

Virtue Ethics: An Overview¹

Giacomo Samek Lodovici

The purpose of this essay is to review some of the significant themes present in the works of Virtue Ethics (VE) authors (mainly, but not exclusively, neo-Aristotelian ones), who have rediscovered the theme of virtue². It must be clear that, for reasons of space³, I do not pretend to be exhaustive⁴

¹ I have developed more extensively some themes of this contribution in G. Samek Lodovici, *Il ritorno delle virtù. Temi salienti della Virtue Ethics*, ESD, Bologna 2009, which I draw from and update here.

² I do not have the space here to consider German *Tugendethik*, or some Spanish and Italian authors' theories about the virtues, or the overlap between VE and feminist ethics.

³ For an introductory overview of VE, see, for example (in chronological order): G. Abbà, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, Las, Roma 1995, pp. 79-144; J. Oakley, *Varieties of Virtue Ethics*, in «Ratio», 9 (1996), pp. 128-152; M. Mangini, *L'etica delle virtù e i suoi critici*, La città del sole, Napoli 1996, pp. 9-40; D. Statman, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics*, in D. Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1997, pp. 1-41; M. Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, in H. LaFollette (ed.), *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Blackwell, Malden (Mass.) - Oxford 2000, pp. 325-347; A. Da Re, *La riscoperta delle virtù nell'etica contemporanea: guadagni e limiti*, in A. Da Re, G. De Anna (eds.), *Virtù, natura e normatività*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2004, pp. 233-261; D. Copp, D. Sobel, *Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics*, in «Ethics», 114 (2004), pp. 514-554; N. Athanassoulis, *Virtue Ethics*, 2004, www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/, in J. Fieser - B. Dowden (eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; S. Van Hoof, *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, Acumen, Teddington 2006; J. Annas, *Virtue Ethics*, in D. Copp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 515-536; G. Samek Lodovici, *Il ritorno delle virtù*, cit.; S. Van Hoof (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, Acumen, Durham 2014; R. Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics*, in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>; D. Carr, J. Arthur, K. Kristjánsson, *Varieties of Virtue Ethics*, Palgrave-Macmillan, London 2017; A. Campodonico, M. Croce, M.S. Vaccarezza, *Etica delle virtù. Un'introduzione*, Carocci, Roma 2017.

⁴ For example, among other topics, I will not consider Virtue Epistemology: see, for example, L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind. An inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundation of knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996 and M. DePaul, L. Zagzebski (eds.), *Intellectual virtue. Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003.

and that I cannot here express an evaluation⁵.

It is important to note that VE is not monolithic. Though it has some unifying elements, in particular, its criticism of deontological and consequentialist ethics, it encompasses various theoretical disagreements⁶ and many varieties⁷. VE authors' sources of inspiration are also diverse. The main one is Aristotle, but some others include Plato, the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas, Hume, and, at times, Nietzsche⁸, to mention only the main ones.

A common aspect of VE is of course the focus on character and virtue, and it is the criterion used in this paper to select the authors mentioned, even when they⁹ do not consider themselves among VE's exponents.

Virtue and character are not absent from modern ethics (e.g., Hume treats these subjects), and are not neglected by deontological ethics (Kant, e.g., speaks of virtue in *The Metaphysics of Morals*) or consequentialist ethics (Bentham, e.g., deals with them in his *Deontology*). But in these moral philosophies' works, character and virtue are secondary. In contrast, in the twentieth century these themes became more central in the works¹⁰ of some pioneers, for example: Hampshire (1949), Anscombe (1958)¹¹, von Wright (1965), Murdoch¹² (1970), Geach (1977), and Foot (1978). Finally, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981)¹³, inspired a proliferation of works on the theme of virtue, which now collectively constitute a very vast literature.

⁵ I explained my virtue's theory in G. Samek Lodovici, *L'emozione del bene. Alcune idee sulla virtù*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2010.

⁶ M. Nussbaum, *Virtue Ethics: a Misleading Category*, in «The Journal of Ethics», 3 (1999), pp. 163-201, has come even to question the existence of VE as an autonomous approach to moral issues. Now, it is true that VE's exponents differ on many issues, but, as we shall see, some themes are common.

⁷ Of recent literature, see, for example, D. Carr, J. Arthur, K. Kristjánsson (eds.), *op. cit.*, especially R.C. Roberts, *Varieties of Virtue Ethics*, pp. 17-34.

⁸ For a critic, see J. Annas, *Which Variety of Virtue Ethics?*, in *ivi*, pp. 35-52.

⁹ It is precisely the case with Nussbaum.

