

# Virtue of Care and Ethics of Virtue

*Elena Colombetti*

Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy

e.colombetti@pusc.it  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7776-7272>

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## Abstract

There are two characteristics shared by Virtue Ethics and the Ethics of Care: a distance from deontology and consequentialism on one hand; the importance of the emotional and affective dimensions in moral discourse on the other. Nonetheless, it seems that the two theories diverge regarding the *central focus* of moral life: the role of the agent's character (virtues), relationality and responsibility for others (care). Be that as it may, there is a little-considered strand which, in the 1970s, revived the concept of virtue precisely by focusing on the inescapable human dimension of care. This analysis will consider the contribution of existentialist psychology which, by reworking Heidegger's proposal, highlighted the psychological and ethical role of care (May, Erickson). Secondly, it will trace the link between care and the flourishing of the individual (Mayeroff), and from there discuss and evaluate the connection between the ethics of care and the ethics of virtue.

**Keywords:** Ethics of care, Ethics of virtues, Existentialism, Self-realization, Flourishing.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There are two overarching characteristics shared by Virtue Ethics and the Ethics of Care: on the one hand, a distancing from, and critique of, Kantian deontol-

ogy and various forms of consequentialism; on the other, the affirmation of the importance of the emotional and affective dimensions in moral discourse. At the same time, it seems that the two theories—whilst taking into account the different formulations in which they have been expressed—diverge regarding the *central focus* of moral life: virtue ethics emphasises the role of the agent's character and addresses the question of *what kind of person I want to be*, whilst care ethics centres on relationality and dependence, from which derives the responsibility to care for others.

It is not uncommon for the relationship between the two approaches to be framed as a question, seeking to answer whether the ethics of care can or should be conceived in terms of a virtue ethics. I find that, expressed in this way, the question may have its theoretical interest but ends up being rather irrelevant from the point of view of practical reason. My suggestion is to modify it slightly, by attempting to understand whether the focus on character (characteristic of virtue ethics) and on relationality and responsibility (characteristic of the ethics of care) *are mutually implicated* and, consequently, whether the exercise of virtue, as such, requires, in certain contexts, acts and processes of care. In my view, this reformulation moves beyond a mere question of classification and makes the anthropological, ethical and political implications more visible.

The work is considerably longer than the space available in this text; I therefore propose an approach to highlight certain elements that may help provide an initial, albeit partial, answer to the question. I would therefore like to examine how, before any theorisation regarding ethics, care was first addressed within the field of psychology, specifically in the areas of existential psychology and psychosocial development, and then explored philosophically from the perspective of the realisation and flourishing of the caring subject. In the final section, I will discuss and evaluate the connection between the ethics of care and the ethics of virtue.

## 2 FROM HEIDEGGERIAN ONTOLOGY TO PSYCHOLOGY

Reflection on care addressed the classic question of virtues at a very early stage and did so independently of the 20th-century philosophical debate that led to the revival of practical philosophy. By the middle of the century, the theoretically dominant development of meta-ethical doctrines (analytic and non-cognitivist) had spurred a pressing search for formal constraints on morality, but it was precisely at that moment that dissenting voices arose, highlighting through rigorous criticism the role of virtues in ethics. It was also the 20th century that saw the flourishing of theories of justice, to the extent that much of the reflection on care, beginning with the watershed work *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan (1981),

denounced such proposals as incapable of grasping the asymmetrical nature of relationships, of dependence and interdependence, and of the inadequacy of the image of the social contract.

In particular, Gilligan, as is well known, recognises and analyses two ways of viewing moral problems and describing the relationship between the self and the other: a moral voice of responsibility that differs from that of rights.

The morality of rights is predicated on equality and centred on the understanding of fairness, whilst the ethic of responsibility relies on the concept of equity, the recognition of differences in need. Whilst the ethic of rights is a manifestation of equal respect, balancing the claims of others and the self, the ethic of responsibility rests on an understanding that gives rise to compassion and care<sup>1</sup>.

His work initiates a broad reflection *on the ethics of care*; however, there is also a strand, little considered, which as early as the 1970s took up the concept of virtue precisely by focusing on the inescapable human dimension of care, itself drawn from Heidegger's ontological-existential reflection. The concept of care present in *Being and Time* is, in fact, taken up from the perspective of psychology<sup>2</sup> and, from there, undergoes a gradual shift towards the ethical plane, eventually developing a genuine *ethics of care*, understood as a specific perspective for addressing the moral question. It is, in fact, precisely by combining with Heidegger's categories of the *world* and *choice* that care comes to the fore: precisely because the subject is called upon to construct the world for themselves and to take on the project of their own existence, care emerges as a central element in the understanding of the human. From the ontological dimension of *Sein und Zeit*, in which it is presented as a mode of being of the *Being-there* (*Dasein*), it is articulated in terms of psychological manifestation and dynamics as an indispensable element for the harmonious development of the person, both as care received and as care offered, thereby assuming choice and responsibility.

