Virtue ethics: an anti-moralistic defence

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to single out four main kinds of moralism, which might be associated to virtue ethics, and to offer a virtue-ethical response to each. By doing so, I aim at defending virtue ethics, properly understood, from the intrinsic danger of a moralistic drift. I begin by proposing a definition of moralism and a list of its main forms. Then, I list the main features of the virtue-ethical perspective I embrace, and finally, I argue that such normative approach can prevent a moralistic drift. Thus, I conclude that a virtue-ethical approach, thanks to its capacity of reconciling reasons and motives, and to its proposing an agent-related perspective on morality, has an advantage in presenting moral requirements in a non-moralistic fashion.

As noted by Craig Taylor (Taylor 2012), moralism has a number of distinct meanings, ranging from legal theory to aesthetics, and can be addressed in just as many ways. From a strictly ethical perspective, the most noteworthy attempt to account for it, is Bernard Williams' critique to impartialist theories, which refuse to recognize a space lying outside the scope of morality (Williams 1985). However, there seems to be a lack of reflection on such topic from a virtue-ethical standpoint. The aim of my paper is to single out four main kinds of ethical moralism (that is, of the moralism ascribable to an ethical judgement and/or theory), which might be associated to virtue ethics, and to offer a virtue-ethical response to each. By doing so, I aim at defending virtue ethics, properly understood, from the intrinsic danger of a moralistic drift, while at the same time rejecting Williams' sharp division between the moral and the non-moral. Such defence, as it will become clear, is based on the centrality of phronesis (practical wisdom) and on its capacity to integrate the agent's judgements and motives.

I will begin my analysis by proposing a definition of moralism and a list of its main forms. There (§1) I will define moralism as the "perception of a moral judgment as inappropriately excessive", and I will single out four

main forms of moralism, each of which corresponds to a different declination of this inappropriate excess. I will label them *Inflexibility moralism* (IM), *Pervasivity moralism* (PM), *Extremeness moralism* (EM) and *Unentitlement moralism* (UM).[1] IM consists in answering "always" to the question of when one should act out of a moral norm, and has to do with presenting a rule as inflexible and independent from the particularity of experience. PM answers "everywhere" to the question of where value is in human life, and is related to conceiving morality as intrusive and devoid of boundaries. EM answers "to the utmost degree" to the question of the extent to which one should exercise morality; thus, it has to do with the imposition of too high a standard of morality, a standard we might identify with sanctity or heroism. UM, finally, answers "yes" to the question of whether or not the person passing her moral judgment on one's action has the right to interfere with one's moral life. Such form of moralism, as I will note, is distinct from the previous three, since it applies primarily to the person who issues a judgement, rather than to the judgement itself. Then, I will show that all these forms share the feature of expressing a kind of inappropriate excess. Secondly (§2), I will go on by listing the main features of the virtue-ethical perspective I embrace: (i) broad account of morality; (ii) qualitative account of the virtuous act; (iii) eudemonistic perspective; (iv) recognition of degrees of virtue; (v) intersubjective approach to morality. Finally (§3), I will argue that such virtue-based normative approach can prevent a moralistic drift, insofar as it effectively avoids the mentioned charges. Indeed, it (i) acknowledges the need for interpretation of every contingent situation, rejects the primacy of inflexible norms, and conceives the moral agent as responsible for her own interpretation; (ii) has a non-extrinsic – that is, agent-related – account of the ubiquity of value, capable of resisting the charge of pervasivity; (iii) clearly distinguishes among different degrees of virtuousness, without imposing moral sanctity as a requirement and therefore avoiding the charge of extremeness; (iv) makes room for an account of relationships capable of accommodating ordinary intuitions on UM.

Thus, I will conclude that a virtue-based approach, thanks to its capacity of reconciling reasons and motives, and to its proposing an agent-related perspective on morality, not only is not liable of moralism, but has even an advantage in presenting moral requirements in a non-moralistic fashion.

