VIRTUE ETHICS AND COMMUNITARIANISM
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Abstract: The last decades have witnessed a revival of virtue ethics, in opposition to impersonal approaches to ethics and to attempts to codify moral knowledge in a set of rules or principles. The article argues that the humanist idea of Bildung can be an important contribution to the project of virtue ethics and explores the connections between virtue ethics and communitarianism.

Keywords: ethics – virtue – communitarianism – Bildung – relativism

To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity, or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth. [...] It stands on the same footing as other inclinations [...] for its maxim lacks moral content, namely the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but from duty.

Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals

The Scruple of Conscience
Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure
Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not virtuous

The Verdict
For that there is no other advice: you must try to despise them,
And then do with aversion what your duty commands
Schiller, Xenien

Suppose you are in a hospital recovering from a long illness. You are very bored and restless and at loose ends when Smith comes in once again. You are now convinced more than ever that that he is a fine fellow and a real friend (...). You are so effusive with your praise and thanks that he protests that he always tries to do what he thinks it is his duty (...): that it is not essentially because of you that he came to see you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it is his duty.

Michael Stocker, “The schizophrenia of modern moral theories”

1. The movement of virtue ethics has become one of the most significant trends of moral philosophy in the last decades, thanks to the contributions of a group of

1 By schizophrenia of modern moral theories, Stocker means the split between moral motivation and moral evaluation.
prominent moral thinkers, like Anscombe, Foot, MacIntyre and McDowell, among others. The movement is characterized by a revival of the Aristotelian ethics, in the light of or, more precisely, in reaction to modern developments in moral philosophy.

But what went wrong with modern moral theories? We may say that, according to virtue ethicists, modern moral philosophy commits a fundamental sin when it tries to ground moral action on a set of universal rules or principles. Such an approach to moral life is subject to two major objections. In the first place, it promotes an abstract account of the ethical domain that neglects some vital aspects of moral life: education, character, motivation, happiness or emotions. In fact, virtue ethics is characterized by a focus on real agents, in contrast to the deontological focus on duties or actions (considered independently of their consequences) and the consequentialist focus on the results of actions. In the second place, virtue ethics claims that moral knowledge cannot be reduced to a system of rules and principles; in other words, moral knowledge is uncodifiable.

The quotes in epigraph help us to understand the appeal of virtue ethics in comparison with deontological and consequentialists approaches to ethics. These approaches, which dominated modern moral philosophy, suffer from what John Cottingham called a “depersonalizing tendency” (1996: 58). In fact, both perspectives are impersonal accounts of moral action: deontological theories are based on a list of universally valid duties or obligations, whereas consequentialism is guided by equally impersonal rules that are supposed to promote, for instance, collective happiness or welfare. On the contrary, virtue ethics, far from abstracting from the character, motivations and even emotions from the agent, tries to ground moral action in the real agent. This point has a good illustration in McDowell's claim that ethics should be “approached via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is
grasped, as it were, from the inside out” (McDowell, 1998: 50). A similar idea is sometimes expressed by saying that virtue ethics focuses on being, whereas deontological and consequentialist perspectives focus on doing. In other words, the central question for virtue ethicists is “what sort of person should I be?”; in contrast, the key question for modern moral philosophers is “how should I act?”

2 In the philosophy of the human sciences, there is a distinction between cold methodologies and hot methodologies; in similar vein, we can speak of cold (consequentialism/deontologism) and hot (virtue ethics) approaches to ethics.

The second distinctive trait of virtue ethics is closely connected with the first one: virtue ethics is suspicious of the guiding role of principles and rules. The point was already made by Aristotle, namely in his discussion of the legal virtue of equity. Equity is required because laws and rules are too generic to accommodate all possible cases that judges can face. No legal system can avoid the occurrence of the so-called hard cases:

The reason for this is that law is always a general statement, yet there are cases which it is not possible to cover in a general statement. […] The material of conduct is essentially irregular. […] This is the essential nature of the equitable: it is a rectification of law where law is defective because of its generality. (Nichomachean Ethics 1137b)

There are, indeed, two basic problems when we try to act solely on principles. Firstly, there is a gap between general principles and the unpredictable diversity of situations that demand moral decisions; as a result it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to determine how to apply a principle to certain, atypical situations. In other words, it is possible to arrive at different conclusions departing from the same