In this regard, I find it interesting to reconsider the role of care in the work of three authors: Rollo May and Erik Erikson, respectively in the fields of existential psychology and psychosocial development, and Milton Mayeroff in the field of anthropology. In an age marked by what Rollo May defines as the 'schizoid condition'—a loss of contact with reality and with feeling—care emerges as the only force capable of bridging the split between the self and the world. Whilst May traces its roots to ontology and the will, Erik Erikson defines its function

<sup>1</sup>C. GILLIGAN, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London 2003<sup>3</sup>, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup>The pioneer in systematically incorporating Heidegger's analytic structures into psychiatric clinical practice was, as is likely well known, Ludwig Binswanger during the 1930s. He derived from 'Sein und Zeit' the concepts of *Dasein*, the notion of thrownness into the world (dejection), and the significance of choice.

within the life cycle as a virtue of maturity, whilst Milton Mayeroff describes its phenomenology as a process of facilitating growth.

### 2.1 *Rollo May: Care as a Remedy for Apathy*

Rollo May played a key role in bringing existential psychology to the US, following in Heidegger's footsteps. He describes care not as a type of activity but as a constitutive condition of being human. It is the structural response to apathy, that state in which *nothing matters* and which, for this reason, we can perceive as a withdrawal from the world. To understand the significance of this statement, we must consider at least some elements of his theoretical and clinical proposal.

Drawing on a statement by Paul Tillich, May describes existentialism as an approach that considers reality as that which is immediately experienced in life, rather than as something that is merely the object of thought<sup>3</sup>. It is, therefore, the immediate experience of the human being, rather than cognitive analysis, that reveals it to us. According to May, the existential method is in fact "the endeavor to understand the nature of this man who does the experiencing and to whom the experiences happen."<sup>4</sup> The human being is an open reality; it is that existent which, while beginning with what it is and the situation into which it is thrown, shapes itself through its own choices and the responsibility that these choices entail<sup>5</sup>. Based on this, it is quite clear why responsibility is positioned at the foundation of the existential method: it is, in fact, characteristic of the human subject to possess the capacity to face reality, whatever it may be, by responding to it in a positive manner—meaning by this neither a superficial optimism nor an axiological judgment of events, but rather as the most refined etymological meaning of *positive* in the latin sense of *being placed*. Consequently, it is not immediately an ethical category, but the ontological and existential capacity to respond to circumstances by taking a stance. Thus, freedom arises as a consequence of responsibility, rather than the reverse: it is to the extent that an individual manages to accept and assume responsibility for their own life that they are, properly speaking, free. Whatever the subject's situation and history, it is up to them to choose how to take a stand and how to construct the world, assigning meanings to events and given conditions.

Structuring oneself and the world, however, is not a solipsistic activity that originates and concludes within the subject: the world is always, as we might say with Heidegger, one of *Mit-sein*, meaning it is the product of an interconnected network of meanings constructed in relation to others.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. R. MAY, *The Emergence of Existential Psychology*, in *Existential Psychology*, ed. by R. May, Random House, New York 1969, pp. 11-51: 13.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>It is from this perspective that Sartre's maxim that existence precedes essence is taken up.

In this passage, we observe the ontological-existential hinge with care. If the environment surrounding the human being is not deemed important, if *it remains indifferent to them*, their very world and thus their existence lose meaning. May identifies the evil of the years he writes precisely in apathy, a state of disengagement from a world that appears devoid of meaning, perceived as pervaded by deterministic forces and in the face of which the individual feels powerless. It is no coincidence that love and will, which previously constituted the response to the world's problems, have themselves become a problem. Both are essential in the process through which a person extends beyond themselves to engage with the world, aiming to influence the context and others while also exposing themselves to being influenced by them. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that, in a time when both values and points of reference appear to have vanished, the very mechanisms of this mutual influence become paralysed, and consequently, genuine engagement with the world is halted. What develops is more than mere disinterest; it is the *creeping conviction that nothing truly matters*, that nothing can be done to change one's situation. Without a basic emotional involvement, the individual falls into an existential torpor that heralds violence. In response to this emptiness, May advocates for the rediscovery of care: not merely a feeling, but as a way of being in the world that enables one to rediscover one's identity and capacity for action.

