

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES, UNITY OF VIRTUES AND REASONABLENESS

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

ONE of the most commonly used standards of evaluation both in morality and in politics and legal theory is that of ‘reasonableness’. Its pervasive presence signals its flexibility. This appears to some authors so extensive that ‘reasonableness’ is sometimes suspected to be no more than a buzz-word. By contrast, I believe that the large use of the ‘principle of reasonableness’ and ‘the standard of the reasonable person’ (and related standards) both in common law and in civil law depends on the non-explicit referral to old ethical categories such as the classical virtues and, especially, *phronesis*.² Similarly,

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¹ This paper derives from a work of revision and reduction of a much longer paper. The main issue revolves around the idea of reasonableness and its interdisciplinary thrust as confronted by the findings of social psychology theories, specially the recent ‘Mixed Traits theory’. I am in debt with Kristján Kristjánsson and Nancy Snow for their readings of the longer paper and I have to acknowledge a particular debt toward Christian Miller who has been very generous in reading carefully especially all the points which regarded his theory. Needless to say, all remaining mistakes are my sole responsibility.

² Aristotle’s doctrine of *phronesis* is spread in several places. This is where his thought on the issue emerges clearly: «It seems proper, then, to an intelligent person to be able to deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial for himself, not about some restricted area – e.g. about what promotes health or strength – but about what promotes living well in general». ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. T. Irwin, Hackett, Indianapolis 1985, 1140 a 26-28 (from now on NE). One of the best contemporary elaborations on *phronesis* to date is D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009. Reflections on the concept of reasonableness are in: M. MANGINI, *Toward a Theory of Reasonableness*, «Ratio Juris», 31/2 (2018), pp. 208-230; and *Is the Reasonable Person a Person of Virtue?*, «Res Publica», 26 (2020), pp. 157-179.

the use of the criterion of the 'reasonable persons' is crucial for the working of the conception of 'public reason' put forward by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism*.³ However, Rawls, probably the most influential political philosopher of the last century in the Anglo-Saxon world, used the concept of 'reasonableness' with a restrictive twist in which 'reasonable' takes only a 'moral' rather than a 'fully ethical' flavour.⁴

I take 'reasonable' as a fundamental standard of evaluation in our society which needs grounding in the ethics of virtues (EV) or, better, in an interpretation of EV in which we hold the 'unity of virtues thesis' because the many applications of the standard encompass a great number of aspects in all areas of human life. This entails that in order to behave reasonably or encourage someone to be reasonable we have to refer to a model of 'living well' or the 'good agent' which can be explicated at best by classical Aristotelian EV. Aristotle's catalogue famously represents a well-rounded model of human flourishing and lends itself, better than other EV competitors, to represent a reference point for the application of 'the reasonable'.

The general assumption that underlies my view is quite well-known among virtue theorists: an Aristotelian model of human flourishing mainly constituted by the exercise of a set of virtues which concern essential dimensions of human life.⁵ A crucial element on which the model hinges is that of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, a conception of practical reasoning in which rational and emotional elements are in balance. A typical worry that would concern most readers, well-informed about Aristotelian ethics, is the question of how to distinguish *phronesis* from reasonableness. From most of what I shall comment later it will appear a substantial identity of contents and functions between *phronesis* and reasonableness. So, what is the need for a new concept, at least from within Aristotelian ethics? I believe that there are at least two crucial points of distinction between the two concepts. The first lies in the different perspectives from which they are used. *Phronesis* is basically an agent-centered virtue which works in combination with all the virtues of character and provides their point in each situation of application. As we shall see, it involves a complex whole of qualities, both on the rational-cognitive side and on the affective side. *Reasonableness*, as already introduced, is basically a *standard of evaluation* which encompasses not only the ethical but also the legal and political area of conduct. Its thrust is wider than *phronesis*, reaching both

³ J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1993.

⁴ M. MANGINI, *Toward a Theory of Reasonableness*, cit., p. 217.

⁵ My reference point is Aristotle's definition: «a virtue is a state that decides, consisting in a mean relative to us and defined by reference to reason» (NE 1107 a 1-4). In my view Martha Nussbaum's elaboration is among those most consistent with the original Aristotelian conception: M. NUSSBAUM, *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach*, «Midwest Studies in Philosophy», XIII (1988).

the personal and the collective level: for example, while traditionally we can judge someone's conduct as *phronetic* or not, we would not use '*phronetic*' for political arrangements, laws or judicial decisions.⁶ However, for coherence of evaluation we also use the concept of 'reasonable' for persons but going beyond John Rawls's well-known usage.

While *phronesis* or practical intelligence dealt with and was able to balance together different character traits, reasonableness extends its thrust to the variety of choices, the large plurality of values that the individual agent has to tackle in contemporary society: for example, how to balance the claims of migrants with those of the cultural identity of one's country; the claims for the preservation of the environment with those for industrial development of underdeveloped countries; the claims to one's own comfort and wellbeing with the moral pull coming from so many have-nots. The reasonable agent and the reasonable society are challenged by these dilemmas and many more and he has to give intelligent responses out of his character and reasoning.

A second point of distinction lies in the agent's self-perception of his conduct: in situations in which courage or friendship or other virtues are required the agent wants to do the right thing, both rationally and emotionally. He does not aim at doing the 'reasonable thing'. This eventually may come later as a third-party judgment. From my presentation so far, it is already clear that the Aristotelian model which inspires this discussion is typically an ideal model which leaves many contemporary theorists unhappy because they doubt that the virtuous agent is "psychologically realistic". It was Owen Flanagan's merit at the beginning of the '90s to emphasize in a pioneering work the importance of psychological realism for ethics.⁷ He brought together different

⁶ It is in its more extensive use that reasonableness emerges as a leading standard of evaluation whose core goes beyond the complex whole of qualities of *phronesis*. Most of the central criteria that we find at work within reasonableness, such as 'coherence, consistency, equality and proportion' among others, (M. MANGINI, *Toward a Theory of Reasonableness*, cit., p. 211f.) find their foundation in a formal reasoning that applies beyond the exercise of the virtues which characterize *phronesis*. Further, reasonableness also calls on typical features of contemporary complex societies, such as, as Rawls calls it, the necessary balancing of plural and conflicting values and the capacity of listening to the reasons of others. (I have expanded on the distinctive features of reasonableness in *Reasonableness and the Unity of Virtues*, on file with author). While 'balancing' is not foreign to the 'integrative function' of different concerns, characteristic of the functioning of *phronesis* (C. DARNELL, L. GULLIFORD, K. KRISTJÁNSSON, P. PARIS, *Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?*, «Human Development», 62 (2019), pp. 118-119), the fact of pluralism emphasizes the level of complexity and conflictuality among values that is a problem of contemporary societies much more than it did in the Greek society at Aristotle's time.

⁷ O. FLANAGAN, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1991.

inquiries such as those of ethics and psychology, starting from the ‘Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism’ (PMPR): «make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing and behavior prescribed are possible or are perceived to be possible for creatures like us». ⁸ One of the protagonists of Flanagan’s book is the EV that is confronted with moral and social psychology theories. Especially the latter direction has been explored in the following years by other theorists such as John Doris, Gilbert Harman and Christian Miller. ⁹

If situationist theses, such as Doris’ and Harman’s, were true or if Miller’s Mixed Traits theory were true, these positions in social psychology would greatly undermine the strength and persuasivity of EV in our societies. In order to ground the plausibility of reasonableness in law and politics we need to start from the virtuous agent and check whether his excellent conduct is psychologically realistic. If theories such as situationism are well founded, a good deal of legal and political theory would be undermined. Thus, we need to assess the status of the agent of EV. Being an ideal agent, the findings of social psychology could seriously threaten its plausibility only if we did not put them in their place: that is empirical inputs within a normative framework in which the virtues suggest lines of correct conduct as constituent elements of an ideal of human flourishing. The psychological realism of EV is not threatened, in my view, by the fact that so many people do not practice the virtues, even when this would require minimal efforts, so long as we share the virtues as standards of evaluation and agree from a third person standpoint on the assessment of human conducts.

