Virtue Ethics, Applied Ethics and Rationality
twenty-three years after After Virtue

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Abstract
In evaluating the merits and shortcomings of virtue ethics I focus on some central differences between virtue ethics and rival theories such as deontology and utilitarianism. Virtue ethics does not prescribe strict rules of conduct. Instead, the virtue ethical approach can be understood as an invitation to search for standards, as opposed to strict rules, that ought to guide the conduct of our individual lives. This requires a particular method. The importance of this approach in present times will become clear when we investigate the relation between virtue ethics and postmodernity. In our postmodern age moral concepts are no longer perceived as deriving their meaning from larger frameworks. Instead, their meanings are perceived as being derived from the contingencies that define our particular existences. Thus ongoing grassroots moral engagement is required, and virtue ethics is the appropriate moral framework for doing this. This results in a broadening of rationality insofar as the full richness of our situated lives are factored into our accounts of rationality. At the same time virtue ethics prevents relativism, mainly because it does justice to the social embeddedness of human activities. In order to illustrate the virtue ethical approach I will discuss two key concepts in our moral vocabulary: responsibility and integrity. We will see how these basic concepts can be properly understood only if one takes into consideration the contingencies, inherent paradoxes and tensions in human life.

A young man of twenty-three is physically and mentally mature, which is to say that he has just commenced his active involvement in society. He is, one might say, full of dreams and expectations which are yet to be fulfilled.

Much the same can be said about the project started twenty-three years ago by Alisdair MacIntyre's After Virtue. The book is an intriguing exposition of all kinds of intuitions and insights, but they demand further elaboration and elucidation. It turned out to be the starting point of what could be characterized as the 'revitalization or rebirth of virtue ethics'. This ancient tradition had started with Aristotle and was the dominant ethical framework in Christian Medieval philosophy and modernity until Immanuel Kant. In the 19th and 20th century virtue ethics played a minor role. Worth

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mentioning are Scheler (1955), and the project 'rehabilitation of Aristotelian practical philosophy' in Germany (Bien, 1973, Ritter, 1969). With MacIntyre's work however virtue ethics started regaining the ground it lost. Remarkably most virtue ethicists turned to Aristotle, apparently neglecting the almost 2000-year-old tradition. Only occasionally inspiration was found in the broad tradition. The explanation lies in the fact that, as we will see, Aristotle has laid firm foundations. The essence of virtue ethics is already present in Aristotle.

After MacIntyre the project of revitalizing virtue ethics has been further developed by many philosophers coming from diverging backgrounds. Special attention must be given to the fact that virtue ethics has captured the imagination of philosophers coming from both the analytic and continental traditions, further blurring the edges between these two traditions. And, as in Aristotle's practical philosophy, ethics and political thought are inextricably entangled, ethicists and political philosophers found themselves being described as members of the so-called 'communitarian' movement. It is however in one particular branch of the philosophical tree that the emergence of virtue ethics was most prominent, namely, the fast growing branch of applied ethics. While twenty-five years ago the concept of virtue was hardly present in applied ethics, a quick survey of recently published textbooks and journals shows us to what extent virtue ethics has indeed become very influential.

In this contribution some merits and shortcomings of the project will be discussed. I will start by providing a sketch of virtue ethics as it has been developed in applied ethics, and give some reasons for its growing popularity. From this sketch a major shortcoming of the project will be revealed. In its short history applied ethics has been used to address all kinds of practical problems, but thorough methodological reflection has been relatively scarce. Far too often it has happened that applied ethicists view 'applied' and 'fundamental' issues in dichotomous terms, thus feeling justified in disregarding deep theoretical issues. This tendency to view applied and non-applied issues in dichotomous terms has had some important negative consequences. Problems have emerged particularly with regard to the issue of rationality. Using my experience in teaching ethics to management students, managers and military officers, I will argue that what could be characterized as a broad conception of rationality is required for making sense of key ethical concepts. It is only when this concept is elucidated that the promises of virtue ethics will most fully materialize. As concrete examples of the proposed method I will deal with two key moral concepts: responsibility and integrity.

**How does virtue ethics work in applied ethics?**

For a long time deontology and utilitarianism have dominated ethical debate. As they stood in direct opposition to one another they were understood as covering the entire moral spectrum. A substantial proportion of the time spent in courses in ethics was dedicated to dealing with the tension between these two lines of thought. Typically, students were asked to engage in case studies and see how deontological and utilitarian approaches lead to conflicting conclusions. This approach showed students the richness and complexity of ethical debate and in doing so it trained them to make better moral decisions.

