Some proposals for “A Social Psychology of the Virtues”

Paper read at IIS 2005
Philosophical Ideas in Sociology, Session C

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Introduction

In this paper I do not attempt to present a social psychology of the virtues, but rather the beginning of a prolegomenon; I want to make some proposals for what such a social psychology could be like and what we may gain if we have one. I have come to the issues from the study of complex organizations. The personnel in such organizations (for example in the fields of public policy, health, business, the military) are frequently faced with moral problems and dilemmas to which their previous "homegrown" socialization offer little or incomplete guidance. Moral education programs (courses, workshops, lectures) are seen as remedies for this and have been widely instituted, but how does one educate effectively about ethics and morals? Classics such as

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1 This paper is a first attempt to investigate some issues about the roles and actions of business, military and other organizations on future international arenas. Examples of writers who have broached them are Martin van Creveld, (The Changing Nature of War) and Philip Bobbitt (The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History). It has become clear to me that the moral education of organizational decision-making elites (but not only of them) is a central issue that organizations will face. My discussion is much indebted to Rhoda Kotzín's paper "Re-reading the canon: Moral Education in Plato (Republic, Statesman, and Laws) and Aristotle (Politics)" in Knowledge – Power – Gender (Chronos Verlag, 2002, pp. 306-312) and an unpublished MS, “Plato’s Philosopher-Queens and Today’s Feminist Educators” as well as to our many informal conversations about moral education over several years.
Plato and Aristotle had some well worked out ideas about this, and I propose that sociology should pay close attention to them.

Let me start with quotes, or "exhibits", from my betters, one intellectual heroine and one hero of mine. They have stuck in my mind for some time during work on the issues I raise, and I shall try to show their relevance as my discussion proceeds. The first two quotes are from the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch:

"More often than the 'experts' imagine, purely intellectual ideas and images can play 'deep' parts in human psychology."

".....the chance "triggers" which may determine our most fateful actions and yet remain opaque particulars with which science can do little,"

**The Philosopher's Pupil**

The second is from a lecture given by John Maynard Keynes at the time he was trying to formulate the theoretical core of the General Theory:

"You can think accurately and effectively long before you can so to speak photograph your thought. A not quite perfect epitome to this would be to say that when you adopt perfectly clear language you are trying to express yourself for the benefit of those who are incapable of thought."
The final quote is from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I read it in 1951, knew even then that Wittgenstein was saying something crucially important and have had it in "the back of my head" all my adult life.

"Die Umgangsprache ist ein Teil des Menschlichen Organismus und nicht weniger kompliziert als dieser." *Tractatus*, 4.002

**Why should we be concerned with the virtues?**

The classical virtues are positively valued, presumably stable and enduring "character traits", or "moral dispositions", such as honesty, courage, prudence, bravery, steadfastness, unselfishness, self-control, diligence, trustworthiness, chastity, personal modesty and piety. The list can be expanded, but these are typical examples.

The virtues are **dispositions** which become "activated" when the person finds him/herself in certain more or less specific contexts. The dispositions are composites of prepared nesses, consisting of perceptions and cognitions, emotions and actions. In moral education the dispositions are expected to become stably internalized, so that they are reliably activated in the appropriate contexts. In moral learning one therefore must learn to recognize when such a context occurs. The internalization is stable when it overrides other and competing considerations, such as expediency, greed or inappropriate orders from superiors.²

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²The literature is enormous. The relevant works are the primary sources, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the writings of Plato. I have benefited from the useful commentaries by Nancy Sherman and Sarah Broadie: Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, (Oxford University Press, 1991) and Sarah Broadie and Christopher
Traditionally the virtues have held prime place in discussions of moral education and moral conduct. Moral philosophers in antiquity (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Epicureans) as well as those of the Enlightenment (e.g. Adam Smith) discussed both moral education and individual conduct in terms of how we might learn to conduct ourselves according to the virtues. Read in conjunction we find in Plato's *Republic* and *The Laws* elaborate discussions of how socialization into virtue should be carried out from early childhood onwards. But the language of virtue is curiously absent in contemporary theorizing and accounts of socialization and social action by sociologists and social psychologists. It would be worthwhile to go through *The Republic* and *The Laws* in order to re-conceptualize what we find about socialization and social control in terms of the best contemporary accounts of these processes.

I want to argue (1) that there are several good reasons why sociologists, social psychologists and moral philosophers ought to build an empirical theory of the virtues on the classical foundations; and (2) that there are some, not very good but widely held, reasons why considerations of the virtues are absent in contemporary theories of socialization, institutions, complex organizations, and social action.

