

# *Spiritual Care: The Spiritual Side of a Culture of Care*

Luigina Mortari

## **Premise**

'Spirituality' comes from the Latin word *spiritualitas*. In Latin, *spiritus* is breath, the breath that keeps us in life. In the Italian language, '*aver spirito*,' to 'have spirit,' signifies having an inner energy that manifests itself in a positive way of being. In ancient Greek, the spirit, the vital breath, is designated by the term *psyché*, meaning 'soul.' But *psyché* has another meaning, that of 'butterfly.' The butterfly is an extremely delicate entity, which lives by its beauty: if we touch the colored patterns on its wings, these patterns are irrevocably damaged and the butterfly, violated in its delicate beauty, will never fly again. The soul, the spirit that gives life to that being-here that we are, is like a butterfly: it has the energy to fly high but is also extremely fragile. So our spiritual life requires care.

This chapter will address care for the spiritual life that is the essence of our human life. The main reference point for this study on spirituality is ancient Greek philosophy, in particular the theories of Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch. The reason for this choice is that ancient Greek thought, the root of Western culture, offers seeds of wisdom which, if they become at this historical moment the object of intense reflection, could generate a new politics of existence, more faithful to the needs of the human condition. Indeed in ancient Greek philosophy, we find the seminal concepts of care, spirituality, and ethics. Here the spiritual life is conceived as a primary ontological tension, which is in the soul before any systematic interpretation

given by the different religions. This spiritual activity is the answer to an originary need that each human being can engage in if he/she stops any practical involvement and listens to the intimate logos that speaks inside him/her. As the Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano claims, if we stop acting and silence the mind, then the soul can explore the 'originary deep root of life,' a generative matrix that takes place before any vital concrete phenomenon (2011, 49). To perceive this "deep root" means to perceive the mystery that accompanies life. Zambrano suggests that the first way in which reality manifests itself to the human being is that of complete concealment and the first reality that conceals itself to the human consciousness is the essence of the human condition (2011, 48). To feel mystery is the essential nourishment of spiritual life. If there is no consciousness of the puzzle and acceptance of the insolubility of this mystery, there cannot be an authentic spiritual life.

To nourish the spiritual life is to care for the soul. Nowadays, to theorize on care is a fundamental cultural field; in particular, care ethics is a discourse essential for a politics of care. But when the object is spiritual activity, care ethics reveals a limit that obliges us to rethink it. Indeed, care ethics is based on an embodied conception of care and forgets the immaterial dimension of human life, but also the immaterial life requires care. Care is said to have as object "child care and people who are disabled, chronically ill or elderly" (Robinson 2011, 1). When Fiona Robinson lists the problems that are a consequence of the lack of care, she speaks of health problems (2011, 3). In short, care is conceived as the action to provide things that are essential to preserve life and repair it when the body becomes ill: these are real dramatic problems. But human life is also spiritual life since to be human means breathing the breath of the soul. For that ontological quality, care not only requires providing material things (biological resources, home to inhabit and where to live in the shelter of the weather, and therapeutic gestures of cure) and provide immaterial things that can nourish the spiritual life.

This study assumes that the ancient Greek philosophy is an essential reference to spiritual care since this tradition has given intensive

attention to celebrating care as spiritual nourishment (Mortari 2016). But, since the theories on ethics of care have been developed in the contemporary culture, it is necessary also to refer to the scholars of “care ethics”; many of these are women who reflect on care starting from the analysis of their direct concrete experience.

For a rigorous discourse, an obliged step consists in making evident the ontological primacy of care. Accordingly, I start from an eidetic phenomenological analysis of the human condition to name its ontological qualities (Mortari 2018); the rationale for this inquiry is that identifying the ontological essence of human life is a necessary step to provide a rigorous ground both for a theory of care and for the cultivation of spirituality. To enroot the discourse in the concrete reality, the reflection is grounded on previous empirical research on the practices of care (Mortari and Saiani, 2014). Theoretical and empirical analysis makes evident the need for a new kind of politics of existence where care, ethics, and the cultivation of spirituality must become the cornerstone. Since human life is a continuous moving in time that is oriented by the desire for good, then to understand the right way to interpret the spiritual life is to reflect on this tension. Such reflection is necessary to discover a practice of caring spirituality.

#### *The ontological call to care*

Much of contemporary philosophy has in many ways betrayed its original purpose, which is to reflect on life to find the knowledge of living, which in ancient Greek is called the ‘technique for living.’ Philosophy seeks knowledge that helps us live and find the proper measure to inhabit our own time; thus, it should be conceived as a form of practical thought that day by day seeks a living and transformative truth capable of orienting the practice of care for our life. Saying that philosophy is the philosophy of existence is like saying that technique of colors is the science of painting

It is essential to seek a technique for living because, as beings, we are incomplete. We are a bundle of possibilities, which must find the knowledge necessary to give form and meaning to life. Indeed, if we

carry out a phenomenological analysis of the human condition, we discover ourselves as uncomplete entities called to become our being. We are not fully realised, but we are potentialities of being. We are *dynamis*, a Greek term that means potentiality not yet unrealised. Our being exists within the possibility of being. We are energy in search of form. In ancient Greek, 'form' is *eidos* that also means 'idea'; this double meaning shows that our search for a form of life requires an idea. To be called to give shape to our being means to be called to transcendence, going beyond what already is, to create the possibilities of a fully human life. Being called to search for a form of life is the essence of the human condition.

This essence can be problematic for us, insofar as the idea of being-here is not a thing we have but which we have to search for. This lack of an ontogenerative idea for shaping our being in the world makes us radically different from other forms of life. Like other animals, we are part of nature and, as the poet Rilke claims (1996), like every natural entity, we are at risk since nature protects nothing; indeed, every entity born to life is abandoned to itself and at risk. We are not only at risk, but we are also risk-takers, for unlike other creatures, who are born with a ready-made map for living, we have to construct our path on our own time. We are not like the migratory birds that know straight away how to cross the sea; in order to cross the time of life, we must construct a map that guides the steps of living. We need an idea of life.

Because of this ontological condition, we need a technique for living, in other words, a philosophy for existence that consists in orienting the search for the best idea for modeling life and for identifying the actions that are necessary to actualize this idea. Moreover, this ontogenerative work is challenging because the human condition is fragile and vulnerable. Indeed, we do not have sovereignty over life, and we are always dependent on the other.

We do not have sovereignty over life because we are positioned in time beyond our choosing. For our entire lives, we are assigned to time; like a log dragged into the sea, we are immersed in the continuous flow

of time without having the possibility to decide the rhythm of living. We do not have the power to move from not-being to being-there. We are our potentialities of being-there, but we do not have the primary potentiality to begin to be in the world.

When we arrive in the world, we find ourselves always dependent on what is other than us. We are dependent on nature because to conserve life in its biological materiality. We need things that only the natural world can give us. Yet, we do not live only biological life, but an immaterial life, and to conserve and nourish this life, we need things that only the other human beings can give to us. We are relational beings, and all our conditionedness consists in this relatedness. The lack of sovereignty and the conditionedness make human life particularly fragile and vulnerable.