2 Cf Hursthouse 1999: 25.
principles. Secondly, there can be clashes between equally valuable principles, depriving thereby the agent of action guidance. We may add that virtue ethics, far from endorsing moral universalism, is sensitive to the role of context in ethics. In the words of Julia Annas (2004: 741), virtue ethics is opposed to “one-size-fits-all” accounts of ethics. Virtue ethics invites us to adopt moral contextualism, but it should be noted that contextualism must not be confused with relativism.3

After this brief presentation of virtue ethics, I will try to clarify and legitimize the idea of moral reliability, which is crucial for virtue ethics. For that purpose, the humanist idea of Bildung will be integrated in the project of virtue ethics. In a third section, I will analyse the most significant affinities between virtue ethics and communitarianism. Finally, I will claim that we can develop, with the help of the idea of Bildung, a form of virtue ethics that is not committed to strong forms of communitarianism.

2. Because it does not conceive of moral judgements on the basis of deductions from principles or decision procedures, virtue ethics is often considered as vague; instead of focusing on consequences or rules, virtue ethics is based on the reliability of the moral agent, and this view may sound puzzling for modern moral philosophers. Standard formulations of virtue ethics are, indeed, somewhat vague. Let us consider, for example, the following presentation of the “fundamental premise” of virtue ethics:

P.1. An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances. (Hursthouse, 1999: 28)

3 I will return to this point later.
Because the formulation is vague, Hursthouse tries to supplement it with a “subsidiary premise” and a second premise:

P.1a. A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely, the virtues.

P.2. A virtue is character trait that…

Hursthouse claims that premise 2 may be completed by a list of virtues or a general definition of virtue; for instance, by appealing to Hume’s definition of virtue as a character trait that is beneficial to the agent or to others. However, the objection of vagueness can be directed against each particular virtue; the demands of, for instance, the virtues of charity and honesty may not be completely clear in concrete situations; worse, they can even conflict with each other.

I believe that the central problem of virtue ethics turns around the idea of moral reliability. This word is used in key contexts by several philosophers associated with virtue ethics. McDowell, in his account of virtue as a perceptual capacity and a form of knowledge, claims that “the deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge” (McDowell, 1998: 51). In a similar vein, Hursthouse describes moral agents in the following terms: “We expect a reliability in their actions” (Hursthouse, 1999: 10). Julia Driver also makes explicit the connection between virtue and reliability: “Both Aristotle and Kant believed that the conditions they placed on true virtue were warranted because the conditions made the trait more reliable” (Driver, 1996: 115). To speak of reliability means, in this context, that the virtuous person is able to grasp morally relevant aspects of a situation and possesses, accordingly, ethical knowledge,
but a kind of knowledge that is a practical capacity and cannot be reduced to a theory, to a set of rules or to propositional knowledge; it is a know how rather than a know that.

However, to legitimize virtue ethics with an appeal to the notion of reliability may seem an instance of explaining the obscurum per obscurius. So, the big challenge of a virtue ethics lies in presenting a satisfactory account of moral reliability. In what follows, I will try to present moral reliability as a plausible and fruitful idea, defending it against the accusation of vagueness.

To begin with, one should notice that reliabilism is an influential theory of knowledge and justification. It is based on the idea that a belief is justified if it is produced by reliable cognitive processes. Reliabilism is a family of epistemological theories, but there is a specific form of reliabilism that is particularly relevant for virtue ethics, because it is based on the idea of intellectual virtues. A case in point is the virtue epistemology of Ernest Sosa, according to which a justified belief is a belief justified through intellectual virtues (reliable cognitive faculties). But to what extent can we introduce reliabilism in moral justification in order to enrich and develop virtue ethics?

Aristotle addressed in a certain way this problem by emphasizing the role of upbringing and experience for practical wisdom, and they are, in fact, fundamental aspects of moral reliability. I claim that we can develop and complement these Aristotelian insights, as well virtue ethics, more generally, by incorporating the humanistic idea of Bildung that was developed by Herder, Humdoldt and Hegel, among others, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by Gadamer, who can be considered one of the most important representatives of the tradition of German neo-humanism.