That said, a critical glance at this method of teaching ethics ought to make us suspicious of the view that the above-mentioned ethical approaches cover the entire ethical spectrum. On closer inspection deontology and utilitarianism are opposed to each

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2 I take John Rawls to be a heir of the Kantian Legacy, as he explicitly elaborates (Rawls, 1972:251-257).
other *precisely because* they are extremes in the same continuum. As Heidegger elaborated in his discussion of Nietzsche's criticism of Plato, a rejection of a position may at the same time amount to an acceptance of the rationality that is at stake (Heidegger, 1961). Indeed, Kantianism and utilitarianism have several core-presuppositions in common. This is not surprising, as they came into being in the same historical period – the enlightenment. Inspired by the vertiginous development of scientific rationality, which fostered emotionally detached, that is, impartial observation, enlightenment-philosophers aimed to formulate ethical laws and prescriptions that are universally valid. As later developments in philosophy of science would show, this was a rather naive approach. At this moment it is however most important to notice that it was the source of inspiration for utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. The prescriptions that resulted from these two theories may be different yet the underlying rationality is the same.

The central idea of *After Virtue* is that enlightenment rationality has serious shortcomings. It purports to provide firm and impartial justifications for good conduct while in fact presupposing a teleological understanding of reality (as discussed by MacIntyre in MacIntyre 1985:51-61). In varying degrees the great philosophers of the Enlightenment recognized the need for a teleological framework for morality, but their successors did not. The successors thought that this recognition was an arbitrary and unjustifiable concession to views that the great Enlightenment thinkers themselves had already rejected. Enlightenment morality's pretensions of impartiality resulted in the destruction of the teleological framework that, according to MacIntyre, grounds morality. The illusion of a firm and impartial rationality resulted in theories with high pretensions but lacking the relevant foundations required for making morality intelligible – teleological foundations.

The emergence of virtue ethics amounts to a revitalization of the pre-enlightenment tradition of moral reflection. This emergence should have led to methodological reflection which would make the failures of Enlightenment rationality explicit and stimulate a search for an alternative variety of rationality. Unfortunately *After Virtue* proves to be of little assistance with this later task and much the same can be said of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. In fact the only methodological indication MacIntyre provides can be found in his discussion of the concept of a practice in *After Virtue*. The introduction of this concept must be understood against the background of what is probably the main problem the project of rehabilitating virtue ethics faces, Modernism's rejection of teleological frameworks.

The Greek word for virtue, ('aretē') literally means 'able to fulfil its natural task'. Although the Latin equivalent 'virtus' is derived from another concept, the meaning is basically the same: a good human life consists in realising one's natural function (the natural function being the sum-total of virtues). As in the Modern era there has been no consensus regarding the metaphysical framework that fixes the natural function, it seems impossible for Modern thinkers to determine the constituents of a human life when it is at its best. In his discussion of the concept of a 'practice' MacIntyre tries to show why morality must be framed within a teleological framework. In what is by far the most quoted passage in MacIntyre's corpus he describes a practice as a "coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (MacIntyre, 1985:187). In the twenty-three years after *After Virtue* it
has become common practice to speak about the virtues developed in the practice of journalism (Cassidy, 2001), the practice of business (and, as discussed by Solomon [1992:160], the virtues required in this practice are different from those involved in playing poker or gambling), the practice of public administration (Cooper, 1987) and so on.

Although it is not always explicitly stated, virtue ethics is sensitive to the complex relationship that exists between ethical theory and human practice. Ethical theory cannot and ought not to provide us with fixed standards of what is considered to be 'moral-right'. Instead, it provides rough guidelines which have the function of stimulating an ongoing sensitive engagement with the ethical dimensions of our daily lives. What this amounts to becomes plain once we look at the main source of inspiration of virtue ethicists – Aristotle's *Ethics*. In the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle denies the possibility of presenting fixed universal rules for conduct. In his words 'We must therefore be content if (...) we succeed in presenting a broad outline of the truth; when our subject and our premises are merely generalities, it is enough if we arrive at generally valid conclusions' (Aristotle, 1990:1094b19-21). For Aristotle the primary task of ethics is to understand the meaning itself of moral phenomena, and it is only if we can understand this, Aristotle thinks, that normative orientations and a critical approach towards human action can be established. The first step to gaining the relevant sort of understanding is to determine prevalent understandings of basic ethical concepts and to determine the sorts of motivational resources required for acting morally. So Aristotle starts his investigation of happiness, courage, justice, practical wisdom and other basic virtues with what could be characterized as an inventory of common opinions. Basing himself on this initial survey he proceeds to develop his own ethical approach. One could say that he develops his own views by establishing a critical dialogue with common sense. He inquires whether certain common sense understandings can be maintained when the underlying meanings of the relevant concepts are made explicit. He compares the force of diverse understandings of specific ethical concepts and he explores basic relationships between a plethora of ethical concepts with the aim of establishing a coherent whole. The critical but deeply engaged Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues is the methodological source of inspiration of the *Ethics*. Analogously, the sorts of human relationships, including professional relationships, that present day virtue ethicists foster are intimate, subtle and dialogical. People should aim at understanding the morality implicit in day-to-day life and to try to find solutions to complex problems from this vantage point, rather than attempting to understand the human situation and address issues in current society from a detached point of view. This implies taking prevalent patterns of reasoning seriously, and developing a critical dialogue with specific individuals living their lives in specific circumstances. From this background the importance of the virtue 'phronēsis', that accompanies all other virtues, must be understood. This virtue enables the actor to make a context sensitive judgement of the situation (and act accordingly).