In nature, the power of care seems to emerge from the perception of another's pain: we do not merely perceive it cognitively, but we can almost experience it, feeling it in our own bodies. Strictly speaking, however, care only arises to the extent that this capacity to perceive another's pain does not end in a neurological reaction alone, but is taken up at the level of consciousness, bringing into play that responsibility previously discussed—namely, the capacity to respond and to perceive oneself as being called upon due to involvement in the pursuit and construction of meaning of the world. It is precisely for this reason that care manifests itself even in the most desolate contexts; we find an almost iconic example of this in certain photographs of the Vietnam War: from images of soldiers tending to the wounded, to the shot capturing the gaze of a marine and a child, both bewildered in the face of such senselessness. A silent exchange in which May sees depicted the unconscious identification with the other's pain, that empathic foundation present in humanity and which emerges despite the horror of war that seems to overwhelm any power of the individual.

If apathy results from the crisis of love and will, then care constitutes the new foundation for their reconstruction<sup>6</sup>: it is, in fact, that state *in which something*

<sup>6</sup>The pathway that leads May to discuss care explicitly involves an insightful analysis of the relationship between love and will, including how their synergy can turn into mutual destruction, as well as an examination of the different levels and dimensions of love.

*matters*. I believe it is important to highlight that the primary aspect is not immediately the dynamism of actions or the process of care itself, but rather *the condition of the subject to whom something matters*, who finds themselves subjectively involved in the recognition that there is something of value, and that this value has to do with them, calling upon them. “Life,” he observes, “comes from physical survival, but a good life comes from what we care about.”<sup>7</sup>

The Heideggerian roots of this analysis are crystal clear. Care, the *Sorge*, constitutes the fundamental phenomenon of human existence: when individuals cease to care, they forfeit their being, and care itself becomes, in a positive sense, the pathway back to it. It is important to note that, within this framework, care does not arise from an act of will or love; rather, it is the genuine origin of Eros and the will. “Will is the full blown, matured form of wish, and is rooted with ontological necessity in care.”<sup>8</sup>

To comprehend the connection between will and care, it is necessary to recall two previously mentioned elements: the significance of experience as a gateway to reality, and the importance of choice. These elements must be considered conjointly, as a reference to experience could lead to confusing care with sentimentality, while the centrality of choice (the outcome of responsibility) requires us to attend to intentionality. Sentimentality, in fact, pertains more to contemplating the feeling than to genuinely experiencing the object of that feeling. To illustrate this, May cites Tolstoy, who describes some Russian women who are moved to tears at the theatre yet completely forget their coachmen waiting for them in the cold<sup>9</sup>. Strictly speaking, sentimentality prides itself on the fact that we have this emotion; it begins and concludes within the subject, without truly engaging with the real object. Conversely, care involves engagement with objective reality; it drives us to act in response to the situation: it unites love and will precisely because it requires decision-making<sup>10</sup>.

A work such as *Waiting for Godot* perfectly illustrates the meaning of mutual care as a remedy for apathy. In that theatrical production by Beckett, May sees the very tragedy of apathy and emptiness being staged, but she also observes that the core of the drama resides in the act of waiting together. In this waiting, the characters share stories, time, and objects (such as a shoe or a piece of turnip): it is the very relationship that develops between them during that time that becomes a form of care and hope, capable of challenging the apparent absurdity of the situation. It is precisely this *mythos of care* that, in essence, enables us to resist

<sup>7</sup>R. MAY, *Love and Will*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1969, pp. 289-290.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 291.

<sup>9</sup>The scene is situated within the novel *Resurrection*, published in 1899.

<sup>10</sup>It is noteworthy that May interpreted the university campus uprisings of that period as a challenge to the notion that nothing can be accomplished. The underlying question was essentially a matter of concern: does anyone truly care?

cynicism: it provides an immediate grasp of being that goes beyond mere technical rationality—an approach that, conversely, strips the world of all meaning. We observe a comparable instance in a clinical context involving one of May's patients, named Preston, a man who felt *unreal* and trapped in his incapacity to love. The pivotal moment in therapy is not achieved through logical reasoning but occurs when Preston expresses sincere concern for the therapist, recognising the difficulty of his task. It is precisely that moment of sympathy and identification that signifies the reemergence of care, as it marks the transition of the therapeutic relationship from purely analytical procedures to a authentic human encounter, with a shared world in which the way one presents oneself, sharing with the other, and the assumption of responsibility (the capacity to respond) hold critical importance.

Care, therefore, as the state in which something matters. We are not yet discussing ethics, but we certainly find its basis here: something matters, the subject is open to reality, perceives themselves in relation to reality, and discovers they are called upon to take a stand. Moreover, we could not genuinely speak of ethics if there were not this assumption of one's own freedom. It is no coincidence that in philosophical existentialism, we find at its core the assumption of one's own freedom as the primary ethical imperative, as the first requirement of morality itself.

