Aristotle),which conceives of rationality as exhausted by theoretical reason. But one thing we can allow ourselves to be struck by in Aristotle's view is the fact that, while Aristotle does not think that practical wisdom is a sensory capacity, neither does he think that practical wisdom derives from, or is necessarily particularly similar to, human capacities for theoretical reasoning. This thought opens up the following possibility: a contemporary account of practical wisdom ought to articulate a notion of practical intelligence that is not an extension or adaption of theoretical reason, but is rather a distinct, basic phenomenon in its own right. Let us, in this spirit, try to identify some of the defining characteristics of distinctively practical wisdom. In the process, we will have an opportunity to consider various ways in which rational capacities are (and are not) implicated in practical wisdom.

We can begin by observing that the absorbed quality of practical expertise in general covers at least two distinguishable characteristics: 1) *immediacy* of attention, and 2) *situational sensitivity* – sensitivity to the full particular details of a situation. The contrast between immediacy of attention and lack thereof can be easily envisioned in a comparison between two different people, both charged with the task of giving a heartfelt and spontaneous (seeming) speech at a wedding. Someone to whom public speaking does not come easily may read his entire speech in a stilted fashion from note cards, in an agony of self-consciousness, whereas someone at ease in such a situation might be able to speak directly 'from the heart', and deliver the whole speech impromptu, with perfect dramatic timing. The latter person is involved, enmeshed; his actions are immediate and his attention is completely on what he is doing; the former person has not attained the same level of skill with respect to the task at hand.

In addition to the quality of attentional immediacy, absorbed coping also distinctively involves a nuanced sensitivity to particular features of situations. We might think of this sort of sensitivity as an ability to match one's actions precisely and fittingly to the contours of the situation. Note that this ability is independent

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 178, 1139b15–17.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 179, 1140a2.

from the immediacy of attention just described. The nervous speech-giver may have chosen just the right content, and just the right words, to convey the message that he delivers so clumsily. And in turn, the fluent and charismatic speaker may allude mockingly to previous marriages or be wholly unaware of mispronouncing the names of important relatives. But the actions of someone who is really top-notch – really skilled – at this sort of human activity will be characterized by both immediacy of attention and sensitivity to the situation.

Next, let us consider whether practical rationality – that is, the 'activity of soul in accordance with reason' of which practical wisdom is the excellence – could have these two characteristics. When it comes to situational sensitivity, we have a good model readily available in Aristotle. He thought of universal, abstract, detached, explicitly conceptual thought as just one part of human rationality. For him, the different facets of human rationality have quite different phenomenal characters, are held to quite different standards of excellence, and are carried out by engaging in distinct and various mental and physical activities. And, as we saw above, it is part of what practical reason is supposed to do, in Aristotle's view, to be precisely as sensitive to the particulars of the situation as that situation demands. So at least when it comes to practical reason, on Aristotle's account reason-involving activities can (indeed, must) be sensitive to particulars. This is what the talk of 'perception' in his account is meant to pick out.

But it may seem that even a conception of human practical rationality as highly sensitive to particulars as Aristotle's cannot satisfactorily accommodate the attentional immediacy of absorbed coping. For it is hard to imagine an account of practical rationality that does not include *some* account of deliberation and choice. And if all truly expert acts are direct in the sense of never being reflective, or deliberate, or painstaking, or self-conscious, then it is hard to see how there could be such a thing as excellent deliberation, or excellence with respect to handling new or complicated practical problems.[41] Perhaps, then, whenever someone deliberates, they are necessarily disengaged? In that case, either directness is not a necessary condition of practical excellence, or the activity of deliberation is never genuinely practically excellent.

But I think that even practical reasoning itself can have the qualities of immediacy and engagement that are characteristic of absorbed coping. To be sure, it is easier to be immediately engaged in some practical activities than others. For example, as we saw above, virtually all humans with the required muscle control quickly become absorbed copers with respect to whatever method they were taught for eating. With other sorts of activities, however, attaining the level of direct engagement that makes actions fully absorbed might be much more difficult, and the ability to do so will vary enormously from person to person and may be quite rare. What is remarkable about someone like a grandmaster chess player is that she is able to be both immediately engaged, and situationally sensitive, with respect to something as difficult as chess. The same goes for any virtuoso, whatever the activity.

