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Virtue Ethics and Education from Late Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

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Virtue Ethics and Education from Late Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

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Introduction

Andreas Hellerstedt

Abstract

Introducing the theme of the volume, this chapter starts from the question posed in Plato's *Meno*: can virtue be taught, and if so, how? It considers changing views on virtue from the ancient world to the Enlightenment and the role virtue, as a concept, played in social, political, and religious contexts. It highlights the differences between philosophical traditions, but stresses the relevance of the study of virtue ethics in its historical context for the understanding of societies in the premodern world. Furthermore, this chapter connects virtue ethics to other important fields of study, such as the history of emotion, gender, and social identities.

Keywords: conceptual history, history of philosophy, intellectual history, history of virtue ethics

> Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught, or is acquired by practice, not teaching? Or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to mankind by nature or in some other way?[1]

Thus, Plato begins the dialogue *Meno*. He continues by discussing, without really answering, what virtue is, asserting that it is fundamentally one, and not several things. Particular virtues must always be exercised with wisdom, it seems, and at one point we get the impression that virtue is itself a form of knowledge. However, towards the end of the work, Plato returns to the question of whether virtue can be taught, and specifically who may be able to teach it. The sophists, whose function was to educate sons of the ruling class in Athens in Plato's day, seem to be likely candidates, but they

1 Plato, *Laches; Protagoras; Meno; Euthydemus*, p. 265 (trans. W.R.M. Lamb). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

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are dismissed vehemently: they do not even know what virtue is. Neither have prominent men of the past, famed for their virtue themselves, been able to pass virtue on to their own sons. Consequently, the dialogue ends with the problematic conclusion that virtue is not based on knowledge, but only on true belief. Men who act virtuously do not really know what they are doing. Therefore, virtue must come from neither education nor nature, but from divine inspiration.[2]

In this introduction, I will argue for the broad relevance of this theme for research on the history of premodern societies.[3] This means that I will ask more questions than I will answer, and more questions than will be answered within the chapters contained in this book. This will also lead me to consider virtue ethics as a system of thought – What characterizes such a system in very general terms? How did conceptions of virtue change over time? Perhaps this may even contribute to the definition of premodernity. Are there reasons to believe that virtue ethics was somehow characteristic of a premodern form of thinking? More importantly, which roles did virtue ethics play in the context of premodern societies? Why was virtue such a useful concept to work with, when analysing and legitimizing the organization of society?

As Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, a word is 'devoid of meaning' if not studied 'in its process of conceptual change'.[4] On the other hand, a word is likewise unintelligible without the context of a particular time and place, as Quentin Skinner is well-known for arguing: 'it is only when we have grasped the precise intellectual context' within which a thinker is writing that we can recognize where his intention has been to deviate from, to repudiate, or to challenge his own 'heritage'.[5] This means that

2 It seems likely that Plato is in fact contrasting the poor teaching methods of the sophists with the exemplary ones of Socrates, and that he is proposing a view according to which virtue-as-knowledge is *both* innate and taught (acquired). This point is well made by Deveraux, 'Nature and Teaching in Plato's *Meno*'. It should be added that Plato gives a different view of the same question in the *Protagoras*.

3 The category of 'premodernity' is not often used in historical research and has many obvious drawbacks. I have, nonetheless, argued elsewhere for the relevance of this period concept in the particular context of the history of virtue ethics. Many reasons could be presented for it, but the main one is in my view that the previous scholarly debate, originating in MacIntyre and Anscombe, has already established a set of questions and problems which can only be answered by taking the whole of the very long premodern period into account. For an extended argument, see Hellerstedt, 'Möjligheter och utmaningar i dygdens historia', a preliminary version of which is available in English as Hellerstedt, 'Challenges and Possibilities in the History of Virtue'.

4 'bedeutungsblind', 'in seinem Begriffswandel', Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, p. 116.

5 Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, p. 129.

the individual works studied are considered to be 'moves in an argument' but must also include an understanding of 'what traditions [a particular thinker] reacts against, what lines of argument he takes up, what changes he introduces into existing debates'.[6] With Bo Lindberg, I believe that it is possible, especially within the framework of crossdisciplinary collaboration, to combine the study of long-term conceptual change *and* the analysis of a single text in its historical context.[7] Indeed, that is the aim of this book: to combine a number of individual studies with a common set of research problems, carried out against a common background of historical tradition.

The main purpose of the research project 'Teaching Virtue', which has been active since the beginning of 2013 at the Department of History, Stockholm University, has been to bring together undergraduate and postgraduate students and faculty members in a crossdisciplinary research environment. This has been achieved through the organization of seminars, workshops, courses, and conferences. The primary aim has thus been to facilitate cooperation, interaction, and personal contacts. This has been done with a specific common research focus in mind. The participants are united by their interest in the study of the educational history of virtue ethics. The question we all try to answer within our respective fields is this: how was the teaching and learning of virtue envisioned and represented in premodern Europe? From this basic question, several secondary issues follow. The individual participants provide answers from widely different perspectives, using different methods and primary sources. The crossdisciplinary approach has made comparative studies a natural part of activities within the project. While the project as a whole has not been situated within the academic discipline of the history of philosophy, the moral philosophical problems outlined above make up the foundation of the individual research projects and the issues under discussion.

Despite Plato's doubts, kings, advisers, philosophers, theologians, and artists were constantly occupied with the problem of teaching members of their societies the virtues upon which the stability and prosperity of those societies were thought to rest.[8] This holds true throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages, and into the early modern period. Erasmus expressed this sentiment more clearly than most:

6 Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 8. This seems to me to agree well with Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 52, 55, 64-68.

7 Lindberg, *Den antika skevheten*, p. 36 (incl. n. 67).

8 One of few works to take both a longer and broader view of the history of virtue is Classen, *Aretai und Virtutes*, which does indeed make the point that conceptions of virtue are as old as civilization itself.

