PRACTICES, VIRTUES AND EMBEDDED MORAL COGNITION

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The aim of this paper is to address the possibility of explaining the nature of moral cognition as being rooted in an agent's involvement in a social practice. Seen along such lines, not only does the recognition of the extent of moral standards show up as based in the agent's experience that has been gathered in the process of education and developing their capacities for acting autonomously, but it is also thanks to the engagement in the set of such social practices that the agent is able to define the moral aspect, which exceeds the practical aims of a certain area of life. Hence, I argue that in order to redefine the borders of shared morality, a practical experience is necessary to link the various practices that enable ethical reflection based on the moral resources that are obtained in this way.

Keywords: Moral cognition – Virtue ethics – Practice – Craft model – Moral education

The aim of this paper is to examine the way in which a moral subject develops their understanding of the scope of morality. My general thesis is that it is only possible on the basis of their involvement in certain social practices in which not only their virtues (modes of action) might be developed, but also depends on their initial understanding of the scope of moral obligations and the sense of the very nature of how the ethical is organised. In this way, I shall argue, morality and evaluative concepts show up not prior to some of an agent's activities, but as rooted in their experience as a practitioner, as an active agent that is involved in socially defined forms of activities. And therefore, what follows is that any possible change in an agent's sense of what should be treated as a moral matter must be rooted in a collaboration between reflection and their attitude as participants in some practice.

I. The scope of morality and action theory

What does it mean to act morally? Due to the view that is most common in modern moral philosophy, it is to act from either a rightful intention or with the view of achieving just outcomes. Yet, there is a more fundamental question that should be raised here, namely, that of what makes an agent act according to moral rather than

other standards in a certain situation. The most obvious answer is that it is through the process of socialisation that we acquire the sense of what morality is and what counts as a moral or amoral act. Hence, however uneasy it might be, or even impossible for an agent to express the rule on which they act, there will still be some knowledge that sets the boundaries of morality. It is important to note that this kind of knowledge consists of not only a set of rules that limit one's acting but also furnishes them with some of the resources of autonomous moral reasoning. This is what makes the difference between morality and taboo – just as the latter is recognised as being set without justification, which is part of one's cultural heritage (given by God's command or as a rule set by the ancestors), the former consists in the internalisation of the rules of acting and their reflective working out. Morality thus not only sets the limits of rightful, acceptable acting, but it also shapes action in a certain way and the knowledge that is involved does not focus on the limits themselves but on the form of interaction between an agent and certain set of objects. That is to say, morality, in some general sense of the term, is a certain way of acting towards a certain set of objects[1]. The relation between these two is what requires some more detailed scrutiny in order to grasp what the relation between moral cognition and the scope of morality is.

In the very first sentence of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says:

> Every art (τέχνη) and every inquiry (μέθοδος), and similarly every action (πρᾶξίς) and pursuit (προαίρεσις), is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim (NE I 1 1094a1).

The concept of action outlined here seems to consist of two features. Firstly, it is not only universal in the sense of covering virtually all sorts of deeds, but also it seems to introduce a certain order of actions. For putting "art" and "inquiry" before any other kind of acting is not only to list them in some way, but also, as the following lines of *Ethics* show, to hierarchise them by ordering the more complicated ones above the simpler ones[2]. Hence, while Utilitarianism and Kantianism start with a simple action and look for a way to justify and generalise the rule on which it is based, Aristotle goes in the opposite direction – he starts with a more complex view on

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[1] Although what follows from the below analysis is that there are multiple moralities, each with specific bounds and features, some outline of the general concept seems possible. Hence, "morality" refers to capabilities and requirements of individual behaviour in which the agent's efforts to organise their life and immediate environment meet social demands of restricting some of their desires and actions. Seen along such lines, morality is a way of building one's practical conduct devoted to establishing their relationships with other agents and significant beings of recognized status, which are non-manipulative and sustain both parties' individuality and intrinsic teleology.

