

# Virtue and Continenence: Defending their Cognitive Difference

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## *Introduction*

In her recent paper *Virtuous Construal* (2019) Vigani provides psychological support to McDowell's silencing effect of virtue, arguing that it is through her moral outlook that the virtuous person represents the situation as an occasion for virtue only. The term "silencing" is still, however, a controversial matter, for it might lead to the conclusion that the virtuous person does not feel any sort of attachment to what is being silenced, thus suffers no genuine loss when it comes to forsaking something valuable in the face of virtue ("no-genuine loss theory": McDowell 1998; Baxley 2007). On the other hand, if we try to argue that what is silenced does not completely cease to exist in the eyes of the virtuous, then it is not clear what the difference between virtue and self-control (Aristotle's *enkrateia*, continence; NE 1150a35) amounts to. The aim of this paper is to defend the difference between virtue and continence in terms of cognition;<sup>1</sup> that is to say, to provide further support to Vigani's argument explaining how it is possible for something to be valuable yet be silenced (thus avoiding the no-genuine loss theory) and how this possibility is precisely what marks the difference between virtue and continence. I shall articulate my defence in the following steps: (A) arguing for the compatibility between a difference in cognition and Aristotle's distinction between the virtuous and the *enkrates* (sections 1 and 2), (B) arguing that the silencing effect does not imply blindness to commonly shared human values (e.g. family, relationships, survival; section 3), and (C) making sense of the difference between virtue and continence in terms of deliberation (section 4). I shall be as loyal to Aristotle as possible, grounding my argument on the following premises: (i) virtuous actions issue from a virtuous conception of a life

<sup>1</sup> For a less strictly cognitive reading see Mele (on the *phronimos*' "orectic commitment" to *eudaimonia* 1985: 388; 1992), Santas (on the failure to "cause movement" of mind and reasoning alone, 1969: 170) and Stoyles (on the need to focus less on the cognitive state of the *akrates* and the *enkrates* and more on the role of their desires and affections; 2007).

worth living (*eupraxia*: NE 1139a31-b5); (ii) there is some sort of context-dependency when it comes to deliberating virtuously (NE 1112b10-20); and (iii) virtuous deliberation does not allow for the inner struggle that is proper of continent deliberation (a “harmony” between appetites and reason: NE 1151b35-1152a5; while the continent is the one who has self-control: NE 1152a25-7). If I manage in the quest, then we will have found what the continent is missing in order to become virtuous, and it shall neither look in-humane nor undesirable; just hard.

### 1. *Who is the continent?*

The main example that will guide our inquiry is taken from recent Italian history.<sup>2</sup> In 1979 lawyer Ambrosoli was assassinated on behalf of mafia as a consequence of his uncovering of banker Sindona’s fraudulent financial empire. He was well aware of the danger and had different occasions to step back, decide to look away and live a peaceful, wealthy life; but even when the threats became explicit he still pursued his inquiry. On the face of it, we could say that Ambrosoli was virtuous because he did the right thing notwithstanding the risk; but what shape did his virtuous reasoning take? Did he blindly value justice over anything else, or was he torn between a clash of values (e.g. the love for his family and the duty towards the State)?

In Book III of the *NE* Aristotle states that the mark of the brave is that he can foresee the pain that the brave action would cost him, but he pursues it anyway (NE 1117b5-20). He also writes that it is pleasurable to act on virtue, but not all virtues can be enacted pleurably (NE 1117b15); as a matter of fact, the brave is the one who chooses to face what is painful and feels the pleasure of doing so (NE 1116a10-15). Thus, virtue involves a choice (NE 1105b30-1106a5) and this choice has a cost. In light of this, it seems unreasonable to think that the virtuous lawyer does not feel pained by the prospect of his own death, or of that of his family. What, on the other hand, does seem reasonable to say is that he is virtuous precisely because, much like Aristotle’s brave, he was pained by such prospects, but acted anyway; and did not do so blindly, but because he took a conscious choice over what good to forsake. If this is true, then the only difference between the virtuous and the continent is that the former is more reliable in choosing virtue over other valuable (and sometimes more pleasurable) perspectives, while the latter is more prone to be tempted by non-virtuous but highly valuable aspects of life (Baxley 2007). Thus, the first question we need to address is: is there really a difference between the continent and the virtuous?

In Book VII of the *NE* Aristotle draws a distinction between continence and

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Dario Cecchini for suggesting the example.