1. *Moralism and moralisms*

Moralism is an ordinary ethical experience.[2] Indeed, if we think about our lives as moral agents, all of us can agree that some moral judgments are perceived as moralistic (and therefore, something called moralism exists); thus, we all have at least an implicit knowledge of what moralism is, and, insofar as we label a judgment as moralistic, we imply such label to have a negative meaning. Thus, moralism appears to be a thick, value-laden concept, rather than just a descriptive one.[3] We normally give the label of being moralistic primarily to judgments, and, only derivatively, to the people who issue them. Being moralistic, for someone, is not an intrinsic property, as being tall or Italian are; it is something other people think of someone in light of their frequent moralistic judgements. My first claim, then, is that a theory can be moralistic too, insofar as it is vulnerable to the same charge; i.e., insofar as it is a collection of moralistic moral claims and judgements, and/or is the actual source of such judgements. As we will see later on, except for one form of moralism, people are not the main subject of moralism.

But what does a moralistic judgement amount to? I will start by proposing a tentative definition.[4] I define moralism as the "perception of a moral judgment as inappropriately excessive". However, although I have a unitary definition, I also think moralism *legetai pollakos*, i.e., it can be said in many ways, and that when we formulate a judgement of moralism, we may refer to four main forms, each of which corresponds to a possible declination of the inappropriate excess which characterizes moralism. I label them *Inflexibility moralism* (IM), *Pervasivity moralism* (PM), *Extremeness moralism* (EM), and *Unentitlement moralism* (UM).[5]

---

[2]   A similar outset, moving from common usages of the term, is conducted by Taylor 2012, although his analysis of moralism, unlike mine, leads him to define it as a vice involving a lack of appropriate emotional responses of pity and recognition towards others. However, the way Taylor categorizes the distortion of judgement implied by moralism partly overlaps with mine; also, he raises the question of whether Aristotelian virtue ethics might be able to meet the objections he raises, but renounces to answer it (2012: 80). My paper, although moving from a different categorization, might somehow be taken as an indirect answer to such question.

[3]   Here, I do neither aim at demonstrating the existence of moralism (which I take to be self-evident), nor at assessing whether it is right to consider moralism as negative or not, but rather at exploring its actual application in ordinary moral language.

[4]   Several other definitions have been proposed. Fullinwider (2006: 10-11) sees moralism as a violation of our duty to be charitable towards other people's behavior; Coady (2006: 25) as an attitude which damages the moral character of the moralistic agent; Archer (2017: 2) as "a disposition to engage in inappropriate moral criticism", which "undermines the force of legitimate moral criticism to morally blameworthy agents and states of affairs".

[5]   A similar independent analysis has been conducted by J. Driver, Moralism. Journal of Applied

As the initial definition implies, all of these forms share the perception of a moral judgment as excessive. A judgment, thus, which exceeds either the appropriate threshold of moral demandingness (IM and EM) – or the boundaries of morality itself (PM), or the limits of moral authority (UM). Passing on to another an inappropriate judgement, so as to make them follow that lead, is a quite serious charge. In this section, I will deepen these forms and see how they fit the general definition of moralism provided before. For each of the proposed types, I will offer an example, and I will then explain why it might be attributed to virtue ethics.

Inflexibility moralism consists in answering "always" to the question when one should act out of a moral norm, and has to do with presenting a rule as inflexible and independent from the particularity of experience. It is the moralism of the inflexible generalist, who takes rules as always applicable to similar cases without taking the specific features of the present situation in any particular account. IM judgements, people and theories are therefore excessively inflexible and incapable of admitting of any need for interpreting rules. They appear also as abstract, insofar as they overlook the concreteness of each contingent situation by emphasising the general relevance of rules and norms. Abstractness is often accompanied by the perception of such judgements as extrinsic: general rules may be well said to be issued by autonomous rationality, but they don't take into any account either the role of practical reason in interpreting each situation, or that of emotions in responding to it.

Thus, judgements issued out of general rules are often perceived as moralistic, insofar as agents normally (a) assign a role to their own practical reason and emotional response, with their joint ability to interpret situations; (b) care quite a lot about their own autonomy, and don't appreciate very much to be deprived of practical authority; (c) thus, they refuse to simply apply readymade rules or "slapdash universals" without any personal interpretation.

> *IM.* Richard suggested me to tell the truth to my boss without knowing anything about the situation.