[2] This argument might be strengthened by evoking another part of *Ethics* (I 7 1097a, 15 – 17: "Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in other arts likewise". What is striking is that Aristotle (here as well as in the following parts of Book I) is not dealing with some individual acts, but rather with some organised structures or sets of action that make sense of individual deeds.

human agency that is rooted in the social and animal nature of human beings, and only secondarily moves down to an isolated deed. What follows is that this view is normative from the beginning because it starts with a general concept of human good (flourishing, *eudaimonia*) and asks both about what form of the good might the life of a certain agent express and what internal and external conditions must be met in order to obtain this goal.

Secondly, what follows from the above is that what an agent aims at in their properly organised deeds is not only what they wantonly desire, but what might be described as reaching beyond an agent's immediate desire and is related to their long-term well-being. It is important to note that the basic idea that stands behind the concept of the good as seen along such a line is that it is not something that an agent gets, but rather a form of life – a certain order of motives, self-discipline and modes of interactions with fellow beings – which draws upon the natural and social resources and develops through the course of reflection and actions towards building a habitus that enables the agent's potentialities to be fulfilled (thus fulfilling their informed desires) which, in their turn, contribute to understanding what the human way of life consist of and it what way it might be developed. Hence, what action theory – and ethics respectively – is interested in is not the normative grounding of a single action, but the ways in which an agent's good might be comprehended and obtained. That is to say, any attempt to explain the realm of morality seen along such lines needs to focus on the way in which agents engage in certain organised ways of developing their lives. And normative theory that seeks to justify it claims not only as a purely theoretical statement but (also) as ways of structuring moral practice needs to develop its positions with reference to the relation of prospective, morally corrected actions as aspects of social practices.

II. Practices, virtues and (social) creativity

The practice I refer to is understood in the sense of Alasdair MacIntyre, according to whom it is:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative 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, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions to the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre 1985, 187)

To explain the value of this account for revealing the relations that organise moral cognition, let's start with the structure of learning within a practice. As they enter it, they have already been shaped by education by their family and local community and have been furnished with some basic understanding of the social context of their actions (MacIntyre 1990b, 137). An agent also has some basic recognition of

the nature of the practice, its role in the life of the community as well as some general understanding of obtaining the internal good that the practice is dedicated to. At this stage, their knowledge is in fact a form of what Gadamer calls prejudice or pre-judgement, that is the initial form of understanding that offers an at-hand interpretation of a social setting and their own action. It is also a form of an at-hand kind of social relation and moral code. On the other hand, to enter the practice is to accept its historically defined norms and standards of excellence, although that does not (and it should not) mean to reduce their activity in order to follow them (MacIntyre 1988, 31). Instead of this, in order to develop as a practitioner and to become an autonomous participant, they need to transform themselves into the role of an apprentice and to recognise their own limitations as well as the need to be educated. How does that work?

Let me give an example. Imagine someone enters the practice of music as a drummer. Their intention might be for a variety of reasons: perhaps they would like to impress a (potential) partner or would like to spend some time with friends or wants to be as famous as Lars Ulrich or Dave Weckl are or just loves some music genre and wants to be part of it. Whatever their initial motivation is and whatever their initial skills are, at a certain point they need to confront what they know with the current state of the art of drumming. Even if the activity is taken up for pure enjoyment, in order to satisfy their expectations towards the standard of the music they play, they need to learn the rules of music[3]. Because at a certain level of their move towards playing music well, and whatever their initial understanding of what good music is, they need a teacher who will help them to develop a drumming technique. This is tricky, however, for there cannot be any development in drumming without a broader understanding of music generally. That is it is not only that teacher shows them how to use Moeller's technique, how to play triplets on a bass drum and how to release the tension in their muscles as they play, but they need to introduce an apprentice to e.g. harmony and instrumentation in order to make them understand the role of a drummer in a band and in this way to make them a better drummer.