The ethical thrust of the considerations that follow will be guided by a main goal: showing the persisting normative plausibility of EV as a ‘unitary theory’, and of reasonableness in particular, vis-à-vis theories of social psychology such as dispositionism, situationism and MT theory. I shall center my discussion especially on a specific example of friendship which will show quite clearly the normative import of friendship to direct the interpretation of the conflictual situation: dispositionism and situationism only provide useful hints to understand the case.

The third step has the purpose of contrasting the empirical accounts of social psychology provided in previous sections through the friendship case with the appeal to the alternative ‘cognitive-affective personality system’ (CAPS) which seems to salvage the inner structure of the virtues.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

⁹ J. DORIS, *Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics*, «*Nous*», 32/4 (1998), pp. 504-530; ID., *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002; G. HARMAN, *Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error*, «*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*», 99 (1999), pp. 315-331; C. MILLER, *Moral Character. An Empirical Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; ID., *Character and Moral Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

In conclusion, the normative lines of interpretation of cognitive-affective processes, as directed by the reasons of *phronesis*, within an overall picture of human flourishing, would lead us toward some version of the thesis of the ‘unity of virtues’ (UV) which represents a strong opponent of theories of social psychology such as situationism and MT. Although *prima facie* implausible because of the large number of qualities of character that we call ‘virtues’, the UV may gain plausibility once we tackle the ‘enumeration problem’. The UV makes sense when we follow Martha Nussbaum¹⁰ and choose the Aristotelian list of virtues that she describes as ‘essential dimensions’ of any typical human life. The model of the virtuous agent, then, emerges as someone who can not only correctly exercise virtues such as justice or friendship in their contexts but is also able to join the concerns in certain basic human contexts. This capacity of integration of the concerns of different virtues is one of the distinctive features of *phronesis* and belongs to the legacy that comes within *reasonableness*. As already pointed out, this goes beyond *phronesis* only to the extent that enlarges its thrust to collective decisions, such as legal and political ones in an age in which we have to take complicated and often conflictual decisions, though trying to keep our orientation to living well.

2. CONFRONTING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES AGAINST THE NORMATIVITY OF THE EV

A fuller account of Aristotle’s EV is required now in order to check what its normative import was really meant to be. After giving this account I will test it with competing theories of social psychology, such as dispositionism, situationism and MT theory, trying to show how Daniel Russell’s proposal of the virtues as ‘cognitive-affective processes’ is both psychologically realistic and more suitable for Aristotelian EV. Second, once our account is in place we need to confront it with Miller’s claims about virtuous actions performed by people equipped with MT. In giving these accounts of social psychology theories *vis-à-vis* the normativity of EV I will keep my focus on friendship as a fertile example that helps to show the limits of those theories. Finally, I will take my moves from Owen Flanagan’s emphasis on ‘evaluative consistency’ among virtuous traits to consider the ancient (Aristotelian) ‘unity of virtues’ thesis. Even if we accept only the weaker ‘evaluative consistency’ claim we face a position which cannot fit MT theory because this is based on isolated traits of character whose analysis is piecemeal and never put into relation with other traits. It will appear that MT theory – and situationism – is not equipped with the theoretical resources necessary to deal with the concept of character as used in everyday language.

¹⁰ M. NUSSBAUM, *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach*, cit.

Our first task is that of making clear what we talk about when we talk about Aristotelian EV. (I concentrate on this brand of EV because it is the typical target of situationism and MT theory). Aristotle constructs his EV within a larger ‘eudaimonistic’ framework according to which human beings pursue the best way to live, ‘*eudaimonia*’, according to his definition. This is pursued in a way in which practical reasoning has a crucial role. This role includes devising the ends we want to pursue in life and especially those final ends that give us reasons by which we can live – assuming the plurality of ends that belong to a flourishing human life. One final end is the central one which gives us reasons to pursue all the others: it is the end of giving ourselves a good life.¹¹ It is from this end that we can deliberate to give meaning and position in the overall framework to all substantive ends that we pursue in our life. Thus, practical reason assumes a crucial role in the way each human being fulfils his life. Further, I should add another important point to the structure of practical reasoning in Aristotelian EV. I do not have space for a proper treatment but it deserves to be mentioned: practical reasoning takes place to an important extent through the structure of the virtues and emotions and feelings play an important role in the functioning of virtues.¹² In other words our reasoning about how to live our life best does not exclude emotions and feelings but includes them in our process of deliberation. Finally, it is worth emphasising how virtuous activity, taking place through rich forms of practical reasoning – as already mentioned – is a *necessary* and most important part of happiness (not also *sufficient* because Aristotle held that also external goods are important). On this view happiness or the good life is constituted mainly by the exercise of virtues such as friendship.¹³ This is, for example, an excellence that reaches broad across the agent’s psychological constituents, such as emotional reactions, attitudes, desires, values, etc. In cases of conduct toward a friend who, for example, has just lost a father or a brother, only practical wisdom (*phronesis*) enables the agent to deliberate with intelligence and sensitivity in the particular situation.¹⁴ It is important to emphasize the crucial role of *phronesis* in the functioning of the virtues. As Kristjánsson and others

¹¹ ARISTOTLE, NE 1149 a 18-22.

¹² One may wonder about the eventual difference between ‘emotions’ and ‘desires’. I follow Terence Irwin in taking emotion, *thumos*, as a «non-rational desire for objects that appear good, not merely pleasant, because of the agent’s emotions. [...] The different forms of appetite and emotion are feelings, whereas rational desires are not». T. IRWIN, *Notes* in NE, p. 394. Thus, «feeling, *pathos*, [...] indicates a mode of passivity rather than activity (e.g. NE 1132 a 9, ‘suffering’). Hence be affected is sometimes (e.g. NE 1147 a 14) the appropriate rendering». *Ibidem*, p. 400.

¹³ Cf. Aristotle’s extended treatment in books 8 and 9 of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁴ For my sketchy reconstruction: cf. D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., pp. 7-18.

have recently clarified once more in the Aristotelian tradition, *phronesis* has a 'constitutive function' by which what is of ethical salience is identified in each concrete situation and a reason-responsive strategy is devised, and an 'integrative function' by which different components of the good life are integrated, especially in dilemmatic situations. It contributes to provide a coherent conception of the good life to which one's moral identity can be adjusted; finally, it contributes to the emotional regulation of the agent, according to his construal of a situation and moral judgment.¹⁵

Now the sketchy reconstruction of Aristotelian EV within the *eudaimonistic* framework that I have presented may give us useful conceptual tools to tackle theories of social psychology. My general strategy with regard to the challenge of psychological realism is that of testing empirical proposals of interpretation of character traits and virtues against the normative account of EV provided above. Rather than reducing EV to what social psychology says that the virtues are, we assume disagreement among theories of social psychology and reverse the test. We start from the ethical ideal of *eudaimonistic* EV and try to check which empirical account of character and the virtues best suits *the normative account of a life lived pursuing happiness according to the virtues*. This reversal may seem puzzling to all those who believe that an empirical account can be assessed only empirically, but from the ethical standpoint I am taking here the normativity of the virtues can be carried forward only if we assume a suitable psychological make-up in human beings. The view of cognitive-affective processes – heir to the well-known CAPS view in social psychology – makes sense of the virtues as we commonly conceive of them, while, for example, the understanding of MT theory runs against the common grain of wisdom.¹⁶ If we want to keep the normativity of the virtues and support their thrust in educational theory, we need to maintain the ideal of EV against contrary findings from social psychology.

3. CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO THE EV (1): DISPOSITIONISM

A useful starting point for our discussion is that of considering a well-known theory in social psychology such as dispositionism as the most obvious candidate in giving empirical foundations to EV. According to dispositionism, we infer from observation certain behavioural signs in a subject, we infer 'broad-

¹⁵ C. DARNELL, L. GULLIFORD, K. KRISTJÁNSSON, P. PARIS, *Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?*, cit., pp. 1180-1220.

¹⁶ CAPS or 'cognitive-affective personality system' can be usefully described, borrowing Christian Miller's definition: «using technical language, the CAPS model re-describes and finds supporting evidence for basic platitudes of common-sense folk psychology». C. MILLER, *Character and Moral Psychology*, cit., p. 108.

based dispositions' that operate across a wide range of contexts and we are able to predict future behavioural patterns because 'broad-based dispositions' are stable over time in the same kind of situation and consistent in different kinds of situation.¹⁷ Dispositionists focus on personality traits without giving any importance to the way agents interact with situations. As I already noticed, the subject's construal of the situation is entirely neglected by dispositionists. Can this model work for EV theory?

I believe that an example based on the disposition of friendship may be helpful to grasp the limits of dispositionism with regard to the virtues. A friendly person is as such according to the persons with whom and the circumstances in which he interacts. He is not friendly across all situations and regardless of those with whom he interacts, although the model of dispositionism relies on stable and constant traits. Further, the virtue of friendship entails a complex relationship between the agent and his friends, involving rational deliberation as much as the display of appropriate emotions. Both the rational and the emotional side of friendship will be strictly connected to a certain situation and to the particular persons with whom someone interacts. In observing the normal conduct of a friendly person we will detect regular patterns of conduct, characterised by both stability in time and consistency across different situations. This is not to exclude that in certain circumstances a 'bad mood' or other factors may induce the friendly agent to a kind of conduct his friends may disapprove of, though understand because of those circumstances. By contrast, what would be considered improper of a friendly person – and would make us wonder of this qualification – would be a behaviour such as that of the person in Milgram's situation.¹⁸ The subject of the experiment who hears cries of pain from the confederate of the experiment, apparently shocked with high electrical voltage, would not remain indifferent to the pain if he believed the confederate to be a friend of his. Notwithstanding the influence exercised by the authoritative figure in the room from which he administers electric shocks to the confederate, the friendly agent would consider the reasons of the experiment much less weighty than those deriving from his relationship of friendship. Further, his emotional involvement with his friend would immediately prevent the agent from causing him pain. In this case the decision of the virtuous agent may be summarised as a complex judgement in which rational deliberation and the emotional involvement converge toward a decision that confirms in the agent's 'narrow circle', to use Hume's expression, his qualification as a friend. Thus, in this experimental situation as

¹⁷ A. L. PERVIN, *A Critical Analysis of Current Trait Theory*, «Psychological Inquiry», 5 (1994), p. 108.

¹⁸ Cf. S. MILGRAM, *Behavioral Study of Obedience*, «Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology», 67 (1963), pp. 371-378.

in many others observation can give us evidence of the presence of a trait of character in someone. It is a trait of character which is operative in all those situations in which it is *appropriate* after a careful review of the situation. Differently we would not use the concept of friendship.

In conclusion on this point, once dispositionism treats personality traits as 'situation-free', as unable to change and adapt according to the nuances of each situation, it misses entirely the main advantage of the Aristotelian model of virtues. These employ *phronesis* to read and understand the situation, both rationally and emotionally, and decide what the concrete contours of friendship – generosity or else – have to be in a certain case. Broad-based dispositions are not disregarded by Aristotelian EV, they represent important patterns of continuity within a person's conduct. In turn the subject's construal of the situation is the counterpart of those dispositions within a certain set of psychological theories which emphasise the situation in which the agent has to decide. Being aware to a certain extent of the way the virtuous agent construes his picture of the situation, we should now turn to situationism as the other main contender in social psychology.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO THE EV (2): THE SITUATIONIST STING

Situationism is the obvious counterpart of dispositionism with regard to our discussion. So much the latter relies on broad dispositions, forgetting the role of the agent in construing the situation and interacting with other agents, as the former emphasizes these aspects to such an extent that nothing else seems to count in determining the agent's decision beside the situation and its actors. Social psychologists Ross and Nisbett see situationism as standing on three legs: situations, subject's construal and the dynamic relation between situation and person.¹⁹ These three factors would explain behaviour much better than dispositions, according to situationists. From the point of view of classical EV all these factors are not rejected but, rather, interpreted as operative features of a well-functioning virtue. A virtue on this view is a stable and consistent trait of character that adapts to the situation in which it is exercised, requires the subject's understanding of the situation and, to some extent, leads to a dynamic interplay with the situation: the trait of character is shaped according to the contours of the situation and so is the response to the situation.²⁰ However according to situationism, a trait of character is only

¹⁹ Cf. L. ROSS, R. E. NISBETT, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1991.

²⁰ In the large literature deriving from situationist experiments, cf. B. LATANÉ, J. M. DARLEY, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?*, Appleton-Century-Croft, New York 1968; J. M. DARLEY, D. BATSON, *'From Jerusalem to Jericho': A Study of Situational and*

local and depending on a certain situation. In a different situation, notwithstanding degrees of similarity, different traits – and, thus, different virtues – may be displayed by the agent.

An example may show with some clarity the limits of situationism from the point of view of classical EV. Two persons, Charles and Peter, have a long-standing friendship, they are colleagues, often go out together and have common friends. In different situations through time Charles identifies some unpleasant aspects of Peter's character: he is sometimes rude, also with children, without a good reason; he reveals at some moments a tendency to be arrogant; when discussing he often does not listen carefully to other people's reasons; finally, when Charles asks him to help his fiancée on the working place, Peter adduces abstract reasons of impartiality which prevent him from helping. Charles understands those reasons but believes that in the particular situation their friendship should justify a more proactive behaviour on the side of Peter. This lack of mutual understanding leads their friendship to a serious crisis.

What would situationists comment with regard to our example? My understanding of situationism is that this example would be taken as fuel to the situationist engine: they would hold that there is no stable and consistent trait of character that we can call 'friendship'. What we have here is some kind of personal relation which may be called 'friendship' only according to certain circumstances and a certain conduct of the protagonists. In different circumstances, when some new factors enter into the relation, this may be transformed into something which is not a friendship any more. The situation, the subject's construal (in this case, Peter's) and the dynamic interplay between situation and persons are all factors which lead the situationist to think that there is no trait of character such as friendship in the evolution of that relationship. (Or, from the point of view of MT theory, that we shall confront soon, one might say that in the presence of certain inhibitors – such as abstract reasons of impartiality – Peter's trait of friendship leaves room to something else: it is a mixed trait, neither stable nor consistent).