> First and foremost, a prince who is about to begin his rule should be instructed that the greatest hope of the state lies in a good education of children [...] Thereby it can happen, that there is no need for many laws or punishments, which is not surprising where the citizens do what is right of their own free will.[9]

From the earliest beginnings of the history of philosophy, ethics was dominated by the concept of virtue. Socrates and Plato formulated their ideas in response to the everyday terms and concepts of their contemporaries, and it was a commonplace notion already in their day that a well-ordered society was founded on the virtue of its citizens. The virtues were connected to the achievement of happiness (*eudaimonia*). It was the starting point of ancient moral philosophy as a whole, not a unique position represented by Plato or Aristotle. They both agreed that virtue was not a means through which we achieve happiness, but rather that the exercise of virtue in itself constituted happiness. In this, it is likely that their views were more original.[10]

Furthermore, both Plato and Aristotle started out from the commonly held view that there were a number of different and perhaps fairly independent virtues. The most well known division is, of course, that of the four cardinal virtues, as described in Plato's *Republic*, Book 4, 426-435. However, both philosophers and many others who followed them were interested in how these different virtues were interconnected. Plato is often considered to have defended a 'strong' version of the 'unity of the virtues' argument.[11] This view also came to be highly influential in subsequent centuries. Aristotle is generally held to have considered the virtues to be separate, although he too viewed them as interconnected, but perhaps not in the 'strong' sense that Plato did. Because Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* came to be so influential all throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the work here.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* returns to the questions asked by Plato in the *Meno*. In general terms, Aristotle sets out to answer the common question of classical moral philosophy, namely what constitutes *eudaimonia*. In all practical action, man always has a view to an end. Among the ends we strive for, one is desired for its own sake. This is the supreme good. The supreme

9 'Illud in primis admonendus est princeps gubernaculis admovendus, praecipuam reip. spem sitam esse in recta educatione puerorum [...] Hac ratione fiet, ut non sit opus multis legibus, aut supliciis, nimirum civibus suapte sponte, quod rectum est sequentibus', Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio principis Christiani*, p. 86.

10 See, for instance, Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle*, introd.

11 Price, *Virtue and Reason*, p. 15; Carl Joachim Classen, 'Platon: philosophische Überlegungen'.

good for mankind follows from man's function (*ergon*). Man's function is the active use of his distinguishing characteristic: the exercise of the faculties of the soul in conformity with reason. A good man does this well, and doing this is virtue, meaning excellence (*arete*), which is the supreme good.[12] This not only means that the rational soul should rule over the human body, but more specifically that the rational part of the soul should rule the lower, irrational parts of the soul, as far as this is possible and desirable.[13] Aristotle also argues that a happy life requires certain external goods, in addition to virtue, because exercising virtue would be impeded without them.[14] To an extent such goods do include innate natural capacities for virtue.[15] But it is more important that virtue is not, as the Stoics and Plato would have it, self-sufficient. Regarding the acquisition of virtue, it comes from habituation and training, which is largely 'pre-rational', although the exercise of virtue itself, in an already well-educated, well-brought-up individual, must involve reason. We learn to be virtuous from a young age, under the guidance of teachers and parents, but it is also very much our own responsibility to develop into the right kind of person.[16]

Aristotle classifies the virtues as belonging to two broad types, corresponding to the rational and sensitive parts of the soul: intellectual and moral virtues. The moral virtues are strengthened by good habits: doing whatever is characteristic of a particular virtue makes us better at it. Also, excess or deficiency is harmful to virtue, and can destroy it. Only the right measure in the activity strengthens virtue: a man does not become brave by constantly running away from danger, and one may become rash by thoughtlessly throwing oneself into it. Only through the measured management of his fears, under the guidance of reason, will he become brave in acting bravely.[17] What is virtuous also largely depends on the situation. One should feel the right emotions or act in the right way, at the right time, towards the right people, and so on.[18] Finally, it is made very clear that virtue is difficult to achieve. Consequently, Aristotle also spends some effort in distinguishing the different ways in which we may fall short of the ideal, which vices are worse than others, and which are more or less similar to true virtue, and so on.

12 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b22-1098a20 (trans. H. Rackham).

13 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a27-1102b29.

14 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b1-1101a6; Cooper, 'Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune'.

15 This is mentioned in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144b33-1145a3.

16 Broadie, 'Philosophical Introduction', p. 18.

17 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a13-1104b3.

18 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b16-1106b25.

The study of ethics is also the study of character (*ethos*), which is significant. Aristotle defines virtues as stable, acquired *dispositions* (*hexeis*) of character.[19] Although he does not claim that virtue can be wholly given to us by nature, he does discuss the interplay of nature, habit, and education, as did many other classical authors, including writers of history and biography. There are, however, significant differences in the way literary representations of historical figures were constructed in terms of virtue: whereas a philosopher would be inclined to investigate the moral development of a child into adulthood, often considering adolescence a crucial period, the historian would often be more concerned with evaluating and explaining the character of a grown man as an agent in the historical narrative. For these reasons, characters of classical literature, biography, and history often come across as products of a fixed ethos, giving the impression that they were determined from birth to become such as they are because of their innate nature, temperament, or something similar. More closely examined, however, it is clear that writers such as the immensely influential Plutarch did not consider character to be a direct consequence of temperament. In fact, their view cannot even be reduced to an interplay between innate and acquired dispositions, as outer circumstances as well as individual rational choice could also be seen to play their part. Tacitus's Tiberius, for instance, is in certain passages portrayed as consciously and deliberately evil, choosing what is wrong, despite being capable of what is right.[20]

Another difference is the one between philosophy and rhetoric. Aristotle did consider rhetoric to be in a sense a part of ethics (or politics).[21] However, ethics was also a means among others to achieve the objective of rhetoric: persuasion. Apart from the obvious use of the virtues in describing people one wishes either to praise or to blame, it is also important for the speaker himself to possess a trustworthy character in order for his speech to persuade. But Aristotle's *Rhetoric* advised that the effective speaker only needs to *appear* to possess the virtues himself in order for his character (*ethos*) to facilitate persuasion. Whether he actually is virtuous or not was strictly speaking irrelevant.[22] Later writers argued instead that a good orator must also be a truly good man, and the Roman ideal of a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* ('a good man skilled in speaking') lasted until the Renaissance.[23]

19 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105b19-1106b14.

20 This issue is investigated by Gill, 'Question of Character Development', esp. pp. 481-86.

21 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1356a30-1356a32.

22 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1366a10-1366a34.