When applied to VE, this particular charge of moralism is directed towards its generalist versions, such as, according to some readings, Thomistic – or in

any case, natural-law-friendly – virtue theories.[6] Within such an understanding, the role of phronesis and virtue would be diminished, in that phronesis would be merely a capacity of drawing consequences from general invariant principles of conduct, known independently from one's particular situation.

Pervasivity moralism answers "everywhere" to the question of where moral value is to be found in human life, and has to do with conceiving morality as intrusive and devoid of boundaries.[7] We accuse someone of PM when she seems to cross the "horizontal" boundaries of the moral field, and to impose herself and others with moral standards belonging to what we take to be non-moral domains. This is perceived as inappropriately excessive, in that it erases the line dividing what belongs to morality and what pertains to – say – good taste, manners, and personal values where nothing moral is apparently at stake.

> *PM*. Martha always reproaches me for saying swear words, for she thinks it's an immoral behaviour.

Classic Aristotelian virtue ethics might be at first sight considered to be pervasive and over-prescribing, given the absence of boundaries between the moral and the non-moral, and the existence of an excellence which governs almost any domain of human experience. This allegedly pervasive approach is quite evident in the Nicomachean Ethics' catalogue of the virtues, which includes excellences related to apparently non-moral fields, such as jokes and informal relationships (see NE II, 1108 a9 – 1108 b10; NE IV, 1126b 10 – 1128 b9). In current VE, it is held by almost all Aristotelian ethicists, and its "liberalized" version is paradigmatically expressed by Martha Nussbaum's 1993 paper, which singles out all the spheres of life, or areas in which experience is grounded, each of which has a virtue as its excellence (see Nussbaum 1993).

Extremeness moralism answers "to the utmost degree" to the question to which extent one should exercise morality; thus, it has to do with the imposition of too high a standard of morality, a standard we might identify with sanctity or heroism. This kind of moralism, like the previous one, has to do with

---

[6]   For a similar reading of Thomistic virtue ethics, see e.g. Iris Murdoch's effective critique, according to which in a Natural Law perspective "[…] the individual is seen as moving tentatively vis-à-vis a reality which transcends him. To discover what is morally good is to discover that reality, and to become good is to integrate himself with it. He is ruled by laws which he can only partly understand. He is not fully conscious of what he is. His freedom is not an open freedom of choice in a clear situation; it lies rather in an increasing knowledge of his own real being, and in the conduct which naturally springs from such knowledge" (Murdoch 1997: 70; see also 1997: 269).

[7]   I think the target of Williams' 1985 critique of moralism might fall under this label.

crossing the boundaries of morality. However, EM, unlike PM, crosses the boundaries "vertically", or "from above", insofar as it fails to identify different legitimate degrees of morality, with different standards of demandingness, and to account for the difference between what is morally required and what lies beyond morality (i.e., supererogation).

> *EM*. Tony blames me for having bought a new bag instead of donating that sum to the poor.

As applied to VE, EM can be seen in the charge of perfectionism, or the accusation of pointing to unattainable moral exemplars and ideals. This is nicely expressed in the debate over moral heroism or sanctity, and particularly in Susan Wolf's critique to moral exemplars (Wolf 1982). In Wolf's account, which is paradigmatic of a more general scepticism over moral heroism and sanctity, the latter would be an undesirable outcome, in that it would lead to an extreme, inhuman life.

There is, finally, a last form of moralism, which applies primarily to the person who issues a judgement, rather than to the judgement itself. What I have labelled Unentitlement moralism, answers "yes" to the question whether or not the person expressing her moral judgment on one's action has the right to interfere with one's moral life. This is perceived as moralistic insofar as such person is not seen as entitled to express her opinion on one's choices and actions, (i) either because she is a stranger, i.e. someone whose relationship with the agent is not close enough to make her enter one's personal sphere, or because she is not herself morally admirable enough to justify her will to give advice; (ii) or because relying upon someone else's judgement, however good it may be, implies ipso facto a lack of autonomy. This person's interference in one's behaviour, therefore, is perceived as inappropriate and excessive, for she lacks, for diverse reasons, moral authority over the agent.