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4 Cf. Goldman (1992: 434): “‘Good’ processes are ones whose belief outputs have a high ratio of truths”.
It is relevant to point out, in this context, that McDowell used the German word *Bildung* to designate the moulding of ethical character and the acquisition of a second nature or the process whereby we develop our conceptual capacities and get initiated into a conceptual space:

If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature. I cannot think of a good short English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*. (McDowell, 1996: 84)

In *Mind and World*, McDowell did not explore the relevance of *Bildung* for his moral philosophy, because he was more concerned with the general idea of a development of our conceptual capacities. Departing from his insight, I will argue that *Bildung* offers us a plausible account of moral reliability that can complement and correct an Aristotelian account of practical rationality.

The reflection on *Bildung* that was developed in the 18th century conceived of *Bildung* as a free and autonomous process of inner transformation and personal development, which could not be subordinated to external ends or purposes. Furthermore, and in accordance with the humanistic tradition, *Bildung* was supposed to promote a harmonious development of human beings and to require knowledge of art, literature and philosophy. Last, but not least, *Bildung* should involve a multiplicity of experiences and an exposure to a diversity of situations. Apparently, this last point explains the previous point: humanistic culture contributes decisively for *Bildung* because it is a large repository of life experiences.

Gadamer, a continental philosopher that McDowell admires, may be considered one of the last representatives of German neo-humanism, and elaborated what is
probably the most insightful reflection on the concept of *Bildung*. One of the main points of Gadamer's hermeneutics is a rehabilitation of the prejudice, or the idea that knowledge and understanding are always and inevitably conditioned by certain historical or cultural presuppositions. This is the reason why Gadamer describes understanding as fusion of horizons, as a process whereby the interpreter brings with herself her prejudices or horizon of understanding and accepts to be transformed during the interpretative process. Prejudices cannot be eradicated, because they are conditions of understanding and sources of intelligibility, but they can be corrected, and they are corrected precisely through fusions of horizons or through a multiplication of hermeneutic experiences. One of the most important chapters of *Truth and Method* is dedicated precisely to the concept of experience. Gadamer characterizes hermeneutic experience in negative terms, as refutation of expectations or prejudices, a refutation that may be caused, for instance, by an openness to or confrontation with different perspectives. Experiences can, therefore, transform those who undergo them. And now we return to *Bildung*. According to Gadamer, *Bildung* is an indefinite process of fusions of horizons and multiplication of hermeneutic experiences. Gadamer claims that through such processes we correct continuously our prejudices and become, therefore, more reliable in our practical judgements.

In light of the preceding considerations, the key idea of moral reliability, so important for virtue ethics, ceases to be mysterious and becomes plausible. As the reflection on *Bildung* shows, the accumulation of (hermeneutic) experiences can effectively refine our moral reasoning, because experiences play a threefold role:

– they correct our prejudices and parochial perspectives;

– they allow us to understand other people (groups, cultures), helping us to discern the morally relevant features of situations involving them;
– they promote the analogical reasoning, by offering to the moral agent a large repository of exemplary situations and decisions.

This clarification of the role of upbringing and experience in moral life is an important basis of a defence of virtue ethics, but our task is not complete without an assessment of the role of emotions in ethics. Centuries of intellectualist approaches to ethics accompanied with prejudices against the notions of emotion and passion caused a neglect of the ethical relevance of emotions. Virtue ethics, as an agent-centred approach that rejects impersonal accounts of morality, is particularly apt to correct this defect of the Western moral tradition.

There are two opposite accounts of emotions that should be rejected: according to the first, emotions are not rational (Kant and Hume); according to the second, emotions are rational. For Aristotle, emotions are “Janus-faced” (Hursthouse 1999: 110), in the sense that they have a rational and a non-rational face. Aristotle also established a clear connection between emotions and virtue; virtues are not only dispositions to action, but also to moderate our emotions or to feel in a certain way. From an Aristotelian standpoint, “having the right emotions is necessary for being a good person” (Stocker, 1996: 174).