temperance in terms of harmony between appetites and reason (NE 1151b35-1152a5). As a matter of fact, while in the temperate person reason and appetites would normally go in the same direction, in the continent they act in opposition to each other (Tieleman 2009: 175). Temperance is, thus, a virtue of character and, in particular, the one that corresponds to the excellence of continence, while continence is just a kind of “semi-virtue” (Tieleman 2009: 175; NE 1150a35), that is to say, a step that is close to virtue but that still has something missing in order for it to qualify as a virtue. The fact that continence is a state that is close to virtue but not a virtue is emphasized once again by Aristotle when he distinguishes *enkrateia* (self-control) from mere stubbornness (NE 1151b4-15). He states that *enkrateia* is marked by the (correct) constancy of sticking to the right reasons, while stubbornness is marked by the (incorrect) constancy of blindly sticking to the wrong reasons (Broadie 2009: 168) and, thus, is characteristic of those who cannot dominate their appetites at all (NE 1151b10). The *enkrates* is flexible, and when it comes to the struggle between appetites and reason, she is obedient to the right reasons (NE 1102b26-8; 1151a26-27) and has control over her actions (NE 1152a25-7; Mele 2011: 466-467). We can thus begin to draw a broad picture of the continent agent: she still suffers from significant disharmony between appetites and correct judgments, but her self-control allows her to pursue the right reasons to act even when they clash with her desires (NE 1146a9-16). Acting on the right reasons will, thus, be the outcome of an internal struggle, which is what ultimately distinguishes it from true virtue, since in the virtuous person judgments and desires align (NE 1147a25-1147b5; 1148a10-17; 1150a25-30; 1152a2).<sup>3</sup> But is it a psychologically plausible distinction? And does it allow for a humanly-achievable account of virtue?

McDowell understands the difference between the virtuous and the continent in terms of cognition: the former cognises the situation through what he

<sup>3</sup> In the picture I am trying to defend, moral emotions can play an important role as the *affective* representations of reasons for action (Dancy 2014); that is, they can explain our access to reasons for action and, thus, express one’s moral vision. This view is compatible with moral motivation pluralism, according to which various kinds of both affective and cognitive states can be source of motivation to act (Corns & Cowan 2021), as well as with an Aristotelian account of emotions, where they comprise of both a cognitive and an affective component (Kristjánsson 2010) and where virtuousness implies having “the proper experience of emotions” (Kristjánsson 2007: 52). Now, a comprehensive account of the role of affective states in the shaping of moral vision is not in the scope of this paper, which is, on the other hand, focused on defending the cognitive difference between the virtuous and the *enkrates*. My argument does not imply that the cognitive difference is the *only* difference we can make sense of, so the role of affective states does not undermine it in its limited scope. However, such role does undermine a purely cognitive account of moral vision, making my argument the preliminary part of a much wider research on the shaping of moral vision (see Kristjánsson 2013 on the process of emotional sensitification in moral education; and Kristjánsson 2018 on the “affective turn” in moral education and the role of emotional traits in a life of *eudaimonia*; chapters 1 and 9).

calls the silencing effect of virtue, while the latter has a clouded representation of the situation (McDowell 1998: 55-56), and this is why the continent has to overcome inner struggle, while the virtuous does not. As a matter of fact, according to the silencing thesis, the virtuous person's attention is drawn by the requirement of virtue only, because all other features of the situation are silenced. Not having the silencing effect at work implies having a confused depiction of the situation, where the requirement of virtue clashes with other non-virtuous requirements. The continent's vision differs from that of the virtuous in its being blurred, that is, not clear over what reason to act on (McDowell 1998: 92). This explanation in terms of cognition is compatible with Aristotle's epistemic distinction between in/continent and virtue, according to which knowledge comes in degrees and the in/continent person only "half-has knowledge" (NE 1146b30-35); that is, she might know that she has to do what virtue requires, but not to the point of truly believing it, and this is why she is troubled about what to do (NE 1147a10-25; Toner 2003). If she had full knowledge, she would have represented the situation as a way to act on such knowledge only; but since she only has half-knowledge, then she depicts reality as somewhat deficient, precisely as her knowledge. If this is true, then virtuous action seems somehow *automatic*; that is, naturally generating from the virtuous representation of the situation. This has a significant implication: it sounds like arguing that Ambrosoli did not need to deliberate over what course of action to pursue, while the continent's choice is the result of an internal struggle between clashing reasons to act. This explanation in terms of reasons is the core of McDowell's argument for the perceptive aspect of virtue: the continent has to decide what to do, while the virtuous perceives what to do. I shall analyse virtuous deliberation in section 4; in particular, what *kind* of deliberation it is that is proper of the virtuous character and what *kind* of automaticity is granted by a virtuous construal, in accord with Aristotle's argument for the centrality of deliberation in practical wisdom (NE 1140a25).

Now, the no-genuine loss theory seems to find some confirmation in the *NE* where Aristotle talks of the brave. Since virtue is marked by the proper emotion, then the truly brave agent does not suffer for the perspective of facing great danger or pain (NE 1104b5-9; Leighton 1988). The correctness of the emotion is granted by the fact that the brave is one who has developed brave *habits* when it comes to facing dangers; braveness has, thus, become a dispositional state, that is to say, a virtue (NE 1106a11). If a person feels regretful for her choice to face danger, then she was not brave in the first place; if a person feels regretful for her choice to pursue virtue, then she was not virtuous in the first place. We can thus imagine that the continent person will be one who, being also prone to inner struggle, would feel regretful for having pursued virtue when the stakes