The reflection on the fact that human beings are conditioned entities is developed by Hannah Arendt (1958, 9). But her discourse analyzes the ontological dimensions of the “conditionedness,” especially in relation to the physical and manufactured world, without deepening the problematic dependency of a person concerning others. We must wait for the feminist thought on care to find a more complete and gendered analysis of the dependent condition of human beings. In particular, the work of Eva Kittay should be considered. Kittay, starting from the analysis of her experience, defines the labor of care as a dependency work by identifying the work of caring with a practice for those who are inevitably dependent (1999, ix). As regards the concept of dependency, Kittay outlines that all human beings are dependent on others. Still, there are some periods of time (infancy, childhood, old age) where the dependency is more intense and, for some persons, even becomes an insuperable condition of life (disabled people, chronic patients). Moreover, dependent persons require more care: this is an unquestionable phenomenical data. But, as regards this data, a political dramatic problem is evident: care for dependent persons is a burden of women, and the women who take care are in a disadvantaged social position, since the labor of care is devalued and unpaid (Kittay 1999, xi).

*The sophia of existence*

Being called to give a shape to life, the best possible shape, to our possibilities of existing given our immersion in a condition of fragility and vulnerability makes it necessary *to care for life*. Even if there is not a well-defined concept of care (Hamington 2004, 2), everybody knows from experience that care is essential to life. Without care, we cannot live, since to care for life means nourishing and protecting ourselves, creating the conditions for life to flourish, and to repair life when the body or the soul suffers injury. Care is an indispensable way of being since the human condition is that of being called to “care for oneself by oneself” (Plato, *Statesman*, 274d). Thus, to care for life is to care for oneself, for others, and for the contexts in which we live, both natural and artificial.

Among contemporary theorists, the first thinker who reflected on care was Heidegger (1962). When Heidegger addresses care, he refers back to an ancient tale whose protagonist Cura gives form to the human condition by fashioning some clay she finds along a riverbank. This mythical tale is a metaphor to say that being-in-the-world means to have the responsibility to find the right way and the right actions for modeling our being-there. Indeed, we who are *dynamis*, in other words, potentialities of becoming something, bring about our potential for being through actions which shape the form of life. The *technique of living* consists in understanding what actions to carry out in order to shape a good life and how to put them into practice.

To conceive the *technique of living* means having the knowledge and wisdom of care; in other words, knowing what good care is and how to put it into practice. If human beings possessed the knowledge and wisdom of living, they would be capable of what Socrates defines as “perfect care” (*First Alcibiades*, 128b), and they would experience the full pleasure of being in the world. If it is true that care, insofar as it is a primary ontological action, guides our being-there to its essence, then having care for oneself and for others is not only a possible ideal for existence but the first and originating necessity for being. In this sense, care is the ethics of being in the world.

In the *First Alcibiades* Socrates engages the young Alcibiades in a dialogue that has as its object the theme of “care for self”. In order to reach an understanding of what it means to care for oneself, Socrates explains that it is fundamental to understand the nature of our essence, and after many dialogic exchanges Alcibiades reaches the conclusion that our essence is the life of the soul (*First Alcibiades*, 128c). Beginning with this ontological assumption, care for oneself is seen to care for the soul. As introduced above, in ancient Greek, the ‘soul’ is termed *psyché*, and this term means the vital breath, the spirit; so, if our essence is in the soul, then it follows that our essence consists in the spiritual life. If we accept this Platonic ontological vision, then the primary question for life is to understand how to care for the soul, for our spiritual life.

But what does it mean, to care for the soul? Socrates guides Alcibiades to understand that to have proper care for the soul (*First Alcibiades*, 128b) is to care for the virtue of the soul, and that virtue consists in searching for *sophia* (133b) (in Latin: *sapientia*), a word commonly translated as wisdom. Socrates explains to Alcibiades that the search for *sophia* consists in knowing our own essence and what are the good things for life (*First Alcibiades*, 134d). This search is a spiritual work, for this knowledge nourishes the life of the soul of what is the truth for existence. So the *sophia*, in other words being in possession of the technique for living, is knowing “the good things” for life (*First Alcibiades*, 134d), “the realities that are worthy of love” (*Phaedrus*, 250d), those which are to be sought in order to make life a time worthy of being lived.

The virtue of the soul, which consists in dedicating vital energy to search for what is good for human life, is the first virtue of politics (*First Alcibiades*, 134b-c); politics, understood as the actions which shape our way of living together, needs the *sophia*, in other words it needs to know what are the good things for all citizens.

Since this chapter explores the radical importance of thematizing care with regard to the spiritual life in the present time, the Platonic theory of “care for soul” is relevant. However, this consideration should not overlook the limits of the intellectual Platonic theory of



care: not only is it a theory conceived by men for men, but it is also focused on the soul and forgets the body as an object of care. Instead, the feminist theory of care assumes the importance of the body and analyzes the practice of care as an embodied action (Hamington 2004; Kittay 1999; Kittay and Feder, 2002; Tronto 1993, 2015). Conversely, the necessity to emphasize the embodied side of care brought some scholars to set aside attention to care for the life of the mind. Reexamining the concept of care in Plato allows us to rethink care as a cognitive and spiritual work and, at the same time, to find in this philosophy the first conception of politics as a work of care, precisely the work of caring for the community. Constructing bridges among different traditions (as Vrinda Dalmiya does by relating care with both virtue epistemology, which has Aristotelian roots, and the Sanskrit epic, *Mahābhārata* (Dalmiya 2016)), certainly requires a rigorous method and epistemic precautions. Still, it can fertilize new generative frameworks of thinking.

*The necessity of the good*

The first virtue of the soul is to remain faithful to the first necessity of human life: to search for the good. Human life is not something already realised, but it searches for its shape, and the *telos*, or the purpose, that guides this existential search is the idea of good. The search for *sophia* leads to the “plain of truth” (*Phaedrus*, 248b) if we remain faithful to what is of prime necessity for human life, in other words what is good. Socrates states that perfect care takes place when we make something better (*First Alcibiades*, 128b), but in order to make something better it is necessary to have an idea of good. Thus, the first essential virtue is keeping the soul directed towards the search for the good, since this is the necessary condition in order to care for life. The search for the good is the fundamental research for life. There is not ethics, religion, or spiritual traditions if there is not the search for the good. And the proper *telos* (aim) of the spiritual activity consists in reflecting on the good.

The idea of good is fundamental in ancient philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Plutarch. But over time ethics has forgotten to



reflect on what is good. The idea of good is not an esoteric notion, but it is the tool of every human being (Murdoch 1997, 301). Nonetheless, a perfect understanding of this idea cannot be grasped, and so placing ethical action on the plain of the search for what is good means taking on a work of thought that can never end. For this reason Murdoch states that the quality of the ethical action is to be endless (1997, 321). Consequently the practice of care, that is ethical in its essence, is immersed in an inevitable imperfection, and for this reason it requires dedicated thinking to examine in depth the ethical questions that correlate with the question of good.

Plato defines the idea of good as “the most important knowledge” (*Republic*, VI, 505a), because it is only with a knowledge of this idea that we can discern things of value for life: what is “the most desirable life” (*Philebus*, 61e). We constantly find ourselves faced with choices, to the extent that we might say the question which indicates the problematic nature of human life is “what should we do?” and only the idea of what is good can help us find what is truly worthy of choice (*Philebus*, 22b). For this reason the idea of the good constitutes the greatest knowledge, not because this is a knowledge that we reach at the end of a long path, but because the idea of good should be at the basis of any research.