23 Classen, 'Aristoteles: Forderungen and den volkommenen Redner'; Cox, 'Rhetoric and Ethics in Machiavelli'.

Furthermore, what has been said up to now mainly regards the moral virtues. They are indeed often at the centre of modern interpretations, as are their political implications and applications, such as they are presented in the *Politics*. However, it is important to emphasize that Aristotle seems to have considered contemplation to be the highest form of human activity, an argument he makes in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. The contemplation of a solitary sage may be described as an activity, but it does not concern action, and seems to present an ideal quite different from the virtues which are discussed in the previous books. This has puzzled many modern scholars, but attempts have been made to explain this perceived inconsistency. Several scholars have, in various ways, stressed that the 'contest of lives' (such as that between the active and contemplative life and the life of pleasure) was a trope that Aristotle inherited from his forerunners. In the context of ancient philosophy then, the differences within Aristotle's ethics should not come as a surprise. Unfortunately, exactly how these different ways of life relate to one another in Aristotle seems to remain an open question.[24]

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the classical philosophical discussions of virtue in terms of moral philosophy were closely connected to politics. Both Aristotle and Plato considered the virtues on a societal scale. This is most famously done in Plato's *Republic*, but Aristotle also mentions the way different constitutions can degenerate through loss of virtue in both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, although he did not agree that this happened in the regular cycles proposed by Plato. Following Plato's lead, later authors, notably Polybius, used this conception of society as a cycle of virtue and vice as a grand theory for explaining history. Such theories became highly influential, not least in the Renaissance, where Machiavelli combined them with Galenic theory, viewing the classes of society as 'umori', humours of the political body. They were also easily combined with the myth of the golden age as found in Hesiod or Ovid, as well as with the Christian story of the fall of man.[25]

Virtue ethics saw continuous changes throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. Stoicism and Neoplatonism were increasingly important in the Roman centuries, and both influenced Christianity. Within Neoplatonism,

24 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*; Lockwood, 'Competing Ways of Life', p. 363, convincingly argues that the ways of life need not necessarily be considered mutually exclusive. On the contrary, a life of contemplation can include moral virtue as well as pleasure.

25 See, for instance, Parel, *Machiavellian Cosmos*. Koselleck argues that it was only with the eighteenth century and the modern idea of progress that a view of the future as 'open' broke through; Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, pp. 9-66.

a theory of degrees of virtue was developed. This will be dealt with in Eliasson's chapter in this volume, but it is important to note that such a theory fits well with both Christianity and the hierarchical view of the world and society, which often accompanied it in premodern Europe. Le Roy Ladurie's famous study of Saint-Simon is a testament to the continued importance of such ideas. By the early eighteenth century, however, they were on their way out, and Ladurie describes Saint-Simon as 'a sort of monolith displaced from its natural environment, a Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite somehow wandered into France – Lord knows why – in the middle of our second millennium'.[26]

Of great importance for the Christian tradition was Augustine, who developed a version of the unity of the virtues, which fit well with his Christian Platonic outlook. He considered love (love of God, Christian charity) to be the most prominent virtue, without which other virtues would be quite hollow. However, he did criticize the Stoics, as he associated their view of the unity argument with a conception of human perfection he was not prepared to support. For instance, he preferred to describe man as gradually ascending towards the light of God, rather than, as the Stoics would, describing him as either perfectly wise or completely ignorant.[27]

After the fall of the Roman Empire, political thought generally shifted with changing circumstances. In Europe, the dominant political form was monarchy, and so it remained until the age of revolutions. Virtue ethics continued to be relevant to political thought, although it increasingly found expression in the 'mirrors for princes', which Tjällén's and Hellerstedt's chapters explore. The debate in recent research has also highlighted the resurgence of 'republican' ideas in the early modern period, following the landmark works of Skinner and Pocock.[28] The present volume will refer to these developments only very sparingly. However, it is quite clear that such ideas had become prominent even in the context of an absolute monarchy by the late eighteenth century, as Nell's study of the Swedish case (included in this volume) shows.

26 Le Roy Ladurie, *Saint-Simon*, p. 347 (trans. A. Goldhammer).

27 Langan, 'Augustine on the Unity'.

28 Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*; Skinner and Gelderen, *Republicanism*. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, argues that the republicanism of the classical world was fundamentally different from modern liberal democracy and at odds with Christianity. The ancients, he argues, valued virtue (the political life of a free man) as an end in itself, whereas the moderns would consider political freedom a means to the end, which was the preservation of life, happiness, or individual well-being; in short, Rahe argues that material well-being was a means to virtue in the classical world, and that in the modern world virtue became a means to material well-being.

Communities of disposition: social and gendered aspects of the virtues in premodernity

Following the common views in the ancient world outlined above, Roman writers and scholastic philosophers described virtue as a 'habitus mentis' or 'habitus animi', corresponding to the Aristotelian view of virtue as a stable disposition (*hexis*) acquired by habituation (the English 'habit' should not be confused with the Latin 'habitus' in this context!), which makes virtuous people prepared to act well according to the circumstances, without the need for time-consuming deliberation or reflection.[29] The concept was taken up by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose views have become immensely influential. They do in my view illustrate why the historical study and awareness of virtue ethics can contribute to our understanding of social history. For Bourdieu, habitus is a system of 'durable, transposable dispositions', 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations', 'history turned into nature'; it structures practice and representation, and works without the 'conscious aiming at ends'. For that reason, habitus can help us explain how societal norms are internalized and how practices are generated through human interaction: 'Through the habitus, the structure which has produced it governs practice.' In short, habitus – i.e. in our case, virtue – is the nexus through which structures are perpetuated or change. It explains human action without reducing it to a simplistic maximization of interest, economic advantage, etc. In Bourdieu's view, this certainly amounts to a form of materialist determinism: virtue may be perceived as the 'community of dispositions', which is common to a class or other social group, as habitus is a mark of social position and social distance.[30]

As already mentioned, Aristotle did not view virtue as an effect of material factors such as the constitution of one's body. If virtue were given by nature, it would not be meaningful to praise a man for being virtuous. It would take no effort, whereas Aristotle in fact held that the greater the effort, the greater the difficulty of his undertakings, the greater the honour bestowed on a virtuous man would be. However, in a virtuous man, passions and emotions are conditioned in the right way, so as to contribute to right action. This view persisted for a long time, although seemingly at odds with Christian notions of the body. Well-used anger was, for instance, a part of a king's exercise of justice, despite the fact that wrath was held to be one of the seven deadly sins.[31]

29 Bejczy, *Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages*, pp. 257-59.

30 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp. 72-96, quotes at pp. 72, 78, 95 (trans. R. Nice).