¹⁰ For the references of these works, see G. Samek Lodovici, *Il ritorno delle virtù*, cit.

¹¹ E. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in «Philosophy», 33 (1958), pp. 1-19.

¹² We will see some later.

¹³ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1981, 1984².

1. *Supremacy of End-Telos versus Emphasis on Duty*

A frequent topic in VE is the criticism versus modern ethics' concentration on duty¹⁴: norms and moral obligations, says Anscombe, lack normativity if disconnected from a legislator (human or divine). For Anscombe, deontology must explain the origin of the morally obligatory strength of its imperatives. Some authors insist on the connection between duty and goods: duty receives its justification from the end-good it is meant to safeguard. Therefore, they argue, it is necessary to return to the concept of the excellent *telos* of human life, namely *eudaimonia*¹⁵, or flourishing. In other words, it is necessary to focus ethics on good¹⁶.

Life must be considered as a totality, not segmented into disconnected fragments¹⁷. For Annas¹⁸, every action has a past, because it is the result of a certain way of reasoning and of reacting emotionally developed in the past; and it has a future, because it influences future actions and emotions. The obstacle to comprehending life in this way, says MacIntyre¹⁹, is that modernity often subdivides every human life into multiple unrelated segments (work, love, free time, private and public lives, etc.), each with its own rules, and treats human action as atomistic. In fact, though, humans are the authors of a story terminating only with death, and behavior cannot be characterized while disregarding the intentions behind it²⁰.

2. *Preservation of Love and Friendship*

Love is a crucial resource for society, but, often, modern ethics is not able to account for the value of love, friendship²¹, and solicitude for oth-

¹⁴ See, for example, E. Anscombe, *op. cit.*; A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 51-56, 118-119, 202-203, 215-216; R. Taylor, *Ethics, Faith and Reason*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1985, chapters 1-2, 12, 14.

¹⁵ J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 122-123.

¹⁶ I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin Books, New York 1993, p. 492; Id., *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London-New York 1970, pp. 51 and 76.

¹⁷ See for example J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, pp. 113-117, 121-126.

¹⁸ J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 52.

¹⁹ See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, cit., pp. 204-208.

²⁰ About this, see, recently, G. Pettigrove, *Virtue ethics, virtue theory and moral theology*, in S. Van Hoof (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 92-93.

²¹ M. Stocker, *The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories*, in «The Journal of Philosophy», 73 (1976), pp. 453-466; N. Sherman, *The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality*, in O. Flanagan,

ers' good: it demands that people consider others as a means to satisfy an obligation (deontologism) or to cause the best possible consequences²² (consequentialism).

But for some virtue ethicists, virtues are dispositions to do good to others, to express solicitude for others' well-being²³, because virtues have a relational aspect. For Nussbaum, "true courage [...] requires an appropriate, which is to say more than merely instrumental, concern for the well-being of one's country and citizens; [...] true generosity a non-crafty concern for the good of the recipient; and so forth. In each case, one cannot choose these excellent activities as ends in themselves [...] without also choosing the good of others as end"²⁴.

The intersubjective dimension is structural²⁵ for mankind, therefore we have a constitutive need to love and be loved²⁶. Consequently, virtue as human excellence must find its realization in human relations. Here emerges the need to pay careful attention²⁷ to others – a *loving attention* (see Blum) – because love is a way of looking that is able to distinguish the important aspects of others' condition. For Murdoch, what is demanded is a "loving gaze", "a suppression of self"; and "the ability so to direct attention is love"²⁸. For Tabensky²⁹, we fear to perceive "the all-consuming sense that one is alone or [...] that nobody cares about me, [...] that I am special to no one". But "I can only dispel the anxiety of separateness [...] by giving of myself for the sake of others. [...] despite the fact that it has a self-regarding dimension. When loving in the "mercenary spirit", one remains enclosed in oneself".

A.O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990; C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics. A pluralistic View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 42 e 54.

²² However, virtue ethicists can be sensitive to consequences: for example, N. Snow, *Generativity and flourishing*, in «Journal of Moral Education», 44 (2015), 3, pp. 263-277, reflects on the virtues of generativity toward future generations.

²³ See for example M. Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, cit.; C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 115 and ff.

²⁴ M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 352.

²⁵ See also A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago 2008, pp. 99 and ff.

²⁶ J.L. Garcia, *Interpersonal Virtue: Whose Interest do They Serve?*, in «American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly», LXXI (1997), p. 47.

²⁷ See L. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 12.

²⁸ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, cit., pp. 33, 64-65.