The good is what every soul pursues, and because of which a person carries out all their actions (Plato, *Republic*, VI, 505d-e). We always pursue what is good, even when we simply walk, since when we walk, we suppose that it is better to walk, and conversely, we stand still when we think that this is good (*Gorgias*, 468b). In the first book of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, closely related to the question Plato raises in the *Euthydemus* (278e), “Is it not perhaps true that all men wish for good?” is Aristotle’s statement that every being tends towards what is good (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 1, 1094a). A faithful interpreter of Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus writes that the properly human thought is this: “to move towards what is good and to desire it” (*Enneads*, V 6, 5, 5-9), since “the energy of all things is turned towards what is good” (*Enneads*, V 6, 5, 15-19).

If we feel that there is some truth in this vision, then being in the world according to nature, that is, according to the proper order of things, means seeking the form of being by situating our search “in the order of what is good” (Plotinus, *Enneads*, III 5, 1). To maintain our desire to search for what is good is to follow the path of the hedgehog, because as the poet Archilochus says, “the fox knows many things, the hedgehog just one, but it is a very important one” (fragment 30).

Staying with our thought in reality and following the intimate order of things means *staying within the necessity of the good*. The essence of having care for life is within the order of the most difficult simplicity: doing that which, and only that which, good asks of us, even if our vision is imperfect; this is the meaning of *staying within the necessity of the real*. Staying within the necessity of the good is an indicator of a pure choice, that choice where there is no choice (Murdoch 1997, 332). In this sense doing what is right is “obedience to reality” (Murdoch 1997, 332). If we reach the point of grasping what in reality is necessary, the problem of will is no longer an issue since the right action becomes that of obeying reality itself.

The expression “*staying within the necessity of the real*” might be perceived as problematic in that it seems to subtract value from liberty, but in reality it asserts that the greatest liberty consists in answering the call of what is good. A passage from the *Republic* reinforces this point. Socrates claims that the person who is lacking in education is the one who confuses what is necessary with what is good (493c). This statement might seem to be in contrast with the thesis of the identity between the necessary and the good, but the statement should be interpreted in light of Socrates’ observations in the immediately preceding lines, where he states that the person who lacks education is the one who has no real knowledge of what is high-minded or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, and thus tends to define as good the things which he likes and as bad those things which make him suffer (493c), thus mistaking “subjective necessity” for the “true necessity” which lies in the objective order of things. Subjective necessity is defined as “Diomedean necessity”, which

consists in the compulsion to do only the sort of things that please us, and not the things that are truly good and beautiful (493d). Staying within the necessity of the real means following the good necessity: the necessity is suggested by what is good, adhering to that which will grant us the feeling of maximum liberty. Knowing what is good not subjectively but objectively, that is, means knowing the truth of living. This truth does not require great effort; rather, it activates an intimate consensus of the soul. Truth, which is knowledge of what is necessary to do good, is the real fount of free acts, the only generator of true sense, the one which gives life to life. By acting in accordance with the necessity of what is good we experience an instant of maximum intensity of being in the world. To live according to the sense of what is necessary requests that form of passivity in which the maximum intensity of the being-there is realised.

This thesis about the good is not the result of an abstract reasoning, but comes from an analysis of experience. When we ask a person who has carried out actions which have been defined by others as of good care, in the sense that they have had the effect of making another feel to have experienced something good, he/she replies in a very simple and effective way from which it is easy to infer that *doing something which does good to the other is something which is necessary and which he/she does simply because it must be done, almost without thinking about it*. A nurse who did not spare her energies in the most difficult early moment of the coronavirus epidemic (February to May 2020), spoke to me about the difficult situation she found herself facing in times of exhaustion. Patients were arriving one after the other and there was very little time and not enough staff. She said: “I didn’t dwell on the thoughts, by thinking too much, I just do what I have to do” (*Luisa*). When we grasp what we must do in order to do good, the mind does not need to come up with complex reasons or elaborate thinking, we just act as the necessity of good asks to us and that is all.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The work of thinking, which is typical of philosophizing, makes sense if it is not only “thinking on the desk” but “thinking into the reality”; for this reason,

María Zambrano claims that at the moment of decision the conscience aches a “subtle suffering” because to decide to act always involves a kind of violence (2011, 72). But the empirical research on the act of deciding in the practice of care reveals that those who act by obeying to the necessity of the good do not avoid the sufferance of the decision; it is a sort of pure action. The analysis of decision-making processes shows it not true that “moral choice is often a mysterious matter” (Murdoch 1997, 342); rather it is very clear, becoming mysterious only if we seek in the agent the confirmation of sophisticated philosophical reasonings carried out in the abstract. The straightforward yet essential way of reasoning of those who are engaged in the practice of care “is not a proof that convinces those who prefer subtle reasonings, but only the wise men” (*Phaedrus*, 245c). The thinking of just people, which is to say those people capable of a just care, is always very simple and essential. The ethical agents reasons thus: reality demands something good and so that is what is done. The actions which have “most purity, most energy, most life” are carried out without the need for complicated acts (Plotinus, *Enneads*, I 4, 10, 25-30). Ethics is far removed from any calculation

I cultivate the reflection on the philosophical traditions and the empirical inquiry at the same time. To stay with the thinking among the things, by listening to the voice of people, is a form of teaching, which I have learned from two women philosophers: María Zambrano and Simone Weil. There is a rich truth in the telling full of sufferance of a nurse, in the telling full of passion of a teacher, in the telling full of ethical dilemmas of a social worker, than in some books about care. When you adopt the phenomenological method, which emphasizes thematizing across phenomena, it happens that some theorizations shatter under the impact of the experience. Nobody can spoil the value of Levinas’ thought, that provides useful categories to meditate on care; however the analysis of caregivers’ reasonings shows that his theory, according to which “the responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision” (1998, 10), is not in accordance with the data that emerge from the analysis of the ways of reasoning a caring person develops when he/she is challenged by a critical decision. Indeed, to care for the other always requires a decision and it is just because I take the decision to act for the other that I can care for her/him. Perhaps it is true that “the good ... has chosen me before I have chosen it” (Levinas 1998, 11), but if my conscience does not decide to obey to the call of the good there is not the possibility of an authentic ethical presence.

(Aristotle, *Ret.*, 1389a), from any rules, from any self-obligation. Ethics of care is answering with solicitude to the quest of making good.

Obedience to reality does not mean accepting everything which happens; this is blindness. Rather, it means keeping our desire oriented towards the first necessary choice, which is guided by the search for what is good. Desire leads to something good if, as the ancient Greek affirmed, it is *kata physis*, that is, in accordance with nature. Acting in accordance with nature is quite different from acting in spontaneous fashion, and means keeping faithful to the order of the real; such is the desire which is an expression of the tension felt by the soul and the soul in its originating tension, seeks that which is good. The Stoic philosopher Zeno maintained that the human being is required to be coherent with the nature of things and that this is the first virtue (Radice 2018, 87). We can understand this thesis if, when we translate the Greek term *physis* with the word nature, we understand it not as a collection of natural entities but as a living energy, the energy which makes all things be. Since the energy of the human being is a part of natural energy, when it acts in search for what is good, it acts in accordance with nature, for every entity which exists seeks the good. In this sense seeking what is good is obedience to the necessity of the real. Adhering to the necessity of the real means keeping our desire anchored in reality: as reality asks for what is good, the proper desire is to respond to the request for the good. This is the ethical nucleus of the right and good action of care.