## 2.2 Erik Erikson: Care as a Virtue of Generativity

Whilst remaining firmly within the psychological sphere, Erik Erikson's reflection on care draws upon conceptualisations closely aligned with the purely moral dimension. In his works, in fact, he explicitly describes care as *a fundamental force or virtue* that emerges in adulthood. Although we are not yet explicitly in the ethical realm, the very term *virtus*, or force, is intertwined with part of the moral significance of virtue, understood precisely as a stable disposition of the cognitive, affective, and volitional faculties that enable an individual to desire, recognise and act well (here indeed in an ethical sense) in various contexts.

Like May, Erikson is also influenced by Heidegger's philosophy. In his research, he develops a theory of psychosocial development rich in humanistic connotations. Compared to Freud, he extended the analysis of development to the entire life cycle and shifts the focus from purely instinctual aspects to the significant impact of social and cultural experiences on developmental dynamics. Drawing on various life histories and clinical case studies, he offers an interpretation of human existence in which psychosocial development progresses through eight stages<sup>11</sup>, each characterised by a conflict wherein syntonic and dystonic

<sup>11</sup>In recent years, Erikson has also contemplated the addition of a ninth stage, that of old age

tendencies collide, resulting in a crisis. It is through confronting and resolving this conflict that the personality is fortified, thus fostering the development of a core virtue specific to that stage.

In the case of adulthood, corresponding to the seventh stage of his descriptive model, the conflict manifests between *generativity* and *stagnation*, and the virtue that emerges from this struggle is, as previously noted, care. Whilst the preceding stage, that of young adulthood, is primarily concerned with the development of identity and meaningful relationships, the existential question here shifts: it is no longer focused on who we are, but rather on how to live in such a manner as to leave behind a legacy—someone or something that transcends us and endures beyond our departure. This is the fundamental aim of generativity: a force embodying creativity and productivity, which, consequently, possesses the capacity to further enhance an individual's identity. Conversely, stagnation acts as a dystonic force with respect to the progression of one's inner life and identity; it results in withdrawal into oneself, driven by fears or needs. Since it does not aim to leave a legacy, if this force dominates, the individual may perceive their actions as futile and barren, despite any potential success, leading to an inward impoverishment.

If generativity is given space, the force that emerges is precisely care, which, analogously to May, does not denote a generic feeling, but rather an active concern, a capacity and a commitment. "Care," writes Erikson, "is a widening commitment to *take care* of the persons, the products, and the ideas one has learned to *care for*,"<sup>12</sup> or, still more precisely, it is "the concrete concern for what has been generated by love, necessity or chance."<sup>13</sup> All the virtues developed in the earlier stages of existence (hope and will, purpose and competence, fidelity and love) are seen at this level as essential elements of what presents itself as a genuine generational task: strengthening the new generation. This strength refers to everything that has been generated, created or initiated: the people, products or ideas that one has learnt to love. It therefore certainly concerns the procreative aspect of physical fatherhood or motherhood, but also the cultivation of ideas or enterprises, educational and formative work, and creative endeavors. In short, care refers to the cultivation and continuation of what will persist beyond our existence. It implies assuming a role within the community and history that enables one to leave a lasting mark, a legacy that endures.

Although care is discussed from the perspective of psychosocial development,

following maturity. This is evidenced by a text authored by Joan Erikson, his wife and research partner, who added it after his death in 1994. Cf. E. ERIKSON, J. M. ERIKSON, *The Life Cycle Completed*, W. W. Norton & Co Inc, New York 1997 and subsequent reprints.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>E. ERIKSON, *Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle*, in *Adulthood: Essays*, ed. by W. Erikson, W. W. Norton, New York 1978, p. 27.

it also possesses an explicit ethical dimension. In its act of giving, care represents an expression of a *compassionate* disposition that relies on the potent instinctual energy of sympathy. Consequently, the ethical aspect arises from the conflict between the desire to include individuals or groups within one's generative concerns and the reluctance (antipathy) to include others. Employing a redundant expression that emphasizes its significance, Erikson speaks of *not caring to care for them*.

Certainly, some form of negation is implicit in every choice; therefore, care too requires a selection of what one commits to. It is then the task of ethics, law and introspective reflection to establish what, in a given context, is the licit limit of such negation. In order to reduce mutual rejection among human beings, spiritual teachings capable of proposing and upholding a principle of universal charity play a special role; they are thus capable of guiding us towards an ever broader and more mature practice of care and, conversely, of diminishing the tendency to view others (whether specific individuals or groups of people) dialectically through the lens of opposition and enmity. The ethical scope of care is thus expressed both in small, meaningful gestures in everyday life and in global struggles against the indifference that leads to the destruction of private and public morality<sup>14</sup>. Not only that: the development of care itself becomes a form of education for the younger generations, since, by engaging in it, the adult becomes a model of what is good and what is evil, transmitting values and ideals<sup>15</sup>.

