

How Close Are Contemporary Ideas on Human Flourishing and the Classical Philosophy of Man?

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Abstract In the present work the “classical approach” to ethics implies the Socratic-Aristotelian tradition which, while not being a uniform or fixed methodology, possesses rather well-defined characteristics. Particularly significant among such characteristics is the harmonization among diverse human capacities and their interaction, permitting a person to lead a coherent life. Certain fundamental ideas of this way of understanding morality were taken up and renewed by Elizabeth Anscombe, who popularized the term “flourishing” as a synonym of the accomplished life and the alignment of just actions in the context of personal goodness. Regarding the modern approach, this work refers primarily to certain recent developments in philosophy of the last few decades and to its contact with schools of contemporary psychology, in particular Abraham Maslow’s holistic-dynamic theory, Carl Rogers’ humanist psychology, and Martin Seligman’s positive psychology. The convergence of various authors will be highlighted in four fundamental points: (1) the awareness of the moral subject, and thus the role of reason in the direction of one’s life (mindfulness); (2) the classical idea of happiness as the search for the good and the ultimate end of human life and (3) certain fundamental traits of happiness, understood as the successful life, as the exercise of one’s activity within a meaningful context; (4) interaction between the various human capacities in the construction of a complete personality or character, an indispensable condition for flourishing and reaching partial goals (proactivity).

Keywords Personal flourishing · Happiness · Aristotle · Plato · Aquinas · Virtue · Character · Work · Professionalism · Intention

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1 Anscombe's Allegations and the Contemporary Idea of Human Flourishing

Certain developments in moral philosophy have remained within the area critiqued by Anscombe, who considered them irrelevant for the explanation of a true philosophy of praxis. For the British philosopher, various theories on morality developed in the early decades of the twentieth century—above all those in England—were stranded in the search for logic and the internal coherence of their propositions, without paying due attention to the roots of human intentionality. Their theoretical character prevented them from proposing an efficacious morality (Anscombe 1976, § 32; Mercado 2010, 165).¹

Other proposals were also conditioned by that cultural maze of postmodernity, from a Nietzschean mold diffused by the *ideological immoralists*, as Philippa Foot called them (Foot 2001, 19–20, 2002, 202–3).² This understanding of the world through postmodernity made it impossible to establish a stable frame of reference. Various authors have severely criticized this position claiming it rendered ethical reflection and related moral dialogue impossible (MacIntyre 1985, 6–8). The meetings of Gadamer with Derrida and of Hadot with Foucault (Grondin 2004, 495–500; *The Economist* 2004, 85; Hadot 2005, 169–79) are an extreme proof of this sterilization of the debate in contemporary practical philosophy.³

The current challenge focuses on the project of reconstructing dialogue and takes into account Enrico Berti's warning to sell out philosophy in the so-called superficial, consumerist “supermarket of ideas”, which often instrumentalizes philosophical divulgation (Berti 2010, 2012, 19–20).

To this end, the re-evaluation of the natural law as the tradition of *recta ratio* is useful. This is not the place to thoroughly explain the misunderstandings and ambiguities surrounding this line of thought. For this work, it is enough to emphasize the role of reason, which recognizes that which is permanent in the species and adapts it to historical needs—as found, for example, in Thomas Aquinas and David Hume (Aquinas 1998, vol. I, 41, lec. 1, n. 4; Hume 2007, Sect. 3.2.1), in order to then offer to the individual a structure by which he can harmoniously arrange his life (Spaemann 1989, 32–4; MacIntyre 1999; Foot 2001, 2002; Inciarte 2005, Chap. 10; Abbà 1995; Rhonheimer 2011). This signifies, in terms of revamping contemporary moral philosophical thought, reading between the lines of our needs, of our tendencies, and the natural phenomena of physical growth in order to find therein various interconnected meanings leading to the development of other types of knowledge.

¹This is highlighted in her ideas regarding inefficacious desires or idle wishes, in §§ 36 and 50.

²This refers to Thrasymachus and Callicles (in the Platonic dialogue, *Gorgias*), Nietzsche and Gide.

³Derrida remained silent during a debate, in order to be coherent with his position on the incompatibility of discourses. The obituary of *The Economist* severely judges the self-referential position of the French author's proposal.

Within this same trend of thought, Anscombe re-opened a fruitful debate on the search for the meaning of natural facts (Anscombe 1958; Foot 2001). Robert Spaemann readdressed certain ideas, very similar to those used by Anscombe, in order to once again lead discussion on statistically normal facts in the direction of a reflection on the nature of man: *normality* is a manifestation of how we are made, and this structure must have to do with our behavior, and such a reflection cannot be done without a teleological conception of human life (Spaemann 1989; Spaemann and Löw 2005; Sison et al. 2017, vii).

2 The Fundamental Question in Ethics: A Cure for the Theory

Aristotle's warning that we ought to study ethics to be good—not just to know what the good is (Aristotle 1984a, 993b30, 1984c, 1103b26–28; 1105a–b; see 1095a5–6; 1097a1–10; 1103a14–1103b25; 1179a35–b2)—is inseparable from the search for the *good life* or the *accomplished life*, as several contemporary authors underscore (Guthrie 1981, 353; Abbà 1995, 176–80; Taylor 1989, 66; 371–3; González 2000, 805). This deals with the ideal of the good life, which in reality is the practical search for the best life for man (Spaemann 1989, 60–3; Abbà 2009, 141–2). A renewal of the starting point of Greek philosophers in the work of various Western authors is currently becoming visible. Such a renewal is formulated as a fundamental question not only for the scholar, but for every free subject. This fundamental question is: “What kind of person do I desire to be?” and thus “how can I harmonize this present desire with what I am convinced is better here and now according to my general plan of life?” (MacIntyre 1985, 160, 219, 1999, 103 ff., 177–8; Spaemann 1989, 45–59; Annas 1993, 27–33; Taylor 1989, 50, 76–7). The basis for ethical reflection is neither the observance of certain rules nor the distribution of certain objects, but rather the clarity of intentions regarding the kind of life to be lived (Abbà 1995, 40, 241, 1996, 25, 34), with significant coincidences with some important studies regarding the search for meaning in ordinary life (Covey and Merrill 1994; Covey 2011). It is this search for the clarity of one's aims that is connected with Anscombe's arduous reflections on our intentions. Such an effort reaches a conclusion that could seem banal: moral theories must help us understand what we really want when we want something (Torralba 2005, 90–102).