The important connections between value and emotions are another sign of the ethical importance of emotions. In fact, many emotions contain an evaluation of their object (anger, love, for instance), and the lack of emotions may lead to a devaluation of other beings (as the existence of psychopaths demonstrates). As Stocker (1996: 177) put it, correct emotions lead to correct evaluations and incorrect emotions make it difficult to make correct evaluations. The relevance of emotions for virtue ethics can be also illustrated by Hume’s defence of sympathy and Schopenhauer’s defence of compassion as the basis of morality.
Today, it is no longer a speculation to claim that emotions play a fundamental role in our decision-making processes; this point is widely acknowledged by neuroscientists. So, when we say that practical reason requires a certain form of upbringing or personal development, we should bear in mind the Aristotelian idea that such a process must involve the education or training of emotions. The humanist idea of Bildung is, once more, very useful in this context, especially if we consider Schillers’ thesis that Bildung requires not only philosophical culture, but also aesthetic education. Bildung was considered an intellectual and affective process.

3. It seems legitimate to consider communitarianism as a natural translation of virtue ethics into the domain of political philosophy; the work of MacIntyre provides a good illustration of the similarities between both movements. In order to clarify this point, it is convenient to sketch out a brief characterization of communitarianism. It is usual to define communitarianism in contrast with liberalism, and this contrast can be made at different levels:

- at the ethical level, there is a defence of particularism and of the thesis that the ends and values involved in moral reasoning have a social origin;

- at the anthropological level, communitarian authors criticize individualistic and atomistic conceptions of the self;

- at the political level, it is argued that the goods favoured by a community should play an important role in political decisions;

- finally, communitarians denounce liberalism’s internal tensions or “pragmatic contradiction”: far from being neutral regarding the different conceptions of the good, liberalism belongs to a particular tradition.
There are, accordingly, important similarities between virtue ethics and communitarianism. In both cases, there is a focus on past experience (at the personal and collective level) and an emphasis on the role played by communal virtues, values or goals on the constitution of moral or political agents. Virtue ethics and communitarianism also reject the view that human action should be guided by universal and abstract principles.

Sandel, as a critic of Rawls’s liberalism, is an importance reference to understand communitarianism. He was considered, after the publication of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, a communitarian author, but in the second edition of this book he pointed out that he was not always on the communitarian side of the debate between liberalism and communitarianism:

The debate is sometimes cast as an argument between those who prize individual liberty and those who think the values of the community or the will of the majority should always prevail, or between those who believe in universal human rights and those who insist there is no way to criticize or judge the values that inform different cultures and traditions. Insofar as ‘communitarianism’ is another name for majoritarianism, or for the idea that rights should rest on the values that predominate in any given community at any given time, it is not a view I would defend. (Sandel, 1998: ix)

The key issue is, according to Sandel, whether there is a primacy of the right over the good (1998: x). In accordance with communitarianism, he claims that that there is an important connection between justice and conceptions of the good. But there are two ways to establish such a connection: we can either say that “principles of justice derive their moral force from values commonly espoused or widely shared in a particular community or tradition” (1998: x) or, alternatively, we could simply claim
that “principles of justice depend for their justification on the moral worth or intrinsic good of the ends they serve” (1998: xi). Sandel endorses only this second view, which is not, “strictly speaking”, communitarian.

At any rate, Sandel advances important themes of the communitarian critique of liberalism: he opposes the thesis that the self is prior to ends and values, and that deliberations are based on a set of desires and wants (taken as contingent psychological characteristics); he claims that the belonging to a community and a tradition is constitutive of our personal identity (in opposition to the individualist anthropology of liberalism).

Charles Taylor is also considered a communitarian critic of liberalism. Like Sandel, he claims that conceptions of the good are constitutive of the identity of the self. He also believes (like MacIntyre, as we will see) that our lives should be understood in a narrative way, as the history of an ongoing quest for the good. According to Taylor, a self has a relational character; what we are depends both on our self-interpretations and on our relations to a community. He expresses the first point by claiming that human beings are “self-interpreting animals”. Because these self-interpretations draw on communal resources (language, shared experiences, conceptions of the good), this also entails that the relation to a community is constitutive of our identity.5

However, Taylor recognizes some valid points in liberalism, and his main targets are certain misconceptions that are interwoven with them. Like others critics of liberalism, he dismisses the fiction of previously individuated persons and blames liberalism (or certain versions of liberalism) for neglecting the social origin of ends or purposes; “The good is what (...) gives the point of the rules which define the right” (Taylor 1990: 89).