²⁹ P. Tabensky, *Virtue ethics for skin-bags: an ethics of love for vulnerable creatures*, in S. Van Hoof (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 462, 466, 468-469. I developed a similar discourse in G. Samek Lodovici, *L'emozione del bene*, cit., pp. 151-180.

3. Norms Are Not Sufficient to Act Well

To act well, it is not enough to have norms or rules³⁰. In fact, sometimes there are conflicts between norms that, in certain cases, demand incompatible actions³¹.

Moreover, applying norms demands the ability to make out the main features of a situation, which we must first of all be aware of in order to be able to decide how to act. The exercise of the crucial virtue of *phronesis* and the education of will and emotions³² are necessary. Furthermore, to apply ethical norms, we must have the ability to identify actions correctly so as to understand when such norms govern a situation (for example, is interrupting the alimentation of a subject nourished with a stomach tube a murder or a refusal to turn into a therapeutic obstinacy?).

And after determining that a certain norm governs a certain act, the norm does not tell us precisely how we must act.

No system of rules can conclusively guide every practical reasoning³³. Rather, practical reason becomes capable of identifying what is actually good thanks to the accrued power given by *phronesis* and from emotions informed by virtue. Furthermore, to be able to perform a virtuous action and acquire moral knowledge, we need to know exemplar excellent human beings that we admire³⁴ as models, and for this purpose it is also very important to listen to stories (cf. the importance of literature mentioned in § 6). We need to be inspired by the model of the *phronimos*³⁵, and also to ask for advice (when possible).

Criticism of VE about the supremacy of norms does not imply on behalf of every author that norms are not useful. It is possible to integrate virtue and rules³⁶: “Duty [...] does not constitute the whole of the moral

³⁰ See E. Pincoff, *Quandaries and the Virtues. Against Reductivism in Ethics*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence (Kansas) 1986; N. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character. Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989.

³¹ For example M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, cit., pp. 25 and ff.; P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas. And Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 175-188.

³² See L. Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-61.

³³ See A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (In.) 1988, pp. 113-123; L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind*, cit., p. 226.

³⁴ Cf. L. Zagzebsky, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017. Contra Virtue Exemplarism see H. Curzer, *Against Idealization in Virtue Ethics*, in D. Carr, J. Arthur, K. Kristjánsson, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-72.

³⁵ H. Alderman, *By Virtue of a Virtue*, in D. Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, cit., p. 156.

³⁶ Among the deontologists, this is the need expressed for example by O. O'Neill, *Towards*

life. But [...] helps the formations of moral habits [...] because we thereby internalize and take for granted certain patterns and values”³⁷. People who do not yet possess *phronesis*, besides from imitating and/or consulting wise persons (and even more when they don’t know wise men), need to follow some good norms, that contain the wise judgment of other people³⁸. Quite simply, norms do not have supremacy³⁹: they are a useful but not sufficient guide for action and must have as a goal the exercise of virtue and the realization of *eudaimonia*⁴⁰. Moreover, the field of ethics is broader than that of actions prescribed by norms, because some good actions are not duties⁴¹ and some are supererogatory (such as to give one’s life for others)⁴².

4. *The Morally Necessary Role of Emotions*

According to VE, deontologists often disregard the role of emotions in a morally good life. Acting morally well demands adequate moral knowledge, but this is not enough. It is necessary to possess above all a well-formed character and appropriate emotions⁴³. Emotions allow us to pay careful attention to the main details of a practical situation⁴⁴, as attention presupposes a certain loving interest in an object and their emotions⁴⁵. Emotions allow us to partially perceive another person’s interior life, in

justice and virtue. A constructive account of practical reasoning, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996. On the different relationship between virtue and norms in VE, in deontology, and in rule-consequentialism, see T. Chappel, *Virtues and Rules*, in S. Van Hooft (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, pp. 76-87.

³⁷ I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 494. On the presence of moral rules in Aristotle, see H.J. Curzer, *Rules Lurking at the Heart of Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics*, in «Apeiron», 49 (2016) 1, pp. 57-92.

³⁸ M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, cit., pp. 304-305.

³⁹ N. Sherman, *Making a Necessity of the Virtue*, cit., pp. 239-246, 266-275.

⁴⁰ A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*, Duckworth, London 1990, p. 139.

⁴¹ S. Van Hooft, *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 9, 46.

⁴² See, for example, S. Hudson, *Taking Virtues Seriously*, in «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», 59 (1981), 2, p. 192; L. Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-21, 166-168.

⁴³ See N. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, cit.

⁴⁴ Id., *The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality*, pp. 149-170; M. Stocker, *How Emotions Reveal value and Help Cure the Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories*, in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live?, Essays on the Virtues*, Clarendon Press, London 1996, pp. 173-189.