31 Rosenwein, 'Introduction', and Althoff, '*Ira regis*', pp. 61, 64-73.

It is also clear that many character traits, similar to virtues or vices, are dependent on or a direct result of one's temperament. It also seems that the physical constitution of the body has a part to play in attaining true virtue. For instance, a form of confidence, similar to that of the brave man, comes with a sanguine temperament.[32] Related views also underlie Aristotle's remarks on gender. In classical antiquity generally, as in the Middle Ages and still in the early modern period, the theory of the four humours provided a basis for distinguishing physical and mental differences between human beings of different age, sex, geographical, even social origins. Women and children were considered to be of a wet and cold temperament, and their capacities for rational thought and deliberation were often regarded as impaired in various ways as a result. When this paradigm began to crumble in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it was gradually replaced by various forms of mechanism. In practice, however, theories explaining the workings of the human body were many and varied for a long time. Few were as reductionist as those of La Mettrie. Linnaeus's view, for instance, combined elements of the scholastic tradition with mechanism, as well as vitalist theories of his own day. Furthermore, the famous dualism of Descartes was perhaps not such a radical departure as has sometimes been suggested, and at all events retained the fundamental opposition between reason and the passions, which underlie so much of early modern ethical and political thought.[33]

Virtue was not only gendered, it was also differentiated according to social status or estates. Aristotle himself spoke about virtues appropriate to different functions, such as those of men, women, and children in the family and the rulers and ruled in society. Martin Luther was critical of scholasticism and Aristotelianism, which he regarded as harmful to theology because they were not founded on the only legitimate source of religious precepts, the Bible. However, he and his followers did not do away with virtue ethics entirely. Indeed, his theological views can be compared to the Augustinian version of the 'unity of the virtues' argument. More importantly, virtues were central to his political thought. In political terms, virtue was an important constituent of the good order, which was

32 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1117b9-1117b22.

33 See, for instance, Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Alanen, *Descartes's Concept of Mind*; Broberg, *Homo Sapiens L.* Leif Runefelt has recently argued that there was little practical difference between the psychologies of Aristotle and Wolff, and that consequently the political thought (taken in a very broad sense) of eighteenth-century Sweden was still, to all intents and purposes, Aristotelian, with a distinct stress on inculcating virtue among the citizens. Runefelt, *Hushållningens dygder* (in particular ch. 2) and Runefelt, *Dygden som välståndets grund*.

the end of political life in Lutheranism. This had little or nothing to do with salvation. Instead, it is in discussions of estates, calling, and worldly professions that we find important clues to the continued importance of virtue ethics in the Lutheran states of northern Europe. In the context of secular society, Luther's ethics resemble, as Risto Saarinen has pointed out, exactly those late medieval views on grace and cooperation in virtue that he disliked so much when discussing salvation through faith alone. We also find function-specific virtues, such as were important in the Middle Ages, and mentioned already in Aristotle. People perform different functions in society, and correspondingly possess virtues particular to that function.[34] Classical, medieval, and early modern views of society almost invariably shared the common fundamental ideals of unity, harmony, and concord. Different functions must work in unison towards the same goal: 'Ein jeder lerne sein Lection, so wirt es wol im Hause ston', as the 'Haustafel', which concludes Luther's small catechism, has it.[35] In both Luther and Aristotle, the relation between man and woman in the context of the family is the prime example of functionally differentiated virtues. Despite this, it has been claimed in a recent overview that historical research on the gendered aspects of virtue ethics has been nearly non-existent up until the 2010s.[36] In this volume, these aspects are most directly explored by Fogelberg Rota, Eyice, and Kolrud, although they are clearly relevant to all contributions.

The relevance of the modern revival: an analytical definition of virtue

Although constantly changing, premodern ethical systems remained, to a large part, systems of virtue ethics, and they differed from modern systems based on duty or utility. When we speak about moral issues today, we may refer to laws or principles, even civic duties, individual rights, or human suffering and welfare. However, we seldom speak of chastity or fortitude.

34 Saarinen, 'Ethics in Luther's Theology', pp. 202-3, 208, 211; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1162a16-1162a33, and *Politics* 1259b20-1260b4 (trans. H. Rackham). It is important to note that this is discussed within the context of the family, and refers to relations between parents and children, masters and slaves, and so on. This was then taken also to hold for society at large. Aristotle makes it clear that children and slaves have only an incomplete or relative virtue, not virtue in the full sense most often used in his *Ethics*.

35 Approx. 'When each and every one learns his lesson, the house will be in good order', Luther, *Der kleine Catechismus*.

36 Green and Mews, 'Introduction', p. ix.

Virtue ethics seems to be a tradition that has not survived modernity, even though it may have begun to experience a revival in recent years.

The modern discussion of virtue ethics is to a significant extent the result of *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre, published in 1981. Since MacIntyre specifically claims that modern moral philosophy, of which he himself is a part, has lost touch with a premodern, in essence Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, it is reasonable to start with him when discussing the problems outlined in the first part of this introduction. To simplify things somewhat one might say that MacIntyre does indeed consider virtue ethics to be characteristic of premodernity, while arguing that modernity has tried to replace it with duty- or consequence-based systems, after having abandoned an Aristotelian teleological conception of man. However, MacIntyre is hardly representative of the developments in moral philosophy in recent years. Therefore, it will be necessary to consider some alternative points of view, as well as certain problems in MacIntyre regarding the relevance of his claims for historical research.

As the very first example of the return of virtue ethics within twentieth-century moral philosophy, it is not MacIntyre, but G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001), who is usually given. Anscombe was an English philosopher and disciple of Wittgenstein, who made important contributions to central problems in philosophy regarding human action, intention, and cause and effect. In an article entitled 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (1958), she criticized modern moral philosophy for lacking a proper foundation and pointed out the need for a new direction. In particular, she argued that modern forms of ethics based on duty or rules (deontological ethics) have outlived themselves. Interestingly, she claimed that the reasons for this were largely historical. The concept of a divine lawgiver has been abandoned, with far-reaching and inescapable consequences: 'if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of "obligation", of being bound or required by a law, should remain though they had lost their root'. Without the metaphysical foundation (most often a Christian one) that ethics had historically had but now had lost, it had become hollow. We live, she argued, with the superstructure of a moral philosophy without the base of metaphysics that made it a defensible system: 'The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.'[37] However, she also claimed that this does not mean that (modern) moral philosophy is an impossible undertaking without the conception of a God-given law: the virtue ethics

37 Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 6.