According to Murdoch, it is the idea of perfection which should be at the heart of ethical reflection, and which should be sought beginning with the question “how can we make ourselves better?” (1997, 364). Instead, it is a mistake to assume that this is the central question of ethics, as it leads the individual to concentrate on himself. It is a misleading question because it is not realistic in the sense that it does not adhere to the quality of the real; as a question it is not faithful to the ecology of life where everything is interconnected, and insofar as it is not realistic it cannot be ethical. Besides, excessive attention to this question risks generating attitudes of neurosis. It is

the idea of what is good that should be at the heart of ethics and which should constitute the object of thought.

The first ethical question, that is the essential question of care, is *how to make something good*. This is what ethics consists of. Ethics comes from the Greek *éthos*, which means not only habit and character, as it is usually understood, but above all dwelling, or home. When the human being is born he does not yet have his dwelling place; when he/she is born he/she finds himself with his/her roots in the earth and his/her branches stretched towards the sky, and from this position he/she must search for a home where he/she can inhabit the time of his life. He/she must seek a home for his soul, what Socrates calls “the plane of truth” (*Phaedrus*, 248b). Since constructing the home of the soul is having care for life, the knowledge to construct the home, in other words ethics, is the ethics of care. Ethics, the wisdom of inhabiting the earth and living under the sky, is, then, the wisdom of care, thus requiring both a concrete involvement in care actions and the practice of the care for the soul, since, without cultivating the soul we do not have the possibility to develop the intimate cognitive and affective postures that constitute the essence of care.

Before developing the other parts of the discourse, it is necessary to explicate the relation between care ethics in its feminist root and the conception of ethics delineated here. Care ethics is a feminist perspective (Bowden 1997; Bubeck 1995; Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Held 2006) and the feminist tradition would appear not compatible with the male-dominated philosophy of Plato and Aristotle that, instead, constitutes the main reference of the present conception of ethics that is developed in this study. But, through my empirical research on the practice of care, I have found the same ethical core, in the sense that at the core of the ancient philosophy as well as at the core of the action of care there is the question of good.

My method of inquiry is phenomenology as way of inquiry that searches for the essence of the things and the phenomenological method is the analysis of a phenomenon. Care is a practice and as a practice is a phenomenon. By following the phenomenological method I investigated many practices of care worked out by mothers

with children in foster care, teachers, social workers, educators, and nurses. Through interviews and narratives, I searched for grasping what is the essence of the work of care: it resulted that when a person cares for he/she searches for a good experience for oneself, or for the other, or for the community. This indicated that the decision to care for the other is the desire to create the conditions that allow he/she to have experience of the good.

Ethics is first of all a practice: the practice of searching what makes possible to have an experience of good. From the analysis of experience it resulted that at the core of ethics of care there is the search for good. But that is the main question of the Platonic and Aristotelian thought. To care is to search what is good for the other. It is on this concrete phenomenonic data that it is legitimate to take into consideration the Platonic reflections on good in order to construct the meaning of the ethics of care. As Iris Murdoch states (1997), the problem of the modern and the contemporary philosophy consists in forgetting the question of good and the analysis of care demonstrates the necessity to go back to the thought of Plato for take those reflections that are important for going to the essence of care.

In summary: (a) care ethics assumes care as the pivotal way of acting and care means placing the other at the center of action; it is radically different both from the Kantian normative conception of ethics and from the utilitaristic view. (b) Also the ancient Greek ethics is neither normative nor utilitaristic, since it conceives the ethical way of being not as an application of rules but a practice based on a continuous reflection on the question of good. (c) The analysis of the practices of care makes evident that good care is ethical in its essence since it is moved by the aim to contribute to the other have experience of a better condition; at the center of the thought of a caregiver there is the question of the good of the other: if we analyze this statement we find in it both the situational view of care ethics and the primary place of good of the ancient philosophies. This flow of reasoning makes evident that it is necessary to avoid any ideological preclusion about some traditions of thought. The reality teaches to build bridges and not to establish separations.



*Yet there is no science of the good*

In the *First Alcibiades* Socrates raises a fundamental question: “what does taking perfect care consist of (128b)?” If we accept the vision according to care seeks what is good, then it follows that good and just care should have as its reference point the perfect idea of what is good. In other words, what are the things of value, those which make life worth living? But in Platonic ontology what is perfect and right is only that which is outside time. It is something both pure and transparent, from which the truth of all things flows. Thus even were the perfect idea of good to exist, it would not be accessible to our imperfect gaze; such an idea is not accessible to ordinary thought, which is to say thought which moves in time, but only to a thought which is not a thought, which realises itself in contemplation; and contemplation is a kind of thinking that does not act and does not develop. The contemplative soul is described in the *Phaedrus* (247b-c): it takes its stand on the high ridge of heaven and a circular motion carries it around those things which must be known. In contemplation there is no movement for the soul, but it is moved around; the soul finds itself in a situation of entrustment to an energy different to itself, which moves it. It is this condition of passivity which allows knowledge of the essence of things. But for us, even while we are stardust which yet retains something of the essence of the real, it is not possible to remain within a condition of pure passivity. Our mode of being is always that of action, and this goes for thought as well.

According to Plotinus, thought which manages to approach what is good cannot be ordinary thought, which thinks by means of differences and opposites and proceeds by reasoning: it can only be intuition (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V 6, 6), that is, the thought that sees the thing with absolute immediacy. But intuition thus conceived is not available to human reason which acts upon the object; thought always takes as its starting point a circumscribed space within which the process of “adaptation” and “assimilation” of the object takes place.

In the thought of the ancients, the good is something perfect and whole, which does not lend itself to being grasped through the

technicalities of reason and its need to analyse and separate, in order then to re-compose. This is perhaps why Murdoch—even though she does not quote Plotinus—maintains that thought which thinks what is good is in some way analogous to prayer (1997, 356), deploying this term to refer not to a religious practice but to a way of thinking which realises itself in full attentiveness to the object.

The reference to contemplation is therefore difficult to sustain, for the mind engaged in understanding something obscure has a need to act upon the object. We come into the world called upon to act; having care, which is our proper mode of being, cannot but be an action, and this holds also for the life of the mind, in the sense that thought which has care for ideas, realises itself through diverse cognitive moves. We cannot but act, and therefore entrust ourselves to the imperfect way of thought which is accessible to us.

If we discard contemplation as a mode of knowledge, we are left with thought in its normal form as the human mind knows it: thinking which knows that it always has to search and thereby proceed by successive approximations within a reality which always retains an area of opacity. The thinking which seeks a true knowledge of human affairs is the thinking which manifests itself, as the Socratic method teaches us, by circling repeatedly around questions (*Philebus*, 24d-e). A divine mind does not need to ‘construct’ truth, but since it is capable of a perfect realism, which consists in being able to see the thing just as it is, truth is something which is welcomed in; the human mind on the other hand proceeds by way of reasoning, and reasoning proceeds by degrees. In this proceeding, which can be long and arduous, there may be many obstacles to make us stumble, many choices to be made along the path to be followed, and all of these moments imply something impure which sneaks in. For this reason, what is to be sought is the greatest clarity of thought and purity of attention (Murdoch 1997, 356). Seeking “clarity and purity” (*Philebus*, 57c) means avoiding fantasy, which “can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person” (Murdoch 1997, 357), and seeking words which help us to see reality in its essence, avoiding the opacity of that way of thinking which

approaches things in a manner already conditioned by pre-structured theories.