The foundation of ethics in these terms, in terms of the subject who decides what kind of life he desires (*agent centered morals*), in the context of the demands of his individual but also social nature is *first person ethics*. The terminology proposed by Abbà suggests that the moral theories of this kind are rather clearly distinguished from those in which the reference point is the external evaluation of actions; these are ethical positions in which a judgment of situations is sought with objective parameters outside of the conscience of the individual who acts (Abbà 1995, 271 ff., 1996, 50–3; 209–11, 2009, 142). From this point of view, Spaemann's and Charles

Taylor's reflections upon the epistemological conditioning of moral philosophy in its study of moral questions are illuminating (Spaemann 1989, 188; Taylor 1985, 15–7, 1989, 164–80, 1992b, 5–8, 1995, 1–19).

3 Plato's Contribution, or the Necessity of Metaphysics

Aristotle's critique of Plato regarding the operative character of ethical reflection must not lead, however, to a merely pragmatic basis for ethics. The correction proposed by the Stagirite includes the good in *the good life*, or the study of how to translate the good into action. The entire initial discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* pivots around the definition of the good in human life. In the words of MacIntyre, one can say that, due to the search for the meaning of goods, the Aristotelian proposal differs from those *prêt-à-porter*, which are based upon maxims and advice (MacIntyre 1985, 8, 15, 68, 246, 1988, 1–11).

The Aristotelian paradigm change lies in understanding ethics as the dynamic search for the good, in the tension that leads to growth because life is never a stationary scene. Life itself is a search for the good, or that which is convenient for survival and then to live well (Aquinas 1998, v. I, 41–2). Living is understood as an unstoppable progress; thus, the individual must grow in awareness of the gravity of his actions *while* he develops. This inevitable flux is guided in part by instincts and requires a gradual maturation.

It is important to know what the good is, and for such knowledge, a calm metaphysical reflection is necessary; however, the person must also know how to recognize the good *hic et nunc*—here and now—and dispose his capacities to achieve it.

Aristotle is aware that reflection upon the activity of living beings, and above all upon human beings, has led to the elaboration of metaphysical notions or to their correction, as in the case of concepts that regard the activities themselves. The being of Parmenides was useless both for physics and for anthropology chiefly because it was false, and the discussions of the Platonic school had left aside that immobilist concept of being, asking the most obvious questions: What does it mean to *possess* things? Why is the possession of an object different from the possession of an ability? Why do certain abilities require a habit and why are some lost with time while others are not? (Plato 1989a, i, h, Aristotle 1984f, 129b33). Why is the possession of some of these abilities called virtuous or perfect? How much do they influence our improvement? How important is it to cultivate stable behavior regarding things, situations, and persons? (Plato 1989a, 408a).⁴ Is the sharing of goods such as a coat, food, or knowledge more important? (Plato 1989e, 11d).

⁴Plato explains through the usage, how one passes from the evaluation of the *use* of things to the evaluation of the *use* of one's soul.

In this *anthropological* approach, metaphysical notions like act and potency take on life and explain the perfection of the person from the perspective of the good life (Plato 1989b, 279b–280d; Aristotle 1984d, 416b–418a; Mercado 2013). The debate with the immoralists (Thrasymachus and Callicles) upon the unsustainability of their position—that the laws are a cage constructed by the weak to suffocate the vitality of the stronger—highlights a different strategy for reasoning about the goodness or the maliciousness of certain behaviors. This strategy is based on the empirical or logical consequences of the adversary’s position. The approach “from the grass-roots” or from notions such as act, potency, and relation offers a more profound perspective on the coherence between different elements of reality, while laying the foundations for the explanation of the thesis according to which he who acts wrongly does wrong, or harm, mainly to himself (Plato 1989f, 469b, 527d; Polo and Llano 1997, Chap. 3).

A metaphysics, thus set out, is one which takes on flesh and becomes mobile, with a dynamism that also avoids the extremes of a flux without identity, as proposed by Heraclitus. The metaphysics of human behavior could be based upon a theory of human capacities, but above all upon a radical comprehension of the growth and development that can include both the natural and rational orientations as well as the incorporation of rules and of projects in which one participates with one’s fellow human beings.

The anthropological model of Socrates and Aristotle draws upon different sources with an expectation of harmonization. The coherence between the basic notions such as act and potency or finality is ordered to the comprehension of life in general and then to human life.

The framework of *first person ethics* and the metaphysical foundation at the base of the philosophy of human behavior are two elements characterizing the ancients which are much less clear in contemporary proposals. The studies done by Annas (Annas 1993, Chap. 1),⁵ Abbà, MacIntyre, Rhonheimer (Rhonheimer 2011) and others have brought to light these distinctive notes, going beyond the mere statement of the divergences between the ancients and the moderns and proposing to re-incorporate certain structural elements of the classical perspective into ethical reflection.

4 Liberty, Autonomy, and Authenticity

It could be fruitful to focus on some points of connection and of contrast between Aristotelian ideas and two aspects observed by certain philosophers closer to us, regarding the value of awareness, of the consciousness of oneself for moral action.

⁵Even if Annas has not adopted the terminology “first person”, her proposal is in line with the other scholars cited.

Aristotle's discussion of the conditions for happiness does not elude the paradox of the virtuous but suffering person.

And perhaps one might even suppose this [excellence] to be, rather than honour, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of excellence seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one could call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs (Aristotle 1984c, 1095b31–35; cf. 1098b3–99b8, 1100a8–9, 1101a7; Foot 2002, 97–8).

Nevertheless, the Stagirite seeks to affirm that no one would desire to be happy at the cost of abandoning his own identity: “For existence is good to the good man, and each man wishes himself what is good, while no one chooses to possess the whole world if he has first to become someone else (for that matter, even now God possesses the good)” (Aristotle 1984c, 1166a20–22). Seligman highlights in his own way this intuition regarding the impossibility of renouncing one's personal identity (Seligman 2003, 8, 206).

These two ideas—incomplete happiness and the necessity of maintaining one's identity—are coherent with the explanation of liberty in terms of the *autonomy of the will*, as can be deduced primarily from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Books 2, 3, and 6. The proposal deals with the distinction of the human faculties according to their objects: the intellect is focused on the true while the will is directed towards the good. Self-determination or autonomy depends upon the comprehension of the known good (by means of the intellect) and the determination to achieve it. This determination implies the control of the inferior tendencies, the stimulus of the appetites. The human being decides towards which goods to move and in which order.