### 3 MAYEROFF: CARE AS SELF-REALISATION

The reflection on care in ethical terms finds an important hinge in a short text, often overlooked today, by Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring*<sup>16</sup>. I use the term 'hinge' to denote a mechanism that enables the connection between two seemingly separate yet interconnected domains. Specifically, I refer to psychology—the discipline in which the two authors discussed so far operate—and philosophical reflection, which focuses on practical reason and the axiological dimension of free acts. In Mayeroff, in fact, we find reemphasised both the psychological and existential significance of openness towards others, the role of generative dynamics in individual development and maturation, and the focus on the virtues required in the acts and processes of care.

The primacy of the other, as delineated by the concept of *care*, is apparent from the very beginning of the book: “to care for another person, in the most

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>In this sense, Erikson observes that authentic generativity inherently embodies true authority. Conversely, its degeneration manifests as the exertion of an ungenerous power, which can result in authoritarianism.

<sup>16</sup>M. MAYEROFF, *On Caring*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1971.

significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself.”<sup>17</sup> Helping a person to grow, but also a project, an idea or an ideal. This is a practice that requires a decentralised perspective, an imbalance in the subject, which is, in fact, oriented and directed towards the other: the focus is not on the carer, but on the person (or thing) who must grow and fulfil themselves. These elements align closely with concepts previously discussed. We have indeed observed that care arises when an individual recognises that *something matters* (May) or as a consequence of having generated something that endures beyond oneself (Erikson). Accordingly, intentionality is not merely introspective; it does not focus on the subject’s inner self but rather on something external to oneself. At the same time, if something matters, one’s life can acquire meaning (May), and being generative fosters individual growth (Erikson). In Mayeroff, too, we find that it is precisely the shift of the centre of gravity beyond the self, required by care, that leads to the agent’s fulfilment. Care is conceptualised here both as an emergent factor in an individual’s maturation—requiring the development of a comprehensive range of skills and capacities—and as a process that, through its very nature, contributes to the flourishing of the caregiver. In other words, by *caring for* someone or something, the person attains a state of fulfilment and, in this very process, enhances their capacity for caregiving within a virtuous cycle. One fundamental aspect connecting the growth of the cared-for individual (or object) and that of the caregiver is the fact that *selflessness* markedly differs from the loss of control experienced during panic or, alternatively, from conforming to external circumstances. Rather, “it is like the selflessness that goes with being absorbed in something I find genuinely interesting, that goes with being ‘more myself’.”<sup>18</sup> Examples facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the concept: a writer develops as their text progresses. Similarly, a teacher’s growth corresponds to the extent of their students’ learning. It is precisely because this pertains to the growth of the other that the primary focus should not be on the outcome but rather on the process. The process is essential because it is only in the present moment that we can genuinely care for the other. Conversely, an undue emphasis on the final product—aimed at erasing the dynamics and timing of the growth process—neglects the individual, reduces them to a mere instrument for achieving an outcome, and potentially causes harm. The connection with the past and the future remains,

But if the present (the process) is not taken seriously for its own sake, and is essentially subordinated to the future (the product) by being treated either as a necessary evil or as a mere means to something lying beyond, then caring becomes impossible<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 32.

The growth process for those being cared for is also a process of growth for the caregiver, who must draw on an extensive array of skills that, through their activation, make the corresponding habits grow. It is noteworthy that the first skill highlighted is competence: precisely because care is not a feeling but necessitates action, it is essential to know how to act in a manner that aligns with the needs of the other individual. One must be *up to the task*, equal to the care to be provided. Competence extends beyond merely possessing technical skills and rises to the level of moral quality: one must learn the necessary actions for the provision of care, whether in interpersonal relationships at a friendly or familial level or within professionally delivered care. Doing a poor job is the opposite of care and constitutes an ethical failing<sup>20</sup>.

Mayeroff devotes several pages to delineating what he terms the primary components of care<sup>21</sup>, most of which are fundamentally virtues: understanding of others and oneself, the capacity to adapt one's pace in response to the reactions of others (Mayeroff does not employ this term, but it can be described as 'responsiveness'), patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage. The core aspect of self-realization, however, resides in the discovery of a meaning for one's own life. In a manner analogous to May and Erikson, caring appears closely associated with the significance of the world and the meaning of one's own existence. Caring for something or someone not only reorders priorities and the axiological judgments we make about what resides within us and around us, but, more importantly, enables the individual to find their place in the world.