The thinking which seeks to grasp the essence of the good is thus arduous work, but even if we cultivate thought in the best way possible, the idea of good is destined to remain inaccessible. Such an idea is not knowable by human reason because it is of a different order, the mind being of the same quality as life: uncertain, fragile, always lacking something. Plato warns us that knowledge of the good is not of this world, in that if someone were to reach the point of acquiring this knowledge, he would become a stranger to other human beings, to the extent of being persecuted because nobody would be able to understand what he was saying (*Republic*, VI, 516e-517a). It is given only to divine creatures to know the idea of good, and even were they to be able to explain it, we would not understand the definition, such is the perfection of the idea of good compared to the imperfection of human thought (Xenophanes, fragment 34).

It is disorienting to note that the mind thinks ideas which it cannot comprehend, as it is when the mind thinks of the idea of the infinite. It thinks ideas which it cannot hold within the borders of its reasonings. And yet it can conceive of them without them appearing mere invention or fantasy. We can conceive some ideas because our thought is no other than the thought which governs the real, since as all the things also we are part of the *logos* of the universe; however we cannot explain them since the *logos* that permeates the universe is present in our mind only in small and insignificant amounts (*Philebus*, 29c). The perfect idea of good is not given to us. It would therefore be out of place to seek the “entire knowledge of all things” (*Philebus*, 30b), while we can search for the “*sophia* of the human things” (*Apology of Socrates*, 20d).

In spite of the impossibility of defining good, we cannot avoid taking on this search because we will never be able to know what it is best to seek and to do if we do not know what is good (Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI 7, 19). But what we need to seek is an idea of good which is consonant with the quality of the human condition; “a mortal

being must have mortal, not immortal thoughts” (Epicharmus, fragment 20). For this reason Socrates suggests shifting our attention: “let’s abandon the quest for what the good itself is... it is too big a topic” and he proposes examining questions that are offspring of the good, which is to say questions which are congruent but of lesser difficulty (*Republic*, 506e). If we are in authentic search for the truth, it is possible to reach the threshold of the house where the good inhabits (*Philebus*, 64c).

*The practical idea of good*

The idea of good to be sought cannot then be the perfect idea, which is situated in the space of realities which are always identical to themselves and which know no change (*Philebus*, 59c), but it must be an idea congruent with human nature and at the same time daughter of the perfect idea of good (*Republic*, 506e). Such is the idea of “the practical good” which is realised through actions (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1097a 23), for it is actions which constitute the essential element of existence, in that the quality of life depends largely on them (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 10, 1100b 33). Care ethics is not a theory, but it is a way of being in relationship with the other, which is guided by a practical idea of good. We are placed within reality not as spectators, whose being consists in contemplating what takes place, but as agents. Action, through gestures and words, is a property of the human being; the good to be sought is, as a consequence, something which is configured as the outcome of actions. Indeed, the question which characterizes our being in the world and as such is an index of the problematic nature of human condition is “what are we to do?”.

The following question is therefore decisive: which actions should be carried out? According to Aristotle they are those actions which allow us to have experience of *eudaimonia* (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 4, 1095a 18-19). At this point, in order to verify if the meaning of *eudaimonia* is pertinent to the practice of care, it is vital to clarify the meaning of the this term. Generally *eudaimonia* is translated by “happiness”, but here we should attempt a literal, more faithful meaning.

The Greek word *eudaimonia* is composed of ‘*eu*’ and ‘*daimon*’; ‘*eu*’ means “in a good way” and ‘*daimon*’ means not only the divinity, and precisely the divinity that dispenses destiny, but also spirit. In many dialogues Socrates speaks of his daemon, that is his conscience, which tells him what he must not do. *Eudaimonia*, understood as the good to which the human being tends, therefore consists in a good quality of the life of the soul.

The meaning attributed here to the term ‘*eudaimonia*’ is supported by a passage of *Philebus* (11d), where, after posing the question of good, Socrates turns to his interlocutors Protarchus and Philebus and asks them to indicate the condition and disposition on which depends the potential of the soul to reach a “good *eudaimonia*”. From this passage we deduce that *eudaimonia* is held to consist in a way of being of the soul. When Aristotle states that “the greatest goods are those of the soul” (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1098b 14-15) and that these goods consist in its actions and its activities, he is expressing his complete accord with the Socratic/Platonic thesis. The actions and activities of the soul are the spiritual practices through which we realise care for self (Hadot, 2002).

*Eudaimonia* is a perfect good because it is always chosen for itself, never in view of anything else (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1097a 34); it is the thing which is most beautiful and most good, and therefore also the most pleasing (*Eudemian Ethics*, I, 1, 1214a 7-8). The term *eudaimonia* indicates “living well” and since the human being is essentially an agent, “living well” is the same as “acting well” (*Eudemian Ethics*, II, 1, 1219b 1-2; *Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 4, 1095a 19-20).

When a person cares for another one, she/he acts guided from the aim to procure a better condition for her/him; at the basis of her/his behavior there is the awareness that to act in a right way is the most important thing. The wellbeing of the soul springs up from this ethical kind of action. Thus, we can affirm that the practice of care, when it meets the needs of the other in the right way, procures *eudaimonia* both to the *caregiver* and the *cared for*.

Care ethics reveals itself in the practice, which results to be meaningful for the caregiver even if care is a labor that requires a demanding

involvement. This occurs because to care is to act in a just way and the awareness of it is sufficient to make someone feel a positive sentiment in his/her conscience.

When I act to care for myself as well as when I act to care for another, what is crucial is the idea of good. At this regard, the practice of care teaches me that it is not only necessary to search for a concrete, immanent idea of good embodied in the daily life (about this, it is possible to speak of a materialistic spirituality as the generative matrix of care ethics), but also to cultivate a manner of thinking that is congruent with both the human limits of thinking and the essence of care. With the help of the thought of the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano we can speak of a maternal thinking, that is “narrative, humble, non-polemical, situated and compassionate” (2003, 91).

A humile thinking is aware that it is not given to us to “seize what is good in a single idea” (*Philebus*, 65a), but we must come to the question by degrees, through a plurality of questions which move between the opposites in which the movement of the real can polarize itself. The perfect idea of good pertains to a reality which is perfectly realised and always identical to itself, while we inhabit a reality which is a place of mixing, where the good is mixed with the bad, the just with the unjust, the beautiful with the ugly. Our mind is lost if it seeks a perfect idea, because it is neither conceivable nor sayable to a thought which thinks through differences: just as the life in which we find ourselves is a becoming between opposites: hot/cold, dry/wet, fast/slow and so on, so ordinary thought can find ideas which guide our actions by reasoning through difference. These are the questions which Socrates indicates as essential: “what is good and what is bad, what is admirable, what is shameful, what is just and what is unjust” (Plato, *Gorgias*, 459d). These are the primary questions, which the mind cannot avoid examining if it does not wish to dissipate itself far from what is essential. By examining these questions the soul comes to find itself on the threshold of good.

These are difficult questions which we must turn back to again and again (Plato, *Philebus*, 24d-e). When Plato/Socrates enunciates the

principle of returning again and again to questions, he is describing the movement of the blissful soul which is led in a circle in its contemplation of ideas, with the difference that here on earth, where we inhabit, the mind is not led but must gather up all its energies to take forward the work of this search. In order to find this epistemic energy, the thought which goes in search for truth, and with it other “things worthy of love” (*Phaedrus*, 250d), must be a thinking enamoured of the things to be loved.