According to Aristotle, to succeed in this determination of the objectives and in the disposition of the means, the intellect must persuade the will: the command to move in a certain direction must take into account the different impulses, which often are in contrast with a rational ordering that the capacity to love receives. The intellect must exert a *political* power over the will, because if the latter does *not want* to move in that direction, it simply will not move. The intellect must convince the other faculty of the convenience of renouncing certain competing possibilities (Aquinas 1948, I, 81, 3, ad 2; Aristotle 1984c, 1102b–1103a9, 1984e, Book I; Serrano del Pozo 2011, 127–39). The virtues are necessary in order that the *logos* takes the reins of life *hegemonically* (not *tiké*, but *politiké*) in regard to the tendencies (Polo and Llano 1997, 140; Polo 1996, 173, 2008, Chap. 6)

Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas stage this dialogue between the faculties in order to highlight that in the individual there is a tension between the different potentialities and that their harmonization depends upon multiple factors. However, the fundamental question is not the conflict, but the movement towards the good (Aquinas 1998, vol. II, 20–1, 94–6). The setting of the paramount question concerning the ethics of the good life is above all a question about the progressive acquisition of goods, in the perspective of a meaningful life.

Judeo-Christian Revelation provides Aquinas with instruments for the conflict between the faculties to which the Greeks did not have access. As impressive as the parallel between the myth of the flying chariot pulled by two winged horses and the Biblical account of original sin may be (Plato 1989d, 245c–8d, *Genesis* 3, 1–7), the Greeks always found the ambiguous behavior of human beings to be a source of perplexion. It seems that Aristotle could not find a satisfying response to the behavior of the incontinent man, who understands what he should do but habitually moves in the opposite direction, or who consciously acts badly (Aristotle 1984c, 1142a31–33, Book 7; Vigo 2011, 326–62).

The elements of the Old Testament Biblical tradition and their enrichment with the advent of Christianity provide a system of redemption which, however, does not eliminate interest in the anthropological question concerning the tension between desires and the attainment of goods: the weakness of the will observed by the ancients remains a problem even when taking into account the role of grace in a supernatural perspective.

As with other fundamental concepts, the Stagirite prefers to pose the question in problematic terms rather than to return to mythological explanations. According to Plato, the contemplation of the good should be enough for us to act well. However, this is Aristotle's point of contention: there is some internal defect that leads us to act incongruently with our perception of the good. Despite their divergences, the two Greeks coincide in their considering *ascesis* indispensable in the reacquisition (in the case of Plato) or acquisition (for Aristotle) of the capacity to make the relationship between the knowledge of the good and its pursuit coherent (Guthrie 1981, 68–9, 197, 243–6; Spaemann 1989, 73–81).

Examining once more the relationship between the intellect and the rational guide of life elaborated by some liberal authors seems to lead us once again to a solution similar to that of Plato. At different times, John Stuart Mill recalls the thesis that contemplation attentive to reality should naturally correct our behavior. His faith in the rational capacity of the individual leads him to reduce to a minimum the intervention of other thinking beings in indicating the way of the good. The affinity between our capacity to know and the luminosity of the facts must lead to a better behavior: the comprehension of reality should lead us to overcome vices and obstacles in an almost spontaneous manner. Given that men incline more towards the truth than towards error, good doctrines will endure and be established despite the obstacles produced by the measures contrary to their diffusion, as occurs in the case of Socrates, of early Christianity, or of Lutheranism (Mill 1977, 239).⁶

Although Mill's fundamental text considers the limits of force that the civil authorities can exert upon individuals, in other words, political and social liberty, his proposal does contain different ideas that reveal this optimism regarding liberty. Hence, both individuals and societies have the duty of forming the most truthful

⁶Later on, Mill maintains that brilliant people are always scarce and need an environment to be able to disseminate their discourse. If they seek to break the framework of the establishment, they can suffer violent consequences or become the targets of uncivilized or unpredictable persons (267–8).

opinions possible and then having the courage to act accordingly (Mill 1977, 230–1). The just attitude in the exertion of liberty is that of maintaining all of the doors of dialogue open, of always submitting oneself to that confrontation or comparison that comes not only from experience but also from debate. Only in this manner can opinions enter into the dynamism of permanent maturation (Mill 1977, 232).

Thus, both at the individual and the social level, the imposition of prohibitions is generally contrary to growth. It is the defense of the liberty of each individual which is desirable. Any kind of authoritative intervention should be confined to providing access to useful information. Such information must be about the risks proven by experience of certain choices or attitudes. The average citizen is assumed to have the capacity to autonomously manage social organization with decent results (Mill 1977, 307–8). In extreme cases, such as that of an alcoholic, provisions can be established *ad casum* to compel him not to neglect his responsibilities, such as providing for his children (Mill 1977, 295).

In Mill, there is an idea of liberty similar, in many respects, to the notion of *authenticity* held by the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile* (Rousseau 1969, 586, 600–1): the perspective of the action of the individual is internal, regarding the use of his personal liberty, rather than its direction, as depicted in *Julie*: the novel recounts as a narrative the events of an authentic personality, in contrast with social, familial, and religious inertia (Rousseau 1964, 31–745). Charles Taylor discusses at length the importance of this conception of conscience (Taylor 1985, 269–72, 1989, 358–90, 1992a, 28–31, 1992b, *passim*). Even more profound is the attentive consideration of the depth of the relationships with others, that one supposes will be just as spontaneous and positive. It helps to emphasize, once again, that the point of reference of action—for the ancients—is that which is being sought by this action, the ends and the goods.

Rhonheimer summarizes the question in the following manner:

The problematic point, for Mill but even more so for Kant, is what I call the “strong concept of autonomy.” In accord with this strong concept, personal freedom and autonomy find their ultimate justification in the free exercise of the capacity to choose and not in the good for which this capacity is being exercised. Therefore, unless the exercise of one’s autonomy were to impede the exercise of another’s autonomy, every interference of the state in individual freedom would be illicit. In contrast, a “weak conception of autonomy” conceives autonomy as the capacity for the free choice of substantial goods in such a way that these goods confer authentic value upon the capacity to choose (Rhonheimer 2013, 41).⁷

In the liberal tradition, this exercise of liberty unfolds upon the background of social peace, of a harmony—or perhaps a mere equilibrium—whose defense is an obligation for all. Well-being and social stability should be facilitated in order to favor progress. This type of social reference point is the guide for political order and

⁷Although Taylor’s approach to the question is very different from that of Rhonheimer, both authors agree in considering the construction of the personality as something more closely connected with the realization of goods than the capacity for self-determination.

conditions the action of the individual. If the individual succeeds in taking this necessity seriously, his decisions will be to the advantage of the social whole; and if he does not succeed, he must accept the application of certain measures by those responsible for the public order.

Without this social context, the question of taking on the responsibility of one's personal obligations, (i.e. liberty understood as responsibility) generates anxiety. For Heidegger as well as for Rousseau, acting from one's personal initiative is a manifestation of authenticity, of distinction, and of mastery of one's personal action. Authentic action entails the assumption of risks and uncertainties, almost a return to the heroism of the ancients without the consideration of a transcendent horizon (Volpi 1998, 311–2).