Three aspects of this process seem to be crucial here. Firstly, however egocentric and self-confident the apprentice is, in order to develop, they need to confront their knowledge, skill level and understanding of the nature of the craft with the standards that have been set by other drummers. Without this, they might expose them self to ridicule by failing to keep up with the way in which the craft has developed at the

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[3] Notice, that an agent who decides to start their education in music is most probably already involved in it and has already not only made some initial evaluations of what good music is and what kind is worth their interest, but also by making the decision to enter the practice, he or she has evaluated its meaning in the system of their goals and has placed them among other forms of actions. This makes them not only interested in entering the practice itself, but also furnishes them with certain expectations of what it will be like to play (good) music.

current stage, and to the standards of excellence that are required. What is the most crucial thing here, however, is that by lacking it, they may also fail to recognise the scope of the good they may actually gain as a practitioner and in what elements the practice consists of. That is to say, by entering the practice, the agent accepts certain view of the action-order and values that are related to certain actions and objects.

Secondly, they need to recognise the collective character of the craft. For it is not only that in most cases a performance is a shared activity, and – as a rule – obtaining most of goods that are important for a good human life requires cooperation with others. Moreover, it is during the course of cooperation with others that the agent becomes aware of the need to develop certain traits of character that will enable them to organise their desires, emotions and deeds (for example, according to what is the place and role of drums in the music the band plays).

Additionally, it is also the case that a form of activity becomes a practice thanks to the engagement of others, which develops the standards of craftsmanship that are typical of that form of activity, accumulates the experience that is necessary for such development and evaluates the possible progress of the agent (see MacIntyre 1999, 156 – 157). Notice that without a context of other practitioners, it is impossible to say whether the drummer plays well or badly, as there would be no ground for any evaluation, no point of reference. The standards of excellence, that is the ways that agents have been involved in a certain practice so far have found fruitful in obtaining the good of the practice are given as forms of organising an agent's activities in the best way so far and at the same time, by applying the pressure to keep up with them, they force an agent to perfect their skills and reflect upon the actions they undertake in the course of obtaining a certain good. Moreover, assuming that practices are generally based on some human capability that is rooted in the human biological heritage as cooperatively and historically developed, they enable agents to not only obtain some good, but also to extend and sublimate the concept of the good, both of that particular activity and of the good of human life in general.

Thirdly, whatever their initial motivation was, that is whatever good an agent aimed at when entering the practice, in order to develop, they need to redefine it and focus on the good that is internal to a certain practice as they cannot obtain any goods without developing according to the standards that are internal to the practice. For, to follow the drummer example, even if they aim primarily at obtaining external goods, in order to keep themselves on the stage, they need to at least attempt to flourish as a musician or they will be unable to obtain both the internal and external good and they would be dismissed from the band for being a poor musician.

On the other hand, however, if they succeed as drummers in a way that makes them not only proficient musicians but also contributors to the art, they also contribute to the good that exceeds the bonds of the practice. This includes developing an

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attitude towards all of the elements that are involved in the practice, their significance and the role that they play in an agent's performance. To follow the drummer example, this may include reflecting on the way in which the practice was redefined by setting new places for drumming in jazz and rock, but also on how it was possible by redefinition of the scope of the performance of drummers – that is by using double bass drums, rim shots or unconventional parts of a drum kit or by setting the drums up in front of the band or even by composing songs for a solo drum kit – to broaden the scope of the good and hence, also the understanding of the possibilities offered by one of our human capabilities. Notice that what follows from this is that true creativity, which is a sign of mastery in a practice, not only consist of redefining the practice itself, but it may also include changing the relations between the actions that are undertaken within the practice and their objects as participants in some other practices and the general social setting. It may also include a change in the way in which the aim of the practice is presented to the community.[4]

For ethics, this seems to have some important consequences. For such a redefinition of a practice not only enables the concept of the good to be reformulated but also certain sets of activities (certain τέχνη or μέθοδος, that is to say) whose aims are to encourage the agents that are involved in it to find new ways of expressing and developing certain human capabilities, but also forces the agents involved to re-evaluate the standards of a good performance, that is the standards of the proper action of a practitioner, as well as of the scope of the activities and their objects that are seen to be part of the practice.