But the property of the human condition is not only a thinking which proceeds by degrees and reasons through differences, but also that which happens with the other. We are relational beings, and we structure ourselves in relation with others. If in the pure world of ideas thinking is a contemplation of the soul which alone with itself keeps its gaze concentrated on the ideas which are always there, in the imperfect and complicated world in which we live the search for truth can only come about through dialogue with others, where minds come together and assist each other. In this sense thinking is engaging in dialogue, and those who engage in dialogue in the search for truth are said to both be capable of a thinking enamoured of those questions worthy of love (*Philebus*, 24e).

#### *Counter-hegemonic spiritual care*

The notion of spiritual care can be at risk when it is interpreted only as an intimate practice, since it can retire from the world. If Socrates indicates care for the soul as a preparation for the political life, we can also state that spiritual care is imperative for acting according to an ethics of care, since the labor of the soul that is in search for an ethics of life is an essential component of ethics and politics of care.

In this perspective, the discipline of spiritual care should challenge the tendency to interpret life on the basis of an acquisitive logic. Murdoch states that “we are blinded by self” (1997, 382) and egoism is functional to nourish the market logic which grounds neoliberalism, and this antipolitical and dangerous vision contrasts the practice of care and makes more vulnerable both the recipients of care and the caregivers. In order to cultivate a spiritual care able to challenge



the acquisitive logic it is necessary to reflect on the essence of the human condition.

When human being becomes self-conscious, he/she discover a lack: a need for something other, and at the same time an obligation towards transcendence and thus to move in the world in search of a form of life. When we leave for a trip in search of something we pack our rucksack with whatever we need for the journey; for that journey which is life the human being does not have a rucksack to begin with, not a compass, and is aware of his constitutive lack: a lack of those things necessary for life and a lack of a map of the directions for existence. For this reason he/she is assailed by a form of avidity for what he/she feels necessary in order to exist. This yearning for something other, lies at the origin of the action of self-care, and is the motivating drive which gives strength. But this desiring tension has to find the right measure, the mid-point between excess and defect; without this, it becomes a form of avidity, which transforms existence into an obsessive process of acquisition. Plutarch asserted that an essential action of the technique for living is to avoid excessive love of self (471d); indeed the perversion of the human mind when it is never satisfied with anything is the cause both of grief and suffering and of a consumistic logic that consumes the time of life.

The language we use is very often inclined towards acquisitive logic to the point of legitimising it. For example, when Plotinus says that “happiness consists in the possession of the true good” (*Enneads*, I 4, 6, 0-5), he leads us to think of good as an object which can be acquired. In this case he uses the ancient Greek term *ktésis* that indicates not simply having, but possessing as in taking hold of the thing, and he evokes a mercantile vision in that he indicates that something can be acquired. For this reason having care of spiritual life demands first of all a critical reflection on the words that we use.

Egotism has its root in our unfinished being; we are insufficient to ourselves and always in need of something other. Because where there is lack we fill the need to fill empty space (Plato, *Philebus*, 35a); from absence is born desire and the desiring being always seeks something to fill the void (Plato, *Philebus*, 35b). It is from unbearable emptiness

that acquisitive tension originates, the tension we find represented in the figure of Penia. In the *Symposium*, we read that Penia, or poverty, comes to beg at the banquet organised to celebrate the birth of Aphrodite. At the banquet, Penia finds Poros, or expediency, who falls asleep, drunk on nectar. To fill the lack in her being Penia comes up with a plan to have a child by Poros and lies down with him, and thus gives birth to Eros (*Symposium*, 203b-c). Eros, love, is thus born from poverty and expediency, and such is his essence: to be poor, lacking, and always in search of something that can fill that lack. For this reason Eros is the metaphor of the human condition, our being always in need of something other and as such needing to seek out what might fill that original lack. We are active beings moved by our desires.

What prompts our actions are our desires. In ancient Greek, the term which indicates desire is *epithymia*, which is composed of *epi* and *thymos*: *thymos* is the vital force, the soul understood as a way of feeling and desire, and *epi* indicates standing over; thus desire is a posture of mind which leans over something and that something is the idea of good towards which we tend. When what prevails is an egoistic idea of good, a gaze enclosed within the confines of our own skin, the search for good becomes an individualistic doubling down which forgets our relational essence, and thus the possibility of being in accordance with the order of things vanishes. Only when the good that we seek is open to the transcendent with regard to the self does it create movement which opens the actualisation of our own being in the world to something other which is beyond ourselves. Precisely because we are relational beings, it is only when the good we seek lies outside our own personal space that we move in accordance with the order of things.

However in our uncompleted and wishful condition there is also a tension between what exists and what lies beyond ourselves. This tension moves our being to the search for the true and good; it is our condition of neediness which makes us “searchers of knowledge for the whole of our lives” (*Symposium*, 203d). But feeling ourselves uncompleted can become a vortex pushing us to all sorts of expedients

to acquire everything that has the appearance of filling our sense of insufficiency.

The way of egoism, which interprets good as the filling up of our own emptiness, is the opposite to the way of care. We have said that care is the search for good, or rather those fragments of good that are accessible to us. According to Murdoch these fragments are lived in concrete forms by simple people. By putting into play the concept of simplicity, Murdoch is saying something essential about the good practice of care and it is worth to interpret this concept from a caring feminist perspective.

Feminist theorists argue that care ethics is radically different from a systematic approach (Noddings 1984; Held 2006). Care ethics is not conceptualized in a normative system of principles and rules, it is not the application of a norm that pretends to have a universal value, instead it is a practical response to the need of the other in a concrete situation and an immediate response to this particular condition. As the nurse Luisa explained, when the other, who depends on my actions, shows a need, the conscience has not to make reference to general rules and does not need to rest and engage in complex reasonings; what the mind feels is the urgency to make something for the other in order to make him/her live as well as possible (Tronto 2015, 4), and this requires a simple but essential way of thinking. To act on the basis of a simple and essential reasoning must not be interpreted as a spontaneous practice since the caregiver, who works out a good care, is acting in the light of an ethical perspective that is gained through a reflection on life, only that this ethics is not normative, i.e. it does not come from general rules, but from the awareness that each human being searches for the good and the right way to be in relationship with the other consists in dedicating our own practice to this research. In this sense, care ethics is a simple ethics, but a simplicity that involves all the arduous labor of the mind to find what is right to do. What is essential rests on what is simple, but the simplicity of the essential things for life are the most arduous.

If Murdoch helps us to see the essential simplicity of the ethical practice, however, she makes an assertion that is very problematic from the point of view of a feminist theory of care ethics. She identifies simplicity in the “humble people who serve others” (1997, 381). That assertion evokes the marginal position in which many female caregivers are confined (Tronto 1993) and at the same time reveals the misunderstanding of care as a service (Bubeck 1995). It is necessary to avoid such an oblativistic vision of the ethical habit that legitimates a disposition to sacrifice. Instead, consider the idea of simplicity starting with an expression in the Christian Gospels that has engaged philosophers from Husserl to Zambrano: “poverty of spirit and purity of heart.”

It is difficult to interpret this expression, for to grasp its full significance would be to go to the heart of being. Nonetheless, it would seem that “poverty of spirit” is given when we can keep to what is essential, following the ways of knowledge directed towards the primary question and seeking the essential truth of this question. “Purity of heart” can be thought of as being able to focus vital energy on cultivating the feeling which has the force to sustain the search for the real sense of being: trust, hope, serenity. These feelings keep us removed from the tendency to facile consolations, to run after fantasies, and to keep our attention on the difficulty of the real. Purity of heart is an absence of desires which distance us from the just order of things and is given over to the necessity of the call to good; poverty of thought is the capacity to bracket off those thoughts which claim to systematise the real, distancing us from the real search for truth.

