Unpacking care and virtue from narrative ethics

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ABSTRACT

The present research deals with the concepts of care and virtue, by emphasizing the branch of studies known as the ethics of care and the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics seen as narrative ethics. In the first part, I explore the essential features of "care" with special regard to the early works of Mayeroff, Ruddick, Gilligan and Noddings. The second part focuses on the interest in the concept of virtue sparkled within Analytic philosophy after a long period of neglect, by referring briefly to the inquiries of Anscombe, Geach and Foot. The main focus will be, however, upon MacIntyre's view on virtue. In the wake of Aristotle's concept of virtues as moral excellences MacIntyre argued for a down-to-earth approach to moral agency and moral decision-making. In the last part of the work, I will unpack care and virtue from both narrative ethics by identifying some possible areas of dis/agreements. A special emphasis will be laid on the narrativity underpinning both views.

1. On the (early) ethics of care

I start with a preliminary remark. To provide an overarching definition of care is not a simple matter. I will not enter into the analysis of the concept of "care" flourished within the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As well known, in his *Sein und Zeit* (1927) Heidegger had explained "care" (*die Sorge*) in existentialist terms of essential structure of existence. Likewise, Michel Foucault's sophisticated philosophical reflections on the concept of "self-care", whose roots are to be found in Greek philosophy – *epimeleia heautou* – do not fall within the scope of the present inquiry.

Let's return to the ethics of care. Despite its young age and the indeterminate boundaries for what is categorized as "care", this concept has come

into being as a subject for fascinating as well as philosophically intricate discussions. Care has been given much attention and gained significance in many and various scientific contexts – from moral psychology and moral philosophy to political and legal theory, from sociology, pedagogy to health care research – raising a number of controversial questions (Serpe 2019; Serpe 2023).

Scattered early reflections on "care" emerge from *On Caring* (1971), a booklet written by the philosopher Milton Mayeroff. In this "lovely little book" – as described by Noddings (1984, 9) – Mayeroff claimed that "to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself" (Mayeroff 1971, 1). For Mayeroff, care is not a product, rather a "process, a way of relating to someone that involves development" (Mayeroff 1971, 22). Care is, therefore, a process where the one-caring experiences the other "as having potentialities and the need to grow" (Mayeroff 1971, 4). Mayeroff claims that the experience of the other is an extension of the self, an experience free from obligations contradistinguished by a convergence "between what I feel I am supposed to do and what I want to do" (Mayeroff 1971, 6). Hence, feelings, reason and action interact in such a way to form the basic pattern of caring. In Mayeroff's view, caring is nourished by a number of Christian notions: devotion; knowledge; patience; trust; humility; hope; courage (Mayeroff 1971, 5-20). These features stress that *caring* is a living process ontologically based on relationship. Mayeroff rejects the abstractness of human relationships. Individualistic autonomy, the being "free as a bird" is depicted by him in terms of responsibility, liberation and self-actualization achieved through the care of the other.

Sara Ruddick's main work, *Maternal thinking: towards a politics of peace*, 1989 – a work which eludes academic classification and a ready categorisation – is an extension, in its contents, of her *Maternal thinking*, an essay dated back to 1980. This latter essay may be considered as the first manifesto of female distinctive reasoning. It should be noted that for Ruddick "*maternal*" is a non-biological but a social category. For this reason, "maternal" may be also acquirable by men through "kinds of working and caring with others" (Ruddick 1980, 346) – although it would assume in men forms radically different then in women due to diverse biological and value reasons.

Ruddick's essay shows how the experience of motherhood characterised by a commitment aimed at preserving life and promoting the growth of a child, manifests a distinct "female morality", alternative to patriarchally

dominant traditions in moral philosophy. Three demands identify, in general, the practice of motherhood: preservation, growth and social acceptability. Each demand, individually considered, can conflict with another demand developing "degenerative forms". For instance, preservation "can turn into the fierce desire to foster one's own children's growth whatever the cost to other children" (Ruddick 1980, 354).