Now, our problem is that of assessing the example from an EV standpoint and show what its distinctive features are, assuming we are interpreting a case of friendship. EV, as we know, is not a theory in social psychology but a normative theory about the correct way people should conduct their lives, employing their qualities of rational deliberation and emotional response to

Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 27/1 (1970), pp. 100-108; S. MILGRAM, *Behavioral Study of Obedience*, «Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology», 67/4 (1963), pp. 371-378; A. M. ISEN, H. LEVIN, *Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 21/3 (1972), pp. 384-388.

achieve a certain goal of happiness (this is the *eudaimonistic* version of EV, as already introduced). Rather than looking at character traits as «independently functioning dispositions to behave in stereotypical ways»,²¹ as situationists do in their experiment tests, Aristotelian EV theorists have a holistic conception of character, inclusive of how we reason and feel emotions. Thus, Peter's friendship has to be interpreted according to his character as a whole, as an integrated set of motivations that includes his beliefs about the world, desires and ultimate goals and values.²² My account of Peter's conduct with regard to Charles may leave room to a reconsideration of his relationship. He has evolved and changed his mind with regard to this friendship *vis-à-vis* his other goals and values – eventually his ambitions. He may decide not to help Charles because of conflicting considerations of justice – because he believes that his help would violate the requirements of impartiality to which he is obligated because of his role – or because of more personal – even egoistic – reasons.

From what has been already emphasized it is clear that classical EV cannot understand the example only in terms of a stable and consistent disposition of friendship (because this seems to falter in Peter's case, though it used to stand steadily in the previous course of that friendship) nor can it be interpreted only in situationist terms in which no relevance is given to the long-term pattern of friendship (because there is some resilience of this relationship in our case that leads us to wonder about its new configuration, what is left). EV considers the example normatively, assuming that Charles' and Peter's friendship resembled to some degree the ideal model of the 'character friendship' or 'complete friendship', that of good people who are similar in virtue and wish good to each other for each other's own sake.²³ Further, Aristotle continues, this friendship is enduring since it embraces in itself all the features the friends must have.²⁴ A friendship that gets easily dissolved is for utility or for pleasure. In these – lower – categories a person is fond of a friend because of what he finds useful or pleasant for himself: when the friends do not preserve those features of pleasure or utility they had for each other these sorts of friendship dissolve. This might be a plausible interpretation of our case in which appropriate rational deliberation and emotional response were shown but only to some extent, and we may add instrumentally – at least on Peter's side. Normatively we should conclude that patterns of cognition, desire and affection were at work in that relationship before and, to some extent, also after the moment of crisis but whether we can talk of the virtue of friendship in its ideal model or, rather, in its lower varieties, depends on a correct and careful assessment of all the features of the case.

²¹ R. KAMTEKAR, *Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character*, «Ethics», 114/3 (2004), pp. 458-491.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ ARISTOTLE, NE 1156 b 6-9.

²⁴ ARISTOTLE, NE 1156 b 18-19.

It is very relevant to notice at this point how the operations of friendship show its nature of a virtue which embeds a complex constellation of cognitive, motivational and affective elements – according to CAPS. In the case of friendship a certain constellation, characterized by specific motives, identifies a form of ‘social intelligence’ of a peculiar nature. I share Nancy Snow’s view that the virtues can be read as forms of social intelligence, that is a «complex, multidimensional set of knowledge, skills and abilities comprised of perception or insight, knowledge and behavioural ability, that, other things being equal, enables us to perform well or be successful in social or interpersonal affairs».²⁵ I believe that friendship lends itself to show all the aspects of social intelligence better than other virtues insofar as its dynamics is constitutively grounded on mutual perception and understanding of at least two people. This takes place within a scenario of social conventions which contribute to give meaning to friendship. However, what really counts for the good working of friendship as social intelligence – and also for the other virtues – is a special expertise that not only connects the agent with a plurality of social meanings but also contributes to give – each – friendship the correct position within the overall picture of the agent’s flourishing. I want to emphasize this aspect of the virtues that generally escapes Snow’s conception of social intelligence.

5. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY (3): MIXED TRAITS THEORY

Finally, we should confront again the most recent competitor among social psychology theories: MT theory. My aim here is to discuss the main features of this theory *vis-à-vis* the normative thrust of classical EV and, once again, our example of friendship will be helpful to highlight pros and cons of MT theory.²⁶ In general terms the virtuous agent may be trusted for acting generously or as a friend when appropriate. He will not be affected by momentary impulses, whims, contrary desires or anything else that threatens to change the virtuous decision. This is taken by an agent who deliberates correctly about what the situation requires – e.g. in terms of generosity or friendship – and, then, acts accordingly.

By contrast, the MT theorist holds that (I) most people may perform good actions but «most people do not have any of the virtues to any degree, although a few might possess one or more of them»;²⁷ (II) the agent’s capacity to perform virtuous actions depends on enhancers or inhibitors which may or

²⁵ N. E. SNOW, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, Routledge, New York-London 2010, p. 69.

²⁶ Although Christian Miller, the MT theorist, never discusses the virtue of friendship in his work, it seems necessary to keep this virtue in order to continue our discussion along the rails of the previous example. Also, friendship represents a good sample of Aristotelian virtue.

²⁷ C. MILLER, *Character and Moral Psychology*, cit., p. 41.

may not be morally problematic;²⁸ (III) agents who have mixed traits act for motivating reasons that are either morally problematic or morally neutral, although sometimes they can act also for morally admirable reasons: however, in these latter cases reasons may not show as stable and cross-situational as it happens for virtue-traits of character; (IV) agents with mixed traits often act out of egoistic motives which apparently overwhelm the power of eventual virtuous motives, but we can properly understand the situation only if we consider the intrinsic/extrinsic opposition of motives.²⁹ So far goes Miller's account of how MT denies the existence of the virtues in *most people* – he only allows for some restricted minority of virtuous agents.

In my view we should consider at least a general response that regards the fit – or misfit – between MT empirical account and the normative thrust of classical EV. The first, developed by Miller himself and many other theorists,³⁰ is the so-called 'rarity response': the EV is proposed by all classical theorists, starting from Aristotle, as an ideal model that can orient the choice of people but it is an ideal that only a few can achieve. Aristotle himself wrote that the most avoid what is base because of fear of penalties, not because of shame. The most pursue their pleasures and have not even the notion of what is fine and truly pleasant.³¹ None of those theorists who accept the rarity response expects to see that most people are virtuous agents, although almost each of us knows that generosity, courage, friendship, temperance, etc. are the appropriate responses in certain circumstances. What Aristotle already knew, devoting a good part of Book VII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, is that many people go wrong in their decisions: for example, «the continent person knows that his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them»; by contrast, «the incontinent person knows that his actions are base, but does them because of his feelings».³² If we take seriously Aristotle's long discussion of cases of incontinence (e.g. impetuosity, weakness),³³ we have a clear statement from the leading author of EV of the many reasons we can go wrong in deciding to act with regard to pleasures. This discussion can first advise all followers of EV that we cannot hope to push all people toward the way of the virtues. Thus, when the 'rarity response' is proposed by the MT theorist he is not running against the tradition of EV but, in my view, following Aristotle's lead from another perspective, with a larger background of empirical analysis and introducing a large array of novel ideas from social psychology. Notwithstanding this concession to the MT theorist, in pondering the real weight of

²⁸ We can find an example of a non-morally problematic enhancer in Miller's discussion of 'empathy': see C. MILLER, *Moral Character. An Empirical Theory*, cit., p. 102f.

²⁹ C. MILLER, *Character and Moral Psychology*, cit., pp. 208-209.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 202, nn. 50-51.