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3 Of course there has been a lot of debate about what exactly Socrates's moral outlook is (and how it relates to the moral practices of his fellow Athenians). It is however generally acknowledged that the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues should be distinguished from the Socrates of the later dialogues in which Plato presents his theory of ideas. In the early dialogues Socrates' humour, mockery and irony are signs of willingness to start an open discussion (Vlastos, 1991; Zwart, 1996), which suggests that the Socratic position in these early dialogues is more closely aligned with Aristotle's outlook.
The dynamics between pre-given general moral principles (embodied in the virtues) and unique situations is particularly relevant in professional life in modern society. Constitutive of each professional practice is a set of standards that need to be implemented in context-sensitive ways. The differences between different professional practices are very great. Let me illustrate this with a brief study of the virtue of bravery, which is considered to be one of the cardinal virtues by the tradition. Politicians can be said to have courage when they stand firm against the pressures they meet in realizing the public good. On the other hand, for a businessman courage amounts to having the capacity to resist pressure to act in ways that do not accord with the basic moral principles which define good business practices; pressure, say, to increase short-term profit margins by diminishing the quality of one's products or by treating one's employees unfairly. Generally, a critical analysis of the virtues implicit in specific human endeavours will result in a heightened understanding of the moral dimension of those endeavours. A relatively comprehensive analysis of the virtues is what is required for understanding the distinct moralities implicit in the multifarious character of our human engagements.

The ethical approach outlined above contrasts markedly with the overly prescriptive tendencies of utilitarianism and deontology, yet, unfortunately, the rise of virtue ethics in the field of applied ethics has not always been sufficiently radical and that is largely because the deep differences that exist between virtue ethics and its rivals have not been sufficiently noticed. The reason the differences have not been sufficiently noticed is that applied ethicists seldom reflect on issues pertaining to methodology. Many applied ethicists seem not to be aware that the shift to virtue ethics has serious consequences with regard to the sort of rationality that should be informing their discipline. This is specially the case with the heirs of the more prescriptive traditions, who insist on transparency and detachment. They are inclined to combine, in unholy matrimony, virtue ethics with the narrow rationality that takes formal consistency and objective truth to be the highest rational values. This unholy matrimony results in abstract and conceptual analyses that do not do justice to the heterogeneity and inner tensions of daily morality.

The search for a successor to the ideal of detached objectivism can be inspired by a discussion of the contemporary social ethos, namely, the postmodern ethos.

**Postmodernism**

As postmodernism is by definition resisting clear definitions, I will not even try to describe it. Partly because of postmodernism's capricious and intangible character the relation between virtue ethics and postmodernism is complicated. For us it is important that virtue ethics is able to deal with a tension characteristic of postmodernism. Contemporary virtue ethics offers an account of the ethical that takes postmodernism's critique of Enlightenment seriously, but it saves the postmodern project from its nihilistic tendencies. According to postmodernists, the grand narratives of the Enlightenment are dead. Moral concepts are no longer perceived as deriving their significance from these narratives. Issues regarding moral orientation, it is now thought, must be resolved at grassroots level. This is clearly illustrated by the recent resurgence of concern for the concrete individual with his concrete and context specific existential struggles and inner tensions. At a popular level, the numerous talk shows that have emerged around the globe in recent years show that people are very interested in the specific life-stories of individuals and don't get tired of exchanging opinions about
personal beliefs and convictions. In the social sciences and the humanities we have witnessed a large growth in the number of books and articles dealing with issues of identity in a way that places emphasis on the particular.