We are 'at home' in the world because our lives are shaped by inclusive care. This stands in contrast to being 'out of place', trying to escape from the 'wrong place', searching for one's 'place', and indifference and insensitivity to 'place'. It is not as though a pre-existing place were waiting for us; we are not in place as coins are in a box, but rather we both find and make our place in the same way that the person who 'finds' himself must have helped to 'create' himself as well<sup>22</sup>.

The greater the ability of various areas of care to be inclusive and harmonious with each other, the more one's life as a whole will assume a beautiful, indeed harmonious, quality. Mayeroff indeed identifies as 'appropriate others' those people or spheres of life that we care for in a manner that enables us to be and feel 'in our place' in the world. These 'others' complete us, not in an extrinsic sense—such as a chair completing a table—or in a parasitic manner, but as integral parts of ourselves, so that their development, as previously discussed, constitutes our

<sup>20</sup>This concept is also examined by Joan Tronto in her analysis of the ethics and politics of care. Cf. J. TRONTO, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of care*, Routledge, New York-London 1993.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. M. MAYEROFF, *On Caring*, cit., pp. 13 ff.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 54.

own growth<sup>23</sup>.

Care, self-realisation and meaning are therefore closely intertwined. A meaning, Mayeroff specifies, that is neither preordained nor externally assigned; rather, it is existentially both discovered and created through one's own actions. However, this meaning is not discovered or created unless one commits oneself to caring for others beyond oneself<sup>24</sup>. Concurrently, caring for one's 'appropriate others' is not a means to an end concerning one's own sense of life. Rather, it is the very act of living with the care of these 'appropriate others' as a unifying centre that leads us toward discovering meaning, direction, and significance in our own lives.

#### 4 VIRTUES IN CARE AND THE ETHICS OF VIRTUES

Let us now attempt to outline some characteristics of virtues. In a broadly general, yet not generic, sense, it can be asserted that they are *operational dispositions* that enhance and stably organise rational, volitional, and affective-passionate capacities. As Abbà aptly summarises, "by working in synergy, each one with its specific role, they enable the acting subject to produce excellent realisations regarding human goods and thus to achieve a truly good life, both personal and communal"<sup>25</sup>. These operational dispositions are both possible and necessary: on the one hand, because the acting subject must, in some way become themselves by unifying their faculties—reason, will, and affections—around what they perceive as the good life; on the other, reason itself, in its practical exercise, recognises the appeal of human goods and the fact that they must be realised, but the agent is naturally unprepared to live in accordance with these dictates of reason. What is required, therefore, is this work of unification and the harmonious strengthening of the various operational capacities. Actually, a significant portion of the debate on virtues, particularly within the Anglo-Saxon world, overlooks precisely this synergistic dimension of practical rationality and emotions<sup>26</sup>, which, conversely, proves to be essential.

Now, reflecting on the connection between virtue ethics and care ethics, we noted at the outset that the focus of the former seems to lie on the agent, whereas that of the latter concentrates on the relationship and responsibility. Hence, an

<sup>23</sup>Something, or someone, may be an 'appropriate other' for us either temporarily or indefinitely. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 58 ff.

<sup>24</sup>"No one else can give me the meaning of my life; it is something I alone can create. Meaning is not something predetermined that simply unfolds; I help both to create it and to discover it, and this is an ongoing process, not a one-off event" (*ibidem*, p. 62).

<sup>25</sup>G. ABBÀ, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, LAS, Roma 1995<sup>2</sup>, p. 137 (translation our own).

<sup>26</sup>Cf. A. CAMPODONICO, *Presupposti di un'etica delle virtù*, in *Critica della ragione generativa*, ed. by P. Gomarasca, P. Monti, G. Samek Lodovici, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2017, pp. 129-139.

apparent distance between the two: care is oriented towards the other, whilst some critics of virtue ethics go so far as to accuse this approach of being self-ish, because it posits that the motivations for acting well concern the agent's own good (exemplarity and flourishing) instead of focusing on the virtue's object. There is extensive discussion around this kind of interpretation of virtues. The detractors of the goodness and moral acceptability of virtue ethics accuse it of being a self-centred perspective, to the extent that virtues would be indistinguishable from other character traits, such as wit<sup>27</sup>. One of the clearest attacks on virtues, for example, comes from Hurka, who claims that they are not intrinsically egoistic on the motivation side—as the agent can take care about others' pleasure or knowledge for its own sake—but they are on the deepest level he calls *foundationally egoism*, because the “reasons to act and be motivated in these ways derive ultimately from their own flourishing.”<sup>28</sup> Some authors, on the other side, distinguish *eudaimonistic virtue ethics* from *target-centred virtue ethics*, considered as *not vulnerable to this objection*, or highlight the coexistence of different levels of motivation, meaning that one can simultaneously pursue the virtuous goal highlighted by the situation (foreground motivation) and aspire to live a good life by flourishing as a person (background motivation)<sup>29</sup>.