5 “A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’” (Taylor, 1990: 76).
Another central target of Taylor’s critique of liberalism is its “pragmatic contradiction”; it officially devalues conceptions of the good, but appeals surreptitiously to them:

It seems that they are motivated by the strongest moral ideals, such as freedom, altruism and universalism. These are amongst the central moral aspirations of moral culture, the hypergoods which are distinctive to it. And yet what these ideals drive the theorists towards is a denial of all such goods. They are caught in a strange pragmatic contradiction, whereby the very goods which move them push them to deny or denature all such goods. They are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking. (Taylor, 1990: 88)

For the purpose of connecting virtue ethics and communitarianism, Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps our most important reference, because he develops both a virtue ethics and a communitarian political philosophy. Like Sandel and Taylor, MacIntyre criticizes liberalism for neglecting the role of communal goods both in our moral life and in the constitution of personal identities. Because liberalism downplays the role of community in the moral life, it leads to an individualist anthropology that undermines ultimately ethical objectivity.

In its articulation between virtue ethics and communitarianism, MacIntyre focuses on three fundamental and interrelated concepts:

1) virtue: a human, acquired quality, whose exercise enables an agent to possess the goods that are internal to a practice;

2) practice: a social, complex and cooperative form of human activity, whereby the goods inherent to them are developed in accordance with standards of excellence;

3) tradition: a set of communal goods and a source of identities.
The strong influence that, according to MacIntyre, communities exert on our identities is well illustrated by his thesis that contemporary young Germans have some responsibility regarding the events occurred in World War II. From a liberal standpoint this is, at least, controversial, if not clearly false. But the thesis is entailed by his account of the constitution of personal identity.\textsuperscript{6}

The young German who believes that being born after 1945 means that what Nazis did to Jews has no moral relevance to his relationship to his Jewish contemporaries, exhibit the same attitude, that according to which the self is detachable from its social and historical roles and statuses. (...) The contrast with the narrative view of the self is clear. For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform, my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. (MacIntyre, 1981: 220-221)

The emphasis on the constitutive role of history and tradition at the level of one’s identity and values raises immediately the spectrum of relativism, and MacIntyre is well aware of it. In Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, he faces the challenge of relativism by stressing “the rationality of traditions”. MacIntyre concedes a point that seems congenial to relativism:

There is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition. There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of

\textsuperscript{6} As one says, the \textit{modus ponens} of a philosopher is the \textit{modus tollens} of another one…
advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other. (MacIntyre, 1988: 350)

However, MacIntyre claims that relativism, the “denial that rational debate between and rational choice among rival traditions is possible” and perspectivism, the view that rival traditions are complementary perspectives and that we should not make truth claims from within any tradition (MacIntyre, 1988: 352), are both children of the Enlightenment and its incapacity to accept the rationality of traditions. In this context, he blames Burke for defining well-ordered traditions as “wisdom without reflection”.

From the above quoted passage, MacIntyre does not conclude that traditions are closed spheres, unable to enter into dialogue; neither does he claim that traditions are opposed to reform. In order to avoid the danger of relativism, he draws on debates in the philosophy of science and establishes an analogy between epistemological and cultural crises inside a tradition. Even when a tradition is based on authoritative texts, these texts can receive different interpretations, and one can detect incoherencies in the corpus of taken for granted texts. Moreover, as MacIntyre claims, the emergence of new situations or problems and contacts with other traditions can also stimulate critical reflection inside a tradition (cf. MacIntyre, 1988: 355). As a result there are three stages in the development of a tradition:

A first in which the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put in question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations. (MacIntyre, 1988: 359)
MacIntyre’s account of tradition is assumedly anti-Cartesian, because the rationality of traditions, far from presupposing “self-sufficient, self-justifying epistemological first principles”, has a “dialectical and historical” character (MacIntyre, 1988: 360). Inspired by the work of philosophers of science like Kuhn and Lakatos, MacIntyre attempts to conciliate its defence of the epistemological role of traditions with a rejection of relativism. The following passage provides a good illustration of this strategy:

It may happen to any tradition-constituted enquiry that by its own standards of progress it ceases to make progress. Its hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally. (...) this kind of dissolution of historically founded certitudes is the mark of an epistemological crisis. The solution to a genuine epistemological crisis requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theories. (MacIntyre, 1988: 362)

In this context, MacIntyre suggests that members of a tradition may, in such crises, acknowledge the superiority of other traditions. It can also happen that a tradition is unable to solve its crises, and such a failure is a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong in it.