III. From practice to morality

Now, the question arises of what the link between these remarks on Aristotle's action theory and the MacIntyrean concept of practice as described above with moral cognition is.

Let's start by summarising what has been said so far. What is of interest for moral theory, and in fact, for practical philosophy in general, is the human good, that is – roughly speaking – the quality of life that makes it worth living for a human being. Taking this position, moral theory needs to pay attention to the conditions for obtaining such an end, that is to those activities which enable an agent to flourish, the modes of structuring the activities of life and the forms of cooperative enterprises rather than to isolated basic deeds. That is to say, an action's goodness or badness, its

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[4] In music, this might be witnessed in the twist in understanding the position of a musician within, say, classical music to that in jazz, which was accompanied be a change in recognising the place of music – from its being part (background) of either religious activities, military training and warfare or leisure to being a (intellectual) game of aesthetic creativity that is undertaken for itself.

praiseworthiness or blameworthiness depends on their relation to the good, which is the basic standard of valuation.

In this respect, both practices and ethics seem to be related, first of all, to an agent's attitudes and relations (for a similar model of a skill-virtue relation see Annas 2011, 20 – 28), for it is in the course of interacting and cooperating with others that an agent may articulate and aim at what they find to be their good. By entering a practice, an agent becomes oriented not only towards a certain good, but also towards the others that are involved in the practice as well as towards those that are influenced by the very existence of the practice itself and to those elements – objects, living creatures and institutions – that are involved in sustaining and developing the practice. That is to say, the organisation of the actions that are typical of a certain practice provides an agent with the behavioural matrices, that is the attitudes towards certain goods (objects and agents) as well as the recognition of their status and value. Being a musician means not only to be devoted to music (to its internal good and standards of excellence), to fellow musicians and audiences, but also to the in-strments, cultural centres and so on. And what follows from this is that flourishing as a practitioner is not only about developing certain technical skills, it is also about acquiring some traits of character and mind, that is about forming a certain attitude (in the sense of Aristotle's ἕξις) towards the important, most signifycant features of one's acting and the practice itself. Three of these should be mentioned here:

Firstly, it is a matter of an agent's justice to allow them to judge according to "just reason". In the case of the example being discussed, it makes the practitioner take their proper place in the performance and not to overestimate their role. It is also justice that is a crucial virtue in judging one's progress by comparing oneself with other practitioners. That is to say, justice enables them to compare the entitlements of various agents thereby reducing their ego-centrism and in this way, it enables see-ing one's actions as objects, reflecting on them and introducing an order thanks to which any changes that are necessary and prospective ways of flourishing become intelligible.

Secondly, practical wisdom, *phronesis*, is the kind of virtue that enables an agent "to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, (…) but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general" (NE, VI 5 1140a, 26 – 29). Practical wisdom is a key virtue as it enables an agent to put the various practices in their life in order. It is also a central virtue in establishing relations and order among practices. For in practice, a wise agent is one who sees in what way certain good and virtues that are typical of one practice might be beneficial for his or her good life and can make use of this knowledge somewhere else. With reference to the drummer, it might be said that it is through an act of practical wisdom that the agent makes the goods of music part of their life taken as a whole. *Phronesis* is thus a

prerequisite for virtues such as industriousness, for it is only by setting a certain practice within the framework of the various activities of an agent that the effort they put in it might be assessed as sufficient or not. Similarly, it is a matter of phronetic judgement to answer the question of whether the agent should invest their time and money in a new set of cymbals or, say, in a language course, in other words, how to allocate the priorities of their awareness.