Central to the structure of maternal thinking is, for Ruddick, the interplay between a capability, "*attention*" and a virtue, "*love*". This conjunction of terms enables to "invigorate preservation and enable growth" (Ruddick 1980, 357). In the construction of her concept "attentive love", Ruddick takes inspiration from the philosophies of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. Indeed, while "attention" points to the intellectual capacity of knowledge, "love" evokes the size of the attachment and detachment. Mother's "*attentive love*" is the core of mothering: through the "the patient, loving eyes of attention" (Ruddick 1980, 357-358) mothers do not objectivise but watch, listen and adjust to the needs of their children, thus fostering their autonomy and independence. Attentive love is the underlying regulating principle of maternal work within private domain. Indeed, it cannot be restricted to a certain exclusive parameter of motherhood. By displaying a caring response to the world's needs, attentive love constitutes the linchpin around which a feminist contention over pacifism and non-violence may revolve.

Another prominent contribution to the feminist moral philosophy was carried out by Carol Gilligan in her seminal work *In a Different Voice* (1982). According to Gilligan, care is *the* female moral voice differing from the dominant male voice of justice. By linking moral psychology to moral philosophy, she focused on the question of how moral development psychology rests on gender differences. The contrast between the two distinct *voices* of care and justice exemplifies two opposite moral frameworks: care ethics and justice ethics. Gilligan holds that the former is characterized by the images of relationships and contexts, while the latter by the ideals of reason and abstractness.

It bears noting that Gilligan's studies took place in the context of a lively debate which arose in connection with the researches on moral development conducted by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. His theory of stages of moral development is founded on an individualised and rights-based approach. Inspired by the Kantian concepts of moral autonomy and reason, Kohlberg hold that a moral action could be explained with reference to levels and

stages of moral development. He elaborated a theory of six stages of moral judgment. He explained that while adolescent males score at stage four (The 'law and order orientation') — characterised by a higher level of abstraction —females tend to stop at stage three (The 'interpersonal concordance or 'good boy-nice girl' orientation') – characterized by the good behaviour of pleasing or helping others and win acceptance (Kohlberg, Kramer 1969, 100-103; Kohlberg 1976).

For Gilligan, the crux of the matter was not an alleged female moral inferiority, rather a female distinct moral voice due to two different modes of experiences which are neither comparable nor subordinated to the moral modes developed by males. Gilligan highlighted the central role played by the interconnection of responsibility and care in women's moral reasoning – both reflecting the women's mode of thinking of the self and the conceptions of morality (Gilligan 2003, 24-63). Hence, she argued in favour of an expansion of developmental morality that could include the different feminine voice. In the famous hypothetical case Heinz dilemma elaborated by Kohlberg – if in order to save his ill wife's life Heinz should steal a drug which he could not afford (Kohlberg, Kramer 1969, 109-111) – the two adolescents, Jake and Amy, approached differently in finding a solution. For Kohlberg, the reasons purported by the two adolescences portrayed a gendered moral development linked to people's age growth. For Gilligan, instead, the different solutions proposed by the two adolescences reflected a different mode of moral reasoning: while Jake solved the dilemma through the application of abstract principles and with the means of logic deductions, Amy prioritised care, responsibilities and relationships (Gilligan 1979, 442).

Through her researches on women's psychological moral development, Gilligan paved the way for developing and ethics based on female contextual reasoning. Nevertheless, we owe to Noddings the philosophical foundations for care ethics. Noddings clearly returned to and was partly inspired by Gilligan and Ruddick in the view that in moral reasoning women encompass a great sensitivity to contexts and considerations of care.

Noddings went much further Mayeroff's assumptions that care for a person consists solely of helping her grow and actualize. Noddings holds that caring relations are both ontologically basic and ethically basic. By ontologically basic relation, she meant that recognising human encounter and affective response is a basic fact of human existence (Noddings 1984, 4). But in order for a relation to be ethically caring, caring must be completed as both parts

(the one-caring and the cared for) contribute to the relation. Caring relations, for Noddings, – require "*engrossment* and *motivational displacement* on the part of the one-caring and a form of responsiveness or reciprocity on the part of the cared-for" (Noddings 1984, 150). Noddings' engrossment is not comparable to Mayeroff's concept of devotion, nor is it empathy. Engrossment involves a duality consisting in receiving the other into oneself, "see and feel with the other" (Noddings 1984, 30). Caring relations are more than an exchange of feelings: a motivational displacement is also required as it is the way through which the one-caring's reality is transformed by the reality of the other.