When liberty, responsibility, and obligation are aimless, the risk of remaining in the situation of an adolescent is not insignificant. For the ancients, there was a finality; the good life was not a state of satisfaction, but rather the search for a dynamic and inevitably imperfect harmonization of the goods in one's life. A consequence of this search is the organization of life, whose spontaneous tendencies need the reins of reason (Maslow 1970, 53, 149–80; Polo 2011, 298–302; Inciarte 2005, Part II; González 2006, 130–58).

The consideration that our capacity to act upon ourselves may arrive at the point of making us better or worse, good or evil, remains outside the perspective of many modern and contemporary authors. The evaluation of suffering as a way of enrichment or degradation also remains foreign, apart from some remarkable exceptions (Polo 2011, 51; Frankl 1992). Nevertheless, the intuitions of the later Maslow and other authors who work on the borders between psychology and philosophy, on human maturity as the harmonization of desires and reason and a dynamic idea of this maturation, restore an important contact with the proposal of the ancients, as illustrated in the chapter "[Creating Better Human Motivation Theories for Personal Flourishing in Organizations](#)".

5 Acquiring Operative Truths

In the liberal Anglo-Saxon tradition, the exaltation of a type of Rousseauian existential and heroic liberty has, as its counterweight, those limits imposed naturally and artificially by society. In the classical position, the control of impulses was overwhelmingly entrusted to interior resources of the self. The structure of the proposals in the first person rely first of all on internal development, on the growth of the individual's capacities to shape a complete, integral personality (Anscombe 1976, § 41; Plato 1989c, 527b).

As Philippa Foot writes,

It matters in a human community that people can trust each other, and matters even more that at some basic level humans should have mutual respect. It matters, not just what people do, but what they are (Foot 2001, 48; Plato 1989g, 361b).

In this perspective, the various human faculties are required; they are in a situation of non-indifference regarding goods and, above all, of non-indifference regarding the direction to give to one's impulses, desires, and plans. To move towards the good requires being capable of such a movement.

Moreover, human life means to move oneself with all of one's emotional and cognitive achievements and forces. We can imagine these internal "belongings" as a valuable package. It can help us to understand the importance of keeping the load compact in order to move efficiently: a piece of badly packed luggage, with too many extensions and deficient zippers, will make the pace more difficult and exhausting. It will require stopping more often to reclose zippers undone due to our hurried pace or to pick up items that have fallen out. The internal unity of this luggage is given by the traveller's character or, better yet, the unity is the character itself and has much to do with self-control (Aristotle 1984c, 1119b5–18, Book 7, Chaps. 2–10; Llano 1996, 129–31; Polo and Llano 1997, 54–7). Character, the moral profile of an individual, is the entirety of psychological qualities and behaviors that constitute one's personality (Llano 1996, 129–50, 2010, 23; Polo and Llano 1997, 86; Covey 2013, 26–30; Collins 2013, 1–8; Maslow 1970, 53, 58, 60–1, 64–6, 74). Hence, Guthrie emphasizes Aristotle's observation regarding the *ethiké* virtues, by describing them not as mere repetitive actions, but as constituents of one's character (Aristotle 1984c, 1103a15–19; Guthrie 1981, 344; Seligman 2003, 64; Peterson and Seligman 2004, 6). Disposition, nature, and temperament are similar terms that express the synthesis of a permanent *flourishing*: inasmuch as one can say that a character is fixed or even sculpted, it is always a synthesis directed towards progress and exposed to bad weather (Llano 2010, 17).

These considerations regarding the anthropological basis of action are important in order to focus discussion on the virtues in terms of their proper context and purpose. This reference to the virtues helps to understand these *excellences* of character as means, and not as the ends, of moral action. The end is happiness, the search for the good in community and for the community. Understanding the formation of a personality and the necessity of developing the virtues in order to attain goods is characteristic of the first person ethical proposals that we have been considering up to this point.

The re-reading of Aristotelian ethics begun by MacIntyre, and thus bringing to the fore the virtues and reflections of the necessity of their development within the small communities of apprenticeship (MacIntyre 1985, 151, 187, 232, 1999, 103–5, 122–3, 142–5), has a different meaning if such aspects of finality are not taken into consideration. The end subordinates and disposes the means; the virtues are the means in comparison to the goals. Their exercise *shapes* one's personality. For human beings, the end builds the character; it does not only indicate a tendency (Polo 2011, 207–11). In this context, significant goal-setting reaches an anthropological level.

The person whose character is well-formed is he who acts well, but it is also he who feels in the right way, at the right moment, consistently with stimuli. In fact,

one can say that this *spoudaios* or person of value (Aristotle 1984c, 1113a24–31, 1169a32, 1170a15) acts well precisely because he felt first that which one must feel (pleasure, fear, anger, etc.) and because he is capable of responding actively and in the correct proportion to the requests of the moment (Inciarte 2005, 415–20).⁸

In this perspective, liberty is understood as the capacity to conduct one's personal life towards the good *understood* (comprehended, apprehended), a capacity that presupposes mastery of one's own acts. This mastery depends upon the growth of the virtues. The virtuous person is the most free and most capable of doing good things (Aristotle 1984c, 1147b5; Polo 2008, Chap. 3).

When virtue is lacking to the rational being, that which is capable of knowing the universal and desiring without limits, he acts inarticulately, without order (like the previously described badly packed luggage). Virtue allows for the link between the *logos* and the tendencies and makes it possible that the tension towards goods be organized, coherent, fruitful (Polo 1996, 170–2).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, recent developments of practical philosophy and the literature on management have produced interesting points of connection in this sense, both concerning the importance of the virtues and for their approach to a more integrated notion of those human qualities summarized within a character, that is, within a more complete personality.

6 Transforming the Ideal Life into a Lifestyle

It would be useful to take up another idea that springs from the critique of Elizabeth Anscombe regarding the aforementioned speculative character of the moral theories in her intellectual environment. A part of the argumentation focuses on the character of the person who acts, while another aims at redefining the notion of *practical truth*. Let us begin with this second part.

Anscombe wrote that in order to solve the difficulties that some have in understanding the notion of practical truth as that *which is realized when it is effected*, sometimes she found it necessary to recur to an efficacious ascension onto the table in the classroom after having declared, "I am about to make true that I will climb onto this table" (Anscombe 2005b, 144n, see 1981a, 99; Geach 2001, 88–90; Vigo 2011, 298, 322–3, 371–3).⁹ Commenting upon an Aristotelian thesis

⁸Inciarte insists emphatically on the harmony between *right reason* and *right desire* in Aristotelian thought as a condition for the goodness of choices and of actions.