of Aristotle does not need it, yet can provide the necessary foundation. It is important to point out that Anscombe made a sharp distinction between Aristotelian virtue ethics on the one hand and Judaeo-Christian law-based ethics on the other. According to Anscombe, it is in fact because of the great dominance of the latter that we have lost contact with the former.[38]

Scottish-born philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is still the single most important work in the revival of virtue ethics (and its history) in our time. MacIntyre maintained, very much as Anscombe had done, that modern moral philosophy finds itself in a highly lamentable state of confusion. We cling to terms and concepts from an age long passed, the meaning and real content of which has been lost to us. This is primarily a crisis for MacIntyre's own academic subject, but it also has a wider societal significance: there is no rational way of reaching consensus on moral issues in our culture, according to MacIntyre, and thus philosophical arguments are reducible to basic premises which are simply not compatible or even in obvious conflict. Freedom stands against equality, justice against self-preservation, and there our discussion ends. Philosophers may claim that there are generally valid principles to fall back on, such as obligation or public utility. However, in fact, MacIntyre argues, these have long since been written off as respectable philosophical premises. If it were not for the historical dimension, the discussion would be entirely unintelligible. Nevertheless, the values we have lost still haunt us, and we still wish ethical argumentation to be rational, even though we know this to be impossible. In elaborating on his argument, MacIntyre severely criticizes most modern attempts in the field. Nietzsche and Sartre are rejected as belonging in a philosophical 'bestiary', while Rawls and Nozick are honoured with a slightly lengthier refutation: he considers them both to be examples of the deficiencies inherent in modern liberal individualism. MacIntyre describes their positions as constructed around the assumption that human beings as members of society have been stranded on a deserted island together with a group of total strangers, and he describes modern politics as a war fought by non-violent means.[39]

Thus, the root causes of these shortcomings of modernity are historical. Admittedly, MacIntyre does question whether we may ever be able to recover what we have lost, but he still seems to view the sort of unproblematic

38 Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', pp. 8, 14-19. This is how the article has often been read, but there are alternative interpretations. Some have claimed that Anscombe in fact tried to put forward an indirect argument for a religiously founded ethics: see Driver, 'Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe', § 5.1, for an extended treatment of this topic.

39 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 11-22, 244-55.

collective identity shared by all, which he considers to have been characteristic of premodern societies, to represent a possible alternative. This collective identity included a shared belief in the good life for man within the bounds of communities of the village, family, and kin, but above all it was grounded in the metaphysical foundation of a conception of human nature. According to this conception, human beings were created for a specific purpose. This is, of course, where virtue ethics enters the discussion. MacIntyre considers Aristotelian ethics to be the strongest premodern system of moral philosophy. In contrast to Anscombe, MacIntyre does not perceive any decisive conflict between virtue ethics and Christianity. The central point that they shared was the quest for the good and a corresponding rejection of self-interest. The break with this tradition occurred with Luther and Hobbes. What is sketched is certainly a drawn-out process: the last to figure in MacIntyre's exposé is Jane Austen, who, he claims, defended a classical conception of virtue, even though she did so within the framework of the bourgeois family.[40]

Much could be said about this view of history. It is worth stressing that MacIntyre was not a professional historian. In fact, he is very critical of modern social science, pointing to Max Weber in particular as complicit in the failings of modernity, although from the point of view of intellectual history MacIntyre and Weber seem to share a simplified and idealized view of premodern 'traditional' societies, in strong contrast to a rational but demystified modernity. Be that as it may, I believe that MacIntyre and other modern moral philosophers can contribute greatly to clarifying the concepts and problems that historians use, particularly when studying premodern societies or the long transition to modernity. However, to be able to speak about virtue as a concept characteristic of premodernity, we must first of all establish what it is that we are actually speaking of.

MacIntyre's description of virtue in premodern systems of ethics centres above all around the conception of virtue as standing in an internal means-end relationship to an overarching purpose (the supreme good). This means that the virtues are part of the end itself, and that they are their own motivation. Aristotle does not (explicitly) use the internal/external distinction himself, but Aquinas does, and it seems that this distinction describes many virtue ethical systems in a useful way. Thus, MacIntyre defines virtue in the following way: 'A virtue is 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 effectively prevents us from achieving such goods.'[41]

40 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 238-43.

41 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191; Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 100-6.

As I have already indicated, MacIntyre claims that this conception of virtue as internal in relation to its end was not exclusive to ancient Greek or Roman philosophers, but formed a part of the Christian tradition as well. It did, however, conflict with the views of many Enlightenment philosophers, such as the utilitarians (Benjamin Franklin being Macintyre's example). For them, the relation was clearly external. The end may be achieved in different ways, but the means has no intrinsic value. Thus, while for such thinkers virtue may well be a means to an end (such as general or individual happiness), it is only one means among many. As long as these means contribute equally well to the end, they are interchangeable. Thus the value of virtue is only instrumental.[42]

This is also where an historian encounters significant problems in MacIntyre. Contrasting, as he does, a modern, rationalized but meaningless existence to a premodern society in which virtue ethics provided a set of stable values is an unwarranted simplification of complex historical processes. The tensions between the 'classical tradition' (of which MacIntyre writes) and Christianity were considerable from St. Paul and Augustine onwards. Furthermore, beside the Aristotelian tradition there were strong Platonic influences on classical and medieval, as well as early modern, systems of virtue ethics. Luther was not the first to reject the pagan 'sour dough', and somewhat paradoxically, the thought of Aristotle also saw a strong revival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *within* Lutheranism.[43] One could also argue that the decisive break with tradition occurred not with Bentham or Kant, as MacIntyre would have it, but with late thirteenth-century voluntarism within scholasticism, as Bonnie Kent has done, or even with sixteenth-century probabilism, as Rudolf Schüssler has argued.[44]

Above all, there are many instances in premodern historical periods of philosophical systems in which virtue plays an important role, without this having very much to do with Aristotle or even having a similar function as virtue has in Aristotelianism. The Stoics, of both the classical and early modern varieties, are among the most important examples of this.[45] The same is true of those new systems of thought, based on various versions

42 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 197-99.

43 For instance, Porter, 'Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period'. Excellent studies of the application of Aristotelian virtue ethics in economic thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are Runefelt, *Hushållningens dygder*, and Runefelt, *Dygden som välståndets grund*, quoted at p. 21.