³¹ ARISTOTLE, NE 1179 b 11-16.

³² ARISTOTLE, NE 1145 b 13-14.

³³ ARISTOTLE, NE 1150 b 19-20.

MT charges we should be careful to not miss the point of the practical reasoning of the agent according to the virtues. I want to keep with my example of friendship in what follows.

Let's proceed in order. With regard to the first MT point, in the example Peter does not show friendship at the crucial moment, when he is asked by Charles to help his fiancée. I want to propose several alternative responses to the MT theorist who would probably claim that no friendship is shown here,³⁴ though the effort would be minimal, because some inhibitor prevents Peter's friendly choice. From the classical EV standpoint we might, first, say that this is a friendship of character and once practical reasoning is carefully applied to the case it shows that helping would not be the best response in that moment, given the contours of the situation on the working place. Second, Peter is still reasoning through the virtues but realizes the complexity of the situation in which also the virtue of justice comes to play a role. Peter, let us add now, exercises a role which requires impartiality with regard to disputes and claims on the working place. Breaking that impartiality in order to help a friend would represent a clear violation of the virtue of justice both in his own view and in the view of all those who know him. Third, Peter's refusal to help can be interpreted as either showing the downscaling of his friendship toward a lower level, such as a pleasure – or utility – friendship; or as evidence that what Charles believed about their friendship does not correspond to Peter's opinion. Peter has taken that friendship in the sense of a relationship of pleasure or, even less, of utility: as a relationship which had sense so far as it had an instrumental value – pleasure or utility. The weight of Charles' request of help suddenly outweighs any pleasure or utility deriving from that friendship for Peter.

It is important to emphasize that all these possibilities are within the shape of the virtue of friendship, representing tokens of practical reasoning according to the structure of the virtue. In the example we are not facing mixed traits by which once Peter behaves as a friend and the next time as an enemy. Normatively we want to have conceptual tools to evaluate the case, not just being told that Peter sometimes is friendly and helping and other times a careless person. Further, Peter himself may be in need of guidance for action and has to inspire his decisions to a model of friendship, as exercised by the *phronimos*.

According to the second point of critique put forward by the MT theorist, virtuous action would be prevented by the presence of an inhibitor. In our

³⁴ It is fair to notice that Miller has never dwelled on friendship in developing his MT theory, so he has not developed those enhancers and inhibitors that are peculiar to this moral domain. However, in my view we can apply also to the case of friendship the general story about enhancers and inhibitors he has developed with regard to other virtues.

example Charles' request and its weight in Peter's conception of their friendship would be taken as an inhibitor to virtuous action and to the overall, eudaimonistic, framework in which that reasoning is located. Given my previous comments on Charles' and Peter's friendship, it is clear that it is no inhibitor to influence Peter's choice but simply motivations and reasoning that belong to the functioning of friendship.

Also the MT theorist's third point, if applied to the example, does not show a lack of friendship. Although one might say that Peter's motivations are morally problematic because his choice is not following the model of friendship, we should object that we can recognize the moral problem just because we know that the morally admirable conduct in our case would be Peter's helping option and for this reason we can advance considerations as those above about alternative interpretations of Peter's conduct. Along the lines of our view the moral problem of the example depends on a break in the ideal functioning of friendship which leaves way to lower models or to other justifications.

Finally, the fourth point presumably advanced by the MT theorist concerns the strength of extrinsic motives over intrinsic motives in motivating human decision and action. What I mean is that, while in the Aristotelian EV basic motivations to act generously, justly, friendly, etc. come from within a specific sphere of human conduct where we can achieve intrinsic excellence of decision and action; in the case of 'generic' virtues that apply all over human conduct and not to a specific sphere, the agent's motivations are extrinsic and more weakly connected to the flourishing of the agent. In my view this sort of motivation is what we find in virtues typically discussed within MT theory such as *compassion*, generically helping behaviour, or 'non-malevolence, generically non-harming behaviour. So, when the agent does not help – as in most experiments of social psychology – there is a lack of virtues, because extrinsic 'virtuous' motives cannot outweigh other motives such as the egoistic ones. But such a characterization does not give the full sense of what goes on in a case of friendship. In our example Peter's motives may or may not include egoistic reflexes but the point is that it would be reductive and inadequate to interpret Peter's choice only in terms of the egoistic/altruistic divide which is characteristic of virtues such as compassion. What we have here is a complex whole with a specificity of rational deliberation, desires and emotional involvement that we traditionally call 'friendship'. In friendship we find stable and consistent patterns that, on the one hand, explain psychologically the conduct of friends but, on the other, underlie the justification or critique of certain samples of conduct because virtue terms are essentially normative. Once again we can reach a full and satisfactory understanding of friendship and its operations only in the light of the 'social intelligence interpretation', as supplemented by an attention to the agent's flourishing, as already explained. What each friend should do in each situation depends on the developments

of these two points of view in a teleological understanding of the agent's flourishing.

6. FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO MAKING NORMATIVE SENSE OF THE VIRTUES

After criticizing competitive accounts in social psychology from the standpoint of classical EV it is now time to consider an alternative account that seems more promising as empirical foundation of classical EV. It seems able to preserve some good aspects of dispositionism and situationism, while rejecting their less plausible sides. I have already mentioned this theory with regard to Daniel Russell but it is correct to say that a 'cognitive-affective personality system' (CAPS) dates back to Mischel's work³⁵ and, once properly interpreted, refers the virtues to basic units of personality, to «cognitive-affective processes by which agents interact with their environment».³⁶ These may be described as patterns which are stable over time and consistent across a range of situations but, differently from 'broad-based dispositions', can adapt to situations through the subject's construal of the situation and another psychological mechanism Mischel called 'if...then...signature'.³⁷ Apparent differences of behaviour can be explained on the grounds of broader goals, priorities, construals, experiences that structure and give sense to a series of otherwise disconnected behaviors. Given the characterization in cognitive-affective terms of a situation by a certain agent, we can infer that a pattern of this kind, though consistent, can adapt in interaction with situational variables.³⁸ Is this empirical account more suitable to the functioning of the virtues in the classical view? In order to make some helpful reflection we need to go back to our friendship example and check whether Charles' and Peter's relationship can be interpreted in terms of a cognitive-affective pattern of behaviour. According to the account provided, it seems we have cognitive-affective patterns of friendship until the moment of crisis. This can be better described as a situation in which new factors enter and produce an important shift in Peter's cognitive and affective patterns. If we conceive of it as a character-friendship, we

³⁵ W. MISCHEL, *Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality*, «Psychological Review», 80/4 (1973), pp. 252-283.

³⁶ D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., p. 258. The theory that is referred to is the so-called CAPS: personality as a cognitive-affective processing (or personality) system whose variables are beliefs, desires, feelings, goals, expectations, values and self-regulatory plans. W. MISCHEL, *Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality*, cit.; W. MISCHEL, Y. SHODA, *Personality Psychology Has Two Goals: Must It Be Two Fields?*, «Psychological Inquiry», 5/2 (1994), pp. 156-158. According to CAPS, perceptions matter because people's actions depend on their interpretation of the stimuli they receive.

³⁷ W. MISCHEL, *Personality and Assessment*, Wiley, New York 1968, pp. 183f, 189.

³⁸ D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., pp. 258-262.

can understand Peter's reasoning and feeling as being outweighed by Charles' request that changes the balance of values in Peter's friendship. Alternatively, if we conceive of it as a pleasure – or utility – friendship, the shift in the new situation is less serious; Peter realises that that friendship threatens the overall amount of pleasure of his life or, similarly, that the cost-benefit calculation is negative in the new situation.