were high. On the other hand, what does not seem to find confirmation in the *NE* is McDowell's distinction between the continent and the virtuous in terms of deliberation: as I have just mentioned, he argues that, when the requirement of virtue is clear, the truly virtuous agent does not need to deliberate (1998: 51). However, Aristotle clearly states that virtuous action is the product of virtuous choice (*NE* 1111b25-30) and a significant step towards virtue is that of correctly deliberating on how to pursue a virtuous end (*NE* 1112b12-20). Allowing that there are such things as moral dilemmas and hard choices we all have to face in life, it seems that the distinction between virtue and continence becomes, once again, faint; if it is true also for the virtuous person that she has to deliberate, then, provided that the continent is the one who has self-control and thus responds to the virtuous requirement (that is, she does the right thing in the end), could it not be the case that both the virtuous and the continent have to undergo some sort of internal struggle when it comes to putting the virtuous requirement into action? Crucially, if this is the case, then would it not also be the case that, if the virtuous person has to deliberate over what pleasure to forsake, then she might just as well feel regretful as a consequence to her choice? These are questions on the nature of values: if something is highly valuable, then it seems implausible to say that it can cease to be valuable in the face of virtue. Because if that was the case, then the virtuous person would start to look more like the blind Stoic rather than the virtuous brave. For example, according to this picture the virtuous lawyer only saw reasons to act justly and no reason to act on love for his family, which implies that, as stressed by Baxley (2007) he was not harmed by his choice of virtue, nor that he suffered any genuine loss when ultimately sacrificing something highly valuable for the sake of virtue (407). Thus, the virtuous person is one who does the right thing and does not feel the pain of doing so.

The dispute concerns the term "silencing": while Baxley argues that if something is valuable, then it is not silenced, McDowell seems to hold that something can be valuable to the agent yet be silenced when it comes to virtue's ultimate requirement. Does this mean that virtue is the only valuable feature of one's life? McDowell seems to imply so when arguing that virtuous silencing is possible because the virtuous and the continent lawyers have two different conceptions of a life worth living: in the former conception virtue is not all there is to make a life worth living, thus the continent lawyer will see many clashing reasons to act one way or another. For the virtuous person, virtue is what *eudaimonia* consists in (McDowell 1998: 6), therefore the reason that the virtuous lawyer will see is the one that marks out the action required by virtue (McDowell 1978: 26). So, should we conclude that the virtuous person, given her commitment to *eudaimonia*, cannot but act on virtue, as if she was a sort of

slave to the virtuous requirement? This sounds significantly different from the commonsensical view of the virtuous person as one who is virtuous precisely because she is not a slave to virtue, but decides to pursue it no matter the loss (Baxley 2007: 409-410). Moreover, how can we truly say that we value something if relinquishing it would not count as a genuine loss? Seidman's example of the shopkeeper (2005: 73) presses on this point: if a shopkeeper facing bankruptcy does not think of every possible option (that is, even the illegal ones) to save his only source of income and, consequently, his family, can we truly say that he valued them, or his business, in the first place? Maybe he did, but not as strongly as to continue valuing them in the face of the virtuous requirement of not perpetrating illegalities. If any kind of value can be silenced when colliding with virtue, then we should conclude that in order to be truly virtuous one should devote oneself to it, making virtue the ultimate life worth above all else. This neither sounds humanely achievable, nor remotely desirable.

I have isolated the following problem: it is not clear what the ultimate difference between virtue and continence amounts to given that both the virtuous and the continent feel some sort of loss when it comes to forsaking something valuable, making virtue look just like a reliable version of the continent's self-control. On the other hand, it seems that if we wish to save Aristotle's distinction, we would need to draw a depiction of the virtuous which is that of the Stoic who blindly forsakes any value that happen to clash with virtue. In what follows I shall argue for a solution that allows for virtuous regret, but of a very distinct kind from that of the continent. Let us now proceed by analysing what the cognitive difference between virtue and continence might consist in.

## 2. *Difference in cognition*

McDowell's claim that the virtuous and the continent see the situation in different manners was recently supported by Vigani (2019) through a construal-based explanation. She uses the example of a by-passer dropping their wallet: the virtuous person represents the situation as an occasion to return the wallet, the in/continent person represents it as an occasion to either return the wallet or pocket the money (that is, due to her internal disharmony she might feel reluctant to return it), the vicious person represents it as an occasion to pocket the money (231). Let us understand "represents" and "occasion to" in McDowell's terms: how the virtuous person depicts the situation is a result of the silencing effect, and how she will act is guided by the reason that is not silenced. This makes it so that the virtuous person does *not* construe the situation as one in which she might as well pocket the money; thus, she does not see any reason to pocket the money. Problems arise, as we noted, when what the virtuous person

does not see reasons to act on constitutes something valuable to them. When there is both family and justice at stake, the virtuous lawyer only sees reason to act on justice, while we can imagine a continent lawyer seeing reasons for both acting on justice and living a peaceful family life. We have two questions to answer here: 1. how is it possible to construe the situation while silencing something valuable?, and 2. what does it mean for something valuable to be silenced?