> *UM1*. How dares Sarah tell me what to do? She doesn't care about me at all!/[8] How dares Sarah to tell me what to do? She is much worse than me![9]

---

[8]   One of the most effective expressions of this idea can be found in the diary of Cesare Pavese, who once noticed, with bitter irony: "From someone who doesn't want to share your destiny, you should neither accept a cigarette" (Cesare Pavese, The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935-1950).

[9]   For this case, most languages have idiomatic expressions. Think to the English: "look who is talking!", and its Italian equivalent, which refers to those people who preach from the pulpit without any right to do so. However, as Taylor notes, this particular kind of moralism amounts more to a form of hypocrisy, which is a related – yet not identical – vice ascribable to moral judgements and people (Taylor 2012: 7).

UM2. How dares Sarah tell me what to do? Nobody else but me can know what it's the right thing for me to do.
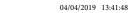
As I have noticed, this last accusation of moralism is the only one which refers primarily to people. However, it can be attributed derivatively to judgements, not insofar as they are intrinsically moralistic (such as in the previous cases), but as they are issued by moralistic people (therefore, reversing the person-judgement order), and to theories, not in that they collect intrinsically moralistic judgements, but inasmuch as they don't make enough theoretical room for strong relationships among moral agents, capable of justifying their mutual interfering in each other's choices and actions.

Given such premises, it can be easily seen that VE's attitude of attributing a strong role to education and to the relations within a community would amount to a dangerous lack of focus on the individual and her autonomous agency, and a moralistic threat to one's individual judgement. Equally risky would be pointing to the *phronimos* as an exemplar, not only for the reasons seen above, but also in that it would deprive the agent of her autonomy, and foster admiration, emulation and mimetic attitudes deemed as dangerous for personal autonomy.

2.   *What kind of virtue ethics?*

In this section, I aim at showing that, on the one hand, VE can prevent the moralistic drifts seen so far, and, on the other, that it can broaden the boundaries of morality when required, i.e., when they become too narrow from within its perspective. This, against what is claimed by some, i.e., that VE often overlooks normative issues,[10] would prove that VE is endowed with adequate theoretical tools to take a stand on the sources and boundaries of morality. Before explaining why and how virtue ethics can prevent the moralistic drifts seen so far, let me step back, to define briefly what I take VE it to be. Obviously enough, there is no virtue ethics as such. VE is always *some kind* of virtue ethics, and I am well aware that many distinctions can be and have been made among kinds of virtue ethics. Generally speaking, the Aristotelian VE I embrace represents an ethical approach focused on the flourishing of the agent, which consists primarily in the development of virtues, defined as "persisting, reliable, and characteristic" (Annas 2011: 8) deep features of the person, responsible for the issuing not of merely automated responses, but of "selective responses to circumstances" (*ibid.*).

---

[10]   Cf. what Onora O'Neill claims in her introduction to Korsgaard 1996: xii.

To be slightly more analytical, such Aristotelian VE is committed to the following views:

a. A *broad* (as opposed to a narrow) *account of morality*, which takes personal flourishing to be morally relevant and therefore includes a balance between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues as a consequence.[11] This, against the separation between the demands of duty (taken to be what morality consists in), and the demands of virtue – considered as pertaining to the ethical and making less requiring demands – rooted in the agent's desires and aims (see Annas 2015). As noted by Slote (1995), narrow accounts (such as Kantian and utilitarian approaches) take only concern for the well-being of others as morally relevant, whereas Aristotle's account emphasizes both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues, assigning enormous ethical significance to the happiness of the agent.

b. An account of *character* as the main focus of morality, and of character building as the primary moral task, as well as something that cannot but being pervasive.

c. A *qualitative account of the virtuous act*, that is, the claim that acting virtuously does not necessarily mean always exercising the virtue's main act as much as you can, but hitting the right mean within a range of possibilities, by means of an attentive sensitivity to the features of any situation. This implies taking virtues as "deep configurations of one's feelings and thoughts, that do not bring about an automatic and *a priori* codifiable behavior, but a sensitivity to some moral reasons, a capacity to perceive the individual circumstance's particular moral features" (Vaccarezza 2017).[12] Each virtue has, therefore, as stated by McDowell, a "relevant range of behavior" (McDowell 1998: 53), i.e., what Aristotle considered the continuum where the virtuous mean had to be found in each occasion.

d. A *eudemonistic perspective*, which includes:

   i) A focus on personal flourishing as both the *reason* and *motive* of morality;

   ii) A holistic goal view, according to which each virtue tends to the overall good of the agent and finds the right mean in its specific field while having the overall good in sight. This implies maintaining the primacy of a "qualified generalistic" account of practical wisdom, which preserves both phronesis' capacity of dealing with particulars, and perceiving them in their contingent detail,

---

[11] See Slote 1999; Annas 2015; Carr 2016.