⁹Vigo cites Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 16, 1 resp. on how the human being, in his acting, makes himself similar to God and "changes" the meaning of the *adaequatio veritativa*, that is, it is reality that fits (or fails to fit) an idea previously excogitated.

(Aristotle 1984c, 1139a30), she highlights that the truth reached is that of action: the practical intellect takes the field and directs the good of the work (Anscombe 1981b, 77, 2005a, 197, 2005c, 157).¹⁰ The practical truth is found in the action, not in the logical conclusion or in the prescription (Inciarte 2005, 317–36; Torralba 2005, 150, 200).

Numerous authors have revisited this Aristotelian thesis in order to emphasize the operative character of Aristotle's practical philosophy. In harmony with the observations of Anscombe and with the Stagirite's notion of wisdom, Inciarte, while first taking a step back for reflection, makes two important observations, to underscore that there is an important dimension of truth already at the level of the decision (Inciarte 2005, 298)¹¹:

There is a difference between *fac hoc* (do this!) and *hoc est faciendum tibi* (this is to be done by you) [...] There is an intrinsic link between truth and gerundives which is lacking between truth and imperatives. Whereas one cannot say "it is true that do this", it is perfectly possible to say "it is true that this is to be done". The "is" in "this is to be done" is in fact the veritative or veridical "is". This applies on the level of superficial grammar to translations of gerundives without "is" as well (in the case of e.g. "this must be done" one can just as well say: "it is true that this must be done"). Thus, whereas the content of "do this" is exhausted by "this" (whatever it may happen to refer to), the content of "this is to be done" does not consist only in the "this". In other words, the content of "this is to be done" is itself prescriptive (Inciarte 2005, 301).

Inciarte emphasizes that these verbal formulations pose the question of deciding and that this dissolves the position of the skeptic, because it is necessary to take part and eventually act (Inciarte 2005, 316). The soundness of an action expressed in a command of necessity (*this is to be done*) becomes something personal (*this is to be done by me*). The connection of the mental functions required for handcrafting is not as direct as that described in these formulae. Inciarte asserts that wisdom harmonizes the elements of knowledge and moral praxis in a simpler and more immediate way than that required to link know-how and the production of goods (Inciarte 2005, 321–25, 385–90, 410–11).

Inciarte's second suggestion regards the constant presence of error in moral action: *recta ratio* is in continual evolution to improve the disposition of the means; it is a *co-recta ratio*, which is rendered well in English by the contrast between *correct* and *corrected*. Reason acts once again in order to shape a will that has been corrected and is always capable of being corrected (Inciarte 2005, 326–7, 415). This possibility of the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic proposal has been little studied: a person can correct herself thanks to the plasticity of the virtues, and virtues can continually align the sensible tendencies; virtues are bound to the

¹⁰In the first reference, Anscombe asserts that "practical truth is the truth *brought about* in sound deliberation leading to decision and action, and this *includes* the truth of the description 'doing well'". The same connection between correctness and truth translated into actions is found in the second reference.

¹¹I will avoid elaborating upon further nuances and divergences between the positions of Anscombe and Inciarte.

exercise of faculties that can make us grow unrestrictedly, as Polo often underscores (Polo 2011, 290–8). On this there is still much to be done in the exchange between classical philosophy and the ideas of self-fulfillment.

Anscombe's other observation, concerning the moral quality of the acting subject, is a recognition of Hume's accusation of the sterility of reason for conducting human activities, against the positions of the rationalists (Hume 2007, 3.1.1, 458, 462) and not completely extraneous to Aristotelian philosophy (Aristotle 1984b, 700a4–19, 791a7–36, 1984c, 1139a21–27, 1147b, 1984d, 434a6–21; Inciarte 2005, 298). She remained sufficiently deluded after having placed much hope in the Aristotelian arguments in order to avoid the “incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge” by the modern philosophers (Anscombe 1976, § 32).

Without entering into the details of the Aristotelian texts—and the no-less-demanding discussions by Anscombe—we can affirm that both coincide in the consideration that the conclusion of a *sound reasoning* must be accompanied by the desire for something good; that the desire is the true principle of action, and that the agent, in order to have sentiments or passions correctly ordered, must be good and not only discerning: one could understand and not act correctly, either because one is incontinent or because one is merely cunning (Aristotle 1984c, 1143a25–28). The desire stands in the stead of a “meta premise”, without which the work of reason is sterile.

Anscombe is very incisive on this point, because she attaches great importance to the rational explanation for why some propositions become facts that condition the life of persons, regardless of whether they are expressed in words or remain rather at the level of unconfessed intentions. In the words of Alejandro Vigo, this is a matter of understanding how one can transform an *ideal model of life* into a *lifestyle*, into an *ethos* (Vigo 2011, 287–8, 352–3), and how able the subject is to deal with her or his own future in a never-ending “learning by doing” (Inciarte 2005, 317–36) and correcting her own way of doing things (Torralba 2005, 170–2; Polo and Llano 1997, 128). At the level of the theory and praxis of management, the observations of Carlos Llano are very clear (Llano 1996, 149; Polo and Llano 1997, 23, 128–9; Díez Deustua 2012, 490).

7 Classic Descriptiveness and Modern Pragmatism

This suggestion regarding the transformation of ideas into real life is one of the most important points of connection between certain developments in contemporary psychology and those ethical proposals which bear the mark of Aristotle. In fact, it is both a point of connection as well as a point highlighting a development of working proposals meant to promote a dynamic synthesis between desires and reason in individuals.

One of the limits of the philosophical proposals is that even in their prescriptive modalities (*it is convenient, it is better, do...*), they remain at the descriptive level. They express that which one should do or that which would be convenient to do,

but they do not offer a methodology for stimulating the synthesis laid out in the preceding paragraphs. Inciarte's observation on the command of necessity implies that the subject may have made his own such a command and may have evaluated it in regard to the decision. If one does not arrive at this stage, the discourse can be stimulating if either the orator or the author are good, as in the case of Rousseau or Heidegger, or if he can invite his audience to reflect, as occurs with the Platonic dialogues or the works of Dostoevsky, Ricoeur or Etty Hillesum. However, the question regarding how to activate and nourish the processes of fusion and coalescence of the faculties as concerns coherent acting remains in the air. This concentration of energies is what previously was defined as a well packed piece of luggage: fusion, synthesis, order directed to action. Coalescence or compactness in this sense does not signify stiffening, but rather concentration and strengthening in order to more often do good and beautiful things in harmony with one's life plan. All of this signifies cultivation of one's own maturity, of one's internal growth in order to do better, within a unified life.