44 Kent, *Virtues of the Will*; Schüssler, 'On the Anatomy of Probabilism'; it should be noted that Schüssler argues against Anscombe and not MacIntyre in this instance; Kraye and Saarinen, 'Introduction', however, do criticize MacIntyre's nostalgia and make the case for the period of 1300-1700 being exceedingly rich in developments and debates on moral philosophy.

45 Lindberg, *Seneca*, pp. 31-50, and Lindberg, *Stoicism och stat*, in particular pp. 46-56, 73-85, 105-15.

of materialism, rationalism, and natural law, which were so important in the early modern period. They would most often not fit MacIntyre's definition of virtue. Stretching this definition, we might label Machiavelli and Lipsius virtue ethicists, but Hobbes and Pufendorf could hardly be so described, no matter how much virtue is lauded by them – this problem is explored further in Lindberg's chapter in this volume. In fact, it may well be the case that constructing a historically useful definition of virtue or virtue ethics is strictly speaking impossible. This may, however, not be a bad thing: the problems we encounter can perhaps clarify the terms and concepts historians use when speaking of an 'Aristotelian tradition' or even 'premodern' society and its norms and values.

In addition, there are other points of view to be found among modern moral philosophers, which may prove highly relevant to a historical exploration of the problems I have outlined. American liberal feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum considers virtue ethics from a different angle. Nussbaum does not lack a historical perspective; on the contrary, her consciousness of the intellectual and social context in which the Greek and Roman philosophers lived and wrote is always a part of her discussion of their arguments. What she does lack is nostalgia over a lost heritage or tradition. She is very critical of MacIntyre, whom she sorts among 'thinkers who are both antitheory and antireason and appeal to ancient Greek ethics with that agenda'.[46] For Nussbaum, then, the philosophers of antiquity are relevant to the modern day in a more direct and less problematic way, even when they express positions we would never share. It would seem that to her, it would not be true to the spirit of Socrates if we did not scrutinize Socrates' views, criticizing them where appropriate. Nussbaum has famously argued for the continued relevance of studies of the canonical Western classics in higher education, where she claims that such studies can aim at a fruitful discussion of the questions of our age: religious and cultural pluralism, social and economic justice, gender equality, and so on.[47]

More directly relevant to historical research, in my view, is Nussbaum's discussion of virtue ethics in her earlier, and perhaps even better known work, *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986). Here, Nussbaum makes two important points. First, that the virtue ethics of Aristotle considers human happiness as dependent on circumstances beyond our control: 'luck', 'fortune', *tyche*. Second, that for Aristotle, emotions make up an indispensable part of practising the virtues: 'Aristotle's final point […] is that […] [the] virtuous

46 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. xxvii.
47 Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*.

condition is not, itself, something hard and invulnerable. Its yielding and open posture towards the world gives it the fragility, as well as the beauty, of a plant.'[48]

Nussbaum has a certain preference for organic metaphors when describing human virtue and happiness (or 'flourishing'), as did many premodern philosophers. A flower requires care, watering, and nourishment to grow, and it is to a high degree dependent on its environment. The flower can be contrasted by another common metaphor, the hard gemstone, which, being perfect, needs nothing, but neither is it dynamic – it does not grow and cannot be improved. Thus, although precious stones were historically often used as metaphors for virtue,[49] Nussbaum would argue that man is a living being, not an unfeeling, sterile, and passive rock. Autonomy may well be a respectable ideal in moral philosophy, but if we were to eliminate all those elements of our existence, which we cannot control – friends, family, community – we would be left with an impoverished life.[50]

Furthermore, Nussbaum argues that emotions must be considered an integral part of the virtues. She prefers to speak of 'the rationality of the passions', strongly opposing the traditional dichotomy between reason and emotion. They are, in her view, compatible, and both are indispensable to a good human life. Clearly, this perspective is also feminist: the hard, reductionist point of view, according to which the good life becomes synonymous with the elimination of everything beyond human control, is also a male point of view. On a general level, Nussbaum characterizes Aristotle's ethics as anthropocentric, a term that encapsulates much of what distinguishes his views from other systems of virtue ethics. In this way, Nussbaum delineates a set of problems, including not only those forms of the history of emotions – which is at present a growing field[51] – but also such aspects as the conception of man and his nature, gender, and body, and man's dependence on and interplay with society and the environment; aspects which must always be at the forefront of the historical study of conceptions of virtue and virtue ethics.

48 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 340.

49 For instance, Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State*, p. 21.

50 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 7, 55-63, 67, 80, 103, 238, 327-30, 336-40, 347-50, 366, 397, 415-18, 420-21; an excellent example of how this problem has been studied historically, using early modern sources, is Savin, *Fortunas klädnader*.

51 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 41-47; Barbara Rosenwein has long argued for a history of emotions, but it seems that the approach of William Reddy is particularly suited to the aims of the present volume; see, for instance, Reddy, 'Logic of Action'.

But where do the debates within modern moral philosophy lead us? It would have been a simple task if it were possible to provide an ideal type definition of the concept of virtue (probably very much like the Aristotelian view), which could then be followed through the centuries. However, this is hardly meaningful, even if one were only interested in the Aristotelian tradition (if there is such a thing). This method would most likely lead only to an evaluation of different systems of thought, resulting in some being deemed closer to the ideal type, others less. It is much more interesting if we instead, just like moral philosophers of recent years, also explore those systems of virtue ethics that do not originate in the Aristotelian strain.

To give but one example, Confucianism has been the subject of much recent work, showing that it shares many general points of view with ancient Greek ethics, without there being any reason to suspect that the one system has been influenced by the other.[52] The history of the reception of Confucian thought in the early modern West is likewise an important example of how virtue ethics, historically speaking, has been much more than just Aristotle. It shows that conceptions of virtue, perhaps because they were so well entrenched in the societies in which they were formed, could be amalgams of ideas of very different origins. German eighteenth-century philosopher Christian Wolff, who was fascinated by Confucianism, claimed that the Chinese had been ruled by philosopher emperors (who were also models of virtue for their subjects) long before Confucius himself appeared: Confucius was 'not the founder, but the restorer of Chinese wisdom'. Thus, Wolff created an ideal representation of the ancient Chinese in accordance with his own political ideal: a modern version of Plato's philosopher-king. From his starting point, Wolff goes on to show how classical Chinese philosophy was in perfect harmony with the modern, rationalist system of natural law, which he himself propounded. Not surprisingly, he considered the Chinese to have held that the perfection of oneself and one's fellow men was the *finis ultimus* (the 'final end') of man's life. This is Wolff's own position, of course, and he even admits that the Chinese have a somewhat 'confused' point of view on the matter.[53] However, in this concept of perfection, Wolff does position himself close to the tradition of scholastic philosophy with which he also often disagreed.