Underlying these popular and not so popular exchanges is a search for a normative orientation. And, clearly, a search presupposes that there is something that we want and hope to find. Furthermore, by definition, these goal-oriented searches cannot be understood as being determined by arbitrary acts of the will. After all, something can only have meaning for a person if it is perceived by that person as being more than merely arbitrary. In making these claims I am not committing myself to claiming that a clear orientation for our lives will ever be determined. At present I only need to acknowledge the basic formal features of a search for a normative orientation.

Indeed, it is because postmodernists reject grand meta-narratives, which offer context neutral – pre-packaged – moral orientations, that they have to spend much energy in their quest for a meaningful moral orientation. But, with postmodernism also comes the threat of a devastating form of cynicism – of pernicious relativism. The emphasis on difference and diversity is often accompanied by a certain incapacity to grapple with the idea of a meaningful normative orientation – a kind of nihilism. From a methodological point of view those postmodernists who embrace a nihilistic stance towards the moral are, inadvertently, aligning themselves with Enlightenment thinking which they purport to reject. They do so in that, by taking up a nihilistic stance, they jump to what could be characterized as an impartial, context insensitive conclusion about the normative orientation we should adopt, namely that all pretensions to truth, and to truth regarding moral orientation particularly, should be abolished. Closely related to this nihilistic tendency is the tendency to think that all moral judgements are moralistic attacks on individual freedom. That said, in recent years it has generally been acknowledged that extreme relativism is a serious problem. This awareness led to what could be characterized as the 'ethical turn' in the philosophy of the recent years. It is not surprising that virtue ethics came into vogue with this turn, since it offers a solution to the nihilistic tendencies of some postmodernists while at the same time avoiding the rigid prescriptive tendencies of Enlightenment morality. With virtue ethics the concrete individual, as opposed to the context neutral Enlightenment subject, came to occupy centre stage.

The emergence of virtue ethics has been facilitated by a shift in our understandings of rationality; a shift from Modern to Postmodern conceptions. More specifically, the postmodern shift from universalism to particularism is the primary element responsible for the reconfiguration of our conceptions of rationality. Making the richness and the tensions of situated individuals more explicit has brought with it a move away from a focus on formal consistency and abstraction and towards a broader conception of rationality which complements virtue ethics very well. Indeed, one could say that the postmodern conception of rationality has provided the ideal soil for virtue ethics to flourish.4

The relationship that exists between virtue ethics and postmodernism is clearly visible in an arena where applied ethics has done a lot of work – the professional arena. Organizations have undergone transitions that could be described in terms of a shift from modernity to postmodernity. Modern professional organizations used to be structured according to the bureaucratic model of Max Weber. In this model individuals are

4 Several scholars go as far as to claim that virtue ethics is the ethical correlate of postmodern rationality. De Wachter (1993) argues along these lines.
given fixed roles and task descriptions, and communicate with each other in accordance with clearly defined formal procedures. Professional organizations were structured in accordance with clear hierarchies. In relatively stable environments this modern model has proven to be very effective in dealing with complicated problems that require highly specialised skills. And, I might add, western bureaucracies to a large extent still embody this model, but the tides are changing, and they have been doing so for the past decade. The new postmodern model is characterized by much more flexibility, independence and freedom in the workplace. The model invites individuals to become more aware of the dynamic context in which they operate and it is for this reason that the new postmodern organization is characterized by shifting relations and fluid task descriptions. The idea of a network, as opposed to the antiquated idea of a pyramid, is now becoming the leading metaphor in the formation of professional organizations (Cooper, 1998; Dubbink 1999; Frissen, 1996).

With changes in organizational structures new questions and new demands arise. Professionals are no longer encouraged to see themselves as small cogs in a grand machine that moves in accordance with fixed principles that fully determine action. Instead, they are now encouraged to see themselves as agents proper who are genuinely responsible for their actions (I will further discuss the concept of responsibility below). However, despite the importance given to the rich and varied experiences of individuals, it is still of crucial importance that professionals understand their professional activities in relationship to an overall institutional orientation that gives purpose and meaning to their specific activities. This new orientation cannot be described in terms of rigid prescriptions. Rather, only general guidelines, rules of thumb, can be specified, and these guidelines invite individual professionals to express their own uniqueness in the task of furthering the goals of the institutions for which they work. Virtue ethics is well equipped for dealing with the processes that take place in these new organizational structures.