Several works published in the management world offer starting points for how to apply certain fundamental ideas in organizations, and they also give excellent advice on how to found personal programs. This includes the many detailed suggestions found in the works of Drucker, Covey, Welch, or Carlos Llano. Returning to the descriptive nature of their writings, one can say that they illustrate with excellent examples, synthesized advice that comes from their vast experience, and describe the effects of diverse positive and negative practices so that the reader or listener may understand their importance and, if he is ready, seek to implement them. A part of their contribution can be found in their descending into the particulars of a proposal that one can implement in a business and descending also into the description of useful attitudes in different areas of personal development, as well as the explanation of criteria for distinguishing that which is "important" from that which is "urgent" and organizing a solution in a coherent manner (Covey 2011, 2013, 159–70, 356–62; Covey and Merrill 1994). Beyond these aids that we can define as working outlines, they often adopt conclusions from psychology for human relationships in order to underline the possibilities that we have of working on our attitudes, for example, in order to improve our attention towards others by means of empathic listening (Covey 2011, 49–51), as explained in the chapter "[Coaching for the Development of the Human Person: History and Anthropological Foundations](#)" in this volume. In other popular works, extreme cases are proposed in order to relate the results of these cases to normal life. For example, Goleman describes in his discoveries some delinquents' incapacity to perceive the suffering of their victims and how remarkable changes have been obtained if the same delinquents are exposed to certain psychological practices aimed at making them compassionate (from Latin *cum patior*, to "suffer with") concerning the pain of others (Goleman 2007, 209–10). He also explains the relationship between reason (*the high road*) and tendencies-automatisms (*the low road*) and the necessity of

rational control, perfectly compatible with the self-control of the Aristotelian kind mentioned earlier (Goleman 2007, 130–2, 321–3).

Important psychological and psychiatric projects in the late twentieth century tend to overcome those limits that were imposed upon their knowledge by the natural framework and time-period in which they were born. For example, the second edition of Maslow's *Motivation and Personality* (1970) is already a work aimed at nourishing the maturation of the healthy person and enlarging a vision of psychology that had been conditioned by experiments on animals (Maslow 1970, xii, 27, 56). Frankl's efforts to utilize the traumatic experiences of war in daily life contributed to encouraging research further centered upon the projects of normal persons rather than upon the obsessions of those who are ill or considered such. The Austrian psychiatrist influenced directly Gordon Allport, Carl Rogers—who eventually translated Frankl's seminal work *Man's Search for Meaning*—and Maslow (Goleman 1996, 2007). Another important element, illustrated in references to the primary work of Mill, regards a certain optimism in the face of human desires: normally our ambitions are good, inasmuch as they are dictated by our mode of being and by a natural drive towards good things or situations. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that the influence exerted by liberalism upon the schools of psychology in the United States and upon certain education sectors with a strong social impact, such as schools of management and business schools, has been aimed at creating attitudes in students as opposed to only—or principally at—sharing ideas (Parra Torres 2013, 264–75). On the other hand, the growth of perspectives of the aforementioned psychological proposals with their empirical approach decreases the weight of rather arbitrary principles of dubious scientific value, such as the egoistic idea of the human being or the exacerbation of the so-called invisible hand of Adam Smith (Ghoshal 2005, 82–3).

These are some of the reasons that illuminate the importance of fruitfully connecting the notions of moral goodness in Aristotle and the psychological techniques for forming one's character.

Let us underscore once more the intimate relation of some aspects of the Aristotelian proposal with these trends in contemporary psychology: the consideration of the acting human agent as endowed with reason and will as well as a tendency towards the good that is moderated by the superior faculties. This endowment is ordered to the attainment of goods (ends)—and in order to obtain them while growing in the virtues and understood as a necessary instrument and not as an end in itself—is indispensable. Given that goods are obtained in the company of other individuals, the action of the person is necessarily inserted into a relational network. These are some of the strengths of the so called first-person ethics.

Some of the most important currents of contemporary psychology acknowledge this foundation and have brought the question of happiness once again to the fore. A summary of the nuances of this latter would be too long for this work. In the next section, there are brief references to some of the elements that seem to be particularly relevant.

8 Towards a Responsible Authenticity

The appeal of the Socratic-Platonic maieutic art has always stimulated questions regarding the mystery of its efficacy. It is Socrates himself who underlines the uncontrollable and intuitive character of his art:

Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as for themselves, although it is clear that they have learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within (Plato 1989i, 150d).

The naivety proclaimed by the master is belied at least partially by the direction of his questions in diverse dialogues: at times the argument induces a specific search; and at other times, it broadens to show that the basic question is another. In any case, Socratic questions tend to open the mind of the interlocutor so that he may find his own way, both in order to understand better and to improve his own activity.

An important and ever valid element of this use of the *logos* is its subordination to the comprehension on the part of the subject: it is he who must better understand in order to conform himself to the reality of the situation. In this sense, the corrective capacity of that reason proclaimed by the afore-cited Aristotelian authors is reinforced by Platonic “didactics”. Socrates does not renounce reasoned discourse when he sees it to be opportune, but his peculiarity or the added value of his interventions is to stimulate each participant in the dialogue to offer his own responses.

At this point, another connection with the line of thought represented by Mill, who trusts in the capacity of the individual to understand what is better, does not seem superficial. A text from Rhonheimer helped us to evaluate his idea of autonomy and how he neglects the notion of finality (Rhonheimer 2013, 41). It now seems important to underline that in his ideas on the support that others can give to the moral subject, Mill is excessively optimistic: it seems that for him the intellectual insight would be sufficient to correct one’s behavior and that external warnings must be limited to demonstrating the risks of a certain way of acting (Mill 1977, 291, 294). It seems that the intellectualism of this certain liberal vein is more profound than the Platonic.

The didactic proposals characterized by the maieutic model, much diffused by participatory methodologies, especially in those based on the case method, come to the aid of this optimism. It is not possible at this point to enter into the minute details of this methodology, which Carlos Llano presents in all of its philosophical wealth (Llano 1996). However, it is important to affirm an important element of that technique—that is, the influence that it has upon the capacity to really pay attention to what others say, to listen and to generate alternatives, above all for a working group, both at the directive level as well as among colleagues or at the horizontal level. Moreover, the open questions force participants to find or to construct a plausible, non-prefabricated, solution.

In the educative environment, the psychological framework of Carl Rogers is more well-known. Therein, the receiver's capacity for listening is put at the center and a basis of strength of the subject towards his own development and self-realization is presumed (Thorne 2003, 26–9, 67–8; Covey 2011, 49–50, 2013, 247–71). At the therapeutic level, but also with sane persons, a systematic approach of this kind establishes the conditions that allow for such strength to emerge and operate (Thorne 2003, 33–5).