Thirdly, taking into account the cooperative character of practices, friendship seems to be the trait of character that furnishes an agent with the emotional resources that are required to make their practical conduct a moral one. It is not only that friendship enables an agent to highlight the position of other practitioners and the meaning of their own attempts to obtain the good. It also builds a kind of conduct that is sensitive to the status of other fellow beings, at least those that are involved in a certain practice.

But there is more to say about the cognitive aspect of both practice and morality because it is an important feature of both of them to not only know how to act in a particular situation, but also which objects deserve to be treated in a certain way. That is similar to some noises (of sound in general) being recognised as a possible source of a new timbre or texture only within the practice of music by an agent with a developed sound imagination, which requires a certain type of practice to recognise the moral status of an object, which otherwise would be taken as amoral (I will elaborate on this later). Hence, it is a matter of being involved in a practice that one's acts and emotions become organised in an attitude, a mode of behaviour, that is to say, and these modes of behaviour are not only a matter of recognising what form of acting would be proper appropriate for an agent to perform or what rules, virtues and intellectual resources should an agent use when dealing with the situation they face, but it is also a matter of recognising the status of a certain object as being meaningful in the situation.

The role of the rules and patterns of acting (see Brożek 2013) that an agent acquires thanks to their engagement in a practice is not only to streamline the process of obtaining a certain good but they also mediate articulating the concepts of a human good as such, the concept of what it is to live a good human life. In turn, they make an agent's actions intelligible to others and enable cooperation that is aimed at the good. Yet, mere rule-following would not be enough because as I mentioned earlier, education within a practice not only aims to reproduce its standards, but also (and primarily) to develop the skills that are required for acting autonomously and participating fully in the practice (or, in fact, to enable them to be creative in setting the ways of obtaining one of the human goods, see MacIntyre 1990a, 345 – 349). Let's consider the drummer example again. If the apprentice learns how to hold the drum sticks, keep the beat and so on, they might become a skilful interpreter of a given sort

of music. This, however, does not make them an artist because what they lack is the openness to the possibility of redefining the scope and the rules of practice, they lack creativity and authenticity – a voice of their own.

This is one of the key common grounds between practice and morality as it is not only that practices are the ways in which human activity is organised and developed towards some goods, and therefore, they should be conceived as ways in which people express their moral conduct, that is their attitude towards what they find to be a human good. It is also that just as the practitioner – if they are about to act as a master in the practice needs the abilities and resources to redefine the scope of the practice and its crucial forms of acting – a mature moral agent is not the one who follows a given moral code but one whose conduct enables them to reorganise their moral life. Thus, the key element of moral maturity is a kind open-mindedness (see Arpaly 2011[5]) to the paradoxes of one's views and attitudes as well as to those features of the world that may have moral status.

There are two roles of open-mindedness here. Firstly, a move towards mastery in a practice consists of developing both the skills and virtues that are needed to achieve a certain aim, as well as the cognitive powers to select the kind of good that is appropriate for a particular agent. Therefore, it is always a first-person move that is undertaken by an individual of a certain social and familial background as well as of some personal experience, which becomes open to a tension between the way in which a practice has organised the deeds of its practitioners so far and the personal attitude and commitments of a certain agent. To express it in terms of the example discussed above: the musician, however educated in a certain tradition of music, becomes a master by bringing his or her own sound to the music material (think of Glenn Gould's and Mischa Maisky's interpretations of J. S. Bach or Ivo Pogorelich's interpretation of F. Chopin[6]) and in this way, by making it a game (in the sense of Gadamer's *Spiele*) of individual taste and resources, they show a possible new way to develop the entire practice.

Secondly, the first-person perspective defines a practice as having some value for the agent, that is as occupying certain place in their life. To say this is not only to point out the fairly obvious fact that an agent's life is not limited to their participation

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[5] As MacIntyre notes: „(…) the powers of moral agency can only be exercised by those who understand their moral identity as to some degree distinct form and independent of their social roles" (MacIntyre 2006, 195).