It seems then that it would be wiser to study the various uses to which the concept of virtue has been put, instead of trying to reach a universally valid definition. This seems more appropriate for cultural history, as it enables us

52 For instance, Ivanhoe, 'Virtue Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition'.

53 Wolff, *Oratio de sinarum philosophia practica*, p. 17.

to understand changes over time and compare differences across different parts of Europe. For this purpose, it may suffice to state that by 'virtue' we will understand an acquired and stable, morally good stance or disposition. This must then be submitted to various reservations: virtue can be more or less constant; it can be more or less similar to a practical skill or intellectual capacity, and more or less a specifically *moral* disposition; it can to a greater or lesser extent be regarded as both a state and as an activity, etc.

This approach also leads to further questions. How were these virtues acquired? Were they considered to be achieved through practical exercise, intellectual study, or imitation of examples? How important were innate talents and gifts and other natural predispositions perceived to be? Were emotions, passions, and affectations considered a hindrance or a prerequisite for virtue? Which role did ideas about acquired or inherited virtue play in legitimating hierarchies based on gender, profession, class, or estate? To what extent was human nature itself considered to be an impediment to the acquisition of virtue? And to what extent was virtue deemed to be dependent on social and material preconditions?

Overview of the volume

The questions posed above are best answered empirically. This volume includes chapters that are the result of ten independent research projects. The range is very wide both chronologically and geographically. A large part deals with Scandinavian sources. This might seem odd, as Scandinavia is usually considered a peripheral and marginal part of Europe. We do not believe this to be entirely true. The Scandinavian countries were indeed Christianized at a relatively late date and were for that reason largely recipients of continental culture and learning for a long time. However, in the early modern period (as most period experts would agree) Sweden and Denmark were neither marginal, nor peripheral. Instead they were the leading Lutheran monarchies, shaping the fate of Western Europe as we know it today. Furthermore, the Scandinavian countries were characterized by certain distinguishing societal and cultural features, which make them worthy of detailed study in their own right. On the most basic level, the Scandinavian countries had a peculiarly structured society in premodern times: relatively egalitarian societies with a strong free peasantry and a relatively weak aristocracy, as well as well-developed local self-governance. On the political level, Scandinavia was never a part of the Roman Empire. Although Denmark was very briefly subject to the German Emperor during the Middle

Ages, this never amounted to much de facto. Related to this was a particular intellectual heritage, with a common legal and literary tradition. Together with the fact that previous studies in the history of virtue ethics have been almost exclusively focused on the familiar western European centre of classical Greece and Rome, France, Italy, England, Spain, and Germany, not to mention its focus on the great men of the Western philosophical tradition, all of this speaks strongly for the relevance of Scandinavian sources to the story of virtue ethics. Thus, far from reflecting a peripheral or marginal interest, we believe that the introduction of Scandinavian material will provide a much needed widening of the discussion.

Erik Eliasson's (Philosophy) chapter develops some of the threads from this introduction, serving as an extended background to the volume as a whole. Eliasson studies the interplay between Platonic and Aristotelian notions of virtue in the Middle Ages. In particular, Eliasson explores the influence of the commentator Eustratius of Nicaea (early twelfth century) on the later Aristotelian tradition. He shows how Eustratius introduced the important Neoplatonic conception of the levels of virtue through his commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Until now, Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* has been considered the main link, but Eliasson shows that Eustratius, commenting directly on Aristotle's ethics, is an important alternative channel for such an influence. While Eliasson's subject matter may not seem directly connected to the consequent developments in the late Middle Ages or Renaissance, the Platonist influence was one of a number of important shifts in the history of virtue ethics over the long term and must be borne in mind when studying later periods. In general, Aristotle did not arrive unmediated in the later Middle Ages or the early modern period: his thought was constantly layered over with the continuous reception, commentary, and adaptation of successive generations.

Biörn Tjällén (History) investigates the Aristotelian ethics of Giles of Rome, author of one of the most important medieval mirrors for princes, the *De regimine principum* (thirteenth century). In particular, Tjällén explores his treatment of the virtue of justice and the concept of perfection. Giles considers the law a means for educating the people. Through the coercion of law, the subjects are made virtuous, as it were, against their will. The prince himself is portrayed as morally superior, possessing an extraordinary form of virtue, which is considered to be a result of divine grace, although education seems to play some part for him as well.

Mari Eyice (History) studies the pedagogic problem faced by the Swedish reformers of the sixteenth century, who had persuaded local congregations that good deeds are not meritorious in the eyes of the Lord, following the

precepts of Luther's *sola gratia*. In this context, virtue could be considered to be highly suspect, as most likely being only feigned or even a veil covering sin. As a consequence of perceived misconceptions of this doctrine, however, the reformers soon felt the need to remind their congregations of the continued relevance of good works, as a central part of a Christian life and as the fruits of true faith.

Tania Preste (History) investigates how early seventeenth-century Swedish student theatre was used to shape virtuous subjects out of young pupils. The period is characterized by major changes in the educational system as a result of the upheavals of the Reformation and the growth of the confessional state. At the same time, the pedagogical ideas of the Jesuits were of central importance in Sweden, as they were in the rest of Europe, despite the confessional divide. Using theatre for educational purposes was an old tradition, which was put to novel uses in fostering Christian virtues as well as practical skills such as rhetoric. History, both classical and biblical, was frequently used as a source of themes and subjects. Preste, however, investigates the historical drama of Johannes Messenius in particular. His plays used ancient (mythical) Swedish history for the purpose of inculcating the virtues of governance during a crucial period of state-building.

Stefano Fogelberg Rota (Comparative Literature) studies moral education in court ballet during the reign of Queen Christina of Sweden. After having been introduced to Sweden in 1638, French *ballet de cour* saw a brief golden age under Christina's patronage. As part of a larger effort to raise the cultural standing of the state that inherited Gustavus Adolphus's position on the European stage, French *maître à danser* Antoine de Beaulieu was brought to the Swedish court to refine the manners of the courtiers. Ballet became a privileged medium for conveying the queen's political decisions and ambitions. The political messages were constantly communicated through the use of examples, portrayed as ideals of virtue. Virtue, not least the then immensely popular *heroic* virtue, was intended to educate and counsel Christina and her young aristocratic favourites. Thus, Fogelberg Rota investigates both the underlying purposes of the representations and the rhetorical strategies that were employed in creating them, as well as the audiences for which they were intended and the actors who performed in them.

