Chapter 8 – Virtue

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The complex fabric of the self-realization discourse has been presented in the context of this study as consisting of three interwoven threads: autonomy, authenticity and virtue. Having discussed the former two in the previous chapters, it is now time to explore the theme of virtue in a similar way.

As in the previous chapters, my aim in this chapter is to find out which conception of virtue forms the most appropriate match with the conceptualization of self-realization, self-identity and moral agency that this study wants to develop. I start with a general introduction to the theme of virtue and virtue ethics (§8.2). Next, along similar lines as in our chapters on autonomy and authenticity, a selection of different perspectives on virtue are discussed. In §8.3.1, I start with the view of Aristotle (*Ethica Nicomachea*), who is generally regarded as the father of virtue ethics in the history of Western philosophy. Next, in §8.3.2 the view of MacIntyre is discussed, whose work *After virtue* (1984) has played a very influential role in the revival of virtue ethics in recent decades. Third, in §8.3.3 a more recent "pluralistic" view of virtue by Swanton (2003) is addressed. After this selective discussion of three relevant accounts of virtue, I proceed in §8.4 to address the way in which the concept of virtue has found its way into gerontological discourse. As will be shown, the application of virtue-ethical thinking to the field of aging studies is surprisingly limited. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the discussed perspectives in light of the aims of the current study (§8.5) and finally a reflection on the most suitable interpretation of virtue in the context of the reframed interpretation of self-realization (§8.6).

8.2 INTRODUCING VIRTUE

As discussed in §4.3.2, compared to autonomy and authenticity, virtue plays a rather subordinate role in the rhetoric of late modern lifestyle and "a life of one's own", which underlies the late modern understanding of self-realization that this study aims to reframe. However, this lack of attention in the soci-

etal discourse is offset by the fact that moral-philosophical debates in recent decades have reintroduced virtue ethics as a critical perspective against prevailing deontological and/or consequentialist strands of thinking. In contrast with the latter's focus on rules and universalizing principles, virtue ethics calls our attention to the importance of character dispositions and the practice of good habits. In this sense virtue ethics shifts our attention away from the question "what to do?" towards the question "who to be?" (Schneewind, 1990). This makes it a highly relevant perspective for a study on self-realization. Whereas deontological and consequentialist perspectives are alternative answers to the same basic question of ethics, virtue ethics, by contrast, asks a different question (Van Tongeren, 2012).

But what is virtue? Broadly reviewing the current literature on virtue ethics, there seem to exist almost as many definitions of what virtue is as there are virtue ethicists. In general, however, most virtue-ethical thinkers agree that virtue is an attitude or character disposition that strives for human excellence, and should result in optimal moral behavior, or at least behavior that can be qualified as the best given the circumstances. The development of virtuous attitudes is thus conceived as a process of moral self-development. In accordance with this, Van Tongeren (2012) qualifies virtue ethics as an ethics of self-realization. The virtue-ethical tradition in moral philosophy has seen a considerable revival in recent decades (for some seminal examples, see Anscombe, 1958; MacIntyre, 1984; Foot, 1978; Hursthouse, 1991; Hurka, 2001; Slote, 1992, 2001; Swanton, 2003). Broadly speaking, four characteristics of virtue-ethical perspectives can be distinguished that play a role in this renewed interest: 1) their critique on dominant moral philosophies that strive for universal rules and principles, which leads to a focus on the moral agent instead; 2) their opportunities to offer a remedy for the perceived "moral crisis" of modernity; 3) their acknowledgment of the fact that moral agents are embedded in a (complex and dynamic) social context; and 4) their recognition that this embedding of moral agency requires a responsive, flexible and context-dependent ethics. I will discuss these points in turn:

- First, the revival of virtue ethics is often explained as a critical reaction towards the two most dominant strands of moral theory since the Enlightenment: deontology and consequentialism (of which utilitarianism is one of the dominant representatives) (Crisp & Slote, 1997; Statman 1997). For instance, in her seminal article *Modern moral philosophy*, Anscombe (1958) argues in favor of virtue ethics because it is capable of articulating a more satisfying moral psychology than deontology and consequentialism, with their one-sided focus on rules, principles and criteria for right actions. In a situation of eroding traditional foundations of ethics, Anscombe argues, we should turn to human flourishing (*eudaimonia* in Aristotelian ethics;

see §8.3.1) as a more viable basis for morality than obligation. Consequently, virtue ethics focuses on moral agents and their lives, rather than on discrete actions (Crisp & Slote, 1997).

We should note, however, that the distinction between virtue ethics and other ethical approaches is not as clear-cut as it seems. The revival of virtue ethics also harbors approaches aiming to formulate criteria for the moral legitimization of actions on the basis of virtue-ethical thinking (Slote, 1992; Hursthouse, 1991). To complicate things further, there are strands of consequentialist as well as deontological thinking which integrate a certain conception of virtue, such as Hurka's (2001) consequentialist account of virtue ethics.

- Second, the revival of virtue ethics has been motivated by concern regarding the moral outlook of (late) modern societies. MacIntyre (1984), for instance, saw virtue ethics as the much-needed remedy for the state of moral crisis he observed in modern societies. Interestingly, although MacIntyre criticizes moral individualism and builds his argument mainly along communitarian lines, it is also possible to argue in favor of virtue ethics for opposite reasons. After all, the virtue-ethical emphasis on the moral agent and his character development also seems to offer valuable directions to deal with contemporary moral individualism and pluralism without having to reject them.

- Third, the revival of virtue ethics mirrors the growing awareness in contemporary philosophy of the fundamental interdependence of human beings and their embedding in a social context. Aristotle's position on virtue, for instance, would be incomprehensible without taking into account his view that humans are fundamentally "political animals", creatures defined by their membership of the community or polis (*Ethica Nicomachea*, see §8.3.1). MacIntyre's (1984) neo-Aristotelian account equally emphasizes that individuals are social beings, constituted by their social surroundings and by the traditions in which their life is embedded (see §8.3.2).

- Fourth, virtue ethics raises our awareness of situational and contextual influences on our moral conduct, and underscores the need for practical wisdom to confront these influences. Whereas deontological or consequentialist approaches depart from the assumption that morality should provide guidance regardless of the specific circumstances, virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of assessing the demands of a specific situation, and deciding which action is required on the basis of this assessment. Lifelong development and maintenance of virtuous attitudes or character dispositions is needed to enable this assessment and flexible responsiveness.

The discussed characteristics suggest that virtue ethics provides a promising perspective to accommodate the views of human identity and moral agency

underlying the reframed version of self-realization developed in this study (see chapter 5). In contrast to ethical perspectives based on autonomy and authenticity, a virtue-ethical perspective is more naturally sensitive to the social and contextual embedding of human life. The fact that the development of virtue is perceived as a lifelong undertaking also conveniently corresponds to my emphasis in this study on the narrative, historical and temporal character of identity. Of course, the revival of virtue ethics has also raised criticism in moral philosophy. Critiques include, for instance, the vagueness of the notion of virtue compared to the universal rules and principles of other ethical approaches, the diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions of what relevant virtues are, or the self-centeredness that supposedly accompanies the virtue-ethical focus on the moral agent. Also, doubts have been raised about the ability of virtue ethics to provide guidance for action in concrete moral dilemmas. Moreover, given its concentration on long-term character assessment, virtue ethics has been criticized for being unable to evaluate the legitimacy of concrete actions (Louden, 1997). Finally, the so-called situationist critique voices skepticism about whether human action in fact depends on attitudes of character, or rather on situational characteristics (which would contradict the basic assumption of virtue ethics that character motivates moral behavior) (Harman, 1999, 2009; Doris, 1998).

In addition to these critiques, virtue as one of the constitutive threads of self-realization discourse raises two additional issues that deserve special consideration:

- First, some interpretations of virtue ethics harbor an image of the telos of human life that is rather naturalistic and essentialist. Such views are also often accompanied by objectivistic assumptions about truth and value, for example, when they assume the existence of a "common good". These naturalistic, essentialist and/or objectivistic views relate problematically to the highly pluralistic late modern moral context sketched in chapter 2. Moreover, such views potentially cause tension with the social constitution perspective defended in this study, which regards categories like truth, value or the telos of human life not as pre-given or universal, but as socially-constituted. Furthermore, these categories are seen as diverse and plural, although this certainly does not imply that "anything goes". In the view of this study, the recognition of these goods as worthy, truthful or valuable is based on a constant intersubjective, hermeneutic process of deliberation instead of on a cosmic order or a tradition that offers "ready-made" goods, as it were. A viable conception of virtue in the context of this study will have to be able to accommodate late modern moral pluralism and the corresponding diversity of goods and purposes, as well as cohere with an intersubjective, social constitution perspective on truth and value.