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3 There is also a substantial literature on this topic. I have found it helpful to read Michael S. Kochin’s discussion of Plato's views about the theory and practice of socialization in his book *Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought*, (Cambridge University Press 2002).

4 Moral education has been dealt with extensively also in Chinese classical writings. I lack the knowledge to discuss these traditions. An interesting introduction is found in Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Education* (Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).
Let me begin with the first point: Although systematic treatments of socialization and action in sociology and social psychology do not focus on the virtues, these figure prominently, although unsystematically, in applied discussions of leadership in business, military and other organizations. Virtue-talk also appears when moral breakdowns happen in organizations, e.g. in the form of corporate scandals in business and accounting or in military conduct, e.g. the treatment of prisoners of war. There are widely held, albeit unsystematic, "folk-theories" about leadership and organizational morale that stress the importance of firmly instilled virtues and character-traits in executives and commandeers and lower-rank personnel. Proposed remedies for moral breakdowns in organizations include better moral training of key actors. It has become increasingly clear that immoral conduct on the part not only of organizational elites, but also by low-ranking actors can have very negative consequences for both organizations' works and the public perceptions and support that are necessary to make and keep the works legitimate.

Organizations in future entrepreneurial market states (see Bobbitt’s The Shield of Achilles for a detailed discussion of market states) will adopt highly decentralized ways of working. Supervision thus has to depend on internalized norms rather than on close supervision. Organizations that are highly visible on international arenas will focus even more intensively than before both on how they select their personnel in terms of pre-existing moral characteristics and on how they provide for further ethical indoctrination of those selected. This needs to happen because such organizations, in international business, military ones, governmental agencies etc., operate globally and in many contexts that for cultural reasons are unfamiliar to their personnel and therefore present issues for which one's homegrown moral compass may not suffice. Moral education needs to have a very high priority; however, the hedonistic mass-culture
or cynical media culture that surrounds the organizations may still impede it. This would most likely have very unfortunate repercussions.

An empirically grounded social and moral psychology of virtues should provide a useful foundation for moral education. Moral education for contemporary complex organizations may be much harder task than we like to think. Quick fixes in the form of lectures, workshops and courses may not suffice. Both Plato and Aristotle made it clear that moral education is a time-consuming, intensive task. We need to press home the lessons from these classical masters, because contemporary political, organizational and media cultures believe in quick fixes.6

But the ingrained ideas and images of the virtues are among those "intellectual ideas and images" that Iris Murdoch refers to as playing vital and deep roles in our collective psychology. That is something to build on for moral education. A moral social psychology needs to tap into people's already existing moral concepts. Many actors, when faced with complex moral issues and the temptations in organizational life, recognize that the virtues are involved. If the home-grown socialization is not sufficient, then at least it is the foundation that further moral learning must build on.

Regarding the second point, an explicit concern with the virtues means that one takes moral positions and that this violates the "ethical neutrality" that scientific method requires of

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6 A serious discussion of these matters is emerging in the management literature. See Sumantra Ghoshal, “Bad Management Theories are Destroying Good Management Practises”, Academy of Management Learning and Education, 2005, Vol. 4, No. 1, 75-911 and Warren C. Bennis and James O’Toole, “How Business Schools lost their Way”, Harvard Business Review, May 2005, 96-104. I am grateful to Dr Jan Lindvall, Uppsala University, for calling my attention to these two important papers.
investigators. To this I shall answer, somewhat dogmatically, that the social sciences never have been "ethically neutral" and should not try to be. Many, probably most, social scientists have fairly definite ideas about what kinds of societal conditions they hope that their professional activities, in a modest way, will help bring about. This they share with the working actors in all or most complex organizations. This does not preclude objectivity and "neutrality" in the manners that we collect and analyze empirical data. Both social scientists and actors in complex organizations need to be objective and respectful of facts and relationships between them. Organizational and societal "stake-holders" who often sponsor and pay for social research, are, of course, not neutral between virtuous and non-virtuous behavior. This notwithstanding, they demand, and are entitled to demand, scrupulous adherence to the rules of data-collecting and data-analysis.

A different objection to virtue theories concerns the use of virtues as explanatory concepts. One can say that explanations of social actions should use concepts that have as their focus properties that all social actors have in common. Thomas Hobbes, for example, was an early theorist who focused on rewards and punishments as explanatory concepts, and he has been followed by many others. All actors have in common that they are susceptible to rewards and punishments.