Noddings holds that our natural and ethical obligation of caring are confined to a present relation or, at least, to a potential relation with a dynamic potential for growth and reciprocity. If no possibility of completion occours, then no caring relation will be possible. Unlike sentimentalists like Hume whose morality was rooted in an internal sense or feeling, and Kant who identified the ethical with the duty out of feelings and love, Noddings placed the source of ethical behaviour in the twin sentiments: natural caring and ethical caring. Natural caring is the feeling of "I must" prior to any consideration arising directly and responding to an initial impulse with an act of commitment. It follows that moral statements cannot be justified by virtue of abstract principles, neither by pure sentiments, nor by mere facts: they arise from *caring attitudes* which are rationally built upon natural caring.

Likewise with respect to the lack of concern for moral justification, the ethics of care proves to be an alternative not only to Utilitarianism and Kantianism, but also to sentimentalism. Making a moral judgment is neither to merely comply with abstract principles, nor merely to express sentiments of approval or disapproval – even though Noddings' view of care as engrossment is rooted into the emotional relational attachment between two parts. In emphasising the role of emotions, caring and personal narratives, Noddings continued in the same vein of Gilligan.

2. Sparkles of virtue ethics within Analytic philosophy

As evinced until now, in illuminating the moral relevance of attitudes, relations and contexts, and consequently the failings of a universal morality in the form of abstract and detached rules applicable across space and time

insusceptible to particular context, the ethics of care has marked a breakthrough. But in this last regard, the ethics of care was not the first and only in this pursuit. After a long period of neglect, the interest in the concept of virtue re-flourished within Analytic philosophy. Virtue ethics also counteracted the dominant moral orientations represented by Utilitarianism and Kantianism which prioritize, respectively, consequences of action and moral rules to the detriment of character, attitudes and relationships with others. In this section, I shall briefly touch the revival of virtue ethics as depicted by the moral philosophers Elisabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and Philippa Foot.

A very peculiar line joins these three philosophers – some of whom were especially inspired by the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Anscombe's *Modern moral philosophy* (1958) is considered the manifesto of the contemporary revival of virtue ethics. In this essay, she focused on the uses of the language of 'virtue' in the light of the underlying intentions, motives and reasons. Her opening words sounded even prophetic: "[…] it is not profitable for us at the present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking" (Anscombe 1958, 1). The lack of an adequate *philosophy of psychology* makes the concepts of moral obligation and moral duty nothing but "*derivatives from survivals*" of ancient ethical concepts. Here, Anscombe especially referred to the 'harmful' English philosophy –from Hume to Bentham, from Mill to Sidgwick – but what she actually meant by "*philosophy of psychology*" is difficult to grasp as "pure" *psychology* was deliberately expelled as discipline from the realm of sciences by Wittgenstein. However, only about twenty years after Anscombe's prophetic words a 'new' moral philosophy – in the wake of Gilligan's developmental moral *psychology* – began to take its first steps.

Anscombe claimed that Aristotle's philosophy could provide very little elucidation as to the modern mode of understanding moral notions. For understanding reasons and intentions underlying moral actions, "a positive account of justice as virtue" (Anscombe 1958, 5) would be required. However, an inquiry of this sort should not be carried out, for Anscombe, by moral philosophy as it would consist in a conceptual analysis. Moreover, modern moral philosophy had neglected the central elements of the Aristotelian ethics – the role of dispositions or virtues – by replacing them with deontic terms such as "should" and "ought".

In Geach's manuscript *The virtues* (1977), philosophy of religion and philosophical theology are inextricably merged. Why do men need virtue?

In answering this question, Geach explores the concept of "needs" in Aristotelian terms. A need is – to use his words – "a necessity for the attainment of and end" (Geach 1977, 9). In contrast with Utilitarianism and Kantianism, Geach's perspective is theologically legalist insofar as it relates to the close connection between human needs and traditional virtues. Hence, he identifies seven main virtues: three are theological (faith, hope, charity) and four are cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, courage). According to him, theological virtues require a specific justification of a man's end as the end is intrinsic to human divine nature: *faith* is "assent to a dogma given by authority" (Geach 1977, 37), while *hope* is a means for general salvation throughout his life-journey; *charity* is – according to the doctrine of Trinity – what God *is* and not has, since "for God's sake – Geach claims – we must have charity towards our fellow-men" (Geach 1977, 86). Rather something else are the cardinal virtues. They are virtues needed by men when carrying out cooperative activities without deflections and with perseverance (Geach 1977, 16). Let's take the virtue of prudence as example. Driven by the prudence, the man of providence is able of correctly detecting cut-off points in the description of an action (for instance: as "an act of blasphemy"; "act of perjury", "act of adultery", and so on).