It is remarkable to notice that the psychological traits involved in the situation are both cognitive and affective. They are patterns with some degree of continuity but adaptable to new situations and adaptability depends on the way the subject construes the situation. This picture of the psychological traits at work defeats at one time the opposite extremes of dispositionism and situationism.

These empirical observations should not conceal the further step to the normative level at which cognitive-affective patterns support character traits that define good models of conduct against wrong alternatives. In all cases in which these patterns rise to the level of virtues we should not forget the role of *phronesis*: the exercise of each virtue always depends on – right – reasons that lead to the right act in a certain situation. In concluding my quick remarks on social psychology approaches I want to emphasize how 'cognitive-affective processes' make most sense from the point of view of a reasonable understanding of human psychology. First, they salvage those aspects of rational reflection and emotional involvement that we have seen at work in the case of friendship. Second, their operation shows that we can still talk of stable dispositions when describing character traits, though these have to be conceived of as flexible and adapting to situations, according to the prevailing reasons. Finally, the account of cognitive-affective processes drives out the MT proposal of 'enhancers and inhibitors' as the main variables that affect the agent's choice. Cognitive-affective processes represent a 'reasonable interpretation' of the agent's choices because they presuppose a (roughly) balanced psychological structure of the agent.

7. FROM THE CHARGES OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO THE UNITY OF VIRTUES THESIS

At this point it seems that we have some good grounds to confirm the classical normative thesis of the virtues as stable and consistent psychological features that endure through time and through different contexts. The qualification of cognitive-affective processes or patterns does not lead us much away from the traditional idea of 'states' (Aristotle) or dispositions, provided we do not interpret them along the lines of the dispositionist theory. According to the view that emerges from the previous discussion and seems to resist to the charges from contemporary empirical theories, it is plausible to imagine a model of virtuous

agent that acts *reasonably* insofar as she is generous, courageous, friendly, etc. in each situation in which one of those virtues is required. Her reasonableness appears both at the cognitive level of understanding and at the emotional level of feelings because she makes the choices and displays the feelings that each situation requires. In the example it represents the model against which we evaluate Charles' and Peter's conduct and emotional reactions. Peter's conduct and reactions are unreasonable from the point of view of complete (character-) friendship but not so if his relationship is reduced to pleasure- or utility-friendship. The evaluative standard of reasonableness requires an overall view of the agent's choices and emotional reactions over long periods, eventually a whole life. Once we confront someone whose swinging conduct depends on momentary enhancers and inhibitors we do not use to characterize him as a virtuous agent whose conduct can be reasonably trusted. Reasonableness requires continuity of consistent conduct through time that responds at least to the expectancies of the 'narrow circle' of the agent. In turn, as also some research in social psychology has pointed out, often when we recognize certain traits of character in an agent we also expect other traits to be displayed. We use to make widespread evaluative judgements about the character of people which presuppose the overall understanding of character. The ancients have transmitted to us – especially through Aristotle's EV – the thesis of the '*unity of virtues*' (UV), a controversial thesis which needs some reflection but can be very helpful in our understanding and rejection of the challenges from social psychology.

I want to start this discussion by emphasising that the normative point of view of classical EV relies on the unitary notion of character of which the virtues are constituent parts. Psychologically the normative thesis is founded on a conception of character traits which are mutually integrated and constitute a balanced whole. Aristotle's ideal model of the good life is essentially based on a well-balanced character in which the virtues orient the agent's conduct. How should we shape the challenge to the unitary notion of character which underpins the normative thesis of UV? Although our previous treatment of social psychology views such as dispositionism, situationism and MT theory already gives us clear hints toward a disconnected understanding of traits of character, we can find more explicit views in the literature.

Owen Flanagan's pioneering work does not discuss explicitly the UV thesis but dwells on the problem of the 'evaluative consistency' of character traits: «we assume that one good trait or characteristic betokens other good traits or characteristics, and similarly for undesirable traits». ³⁹ Flanagan exemplifies the view of evaluative consistency by recalling Asch's study ⁴⁰ according to

³⁹ O. FLANAGAN, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, cit., p. 283.

⁴⁰ S. E. ASCH, *Forming Impressions of Personality*, «Journal of Social Psychology», 41/3 (1946), pp. 258-290.

which a list of traits such as ‘intelligent – skilful – industrious – warm – determined – practical – cautious’ brought a majority of persons to infer that the bearer was also ‘honest (98%), good-looking (77%), altruistic (69%), happy (90%) and generous (91%)’. Although Flanagan is not especially inclined toward evaluative consistency, he allows that there may be internal psychological pressures among traits, beliefs and desires that point toward evaluative consistency; or that certain moral educational environment engenders such consistency. His concern with this thesis starts from realising the degree of surprise we feel in front of character inconsistencies such as in Oskar Schindler, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy or Ghandi.⁴¹ They are generally considered morally positive figures and some of them, King or Ghandi, are seen by many as almost saints and, yet, there were inconsistencies in their moral outlooks. Flanagan correctly argues in my view that we are surprised by these inconsistencies because we tend to expect from people the display of a well-integrated character.

In order to test the degree of integrity to which our character can aspire we should consider some competitors. Flanagan quotes but does not agree with the ‘Anything Goes Rule’ according to which «absolutely anything can go with anything».⁴² Can we accept a claim that does not allow even for ‘clusters’ of traits? Flanagan believes that the Anything Goes Rule is too strong. He inclines toward the Thesis of the Multiple Realizability of Moral Psychologies (TMR) according to which an integrated system of traits is possible, though it does not take any particular systematic form. He argues that an enormous variety of moral psychologies is possible.⁴³ He takes this view as sharply opposed to the UV thesis. By contrast, I believe some steps can be done to bridge the gap between TMR and UV. In my view there is some confusion in the kind of traits that Flanagan and other social psychologists bring together in order to build – actually or potentially – clusters of traits. If we consider the kind of traits of the Asch’s example, we find together moral, prudential and physical qualities. But we may find plausible also other clusters with minor variations: for example, one might be “uncautious and bad-looking” and still possess all the other traits. However, it would be unusual to find someone who is reputed ‘warm’ but not ‘honest, altruistic or generous’. The situation, Flanagan himself adverts, is even more complicated when we check the compatibility between ‘warm’ – and I would add ‘happy’ – and traits such as ‘intelligent – skilful – industrious – determined – practical – cautious’.⁴⁴

In response to Flanagan’s TMR I would like to emphasize two points. First,

⁴¹ O. FLANAGAN, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, cit., p. 6f.

⁴² R. BROWN, *Social Psychology*, Free Press, New York 1986 (2nd ed.).

⁴³ O. FLANAGAN, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, cit., pp. 286-287.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

the kind of evaluative consistency about traits that we normally assume about people's character is a modern, weak survivor of the UV thesis. Whatever its psychological causes – that Flanagan explores to some extent – evaluative consistency explains our surprise when inconsistencies arise, as with M. L. King, J. F. K., Schindler or Gandhi. This leads me to emphasize a second point: what really surprises us is not any inconsistency – as in the case of Asch's traits – but an inconsistency among moral qualities. Gandhi, for example, is unanimously considered as an outstanding example of universal justice but he was also careless about his own family.