The answer to the first question can be explored starting with what seems to be an authoritative trait of virtue: if an agent has a virtuous representation (a “schema”; 2019: 240) of a life worth living, then she will construe situations accordingly; that is to say, as a way to act on the virtuous requirement she clearly has in mind. Now, we can imagine the kind of life that is worth living for a virtuous lawyer as being one in which abiding to mafia diktat is not an option. This is perfectly compatible with a dimension of worthwhileness that includes a peaceful family life, until the worth of a peaceful family life gets entangled with the option of abiding to mafia diktat. This is when the virtuous schema becomes authoritative: there was no way for the virtuous lawyer to both pursue justice and care for his family, and given that caring for his family would have meant dropping his pursuit of justice, it was not an option to him. On the other hand, we can imagine the continent lawyer’s representation of worthwhileness as including the possibility of being corrupted if it means being sure to stay alive and be able to provide for his family, thus he will see both reasons to pursue justice and surviving. Now, “continence” goes to indicate that, in the end, he does the virtuous thing, but he is not reliable in doing so because he had to overcome his temptations (McDowell 1998: 47; NE 1151b34-1152a5), while he would be “incontinent” if he decided for corruption. The key here is that we get a picture of the virtuous person as being one that has a virtuous schema of worthwhileness that guides (authoritatively over other dimensions of worthwhileness) the depiction of the situation and who, for this reason, does not need to deliberate over which reason to act on. This might already sound pretty strong, but we can allow for the virtuous’ harmony to include both the judgment that he ought to pursue justice and the strong desire to do so.

The answer to the second question is actually a clarification of the term “silencing”. Incompatible values are silenced in their motivational force, but this does not mean that they stop existing for the agent (Vigani 2019: 236-237). For the virtuous lawyer there is no reason to act on family values given their entanglement with the perspective of corruption, and what this means is that he feels no motivation to act accordingly. This is not to say that family values stopped being important for him, or were never so in the first place. What this is to say, is that the virtuous person does not act on self-control (“I must refrain from being corrupted”, as *enkrateia* would allow; NE 1168b34-1169a5), nor on blind

stubbornness (“I must pursue justice no matter the cost”; NE 1151b5-10). What the continent is missing in order to be fully virtuous is precisely this capacity to hold something as valuable, without it becoming a reason to act in opposition to virtue. The price of virtue, though still present, starts to look less like Stoic forsaking and more like a *modus vivendi*. It is not a pondered decision to sacrifice values for the sake of virtue, but rather the condition of feeling the motivation to act on virtue only, while still valuing all there is at stake. McDowell presses on the point that sees the virtuous person not regretting the action undertaken for the sake of virtue (no-genuine loss), but that can (and indeed does) feel regretful for the circumstances that he found himself in (McDowell 1995; Peters 2015). We can call this “weak no-genuine loss” theory, as opposed to the “strong” one that sees the virtuous person as not feeling any kind of regret whatsoever. The silencing effect does not imply the strong version of the no genuine loss theory, because nothing in the silencing of non-virtuous reasons makes it so that the agent cannot still feel that she is forsaking something valuable. The fact that such forsaking and its correlated pain does not constitute a reason to act otherwise (does not motivate her to act otherwise) does, however, imply that the agent will not feel regretful for having pursued the virtuous course of action, because regret would imply that she did not actually wish to pursue virtuous worthwhileness in the first place. Thus, there is no regret for having acted on virtue, but we can reasonably allow regret for the circumstances the virtuous person has found herself in.

Thus, virtue marks a difference in cognition because being virtuous does not only mean reacting virtuously to the features of the particular situation (simple skill), but also construing the situation as an occasion for virtue rather than for, say, vice or in/continence. Now, the assumption here is that this occasion for virtue is itself motivating, because, in the virtuous person, choice and desire align (NE 1113a10-13); that is to say, the virtuous person’s desire to act on virtue is the immediate result of her virtuous deliberation (Toner 2003). It is not possible to be wise and not feel the desire to act on wisdom (NE 1113a10-15), because having full-knowledge *causes* virtuous action. This, on the other hand, does not happen in the continent; her knowledge is not yet fully-formed, thus the causal chain is somewhat faulty. She might end up doing the right thing, but her correct action would not have come about in the same way as it did for the virtuous person. We can thus conclude that, when it comes to cognitive states, we can understand this difference in terms of motivation: the virtuous person represents the situation in a way that is automatically motivating (where automatically means without any additional mediums), while the continent does not, or not to the same degree. We shall explore virtuous automaticity and deliberation in section 4, let us now linger a little more on the difference in terms of situation-construal.



We can now draw a better picture of what the virtuous personality amounts to, adding that the silencing effect is the result of the agent's cognitive *and* affective states (virtuous inner harmony). McDowell puts this intuition forward when talking about the agent's experience of secondary qualities: as a matter of fact, secondary qualities are

“propert[ies] the ascription of which to an object is not understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance” (McDowell 1998: 133).

Thus, the agent's experience of secondary qualities makes it so as they are, for the agent,

“qualities not adequately conceivable except in terms of certain subjective states, and thus subjective themselves” (McDowell 1998: 136).