[6] This can be extended naturally to those kinds of music such as jazz and rock, in which in most cases, there is no strictly defined music material that is interpreted by a performer, but material that is improvised by themselves more or less *ad libitum*. I chose classical music, however, as it not only requires a set of technical skills but also a deep knowledge of the traditions of interpretation and performance. The practice of classical piano might thus be a good example of an area in which the personal characteristics of a performer are key factors in developing the entire art.

in their particular practice[7], but rather the unclear relation of the mutual interdependence of the various goods and commitments that agents are devoted to because as I shall argue in the following section, it is by the experience that is taken from one practice or sphere of life that the definition of the good that is internal to another practice might be possible.

IV. Cognition and moral practice

What follows from the above permits, I believe, the claim that morality is to an important degree a cognitive enterprise to be supported and as such it is dependent on the forms of practice in which an agent might be engaged in a certain social environment. Consider another example, that of animal rights.

It might be a bit surprising that the animal rights movement originated in the highly industrialised countries, among people who did not, in fact, have much to do with animals (except perhaps for pets[8]). But upon consideration, this, in fact, reveals an important aspect of both the movement and the relation between practice and moral cognition because it started in the quite radical redefinition of the scope of morality in which the status of animal was changed due to the fact that for most people, animals are not some at-hand parts of their world anymore. It is of little surprise that both hunting and agricultural pre-modern societies, treated animals as a work force and source of food, and attributed quite a high status to them for they were dependent on the well-being of animals to an important degree and that without sound tools for controlling it, the general care for domestic animals and respect for the role of wild animals became an important part of the pre-modern consciousness. This was not only expressed in the symbolic form of animal-like gods and demons, totems and magic, but also in the close relation of house-sharing and care (see Mason 2007; Page 2007). It was only at the turn of modernity with its growing urban population, which for the most part only met animals as products or tools that are mediated by the modern methods of production that the distance between humans and animals widened (not to mention the intellectual gap that is highlighted by the development of the modern, post-Cartesian philosophy of consciousness). The pre-modern way of dealing with animals, which was embodied in practices such as farming or chivalry, did not actually require any specific notion of animal

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[7] Although agents might find their commitment to one of the practices they are involved in as the most important by providing them with the reference point for all of the others (e.g. maintaining a household, the priesthood, military service etc.)

[8] Notice the presupposition of the language distinction between pets and animals, which makes the former not-that-animal or "closer to humans". Its moral signification might easily be recognized by the shock that some people get when confronted with the idea of eating a dog or guinea pig (which in fact were originally kept in pre-Columbian America as a source of meat).

"rights" due to the fact that the way in which practitioners such as farmers and head grooms or even those for whom dealing with animals in their *oikos* was part of their daily routine did see the good of animals as part of their own good (see e.g. Rabe, 2007, 75 – 78; DeMello 2007, 88 – 91).

The change, then, that made the lives of many creatures so miserable did not occur purely intellectually, and it would be an important overestimation of the role of theoretical philosophy to take it as such. What has happened should be taken as complex change in Western culture that combined important intellectual innovation in moral epistemology, the philosophy of mind and anthropology with growing urbanisation and the rise of industrial way of production, which alienated most people from any possibility of having any face-to-face relations with animals other than pets. And the relations towards pets is, in fact, to a certain degree a moral relation that has a similar dose of friendship or cruelty that people tend to express towards their elders, children or any other member of the household having a questionable (or limited) productivity.

Hence, no wonder that finding out the misery of animal production was pretty much a shock for many people as they had never had the chance to have any moral relations towards the meat they consumed or leather they wore.