We may, however, easily conceive of virtues in quantitative terms. In fact we do, when we speak of people possessing degrees of initiative, courage, leadership "ability" etc. but we can take the objection that virtue-talk focuses on individual differences and turn it into a strength, as Machiavelli does. One main thread in Machiavelli's Discorsi sopra la prima deca de Tito Livio (one of the finest classical works about virtue) is the study of the actions taken by exceptional
individuals and the consequences of these actions, which were to radically alter the conditions for any future actions by themselves or any other actor. The exceptional actors, in Machiavelli's view, possessed unique combinations of virtues, skills and other properties and acted in situations that are unrepeatable, because the actions taken created entirely new sets of circumstances which erased the conditions that made the actions possible in the first place. For example, when Napoleon seized power, then he decisively eliminated the conditions that made this possible for anyone else to do in the same manner.

Hence, theories in the social science need to take account of the fact that significant actions may be performed by exceptional actors under conditions that are highly particular, not easily subsumable under the general concepts that we are used to. Similarly, the "trigger events" that Murdoch wrote about may turn out to be both very important and highly particular.

Of course, much of social life nevertheless consists of routine, repeated events, the ordinary, "everyday life". We believe, or act as if we believe, that we grasp the motivations that produce the events. The events recursively produce and reproduce social relations ("structuration", "morphogenesis"). Much of the theorizing in sociology and social psychology has dealt with this flow of repeatable and repeated events. Now and then, though, events happen that seem to alter, sometimes dramatically, what can happen next. To understand what has happened we fumble for

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7 In addition to Machiavelli's Discorsi I have benefited from the commentaries by Leo Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli (The University of Chicago Press) and Harvey Mansfield, Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Levy (University of Chicago Press, 1979) and Machiavelli's Virtue, (University of Chicago Press, 19996).

descriptive phrases to describe very particular, unique constellations of properties of situations as well as actors. But we also find that we are dealing with something that is and remains opaque, hard to speak about.

Sociology, then, needs two rather different kinds of theories: (1) formulations that deal with the routine, "institutional" events and (2) theories or models that focus on the exceptional actors and actions that disequilibrate and cause new situations to emerge.

It is one of the virtues of Machiavelli that he at times in the Discorsi pointed the way toward the second kind of theorizing. He pointed the way, but no more, and we need to complete his account.

Machiavelli mostly had in mind major historical actors and events, and the men (and some women) who made them. But unique and unrepeatable events occur also on a lesser scale in ordinary organizations and in everyday life. Here too we often find it hard, using general concepts, to capture people's motivations and what seem to be the relevant situational features. At times Machiavelli may seem to equate virtue with the characteristics of great leaders that make them prevail. His term “virtue” does not always easily map into the “arete” of Plato and Aristotle. Sometimes it seems to mean no more than “manly strength”. However, in his discussions of what made the early Roman republic succeed he has much to say about virtues of the classical kind.
Machiavelli did not address the fundamental problem that arises when we want to communicate with one another about situations that we perceive to be opaque, unrepeatable, and ineffable. Science, even social science, must to be a public activity, its results communicable. Hence we must have or strive to have a language in which to speak to ourselves and others about what we find out, even about that which is initially unique, opaque and ineffable. One must make the best possible use of the resources of our language and if necessary extend and enrich them.9

It is here that the discourses about the virtues in traditional moral philosophy might help us enlarge and enrich the vocabularies of motives and situations, so that we might speak better than we now can about the specific, highly particular situations social actors find themselves in. We need a vocabulary that is richer than the ones we now have to enable us to do detailed phenomenological descriptions of moral situations. I see this "linguistic" task to be one of our greatest methodological challenges we face at present in sociology and social psychology. It is a matter of learning to use the full descriptive and evocative resources of our natural language(s). Social scientists must learn to become more like good novelists.

The discourses about the virtues in moral philosophy from the ancient and classical periods become important resources for sociology and social psychology, because they made much important progress in distinguishing between different meanings of key terms. Plato and Aristotle, for example, provide careful discussions about the several meanings of courage.