[12] A more radical claim made by McDowell, is that virtue is a quasi-visual capacity (see NE III, 1114b 6; McDowell 1998: 53).

and its openness to the knowledge of general ends (see Sherman 1989, 1997; Nussbaum 1990);

III) An integrated view of the interaction between cognitive and emotional components, which need to be both present in the agent in order for her to be genuinely virtuous.

IV) The recognition of *degrees of virtue*, from vices, to natural traits, to heroic virtues and supererogation (Swanton 2003; Stangl 2016).

V) An *intersubjective approach to morality*, which emphasizes the role of shared values, admiration for exemplars, education and upbringing, and promotes extended altruism and other-regarding virtues.[13]

3. *A virtue-ethical response*

Having listed briefly the main features of the Aristotelian virtue-ethical perspective I embrace, I will now draw their consequences, so to show how such an account can avoid the fourfold charge of moralism outlined above. If this attempt will prove successful, I will be in a position to argue that VE has the capacity to resist moralistic drifts, and that to do so it does not need to accept definite boundaries of morality.

As it is shown by its adopting a qualitative account of the virtuous act, and qualified generalism over the role of phronesis, in response to IM, VE acknowledges the need for interpretation of every contingent situation and rejects the priority of inflexible general norms. This can be easily seen in the primacy assigned to phronesis, i.e., practical wisdom, the sovereign intellectual virtue which is responsible for an accurate moral perception and needs to operate in synergy with the other (ethical) virtues, i.e., with the emotional (rationally guided) sphere of the soul.[14]

Previously, I have noticed that IM answers "always" to the question of when one should act out of a moral norm; more specifically, I take IM as making use of a "quantitative always". VE, on the contrary, answers "always" to a different question, namely, that of when one should act out of virtue. Therefore, it makes

---

[13]   As noted by Annas 2015: 609, "Eudaimonism has been characterized so far in two ways. One is that of aiming at goals; normativity has taken the form of the attractive power of the good. In terms of a famous contrast, eudaimonism takes as basic the idea of attraction rather than that of command or imperative".

[14]   The leading role of the virtues in perceiving the moral features of any situation has led many interpreters to envisage a priority of particularity in Aristotelian ethics, or even a particularistic perspective stricto sensu. See e.g. McDowell 1998.

use of a "qualitative always", which does not prescribe a standard action to ac-
complish, but rather – as I have noticed when sketching the qualitative account
of the virtuous act – it aims at finding the right mean in a wide range of possibili-
ties, by means of an attentive sensitivity to the features of any situation. Thus, it
keeps the source of morality within the agent, in her perceptive and creative re-
sponsibility, instead of moving it without. When a virtue theory prescribes me to
be always virtuous overall, it leaves me entirely open the challenge of interpreting
the situation to see which virtues are relevant here and now, and what does it
mean to act out of that specific virtue. This does not necessarily imply holding
a form of particularism; rather, it implies claiming that there is no top-down de-
duction from general rules to particular actions, but an interpretive bottom-up
movement of finding the way to aim at general ends and principles in the given
particular situation. Thus, holding that general principles and ends play a cen-
tral role in morality does not imply ipso facto being liable of the accusation of
moralism, in that following principles and aiming at ends gives birth to different
actions depending on the situation, which has to be creatively interpreted.

In response to the allegation of PM, I think it is useful to distinguish be-
tween two similar but distinct concepts: the ubiquity and the pervasivity of
value, the former being a legitimate trait of morality, and the latter its moralis-
tic degeneration.