That is to say, what is key to understanding the changes outlined above is the internal evolution of the practice of housekeeping. For in pre-modern societies the role of both the breadwinner and the care-giver was in most cases to *produce* what was needed within the household, rather than *to purchase* it. This made all of the necessary agents and resources objects with value, and as the nature and behaviour of animals could be understood and controlled only to a certain degree and their value (both in terms of the resources needed to obtain and maintain them and those of their contribution to the household productivity and well-being), they had the high status of semi-members of a household. For just as the drummer in the example discussed above had to subject their initial motivation, skills and attitude to the standards given by the history of music, the apprentice head of a household (and in fact any household member) had to recognise the extent to which respect for the well-being of animals was crucial to their own. And this recognition was the factor that made the relation the moral one. However, with less dependence of the well-being of households on their agricultural activities that came with the growing urbanisation and mobility, the productivity of households became less dependent on the work of animals and they were removed from the scope of moral relations that was connected with household members and they became objects of practical value in the form of a commodity.

If what I said is right, then this enables at least two important aspects of moral cognition to be revealed. First, any kind of cognition that can be called moral is in fact

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embedded in certain social practices (see MacIntyre 1990a, 355 – 356). Notice, that, for instance, in respect to animal rights, there has been quite a tradition of moral and religious calls for their respect (even in Western tradetion), which, however, remained unsuccessful in the face of traditional (and especially – industrial) methods of production. What follows from this is that there is a tension not only between theoretical ethics and a moral life (with the former's claims to being able to settle the standards of justification and rightful actionprior to their embodiment in real human deeds and life-forms), but also between an agent's knowledge and their experience. This is where the importance of the very virtue of friendship and a virtuous character in general arises. For just as justice is needed in order to make an agent able to assess the value of all of the elements that are involved in their practice and *phronesis* is necessary to establish a place and role of a certain practice (of the goods, relations, objects and institutions that are typical of it) in the life of an agent, what makes those relations *moral ones* is an affirmative conduct – either imposed on an agent as compulsory by their social surroundings or developed by themselves – which is not only direct but is also focused on some axiological aspect of the object, that is on their well-being.

What is crucial here is the way in which some special aspect of the relation might be recognised, that is in what way might *moral* cognition occur. One of the strategies that is possible here was developed by Alexander Guerrero (Guerrero 2007). Working within what he calls "moral epistemic contextualism",[9] he introduced the notion of a blocker:

> call any state of affairs which, if it obtained, could make it morally impermissible to perform some action A, a 'blocker' with respect to A. For example, a blocker with respect to keeping slaves is the state of affairs of all human beings having the right to self-determination (Ibid., 73).

Notice, that as a consequence some gradation of blockers needs to be recognised. The fact that an item is someone's product, someone's possession, a living creature or conscious being[10] are four basic phenomena of such a hierarchy. Notice also that at least with respect to the first and second of these, their being a blocker occurs due to their being part of the social relation of craftsman and ownership. What thus constitutes the moral relation here is a form of interaction between an agent's conduct and an object's feature with the emphasis on the latter because it is the appearance of the blocker that triggers a change in an agent's conduct, the

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[9] „How much one is morally required to do from an epistemic point of view with regard to investigating some proposition *p* varies depending on the moral context – on what actions one's belief in *p* (or absence of belief in *p*) will license or be used to justify, morally, in some particular context" (Guerrero 2007, 69).
[10] I set aside the question of the way in which having consciousness might be ascribed to a being except for the most basic case of its being of the same species as the agent.

external factor that limits or closes certain way of acting. Moreover, it is important to notice that while Guerrero focuses on the epistemic criteria for justifying a certain action or to hold someone responsible for the consequences of the action, the virtue ethics perspective would be quite different. Guerrero takes ignorance concerning the moral status of the object of action as a condition that undermines the justification of action, and hence he proposes a rule – Don't Know, Don't Kill – which expresses the moral limitation of actions that are done from ignorance. Yet, what seems quite unclear is the range of the applicability of this rule. What kind of objects require that their moral status be checked before taking action? Two answers seem to be applicable here. Firstly, a moral maximalist might answer by saying that every action of a conscious agent should involve some moral consideration. However attractive this may sound, a view of this kind is not credible. Firstly, because no agent considers the moral aspects of all their deeds, and secondly, as Bernard Williams pointed out, the over-exaggeration of the role of moral motivation is harmful to the diversity of human motivations and actions (see Williams 1980, 38).