It seems that there are two dispositions present: one in the object that is disposed to be perceived, the other in the subject who is disposed to perceive, and how both these perceptual dispositions are brought about depends on the nature of such dispositions, where “nature” indicates the drive of the agent's moral outlook. It is not in the scope of this paper to defend McDowell's perceptual claim of some properties being dispositionally present in the object; what is relevant here is the dispositional perception of the agent (NE1106a11: virtue as a dispositional state), that includes, as we argued, the moral outlook according to which she construes the situation and the disposition to be automatically motivated by certain features of the situation. This is important because it stresses once again what I have argued so far: the virtuous agent is not just the one who “reacts well” in each situation, because if that was all there was to virtue, then exponents of empirical psychology would be right in pointing out that, actually, non-moral situational features play a much bigger role than they seem they should in automatic deliberation (if I am in a hurry I will be less inclined to stop and help a by-passer, as stressed by the “situationist challenge”).<sup>4</sup> Quite the contrary, both moral and non-moral features play the role that the agent's virtuous disposition allows; that is to say, if I do not stop to help a person in need because I am incredibly late for work, what this means is that my moral outlook

<sup>4</sup> The “situationist challenge” (Doris 1998, Harman 2000) is the objection to virtue ethics that comes from empirical psychology; they press on the evidence that situational factors play a much bigger role in deliberation than virtue ethicists would like to allow (whether I have change with me to spare, or whether I am in a hurry, would impinge on my being inclined to help a passer-by, for example). The challenge was recently advanced in terms of ‘moral dissociation’ (Merrit *et al.*, 2010), according to which people do not consistently follow the diktat of their conscience, thus we should not speak of the virtuous character as something that has integrity.

includes the possibility that, if I am late for work, then the rest of the world stops existing. Thus, if I notice that a person needs my help, I might feel that I should help her, but since I also have the option to keep running to the office, then I would probably do so. If, on the other hand, I do not have the option that the world stops existing in the face of my being late for work, then I will help the person and my doing so ending up being even more late does not imply that my job suddenly stopped being important to me. Although plausible, the latter example might strike as suspicious: how can my job still be important to me, yet fail to motivate me to keep running to the office? In order to answer this quest, we need to make better sense of what it means for values to be silenced, yet be somehow present in the agent's awareness. Dancy's holism (2004) is an exhaustive explanation of how a feature of the situation can be significant, yet fail to contribute to the overall reason to act. In what follows we will see how values behave in a similar way and explore how the holism of values can help us with our picture of the virtuous person.

### 3. *Silenced values*

In the example of providing help notwithstanding being late for work, what was it that worked as decisive for acting in favour of helping rather than running to the office? According to the core thesis of the holism of reasons, all features of a particular situation contribute in some way, but none are intrinsically decisive, to the overall reason to act. Now, the "overall reason" is not an extra reason in addition to the contributory ones (that is, "I am late" thus, extra reason: "Job is more important"); rather, we should think of it in terms of "where the contributory reasons come down – on this side or that" (that is, either "I help" or "I run to work"; Dancy 2004: 16). In other words, whether I judge that I have more reason to help a person in need than to walk by does not specify a further reason for me to help the person in need. To see how this might work let us use Dancy's own example and imagine I promised my friend to help her move house:

- (1) I promised to do it.
  - (2) My promise was not given under duress.
  - (3) I am able to do it.
  - (4) There is no greater reason not to do it.
  - (5) So: I do it
  - (5\*) So: I ought to do it.
- (2004: 38)

Dancy's point when distinguishing between (5) and (5\*) is that if we end up with (5\*) we are thinking of reasons as if they were in a right-making relation

with one another, thus building up a logical argument in which they function independently from one another (as premises). For the sake of the argument, whether we end up with (5) or (5\*) is not crucial; what matters is that we should think of reasons in terms of favouring and enabling relations. That is to say, we should understand the resultant action as the synthesis of the reasoning that led to it as opposed to thinking that we can find the reason that makes the action right independently of the others. As a matter of fact, between (1) and (4) there is no independent reason for (5). We can say that the fact that I promised to do something counts in favour of my doing it, so (1) stands in a favouring relation to (5). According to (2) if I were to have promised under duress, then I would have had a reason not to (5); thus, (2) enables (1) to favour (5), because were (2) not the case, then (1) would have not favoured (5). The same goes for (3) and (4): each reason has contributed in some way but none were intrinsically decisive (2004: 43). In other words, it is not the simple fact that I promised my friend to help her that made it so that I helped her (or that it was right for me to help her), but the contribution that this and other reasons provided to the overall reason to help, which is called “overall” only to indicate that it is the reason all other reasons end up favouring the most, not an extra reason we discover by somehow adding up all those we have.