We can develop this answer to the objection of relativism (which is often directed against virtue ethics and communitarianism) by appealing explicitly to a distinction between progressive and degenerating traditions. This distinction was first proposed by Lakatos (1977), a philosopher of science, but it can be very useful in moral and political contexts. Lakatos’s criterion to demarcate science and pseudo-science is in line with MacIntyre’s reflections and can help us to understand how his defence of the role of tradition does not condemn us to relativism. Lakatos rejected Popper’s
demarcation criterion (falsifiability) and Kuhn’s criterion (based on the idea of a puzzle-solving tradition). Departing from the idea of a research programme, he distinguished between degenerating and progressive research programmes, and associated science with the latter programmes and pseudo-science with the former ones. Developing this distinction, Thagard added that a theory is pseudo-scientific if “it has been less progressive than alternative theories over a long period of time, and faces many unsolved problems” and “the community of practitioners makes little attempt to develop the theory towards solutions of the problems, shows no concern for attempts to evaluate the theory in relation to others, and is selective in considering confirmations and disconfirmations” (Thagard, 1978: 32). By analogy with this epistemological distinction, we can distinguish, in the cultural domain, between progressive traditions and degenerating ones, along the lines suggested by Thagard. This distinction allows us to evade the threat of relativism, without renouncing to the idea that communities and traditions are constitutive of our identities and enquiries.

In order to complement this answer to the challenge of relativism, it is important to establish a further distinction, a distinction between relativism and contextualism. The idea of context-dependence is not enough to define relativism, because relativism, as the ordinary use of this word clearly implies, includes also a permissive stance regarding conflicting and even mutually exclusive perspectives or belief systems. Accordingly, it is legitimate to characterize relativism as the combination of the context-dependence thesis with the above mentioned permissive attitude. Contextualists concede that standards for justified belief are context-dependent, but they are not committed to relativism, because nothing prevents them from criticizing rival belief systems and even aspects of their own world-picture. Standards of justification that prevail in a particular culture can be challenged and criticized, either by an insider or
outsider. In each particular context, our critical reflection necessarily takes for granted some propositions or beliefs, but these presuppositions are not immune to challenge and rejection. The claim that justification is context-dependent does not entail relativism, but only that justification is an ongoing and open-ended process, always dependent on certain assumptions.

4. Virtue ethics and communitarianism are closely related, but I also claim that virtue ethics is not committed to strong forms of communitarianism. Departing from McDowell’s suggestion to connect the humanist idea of Bildung with Aristotle’s ethics, we can propose an account of virtue ethics that steers a middle course between the extremes of individualism and strong communitarianism. As we have seen, Bildung was understood as a self-determining process, based on an adequate (humanistic) education and a multiplication of experiences. In this sense, Bildung is compatible with an Aristotelian account of practical rationality but, by promoting personal autonomy and an openness to other cultures, it is also a modern idea that goes beyond Aristotle’s ethics. Replying to Rüdiger Bubner, who objected that the modern idea of Bildung was not compatible with the ancient worldview that is presupposed by the Aristotelian ethics, McDowell says:

Bubner notes helpfully that the modern concept of Bildung, which I approach through Aristotle’s conception of the moulding of ethical character, pertains not merely to the inculcation of an approximation to a “socially fixed and pre-given ideal of virtue,” as in Aristotle, but also to the acquisition of an individual personality. The modern concept coheres with valuing a critical individuality, whereas the Aristotelian ideal is rather that particular human beings should be unreflectively excellent occupants of fixed social roles. (McDowell, 2002: 296)
Confronted with this objection, McDowell correctly points out that, in spite of the differences, the modern idea of Bildung can enrich the Aristotelian idea of second nature:

I find it preferable not to relegate the idea of second nature to the status of an archaism. (…) With second nature so understood, we do not step back into a pre-modern outlook. Talk of second nature can invoke everything implied by the modern concept of Bildung, including what permits us to value distinctive personality. (McDowell, 2002: 296)

In sum, the idea of Bildung has a twofold relevance: on the one hand, it helps to clarify the reliability of the moral agent, as it is understood in the light of virtue ethics; on the other hand, and because of its individualist and liberal connotations, it allows us to avoid strong forms of communitarianism (like “majoritarianism”).

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