- Second, the sensitivity of virtue ethics to the social and contextual embedding of human moral agents is sometimes accompanied by a tendency of conventionalism and traditionalism. This tendency can be problematic when it comes to the potential for critical resistance that the theory of cultural narratives and counter narratives used in this study ascribes to- and requires from moral agents (see §3.2.4). Thus, a viable conception of virtue in the context of this study principally needs to incorporate the possibility to stand up to the status quo and criticize opinions or people who are traditionally seen as exemplary in a moral sense. Before I can attempt to formulate an interpretation of virtue that matches this study's suggested view of self-realization, it will be clarifying to discuss a selection of views illustrating how virtue has been developed and interpreted in the course of philosophical history.

8.3 SELECTED ACCOUNTS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

8.3.1 Aristotle: Virtue as 'nobility of the soul'

One of the most important and well-known sources of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition is Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*. The deepest roots of self-realization as a moral ideal depicting the good life can be found here. Self-realization in Aristotelian virtue ethics is perceived in terms of a lifelong developmental process of acquiring a virtuous, i.e., excellent, disposition of character. The good life for human beings is believed to be realized through "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (*Ethica Nicomachea* I, 7, 1098a16).

Aristotle's ethics and his understanding of virtue cannot properly be understood without considering his conception of the world as a meaningful cosmic order, his metaphysical biology/anthropology, and his ideas about society as a political and moral community. Importantly, Aristotle's philosophy teaches us that the individual striving for self-realization is interwoven with the good of the community – in Aristotle's case, the Greek polis. It thus has a moral relevance transcending the interests of the individual. This underscores that self-realization is not an atomistic undertaking. Instead, practicing the virtues has the potential of influencing the broader social and societal context of individual life. The virtue or excellence of an entity, according to Aristotle, is defined by its contribution to its optimal functioning. A hammer is a good hammer if it performs the function of a hammer well; likewise, human beings are good human beings if they live up to their natural function. In the worldview of ancient Greek philosophy, every entity – including human beings – has its own place in a meaningful cosmic order, from which its natural function flows. The

good life is perceived as that life in which the natural telos or purpose of human life is optimally realized.

Aristotle thus presents a teleological ethics. The natural purpose for human beings, the telos strived for in the process of self-realization in virtue ethics, is formulated by Aristotle in terms of *eudaimonia*, or happiness. Eudaimonic conceptualizations of happiness contrast so-called hedonic conceptualizations that perceive happiness in terms of pleasure and absence of pain or unpleasantness (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Instead, eudaimonic views perceive happiness in terms of a life well lived, a flourishing existence in accordance with the purpose or telos inherent to human nature, an existence that represents the best realization of the agent's potentialities. The faculties required for realizing eudaimonia are supposed to be potentially inherent in all beings, but need to be developed to become actualized. This implies a lifelong process of learning and maintaining virtues: excellent character dispositions, acquired through developing the right habits and performing good actions. For Aristotle, acquiring virtues takes place in concrete daily practice; one becomes a just person (i.e., acquires the virtue of justice) by performing just actions. Consequently, Aristotle's ethics conveys a life course perspective: one's virtuousness cannot be fully judged until life is completed. There is always the possibility that people who have made the right choices so far go astray in another situation, thereby compromising their virtuousness. Thus, Aristotle claims that "human good turns out to be the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. But we must add: 'in a complete life'. For one swallow doesn't make a summer, nor does one day" (*Ethica Nicomachea* I, 7, 1098a19).

Aristotle also thinks that children and young people cannot be called virtuous. They may have had some education, but they still lack the experience and training required to have developed virtuous habits. Practical wisdom, a very fundamental virtue for Aristotle, essential to obtain other virtues, is something that can only be developed in the course of maturation throughout life. These observations strengthen my surmise of a particular relevance of virtue ethics for aging. However, it should not be concluded that Aristotle automatically perceived older people as the most virtuous – in his *Rhetoric*, he was surprisingly negative about the elderly (*Rhetorica* II, 12, 1389a-1390a; Dohmen & Baars, 2010). Although we all grow older, not everyone manages to become mature and acquire wisdom; this seems to be the sensible conclusion. Thus aging appears to be a necessary, but by no means a sufficient condition for virtue.

For Aristotle, the virtues exist in the proper mean between excess and defect of a certain trait. So, for instance, courage as a virtue is the proper mean, while fearlessness and cowardice represent the accompanying excess and defect states, temperance is the proper mean between self-indulgence and insensibility to pleasure, et cetera. Importantly, Aristotle acknowledges that both what

counts as virtues and the concrete interpretation of their content depend on the context in which they are exercised. For instance, the virtue of good temper, which is the proper mean for the passion of anger, requires "to be angry in the manner, at the things, and for the length of time" that is required by the circumstances (*Ethica Nicomachea* IV, 11, 1125b32-1125b34). *Reason* is presented as the quintessential capacity to arrive at the proper mean in any given situation, for it enables thoughtful deliberation and steers our passions and emotions in the right direction. In this way, we ideally develop a virtuous disposition of character which we can rely on in future situations requiring our (moral) response. Note that the right mean envisioned by Aristotle is not an absolute mean, but a mean relative to us and to the situation. The intellectual virtue of practical wisdom is quintessential in deciding what a certain situation requires in terms of virtue as the right mean. Here, in these Aristotelian ethics, we strongly recognize the flexibility and context-sensitivity that is also characteristic of virtue ethics in general.

Aristotle's focus on excellence could elicit the conclusion that true virtue is attainable only for an elite minority. But in fact, his ethics harbors a strong awareness of the imperfection that characterizes earthly life for humans and the many contingencies and the existential vulnerability that influence our realization of eudaimonia. As Aristotle puts it, "Now many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other; but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life happier [...] while if they turn out ill they crush and maim happiness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul" (*Ethica Nicomachea* I, 11, 1100b23-1100b33). Thus, what Aristotelian virtue ethics suggests is finding the *right attitude* to deal with vulnerability, which relates significantly to this study's aim of composing an understanding of self-realization that is able to integrate existential vulnerability (see §2.5.2).

Crucial to the Aristotelian conception of virtue is making the right choices and doing the right thing based on the right, i.e., excellent attitude. But for people who cannot fully live up to this perfectionist standard, it still remains meaningful to strive for virtue and keep aiming to bring their passions under the control of their reason. There are many people, according to Aristotle, who know what is the right thing to do and struggle to make the right choices, against their emotional inclinations to do the opposite. Such people are in possession of "continence" rather than virtue. But this is still to be morally preferred over people failing to do the things they know are right, because they are unable or unwilling to control their wrong inclinations. Thus, everyone should be able to take part in the good life and reach a degree of eudaimonia

that fits their capacities and situation. This part of Aristotle's view can serve to mitigate the supposed perfectionism his ethics has sometimes been criticized for, although his standards for true or "full" virtue remain quite high.

In sum, Aristotle's perspective on virtue has much to offer that is relevant in light of the account of self-realization developed in this study. In particular, its understanding of the moral agent as a socially embedded creature, its context-sensitivity, its life-course perspective and its suggestions for finding a satisfactory attitude towards inescapable existential vulnerability stand out in this regard. However, the question might be raised whether virtue-ethical ideas like Aristotle's are at all applicable to our lives in the complex world of late modernity. Isn't speaking about virtue these days rather archaic and strange? Doesn't it require the relatively ordered and organized context of the Greek polis, the context in which Aristotelian virtue ethics arose, and the corresponding metaphysical assumptions about the place of humans in a meaningful cosmic order that provides them with their natural telos? In the next section, I discuss the neo-Aristotelian view of MacIntyre (1984), who gives an account that defends the application of virtue ethics to the context of modernity.

8.3.2 Alasdair MacIntyre: Virtue as a remedy for the modern "moral crisis"

In §2.3.6, MacIntyre's (1984) dramatic estimation of the moral outlook of the modern world was already discussed. His remedy for what he perceives as the severe uprooting and moral crisis of modernity is a return to a neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical perspective. This revival should restore our connection with the traditional sources of our moral intuitions and help us escape the modern dangers of relativism and emotivism. In MacIntyre's view, the process of modernization led to the loss of precisely those shared conceptions of common goods of the community and the individual that formed the basis of the traditional virtue ethics, together with the idea of a telos of human life. Admittedly, virtues have been reformulated in modern terms, but not in very helpful ways according to MacIntyre. On the one hand, modernity has conceptualized virtues in terms of their contribution to authentic self-creation, opposing the restrictions of conventional morality. This, for instance, is the view underlying Nietzschean philosophy, pleading for a strong, authentic, self-loving agent transcending the limitations of narrow, common morality (see §7.3.2). On the other hand, virtues have been regarded as those dispositions that help people conform to the moral rules. This conformism is perceived as necessary to guarantee people's moral behavior in a world characterized by the unending struggle between atomistic human actors securing their self-interests and survival. This view underlies a wide variety of philosophical views, from Hobbes to contemporary communitarians. In both cases, however, MacIntyre observes that the context that

originally provided virtues with meaning has disappeared. MacIntyre's own approach therefore defends a return to traditional Aristotelian virtue ethics, where individual virtuousness presupposed a context of shared goods, and the good of the individual automatically coincided with the good of the community.