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9 Machiavelli seems to redefine or extend the meanings of virtues in the classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Thus Hannibal's great cruelty is said to be one of his virtues. Often Machiavelli was thinking of founders (or would-be founders) of states or defenders of states in moral danger, such as Moses, Hannibal, Cesare Borgia or Pope Julius II. Such persons, in his view, have virtues very different from those who want to live wisely and well in existing well run states. Strauss discusses at some length the nature of Machiavelli's break with classical virtue thinking.
Important passages in *The Republic* are about how we should define the "thumic", spirited dispositions or character traits, and separate the desirable ones from the undesirable.\(^\text{10}\)

We need to give a broad meaning to "moral philosophy", to include important works of fiction that implicitly or explicitly contribute to the moral discourse. F.R. Leavis and his followers were right, albeit one-sided, in stressing this.\(^\text{11}\) For example in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* much is made of the *pride* of both Elizabeth and Darcy. Much of what happens in the novel is about how their pride ceases to be a barrier between them. At the end of the story they have not ceased to be proud, self-regarding, people, but they have learned something crucially important. Jane Austen challenges the reader to think carefully about *what* it is that they have learned about how what they have learned has changed their pride. We, the readers, are meant to wrestle with these issues, because Austen does not serve up a ready made solution for us. A second interesting example is the ending of *The Wings of the Dove* by Henry James.

It goes without saying, of course, that moral philosophy is not all one finds in *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Wings of the Dove*, Nor, to take another example, are Iris Murdoch's novels merely illustrations of her philosophy, although they sometimes are that too. Many novels are arenas where an author explores situations, motives and actors that are opaque, ineffable and particularistic and draws out the not easily generalizable knowledge that is there for us to gain.


\(^\text{11}\)F.R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought*, also his most famous book *The Great Tradition*. One can learn much from Leavis, if one disregards the dogmatic tone he sometimes uses.
Sociologists need to learn to read some classical novels with the same focused attention that one needs to have when one studies seriously the major classics in sociology.

**Theorizing virtues through the study of exemplars**

The virtues have to do with what is excellent. The word Plato uses is "arete", which means excellence relative to specific task, jobs or functions. The tie between specific aretai and tasks or functions is crucial. Tasks or functions can be performed more or less well, and arete is the property that enables a person or an animal to perform its allotted functions and tasks very well. I refer the reader to a very useful discussion by A.W.H. Adkins which carefully specifies the relationships between the aretai, jobs, tasks, functions (ergon) and tools in Greek thought. In classical Greek one could speak of the arete of a warrior and also of the arete of a horse. Our term "virtue" does not have this range of meanings, but I suggest that we adopt the Greek usage. In many, maybe in most normal, cases it is useful to keep functions in mind, when we attempt to study what is excellent.\(^1\)

In many contexts one can specify rather concretely the function or task that is to be performed. The task of coaches is to build and train teams that win games. Yes, but is it always that simple? What are the functions of executives? Since the time of Chester Barnard's discussion of this question in *The Functions of the Executive* we know that there are answers that can be given, but also that they are not simple and clear-cut. Executives and others may have multiple functions.

\(^1\)See the very useful paper by A.W.H. Adkins, "The Connection between Aristotle's Ethics and Politics", *Political Theory*, 12 (1984). Adkins contextualizes the meanings of the crucial Greek terms, not only in Aristotle but in earlier writers also. Plato and Aristotle started with terms drawn from common usage and then made their conceptual innovations. Rhoda Kotzin’s work in progress, a paper entitled “Gender-coded ordinary language, conceptual analysis, and conceptual innovation: examples from Plato and Aristotle on virtue (aretē)” addresses this issue.
To specify function(s) may inevitably presuppose that we make ethical judgments. For example, when we speak about executives we need to consider what his or her responsibilities ought to be, given the values we are committed to and want to institute. The executive is and should be held accountable not only for the organization’s "bottom line", but also for the welfare of its personnel and other "stakeholders". We make moral judgments when we specify the range and identities of the stakeholders, their relative influence and their domains of influence.

There are, however, many situations in which it seems forced to look for tasks or functions. Suppose we want to discuss what Darcy and Elizabeth have learned at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. Do we want to do it in relation to some task, job or function? We could do it, I suppose, by asking how their new insight, their modified pride or self-regard, relates to a "goal" such as personal flourishing or even flourishing as a couple or family unit? This way of speaking may take some getting used to, but it is, in fact, quite plausible.

Insight into the virtues can benefit a great deal from the careful study of exemplars of situations, motives and actors. But how should we approach the exemplars to benefit from them? Here Plato offers some guidance in his method of division, the science of "separating and distinguishing".