Geach's theological view is both descriptive and normative. In being so, it falls into the vicious circle that what is described as good (or virtuous) is such as conformed to the theological model of good (or virtuous). Hence, the goodness (or the virtuousness) of an action is deduced from the fact of conforming to such a model.

In line with von Wright's approach on virtue (von Wright 1963) – both in the need to combine semantics sophistication with the analytical anti-metaphysical theorising – is Foot's view on virtue. Her essay *Virtues and vices* dates back to 1978 and includes a thorough analysis of the concept of virtue. Firstly, she illuminates the linguistic discrepancy between Aristotle' and Aquinas' terminology (*aretê /virtus*; *aretai ethikai/virtutes morales*) and the discrepancy between their terminology and our own (Foot 2002, 2). Moreover, Aristotle's differentiation between virtues entails, for Foot, a series of complex moral considerations regarding the relation between virtue and the will, the difference between wisdom and art, ends and skills (Foot 2002, 5-7). Especially interesting are her contentions on the ameliorative function of virtues – contentions based on a keen analysis of Aristotle's theory of virtue and Aquinas' theology. She writes that: "[virtues] are corrective – each

one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good" (Foot 2002, 8).

Anscombe, Geach and Foot were not the only allies in the remarkable revival of Analytic philosophy in the second half of the last century along the Aristotelian doctrine of virtue. The list goes on to include Iris Murdoch, Stuart Hampshire, Rosalind Hurthouse. Nevertheless, within the contemporary renewed interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics, Alasdir MacIntyre's manuscript, *After virtue* (1981), has been hailed as one of the most influential and successful virtue-centred project of reviving the Aristotelian moral and political philosophy. MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism is the hallmark of a number of criticisms against the "disquieting suggestion" (MacIntyre 2007, 1) of the "predecessor culture and the Enlightenment project of justifying morality" (MacIntyre 2007, 36). His critique of moral and political liberalism through the lenses of Aristotelian ethics has stimulated academic debate launching a challenge – like for the ethics of care – to "modern moral philosophy".

3. Briefly on Aristotle's virtue ethics

Before we dwell on MacIntyre' neo-Aristotelianism, I shall touch here briefly some key aspects of Aristotle's virtue ethics contained in his seminal work *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Differently from involuntary actions which are those carried out "under compulsion or owing to ignorance" (Aristotle 1999, 33), voluntary actions are, for Aristotle, those we deliberate and choose. Choice is not "appetite or anger or wish or a kind of opinion" (Aristotle 1999, 36) but it is voluntary – although the "voluntary" extends more than "choice" (a child's action, for instance, is voluntary but not necessarily chosen). Choice concerns *means* and since it regards things that are in our power to act, it involves a rational principle through which we deliberate. The *end* is what we wish for. As a specific human desire, wish may concern things that could in no way be in our power or not be brought about by our own efforts: "there may be a wish even for impossibles, e.g., for immortality" (Aristotle 1999, 37). Aristotle claims that "the exercise of virtues is concerned with means" (Aristotle 1999, 40): virtue (*aretê*) is, as well as vice, in our own power to act or not to act.

Aristotle's inquiry on virtues is strictly connected to his theory of soul. Moral virtues are about a man's character (virtues of character): although

men are by nature prone to them, they come about a result of habit (*ethike*, from *ethos*). Intellectual virtues (scientific knowledge, artistic or technical knowledge, intuitive reason, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom) are virtues of thought as belonging to the rational part of our soul. The birth and growth of intellectual virtues depend upon teaching, thereby they reveal and develop with time and experience. Virtues are intimately linked to the internal attitudes of our soul: passions, faculties (of being capable of feeling), states of character. Aristotle defines virtues as "states of character" (Aristotle 1999, 26)[1], or moral habit. As states of character, virtues are of a certain kind. "Every virtue or excellence – he claims – both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well" (Aristotle 1999, 26).