At this point, an analogy with values might strike as extreme: surely, the fact that I promised something does have some value, so does make a difference to the final value<sup>5</sup> to promote. Before proceeding to the analogy between holism of reasons and holism of values I must clarify what the relation between reasons and values is in Dancy’s terms. He argues that it is true that whenever there is a value there are reasons (e.g. I value the well-being of my family, thus I have at least one reason to care for my family), but “to be of value is not itself to have reason-giving features” (2004: 88). That is, the fact that I value the well-being of my family is not itself what gives me reasons to care for my family. We can now see how Dancy treats values in a way that is significantly similar to that of reasons, arguing that no value can be treated as valuable independently of others (holism of values) and that the fact that values can vary in intensity does not imply a change in the object that is valuable (2004: 170). He grounds the holism of values in his argument against Moore’s invariabilist account of supervenience, according to which if there is a change in the intensity of the final value, then there must also be a change in the object of value so that there is never a discrepancy between the value of the object and the value it goes to contribute to (do not vary independently of one another: 177). That is to say, if something is

<sup>5</sup> In what follows I shall call “final” value what Dancy calls “overall” value, as mean to clear away the idea that reasons and values add up to an overall reason/value.

intrinsically valuable, then it cannot vary in value unless something else about it changes significantly. Thus, if we take a promise to be intrinsically valuable, then it must make as much difference to the final value as the value that it holds, unless something about this promise changes radically (say, I am a pathological liar, thus all my promises are void of intrinsic value). If this is true, then there can never be an instance in which there is something valuable (family) that maintains its value without making a difference to the final value (virtue).

Dancy argues for a different account of supervenience that is less local in its allowing for an object to change in value intensity as a consequence of a change *somewhere* in the situation and not necessarily in the object itself (177-178). This context-dependency does make a difference on the object's being ultimately valuable, but does not necessarily impinge on what makes it so that it is valuable. In order to support this, Dancy draws a distinction between resultant relation and supervenience relation (178): the resultant relation of the promise is the relation between the promise and what makes a promise valuable; that is, between the action of promising and only some non-moral properties (Dancy 1981: 381), e.g. the fact that a promise does not need anything but pure trust in the person who makes it, to name one. The supervenience relation is the relation between the promise and the context of the promise; that is, between the action of promising and all the non-moral properties that the particular case presents (2004: 381-382), e.g. the fact that I am a pathological liar does not impinge on the resultant relation between the promise and what makes it valuable, but it definitely limits the amount of value that my promises ultimately carry. Less extremely, if I am urgently needed somewhere else and thus cannot fulfil the promise I made to my friend, there is nothing in the promise itself that changes; rather, the urgency affects the promise's making a difference to what is ultimately valuable in that moment.

Going back to our original example, we can now say that if all this is true, then it is plausible for something as valuable as family care to be valuable for the virtuous lawyer without necessarily contributing to the final value. But what is this final value and what is its relation to the parts that contribute to it? In Dancy's words, the value of the whole does not coincide with the addition of all values of the parts (just as for the holism of reasons the overall reason is not the addition of all present reasons), but it contains the value of the contributing parts (181). This is crucial: once again what matters is the contribution (not something that is intrinsic to the value), and this contribution depends on the presence of other features. The fact that a requirement of virtue is present makes it so that pursuing virtue is what contributes to the final value, while family care, though maintaining their value, does not contribute in the same way. This is strong, because family counts as a *moral* reason to act, in the sense

that there are some “oughts” that are implied. The situation is thus much more critical than when it comes to, say, one’s survival: one might count one’s own well-being as non-moral when it comes to clashing with virtue, but it is much less straightforward to do so when the well-being is that of one’s children. This said, we reached the controversial part of the holism of values: it is not the case that family stops being valuable in relation to what it is that makes family valuable, but its strength in value is softened due to the context in which the lawyer cannot entertain the possibility of corruption. This asymmetry between value and value contribution might still sound suspicious; after all, we do want to say that there is something about the prospect of caring for one’s family that charges it with value independently of other features of the situation. Dancy does not deny this and advances a moderate form of holism that

“allows the possibility of what we might call ‘default value’. By this I mean that it can accept a distinction between those features that bring no value to the situation, though once there they acquire a value that they can contribute to the whole, and those features that bring a value with them, though once they are there that initial value can be wiped out, or even reversed, by other features of the situation (185).”

We can thus argue that the prospect of surviving and, say, a book do not have the same “default value” when understood independently of anything else, because the former is already somehow charged with value. This is not to say that they cannot contribute in different ways or not contribute at all to the final value; a book can become incredibly valuable if it is the only copy left on earth (180), while family can become less valuable if it would necessarily bring perpetration of injustice with it. In this last case, the fact that a certain value is inextricably connected with a non-virtuous element is what makes the difference in terms of contribution.

Let us now merge the holism of reasons and the holism of values in light of what we have argued so far. The silencing effect of virtue makes it so that what is not relevant to the requirement of virtue ceases to be a reason for action; this is not to say that it ceases to be valuable and that cannot contribute to the final reason where the virtuous requirement allows it. This is possible because in the virtuous person the synthesis of reasons occurs under the authority of virtue; given that virtue is what silences non-salient reasons,<sup>6</sup> we will have values in some sort of relation with reasons, but not all of them will contribute to the resultant one. Let us make practical sense of this: in Ambrosoli’s situation there was (1) the fact that he was a lawyer, thus it was his duty to pursue justice; (2) engagement with his duty towards the State, because he truly believed in his

<sup>6</sup> where “non-salient” does not mean “not valuable”.

mission; (3) a family that needed his love and support; (4) explicit threats towards him and his family on behalf of the mafia. None of these features worked independently of one another; which means that, this is not a case in which we have two distinct moral requirements that clash and over which one needs to deliberate. Rather, the final construal of the situation is the result of the synergy among these features. (3) and (4) did constitute a source of value, but the situation a virtuous lawyer construes according to his schema is one in which abiding to fraud is not an option, thus anything that could work towards that outcome loses its motivational force. What the virtuous agent has automatic motivation to act on is the final reason, not the single reasons; thus, even though the single reasons are still present and contribute to the overall reason, they are silenced in their motivational force. Holism can thus explain how family can still be present in the virtuous lawyer's mind and heart (as something one can reason on and feel pained by), but at the same time fail to find any motivation to act for the sake of it given its entanglement with the illegal course of action.