⁴⁵ M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 30.

turn allowing us to intervene morally well in his/her respect, even though they do not externally manifest their inner life⁴⁶.

According to MacIntyre (see also Aristotle), virtues “are dispositions not only to act in particular ways but also to feel in particular ways”⁴⁷. Sometimes emotions constitute a great moral obstacle, but, other times, they support both *phronesis* and other dianoetic virtues⁴⁸. They are a kind of energy, and support acting virtuously⁴⁹ and respecting norms: gratitude pushes us to thank a benefactor and to reciprocate; rage brings us to repay an unjust situation/act; admiration urges us to emulate others’ morally good actions⁵⁰. Therefore, our emotions need to be developed so as not to deform reason’s evaluations: temperate, courageous, and just people reason better morally because they are not influenced by resentment, fear, or pleasure⁵¹. A vicious disposition and the correlated emotions may alter our intellectual evaluation of good and evil in a situation because our will and affectivity are altered⁵².

5. *The Importance of the Community*

Another recurrent criticism of modern ethics from VE is that it does not take into adequate consideration the importance of the community in the moral life of the subject, while what and how far we are able to perform “depends in part on what and how far we received”. We need others to help us not only materialistically but also morally because we are not self-sufficient, and not only at birth. Thanks to others’ goodwill, we may become “the kind of human being – through acquisition and exercise of the virtues – who makes the good of others her or his good”⁵³. Then “it is al-

⁴⁶ For example N. Eisenberg, T.L. Spinrad, Z.E. Taylor, *Sympathy*, in S. Van Hooft (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 409-417.

⁴⁷ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, cit., p. 149.

⁴⁸ See L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind*, cit., especially pp. 137-139, 146-150, 214-219, 230-231.

⁴⁹ M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996, p. 96.

⁵⁰ For example C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 179 e 231; R. Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics and Emotions*, in D. Statman, *Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 101 and ff.

⁵¹ See G. Santas, *Does Aristotle Have a Virtue Ethics?*, in D. Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, cit., p. 269.

⁵² M. Stocker, *How Emotions Reveal value*, cit., pp. 175-190; N. Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, cit., pp. 39 and ff.; L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind*, cit., pp. 51-58, 147-151.

⁵³ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, cit., pp. 99, 108.

ways within some particular community [...] that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues”⁵⁴, and “our individual good is connected to the common good of the communities of which we are part”⁵⁵.

Between virtue and community, according to these authors, it is possible to distinguish various links⁵⁶. For example:

- virtues are apprehended in specific communities (starting from the family), through theoretical explanations and examples of realized models;
- practice of virtue is sustained by various communities;
- some civic virtues sustain communities: solicitude, care, etc. constitute communities’ social capital and make for a good society⁵⁷.

6. *The Nature of Virtue*

Up to now, we have seen some of the most frequent VE criticisms of modern ethics, and, indirectly, we have also started to rebuild the outlines of VE theories of virtue. Turning now directly to its concepts of virtue, we must underline that according to the most common interpretation of VE authors, virtue is a disposition to perform morally good actions and react to situations with the appropriate emotions. Our tendencies are always molded by the moral dispositions and the ethical commitment that we have or have not spent. Virtue⁵⁸ is a character trait that intimately constitutes a personality and constitutes human excellence: is a moral excellence.

Virtue, like vice, is acquired by reiterating acts⁵⁹. This depends on the fact that human action has an intransitive-immanent dimension: its effects fall back on the acting subject, determining in him/her inner modifications, including the dispositions to act. This means it is an error to sup-

⁵⁴ Id., *After Virtue*, cit., p. 195.

⁵⁵ D. McPherson, *Vocational Virtue Ethics: Prospects for a Virtue Ethic Approach to Business*, in «Journal of Business Ethics», 116 (2013), 2, p. 291. The author argues there is a “we identity” and applies VE to business.

⁵⁶ Some are indicated by L. Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

⁵⁷ D.S. Bright, B.A. Winn, J. Kanov, *Reconsidering Virtue: Differences of Perspective in Virtue Ethics and the Positive Social Sciences*, in «Journal of Business Ethics», 119 (2014), pp. 454-458, conjecture that there are also virtues of communities.

⁵⁸ See for example L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind*, cit., pp. 84 and ff. and J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, cit. (for example pp. 1, 14-16), which focuses on the analogy between the acquisition of virtues and practical skills.