As to the specific nature of virtue, virtue is a mean or an *intermediate state* between the opposed vices of excess and deficiency. It is noteworthy that for Aristotle, the "*intermediate state*" is not the result of an arithmetical proportion, rather it is a relatively to us state of character "which is neither too much nor too little" (Aristotle 1999, 26). Courage is, for instance, a mean or an intermediate state between the two excesses or vices rashness and cowardice. Hence, virtues are: "states of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean […] relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom [*phrónesis*] would determine it" (Aristotle 1999, 27-28). A virtuous man displays behaviour patterns in accordance with practical wisdom along with moral virtues. Aristotle explains it by saying that: "virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means" (Aristotle 1999, 103).

Therefore, although the philosophical wisdom [*sophía*] is the highest intellectual virtue, practical wisdom serves as a guide for the achievement of virtuous actions. As the *ergon* (function) of a man is to live a life at its best, practical wisdom is the virtue guiding us towards happiness (*eudaimonia*): "Happiness – Aristotle notes – is activity in accordance with virtue" (Aristotle 1999, 173).

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[1]   In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Greek word for *state of character, hèxis* turned into Latin *habitus*. A definition of *héxis/habitus* – thereafter adopted by Aquinas whose concept of *synderesis* as innate, natural habit, was inspired by Aristotle's *habit* – is provided by Aristotle in his *The Metaphysics*. In this work he wrote that: "habit is called disposition, conformably to which that which is disposed is well or ill disposed, and this either essentially, or with relation to another. Thus, health is a certain habit; for it is a disposition of this kind. Further still: it is called habit, if it is a portion of a disposition of this kind. Hence also the virtue of parts is a certain habit" (Aristotle 1801, 134).

4. Ethics of care and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Areas of dis/agreements

Care ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics share some areas of agreements. The purpose of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive picture of care ethics and virtue ethics, rather to reflect upon the (early) concept of care and the concept of virtue as core concepts – which has gained significance within these contemporary narrative ethics – in the light of some communalities such as, for instance, the underpinning *ontological* and *ethical* grounds.

As we have seen, care ethics is foundationally grounded on relational *ontology*: human nature is conceived as relational and depending in contrast with the dominant moral views depicting human nature as atomistic, rational, abstract and unencumbered. Mayeroff's view on care was based on the ontological assumption that the relationships are part of every human being (Mayeroff 1971, 42-43). Gilligan's research in moral developmental psychology offers an image of the "network of relationships" between interdependent individuals and the self is portrayed in dynamic interaction with the other within a relational context. Noddings plainly admitted that not the individual, rather relations are *ontologically basic* and that a caring relation involves "engrossment and motivational displacement". In the same vein, other care ethicists shared a relational ontology. Noddings recognises dependency as the moral core of any relation, while Ruddick illuminates the living model of maternal work as a particular kind of relationship.

The *relational ontology* of care ethics displays in *moral particularism*. In contrast with moral views grounding moral obligation in abstract principles or in a quantified notion of utility, for *these* care ethicists obligation derive from relations. Noddings advocates a very narrow notion of "*sameness*" in defence of the irreducibly contextual peculiarities of each concrete relation. In so doing, she stands against the principle of universalizability or hierarchies of principles and needs[2].

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[2] In describing the nature of social relationship Noddings' strict contextualism is mitigated by the image of "concentric circles of caring" in which she distinguishes an inner circle of caring relations (others are encountered as intimates and proximate) from the outward circle of caring relations (others are not yet encountered). This image gives rise to Noddings' acknowledgement of ethical obligation to strangers (Noddings 1984, 46).

The core of particularism in Aristotelian virtue ethics is noticeable from within the specific nature of virtue as intermediate state between excess and deficiency and a relatively to us state of character. Therefore, the virtuous action is context dependent. Even though particularism is ingrained in his ethics, not every action is context dependent: some actions, like adultery and murder, are bad in themselves. This resonates, for instance, with Geach's inquiry on necessary theological virtues or with Foot's notion of natural goodness (Foot 2001).

In Aristotelian virtue ethics emotions play a direct role in decision-making as emotions are embedded into the virtues of character. As outlined before, the virtues are concerned with the character traits of things and of men and they are of a special kind: they constitute an *excellence* of character. Moral evaluations derive from such character traits, not from a conformity to universal maxims in Kantian terms. Virtues are rooted in our natural disposition (*hexis*) to think, to feel and to act. In this regard, when exploring true friendship (*philia*) as an essential part of "good life", Aristotle sheds light on the level of emotions shared by friends in experiencing life together. "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for those wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends […] And such a friendship is as might be expected permanent, since there meet in it all the qualities that friends should have […] and to a friendship of good man all the qualities we have named belong in virtue of the nature of the friends themselves; for in this kind of friendship the other qualities are also alike in both friends, and that which is good without qualification is also without qualification pleasant, and these are the most lovable qualities. Love and friendship therefore are found most and in their best form between such men" (Aristotle 1999, 130).