Thus we can say that care for the spiritual life is what sustains clear thought and pure feeling, and spiritual care is the ground for a good practice of care since the right action is *sustained by the clarity of thought and purity of feeling*. This is the *spiritual core* of care ethics. And since care is primary in life, care ethics has to be considered the very essence of ethics.

It is necessary to further clarify to avoid a misleading interpretation of the spiritual life concerning care. The spiritual life develops in a right way when it responds to what is necessary for life, and what

is necessary is the truth, precisely the truth of existence. In contrast, science searches for the scientific truth that is useful to understand the phenomenic world, spiritual work searches for the truth that illuminates our being-in-the-world-with-the-others. But this truth is not only an outcome of reasoning but it is gained through action. Precisely, the truth of existence is realised in actions that change the human experience for the better.

Thus, spiritual life is not a mere interior activity since, if conceived in this way, it would divert from the world; instead, it is a pragmatic activity since it is made of thoughts and sentiments that are embodied in the material experience. Only the experience we live with the others is the test of the truth. So, we can speak of *materialistic spirituality*.

#### *The essence of actions of care*

Since we, as human beings, are essentially entities who act, a good quality of life depends on the quality of our actions. It is therefore of fundamental importance to determine which actions are associated with the good. If we can answer this question, we can come to identify the agency that defines good care, that care which seeks what is good.

If we consider the experience of people who are thought of as being witnesses to good care, it is self-evident that their action consists of acts which it takes no conceptual stretch to define as virtuous: they have *respect* for the other person, they act with *generosity*, they conduct themselves with a sense of *justice*, and they know how to find the *proper measure* in doing things. When it is necessary, they have *courage*.

This phenomenological data, which indicate the essence of care in virtues, finds noetic evidence in the thoughts of the ancients. For Aristotle, who conceptualised the idea of “practical good,” virtuous actions are decisive (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1100b 8-10). Acting well means acting in accordance with virtues (*Eudemian Ethics*, II, 1, 1219a 28). Thus we can say that the ethics of care is the ethics of virtues.

Plato and Aristotle are in complete agreement as to which actions might make us feel good. Socrates says that the good of the soul

consists in the virtues (*Philebus*, 48e), and Aristotle states that the good of the human being consists precisely “in the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1099b 26). In other words, “the activity of virtue is the best good for the soul” (*Eudemian Ethics*, II, 1, 1219b 32-33). It follows from this that searching for good means acting in accordance with virtue. Thus if we were to seek the answer to the essence of “perfect care,” we might say it was that which seeks good by acting according with virtue.

But since the good we seek is a practical good, the actions of the soul are not enough: we also need the practical ones. Indeed Aristotle states that for a good life, we need movements of the soul in accordance with virtue and the practical actions that draw inspiration from them (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1098b 10-14/13-14). For this reason he speaks of dianoetic or intellectual virtues, that is the virtues that inform the search for science, and political virtues, that is the practical ways of acting in the public world.

We need to be clear what we mean by the term “virtue.” It is a potentiality of being (*Rhetoric*, I, 1366a), that is to say, the way in which we model our energy, our substance, orienting it towards the search for good. Thus we can say that virtue is to live according to nature, since it is to act in accordance to the order of things that for the human being is the search for good.

With regard to the platonic question as to whether virtue is single or many, the answer is as follows: since for everything there is an essence which defines it, the same holds for virtue and its essence consists in orienting action according to the good, but since the modes by which it manifests its essence are different, virtues are many. Indeed, when Aristotle speaks of virtue in the singular he is describing the essence of the virtues as a whole; when he speaks in the plural he is listing the modes of modelling being which actualise essence: justice, courage, temperance, generosity, magnanimity, liberality, wisdom and knowledge (*Rhetoric*, I, 1366a).

Virtues, states Aristotle, “are necessarily a good, in that those who practice them feel good and are in a condition to do good things and to act well” (*Rhetoric*, I, 1362b). Virtues differ according to the energy

on which they act. Virtues of the soul [in Greek: *aretai psychés*] are the way of orienting its energy; virtues of the body [in Greek: *aretai somatos*] are the way of nourishing and conserving its energy well, keeping it healthy and looking well (*Rhetoric*, I, 1361b 1362b). Both care for the self and care for the other need spiritual virtues and material virtues; a good maternal care gratitude the soul of the child through vital and gentle words and cultivates his/her body with gestures that communicate the best respect and delicacy. The physician or the nurse reveals to be a good caregiver when he/she is related to the patient by having respect and delicacy both for his/her soul and body.

Starting from this reasoning it is possible to reinterpret the ethics of virtues. On the basis of a disembodied culture who tends to interpret virtues as disembodied acts, when we speak of “moral or civic virtues” we tend to interpret them as relational acts that are put in place from an agent who considers the other only as a rational being, without a body. Instead, a good politics of care, as suggested by the feminist thought, is a care that gives attention both to the material life and the spiritual life.

#### *Spiritual practices*

Since good actions of care must be infused by good spiritual acts, an authentic philosophy of existence is incomplete if it does not indicate the actions necessary to cultivate the life of the soul (Mortari 2014).

Plato defines as “tender and pure” (*Phaedrus*, 245a), the perfect condition that has to be searched for by the soul when it looks at truth. It is extremely difficult to achieve such a condition, because even though it is no more than a puff of air the life of the soul tends to get bogged down in the continual contact with the things of life. The soul, which is to say the organ of spiritual life, is like a shell in the sea, which over time finds itself weighed down by the algae of the sea that attach themselves to its surface.

The essential question for spiritual life then, consists in understanding how to have care for the energy of the soul and thus enable



it to maintain its purity and power of caring for life. In order to find an answer to this question we need to seek in ancient philosophy what can be defined as “spiritual practices”.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, we find some particularly insightful reflections in the philosophy of Plutarch, who speaks of “healthy thoughts” (*On Tranquillity of Mind*, 470d), those which contribute to achieving a good disposition of the soul, defined in ancient Greek by the term *euthymia*, which means a good way to feel life.

According to Plutarch, there are two ills which can afflict the soul: insensibility and ingratitude (*On Tranquillity of Mind*, 473c); in other words not feeling the quality of the real, and not acknowledging those phenomena and those actions which are indicative of the good which happens. A good quality of the life of the soul is facilitated by acts of gratitude. Thanking the other for a gesture or a word is an essential act of recognition.

The most important acts of care are gratuitous, since they are done simply because it is necessary, without expecting anything in return. But, as the language itself suggests, there is a close relationship between *gratitude* and *gratuitousness*; indeed, since acting with care requires a great deal of inner energy, both cognitive and emotional, the agent of care needs spiritual energy, and the act of gratitude that he/she could receive from the cared-for is the best nourishment. When I thank the other for what he/she has done, both her/his and our spiritual energy nourish.

Knowing how to give thanks for what it is easy to take for granted—“enjoying good health, seeing the light of the sun” (*On Tranquillity of Mind*, 469e). Knowing how to recognise the value of that “being able to speak and act” (*On Tranquillity of Mind*, 469e) is a good that we often take for granted. When we are incapable of seeing the value of what is but cannot comprehend the fragility of

<sup>2</sup> Hadot, an important French scholar of ancient philosophy, uses the expression “spiritual exercise” to signify the work directed to the education of the soul. The study of Hadot shows how ancient philosophy has a practical vocation, especially Stoicism and Epicureanism. But the term “exercise” is too scholastic; for that reason the term “practice” is to be preferred.

certain goods, it is all too easy to lose these possibilities of being. Bad politics come to the fore when citizens cannot see the good they risk losing and allow themselves to be swept along by phantasmatic rhetoric. A good politics is therefore, one which invests in education.