Given its eudemonistic focus on the flourishing of the agent, and on char-
acter building as the primary moral task, VE has an account of the ubiquity of
value, capable of resisting the charge of pervasivity. Its non-moralistic way of
answering "everywhere" to the question of the place of value in life, depends
on the fact that phronesis aims at the happiness of the agent. If happiness and
flourishing are the point of being moral, and the overall goal of morality, then
it is no moralism to claim that every aspect of life should be included in the
field of morality. Character building, furthermore doesn't count as an excessive
constraint, since once you've built a certain character you don't have to pass a
constant control from outside on your actions.

This may be better understood by referring to the list of Aristotelian virtues,
a list that covers almost every area of human life (see the central books of Ar-
istotle's NE, but also Nussbaum's 1993 reformulation mentioned above), jokes
and wit included. In Aristotle's perspective, it would be against the agent's in-
terest to single out a non-moral field where to behave arbitrarily; also, it would
contradict the common human experience of the "impossibility" to exit the
domain of value. Something similar is nicely expressed by Iris Murdoch, when
claiming that "all sorts of momentary sensibilities to other people, too shadowy
to come under the heading of manners of communication, are still parts of

moral activity. ('But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?' Yes, roughly.)" (Murdoch 1994: 495).

In response to the third accusation, I maintain that VE, in its most refined versions, clearly distinguishes among different degrees of virtuousness, without imposing moral sanctity and heroism (or supererogation) as a requirement, and therefore can avoid the charge of extremeness.[15] There are both, indeed, a standard and a heroic level of virtue, depending (among other things) on the difficulty of the circumstances at hand. The first, is the level of ordinary morality, while the second belongs to sanctity, or to supererogation, and is compatible both with the doctrine of the virtues and with the so-called doctrine of the mean, in that "heroically virtuous people do not go to excess, but their actions remain at the high end of the intermediate range" (Curzer 2012: 142). Even if the second level may have an effect on the first, it cannot be the object of a moral requirement. Think, for example, to the role of moral exemplars, such as father Kolbe: what he did (volunteering to die, so to save another prisoner in Auschwitz) can be a source of inspiration, helping all of us understanding the importance of courage and selflessness. Thus, such deed can contribute to ordinary morality, without being in itself the object of a prescription.[16]

In sum, supererogation, however conceived, exceeds the requirements of duty from above: VE, although rejecting a focus on duty, is capable of recognizing such difference by distinguishing between different degrees of virtue, and therefore by admitting heroic (supererogatory) virtue without attributing it the same degree of compulsoriness as ordinary virtue.[17] Still, it is capable of recognizing its value for ordinary morality, avoiding the risk of flattening morality.[18]

---

[15]   A way to understand the different degrees of virtue is Swanton's analysis of right actions, as different from virtuous actions. As Rebecca Stangl notes, "in some circumstances, more than one virtuous action seems available, some of which are more virtuous than others", since "there is much latitude in hitting the target of the virtues such as generosity. Right acts range from the truly splendid and admirable to acts which are 'all right'" (Swanton, Virtue Ethics, 240). "So, it seems that an action can be generous without being perfectly generous". Also, "even a quasi-quantitative doctrine of the mean need not say that, in every situation, there is only one virtuous action that constitutes a mean" (Stangl 2016: 351; see also Curzer 142). However, in Aristotelian terms, the existence of degrees of virtuousness can be defended without appealing to a doctrine of right actions, conceived as distinct from virtuous ones. I will address at more length this point in the conclusion.

[16]   The recent debate on supererogation and virtue is extremely lively and cannot be summarized here. Besides the work just cited by Swanton, Stangl and Curzer, see, e.g., Kawall 2009; Crisp 2013; Heyd, 2015.

[17]   See the example provided by Curzer 2012: 142.

[18]   Something not too dissimilar to such potential flattening was what Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had in mind when he gave his famous Harvard speech in 1978 "A society which is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level

As I have noticed before, UM has a particular status among the forms of moralism, since it is the only one that refers to the person issuing the judgement, rather than to the judgement itself; in particular, I have distinguished between the charge of UM against strangers and non-admirable people.