Similarly, caring relations are built up and develop on emotions which, in turn, are sources of moral obligations. In the vital role assigned to emotions, care ethics is in strident contrast with both Utilitarianism and Kantianism. As we have seen before, Gilligan's image of the "network of relationships" (Gilligan 2003, 17) between interdependent individuals relies upon attentiveness and emotional responding. In Mayeroff's view, *devotion* lies at the heart of caring, as a paradigm of caring relation. As "an integral part of friendship" devotion consists in committing oneself entirely into the experience of the other, in "helping the other grow" (Mayeroff 1971, 3) and in feeling "needed

"by it for that growing" (Mayeroff 1971, 6). Devotion supports the obligations of caring. In this regard, Mayeroff writes that: "Obligations that derive from devotion are a constituent element in caring, and I do not experience them as forced on me or as necessary evils; there is a convergence between what I feel I am supposed to do and what I want to do" (Mayeroff 1971, 6). Similarly, Noddings incorporates emotions in the moral realm. While "motivational displacement" revolves around the mode of consciousness, *engrossment* is characteristically a sort of attention that manifests in "receiving the other into myself, see and feel with the other" (Noddings 1984, 33).

Despite these points of affinity, Aristotelian virtue ethics is ontologically entrenched in the individual. It is true that care ethicists use a "virtue glossary" with suitable key-terms such as "virtue", "flourishing", "excellences". Nevertheless, the subsumption of care ethics under virtue ethics has been a consistent point of contention. Indeed, while virtue ethics focuses on the individual dispositional traits of virtue, the ethics of care assigns a primary role to caring relations. In Noddings, the strenuous defence against the irreducibility of care is conceptually linked to her rejection of universalism and abstractism. For her, to reduce care into virtue is to reduce care to an abstract category portrayed by the image of a holy man living abstemiously on the top of a mountain. It's probably a little too much capturing the concept of virtue through such a bizarre image of a hermit in solitude and contemplation, but it makes the idea of strong reluctance.

Divergences between the two moral orientations increase if we bring into focus the feminine and feminist core characteristic of care ethics. For care ethicists, Utilitarianism and Kantianism are grounded in masculine experience exemplifying the traditional male thinking in terms of autonomy, rights and justice. In this last regard, care ethics stresses that virtue ethics "has characteristically seen the virtues – in Held's words – as incorporated in various traditions or traditional communities. In contrast, the ethics of care as a feminist ethic is wary of existing traditions and traditional communities […] Individual egalitarian families are still surrounded by inegalitarian social and cultural influences" (Held 2006, 19). Aristotle's misogynist and sexist belief in male's superiority (and natural slavery) stands as a sharp contrast with the (feminine) soul of care ethics.

It is also true that care ethics has often been charged of being too conservatively female-oriented: in the attempt of rescuing female "voices" and experiences, care ethics has been considered vulnerable to the risk of essen-

tialism[3]. Nevertheless, care ethics' alleged essentialism is something entirely different from the sexism inherent in Aristotle's natural philosophy. Held couldn't have put it any better: "The traditional Man of Virtue may be almost as haunted by his patriarchal past as the Man of Reason" (Held 2006, 20).

Aristotle's first systematic explanation of woman's inferiority goes back to his treatise on biology *De Generatione Animalium* (Generation of animals) where he offered a rational explanation of the biological male superiority based on the assumption that heat is central in the reproduction of animals. In particular, he claims that it is the male semen to give quality and nutriment to the female eggs, through heat and concoction. Hence, the more heat an animal enables to produce the more developed it will be. Through his theory of reproduction, Aristotle proves that women's inferiority is based on women's lack of heat compared to men. Female semen resembles and looks like blood and this is due to their biological incapability to transform it through the infusion of heat (Aristotle 1943a, 88-95). Males contribute to the excellence to future generation, while females only provide material necessary for the foetus development. This is due to the "proximate motive cause" to which belong the *logos* and the Form", that is "better and more divine in its nature than the Matter" (Aristotle 1943a, 131-133). For Aristotle, males are the (active) efficient cause, while females are the (passive) material cause. Aristotle applied his biology of sex to determine each gender's role in society. He believed also that only men, by being endowed with rationality and strength, could receive an education and hold responsible positions of power. On the contrary, irrationality and weakness were characteristic of women's imperfection and lack of authority. Such imperfection reflected their incapability for abstract reasoning with the consequence, for them, to be assigned only to the domestic sphere. For Aristotle (1943b, 76), according to nature "the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has not deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but

