

## PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL VIRTUES AND PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Roberta De Monticelli, in her contributions to an epistemology of personal knowledge, writes: "knowing ourselves is more than grasping a reality; it is accepting it in order to make it effective, to *make it living*"<sup>1</sup>

I believe that practising or living social virtues contributes to a deeper knowledge of self and the other. The conditions and factors that promote or inhibit social virtues, promote or inhibit personal knowledge. This connection may seem obvious with sincerity or trust, but not evident with other social virtues, like gratitude and wonder.

In the first part of my talk, I will illustrate my research into social virtues, particularly into the dynamics of gratitude and wonder. In the second part I will try to connect social virtues and personal knowledge with reference to the theoretical frame of Michail Bachtin and Roberta De Monticelli.

### PHENOMENOLOGY AND DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL VIRTUES

In human sciences, particularly in depth psychology, scientists have preferred to investigate the 'shadow' of man (in the sense of Jung): inferiority, unacceptable impulses, shameful actions.

However, if we want to understand the whole man, we must investigate not only the negative but also the positive qualities of personality and the constructive factors which make for 'goodness' or 'greatness' in man. In this theoretical frame, my research over the last decade has been centered on social events of everyday life: commitment, gratitude, wonder, forgiveness, trust, sincerity. I have defined these events 'social virtues' although the term 'virtue' is not very highly valued in our culture<sup>2</sup>. Each of these virtues was investigated in the "Colloquia on interpretation", which I have organised, since 1979 in the Department of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the University of Macerata<sup>3</sup>. In the Colloquia scholars from many disciplines: philosophy, theology, linguistics, psychology, literature and law take part.

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta de Monticelli, *Personal Identity and Depth of the Person; Mind and Essential Individuality* (manuscripts); *Andrea o dell'individualità essenziale*, In G. Usberti (Ed.), *I modi dell'oggettività, Saggi in onore di Andrea Bonomi*. Bompiani Milano, 2000; *La persona: apparenza e realtà. Testi fenomenologici 1911-1933*, Cortina, Milano 2000.

<sup>2</sup> G. Galli, *Psicologia delle virtù sociali*, Bologna CLUEB 1999; *Psychologie der sozialen Tugenden*, Wien, Böhlau 1999.

<sup>3</sup> G. Galli, (Ed.) *Interpretazione e perdono* (1992); *Interpretazione e gratitudine* (1994); *Interpretazione e meraviglia* (1994); *Interpretazione e sincerità* (1996); *Interpretazione e dedizione* (1998); *Interpretazione e fiducia* (1999), Pisa-Rome IEPI.

The basic unit of my research is the person, not in an empty environment, but in continuous relation to, and interaction with, another person. Consequently, I speak of 'social virtues' as interpersonal events, and not as attributes belonging to a person as a lone subject like those represented in the symbolic pictures of the seventeenth century (Fig.1). My approach is relational, not monopersonal like that of the old phrenology of Gall, where each virtue has its own place in the brain ( Fig. 2 ) or like the genetic theories according to which each virtue has its own gene.<sup>4</sup>

In order to elaborate a phenomenological description of social virtues, I use everyday experience and different literary forms, in accordance with Heider<sup>5</sup>, who believed that these texts "provide a fertile source of understanding interpersonal relations.... The psychologist must, however, translate the propositions of common-sense psychology into a language of more use to scientific investigations".

For the dynamic interpretation of virtues I refer to the field-theory of the German Gestaltpsychology and to psychoanalytical theory. We need the contribution of both schools if we want to discover the factors and conditions which promote virtues or inhibit them. Psychoanalysis, defined by Ricoeur as the 'school of suspicion', started with a pessimistic view of man and can help us to analyse the conflicting factors within man. Gestaltpsychology, which I define as the 'school of respect', has a more optimistic image of man and prefers to investigate the environmental and social conditions which promote virtues.