The second answer thus, pays attention to the fact that some initial recognition of the scope of moral reasoning is required. That is, we consider the moral status of animals because prior to this, we were aware that some of them had it. Similarly, the fact of being someone's possession or product might be taken as a blocker *because* we ourselves have a certain attitude towards our own property and the results of our work. Guerrero's rule might then be a useful tool but only in relation to those living creatures whose status might become an issue in moral reasoning as we practice it on a daily basis within well-established, broadly shared moral and cultural frameworks. Hence, what might be discussed is the status of a dolphin but not an ant, a pig but not a carrot.[11]

Therefore, what is at stake here is really the subjective conditions, or set of conditions, for recognising such a feature, that recognising the element that makes the relation to the object a moral one. Hence, the other option would be to look into one's practical conduct for the ground on which such a recognition might occur and this takes us back to the virtues. For what makes an agent able to recognise the moral entitlement of other being is the same trait of character that makes them able to act according to the good of their fellow beings. This means developing a kind of friendly attitude – in the Aristotelian sense of the word – towards a being that has not as yet been treated as having moral status and taking their possibilities for flourishing as not being less deserving of sustainment than the agent's own.

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[11] In fact, it is only in Jainism, at least to the best of my knowledge, where the moral status of every living creature might be an issue.

Here is where the second feature of moral cognition, which is its relation with a human way of acting, arises. I do not mean by this that at the end of the day cognition must always be an act of a certain subject, but rather that moral cognition is possible in the relation between the over-individuality of a certain practice, with its standards of excellence and the (*prima facie*) fixed modes of acting and personal engagement, individual tastes, reasons and motivations. It is thanks to limiting the role of a certain practice in the life of a particular agent, that his or her relations and allegiances of other spheres of their life may influence each other thereby enriching their sense of what is at stake in this particular practice.

V. Conclusion

Seen along such lines, moral cognition is firmly embedded in, and made possible by, a system of key social practices and virtuous characters of the agents involved. What follows from this is that, firstly, virtue ethics always needs to be aware of social conditions and contexts of virtuous practice, and secondly, any attempt to measure the progress in ethics and morality needs to take into account both the conformity of various spheres of human acting with an agents' concept of the good and their capacity for redefining the crucial forms of their social activity

If I am right about the role of practices, then what follows is that moral cognition consists of both a recognition of the moral status of some features of certain objects *and* a recognition of what proper moral conduct consist of. However, this might be possible only if an agent has gathered enough moral and cognitive resources thanks to their involvement in other practices and other forms of interactions. The key element here is an agent's ability to recognise the relevance of some resources to some other practice-defined situations. Hence, moral cognition is enabled by the virtues of open-mindedness and self-scrutiny.

The conclusion of the above remarks seems to be unsurprisingly Aristotelian – just as acting without reflection on it is blind, ethics taken as a strictly theoretical enterprise cannot be normative because when is rid of its roots in practice, it becomes artificial and futile. Philosophical reflection then has a hermeneutical structure – it starts with a problem occurring at a certain point in the development of human affairs and by enquiring, it provides a set of possible solutions. This makes moral education reliable only as being involved, not to say – embedded, in practical education that teaches students not only how to do things, but also – how and why to reflect on them and their relations with the other actions of an agent and their environment.

Finally, what follows from this is that – contrary to Kant's optimistic view – people do differ in their 'moral capital'. The difference, however, seems to be of a qualitative, not quantitative nature, for it is not the number of practices they are

engaged in, but the mode of interaction that makes an agent conscious of the needs and status of their fellow practitioners and the other agents that are involved.

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