MacIntyre (1984) defines virtue as, "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which prevents us from achieving any such goods" (p. 191). His account of virtue rests upon three important conceptual ideas: the concept of a practice, the narrative unity of human life, and the moral tradition. I will discuss his ideas about these concepts in turn.

- *Practice:* MacIntyre's (1984) understanding of virtue presupposes the context of a practice in which virtues are exercised. A practice is a mode of human activity in which certain common goods are at stake, goods that virtues help us to realize. However, not just any activity qualifies as a practice. The concerned activity has to be a social and collective undertaking forming a coherent unity which is meaningful to those involved. It has to aim at the realization of a certain good that is internal to the practice, a standard of excellence flowing from the practice itself. An illustration of a practice relevant to the context of aging might be caring, in which virtues like compassion, patience, helpfulness, modesty, kindness, thoughtfulness and generosity are exercised (Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006; Blum, 1994). Typically, a practice transcends the existence of the individual agent. It precedes the individuals involved in it, and will continue to exist after they are no more. Moreover, engagement in a certain practice requires the subordination of purely individual preferences to the authority of the history and tradition of the practice, and to those already experts in it. It involves a willingness to learn and to realize one's potentials in service of the realization of the common goods that are inherent in the practice.
- *The narrative unity of human life:* Although practices provide the necessary context for any virtue according to MacIntyre (1984), a practice does not in itself offer an overarching criterion to rank possibly conflicting or incompatible requirements posed by different virtues in the context of multiple practices. We thus need to choose between conflicting demands of a certain situation and decide which virtues will help us realize the overarching goal of a good life. Yet according to MacIntyre, our lives cannot qualify as good if they lack a unifying framework of meanings and values. Such an overarching picture of what matters most to us in our lives should help us make the proper choices and bring order into the demands at stake in a given situation. MacIntyre understands this framework of meaning in terms of an integrated unifying narrative. The problems associated with such a notion of narrative integration or unity have been encountered in §5.2.3.

MacIntyre's assumption that life needs to be experienced as a unified whole is based on the Aristotelian premise that a virtue is a disposition that is supposed to be consistently present in one's actions throughout life, not just contingently exercised in a particular situation. Only in light of the narrative unity of our lives can we apply a hierarchical ordering to our values and strivings, and experience our lives as sufficiently coherent to count as meaningful. Although this view implies a strong emphasis on the narrative competence of the moral agent, it is important to note that MacIntyre perceives moral agents as only the co-authors of their own narratives, and not independent, self-determining authorities. Our lives are always embedded in a context (social, historical, cultural) and shaped by the tradition to which we belong.

- *The moral tradition:* According to MacIntyre, we can never decide solely as individuals what is the good life for us, or exercise the virtues in pursuit of such a life. Who we are and what we value and strive for, is mediated by social and cultural moral traditions. It matters for our own conduct and life choices whether we are born in a culture that values familial honor and loyalty over individual self-realization, or in a culture that values hard work, frugality and modesty, or in a culture that celebrates individual freedom. Our placement in the socio-cultural context in which we are born provides our individual life with its moral starting point. Our individual existence forms the embodiment of a social and moral identity (or several identities in different contexts) which has (or have) been shaped by the traditions that form the background of our lives. For MacIntyre, virtues play a key role in sustaining vital traditions that provide our lives with historical context and with the relevant common goods to be strived for.

  MacIntyre is well aware that his view regarding the role of moral tradition is strongly at odds with the dominant individualism pervading our modern societies. He states: "From the standpoint of individualism I am what I myself choose to be. I can always, if I wish to, put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of my existence" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 220). This individualist standpoint is something MacIntyre strongly denies. We cannot detach who we are from our social and historical roles and the background of our moral tradition. We cannot even be called selves without acknowledging the fact that we are bearers of that tradition.

In sum, MacIntyre (1984) provides an account of virtue that is "modernized", insofar as it no longer presupposes Aristotle's metaphysical framework, which has become an anachronistic curiosity to the modern mind. His emphasis on practice is interesting, since it enables a concretization of how virtue is developed and sustained in human lives. However, his focus on the moral tradition and the quest for narrative unity are still relatively conservative and monistic,

which makes a connection to the reality of late modern moral pluralism more problematic. I therefore proceed to discuss a view of virtue ethics that aims to accommodate moral pluralism.

8.3.3 Christine Swanton: Pluralistic virtue ethics

According to Swanton (2003), modern virtue ethics has been "rightly praised for taking seriously the richness and complexity of the moral domain, for its sensitivity to context and situation, and for its skepticism about the codifiability of ethics" (p. 9). Nevertheless, Swanton believes modern virtue ethics should enlarge its scope by incorporating pluralism in several ways. Swanton advocates a pluralistic understanding of the virtue concept itself, but her pluralism also extends towards an attempt to integrate insights from other strands of moral philosophical thinking that are usually perceived as mutually exclusive. The pluralism of her view seems promising when it comes to adapting virtue ethics to the context of late modernity. Four elements of Swanton's view merit particular attention for this study's purposes: 1) her focus on the *responsive* character of virtue; 2) her preference for a *realistic* rather than an idealistic or perfectionistic account of virtue; 3) her focus on *pluralism* at multiple levels; and 4) her suggestion of theoretical resources for the integration of *existential vulnerability*. I will discuss these aspects in succession:

1. *Responsiveness and virtue*
    Swanton (2003) defines virtue as, "a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way" (p. 19). In this definition, we see the notions of *responding* and *acknowledging* occupying a central place. The field(s) of virtue is (or are) interpreted in a broad way as the situation(s) requiring a moral response. Swanton argues that the good life has both "prudential" components, which pertain to personal flourishing and satisfaction, and components of "moral meritoriousness", which pertain to a "consistent appropriate responsiveness to the demands of the world" (Swanton, 2003, p. 59). These two types of components may be in tension, and the criterion for a virtuous life is that it succeeds in harmonizing the tension between the "demands of the self" and the "demands of the world". However, Swanton emphasizes that the gap between the two will not be closed completely.
    A certain situation may require several, sometimes conflicting virtues at the same time. For instance, experiencing one's partner suffering from Alzheimer's disease places older people in a situation where multiple virtues are called for: care, patience, trust, respect, but also self-care and assertiveness. Some of the demands raised by this situation flow from the

needs of the other or the outside world, others flow from the needs of the self. Both types of demands need to be acknowledged in order to arrive at the desired virtuous attitude in confronting a given situation. In Swanton's view, the criterion for virtue is an appropriate response to the demands of the world as well as the demands of the self. The adequacy of the response cannot be captured in any universal guideline for action, for it depends on the situation and needs to be decided upon in an intersubjective process of attunement requiring much moral sensitivity for the needs of others and of the self.

By emphasizing that the self is a relational entity, involved in a social world of multiple bonds and responsibilities that require a proper response, Swanton's (2003) analysis accords with my reflections on the role of socializing influences on identity (see §4.2.2; §5.3.2). Our relations with others enable the process of development of virtue, but they can also stand in the way by placing contradictory demands or strains on the individual. Importantly, Swanton argues that the way in which we respond to the demands made by a situation defines who we are as an agent. The virtuousness (or lack of virtue) of our character disposition is manifested in the way we respond to the demands of the situation. This understanding of virtue related to identity echoes the previously discussed view that our moral identity and moral agency presuppose the desire to remain *self-constant*, i.e., to live up to our commitments to others and thereby to ourselves (Ricoeur 1992; see §5.5). Swanton's (2003) analysis seems consistent with this analysis, because she underscores that our virtuous response to a certain situation is an expression of our motivation to be a certain person. As I understand it, this motivation defines what Swanton describes as the demands of the self. These demands need to be answered, but this process of self-realization has to be combined with a proper response to the demands of the world.