#### *The field-theory of Gestaltpsychology*

In this school the psychological field is conceived as a whole with two poles: the subject on one side and the object on the other. The structure of the field can have various qualities depending on the type of centering: structure with centering in the ego, or with centering in the object, or co-ordination between the two poles. Wertheimer, a founder of Gestaltpsychology, said:

"In some experimental psychological investigations, the results have indicated that the old principle is wrong, which asserts that all acts of man are centered by the 'ego' (striving for one-side satisfaction of ego interests)"<sup>6</sup>.

In many cases the centering is by the object:

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<sup>4</sup> B. Jordan, *Les imposteurs de la génétique*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> F. Heider, *The psychology of interpersonal relations*, New York, Wiley 1958, Chap. 1.

<sup>6</sup> M. Wertheimer, *Some problems in ethics*, in "Social Research", II (1935), 3, p. 365.

"Although there are many strong forces working against true centering, there is, nevertheless, in human beings a clear desire not to be structurally blind, a desire to centre properly, to do justice to the situation to centre in accordance with the nature of the object, of the structural objective requirements"<sup>7</sup>.

In social virtues the ego-pole becomes smaller and the object-pole increases in importance. This is what happens in the virtue of dedication: to care for a child, to teach a pupil, to treat a patient, to investigate a scientific problem, a person must have a deep sensibility of the requirements that originate in the object-pole and be able to put his own ego to one side. My teacher Wolfgang Metzger has written that dedication is an 'objective care', a 'service', an 'obedience' to the requirements of the situation.

Now I will analyse the virtues of gratitude and wonder.

## THE VIRTUE OF GRATITUDE

### *Gratitude for a benefit*

In accordance with Fritz Heider<sup>8</sup>, an action or a gift can evoke gratitude only if it is perceived as a benefit by the person who receives it. We must thus adopt the point of view of this person and recognise her inner world. Heider says that the meaning of an action depends on various factors: local and total relevance, levels of attribution, power and status and so on. Local and total relevance can, for example, explain the different meaning of criticism: initially, it may be perceived as an attack, but in a global perspective it can be accepted with gratitude as a positive and constructive stimulus. The opposite can concern the help: "A frequent reason given for rejecting help by injured persons was that though assistance may expedite the reaching of an immediate goal, the long range goal of learning to do for one self is blocked". Another reason given by the injured for rejecting help is that accepting help involves being in a position of lowered status. Gratitude is determined by the interpretation or attribution to the intention of the benefactor as Heider demonstrate with many cases.

I will illustrate another basic condition of the psychological field, which promote gratitude.

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<sup>7</sup> M. Wertheimer, *Productive Thinking*, New York, Harper 1945, Chap. VII.

<sup>8</sup> F. Heider, *The psychology of interpersonal relations*, cit. Chap.10.

### *Feeling of interpersonal belongingness*

An example is provided in a letter<sup>9</sup> written to his primary school teacher by Albert Camus when he received the Nobel-prize:

Dear M. Germain,

...When I heard the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without the hand that you held out to the poor boy who I was, without your teaching and example, none of this would have taken place. I will not aggrandise this honour. But it is a chance to tell you, what you have been and still are for me and to assure you that your efforts, your work and the generous heart you put into it are still living within the small pupil, who, despite his age, has not ceased being your grateful disciple.

In this letter, Camus observes his life-cycle as a whole and recognises the role of his mother and his teacher in the building of his personality. He considers his own ego in the correct position in a network of interpersonal relations to which he belong. The Nobel-prize is not an occasion to exalt himself. Camus considers the prize as too great an honour for him; he will share this honour with the persons who have helped him to become who he is. He believe that his fate would have been different "without the care and the generosity" of his teacher. From this global perspective of his life arises Camus' deep gratitude.

### *Gratitude for existence*

I have illustrated gratitude for a benefit, which a person has received from another person. There are different expressions of gratitude, which concern not a benefit, but the pure existence of a person. With regard to this Romano Guardini<sup>10</sup> says: "There are moments when a person feels she must thank another person because she is; not because she has done this or that but because she is here ("da ist")".