Rogers' vision considers and promotes the intellectual and emotional maturation of the subject through the comprehension of one's situation and a non-narcissistic acceptance of one's own personality. His proposal can be assumed without risks of self-referentiality on the part of the subject if it is directed towards the achievement of goods, and not towards improvement itself: if the good is lost as a reference point, one can fall into a misrepresentation similar to that of the closed cultivation of the virtues. The commitment to knowing oneself better is also directed towards improving relationships with others: the knowledge of one's own limits is a first step towards working on them, assuming that the subject so desires. Removing stereotypes regarding others, the environment, and oneself is more difficult than it seems, and overcoming these is not based on advice but on the recognition that one holds them (Whitmore 2009, 81–2, 210; Covey 2011, 51). The theme of authenticity can have a much more realistic and congruent development than that of Rousseau mentioned previously (Whitmore 2009, 191–2).

Here the updated Platonic technique becomes useful once more: one who listens to the desiring subject must be capable of *helping him to help himself* (Whitmore 2009, 10–1, 18). The questions that facilitate the comprehension of one's particular problems are not spontaneous, and if they are well-formulated, serve to recalibrate one's perception of reality in a manner similar to that of the classical *co-recta ratio*. The questions require and develop the comprehension of one's own desires (Whitmore 2009, 44–52). The discernment of important aspects passes through the decoding of the intentional layers of the agent's projects, as Anscombe demonstrated. For example, it is not a question of telling the person in question to decide "either/or" between familial and work obligations, but to help her to reflect upon the thing that she wants. Examples of such goals may be various activities, recognition, money, or spending time with her children. These may be achieved by thinking about the thing that is most important: if given the circumstances, the proposals or plans can be integrated. If they are incompatible, perhaps the pieces of the puzzle can be resized in order to fit better in another manner. This can be sought after in part by reflection on the importance of personal or external obstacles.

Another important aspect of the practices derived from this psychological strand is that as one needs to clarify his desires, he must also push himself to make the necessary decisions to realize them: "How can you begin this step?" "When would you like to begin...?" (Whitmore 2009, 85–9).

The questions in this sense are not important for the therapist, or the counselor, or the coach, but for the client. It is the client who when asked such questions, must understand how much of himself he is willing to dedicate for such an undertaking

and he must decide when he intends to launch the project. Thus, the person questioned must understand, if he truly wants to do something and with which means. Again, we are dealing with a deep understanding of goal-setting.

9 Self-Command for a Purposeful Life

It seems obvious that a journey of this type can foster both deliberation as well as the making of decisions (the *imperium* of wisdom, as it was called by the medieval authors) and transform ideals into programs. If the process becomes operative, it must necessarily involve the enrichment of character through the development of the virtues.

Carlos Llano explains one useful way to evaluate the attitudes of people regarding their ability for initiative. He claims that there are those who *idealize reality* (those who barricade themselves into a mental and organizational position without taking into account the facts and the opinions of others) and those who *realize the ideal*: those who commit themselves to constructing, taking into account the facts (Llano 2007, 16–8; Llano 2010, 18–9). The abovementioned instruments of contemporary psychology could be powerful tools to help individuals to overcome their internal hindrances.

The systematic application of some of these practices has shown itself to be very useful as a means of correcting one's behavior; it can also have an impact on group performance, as explained by Engelland in his study "[Team Building, Virtue, and Personal Flourishing in Organizations](#)." If, to the vast knowledge of personalities and the selection of personnel, itineraries of development of this type are added, not only could better results be obtained, but there could also be conspicuous savings in areas that are normally not calculated, such as the attrition of internal relationships in a work community or the lack of communication that occurs when one's personal limits have not been overcome or barriers have been constructed for convenience (Whitmore 2009, 53–5).

If employed in a certain manner, this art can render great benefits at the level of life in general, of life as a meaningful whole. The potential of this instrument for organizing and ordering personal priorities can influence interior growth that leads to a better management of internal and external resources. A support of this type serves to foster an interior strength that makes one freer, which is greatly relevant in a society in continuous evolution and in which certain models of personal development seem inevitable, as Taylor claims (Taylor 1992b, 55–7).

The ability of these techniques to lead to a clear improvement of persons is not in conflict with the weakness or intrinsic insufficiency of human beings. This constitutive weakness has always been an obstacle in our comprehension of the human being and finds an organic response only in Judeo-Christian Revelation. This is not the place for expanding the discussion to include the correlation between natural human capacities and the role of grace. However, it should be emphasized that there

does not seem to be any opposition between this strengthening of the dialogue between reason and will and the theology on original sin and Christian pastoral praxis.

10 Authenticity, Happiness and Well-Being

Another question to be included in this discussion is that of the formulation of happiness. It is well-known that Aristotle did not wish to return to mythological explanations and, therefore, proposed two responses which are difficult to reconcile.

The first response, which regards the *content* of happiness, begins with the premise that all desire to be happy, and enters successively into a long discussion on what happiness is. His selective discussion takes into consideration pleasure, wealth, and honors, none of which fill with meaning the life of a being that can always desire more (Aristotle 1984c, Books 1–2; Guthrie 1981, 342–3).

The second response focuses more upon the dynamism of life and presents happiness as an activity of the soul according to virtue (Aristotle 1984c, 1097b–1098b), leaving in the background the possession of external goods and highlighting the pleasurable character of the exercise of certain activities (Aristotle 1984c, 1099b22–24). However, since our human activity is complex, one runs again into the question of the multiplicity of human faculties that merge into the excellencies of character known as the virtues. The virtuous person must order his life so as to be less dependent upon the minor satisfactions and to make good use of material goods (Aristotle 1984c, 1100b17–1101a6). This relative autonomy, closely linked to the self-mastery treated earlier, assures a certain serenity. We are always needy and vulnerable, and it is not reasonable to think that the virtuous man who suffers atrociously is happy, as already explained in Sect. 4 of this chapter. The most complete version of this earthly happiness includes the exercise of virtue and the possession of goods sufficient for a lifetime (Aristotle 1984c, 1099a34–1100a16, 1153b14–19), a situation difficult to achieve. This sketch of the Aristotelian ideas is sufficient to summarize the tension between the earthly life and the divine life in the classical context so as to establish another connection with contemporary psychology.