In the example sketched above, where someone is confronted with a partner diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, this person may be dedicated to the promise to care for her partner "till death parts them". Expectedly, this commitment defines her identity and thus poses demands on her to honor it. But the situation may also make other demands; adult children, for instance, can argue that they have a shared responsibility to assure proper care for both parents, that motivations of protection or safety should prevail and that the sick parent should therefore be placed in an institution. Moreover, the demand to take into account the perspective of the sick partner/parent and the need to respect his autonomy as far as possible also deserves to be reckoned with. Whereas the concerns of the patient and the children may be at odds with the demands of the self of the wife/mother, it is clear that they present legitimate demands that should be answered as well, if the situation is to be handled virtuously.

Although Swanton (2003) emphasizes the importance of a virtuous motivation in moral agents, her account differs from the agent-centered account of Slote (2001), who argues for excellent motivation as the basic criterion of virtue. Swanton (2003) wishes to incorporate other factors besides motivation in her view, thereby aiming to do some justice to the situationist critique mentioned earlier (§8.2). In Swanton's view, the criterion for moral rightness of action is whether the target of the relevant virtues is appropriately met. What the situationist critique teaches us, in Swanton's view, is that an excellent motivation is not the only relevant factor to be taken into account to assess virtue, because situational influences can sometimes outweigh motivations. The fact that in a practical context of action our virtuous motivation is vulnerable to being overruled by situational circumstances, however, need not deny the value of virtue ethics as such. Swanton just advocates a more modest and realistic view of how virtuous motivation and situational influences *both* decide how our moral behavior will turn out in a specific situation.

2. *Realism and constraints on virtue*

Since Swanton is well aware of the many difficulties people can meet in their search for virtue, she strives for a realistic, rather than perfectionist account of virtue. Generally speaking, Swanton advocates a view in which the criterion of virtue is seen as relative to the situation and the capacities of the agent. This has the advantage that no one is principally excluded from the realm of virtue; virtue is not something restricted to moral "saints" or "heroes". Swanton (2003) suggests a "threshold conception" of virtue (p. 63), in which the criterion is not some high idealistic standard of perfection, but the adequacy of the response to the demands at stake in a specific situation. What qualifies as virtuous and what is regarded as good may thus vary considerably depending on the context, according to Swanton's view. Life circumstances, expectations, value orientations, social relationships, external conditions, et cetera, all influence what can be called good in a certain situation. One of the interesting consequences of this view is that it allows for life-phase specific (constellations of) virtues and goods, which is a relevant point from the perspective of aging. Swanton herself points out that what is virtuous behavior for a younger person may not be so for an older one, and vice versa.

Swanton's realism implies that acquiring and exercising virtue can be complicated by many different factors. These factors include structural features of one's cultural and societal context, or parameters set by the social roles one is expected to fulfill, or a person's psychological outlook. For example, it would be more difficult to enact the virtue of generosity if one is not perceived by one's social and cultural surroundings as the kind of person who has something valuable to offer. Likewise, standing up against an injustice

may require different types and expressions of courage from the position of a member of an oppressed minority than from the position of a well-meaning outsider. Finally, being very self-centered would complicate acquiring virtues like magnanimity or care.

Although Swanton argues for a realistic and context-dependent account of virtue, her view is not relativistic in the sense that *any* disposition can count as a virtue. Swanton suggests the application of a "constraint" on virtue, in which only agents showing a sufficient amount of psychological health and stability can qualify as virtuous. In her view, most contemporary accounts of virtue fail to offer a satisfactory understanding of the role of psychological factors in attaining virtue. She thus advocates an account of virtue that is based on acknowledging the complexity of human psychology. In order to accomplish such an account, Swanton suggests that virtue ethics should adapt to contemporary insights on psychological health and pathology. Swanton draws her inspiration for the criteria of psychological health which a virtuous agent in her view should possess from several psychoanalytic thinkers such as Winnicott (1965) and Horney (1950), but also from Nietzschean philosophy. These sources provide a much more complex and nuanced understanding of human nature than Aristotle's traditional naturalist metaphysical view, which is an advantage when it comes to adapting virtue-ethical thinking to the reality of late modernity.

Among the criteria for psychological health formulated by Nietzsche and post-Nietzschean psychologists that Swanton (2003) applies are, for instance, a realistic image of one's own strengths and weaknesses, the ability to maintain meaningful social relationships, the ability for life-affirmation and a sense of self-love. The latter is particularly important in Swanton's view, because she argues that a healthy form of self-love should be a part of the profile of every virtue. Swanton's "constraint on virtue" holds that, if an attitude or motivation does not spring from a sufficiently healthy psychological outlook along these lines (for instance, if it is associated with a narcissistic personality disorder, chronic resentment and hostility towards the world, or a pathological desire to harm others), it cannot qualify as a virtue.

3. *Pluralism*

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Swanton's account is her dedication to pluralism on multiple levels. In contrast to the classic eudaimonic view of (neo)-Aristotelianism, which regards the promotion of flourishing to be the sole and quintessential purpose of a virtuous life (see §8.3.1), Swanton believes other goods besides human flourishing are relevant for virtue as well. Importantly, this means that Swanton aims to enrich her virtue-ethical perspective with insights from other moral philosophical approaches (such as Kantianism or Nietzschean ethics) that are usually perceived as conflicting or mutually exclusive. Though her focus remains virtue-ethical,

she nevertheless wants to acknowledge the rightful claims of other moral theories. Any monistic conception of ethics is thus criticized by Swanton. A monistic conception of ethics bases what counts as right or virtuous on one single rationale, be it maximal promotion of value (in consequentialism), love or care (in forms of relational ethics), respecting moral status (in Kantian approaches), expression of authentic moral strength (in Nietzschean approaches), or contribution to human flourishing (in eudaimonic virtue ethics). Swanton's pluralism affirms my earlier statement that the three forms of ethics – universalist, personalist, particularist – distinguished by Gewirth (1998) (see §4.2.1), with their corresponding goods, all deserve to be given their proper due in my reframed interpretation of self-realization. In contrast to monistic theories, Swanton's (2003) view emphasizes that a virtue-ethical theory should not only be pluralistic regarding the goals to be strived for, i.e., *bases* of moral responsiveness, but also regarding the *modes* of moral responsiveness. In eudaimonist approaches, the only mode that seems to be acknowledged is promotion (of human flourishing). However, Swanton argues that a pluralism of goals also calls for a pluralism of viable modes of responsiveness. Depending on the characteristics of the situation drawing the response, other modes of moral responsiveness may be in order, such as respecting or honoring moral status, loving or being receptive of affective bonds, or expressing creative engagement with one's life. Every virtue has a complex profile, a constellation of multiple modes of moral responsiveness that are relevant to the situation.

An important implication of the pluralism Swanton advocates in her approach to virtue is that a good life does not automatically equal a flourishing life. The fact that other goods and strategies are also acknowledged to play a role in a virtuous life implies that life need not be (fully) flourishing to qualify as good (as eudaimonism implies). In fact, many situations in our lives may restrict our chances for flourishing. However, even a non-flourishing life can still qualify as meaningful or admirable, for instance, and therefore qualify as good. In the example of the woman whose partner suffers from Alzheimer's disease, her own well-being and self-realization are likely to suffer from the unfortunate condition of her husband, which will result in a less than flourishing life. But because she honors the demands of love and care constituted by her relationship with her husband in an excellent way, in Swanton's account her life can still be seen as virtuous.

4. *Virtue and existential vulnerability*
    Swanton's sensitivity to the complications that confront moral agents striving to lead a good life makes her view particularly apt to offer a perspective on self-realization that acknowledges and integrates existential vulnerability. In formulating the point of departure of her account of virtue ethics, Swanton underscores right away that many possible obstacles threaten the

ideal-type of virtue usually presented in moral philosophy. In this light, she argues that "[...] due to evil, catastrophe, and vulnerability, strategies for attaining the goals of personal self-realization and meeting the demands of the world cannot be assumed to coincide" (Swanton, 2003, p. 14). Swanton thus seems acutely aware of the way our lives are inevitably imbued with what I have termed existential vulnerability, which is inherent in human existence (see §2.4.6). In my interpretation, her view rightfully acknowledges that moral agents are living in a world full of complexities and contingencies. Their striving for self-realization is fundamental to their good lives, but the demands of the world may complicate or impede this striving. Swanton's doctrine that virtuousness requires realizing a healthy equilibrium between seemingly opposing poles, suggests that living a virtuous, moral life is always a complicated balancing act. We cannot change or deny the fact that our lives are liable to existential vulnerabilities and other situational influences, but we can maybe develop an attitude that helps us deal with them in a satisfactory way.