[41] With Stuart Dreyfus, Dreyfus (1980) proposed a model of human skill acquisition that makes room for *innovation* as a kind of expertise that transcends expertise, so to speak. See note 34, above.

5 Practical Wisdom Reconsidered

With the foregoing sketch of mindful absorbed coping in mind, let us now turn to ask how being absorbed relates to being practically wise. As it turns out, being absorbed is only *one* dimension of practical wisdom, and it is not related to the ethics of action in any easy way. For if being able to perform a given activity in an absorbed way is something like a skill, then of course people can be good at all sorts of things: wonderful, horrible, and trivial.

Let us first consider the relationship between immediacy of attention and practical wisdom. In general, the immediacy of an agent's attention does not bear any consistent, regular relationship to the ethical character of her actions. For unfortunately, just as a kind person's kind actions will often be characterized by a certain unhesitating deftness, someone highly practiced in the art of cruelty will be cruel with deftness, ease, and a total lack of hesitation as well. Jane Austen's Emma, for example, once did something very cruel simply because it came so easily to her. At a picnic with a group of friends and neighbors, she saw an opportunity to make a joke at the expense of the simple and garrulous Miss Bates. And, as the author puts it, Emma *could not resist* the opportunity:

> "Oh! very well," exclaimed Miss Bates; "then I need not be uneasy. 'Three things very dull indeed.' That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as even I open my mouth, shan't I? (looking round with the most good-humoured dependence on everybody's assent.) Do not you all think I shall?"
> Emma could not resist.
> "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me, but you will be limited as to the number,—only three at once."
> Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her.
> "Ah! Well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means (turning to Mr. Knightley), and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend."[42]

As Emma's cruelty shows, immediacy of attention, while it is certainly a mark of *some* sort of expertise, is not necessarily a mark of *ethical* expertise. Practical wisdom is thus not a necessary condition for immediacy of attention, though it is possible that immediacy of attention is a necessary condition for full practical wisdom.

Instead, Emma's actions illustrate a more complicated, but still very close practical connection between the immediacy of one's involvement in action, and the morality of one's actions. Would Emma have hurt Miss Bates' feelings so cruelly if not for her direct, easy engagement in the way of acting that led to (and constituted) her cruelty? Probably not. Though she did what she did deliberately (in fact, she did

[42] Jane Austen, *Emma*. (Boston: Tichnor and Fields, 1887), p. 319. Accessed online at https://books.google.com.

it in a calculated effort to impress someone), she was 'carried away' by reveling in her own facility with her verbal weapons, and she felt afterwards that she had acted very badly. Austen presents Emma as someone who does want to be a better person, but who is self-indulgent and complacent, and to whom bad behavior comes very naturally. The trouble for Emma is that her very expertise makes it too easy for her to be cruel, and makes kindness much less possible for her.

If someone like Emma is going to learn how to be kind, her first step must be to be jolted out of her comfortable way of behaving, so that she can train herself to do better. In Dreyfus' terminology, she must return to the "novice" stage of skill-acquisition and learn slowly (and perhaps painfully) how to be kind.[43] To express the same thought in quasi-Aristotelian terms, Emma must attempt to undergo something like remedial re-habituation as an adult; she must re-train herself so that, if possible, kindness becomes more like second nature for her.[44] And it may be the case that someone like Emma who learns to be kind as an adult will never be quite as good at it as someone who has practiced it consistently since childhood. The acts of kindness done by her older, wiser self may never be as immediately engaged and effortless as her prior acts of cruelty were. Kindness will probably not be one of her strengths.[45]

The fact that attentional immediacy is characteristic of skillful human actions is thus of great practical relevance to the first-personal search for practical wisdom. Emma's cruelty illustrates the fact that, for any human being, coming to understand our own capacities for direct, immediate engagement (and how they hinder or further our own attempts to be good people) is an important part of trying to live well and do what's right.

Next, how does sensitivity to the particulars of a situation relate to practical wisdom? As with immediacy of attention, the sheer capacity to be fine-grained and subtle in one's responses to a situation is not in itself automatically a mark of ethical excellence. Just as one can be directly engaged in cruelty, cruelty can (indeed often must) be creative, subtle, sophisticated, and highly tailored to the situation. Emma's joke on Miss Bates played artfully on the interpersonal dynamics of the social situation.