Let me substantiate these last claims with an example taken from my experience as a guest lecturer in the Dutch Royal Naval Academy. In the 90's the Dutch army was involved in a number of peacekeeping operations. In operations of this sort soldiers face all kinds of moral dilemmas. To support the development of ethical skills, an education program was set up. It started with two theoretical lectures, after which military officers with direct experience in peacekeeping operations are given the opportunity to explain how they have dealt with the moral conundrums presented to them. In what is referred to as a 'Socratic interrogation' session young midshipmen are invited to address questions to the participating officers. This practical component of the course, where officers were given the floor, was of particular interest to pupils. In the accounts provided by the officers, theoretical analyses was thin, but this is not to say that all they were doing was providing mere informal stories involving little more than disjoint anecdotes. Instead, they presented coherent stories that integrated the decisions being made on the ground into the larger narrative that was unfolding in the war torn regions where troops were deployed. The motivations and characters of the officers spoke directly to the pupils and the stories bestowed sense, graspable by most, upon the actions and decisions that were taken in morally challenging circumstances. To be sure, in this process of moral education detached theoretical analyses may also have a role to play. The officers explain their motivation and relate their behaviour to standards that every soldier ought to know. Abstract concepts such as human rights, the core-concepts of the codes of conduct and concepts such as dignity, utility and duty are useful for making sense of grassroots involvements with morally difficult situa-
tions. But, and this is a crucial point, these concepts on their own do not suffice for explaining the decisions made on the ground, nor do they provide us with all that is required for making effective moral decisions. Although abstract concepts play an important role in helping us make sense of certain events, it is in the stories that were told that the full meanings of the decisions and actions were communicated. Indeed, narratives are the primary source of moral knowledge and meaning. The sort of knowledge expressed by the experienced officers cannot be grasped by means of theoretical analyses from a detached and 'neutral' vantage point. On the contrary, a refusal to understand a given situation by means of rich narrative, trumps any attempt to properly understand the moral dimension of their actions.

This example makes it clear that good moral action requires a dynamic between general ideas and particular situations. The starting point is a broad framework of moral guidelines. In the army there is consensus about basic moral standards and these standards ultimately refer back to general standards that ought to guide society at large. However, specific embodiments of these general standards can only properly be understood if one understands the narratives within which they are nested.

A deeper understanding of the ethical dimension of our lives is possible when we analyse concrete circumstances by using what can be described as a narrative logic. It is only with this sort of 'logic' that we can make sense of how the different parts of our lives, which are being played out in unfolding circumstances, are related to one another, thus forming a coherent whole. It becomes clear that narrative logic cannot be the same as the logic deployed in the sciences. Indeed, basic standards of coherence inform both modes of understanding, but the set of standards used to understand our lives is very different from the set used in scientific inquiry. The coherence of a narrative is much broader. Its aim is not so much consistency as it is holding a field of tensions together – tensions which form an inherent part of living as human beings.

Awareness of the sort of narrative logic or rationality that informs our lives has been enhanced and, relatively, the theories that are meant to explain this form of rationality have experienced significant development since the appearance of *After Virtue*. But much work still remains to be done, particularly with regard to our understandings of the complex matrix of moral motivations, the inner tensions in our daily lives and the virtues that are required for operating at our best in professional and non-professional spheres. In order to do this work well, the practical philosopher has to consider the moral domain from what could be characterised as an internal perspective. As the example from the Royal Naval Academy illustrates, the meaning of particular virtues and values can be understood properly not from a detached vantage point but, rather, from the point of view of someone who is directly and intimately committed to a specific set of existential endeavours. This of course does not mean that one cannot be critical about certain aspects of how people go about the business of living, not at all. One can be critical, but one can only be critical if one has an involved understanding of the moral concepts that are at stake. When making a moral move one must take into consideration all sorts of competing tensions that are unique to specific circumstances.

**Elaboration of concepts**

After this plea to deal directly with the moral motivations of professionals it would be inconsistent to confine ourselves merely to meta-level analyses. Concrete examples will help to clarify issues, so I have chosen to deal with the issues of responsibility and integrity. These are core concepts in current ethical debate. As they are not present on the list of classical virtues, it is a challenge for present-day virtue ethicists to rewrite them in their vocabulary.
Responsibility

When a misdemeanor occurs in professional circles a search for a responsible party typically ensues. Those searching for a responsible party are typically interested in issues of accountability and liability. It is not hard to see why this is the case. Someone is accountable or liable insofar as he has not acted in a responsible way. Trivially, a person who has behaved irresponsibly is one who has done something that he should not have done, or he did not do something he should have done. The question one might be tempted to ask at this point is 'What are the qualities required for counting as a responsible agent?'.

Peter Strawson argues that people are responsible when they are free, possess power and have knowledge of the relevant situation (Strawson, 1962; see also Ben Ze'ev, 2000). Indeed, a large volume of literature dealing with the issue of responsibility address the criteria listed by Strawson. At the forefront are questions such as, 'Can we blame individuals for acting out of ignorance?', 'How far do individual powers extend?', and 'To what extent are people free?' (consider the responsibility-determinism debate). Although it is clear that Strawson's list is important in determining who is responsible, his criteria do no more than scratch the surface of the concept of responsibility. In order to have a proper grasp of the relevant concept one must possess an understanding of the moral qualities responsible individuals embody. Only a proper description of responsibility, understood as a quality of character, allows us to place the basic list of concepts mentioned by Strawson into proper focus.