⁵⁹ See, recently, J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, cit.

pose that in human life certain areas have no moral relevance⁶⁰. Through virtue, the virtuous act becomes natural and amiable (except in dramatic circumstances⁶¹): the subject performs it as if by a second nature⁶². So whoever acts out of a sense of duty is always exposed to the temptation to do evil, while for the virtuous person it is much easier to avoid it. Virtue is achieved through a repetition of acts, through long and complex self-development. Once acquired, virtue makes good action spontaneous. But this is only its secondary effect.

Its primary effect is to enable the subject to desire (the task of ethical virtues), to identify, evaluate, and command (the task of *phronesis*), to choose and execute (again the task of ethical virtues) the action or emotion that is good in a certain situation. Therefore without virtue the desire, identification, choice and execution of the good action/emotion is often impossible.

We have already seen (§ 4) that emotions assist or mislead *phronesis*, and therefore must be developed to avoid a misleading evaluation on the part of reason. This process of cultivating⁶³ good emotions is possible thanks to their intentional content, that is, the fact that they concern an object⁶⁴: for example, rage flares up with reference to something that unleashes it in me (e.g., I may think I have been offended). Emotions surge inside us at the thought of something. Because of this intentionality, emotions can be cultivated: by modifying and correcting the beliefs on which they are based (for example, I can realize that the offense I thought I received had not actually wronged me); through the education we receive from others; through the education of laws; thanks to friendship and love of others; through artistic fruition⁶⁵ (literature, cinema, theater, etc.).

According to Nussbaum⁶⁶, narrative art increases our understanding of the world, of life, and of ourselves: it makes us observe the lives of various

⁶⁰ J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, cit., p. 126; I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, cit., p. 36.

⁶¹ Id., *Intelligent Virtue*, cit., p. 77.

⁶² See, for example, L. Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the mind*, cit., p. 116.

⁶³ See R. Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics and the emotions*, cit., pp. 108-120.

⁶⁴ See M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., pp. 19-48; N. Sherman, *Making a Necessity of the Virtue*, cit., pp. 31, 45, 78 and ff.

⁶⁵ M. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity. A classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1997.

⁶⁶ M. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Beacon Press, Boston 1995.

characters living experiences we have not had, or we have only partially had; it makes us participate in the decision-making processes of some characters. Narratives construe some traits “as worth pursuing, some action as to be done or to be avoided, and so on”⁶⁷, because art has a universal value (cf. Aristotle)⁶⁸.

To be sure, some consequentialists and deontologists also recognize the existence and the role of virtues, but only because they think that virtues contribute to realizing optimal states of the world or to developing respect for norms, that is, virtues have extrinsic value⁶⁹. Rather, a virtuous action has intrinsic value: the goal of virtuous dispositions is to realize virtuous actions in itself⁷⁰. For VE, the just person “*aims* at keeping promises, paying what is owed, and defending those whose rights are being violated, so far as such actions are required by the virtue”⁷¹.

Therefore why act virtuously? Because of the beauty of the act (cf. Aristotle). Here we may find an analogy between virtue and a work of art⁷², because the latter is the result of the desire to realize beauty.

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to review some significant themes present in the works of Virtue Ethics (VE) authors (mainly, but not exclusively, neo-Aristotelian ones). First it focuses some VE’s criticism versus modern ethics, for example the concentration on duty, arguing, on the contrary, that it is necessary to identify the telos-flourishment of human life and to preserve love-friendship as crucial for societies. According to VE, norms are not sufficient to act well: we need to be inspired by the phronimos and to possess phronesis. That implies the importance of the community and the necessary role of emotions. Then the essay focuses on virtues as dispositions to perform

⁶⁷ G. Pettigrove, *Virtue ethics, virtue theory and moral theology*, in S. Van Hooft (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, cit., p. 94.

⁶⁸ D. Carr, *Literature, arts and the education of virtuous emotions*, in *ivi*.

⁶⁹ An attempt to develop a consequentialist theory in which virtue has intrinsic value is T. Hurka, *Virtue as Loving the Good*, in E. Frankel Paul, F.D. Miller, J. Paul (eds.), *The Good Life and The Human Good*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 149-168.

⁷⁰ See for example R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 123-131 and J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, pp. 105-107, 110-111, 117, 154.

⁷¹ P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, p. 12.

⁷² See C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, cit., pp. 163 and ff.

morally good actions and react with the appropriate emotions. Virtue has intrinsic value and makes good action spontaneous, but its primary effect is to enable us to desire, identify, evaluate, command, choose and execute the good in a certain situation.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics; rule's insufficiency; human telos; friendship-love; ethical role of emotions.

Giacomo Samek Lodovici
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano
giacomo.sameklodovici@unicatt.it