There are two moves VE allows us to do to avoid such charges, and to make room for an account of relationships capable of accommodating ordinary intuitions on UM.

   a. The first, amounts to conceiving of the relationships as central to morality. In a virtue-ethical perspective, people who strive for the virtuous life share a common aim and a common good capable of grounding a peculiar kind of familiarity. In Aristotle's view, we may not be close friends, but our common belonging to a community that shares aims and values justifies the presence of a peculiar form of *philia* among us (as testified by the references in NE to *politike philia,* to the so-called social virtues, and to the nameless virtue resembling *philia* among fellow-citizens). Among people who seek to be virtuous (in a developmental perspective), there is no stranger as such.

   b. This leads to the second point. The condition for someone to be entitled to judge and give advice to someone else is, precisely, that of striving for the virtue. This might not mean that she is actually virtuous, or *phronimos* (i.e., endowed with practical wisdom). However, the *phronimos* is the regulative ideal of what everyone should look like in order to give advice.[19] Aristotle explains that, besides sharing the common aim of becoming good, the *phronimos* is the actually virtuous human being, who is therefore capable of judging (see the annex virtue of *gnome*) and of giving advice to others (*synesis*); also, since she is morally exemplar, the *phronimos* is admirable, which means that the other people entertain a relation of admiration with her, and they don't perceive her as a stranger.[20]

For these two reasons, VE makes room for advice and judgements coming

---

of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relations, there is an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralyzing man's noblest impulses" (Solzhenitsyn 1978).

[19]   Let me note incidentally that the *phronimos* is also the standard against which to evaluate whether the perception of a judgement as moralistic is reliable or not, whereas the merely continent (enkrates) person's perception on the matter is unreliable, as well as the vicious'. Both might indeed perceive as external a judgement which contradicts their desires and/or better judgements, which happen to be wrong. See Kristjánsson 2013.

[20]   A very convincing phenomenology of admiration is offered, among others, by Linda T. Zagzebski. See Zagzebski 2006, 2010, 2015, 2017, where she defends the idea of the morally exemplar as "imitably attractive". For a "logical geography" of the emotions targeting moral exemplarity, see Kristjánsson 2017.

from outside the self, but it does so only insofar as they are issued by someone who has some kind of meaningful relationship with the agent, be it proper friendship, the sharing of common (virtuous) ends, or the bond between someone supremely admirable and the people admiring them. This, I claim, endows the person passing the judgement with enough moral authority over the agent – an authority attributed by the agent herself – not to be moralistic. This is also what allows VE to address the final charge against UM, i.e., that relying upon someone else's judgement would imply a lack of autonomy. First, VE's intersubjective approach to morality, and the central place it assigns to relationships, has goodness, virtue and personal flourishing as criteria against which to evaluate others.[21] Second, virtuous relationships are chosen bonds; thus, they reflect and respect the agent's own system of beliefs and values, and are an expression of, rather than a threat to, her autonomy.

4. *Conclusion: the demands of duty and the demands of virtue*

In this paper, I have claimed that a virtue-based approach, thanks to its capacity of reconciling reasons and motives, and to its proposing an agent-related perspective on morality, can be defended from the charge of moralism.

I think in conclusion I can move a little further in this inquiry, to explore VE's advantages over rival approaches in presenting moral requirements in a non-moralistic fashion, and in providing insights over the proper (upper and external) boundaries of morality. What I suggest is that a strict, "Kantian" division between demands of virtue and a supposed categorical ought, representing the demands of right action, is exactly what leads to my initial definition of moralism.[22] As noted by Annas, an approach focused on a sharp division between what is right and what is virtuous accounts for the demands of duty in terms of something "coming from a source which is other than, and experienced as different from, her own practical reasoning and its sources" (Annas 2015: 613). Also, what makes this kind of demandingness special is that "it presents itself as external to the agent's own practical reasoning and its sources in her or his desires, goals and aspirations" (*ibid.*). This, it is said, expresses the fact that that right action makes a categorical demand on us;

[21]   In Zagzebski's view, for example, although admiration is the primary source of moral knowledge, it is also possible (and necessary) to criticize and rationally assess role models, in order to preserve one's own autonomy and make sure that one's own admiration is directed to fitting (i.e., truly good) objects (see Zagzebski 2015, 2017).

[22]   Recently, such a strong division has been emphasized by, e.g., Glasgow 2012; Horgan and Timmons 2008.

and it is something eudaimonist ethical thinking should be able to account for as adequately as deontologist thinking.