Returning to my earlier example, being confronted with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease certainly qualifies as an instance of existential vulnerability, both for the person involved and for his partner or children. There are many emotional states that are possible in initial response; "negative" states such as denial, anger, sadness, despondency, but also more "positive" ones such as love, care, dedication, et cetera. It is likely that these states will *all* be experienced along the way of accepting and integrating the situation in one's life. What seems to matter is which states and inclinations define our response to this instance of existential vulnerability in the long run. It seems obvious that remaining stuck in anger or denial is not going to lead to a viable way of dealing with the situation. Yet, if we succeed in finding a livable balance between sadness, anger, injustice, care, love, acceptance of the inevitable, et cetera, this is likely to contribute in a positive way to our experience of the quality and meaning of life. This expectedly facilitates an "excellent or good enough", i.e., virtuous, way of responding to the demands of the situation. Having developed a virtuous character disposition may thus significantly increase this possibility, although no guarantees can be given of course.

In sum, Swanton's work suggests that virtue consists in finding an excellent or good enough way to respond to the demands placed by a situation. Her realistic perspective offers a welcome differentiation from Aristotle's supposed "perfectionism". Her acknowledgment of a diversity of goods, moreover, seems more capable of accommodating the reality of late modern moral pluralism than the more conservative approach of MacIntyre (1984) that presupposes a hierarchy of shared common goods delivered by the moral tradition. Nevertheless, an omission in her perspective is that it

gives relatively little attention to the importance of a life-course perspective, and shows little sensitivity for the relation between our virtuous character disposition and the narrative coherence of our lives and identities. A satisfactory conception of virtue in the context of this study would do well to retain these two aspects from the views of Aristotle and MacIntyre, which are especially relevant from the perspective of aging, yet combine them with the realistic and pluralistic orientation of Swanton's account.

8.4 Virtue in the context of aging

Throughout this chapter, I have repeatedly suggested that a virtue-ethical perspective has a specific relevance in the context of aging, given its focus on a life-encompassing process of self-realization and the openings it offers for integrating existential vulnerability in our lives in a meaningful way. Surprisingly, however, gerontological research applying the language of virtue to aging well, seems relatively scarce. I will focus on three examples here. The first is a chapter by May (1986) in the volume *What does it mean to grow old? Reflections from the humanities* (Cole & Gadow, 1986). The second is a chapter by Ruddick (1999) in the volume *Mother time. Women, aging and ethics* (Walker, 1999). The third example is the quite extensive body of *wisdom-literature* in gerontology. Although not explicitly focused on virtue, this field of research can also be interpreted as congenial to the virtue-ethical discourse.

1. May (1986) discusses the virtues and vices of the elderly. He argues that older people should be taken seriously as full members of the community, which implies that they should also be treated as moral beings whose behavior may be approved or reproached in a moral sense. Although this may seem like an obvious statement, it is not. Particularly in the context of professional care, where there is an inevitable power imbalance between professionals and clients, all too often older people are consigned to the status of a passive recipient of caring services, rather than as full-fledged moral agents with an active responsibility for their own lives. This has an alienating effect, for the power imbalance between professionals and clients is not easily redressed, and can even be reinforced by what May calls 'the professional ethical ideal of philanthropy' (p. 45).
   Instead of trying to secure the moral status and dignity of the elderly by proclaiming the importance of respecting their autonomy, ethicists and gerontologists should focus on questions of character and virtue instead, according to May. His argument for this is similar to the one about existential vulnerability advanced above; precisely because the elderly face 'the ordeals of sickness [...] infirmity, and fading powers' (p. 49), they need strength of

character to endure them. Relevant virtues discussed by May include courage, patience, simplicity, benignity, integrity, wisdom, and finally, hilarity. The last mentioned virtue may sound odd and a little out of place given the 'ordeals' mentioned earlier, but describes a type of 'humored detachment' that can emerge in people who have been through a lot. May emphasizes, however, that none of these virtues develop automatically in the process of aging or are exclusive for elderly. Rather, they require perseverance and often struggle. But the effort of acquiring the virtues pays off because it enables people to address life's challenges, not as instrumental problems to be managed, but as existential events to be integrated in their life narratives.

2. Ruddick (1999) raises the question which virtues may be of relevance in the context of aging. This question could elicit two kinds of answers: it could be argued that some "classical", general (Aristotelian) virtues, such as temperance, courage, friendship, or practical wisdom, obtain a specific interpretation or substance in later life; or it could be argued that there are some special virtues that acquire relevance particularly in the context of aging. Ruddick argues in favor of the second option.

The concept of virtue that Ruddick uses is rather inexplicit. She only states that her conception of virtues is *relational*. This qualification implies that virtues are not seen as individual character dispositions, but believed to emerge from relations between interdependent and principally vulnerable people. Ruddick's view is based upon feminist insights about the fundamental importance of care relationships – such as those between mother and child – in human life. It remains unclear, however, how this view relates to the assumptions about individual self-realization and maturation that underlie most traditional conceptualizations of virtue ethics.

Ruddick highlights two examples of virtues that she perceives as particularly valuable from an aging perspective. The first is the capacity to *forgive and let go* of bitterness and regret, which she connects to the importance of "life review" and the Eriksonian goal of ego-integrity, or acceptance of how one's life has turned out. The second is the capacity for what she calls *wise independence*. This includes both upholding one's self-directing capacities and acknowledging one's limitations in this regard, and being able to accept needed assistance with an attitude of graciousness. Apart from these two virtues, Ruddick also mentions curiosity, capacity for pleasure and delight, concern for others, (self-)acceptance, appreciation, hopefulness and "energetic anger" as virtues that have a special or heightened importance for aging individuals. Importantly, Ruddick refutes the idea that it is overly demanding to expect virtuousness from older people. She does recognize, however, that virtues of older people commonly valued by others, such as productivity, independence or self-sufficiency, mirror the problematically stereotypical and ageist understandings of later life, also discussed in the

context of cultural narratives in §3.3.4. Ascribing these virtues to later life may have detrimental consequences for aging people, forcing them into a framework of productivity, health and activity that is burdensome for those unable to live up to its standards.

Ruddick also denies that age-related deterioration, a reality for many older people, makes it problematic to speak about virtues in the context of aging. While severe mental retardation can impede the capacities that make exercising virtue possible, this is only an expression of a vulnerability that is intrinsic to the human condition as such. The risk of diminished capacities thus threatens potentially *all* agents striving for virtue, not only older people. Moreover, mental incapacity connected with the aging process usually only endangers the efforts to exercise virtue slowly and gradually, which still makes it possible to speak of virtues in the context of aging.

3. Given the fact that the Aristotelian virtue-ethical tradition already saw (practical) wisdom as one of the most predominant virtues, it seems logical to present wisdom studies in gerontology as an application of virtue-ethical thought to the domain of aging. This field of study draws on a long history of ideas that associates wisdom specifically with later life. The connection between wisdom and old age occurs in different cultural, philosophical and religious traditions throughout the world. A notable example voicing this standpoint in the Western philosophical tradition is Cicero's *De Senectute* (1467/2002). However, it is generally agreed that aging (reaching a higher chronological age) as such does not provide any guarantees for wisdom. As Aristotle argued with regard to virtue, old age and in particular the life experience accompanying it should be seen as a necessary, but by no means a sufficient condition of wisdom.

Definitions of what wisdom amounts to are either based on (historical) exemplary figures that in most people's opinion could be considered wise, such as Jesus or Buddha, or extracted from a variety of wisdom traditions existing in human history, or constructed by probing people's opinion on what wise conduct would be in a particular (hypothetical) situation. Characteristics associated with wisdom that most conceptualizations have in common include, for instance, the capacity for tolerance, the capacity to accept uncertainty, the capacity for empathy and compassion towards one's fellow (human) beings, and the desire to transcend self-interest and contribute to the common good (Edmondson, 2015). These characteristics lend themselves easily to interpretation in virtue-ethical terms, since many of them are derived from classic virtue-ethical traditions like the Aristotelian. Much of contemporary wisdom research in gerontology has been done from a psychological perspective, for instance, by Baltes and his colleagues in the *Berlin Wisdom Project* (Baltes, 1991; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes et al., 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), or by Ardelt (1997, 2003, 2011) who developed

a three-dimensional wisdom scale consisting of cognitive, reflective and affective dimensions of wisdom. Generally speaking, these studies see wisdom as a personality characteristic rather than something that might vary from one context to the next. Wisdom is also treated as an ideal-type that in its full form is not expected to occur very frequently in practice. The studies by Baltes, Ardelt and their colleagues seem predominantly oriented towards measuring the psychological characteristics that individuals possess or may develop throughout life, which enable them to act in a manner that is considered wise. It is an important merit of the discussed approaches that they emphasize wisdom as a capacity that need not diminish with age, and may in fact even increase. However, the focus in psychological approaches to wisdom lies predominantly on improving the sophistication of measurement instruments, rather than on philosophical reflection about wisdom and its associated virtues.