And yet, the more one is inclined to accept an Aristotelian conception of practical rationality itself, the more one will have reason to say that apt sensitivity to the particulars of one's practical situation partly constitutes practical wisdom, and is perhaps, together with immediacy of attention, sufficient for it. It depends upon what *kind* of accuracy sensitivity entails. For example, Gavin Lawrence has distinguished between different kinds of "proper" theories of practical reason. On a (roughly neo-Humean) "end-relative" proper theory, one's ends are not determined by practical rationality, and the theory holds simply that if "A wants X" and if "M

[43] See Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980.

[44] For an account of second nature as central to the 'conceptualist' view of virtue in terms of which Dreyfus frames his initial argument, see McDowell, *Mind and World*.

[45] See Rosalind Hursthouse, "The Central Doctrine of the Mean," in *Blackwell's Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Richard Kraut (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 96–115, for an account of individual virtue in terms of hitting the mark, where the 'mean' – the mark the practically wise person hits – is conceived as the center of a circle, which one may fail to miss in all directions and in any number of different ways.

serves X" then therefore "There is a reason for A to M."[46] On this sort of theory, if Emma wants to impress a third party, and if making a cruel joke at the expense of Miss Bates furthers her goal, then she has reason to make the cruel joke. Her subtle, sophisticated, highly-situationally-tailored act of cruelty is not practically wise, but it is an excellent display of practical rationality and it is, in the terms of the end-relative theory, as sensitive to the details of the situation as one could expect practical reasoning to be. Here, practical wisdom is not a necessary condition for excellence with respect to situational sensitivity.

Contrast what Lawrence calls a "traditional conception" of practical rationality, such as Aristotle held. The "constitutive principle" of a traditional conception of practical rationality says that "a consideration C is a reason for an agent if and only if (and because) it constitutes, or suitably connects with, the practicable good, i.e. with what the agent must do to be acting well."[47] If so then full practical rationality on the traditional conception requires recognizing and choosing good ends and means; the practicable good.

Now, whatever the standards by which we determine what the practicable good consists in, let us assume a) that it is determined in some objective way by the facts about the circumstances of one's actions,[48] and b) that cruelty is no part of it. On this assumption, then one thing we can say about Emma is that certain objective, practically relevant features of her situation escaped her entirely; her cruelty partly consists in and was made possible by her blindness to the true practical significance of such things as the fact that Miss Bates is 'good-humoured', 'an old friend', and capable of being pained. On this way of thinking about practical rationality, acting other-than-well is incompatible with full sensitivity to the particular facts of one's situation, because 'sensitivity' here includes an ability to *evaluate* ends and means properly. And acting well at least partly consists in one's complete and perfectly fitting responsiveness to one's situation.

6 Conclusion

Dreyfus' phenomenological insights led us to a partial characterization of human practical excellence, in terms of immediacy of attention and sensitivity to situational particulars. These aspects of practical excellence do not, in themselves, amount to practical wisdom in the full ethical sense. But we can nonetheless describe the kind of excellence that the wise person has, using Dreyfus' insights about the phenomenology of practical excellence, and drawing on Annas' account of intelligent virtue as a kind of skill. A practically wise person is *good at* a certain kind of activity: she is good at being good, or good at doing what's best in an ethical or very broadly moral sense of 'best'. She is good at this activity, just as an

[46] Gavin Lawrence, "The Rationality of Morality," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 122.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

[48] For a vivid description of this sort of deliberation see David Wiggins' "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1976): pp. 29–51.

accomplished artist is 'good at' working in her medium of choice, or a fluent speaker of a language is good at a range of speech-related activities. In contrast, in different ways and for different reasons, being good comes harder to someone with very little experience, or to someone struggling to overcome some person failing, or to someone with a gleeful or morbid lack of interest in doing what's best, and so forth. Emma, for instance, is not *good at* being good; she is, in particular, clumsy at best in her attempts at kindness. In this respect she lacks practical wisdom.

In practical wisdom, then, we have a name for a very fundamental sense in which actions can be good, or excellent. Being good at any practical activity is marked by a distinctive capacity for direct, immediate attention, and by a distinctive capacity to be sensitive to particular nuances of a situation. A wise person in particular is a person who is good, in these ways, at being good.

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