We see this type of gratitude, for example, in the letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other courageous persons who conspired against Hitler and were condemned to death<sup>11</sup>. In a letter from his prison (28/12/44) Bonhoeffer wrote to his mother:

"Dear Mama, I want you to know, that I think about you and Papa innumerable times a day and I thank God because you are here ("da seid") for me and the whole family."

This type of letter shows a retrospective of the writer's life, in which the hierarchical organisation of the different regions of life-space is modified: the interpersonal region becomes the centre, and political and social commitment become peripheral. Another important event is the vanishing of the 'obvious' aspects of reality. Hans von

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<sup>9</sup> A. Camus, *Textes établis par Roger Quilliot*, Paris, Gallimard; *Discours de Suède*, commentaires, p.1894.

<sup>10</sup> R. Guardini, *Tugenden*, Würzburg, Werkbund-Verlag 1967 (my translation).

Dohnany, from the same prison, wrote to his wife (18/2/45): "I have understood the value of many obvious things only when these have been taken away from me".

Reality purified from the 'obvious', can now be seen from another perspective: with the eye of "wondering gratitude".

*Inhibiting factors of gratitude: pride and envy.*

The case of pride is well illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luk.18,9-14 )<sup>12</sup>:

Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get".

The prayer of gratitude of the Pharisee is not accepted by God because "he prides himself on being virtuous and despises everyone else". The psychological field of the Pharisee is centred on his ego which he considers perfect; at the same time interpersonal relations vanish.

Another inhibitor of gratitude, envy, was investigated by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein<sup>13</sup>. She describes an example observed during psychotherapy.

For instance: the analyst has just given an interpretation which brought the patient relief and produced a change of mood from despair to hope and trust. With some patients, or with the same patient at other times, this helpful interpretation may soon become the object of destructive criticism....The envious patient grudges the analyst the success of his work;.... it is characteristic of envy that it implies robbing the object of what it possesses, and spoiling it ..

Real conviction, as we often see in less envious patients, implies gratitude for a gift received... Melanie Klein suggests the psychoanalytical hypothesis of 'transference' as the explanation of these events.<sup>14</sup>

*THE VIRTUE OF WONDER*

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<sup>11</sup> E. Bethge, R. Bethge (Ed), *Letzte briefe im Widerstand*, Kaiser, Guetersloh, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible*, London 1966.

<sup>13</sup> M. Klein, *Envy and gratitude*, in Writings of Melanie Klein 1946-1963, p. 183-184 ,187-189.

<sup>14</sup> In the transference we discover the root of envy if we trace back the emotional situations we encounter in earlier stages down to primary one....Gratitude is rooted in the emotions and attitudes that arise in the earliest stage of infancy, when for the baby the mother is the one and only object...A full gratification at the breast means that the infant feels he has received from his loved object a unique gift which he wants to keep. This is the basis of gratitude."

Wonder is traditionally defined as arising from the perception of an unusual and unexpected object. However wonder can be defined as a virtue if we consider it as the effect of an appropriate attitude to reality, particularly to the reality of the 'other'.

*Wonder revealed to the simple*

To introduce this concept, we can refer to modern poets and dramatists. In his ninth Elegy the poet Rilke says:

...Praise this world to the Angel, not the untellable: you  
can't impress him with the splendour you've felt; in the cosmos  
where he more feelingly feels you're only a novice. So show him  
some simple thing, refashioned by age after age,  
till it lives in our hands and eyes as a part of ourselves.  
Tell him things. He'll stand more astonished: as you did  
beside the roper in Rome or the potter in Egypt.

In these texts we can find the echo of Jesus' words when he exclaims (Lc 10,21):

"I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children."

The attitude of the simple can be defined "docta ignorantia", the concept coined by Augustine and later elaborated by Nicholas of Cusa.