Plutarch distinguishes between "people without education" (*On Tranquillity of Mind*, 467b) and "wise people" (467c). He presents us with this distinction in the same paragraph where he speaks of welcoming events with temperance, letting us understand that the education of the soul, which leads to wisdom, is realised above all through thinking, feeling, and acting in just measure. "Nothing to excess" was one of the principles written at the entrance of the temple of Delphi. The right measure is essential in evaluating the quality of events. The quality of our actions depends, indeed, on the wisdom with which we evaluate events.

For every event, it is vital to see *what there is of good*, despite our tendency to focus attention on negative elements and get caught up in tormenting thoughts. Torture a good disposition of the soul, it is important to learn not to neglect what there is of good and favourable in circumstances which we judge negatively because they do not happen in accordance with our desires (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, 469a). Adopting this principle means acting in accordance with nature, and, if we observe how our body behaves in reaction to stimuli, we notice that when our eyes are wounded by something too bright, we turn our gaze away and let it rest on the colours of the flowers and the grass (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, 469a). If we persist in focussing on the negative, this connection becomes more obvious and more vivid, producing a feeling of darkness in the soul. Learning how to shift our attention to the positive makes it possible for us to feel less unbalanced, less excitable, therefore more temperate. Shifting our attention does not mean eliminating the negative but finding a way to make it bearable. Often the work of care itself makes it difficult to do so, as it results in reports of nurses and doctors during the Covid-19 emergency: much trauma of the spirit results from overwhelming and unrelenting care duties that involve futility, bad decisions, absurdity, and death. The gratitude

manifested by citizens and civic institutions is the primary duty of a politics of care.

The condition for finding the right way of acting consists in practicing not becoming too closely attached to anything. Over-intense desire towards everything rouses in us the fear of being left without it, and in this, our joy becomes weak and uncertain, like a flame exposed to the wind (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, 474c-d). Because of the need that every human being has to procure those things necessary for life, he runs the risk of giving excessive weight to things, investing in them in measure which goes beyond what is necessary. Not dealing with things in just measure upsets the balance of the soul. Plutarch advises us not to become too attached to the things we have, or which we believe we have. Care for our belongings (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, 471b) is necessary for it allows us to find some security, but when it is excessive and becomes a matter of accumulating much more than is necessary, it prevents us from having care of what is really essential. It is therefore a question of learning to value not external goods but internal ones, such as virtues. It is not given to us to have sovereignty over our own lives; for this reason, even what we think we own is, in reality, fragile and uncertain. To protect the soul from inevitable suffering, experience teaches us to think as little as possible of those things which do not depend on us and to focus instead on our modes of being: learning to take joy in the good which comes to us, and not to despair at the good which is lost (Plutarch, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, 473f). Remembering always that our ontological weakness manifests itself in the impossibility of grasping the real. We are the fragile guests of reality. We need to do away with the tension to keep hold of things and place all our trust in them to cultivate an attitude of acceptance. An acceptance is an acknowledgment of the inevitable but never a surrender to the negative, which can be avoided by effort.

When we think of inner life, we tend to have an intellectualising vision, while thinking is always, in fact, feeling. And so cultivating spiritual life means cultivating a *health-giving feeling*, one who assists us in the work of living. In the literature which speaks of care, we

often find reference to love as a feeling essential to care and thus to ethical action.

The feminist philosopher Judith Butler admits that she does not have a clear idea about love, suspecting that we can know love only when all the ideas we have about it have been deconstructed (Butler 2002, 62-67). Zambrano (1950), on the other hand, perhaps because she has been an attentive student of both Plato and Dante, does not hesitate to speak about love, stating that since where there is no love, there is no life, we cannot conceive of a philosophy which aims to be of help in life without going into the theme of love. As Dante states, “love is what moves the sun and the other stars” (*Paradiso*, XXX). Murdoch, too, reserves a position of fundamental importance for love, maintaining that the weakness of contemporary moral philosophy lies in its having chosen not to speak of the concept of love (1997, 337). She maintains that reality—and for the human being engaged in care, reality is not only what is, but also what should be—“is revealed to the patient eye of love” (1997, 332). Kittay defines the practice of care as “love’s labor” (1999).

Perhaps it is then impossible to avoid speaking of love, but first, a reflection is necessary.

We can say that love is necessary for ethics if we understand love as the translation of the Greek term *agapé*. There is little said in Greek dictionaries about the meaning of this word, but if we consider how it is used in the Gospels, it indicates the spiritual love which the soul is capable of. When Plato speaks of the life to be sought, he uses the term *agapétaton* (*Philebus*, 61e), which comes from *agapé*, which is the way of feeling of the soul which is necessary for the search for knowledge of the things worthy of being *loved* (*Philebus*, 62d), in other words, things which are of the greatest importance for life.

In love as *eros*, there is an acquisitive urge: we love the other in the sense that we desire not only to love but also to be loved: we love in being loved. This acquisitive drive is not present in *agapé*. In love as *eros*, there is a type of affirmation of the self because we love while seeking to be able to be loved: *eros* does not exist if there is not a movement of feeling from one to the other. Aristotle says that love

for the other also seeks something for itself (*Nichomachean Ethics*). In *agapé*, we make ourselves the instruments of necessity. We love in the sense of *agapé* when we seek that thing which has to be. *Agapé* is not just a feeling, but a way of being, a way of acting in the world. And the feeling which nourishes the mode of being which is *agapé* is not a passion, but the originating feeling of trust and hope that all those things which make life a good time to live may happen. The action of care, which puts itself at the service of becoming what it is good that it should become, has no certainty that what is desired will actually come about, for there are too many factors which intervene on action. Only hope and trust in the possible can sustain this effort of acting in uncertainty. Then, when a little of the good that we seek actually occurs, we feel pure joy, the joy which the soul feels when it sees happening what is necessary. We find an example of the joy which comes with *agapé* in the Gospel when Jesus explains that the friend of the bridegroom rejoices in the joy of his friend. "That is perfect joy," and he adds, "He must grow, while I must be diminished" (John 3, 29-30). In love as *eros*, there is always something egotistical, which is not present in love as *agapé*.

And so we can say that reality, by which we mean that which is in the order of necessity, is revealed to the gaze which patiently seeks good, and this gaze is love as *agapé*. The fundamental disposition of the soul consists in obeying reality as an exercise of care, moved by that thinking and feeling which is *agapé* for good.

## Conclusion

At the core of this writing, there is the following argumentative nucleus.

There is an originary spirituality that reveals itself when the soul remains in touch with the mystery of life. There is the possibility of an authentic spiritual life when the soul, having put in bracket any kind of theory, opinion, belief, can advert the sacred ground that generates the flow of life in the world. To be able to breathe in a spiritual way requests the soul to keep in touch with infinity,

accepting not to be able to give it a name. Thus, the soul can cultivate a kind of purity of the heart and simplicity of the mind.

This breath of the soul is originary since it comes before every systematic thought, before every theory, before every religion. Therefore, the authentic spiritual life cannot be confused with systems of thought, neither philosophical nor religious.

The spiritual breath makes the mind conscious of the prime question for life: the question of good. To assume the research of good, both as a thoughtful activity and a practical one is the generative matrix of the practice of care.

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