What is dominant here, as Annas remarks, is the «metaphor of externality», expressing the idea that any authentic moral demand "is external to the system of the agent's desires, goals and aspirations which is normally the subject, and the source, of his practical reasoning. The special strong demand does not come from, and so is in no way dependent on, the person's desires, preferences or goals. It comes from outside what we can call the practical self. Any demand which depends on any of the practical self's aims, projects or desires only appears to be a demand" (*ibid.*).

I think we are now in a position to evaluate the advantage of virtue ethics with regards to moralism as I have defined it throughout this paper. It is an approach, as far as I can see, which can make sense of moral demandingness, without referring to the metaphor of externality, i.e., without disposing of the practical self, with its motives, reasons, goals and aspirations, which all make part of the broad field of ethical thinking and reasoning.

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza
ms.vaccarezza@gmail.com
DAFIST – University of Genoa

References

Annas, Julia, 2015, "Virtue and duty. Negotiating between different ethical traditions", in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 49 (4): 605-618.

Carr, David, 2016, "Graditude. An educational postscript", in Id. ed., *Perspectives on Gratitude. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Routledge, London: 229-234.

Coady, C.A.J., 2006, "The moral reality in realism", in C.A.J. Coady ed., *What's wrong with moralism*, Blackwell, Oxford: 21-36.

Crisp, Roger, 2013, "Supererogation and Virtue", in M. Timmons ed., *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, OUP, Oxford: 13-34.

Curzer, Howard, 2012, *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Fullinwinder, R.K., 2006, "On moralism", in Coady 2006: 5-20.

Glasgow, Joshua, 2012, "Does Direct Moral Judgment Have a Phenomenal Essence?", in *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10: 1-18.

Heyd, David, 2015, "Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?", in C. Cowley ed., *Supererogation*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, Vol. 77, Cambridge University Press, 2015: 25-47.

Horgan, Terence and Mark Timmons, 2008, "Prolegomena to a Future Phenomenology of Morals", in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7: 115-131.

Kawall, Jason, 2009, "Virtue Theory, Ideal Observers, and the Supererogatory", in *Philosophical Studies*, 146: 179-19.

Korsgaard, Christine, 1996, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kristjánsson, Kristján, 2013, "Aristotelian motivational externalism", in *Philosophical Studies*, 164 (2): 419-442.

Kristjánsson, Kristján, 2017, "Emotions targeting moral exemplarity: Making sense of the logical geography of admiration, emulation and elevation", in *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1): 20-37.

Murdoch, Iris, 1994, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin, London.

Murdoch, Iris, 1997, *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Chatto & Windus, London.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven, 1988, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 13: 32-53.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven, 1990, *The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality*. Ead., *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 54-105.

Sherman, Nancy, 1989, *The Fabric of Character. Aristotle's Theory of Virtues.* Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Sherman, Nancy, 1997, *Making a Necessity of Virtue. Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Slote, Michael, 1992, *From Morality to Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Slote, Michael, 1999, "Self-regarding and Other-regarding Virtues", in D. Carr and J. W. Steutel eds., *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*. Routledge, London: 95-106.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, 1978. *A World Split Apart*, delivered 8 June 1978, Harvard University.

Stangl, Rebecca, 2016, "Neo-Aristotelian Supererogation", in *Ethics*, 126: 339-365.

Swanton, Christine, 2003, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Taylor, Craig, 2012, *Moralism. A Study of a Vice*, McGill University Press, Montreal and Kingston.

Vaccarezza, Maria Silvia, 2017, "The Unity of the Virtues Reconsidered. Competing Accounts in Philosophy and Positive Psychology", in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, DOI 10.1007/s13164-017-0334-7.

Williams, Bernard, 1985, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Wolf, Susan, 1982, "Moral saints", in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79(8): 419-439.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, 2006, "The Admirable Life and the Desirable Life", in T. Chappell ed., *Values and Virtues. Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 53-66.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, 2010, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory", in *Metaphilosophy*, 41(1): 41-57.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, 2015, "Admiration and the Admirable", in *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89(1): 205-221.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, 2017, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, OUP, Oxford.