Bo Lindberg (History of Ideas) explores the discussions of virtue ethics at Swedish universities during the seventeenth century. These discussions were conducted very much in the wake of contemporary criticism of Aristotle following the scientific revolution and the rise of secular natural law theories, but also older criticism, inherited from Lutheran theology. However, despite such criticism, virtue still had a place in seventeenth-century academic discourse.

Through humanist and republican ideas (within the monarchical political setting), including cyclical views of history, virtue ethics remained relevant in the realm of politics. Even so, natural law emerged as a serious competitor, providing a clearer and more efficient method for teaching moral philosophy and a solid theoretical foundation for the political systems of the period.

Kristine Kolrud (Art History) investigates the court ballet *The Education of Achilles*, performed in Turin in 1650. The work is interpreted as an education for princes and princesses. As with the contemporary Swedish ballets, courtiers and members of the ducal house performed part of the roles themselves. In particular, the role of duchess Marie Christine – de facto regent of Savoy – as educator is highlighted. In the centre of the performance stands the education of Achilles (identified with Carlo Emanuele II) by the centaur Chiron. We encounter a harmonious vision of education in the context of the symbolical universe of the seventeenth century: a perfect balance of the elements corresponds to the balance of the four cardinal virtues and the four humours of the body.

Michaela Vance (English Literature) explores the theme of virtue and education in the early works of English writer Frances Brooke (1724-1789): namely, the periodical *The Old Maid* and the novel *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*. Brooke's thoughts on education were formulated in response to Rousseau's and Locke's ideas, which she considered to entail a supervisory ideal of education. In contrast, Brooke cultivated the notion of the child's virtue as innate and natural to an unusual degree, and consequently argued for liberty and individual agency. Adopting the child's perspective, she regarded the role of the teacher to be closer to an adviser and friend than the supervisor associated with traditional education.

Jennie Nell (Comparative Literature) analyses how King Gustavus III of Sweden, who was a talented writer, utilized the cardinal virtues in his dramatic works, considering both princely and common virtues. The King used the idea of exemplum as a tool for educating his people. In fact, the communication can be said to have been two-way: an interplay of ideals and expectations between the King and his subjects, expressed through art. Often using a variety of historical material, Gustavus preferred to use the famous Gustavus I and Gustavus Adolphus (his 'Gustavian' ancestors) as exempla, and as mirrors for and of himself. Perhaps even more importantly, he used the stage for royal rhetoric, presenting an image of an ideal king as well as ideal subjects.

Providing a loose framework around the project as a whole, Andreas Hellerstedt (History of Ideas) studies Scandinavian mirrors for princes from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century. This includes a relatively small

number of texts, and thus it is possible to study their development over a long period of time. Despite strong continuities and a living tradition, a number of important changes are observed. Most important among them is a slow shift from ends to means. Where the earliest texts consider politics as the means of achieving virtue, the later texts regard virtue as a means for preserving the state or even the personal interest of the ruler.

Together, we argue that premodern societies were characterized by a search for answers to questions about the good life for mankind. Perhaps this can be said of almost all human societies throughout history. Even so, the history of virtue seems, in our view, a particularly fruitful approach when studying premodern periods. It is hard to deny that systems of moral philosophy, and more day-to-day moral ideas and practices in which virtue was also prominent, were incredibly important in premodern societies. Thus, we believe that the history of virtue is central to understanding these societies, and that even the criticism of virtue and virtue ethics tells us important things about how men and women thought and acted in ages long past.

Furthermore, our perspective can provide the benefits of long-term historical study. Through comparison of the development of concepts, and by contrasting them with competing views, systems of thought, and patterns of human action, they will stand out more clearly to us. In that sense, 'Teaching Virtue' is perhaps part of a larger turn back towards a history of the *longue durée*. It may be that historians in recent years have in fact regained some faith in the capacity of their subject to contribute something to our understanding of what it means to be human, more than any purported contribution to short-term political utility. Swedish historian David Larsson has argued that in particular cultural history, with a breadth in terms of method and a depth in terms of time frames, will indeed be forced to confront larger issues, such as distinguishing between what is universally human and what is in fact period- or context-specific.[54] It will be sufficiently clear from what has already been said that this is more than relevant to the long history of virtue. It has, however, also been claimed that our interest in history has 'existential' aspects, that we have a 'need' of history, and so on.[55] Surely this is a consequence of the fact that scholars within the humanities at present are experiencing increasing difficulties in countering the demands of short-sighted public utility: history, like all forms of education, it is claimed, must make itself useful. To me a golden

54 Larsson [Heidenblad], 'Vilka tidsrymder angår oss?', pp. 758-59; Österberg, 'Den omoderna människan'.

55 For instance, Österberg, 'Den omoderna människan'.

mean is good enough, a long-term utility, if you will. In fact, I believe this to be something we can actually learn from history itself, that is, that we *can* actually learn from history. I am not speaking of any moral lessons or the fulfilment of existential needs. I would simply claim that history is a story of human action. This was a view defended with great force in premodern societies: 'thus, if someone wishes to be successful in his endeavours, he should employ the same means, with which others have sought the same goal. For there seems to be no reason, why that should fail to happen, which has happened before, and why the same cause should not have the same effect, *ceteris paribus*',[56] a professor at Uppsala University stated in 1743. His grandfather, also a professor at the same university, wrote some 60 years previously, that 'to the means, with which those who are best equipped to govern the state take up their office, history belongs, which is the witness of truth, and the best works of the best writers'.[57] Why should the same not be applicable today? British archaeologist Richard Miles seems to think so, and in his simple expression echoes the same idea: 'it [i.e. history] is the story of us, then'.[58] This may lead us to abandon notions of the past as 'a foreign country' and realize, with Miles, that history is indeed a mirror.[59]

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56 Ihre/Wargentin, *De politica Machiavelli*, p. 4.

57 Matthias Steuchius, ep. ded., in Norcopensis/Forelius, *Gubernacula*. Both Ihre and Steuchius based their arguments on Machiavelli, *Discorsi* 3.43, pp. 564-66.

58 Miles, *Ancient Worlds*, p. xxv.

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