By contrast, the perspective on wisdom that is presented by Edmondson (2009, 2015) seems to show more congeniality with the philosophical virtue-ethical perspective I have discussed. Edmondson (2015) conceives of wisdom in traditional Aristotelian terms as a set of "interlocking ethical, emotional and social practices, both tacit and explicit, making possible responses to other people, to oneself and to profound problems of human existence; questions without predetermined answers" (p. 91). Edmondson suggests a social understanding of wisdom in which it is not perceived as an individually measurable personality characteristic, but as something that emerges from a social, hermeneutic process in which people share their insights and life experiences to reflect on what would be wise to do in a given situation. Like MacIntyre (1984), she contends that wisdom is something that is embedded in human practices of daily life from which it cannot be isolated. This view has implications for her approach to wisdom research, which does not include measurement scales, but ethnography, observation, and listening to older people's life stories.

Edmondson's (2015) socially embedded conceptualization of wisdom presents it as something modest instead of spectacular, flexible instead of fixed, something that emerges from social interactions in the daily lives of people. Her view of wisdom is practical and dialogical, and strongly focuses on processes of deliberation. Acknowledging this wisdom that many older people have to offer, despite its modesty, could potentially have profound societal, cultural and even political implications for the position of older people. Such recognition could enhance the general status attributed to older people in our society, and give them the opportunity to participate fully as moral agents in the community. In this regard, Edmondson's perspective on wisdom and meaning in later life has much to contribute to the development of moral agency-enhancing cultural counter narratives.

8.5 EVALUATION OF THE DISCUSSED VIRTUE ACCOUNTS

This chapter has discussed the third thread that weaves the fabric of self-realization discourse, namely, virtue. A selection of three different accounts of virtue(-ethics) have been covered. In this section, I evaluate the merits of these different approaches to virtue, to come up with an account that accommodates the reframed view of self-realization advanced by this study. As in the previous two chapters, this study's account of virtue will have to be able to fit the outlines of the view of narrative identity and moral agency on which my suggestion for a reframed account of self-realization relies. As mentioned in §8.2, generally speaking, views of virtue are well-equipped to match the socially embedded, embodied, reflexive and narrative conception of the self that this study has taken as its underlying anthropological framework (§4.2.2; §5.3). As observed in §4.3.2, the concept of virtue is undervalued in late modern self-realization discourse, with its one-sided focus on (problematical interpretations of) autonomy and authenticity. Virtue therefore has a particularly relevant contribution to make in light of my attempt to reframe the late modern understanding of self-realization. In particular, virtue-ethical views are more sensitive than traditional autonomy and authenticity views to the socially embedded nature of human existence. This means that the conceptualization of virtue needs less adaptation on that point to match the perspective of the current study. Further advantages of virtue-ethical thinking for this study's view are its flexibility and context-sensitivity, and its emphasis on a life-course perspective in ethics. A final important point to mention is that virtue-ethical perspectives appear to offer particularly important resources for an account of self-realization that is capable of integrating existential vulnerability in a meaningful way, another requirement I have formulated for the current study's interpretation.

Despite the merits of the virtue-ethical perspective, however, two potential problems with virtue, identified in §8.2, need to be remedied for a satisfactory account of virtue in the context of this study. First, some interpretations of virtue ethics harbor a problematically essentialist, naturalistic and/or objectivist understanding of the purpose of human life and of the (common) good. Second, some accounts of virtue can give rise to conventionalism and traditionalism, whereas the view advanced by this study necessitates a perspective in which the given socio-cultural and moral horizon, the "status quo", can be critically encountered and, if necessary, resisted by moral agents striving for self-realization (see also §7.3.4, §7.5). Let me now evaluate the three selected accounts of virtue for their strengths and weaknesses along the discussed lines.

- Aristotle, it was said in §8.3.1, provides my account of virtue with a valuable starting point, given his focus on moral agents who, embedded and situated in a moral community, strive all their lives towards realizing what, given

their nature, constitutes the best life (*Ethica Nicomachea*). By virtue of its emphasis on the social embedding of moral agents, Aristotle's interpretation of self-realization offers an important argument against the critique that self-realization discourse implies a solipsistic self-absorption and is therefore unable to address moral issues. Aristotle's sensitivity to context is also shown in his emphasis on the right mean that separates the virtues from excesses and defects, which he sees as dependent on the practical circumstances in which the virtue is exercised. Moreover, his virtue ethics clearly has a life-encompassing scope, which as mentioned is important given this study's focus on aging and its narrative conception of identity.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Aristotle to the concept of virtue advanced in this study, however, is his view of how virtues can help us relate to the inevitable existential vulnerability of life. In my reading, what Aristotle suggests is a manner of relating to inevitable existential vulnerability in a way that is different from both denial and rejection (characteristic of age-defying narratives, see §3.3.3) and passive surrender (characteristic of decline narratives, see §3.3.2). "Nobility and greatness of soul" (in other words, virtue) apparently help people to endure adversities with graciousness without losing their soul or (in more modern terms) their character or selfhood. This suggests an opening towards finding a satisfactory way of integrating existential vulnerability in one's life, without compromising or having to give up on self-realization: namely, that developing and maintaining relevant virtues, as a way of self-realization, can be of assistance in this regard.

What distances Aristotle's virtue account from the view of virtue I am envisioning is of course his premodern metaphysical worldview, which means that the application of his views suffers from the first problem that I have identified above. He assumes that self-realization takes place in a cosmically ordered world, in which human beings have their naturally predefined place that defines the best possible life or highest moral purpose for them. An account of virtue presupposing such a naturalistic and pre-given conception of the good seems a poor match with the reality of the late modern world. After all, in late modern circumstances, what is considered good has become individualized. Moreover, people live in a situation of moral pluralism where the good has to be constantly intersubjectively negotiated, without a self-evident authoritative meaning-framework or moral tradition to fall back on (see §2.3.2). A satisfactory conceptualization of virtue in the context of this study will have to be able to take these points into account, but Aristotle obviously cannot assist us here.

- MacIntyre's (1984) view, not surprisingly given his intention to revive Aristotelian ethics in a modern context, shares many of the valuable characteristics of Aristotle's account. MacIntyre's rejection of the dominant mod-

ern view that presents individuals as the autonomous, self-determining sculptors of their own lives shows close similarities with my own critique against such an atomistic self-concept (see §2.5). By acknowledging the importance of social, contextual and historical embedding of the individual, MacIntyre's view seems to be concordant with the perception of identity that this study advances (see §4.2.2, §5.2, §5.3).

Furthermore, for my purposes, MacIntyre's emphasis on the narrative unity of a life provides a particularly useful angle to interpret the development of virtues. By focusing on the narrative coherence of a life, which he sees as a requirement for the development and exercise of virtues, MacIntyre's view seems a natural match with a view of aging as a lived experience through time (Baars, 2012a). Though his interpretation of narrative integration seems problematically oriented towards culmination, a view I would like to nuance (see §5.2.3), his focus on the relation between the identity-constituting and meaning-making function of narrative on the one hand, and virtue on the other, remains noteworthy. Also, MacIntyre's (1984) notion of a practice, although too complex to do justice to in my brief discussion of his view, has important merits for this study's purposes. His concept of practice in particular underscores that self-realization, as was also argued in §4.2.3, should be situated in the context of concrete human activities, which together form a meaningful framework that suggests which good to strive for in life.

Despite these strengths, however, MacIntyre's account suffers from both general problems that were identified above, which suggests that what this study's conceptualization of virtue may retain from his view needs to be complemented with other insights. First, with regard to the issue of essentialism/naturalism/objectivism, MacIntyre's idea of an intrinsic common good to be strived for in virtuous practices raises questions. For MacIntyre, like Aristotle, what constitutes a good is to a large extent *given* by something that transcends the individual. Granted, MacIntyre substitutes Aristotle's premodern idea of a cosmic order of the universe with the more modern idea of the moral tradition as the primary provider of the good. However, in an era that celebrates autonomy and authenticity as guiding moral values, a view of virtue that makes the (common) good dependent on a given cosmic order or tradition, seems to become increasingly problematic. Such a view seems to leave insufficient room for the good to be defined on the basis of individual aspirations and self-appropriated value orientations. The latter view, however, is an important premise underlying the autonomy and authenticity threads I have discussed in chapter 6 and 7. This study's envisioned account of virtue should be able to acknowledge the value of this premise. However, MacIntyre perceives individualism and individualization primarily as a danger to the moral outlook and social cohesion

of society, not as something that could also potentially be valuable. In this sense, his account of virtue ethics is unsatisfactory for my interpretation of self-realization, since the latter also wants to do justice to the intuitions of the autonomy and authenticity threads (see chapters 6 & 7).