Without delving extensively into this debate at present, which goes beyond the scope and purpose of these pages, what we want to address here is the claim that virtues and care start from opposite and, for some authors, incompatible perspectives. With this aim, it is worthwhile to reconsider what we have presented below, namely that reflection on care inevitably invokes virtues as essential characteristics for the very existence of caregiving practices (such as courage, patience, generosity, etc.), and that care, like virtues, also encompasses the flourishing of the agent<sup>30</sup>. Now, if virtues were to form a perspective focused on the agent, and care, on the other hand, on the other and their needs, such mutual im-

<sup>27</sup>On this debate see T. HURKA, *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, Oxford University Press, New York 2001, especially Chapter 8; J. HARE, *Scotus on Morality and Nature*, «Medieval Philosophy and Theology», 9/1 (2000), pp. 15-38; C. TONER, *The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics*, «Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy», 81/318 (2006), pp. 595-617; J. ANNAS, *Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism*, in *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. by P. Bloomfield, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 205-221; L. BLUM, *Moral perception and particularity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994; T. IRWIN, *Virtù e obbligo morale. Antichi e moderni*, EDUSC, Roma 2018; E. GRIMI (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect*, Springer, Cham, 2019.

<sup>28</sup>T. HURKA, *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, cit., p. 232.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. C. SWANTON, *Eudaimonistic versus Target Centred Virtue Ethics*, «Teoria. Rivista di filosofia», 38/2 (2018), pp. 43-53; or C. SWANTON, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003.

<sup>30</sup>Other perspectives that address the relation between care and virtues are, of course, very interesting. For a noteworthy comparison that focuses on virtue as *ordo amoris* and care of oneself, see, e.g., G. SAMEK LODOVICI, *Il nesso tra cura e virtù*, in *Prossimità difficile. La cura tra compassione e competenza*, ed. by L. Alici, Aracne, Roma 2012, pp. 41-66.

plication would be, at the very least, problematic, if not outright contradictory.

If we then move from the definition to a phenomenological examination of virtue, we might identify three common characteristics within virtues themselves. The first is attention to reality, to others. Without attention, it is indeed impossible to perceive the goods at stake, the connections, the needs, and the challenges that the pursuit of the good entails. The second aspect is responsibility, which we must distinguish into four meanings or facets: a) Responsibility for one's own actions, which stems from freedom and attributable; b) the capacity to evaluate reality and the goods at stake (which leads, in common parlance, to the expression that a person is or is not responsible, thereby indicating a moral quality; this, in fact, constitutes an aspect of *phronesis*); c) the perception and acceptance of one's responsibility towards others, based on the inherent relationality among human beings and its specific manifestations; d) the perception, not necessarily articulated explicitly, of the impossibility of evading the question posed by reality once it has been intercepted and grasped: one must freely position oneself within a response. In fact, as J. Annas observes<sup>31</sup>, when virtuous people act, they do not pause to think about virtue itself, that is, whether that action is or is not what virtue would require, or whether it would be the sort of action that the sort of person we wish to become would perform. When, for example, a person who has performed a courageous act is asked why they acted that way, they simply reply that they saw someone in need of saving and did so, not that they reflected on the virtue of courage. Reflecting on the experience of virtue (and here we return to the subject May discusses: an experiencing being, the one to whom experiences happen), Annas introduces a distinction between the process of acquiring virtues and the act of manifesting a habit once it has been established. During the learning phase, akin to other practical skills, the individual must focus on their mentor or model and reflect on their actions. Nevertheless, such introspective thoughts tend to diminish over time, except in more complex situations. The point is that attention to the agent's character, which does not eliminate but transcends the reference to the norm, does not imply making it the centre of the moral issue.

It is not hard to notice the convergence between the traits of the virtues we are discussing and much of what we have observed concerning care. Indeed, the first-person perspective relates to oneself in a reflective and thus secondary manner, as the primary concern is *the good life*. Furthermore, if we take into account that what is *good* is the life of a subject-in-relation (we could again recall Heideggerian *Mit-sein* and delve deeper into the relational dimension of our identity), then this

<sup>31</sup>J. ANNAS, *The Phenomenology of Virtue*, «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», 7/1 (2008), pp. 21-34.

comprehends the worth and care of the reality we are part of and in which we are situated. Virtues, of course, are not merely *functional*: they have intrinsic value, and the subject acts in a virtuous way also because of the beauty of the act itself, but at the same time, this virtuous act is perceived as the right answer towards some concrete good or goods in a particular situation. The beauty of the act is not abstract but engages with the value perceived in reality. The flourishing of the concrete other is understood as a matter directed towards us: the other is *important*, *has value*, and is perceived as connected with us; therefore, we also perceive a personal call to respect them and to try to respond to their need for care. In other words, because the subject recognises the value of a specific reality, they also perceive the intrinsic value of caring for it, and that caring for something of value entails a certain beauty in the action, thereby giving value to their own life. Such care, in turn, requires practical dispositions, which are precisely the virtues.