Wim Wenders, in his film "Wings of Desire", extends wonder from things to people. When one of the two angels, the protagonists of the film, decides to become human, he says to his companion: "to look is not to look from up to down, but look at eye level .." He means that he is giving up his superiority, his all-seeing and all-knowing. After this decision, reality changes: he begins to see with wonder the colour of things and perceive their smell and flavour and, after meeting the woman he loves, he can finally say:

"Tonight I have learned wonder... only the wonder of us two, the wonder of a man and a woman made me become a man. Now I know what no angel knows"

*Wonder and respect for the mystery of human beings*

Max Frisch in his diaries (1946- 1949)<sup>15</sup>, written at the same time as he wrote the tragedy "Andorra", focuses on the conditions of love and wonder. The tragic events of this piece concern a young man who was labelled as Jewish by the people of his town and, on the basis of this stereotype, was condemned to death. As a contrast to the atmosphere of hatred in Andorra, Frisch writes:

"Love liberates from all images... The biblical commandment (Dt 5,8): 'You shall not make yourself an image of God', could be said of the divine, which lives in each man, and which is full of mystery and is

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<sup>15</sup> Max Frisch, *Tagebücher 1946-1949*, Frankfurt/Main. Suhrkamp (my translation).

unknowable...The wonder of love is based on our willingness to become involved in the dynamics of the living and to follow a person in all his possible developments".

Wonder arises from the renouncing the claim to total knowledge of the 'other'. Love and wonder vanish when we make an image of the other:

"When we believe we know the other, love ends.. we are tired of putting up with the mystery of man, the exciting enigma that man is forever...stereotypical images of friends, parents and teachers weigh on us like an ancient oracle...

### *Wonder and gratitude*

Wonder and gratitude, particularly the gratitude for existence, show a mutual influence and appear frequently together. This is expressed in its purest form in the "Canticum Fratris Solis" by St. Francis of Assisi. In this song St. Francis praises, glorifies and thanks God because He is and thanks Him for all the wonders of creation ("laudate e benedite mi Signore e ringraziate e serviteli cun grande umilitate")<sup>16</sup>.

In the psychological field of St. Francis, his ego remains in obscurity and, in the centre, is God, the creator, surrounded by all his creatures.

The same field-structure can be find in the interpersonal love when a person contemplate the other without the need to posses him.

I move on to the second and last part of my talk.

## DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL VIRTUES AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

Analysing the dynamics of gratitude and wonder, we have found factors which promote or inhibit these virtues. I hope to demonstrate that the same factors promote or inhibit personal knowledge.

### *Gratitude and personal knowledge*

Gratitude requires a sense of belonging, of seeing oneself in a correct place within human relations. From this standpoint the individual can know himself and know others in the roles they play and the qualities they posses. For example Camus knows his own personality has been built thanks to the generosity of his teacher and the care of his mother.

When the obvious aspects of reality disappear, the network of interpersonal relations becomes wider and the individual can see himself from the perspective of a

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<sup>16</sup> G. Pozzi, *La gratitudine nel lessico di san Francesco*, in G. Galli (Ed.) *Interpretazione e gratitudine*, cit.

creature who is near to others and feels gratitude for his own existence and for the existence of those who have dedicated attention to him. William James emphasises the importance of interpersonal attention when he says: "no more fiendish punishment could be devised as to be unworthy of attention at all."

In the cases of pride and envy personal knowledge becomes distorted.

Pride, an inhibiting factor of gratitude, inhibits a correct knowledge of self and the other because the ego of the individual becomes inflated, the other becomes depressed and interpersonal relations diminish.

With envy, another inhibitor of gratitude, the image of the other becomes even more depressed because envy grudges and spoils the attributes of the other and so the individual avoids the perception of his own inferiority.

### *Wonder and personal knowledge*

Poets and dramatists, like Rilke and Frisch, tell us that wonder requires an appropriate attitude, the attitude of the simple, who renounce the claim to total knowledge of the other, who refuse to set the other in a fixed form or image. This attitude can be defined "docta ignorantia". We must rather respect the mystery of the other and be willing to follow him in all his possible developments.