One might raise the objection that MacIntyre's notion of a moral tradition as the provider of the good can also be perceived in intersubjective rather than objectivistic terms. This view would imply that moral agents engage in constant deliberation and dialogue about what constitutes the good for them. Although this interpretation is certainly more in sync with the view advanced in this study, and MacIntyre's view in principle does not rule out such an interpretation, in the end his account still remains problematically prone to moral monism instead of moral pluralism. There is another possible counterargument to my charge that MacIntyre's view does not acknowledge the valuable intuitions of the autonomy and authenticity threads: namely, that MacIntyre's critique seemingly only targets the essentialist, narcissistic version of authenticity that has been rejected in this study (see §7.2; §7.5). But even when authentic personhood is conceived as a social and moral practice (as this study suggests, see §5.3.2 and §7.5) it seems hard to combine with MacIntyre's view that only the moral tradition, and not the individual as well, can be the source of moral good(s).

The second general problem concerns the charge of conformism or traditionalism. Because of his emphasis on the formative role of moral tradition, MacIntyre's view shows a lack of attention to the possible necessity of challenging or transforming the status quo of one's existing socio-cultural context. For this reason, the value of resistance against oppressive forms of practices that constitute our social identities, which is emphasized in Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory about cultural (counter) narratives (see §3.2), is difficult to combine with the virtue account that MacIntyre (1984) suggests. My critique of MacIntyre's position in this sense echoes the one against C. Taylor's (1991) view of authenticity (see §7.3.3; §7.5), which also seems to underestimate the dangers of conformism.

- Compared to Aristotle (*Ethica Nicomachea*) and MacIntyre (1984), Swanton's (2003) view of virtue seems to offer a more useful point of departure when it comes to escaping the problems of essentialist, naturalistic and/or objectivistic interpretations of the good. Admittedly, Swanton develops a rather dense and sophisticated theoretical argument, which makes it difficult to assess the concrete consequences of her view in practical situations. Nevertheless, her argument that a viable conceptualization of virtue can be combined with a plurality of goods conveniently suggests that virtue need not be in conflict with purposes of self-realization that are suggested by autonomy and authenticity. For example, her view lays a strong emphasis on the basic importance of self-love for virtue, which can accommodate the

Nietzschean value of self-affirmation ascribed to authenticity (see §7.3.2). Also, the fact that in her view this self-love should always be interpreted in conjunction with an equally valued concern for the other (called "universal love" by Swanton), supports my reflections about the necessity of self-constancy as a weak substantive criterion for autonomy (see §6.6). Swanton's sensitivity to other goods and values, including those underlying authenticity and autonomy discourses, makes her view more favorable in comparison to MacIntyre's, whose conceptualization of virtue seems inimical to these discourses. Modeling my conceptualization of virtue on the pluralistic outline advanced by Swanton should therefore make it easier to arrive at a view of self-realization in which the threads of autonomy, authenticity and virtue all occupy an equally valued place.

As seen in §8.3.3, another advantage of Swanton's pluralism is that her recognition of a variety of goods besides optimal human flourishing enables us to see how lives that, due to confrontation with existential vulnerability, are not (currently) flourishing may still be called good or virtuous. This is an important merit because it suggests the possibility of an account of self-realization in which existential vulnerability is recognized and integrated as part of a good life. It also implies that Swanton's view could be particularly relevant when applied to aging. Her focus on a diversity of goods opens the possibility that an old age that is not "successful" in the conventional way may nevertheless be meaningful or admirable. In this sense, applying her ideas to the conceptualization of virtue and self-realization helps strengthen the critique against age-defying cultural narratives with their superficial and one-sided notion of success in aging (see §3.3.3).

Regarding the issue of integrating existential vulnerability, Swanton's view has another (related) merit, which she shares with Aristotle. This is the fact that the realism and modesty of her view enables a great sensitivity for the uncontrollable contingencies and existential vulnerability we are confronted with in life. As discussed, she argues that virtue implies constantly refining our ability to respond in the most fitting manner to the demands of a given situation. This feature of her view is valuable because it suggests that a virtuous middle road can be found between the options of passive surrender to existential vulnerability (suggested by decline narratives) and denial or rejection of existential vulnerability (implied by age-defying narratives). The emphasis on responsiveness in Swanton's account of virtue may thus be a useful entry to a view of self-realization that enables a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability.

When it comes to the problem of conformism, Swanton's account remains too theoretical and abstract to properly judge her position in this regard. What seems important though, is her emphasis on how virtue-ethical self-realization can never solely be about the self and its inner states. Her

view implies, in my interpretation, that we are inevitably engaged in a social practice with others. This embedding urges us to involve ourselves in a constant process of negotiation between demands of the self and demands of the world. What Swanton (2003) therefore advocates is a virtue-ethical form of "dialogic" ethics (p. 266), where constant deliberation among agents is required to decide how the demands of a situation are most virtuously met. It seems to me that such a dialogic ethics principally includes the possibility of conflict and resistance, which would provide at least some safeguard against the dangers of conformism and traditionalism.

Despite the valuable resources that Swanton's view offers for modeling my suggested conceptualization of virtue, it should be emphasized that compared to Aristotle and MacIntyre her view lacks the sensitivity for narrativity and life-course temporality that is highly important from the perspective of aging. In particular, it remains unclear how she perceives the development of virtues over time, which is an important aspect for my purposes, since I have presented self-realization as a lifelong process of moral self-development.

8.6 Conclusion: Towards virtue as attitudinal concretization of moral agency

After evaluating the merits and limits of the accounts of virtue, the time has now come to reflect on which conceptualization of virtue would be most suited to the reframed understanding of self-realization and its constitutive concepts developed in this study. Based on what has been discussed so far, the account of virtue that I propose should have at least the following characteristics:

- The understanding of virtue should retain the premise that moral agents are *socially embedded*, which is shared by all discussed accounts of virtue. This view also implies that the self-realization of moral agents is not seen as a self-centered, narcissistic undertaking but as a process shared with others and taking place in the context of social practices.
- The account should emphasize the fact that virtuous living implies a life-long process of moral self-development, that acquires guidance from the value orientation underlying the narrative of a human life (as MacIntyre (1984) points out) and requires continuous attention and maintenance through practice (as Aristotle (*Ethica Nicomachea*) underscores). Virtue in its ideal-typical form is thus regarded in terms of a lifelong process of maturation and acquiring (practical) wisdom.
- It should offer room for a plurality of goods that are acknowledged as relevant for a virtuous, i.e., good life, including those associated with the auton-

omy and authenticity threads of this study's conceptualization of self-realization. Monistic and perfectionist accounts of virtue should be replaced by a pluralistic and realistic interpretation, for which Swanton's (2003) approach offers welcome theoretical backing.

- The account should perceive virtue in a responsive manner (inspired by Swanton), which implies that self-realization should be conceived as a process of constantly refining our way of responding to the demands confronted in a situation. Virtue is then interpreted in terms of finding the right attitude towards whatever may cross one's path, including contingencies and instances of existential vulnerability.
- It should not answer the question of what is right or good by the application of any naturally given or objective standard. Instead, what is right or good should be context-dependent, and perceived as constantly negotiated and reflected upon in a hermeneutic, dialogical process. This hermeneutic process should either take place between moral agents or through self-reflection and internal dialogue within moral agents themselves.
- The understanding of virtue should acknowledge the moral value of individuality, while remaining aware of the fact that this individual is socially embedded. By insisting on the moral primacy of the individual, the deeper roots of the liberal spirit that gave rise to modern interpretations of self-realization are given their proper acknowledgment. At the same time, a virtue interpretation that acknowledges the moral value of individuality still remains able to criticize – in line with MacIntyre (1984) – liberalism's modern aberrations.
  - Integrating the moral value of individuality in this suggested view of virtue includes valuing the particularity and uniqueness of each moral agent and their life story, recognizing and respecting their room for self-realization, and their authentically appropriated value orientation, which ideally finds its concrete expression in autonomous action.
  - Acknowledging the moral value of individuality also implies taking into account that the relation between the individual moral agent and their socio-cultural context may be full of tension. In the view this study suggests, a virtuous life should include the possibility of distancing oneself from one's social embedding, of criticizing or rejecting the status quo of a given moral tradition and emancipating oneself from one's context by challenging the rules and norms of one's moral community.