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[3]   I cannot address this issue here. I shall only mention that early care ethicists have been blamed to strengthen traditional sexist stereotypes by (also) failing in investigating the ways in which women differ one from another. In the light of such criticism, some care ethicists endeavoured to improve some complicated shortcomings. Against this background, it is probably no coincidence that the title of Noddings' manuscript was changed from *Caring. A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (1984) to *Caring. A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2013).

it is without authority […]". The same applies to moral virtue: they belong to all of them, but, as Aristotle says, "only in such manner and degree as is required by each for the fulfilment of his duty" (77). Therefore, "the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown on commanding, of a woman in obeying" (77). And this is, for Aristotle, true for all other virtues.

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5. Unpacking care and virtue from narrative ethics

In this final section, I will set out how care ethics and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics share some areas of agreements, though remaining distinct normative frameworks for the different underpinned ontology. Narrativity identifies a converging point between the two moral views. Here, MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism comes into the picture. In being a viable alternative to traditional Utilitarianism and Kantianism, the ethics of care and the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics display – though at different levels – an intersubjective sensitivity in considering humans as subjects embedded in particular relations who make sense of themselves and the others. Moreover, both ethics explore moral practices of ethical nourishment and cultivation. This specific common aspect gives reasons for supporting the notion that *narrativity* imbues both ethics: narrative ethicists deal more with stories flowing from experience than objective facts, more with particular contexts than abstract rules and principles of justice.

As we have seen, the aspects of caring outlined by Mayeroff reflect the Christian narrative of love and compassion fully embodying the narrative of life as a precious gift. Mayeroff's philosophical perspective on caring displays a narrative model of interpreting caring relations. Motherhood and moral thinking are intertwined in Ruddick's perspective: the intellectual and emotional conceptual elements of "attentive love" convey a sense of vulnerability and narrativity in human experience. In Gilligan's researches on moral psychological development "the experience of women's relationship" is shaped on relational ontology. "Since the imagery of relationships shapes the narrative of human development – she says – the inclusion of women, by changing that imagery, implies a change in the entire account" (Gilligan 2003, 25). In Heinz-dilemma, the young Amy resolves the moral dilemma not as a mathematical equation, rather in the light of a "narrative of relationships

that extends over time" (Gilligan 2003, 28). Amy's reasoning is guided by the core principles of narrative care ethics. A narrative care ethics is grounded on a dynamic process of interaction based on the capability of the self of establishing and maintaining relationships of mutual dependence and care.

In the same wake, Noddings' care ethics turns towards narrative, pluralistic and contextualised experiences of relations. Noddings' conceptual nucleus of care as engrossment is entrenched in the emotional relational attachment between the two parts. In emphasising the role of emotions and sentiments, moral attitudes and natural caring, personal stories and specific narratives, Noddings, as Gilligan, overrules the notion of universalizability by embracing a narrative relational approach. This is evident when Noddings refers to Nietzsche's concept of *sameness* in order to reject abstractism by claiming the uniqueness of each concrete situation (Noddings 1984, 84-86).

MacIntyre advances a narrative approach to moral philosophy by identifying his framework with the ethical and political philosophy of Aristotle. In his view narrativity is a crucial concept for understanding the self and the structure and the meaning of in-relation human lives. Narrative is entrenched in human nature as human nature is narrative.