Since habits are cultivated through the voluntary repetition of certain types of actions, attention to goods and the inquiries posed by reality is perfectly compatible with attention to the models and types of actions performed, which are indicative of every form of practical acquisition. They require experience and time<sup>32</sup>. Once acquired, however, they develop into a capability that empowers the individual to respond fluidly to reality and its requisites for the good. The virtuous person acts without making themselves or their own action the focus, experiencing a convergence of their intellectual, volitional, and affective faculties. Such conduct is regarded as harmoniously aligned with their core identity. It is evident, however, that this does not imply the absence of effort, nor that the complexity of certain circumstances may not occasionally give rise to a perceived tension between the various demands of the good; nevertheless, the resolution, which is continually innovatively devised (from the Latin '*invenio*', meaning 'to find'), will be recognized as congruent with oneself. A description perfectly compatible with, or indeed referable to, care<sup>33</sup>. Thus, the connection between care and virtue, and consequently between virtue ethics and the ethics of care, be-

<sup>32</sup>Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1103a-b 2.

<sup>33</sup>Regarding this subject, Luigina Mortari, a distinguished scholar with a specialized focus on care, advocates for differentiating between virtue ethics and a *Melaretic* ethics, which involves an ethical framework that integrates care (*mèlete*) and virtue (*areté*). She recognizes that care is expressed in terms of virtue, yet asserts that while an ethics of care concentrates on the agent (what kind of person should I become)—the Melaretic ethics focuses on the actions undertaken (what action should I perform). From my perspective, this proposal effectively reaffirms the critique of virtue ethics briefly discussed earlier. Nonetheless, it remains a highly interesting proposition, especially in relation to the capacity for cultivating virtue through education. Cf. L. MORTARI, *Sull'etica della cura*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2023, especially pars III, and L. MORTARI, F. VALBUSA, *Cura e virtù: una filosofia dell'educazione all'etica*, «Studi sulla Formazione. Open Journal in Education», 1/2020, pp. 301-318.

comes even more evident. As many theorists have emphasised, care is inherently dependent on context (situational) and cannot be articulated through universal principles. The same applies to virtues, which are expressed as an excellent balance within a specific context and situation, with the subject also constituting an integral part of this context and condition. Care demands the practice of virtue: attentiveness, altruism, generosity, courage, perseverance, responsiveness (and so forth), along with the appropriate measure (here, the concept of moderation is reaffirmed). Not every virtuous act qualifies as an act of care; however, virtues such as magnanimity, generosity, and justice frequently necessitate care and are expressed through caring actions and behaviours. We may also add that attention to virtue, such as care, stems from the relational nature of the human condition. The measure of virtue is the virtuous person, as Aristotle observes, and it is consequently through our interactions with such a person that we acquire virtues experientially, namely, within the context of plurality and community, rather than in the solipsistic relationship of the subject with itself. Furthermore, caring for others necessitates self-care, involving the practical acquisition of virtues that enable us both to accurately recognize the true needs of others (so that not every request necessarily entails a duty of care) and to comprehend the appeal that need presents to us—thereby summoning *us* to respond—as well as to put into practice the strategies and actions required to actualize that care.

In supporting the young and ambitious Alcibiades, Socrates cautioned him by reminding him that, to care for the city, he must first care for himself. And as he neared death, in *the Apology* we see his tender care for his friends and disciples, nurturing in them, right to the very end, the pursuit of the good. It is within this context that he makes an appeal to the Athenians:

When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing,—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, *for not caring about that for which they ought to care*, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing<sup>34</sup>.

And it is precisely from these words that we derive a final element. The ethics of care places relationships and interdependence at the centre, and with Erikson, May and Mayeroff, we have seen the connection between care and the meaning of one's own life. A profound question thus arises, encompassing both the ethical and the existential dimensions: what am I caring for? If the meaning and significance of reality, as well as the meaning of one's own life, can be inferred from acts of care, it is not feasible to distinguish the issue of care from the question of

<sup>34</sup>PLATO, *Apology of Socrates*, 41e, trans. by B. Jowett, in *Apology of Socrates*, Duke Classics and its licensors, s.l., 2012.

the truth of the good. A question and an answer that cannot emerge from theoretical analysis alone, but rather from the practical experience—both intellectual and affective—of the good itself and its appeal.

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