What image of virtue can be extracted from the outlines of this envisioned view summed up above? It becomes clear that virtue, in the context of my reframed conceptualization of self-realization, is best regarded as the attitude, or set of attitudes, that people ideally develop throughout their lives which helps them realize the purpose I have defined for self-realization: the optimal fulfillment

of our potential for moral agency, i.e., the enactment of our moral identity in practice. It thus seems most viable to advance an account of virtue as the *concretization in practical attitudes of our striving for moral agency*; the dispositions we develop to help us realize a good life, with and for others, in accordance with our highest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community. Developing virtuousness would then be seen as a process creating strong and resilient moral agents, able to confront the complexity and uncertainty of life, instead of being perplexed and impotent in the face of it.

What could such a conceptualization of virtue mean for aging? How could it contribute to the narratives of becoming advanced in this study? It is tempting, perhaps, to try to formulate a set of later-life virtues: an orderly catalogue of attitudes that one should develop throughout life in order to increase one's chances for aging well. It would not even be all too hard to suggest candidate virtues for such a catalogue, as Ruddick (1999) has attempted to do for instance (see §8.4). Practical wisdom would probably score high for many people (including myself) as a virtue relevant for later life, as would loving self-acceptance, generativity, patience, equanimity, vital involvement, et cetera. However, the conception of virtue as the attitudinal concretization of moral agency, as defended in this study, should make us hesitant to formulate any such catalogue. The emphasis on responsiveness and pluralism that my account draws from Swanton (2003) implies that what is virtuous is ultimately decided in the context of a concrete situation that calls for our appropriate response. What the relevant virtues for later life are, cannot be decided by drawing up a catalogue, for without the context of a specific life situation to which an individual moral agent should respond, such a catalogue would always remain somewhat arbitrary. Defending a dialogic, hermeneutic form of virtue ethics, wherein what constitutes the good is constantly negotiated in an intersubjective process of deliberation, implies that the virtues that contribute to the practice of aging well in a given situation can only be decided by sensitively probing the characteristics of *that* person and *that* situation. Thus, how the suggested account of virtue as the attitudinal concretization of moral agency could work out can only be clarified by illustrative case examples, in full awareness that other case examples could emphasize other virtues, and that no definitive set of virtues for later life can be settled upon. Let me conclude with one such case example.

Imagine a woman who has struggled with the societal norms of feminine appearance all her life. Her mother taught her that taking good care of one's appearance was a sign of self-respect. As an adolescent, she was an introvert and insecure about her looks. She would always try to adapt as much as possible to how her peers dressed, spending a lot on clothes and make-up. During college, this pattern continued, although she grew increasingly uneasy about it, a feeling she could not put into words at that time however. She fell in love with a young man and after some time, they got married and started a family. When

her children grew older she went to nursing school and started working as a nurse. Throughout adulthood, she kept putting great efforts into managing her physical appearance, which ensured her feeling of self-worth. At the same time, she developed a growing interest in feminism, which made her critical about the societal norms prescribing women to subject themselves to the dictates of the "male gaze". In her work, she decided to specialize on adolescent girls with eating disorders, whom she saw suffering from the pressures of societal beauty ideals. Under the influence of her engagement with feminist groups, she developed an increasing desire to devote less attention to her appearance and value herself (and be valued by others) for her other qualities. Yet in her relationship with her husband, she could not bring herself to lower her efforts regarding her looks. This caused conflicting feelings within herself that she found difficult to share with her husband or friends. When physical signs of senescence started to appear – wrinkles, spots, dry skin – these were hard for her to accept, even though she reproached herself for her own disgust of them. One day, she discovered a new spot on her skin, which proved to be a melanoma. Due to the medical treatments that followed, she developed severe facial neuralgia. Because of the pain, she could no longer cover up stains and wrinkles with facial creams and make-up. This initially made her feel uneasy and ashamed, but when she realized that other people did not approach her differently for it, she gradually learned to accept the situation, joke about it and relativize her life-long preoccupation with beauty products. Interestingly, her relationship with her husband also changed following her illness. They were able to exchange thoughts and feelings that were of deep importance for them, which they had never spoken about before. She felt a deeper connection with her spouse than she had in many years.

From my perspective, this story can be seen as the enactment of a narrative of becoming at the level of an individual life, in which the three threads of self-realization as (re-)conceptualized in this study – individuating autonomy, authenticity as a social and moral practice, and virtue as the attitudinal concretization of the striving for moral agency - can all be detected. We encounter a woman who throughout life, in interaction with her social surroundings, strove to live in accordance with what she has gradually appropriated as valuable (a condition for both individuating autonomy and authenticity as a social/moral practice). Her value-horizon was in continuous development, however, and in each new life phase, context and situation, she had to navigate the demands placed upon her anew and find the best way to respond (which calls for virtue as the attitudinal concretization of moral agency). She encountered difficult conflicts between the good she endorsed (a well-cared for physical appearance as a sign of self-respect, emancipation and freedom from oppressive male norms, care for the victims of societal norms in her work with anorexic girls, et cetera.). The socio-cultural context in which her life was situated both restricted her

moral self-development (for instance, through the norms of beauty she found it difficult to withdraw herself from) and enabled it (for instance, through the insights and reflections evoked by her work and her engagement in feminist groups). As a result of the existential vulnerability she encountered in her illness, she was stimulated to further explore what was of true importance for her, which led to an unexpected but pleasant transformation of her relationship with her husband and her friends.

Interpreted from the virtue-ethical perspective elaborated in this chapter, the crucial element of this story is how her striving to live a good life, in accordance with the aspirations and value orientations she gradually appropriated, depended on the disposition she developed in responding to what she was confronted with. In other words, what was crucially important for her living a good life with and for others was her attitude, towards herself, towards her (social) environment, and towards the broader socio-cultural context in which she lived. Inasmuch as she succeeded in her striving for self-realization, this occurred as a result of practicing and thereby constantly further developing virtues like self-knowledge, loving self-acceptance, attunement with others, assertiveness, independent thinking, mildness, humor, the ability to put things in perspective, et cetera. These virtues enabled a lifelong process of becoming herself.

To conclude my reflections in this chapter, let me recall that the initial purpose of creating a reframed interpretation of self-realization was to provide a viable resource that could support the creation of more satisfactory cultural narratives about later life. These cultural counter narratives are supposed to enhance people's moral agency (see §3.2.4). In order to do so, it is important that older people are ascribed with the status of full moral personhood, so that they will be given the opportunity to participate as full and equal members of our society or community instead of estranged bystanders, as Honneth's (2008) theory about reification helped to underscore (see §3.2.3). Realizing this participation is conditional on our perceiving older people as members of our moral community. This, however, is complicated by problematic cultural master narratives about later life that result in a dynamics of "othering", placing older people outside the realm of "normal" adulthood (see §3.3.4). The focus of virtue ethics on the interplay between the self and the world conveniently emphasizes the mutual interdependence of individuals in creating and maintaining a moral community. Incorporating older people as full members in such a community will greatly enhance their ability to realize their potential for virtue. It is my contention that this will not only benefit the lives and experiences of meaningfulness of the older people themselves, but also help society to make better use of the now often underused potentials older people have to offer.

This relevance of the virtue-ethical thread of self-realization discourse in the context of this study is beautifully illustrated by the following quote from

Agich (2003), whose phenomenological account of autonomy was discussed in §6.4.2. He states: "If frail or incapacitated elders appear powerless, they can be empowered precisely by acknowledging them as responsible persons. Taking elders seriously as members of the moral community of persons entails understanding their obligations and responsibilities as well as respecting their rights. Failure to criticize elders may subtly remove them from the realm of persons; unlike very young children who are not usually held accountable for their actions, elders are morally mature. To respect elders as moral agents, then, requires that we acknowledge and support the virtues and character traits appropriate to being old. Virtues involve not only the habits that allow us effectively to exercise our agency in the world, but comprise the strengths that grow out of adversities and sustain us through them" (Agich, 2003, p. 79).

In sum, in the attempt at remedying the shortcomings of the late modern self-realization discourse, and reframing this discourse so that it may serve as a valuable resource for much-needed moral agency-enhancing cultural counter narratives about later life, I contend that we would do well to integrate insights from the virtue-ethical discourse. The conceptualization of virtue I have suggested is able to contribute to both required conditions I formulated for such narratives: it lays strong emphasis on the potential for growth and maturation throughout life, and it suggests a viable way of dealing with existential vulnerability without succumbing to passive surrender or denial and rejection.