In order to overcome the morality's current state of crisis, MacIntyre laid the basis for a renewed ethical Aristotelianism and ancient Greek culture. He holds that heroic virtues were the pivotal points around which the heroic society revolved. Greek narratives, such as *Iliad*, displayed the moral background of heroic societies. As an example, MacIntyre argued that for properly understand the virtue of courage "is not just to understand how it may be exhibited in character, but also what place it can have in a certain kind of enacted story" (MacIntyre 2007, 125). Differently from the concept of self in modern philosophy, the self in the heroic societies is not detached from a particular context. The individual is embedded within the polis and is morally responsible for her freely chosen actions before the local community with whom she shares the same tradition. MacIntyre holds that the exercise of the heroic virtues "requires both a particular kind of human being and a particular kind of social structure" (MacIntyre 2007, 126). The heroic narratives represent a form of society with a moral structure shaped on the interconnection among a *particular* conception of each individual's social role, a *particular* conception of excellences or virtue with which each individual fulfils her social role, and a *particular* conception of human vulnerability to death and destiny.

What modernity lacks is, for MacIntrye "a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre 2007, 205). Narratives are embodied in each single life and are constitutive of the human being. Human acts are defined by the correlation with tradition while the intelligibility of an action is conceived in a narrative sequence. Therefore, living out the form of narrative is inappropriate for understanding the actions of others. From a narrative perspective, the exercise of virtue is tightly bound with the human identity and the search for "the good". "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest" – he writes – and the search for "the good" cannot be achieved independently from the society we live in: "the possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide" (MacIntyre 2007, 221).

In conclusion, one may question if our *full* identities as individualised units of narratives require to be accounted for in order for our actions to be intelligibly conceived or only some *specific* components are required, or, again, if all our actions need to be set in a unified narrative sequence at all. The picture grows more complicated when one asks what "the good" is made of, or how much of "the good" is required in order for an action to be intelligibly conceived. The indeterminacy of this notion involves the question of the relationship between the individual's own moral identity and her being member of a local community.

MacIntyre readily claims that membership "does not entail that the self has to accept the moral limitations of the particularity of those forms of community" (MacIntyre 2007, 221). But at the same time, he admits that although the particularity needs to move on, there would be "an illusion with painful consequences" (MacIntyre 2007, 221) to refer to universal maxims and principles in order to reform the traditions. Now we are on the horns of a dilemma: if no appeal to universal principles is possible, then no rational criticism may take place; and if no rational criticism may take place, then what conception of good should we adopt in order to move on, namely what virtues would be necessary for the searching of a "good life"?

MacIntyre's narrative approach is in line with care ethics insofar as it considers humans as narrative beings morally interacting within narrative contexts. Nevertheless, the remaining point of disagreement relates to the fact that for MacIntyre the "narrative units" pursuit and contribute to the common good of the community of which the "narrative units" are

members by the exercise of virtue. But virtues are aimed at sustaining and constructing local forms of community. This is not true of care ethics. The practice of care is neither subsumed within a determined community nor sustains specific cultures or traditions. For MacIntyre the way out of the darkness of current philosophy, is the construction of virtuous local forms of community within which – he argues – civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained.

One final consideration. For MacIntyre, historical identity intertwines with social identity, and the exercise of virtues is for the purpose of sustaining and continuing the inherited traditions. In a chaotically globalised crowded world as our own, how long would it take before such local narrative communities will crumble to pieces? Again, this is not true of care ethics. Care ethicists do not purse the dream of forming local communities of care. Quite the opposite, indeed: care is not to be considered a merely private expression of interiority detached from the public practices, rather it is to be included in a more overall political phenomenology. The concept of care has undergone a complex and profound evolution as to its application to the public realm (Serpe 2024). Joan Tronto's contribution may be taken as a pioneering in having laid the foundation for further political development of care ethics in a democratic direction (Tronto 1993). In her own way, Noddings had moved in the same direction of Tronto when questioning the normative force of care as far as the relational inclusion with distant others, such as groups, institutions, states are concerned. Moreover, Held's reflections on the world violence (Held 2004; Held 2006) and Fiona Robinson's view of expanding the transformative critical ethics of care at global level must be seen from a similar perspective (Robinson 1999; 2013). Indeed, the evolution of care concept and the overcoming of the distinction between private and public were apparent to some extent in Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, where she explored how motherhood could response to public issues and conflict resolution. The list of care ethicists moving in this direction is far from complete.

In virtue of a wider care-concept application, a vast amount of scientific literature has become widespread in other research contexts giving rise to significant implications in the fields of women's rights, labour law, political citizenship, welfare policy, international relations, global political economy. Delving into these issues would lead into a broader debate which would move us well beyond the scope of the present research.

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