In the midst of overcoming a perspective focused upon illness, the question of happiness has returned in vogue in psychological studies (Seligman 2003, 31–41; Peterson and Seligman 2004, 1–6). It has been more than fifteen years since Martin Seligman proposed a research and work project meant to change the course of research on personal predispositions to depression. According to Seligman, prejudices regarding the conditioning of animal and human behavior had determined the lack of interest on the part of scientists towards a non-indifferent quantity of “diehards” found in all sections of experimentation. These diehards or resilient individuals do not lose their spirit in the situations of permanent frustration that caused the majority of their peers to go into depression (Seligman 1993, 2003, 2011). Seligman asserts that this omission had fostered deterministic doctrines and

had focused psychiatric and psychological practice on the cure of depression and not on the search for the elements that rendered these stronger individuals more resilient. A psychology aimed at identifying and reinforcing these character traits could stimulate psychology in a more positive direction.

Seligman and his colleagues, thus, launched a strategy that began with the distinction between the pleasant, good, and meaningful life. The key to a full life is found, on the one hand, in understanding the hierarchy of these three kinds of existence: a meaningful biography renders pleasure and pain capable of being assimilated according to how we order our successes and failures. Having a meaningful vital perspective supposes that we have found a finality that gives direction to our existence (Seligman 2003, 8 ff.; Peterson and Seligman 2004, 18, 609–11), and that we know how to employ our capacities in the service of something greater than ourselves (Seligman 2003, 248–9, 263).¹² Seligman does not hide the fact that the key to this perspective is the Aristotelian distinction between pleasure and the good life (Seligman 2003, 111 ff.; Peterson and Seligman 2004, 18–9).

Sensible pleasures and pains have a very limited area in our emotional lives. To feel well or to sensibly enjoy a situation is different from the sentiments and positive emotions that one achieves with virtuous activities, such as working in a business to do good, helping others, or educating one's children (Seligman 2003, 6–12, 62–4, 102–22).¹³ The most gratifying activities are those in harmony with noble aims and imply the actualization of the virtues (Seligman 2003, 112): authentic gratification is acquired at great price (Seligman 2003, 116–7). The point of contact with the Aristotelian approach is clear: the situation of one who delights in performing certain activities both physical or intellectual—i.e. those quoted in the previous lines—is most beautiful and pleasurable (Aristotle 1984c, 1099b22–24).¹⁴

Pleasures are normally fleeting, and even great satisfactions like winning the lottery positively impact one's mood only temporarily (Seligman 2003, 48, 50–60, 102–3; Hadot 2005, 169–70). Pleasures remain at the emotional level, while gratifications are the product of engaging in activities in which the strengths of our personality flourish. These activities require thought, the capacity to perceive and transmit meaning, to correct oneself, etc. (Seligman 2003, 103, 111 ff.) Feeling positive emotions while performing good actions implies a well-developed personality for whose foundation innate dispositions are not enough.

¹²On this point, Covey's ideas and that of his group have a more well-defined program for indicating which things in life are more important, and they give less space to a quantitative type of research work.

¹³The positive enjoyment of activities that are good or neutral in themselves depends greatly upon the temperament of the person. Thus, it is important that each person succeeds in individuating the activities in which she expresses herself best and feels most satisfied. Even positive emotions, if sought as ends in themselves, empty activities of meaning and lead to inauthenticity and depression.

¹⁴On Csizsentimihyi's contribution, see the Chapter by Ribera and Ceja, "Flow: Flourishing at Work."

The manner in which Seligman and his followers recover the notion of character neglected by other authors, such as Allport (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 18–9), is noteworthy. Also of importance are Wright’s warnings to take care not to neglect the philosophical and theological premises of the notions most dear to this psychological proposal, such as character itself and the positive emotions; otherwise, one risks remaining at the level of a pragmatic and self-referential *self-improvement* philosophy (Seligman 2003, 250).

It is not possible here to present in detail the description of happiness—and the tension with the notions linked to well-being—that Seligman provides. Apart from the extension of the subject, Seligman and his collaborators have been improving their proposal in more recent works (Seligman 2011).

For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to underline once more the correspondence of the positive psychology project with important elements of classical thought and to reiterate that the things and activities that are normally called good are such. This is reflected in a stable state of well-being diverse from the possession of material and corporeal goods (Seligman 2003, 58).¹⁵ Moreover, positive situations and the capacity to delight in the good also have consequences for the quality and the real lifespan of the human life (Rath 2015, Chap. 2).

In one of his most recent works while returning to one of Aristotle’s questions, Seligman, attempted to insert the success factor in the parameters of happiness. This “novelty” is cautiously studied within the field of positive psychology since one of the most debated points in the field remains that of harmonizing the subjective elements of happiness (how happy or satisfied the person considers or declares himself to be) with the objective (the satisfaction of necessities) (Seligman 2011, 9–15).

11 Conclusion: Ethical Theory Is About Being Better by Doing Good

At this point we have reopened many questions to which we seemed close to providing a solution. Open positions or those that are deliberately left inconclusive are not necessarily better. It is not difficult to admit the attraction of the Enlightenment or the postmodern position that loves interpreting the research of truth as indeterminacy within a never ending navigation in order to delight in this liberty (of thought). However, it is anything but a given that life is made for thinking freely and aimlessly or without this liberty affecting one’s personal existential project.

¹⁵It is significant that not even an objectively good state of health is decisive for the mood of a person, if the person does not consider it to be so.

From this point of view, the dynamism included in the famous Augustinian exhortation seems more plausible:

Always be dissatisfied with what you are, if you want to arrive at what you are not yet. Because wherever you are satisfied with yourself, there you have stuck. If, though, you say, “That’s enough, that’s the lot”, then you’ve even perished. Always add some more, always keep on walking, always forge ahead. Don’t stop on the road, don’t turn round and go back, don’t wander off the road (Augustine 1992, 235).

As a sort of gloss on the provocation of the Bishop of Hippo, the following passage from a text by Leonardo Polo may be useful in ordering the numerous classical and modern elements sketched in this essay:

Sometimes it is said that the principle known through synderesis is “Do good and avoid evil.” I prefer to formulate this principle simply this way: “Do good, act”; act as much as you can and improve your actuation. Evil, we already know, is forbidden. To avoid evil is a “no,” but the negation is not what comes first in morals. The moral knowledge of principles impels, confirms that the human being should have initiative. This is not an added duty, but rather the expansion of freedom: pursue good, carry it out, do not withdraw, do not fail to do it, do not be lazy. The principle is addressed to the subject, to the attitude of the person faced with the lengthy task of living, faced with the human project that is the development of his own existence by increasing what is real. Throw yourself into life, contribute, put something on your part, do not fall short. This is the great principle. Is this a moral norm in the strict sense? I do not think so. It is rather the connection of any norm with me, since the moral norm is not an obligatory request that rises before me in isolation demanding a forced fulfillment (Polo 2008, 185–6, cf. 2011, 299).

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