How can we know the other without make images of him? Pirandello expresses this problem in the preface to his *Six characters in search of an author*: "...a sufferance of my spirit is the tragic conflict between life which continuous moves and changes and the form that fixes it immutable". Form, he says, that can become a "prison" or a "funeral epigraph" for the person.

I will try to bring these insights into the epistemology of personal knowledge with reference to the work of Michail Bachtin and Roberta De Monticelli.

### *Michail Bachtin*

Bachtin, in his notes on *Methodology for the Human Sciences*<sup>17</sup>, writes:

Any object of knowledge (including man) can be perceived and cognised as a thing ( monologic form of knowledge). But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be *dialogic*.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Bachtin, *K metodologij gumanitarnych nauk*, in "Kontekst", Moskva 1975.



In the human sciences precision is surmounting the otherness of the other without transforming him into purely one's own...Understanding is the transformation of the other's into "one's own-another's" (svojo-cužoje).

How can we interpret Bachtin's expression "one's own-another's"? Knowledge of the other is inevitably influenced by the conceptual and linguistic parameters of the cognising person. If we try to know our own parameters, we respect, as far as possible, the 'otherness' of the other. The end product of this process is Bachtin's "one's own-another's".

Bachtin believes that personal knowledge is bottomless, inexhaustible like the meaning of a text, but through dialogue it can become deeper, it means "reaching digging down to the creative nucleus of the personality". In order to participate in dialogue, the cognising person must adopt an appropriate attitude, that of 'humility' and 'devotion', in order to meet the other and allow him to overcome his feelings and fear of revealing himself. Bachtin concludes that:

The ineffable centre of the soul can be reflected only in the mirror of total sympathy (socuvstvie).<sup>18</sup>

With reference to the field theory we can say that Bachtin's "one's own-another's" shows good co-ordination between the two poles of the field: ego and object.

I would argue that there is a connection between Bachtin's "one's own-another's" and the approach of the hermeneutic who says that is impossible to leave the hermeneutic circle or our own preconceptions towards the other, but it is possible and useful to know what these preconceptions are.

I find another connection with the psychoanalytical concept of 'transference'. Freud says that transference concerns every interpersonal relation and writes<sup>19</sup>:

Knowledge of the other after childhood must take on a sort of emotional inheritance and is based on the traces of the earliest models or images

Psychoanalytical practice requires consequently that the analyst be analysed and know his inner world before he treats patients. The analyst must be suspicious of his own emotions and preconceptions in order to control his counter-transference towards the patient.

### *Roberta De Monticelli*

The following are some of the basic concepts which can be extracted from the contribution of Roberta De Monticelli to an epistemology of personal knowledge:

- "Knowing ourselves is more than grasping a reality; it is accepting it in order to make it effective, to *make it living*."

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<sup>18</sup> M. Bachtin, *K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnych nauk* (1941), in "Kontekst" Moskva 1975.

<sup>19</sup> S. Freud, *Some reflections on schoolboy psychology* (1914).

- "The irrefutable fact that the consciousness of oneself and of other people is far from being *knowledge* of oneself and of other people."

- "Self knowledge, like all knowledge of an individual is endless...a person has a hidden depth. The visible must somehow announce the invisible."

- "Self knowledge, like all knowledge of an individual requires an appropriate attitude on our part."

I agree with the distinction between consciousness and personal knowledge, which can be realised only in living relation to the other. Field theory suggests that a person will show only those of their 'hundred' aspects that are in accordance with the aim of the situation and the type of interpersonal relations. For this reason, clinical psychology and not experimental psychology can reach a deep knowledge of a person.

I want to focus on the concept of the "appropriate attitude" of the knowing person, that we have found in Bachtin and in Roberta De Monticelli, and suggest the following definitions which emerge from my analysis of social virtues:

- grateful acceptance of oneself as part of a network of human relations, where everyone belongs to each other;
- wondering respect for the mystery of human beings;
- willingness to enter into sincere and trusting dialogue in order to reach the depth of oneself and the other.