Responsible subjects are just those sorts of subjects insofar as they direct themselves towards objects of responsibility. They direct their care and attention towards objects of responsibility. But, what motivates a person to act caringly and attentively? A conviction that the object at stake is of some value – that there is a good that ought to be realized. Indeed, at times people bearing heavy responsibilities go so far as to consider themselves to be subservient to the goods that are at stake. These brief comments have implications with regard to the issue of personal identity. A responsible individual tends to derive quite a lot of satisfaction from his responsibilities insofar as he identifies with his work. His reply to questions such as 'Who am I?' will typically involve pointing out how important and valuable his work is. In cases where this identification is completely absent, people suffer from an often hard to bear estrangement or alienation from their work.

A responsible agent is not merely one who has good intentions. He is able to act in an appropriate manner, and acting in this manner involves having the right sorts of capacities, expertise and knowledge that will allow him to act in a fully committed fashion, particularly when the going gets rough. Indeed, the concept of responsibility becomes a particularly useful one for describing human action precisely when actions do not conform to strict rules and prescriptions, and this happens particularly when complex and unexpected circumstances call for difficult and creative solutions. The responsible agent is one who is attentive to unexpected occurrences and who is prepared to sort out, in a creative fashion, how to adjudicate between competing moral demands in the workplace and elsewhere.

I might further add that one cannot become responsible by a simple act of the will. Rather, like any other complex attitude, one must acquire the relevant habits or attitudes through habituation. This is indeed something Aristotle has taught us in his dis-

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5 A more detailed version of this analysis can be found in Becker, 2002.
cussion of how the virtuous habits are acquired. The habits are acquired through an ongoing engagement with the complex circumstances within which our lives, including our professional lives, are played out. In the initial stages of their professional lives novices experience many externally imposed obligations. As time goes by virtuous habits are developed, which is to say that the underlying values and principles that define good practice within a given professional sphere have been internalized. Of course this requires a relatively stable social environment that stimulates the person. Habituation only succeeds if there are good examples in the neighbourhood, if the person is punished when he does wrong, and good actions are rewarded.

The relevance of specific social environments for virtue becomes even clearer when we look at the significance of specific professional activities. Essential to this process of developing the right sorts of professional habits is the development of a heightened awareness of the meaning of one's professional activities. The significance in question is derived from an understanding of the larger framework from which one's specific professional engagements are nested. To be sure, single-minded professionals engaged in their narrowly defined pursuits might count as responsible actors, but only if their narrow pursuits presuppose an implicit understanding of the role their pursuits play within the larger whole which constitutes their company or, indeed, the social order within which their professional activities are carried out. As long as, at some level, people realize that their work derives meaning within a larger sphere of significance, and as long as they act in accordance with this understanding, they will be acting as responsible agents. They are not solely focused on their own narrowly defined concerns, but are able to incorporate considerations pertaining to the overall sphere of moral concerns within which their narrow field of concerns is nested. By contrast, a single-minded professional who has little or no interest in how his activities are embedded within a greater whole, is in danger of undermining the framework that bestows meaning upon his activities.

Dealing with the practice of public administration can help elucidate the dangers mentioned above. It is widely recognized that public administrators have to deal with many competing interests. Several theories have been developed to help them decide which interests to privilege. In their desire to solve conflicts some theoretical approaches neglect a fundamental tension. On the one hand, the public administrator has to defend the interests of his department or organization against alternative interest groups and other departments. On the other hand, he should always be motivated by a general understanding of the public good which forms the backdrop of his narrowly defined set of interests. This tension between narrow and wide concerns is at the heart of administrative practices. Ignoring this tension diminishes one's understanding of the moral dimension of one's work.

In this treatment of responsibility several issues have emerged that cannot be understood in terms of a rationality that privileges formal consistency and shuns contradiction and conflict generally. Instead, we can only properly understand responsibility in relation to the broader understanding of rationality discussed above.

**Moral Integrity**

Following the financial scandals of the past decade a multidisciplinary debate has arisen regarding moral integrity in the workplace. That said, it is not entirely clear what the contributions of philosophy could be to this debate. One, after all, does not have to be a philosopher to know that things like stealing and cheating are bad and,
also, armchair philosophers are hardly the best people to give advice to people working on the ground. Perhaps one area where philosophers can make a significant contribution is in the area of 'integrity training'. It is in this area where a minimal understanding of specific work environments and philosophical acumen can come in handy. Such an understanding of the role integrity plays in the work environment can be deepened with the help of the fast developing integrity-debate found in recent philosophical literature. And, I might add, it is in the rapid development of this debate that the need for a broad understanding of rationality has become most evident.