This picture is compatible with Aristotle's discussion of voluntary and involuntary actions in *NE* Book III, where he claims that there are certain situations in which one would not have pursued a specific course of action if one could have done otherwise (*NE* 1110a19). We can see how nobody would voluntarily choose to die or to risk the safety of their family members if they could avoid doing so, which is precisely why the virtuous person is not a Stoic: she would not have chosen a particularly painful course of action if she had any other (virtuous) option available. Moreover, family is among those external goods that can be regarded as essential for a flourishing life (*NE* 1099b1-9), whether they be instrumental for acting on virtue (like friends, money or political power, *NE* 1099a32; or strength and comfort *NE* 1178a29-32) or whether not having them would imply living a significantly less-enjoyable life (which is our example; *NE* 1096a1-5; 1099b4; 1101a14-15).<sup>7</sup> The forsaking of such external goods is itself a painful experience for the virtuous person; the "weak" version of the no-genuine loss theory is, thus, compatible with Aristotelian virtuousness in its allowing for painful regret of circumstances that required the forsaking of such valuable goods.

Our analysis brought us to the following sketch of the virtuous person: she still feels the pain of the price of virtue, but also does not have to overcome inner struggle when it comes to doing the right thing. Baxley's objection states that the silencing effect is implausible, because if something is silenced then either it was not important in the first place (Seidman's shopkeeper), or it completely

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on Aristotle's use of external goods in the *NE* and in the *Politics* see Cashen (2016).

ceases to exist in the eyes of the virtuous, thus making her look like a blind value foresaker who does not feel any pain in doing so (“strong” no-genuine loss). If this is true, then virtue does involve some sort of internal struggle when it comes to clashing values, making it look more like continence than Aristotle’s dispositional excellence. Thus, one way to save the cognitive difference between the virtuous and the continent is to show (a) that it is plausible for something to be valuable yet be void of motivational force, and (b) that this possibility is precisely what marks the difference between continence and virtue. Concerning (a), I argued that the plausibility in question can be supported by an account of silencing that sees values as being important in two different manners: they can be important independently of the context and dependently of the context (NE 1110a10-15), which is not so controversial. Crucially, they can be important both independently and dependently of the context, at the same time and with two different degrees of motivational strengths, which is the controversial part. From Aristotle we know that continence is the condition of those who have self-control, and that in the continent action is the result of somewhat deficient deliberation, as opposed to the excellent one of the virtuous; what we need to discover is whether Aristotle’s account of deliberation can be compatible with the cognitive picture we have just sketched, that is, that virtuous deliberation is both automatically motivating and allows for context-related regret (virtuous “silencing”), while continent deliberation is characterised by a somewhat deficient motivational element and, thus, allows for action-related regret. If I manage to support this latter point, then I shall have also found the proper support to (b).

#### 4. *Deliberation: the “why” and the “how”*

We noted that McDowell’s view might not be compatible with Aristotle when it comes to deliberation: for silencing to be the mark of virtue it has to be automatically motivating, which sounds like arguing that the virtuous person is rarely in the situation of rationally deliberating over what course of action she should pursue. On the other hand, Aristotle explains virtue in terms of excellent deliberation (the *phronimos* is one who deliberates well; NE 1140a25; 1141b10) and understands deliberation as the process of calculation (NE1139a5-15) that involves both reason and thought (NE1112a15). All this he calls *prohairesis*, which is what ultimately issues virtuous action (NE1105a28-33; 1113b1-14; Broadie 1991). He also states that the object of deliberation is not an end, but what brings one to the end (NE1112b12) and such object of deliberation takes the form of a deliberative desire (NE1113a5-10). In other words, it is as if we somehow “assumed” the end and had to deliberate over the means to

achieve it, just like the mathematician assumes a specific postulate in order to draw rational conclusions (Broadie 1991: 233). If this metaphor holds, then our ethical assumptions would be specific too; that is, they would be a specification of what a life worth living means to us. Thus, McDowell's argument for the difference in moral outlooks might also be read as a difference in terms of ethical assumptions when it comes to virtue and continence: if I am continent, then my ethical assumption might be way too general for it to be reliably motivating in a way that would avoid inner struggle. For example, if I assume that "I must do the virtuous thing", then my deliberation would need to consider what the virtuous thing to do might be, then operate my self-control in order to bring myself to do it notwithstanding the temptations. Temptations that, arguably, might be present precisely due to the overly general formulation of my ethical assumption which loses part of its motivational force the moment I have to remind myself of the "why" I must bring it about.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, we might imagine the virtuous lawyer's ethical assumption in relation to *eudaimonia*, that is, to the conception of a life worth living: for example, "a life worth living is one in which I am *not* corrupted". If this is so, then virtuous deliberation might not come about automatically when it comes to clashing moral values (family and justice); however, it would automatically rule out certain courses of action, which is what does not happen to the continent.