These points seem apt to open the way toward a careful consideration of the UV thesis once we assume – as also Flanagan does at some point – that evaluative consistency more than a psychological role plays a normative role. We expect a certain conduct from someone whose positive qualities we already know and in case of a slight we express anger and disappointment.⁴⁵ On the one hand, we express normative considerations on the conduct of others, while, on the other, we assume, often unawarely, a certain degree of integrity of character in people. We already know that UV underlies this attitude at a theoretical level but we should not forget that also at the empirical level our daily interactions with fellows require an assumption of coherence of conduct on our side in order to know what to expect from others and, vice versa, we often know that others expect us to act along character lines they already know. This entails that when social psychology theories such as situationism and MT theory propose a piecemeal understanding of human conduct, fragmented and entirely dependent on the nuances of each situation and on the psychological items casually at work in a certain moment, our understanding of social relations and how to act with regards to other people's actions worsens.

In my view the best way to tackle the social psychology challenge is that of considering the normative adequacy of UV in terms of responsiveness to reasons, of the role of *phronesis* but also in terms of the understanding of the virtues within a certain picture of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). The crucial point is to be detected in the capacity to accept certain reasons from a specific dimension and integrate them with other reasons. This happens through the employment of *phronesis* which should be also best interpreted as an *evolving, intellectual quality* that improves after experiences, opportunities and conflicts. The normative adequacy of decisions directed by *phronesis* improves and sharpens through exchanges and interconnections among the virtues so that, in the example, Peter's *phronetic* exercise of justice could learn to extend its concern to friendship. What is just in the case situation according to practical deliberation may become compatible through *phronesis* with an appropriate display of friendship or, simply, with the unavoidability of a 'tragic choice'.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

We may follow Cooper and Russell and believe that also in situations of conflict we have room to show the unity of character.⁴⁶ If the reasons of justice better define Peter's character and his public role, he may correctly choose to give them a preponderant role but he has also not to neglect the reasons of friendship by appropriate conduct toward Charles and the eventual offer of helping out in other ways. Thus, we should notice that, according to this UV interpretation, the exercise of the 'dominant' virtue in this case is not exclusive of the exercise of the other one. Rather, the dominant exercise of justice entails a sphere of concern that extends to encompass other concerns such as friendship. We may also take an evolving perspective of the exercise of virtues in this case and assume that Peter may improve his understanding of the reasons for justice when integrating those reasons with those of friendship. Peter's virtue may have evolved, on this interpretation, into a fuller excellence.

If we can reach consensus on the limited thesis of the compatibility between justice and friendship, this does not imply the automatic compatibility of all virtues among one another. For example, a virtue often discussed in these days such as honesty may or may not be compatible with kindness or courage or parsimony. Or, if we follow Neera Badhwar, even the same virtue cannot hold across different domains: for example, kindness to friendship and family does not entail kindness to strangers.⁴⁷ In order to give a proper answer to this problem of compatibility, and once more argue in favour of UV, we need to introduce into our account two further factors that are often neglected by EV theorists. The neglect may not be casual because these factors unavoidably draw our account toward the Aristotelian classical conception of *human flourishing and the virtues*.

The first issue I would consider in arguing for UV is the list of virtues we deal with, the 'enumeration problem', as Russell defines it.⁴⁸ Virtue theorists confront in our times the problem of the proliferation of the virtues: the 'Virtues Project' list comes down to no less than 71 virtues.⁴⁹ No UV theory could plausibly fit together such a number of disparate qualities because "swarms" of them belong to different characters, as the ancients already knew.⁵⁰ Further, a potentially infinite number of virtues would also prevent the model of the virtuous persons from working as a plausible model and contribute to the UV. So, what we need is a model of virtues which fit together, forming a

⁴⁶ D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., pp. 350-351; J. COOPER, *The Unity of Virtue*, in ID., *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, p. 87.

⁴⁷ N. BADHWAR, *The Limited Unity of Virtue*, «Nous», 30/3 (1996), p. 308.

⁴⁸ D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., p. 145f.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 149, n. 5.

⁵⁰ Plutarch criticizes the Stoic Chrysippus for this proliferation of virtues and characters: *On Moral Virtues*, 441 b.

coherent and plausible whole that has a model of the virtuous person at its centre.

The search for a model of this kind does not lead us too far away from where we started: the classical, Aristotelian model of the virtues. As it is well-known, this rotates around virtues such as ‘justice, courage, generosity, temperance, friendship, *phronesis*, truthfulness, wit’ and a few others. The list is open to evolution to some extent, for example in the direction of preserving and taking care of the environment, in our age a major problem. The obvious objection ‘why these virtues and not others?’ can be rebutted using Martha Nussbaum’s argument of the ‘essential dimensions’ of human life. These are dimensions of choosing and feeling that belong to any typical human life.⁵¹ In each of these dimensions we have a right answer and some wrong answers. For example, in the dimension of the vulnerability of the human body ‘courage’ is the right answer; in the dimension of bodily appetites and pleasures we have ‘temperance’; in the dimension of the distribution of limited resources among more claimants it is ‘justice’, and so on. The argument holds that the account offered for each virtue is ‘thin’ and requires specification in a given society. Aristotelian virtues are a number of excellences that fit together to form a model of the virtuous man that Aristotle called the *phronimos* because of the central place taken by the virtue of *phronesis*, as already shown.

The advantage of Nussbaum’s proposal with regard to the enumeration problem is that the model of the essential dimensions is an *ethical* model which leaves out all those traits of character which cannot properly be considered ethical: e.g. contentment, perseverance, determination, orderliness, etc.⁵² Without excluding the possibility of endorsing other virtues the Aristotelian model shows an ethical character which lives a typical human life. The virtuous agent should at least exercise those virtues, living within a social collectivity such as a *polis*.

Keeping close to essential dimensions or ‘key areas of life’ allows also to identify ‘new’ virtues that apply in domains in which technology either affects our abilities to interact with others or place us in front of inexperienced challenges. Nancy Snow, for example, introduces ‘*techcheck*’ as «practical wisdom informed by experience with technologically mediated forms of communication». ⁵³ However, this is not practical wisdom descending from above onto a new context but it emerges from within a (technological) sphere of life and is articulated in ways that depend on the actual conditions. She is concerned with the issue of the finiteness of the lists of virtues in front of new challenges

⁵¹ M. NUSSBAUM, *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach*, cit.

⁵² D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., p. 149, n. 5.

⁵³ N. E. SNOW, *Proliferating Virtues: A Clear and Present Danger*, in E. GRIMI (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect*, Springer, Dordrecht 2019, p. 190.

such as ‘to what degree can I show my feelings and sensibility through text messages?’, but also the difficulty of scientists to make right choices when confronting entirely new realities such as SHEEFs (‘synthetic human entities with embryo-like features’).⁵⁴

From my point of view these new contexts emphasize once again the centrality of *phronesis* or practical wisdom on which the application of other virtues such as care, empathy, caution humility – to stay close to Snow’s examples – hinges. I would add to her argument a point in favour of *reasonableness*. It makes sense to use this notion rather than *phronesis* (or practical wisdom) not just for an update of terms but for the following reason. Reasonableness or ‘the reasonable person standard’ are characteristically used in contemporary judicial decisions because they are taken as the ‘ultimate resource’ to appeal to when conflicts of values appear unresolvable. It is a notion of flexible balance between values that, when applied as a personal standard, expresses a unity of feelings and concerns within a single character.

Also, the notion of reasonableness may find even larger consent when applied in its negative version. We find unreasonable both those who want to start (or close) a love affair by text messaging or social media and the scientist of Snow’s example who would eventually choose to proceed with experimentation with SHEEFs in a piecemeal and fragmented way. Scientists deal with unexplored and complex situations in which a unitary character whose balancing is operated by reasonableness can determine what is best for human flourishing and for the pursuit of truth.