'Integrity' derives from a Latin word meaning 'wholeness' or 'unity' as opposed to being fragmented, split or destroyed. It is important to note that the concept of integrity has come to play a prominent role in our times. In present-day society people working in larger institutions stand in the middle ground of many tensions. The public-private distinction that lies at the heart of modern organizational culture is supplemented by several other tensions that characterize the present-day 'network organization'. Much more than in the monolithic hierarchically organized institutions, professionals face divergent demands coming from many directions. The emergence of the concept 'integrity' suggests that a certain variety of uneasiness and a longing for unity arises from the diversity and heterogeneity that typifies professional life.

What does 'integrity' mean in the present context? For a long time the answer was given in far too narrow terms. The person of integrity was understood as the person who complies with fixed minimum standards. These minimum requirements could be described in exhaustive terms and they were readily universalizable. In short, a person with integrity was considered to be honest, reliable and truthful. The theoretical framework underlying this interpretation is clearly Kantian (Carter, 1996). It is very difficult to come to embody these qualities, but reflection on them is not intellectually challenging, and it is for this reason that intellectual debate on integrity was limited.

However, recent debates among scholars have taught us that the deontological understanding of integrity is far too narrow. It is much easier to understand the rich implications of the concept of integrity if one understands that integrity is not a matter of comparing individual acts with abstract moral principles. In order to understand the concept we must analyze what it means to be a person of integrity. The emergence of this conviction mirrors the important paradigm shift discussed above. First, a person who honestly and sincerely makes certain claims, but changes her mind daily, cannot properly be understood as possessing integrity. At times compliance with minimum standards goes hand-in-hand with incoherent and chaotic behaviour and we do not describe people acting in such a way as possessing integrity. Integrity has to do with the way specific segments of behaviour fit into the pattern of a life understood as a whole. Integrity involves constancy of character. Second, the deontological interpretation faces serious problems because it implies that there are fixed standards and clear distinctions. However, in everyday language we talk about persons having more or less integrity. So integrity cannot be analysed in relation to a fixed set of rigid standards people are meant to comply with.

Following these critical comments on the concept of integrity narrowly conceived, a rich and varied philosophical debate has ensued in which integrity, more often than not, has come to be understood as a character trait. Whether or not explicitly stated, most authors describe a person consistently faithful to his commitments as one who has integrity (Calhoun, 1995; Cox, 2003). John Kekes makes use of MacIntyres's analysis of the concept of a practice to analyze the notion of integrity. He describes a per-
son of integrity as faithful to his commitments and not seduced by external goods such as monetary gain, status and power (Kekes, 1983). Integrity, of the sort that Kekes describes, requires a strong character, meaning that being committed in a way that implies having integrity is directly related to a person's desire to lead a meaningful life.

As mentioned above, the recent developments in our understandings of integrity imply a broader understanding of rationality than the one provided by the enlightenment. Within this broader framework emotional attachments are not as clearly distinguished from rational deliberation. Diverging and antithetical commitments can now be understood as forming part of a structured whole. A person with integrity is one who is properly able to manage a complex network of divergent commitments and to bring coherence to his convictions and actions. Integrity cannot properly be understood in isolation from the commitments that are constitutive of a life story, but it must be understood as an attitude that brings unity to a complex matrix of diverging elements.

A concrete example of the need for a broader rationality is given by Michael Walzer in his famous 'dirty hands' article (Walzer, 1972). He describes a politician who steadfastly opposes the colonial war his country is involved in, and wins the elections with the promise of decolonization and peace. He goes to the colonial capital to open negotiations with the rebels, and is confronted with the following difficult decision: “he is asked to authorize the torture of a captured rebel leader, who knows or probably knows the location of a number of bombs hidden in apartment buildings around the city, set to go off within the next twenty-four hours. He orders the man tortured (…) even though he believes that torture is wrong, indeed abominable, not just sometimes but always. He has expressed this belief often and angrily during his own campaign; the rest of us took it as a sign of his goodness. How should we regard him now?” Walzer defends the politician's decision to torture. The politician is a sincerely committed man who inevitably has to get his hands dirty. In explaining the dirty hands concept Walzer makes a crucial claim: “It is important to stress that we don't want just anyone to make the deal; we want him to make the deal, precisely he has scruples about it.” It is tempting to understand Walzer's conclusion in quantitative terms. In such an interpretation the politician has not lost his integrity insofar as the many good deeds he has done and the many positive enduring commitments he has made are not outweighed by his decision to torture. Many utilitarians think along these lines, as if morality were primarily a matter of calculation: when a certain amount of good deeds are realized, a mistake is permitted. This interpretation misses the point. The essence of morality is not a calculation effected by weighing up pro's and con's. Walzer emphasizes that it is just because the person has done well in the past that we want him to take this decision. The goodness of his previous acts directly influences our evaluation of current acts. Note that utilitarian considerations would lead to similar conclusions regarding the choice to torture, but utilitarian considerations would not give us grounds to trust the politician. A utilitarian approach would only allow us to judge the isolated decision missing the deeper moral dimension of the case. A rationality that goes further than mere calculation is required for making sense of the politician's actions.