This distinction between conceiving of the end and of the means is crucial, for virtue needs both moral excellence to form the proper end (*skopos*) and intelligence to get the means right in order to achieve it (NE1144a7-9). Excellent deliberation will thus be what allows one to reach the virtuous end (NE1142b33; 1144b15; Broadie 1991: 243) which, as we said, is both arrived at and assumed. That is to say, that the virtuous person is one who has reached the conclusion that a certain end is to be assumed, and then assumes it when it comes to bringing it about. That is not to say that the virtuous person finds automatic motivation in seeing *how* to bring virtue about, but rather in the very option of bringing it about (the "why"). This is the inner harmony that we encountered in section 1 and that seemed a good candidate for conceiving of the difference between virtue and continence. Now we have the tools to draw a comprehensive

<sup>8</sup> There is a sense in which how we think of virtue counts towards our moral outlook. Broadie (1991) argues that if we idealize virtue, then our deliberations would be somewhat naïf and our actions, consequently, either *akratic* (against what we thought as the right thing to do) or *enkratic* (a struggle to finally act in accordance with what we thought as the right thing to do: 241). I believe this to mean something similar to what I am arguing: if our assumptions are clear specifications of what a life worth living means to us, then the "why" is already present when they function as premises to our deliberation. This is not to say that they cannot be reasoned over, but that if they take the form of deliberative volitions, then we do not encounter a lack of motivation when it comes to enact them (*akrasia*), nor an inner struggle between virtue and temptations (*enkrateia*).



sketch of the virtuous persons' cognition: the virtuous agent has arrived to her ends through *phroairesis*, thus construing her moral outlook, and her actions are expressions of such moral outlook (Finnigan 2014: 689). That is, she represents situations accordingly (section 2). Moreover, her virtuous representations automatically exclude certain courses of action (silencing effect) and if there are particular moral values that fall in the excluded area, they become a reason to regret the situation she had to face ("weak" silencing effect; section 3), but not her pursuing of virtue, because acting on such values *is not an option* for her. This is not to say that the virtuous lawyer automatically forsakes the well-being of his family to pursue justice, while the continent lawyer understandably takes his time to consider his options. What this is to say is, rather, that the virtuous lawyer already knows that his goal is (and desires) to live a life in which he is not corrupted, thus does not need to deliberate over the end, while the continent does. Virtuous deliberation is about the "how"; continent deliberation, on the other hand, needs to deliberate also about the "why".<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is conceivable that the virtuous person needs to deliberate over how to avoid corruption when the well-being of his family is present in his mind and heart. It is not possible, though, for him not to assume his virtuous moral outlook; he will necessarily represent the situation as one in which corruption is not an option and, thus, will not see any reason to be corrupted as motivating enough for him to act in that direction. This is compatible with Aristotle's account of virtuous deliberation which is not "automatic" in the sense that does not need to be reasoned about, but is rather "spontaneous",<sup>10</sup> where our endorsed ends "are assumed to constrain the deliberative process to such a specified extent that they afford a single, unique possibility for action in view of a certain circumstance" (Finnigan 2014: 695); that is, they provide the virtuous option only.

### *Conclusion*

I argued that virtuous person has a moral outlook that excludes non-virtuous courses of action, much like Aristotle's ethical assumptions (Vigani 2019; section 2); but since for something to be valuable does not imply its being intrinsi-

<sup>9</sup> NE 1112b10-20: a doctor does not need to deliberate over whether to heal her patients, nor a public speaker needs to decide whether to persuade the audience or not. In the same way, the virtuous person does not need to decide whether to be virtuous, but how to be so, and she will do so assuming a virtuous moral outlook on the situation.

<sup>10</sup> NE 1115b15-20: in spontaneous virtuous action passions play a significant role in favour of virtue, because virtuous passions are not like the continent's bodily appetites (Leighton 1988). This goes to support the argument for the harmony between reason and affective states, where virtuous emotions do not take the shape of temptations but, rather, of confirmations of the ultimate value of one's own moral outlook.

cally reason-giving (Dancy 1981, 2004; section 3), then it must be true that reasons can be silenced while their correlated values are still present. This might sound like arguing that virtue implies a life of sorrow, where the virtuous person is constantly driven towards the right thing to do while passively suffering for all she has to forsake. However, the virtuous moral outlook takes the form of a deliberative desire (NE 1113a10-15), where what is silenced is not present as a practical option (or it is void of motivational force, in McDowell's terms). Thus, being virtuous means that what is valuable remains valuable without opening a non-virtuous option; this is why there is no struggle when it comes to deliberating whether to act virtuously, nor regret for having done so. What the continent is still missing is precisely this excellence of character that allows for contemplating something, both rationally and affectively, without it counting against virtue.

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