These last considerations take us quickly to shed light on the second factor which speaks in favour of the UV: human flourishing. The Aristotelian model is not simply a model of virtues, with a certain list that can be more or less correct than others, but is also a model of how it is good to live for a human being – though Aristotle also supplemented the model by a number of external goods. Further, it is important to notice that the model does not preclude agents to choose a large plurality of styles of life, though in each case the virtues will indicate the correct choices in the essential dimensions of life.

Russell’s long argument in support of the UV thesis concludes with what he calls the ‘model view’. According to this view, every virtue unfolds by having through *phronesis* a grasp of practical reasons beyond its sphere of concern. Further, *phronesis* represents the excellent, balanced and integrated way by which a character responds to all reasons coming from the different virtues.⁵⁵ The virtues themselves, Russell says, are not piecemeal and fragmentary in their very nature but in their development.⁵⁶ This view is largely compatible

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 186-187.

⁵⁵ D. C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, cit., p. 372.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 373.

with the view of the essential dimensions and human flourishing that I have put forward. However, the centrality of *phronesis* and its unifying role with regard to the virtues would be very objectionable, if confronted with the enumeration problem. By contrast, if the virtues that interact through *phronesis* are those of the essential dimensions, they are excellences that, though potentially conflicting, can be integrated into a balanced whole which is conducive to human flourishing, according to Aristotle.

Once this overall normative picture is in place we can face again the challenge from social psychology. Situationism and MT theory can undermine the EV much less, if we reshape the content of the EV according to the essential dimensions view. In our example Peter will act out of friendship or out of justice, showing which of the two is his dominant concern, though leaving room to the reasons of the other concern. If he needed an incentive to act out of justice or if in a slightly different situation his orientation to justice changed into something else, we should simply doubt that a virtue is at stake. Further, if Peter reflected on the consequences of his choice on his flourishing, he would reject as incoherent the option of deciding just according to the situation or its enhancers and inhibitors. Thus, it seems fair to conclude that the social psychology argument does not hit the target for virtuous people, meaning those who have the virtues of the essential dimensions. It may eventually address non-virtuous people but this is less interesting for EV theorists.

8. CONCLUSION

The previous discussion has been mainly focused on social psychology theories and their objections against the EV. However, my main concern throughout this paper has been that of arguing in favour of a long-standing standard of evaluation such as reasonableness or 'the reasonable person standard'. I take both as wide-spread criteria of evaluation in legal and political theory and directly stemming from ancient EV. I have held that if the EV cannot stand because of social psychology findings, also our legal and political criteria of reasonableness cannot be maintained, undermining important parts of legal adjudication and political theorizing (e.g. Rawls's conception of 'public reason').⁵⁷

Reasonableness offers a generic and pluralistic standard of evaluation that applies in all spheres of human activities, both at the individual and at the col-

⁵⁷ John Rawls's 'political liberalism' is a complex set of ideas in which the idea of 'public reason' plays a crucial role. This does not amount only to reasonableness but the idea of 'reasonable persons' is crucial in the development of Rawls's conception. J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, cit., p. 49f. Rawls would not subscribe to a virtue-based interpretation of reasonable persons but would surely agree to a characterization in terms of stability and continuity of their traits of character.

lective level. It does not only represent the direct heir of the ancient *phronesis* but embeds a special capacity of balancing competing values. Accepting reasonableness as a generic standard of evaluation entails that, notwithstanding its pluralistic core, we accept its unitary nature, descending from the EV and the thesis of the 'unity of virtues' (UV). My task in this paper has been that of confronting these claims of reasonableness with the theses of social psychology according to which virtues are rarely exercised by human beings. By contrast, I have held that under a certain interpretation the ideal of the virtuous agent is not so farfetched to be unrealistic for creatures like us. Reasonableness is valid as a standard of evaluation because it refers to a realistic ideal.

I have held that social psychology theories provide useful hints for the understanding of human conduct but that their plausibility has to be tested against the normative import of the EV and reasonableness. Insofar as the latter represent long-standing criteria of evaluation which date back to antiquity with their empirical presuppositions about human psychology I take them as representing a counterintuitive test of empirical adequacy. Thus, reversing the usual test, social psychology theories such as dispositionism, situationism and 'mixed traits theory' are inquired critically from the point of view of EV and reasonableness. Russell's proposal of personality as 'cognitive-affective processes' seems the most compatible with the normative import of EV and reasonableness, while MT theory understands traits of character in a way that does not leave much room for the development and exercise of stable and cross-situational virtues, as we are used to consider and evaluate them.

I have tried to make the empirical picture more vivid and more conducive to the normative import of EV and reasonableness by employing an example based on friendship. The features of the case show that we can reason and discuss of friendship in terms of character traits and virtues, starting empirically from cognitive-affective processes. The analysis shows that we cannot gain anything useful from concocting the case in terms of mixed traits which would simply drive out the possibility of a judgment of reasonableness or unreasonableness. In a nutshell, our criteria of evaluation cannot make any progress once we know that Peter sometimes shows friendly feelings and conduct and other times is unfriendly and unresponsive. By contrast, an understanding of the case in terms of cognitive-affective processes offers the conceptual tools for expressing well-grounded judgments of reasonable or unreasonable conduct.

In the example, it is worth-emphasizing, the balancing core of reasonableness emerges clearly, showing how the conflicting reasons of impartial justice and friendship should find their point of compromise in the agent's practical reasoning. As observers from the outside we cannot help using reasonableness as a standard of evaluation in which the agent's reasons are pondered against each other.

Finally, assuming that all the agent's ethical choices find a meeting point in a practical reasoning in which reasonableness – rather than *phronesis* – plays a crucial role, we can move toward the thesis of 'the unity of virtues' (UV). Taking moves from the general assumption of 'evaluative consistency' of human character, I support the view that we accept its plausibility more at a normative than at an empirical level. Using the example of friendship, I notice that at the empirical level the interpretation of Peter's conduct in terms of cognitive-affective bundles may be informative and show a consistency that would be ignored by a situationist or MT theory standpoint. In turn, the normative adequacy of UV appears clearly when we consider the interplay of the reasons coming from friendship with those coming from impartial justice. What is required is an evolving perspective in which *phronesis* or reasonableness, in accord with human flourishing, plays a crucial role. I conclude by appealing to Nussbaum's argument of the 'essential dimensions of human life' as a model by which we narrow the limitless number of potential virtues which might be collected by an extensive – and unworkable – UV interpretation. Centering on human flourishing and an updated view of *phronesis* in terms of contemporary reasonableness, we are also in a good position to extend the application of UV to the new challenges that come from technology.

ABSTRACT · The standard of reasonableness and 'the reasonable person standard' enjoy a wide legal and political use but their origin is, in my view, within the ethics of virtues. The virtues refer to an ideal agent, useful for evaluations of human conduct. Certain theories in social psychology propose views which undermine the use of virtues in daily life. I believe that common practical reasoning leaves more room to virtue-concepts than what theories such as 'Mixed Traits theory' allow. If the argument is plausible we also have good reasons to hold the 'unity of virtues' (UV) thesis as a thesis which is conducive to integrate the concerns of different virtues, deflating conflicts. In our increasingly conflictual age UV seems required by reasonableness which, in turn, shows its importance for human flourishing.

KEYWORDS · Social psychology, Unity, Virtues, Reasonableness, Character.