**Conclusion**

The emergence of virtue ethics must be accompanied by a methodological shift, and the need for this shift is not always established explicitly in the literature. A detached ethic that aims at complete transparency and prescriptive rules must make room for an
approach that aims at understanding the underlying moral complexities involved in professional life. On the basis of this understanding, normative guidelines can be provided, but not in terms of fixed rules. Instead, and as Aristotle already showed us in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, human action can best be understood in terms of ideals – basic normative pointers. This sort of approach towards ethics requires a broader rationality. It is possible to determine three basic characteristics that define this broader understanding. First, implicated in our proper understanding of basic ethical concepts is the need to establish dialogical relationships with moral subjects in order to be able to make sense of their actions from an 'internal perspective'. Ethics has to investigate the content of people's moral motivations and moral experiences. The whole spectrum of human thoughts and emotions must be taken into consideration. In this task the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions are important sources of inspiration. Moreover, in exploring the full richness and complexity of situated human action, postmodernism has made us more acutely aware of the tensions that exist in our lives. The required rationality is not the sort that implies rigid consistency but, rather, the sort that is guided by the principles that define narrative coherence. For instance, one must be sensitive to the tensions that emerge between the moral demands required for performing a given task and the demands of the large institutional framework within which a given task is carried out. We can only fully make sense of the moral status of a given subject's actions if we come to understand the manner in which they deal with tensions such as the one just mentioned. At times moral principles compete with one another and it is the mark of a responsible agent to know how to adjudicate between competing demands. The third basic feature that defines broad rationality is that it does not suggest a sharp dichotomy between reason and emotion. As we have seen in the treatment of responsibility in processes of moral development, reason and emotion influence each other. Aristotle's rich moral psychology teaches us that virtue is developed in the interaction of 'logos' and emotions.

Once it has been shown that the sort of rationality required for understanding human action is broad rather than narrow, it is possible to make a few remarks about a reproach often made against virtue ethics (and communitarianism), namely, that these moral outlooks entail relativism. They would be characterized by an inability to present fixed moral standards. First, this reproach tends to neglect or deny the emphasis that is laid on the social embeddedness of virtues. MacIntyre's concept of practice presupposes this embeddedness. We have also witnessed the importance of it in the discussion of the concept responsibility. There is moreover an important misunderstanding concerning the concept 'personal'. Virtue ethical theory is highly personal in the sense that it explores the many-sided psychology of human motivation in depth. It is however not personal in the sense that it argues for individuals that follow their arbitrary will. In this respect it disputes the extremes of postmodernity. Another problem of the relativism-reproach is its suggestion that the black and white distinction between true and false is appropriate in moral matters. The background of this suggestion is a long tradition in Anglo-Saxon thought about the status of moral claims. Extreme positions such as Mackie's relativism and Moore's realism have come out of this tradition. As with the opposition between deontology and utilitarianism, the opposition between truth and falsity is one between two extremes on the same continuum. At-

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6 The required method is splendidly developed as a 'hermeneutic ethics' in Van Tongeren, 1994.

7 It is striking how many postmodernists in denying the possibility of moral standards confirm this dichotomy. In this respect they are in the same line of thinking as modern dichotomous rationality.
tempting to understand moral claims as being either true of false does not do justice to the nature of morality. The true/false dichotomy may have its merits in those disciplines that are inspired by the pretensions of objectivity of Enlightenment rationality. But particularly in the field of human action a rigid use of this dichotomy will lead us to a dead end. To consider moral phenomena from a completely external vantage point, and conclude that every moral statement is either true or false, is the wrong way to go about the business of understanding morality. An ethicist should not search for everlasting principles but, rather, he ought to aim at deepening his moral sensibilities in order to be able to understand how moral concepts get played out in our daily lives.

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