To benefit from exemplars when developing a social phenomenology of the virtues we need to do more than learn to talk cleverly about them. We must wrestle with them, intellectually and emotionally as one might wrestle with, say, Bible stories pregnant with meaning, such as the story of the binding of Isaac or the narrative about Tamar. We need to learn to feel what actors
feel in a situation as well as to cognitively tease out its signifying features. Plato pioneered this mode of reasoning in his method of division. Space does not permit us to go into the issues here, but let me assert that we can learn much from Plato (and Aristotle) about the contents of the virtues, and we can also profit from close study of the dialogues in how to conduct serious and focused discourse about them.

As I have suggested, we need to learn to draw on the full resources of our language in order to express what we find in our explorations. Our "ordinary" language is infinitely richer than "social-science speak" would lead one to believe. The aphorism by Wittgenstein I cited at the beginning of this paper is meant to tell us how rich it potentially can be. We should not expect these investigations to be easy. Iris Murdoch's discussion of the centrality of attention (in the augmented sense of Simone Weil) when it comes to the knowledge of the details of moral situations also stresses the importance of language: "Language is far more idiosyncratic than has been admitted." And situations arise in which one must invoke very private knowledge, which when understood profoundly affects how one perceives a situation. "The notion of privileged access to inner events has been held morally suspect because, among other things, it would separate people from 'the ordinary world of rational argument'. But the unavoidable contextual privacy of language already does this, and except at a very simple and conventional level of communication there is no such ordinary world." Murdoch speaks about learning: "through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others, if we can to some extent share their contexts. Often we cannot." She wrote in her copy of Simone Weil's Intuitions Pre-Chrétiennes "Virtue is knowledge/is attention."

Murdoch points to a problem that she does not solve: Language often deals with hard-to-share
private insights, intuitions into situations. But to draw conclusions and persuade others we need to "externalize" the intuitions and insights. How can this be best done?  

In some cases we are able to break out, gradually, from the "contextual privacy of language". A case of this is the slow appropriation of complex poems that at first seems to use language in a completely private manner. I am thinking of poems like "The Auroras of Autumn" or even Paul Valéry's "Le Cimetière Marin" from which Murdoch got the title her novel I will refer to later. Such poems begin to communicate only after many attentive rereadings.

The following is the ending of a very good exemplar of moral learning, extensively developed by its author (in his novel The Wings of the Dove):

"Your word of honour that you're not in love with her memory."

"Oh - her memory!"

"Ah - she made a high gesture – “Don’t speak of it as if you couldn’t be. I could in your place; and you’re for which it will do. Her memory your love. You want no other.”

He heard her out in stillness, watching her face but not moving. Then he only said: ‘I’ll marry you, mind you, in an hour.”

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13Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970 and later editions, also reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics). These essays should be must reading for social scientists concerned with method. Murdoch’s discussion of language and private imagery shows her long engagement with and rejection of the behaviorism in Gilbert Ryle’s The Concept of Mind, a work that profoundly shaped her generation of British philosophers.

14One can study this process of slow appropriation in the writings of some critics. A useful example is Ulf Linde's essay about Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn", "De ärorika lögnerma" in his collection Svar (Bonniers, Stockholm 1999). Other writings by Linde, for example his book about Marcel Duchamp, are also very informative about the process.
“As we were?”

“As we were.”

But she turned to the door and her headshake was now the end. “We shall never be again as we were.”

“She” is Kate Croy, the most splendid, if flawed, woman in the fiction of Henry James.

Kate Croy has seen and learned something of great importance. We might even say that she has acquired new virtue. To understand what she has learned we must first study Henry James’ detailed accounts of the events that have led up to this scene. Then we must attempt to tease out what was important about the events and how they affected Kate Croy’s perceptions, and finally learn to feel how she came to feel. If we manage this, then we will grasp the sense of her final sentence.

Moral learning through exemplars, if what is learned is to last, involves cognitive discernment of the highest order, but also, importantly, our emotional imagination. To learn what Kate Croy has learned we must try to put ourselves in her place, try to perceive what she has come to perceive and feel what she has felt. If we can then come to see the rightness of her response, then we may want to first explain and then internalize for ourselves the lesson that she has learned, make so to speak her lesson our own.15

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15Is Maggie Verver virtuous? Formerly I did not think so, but John Bayley’s discussion of The Golden Bowl convinced me that she is, even to a high degree, through her silence and seeming non-action. Non-action, the refusal to confront and a determination to uphold a façade of convention can be virtuous behavior. See Bayley’s The Characters of Love (New York, Basic Books, 1960), chapter 4). When I read Bayley’s chapter it occurred to me that his wife’s fine novel An Unofficial Rose can be read as an ironic
If this account of learning virtue through examining exemplars is correct, then what is the role of a teacher or mentor in this process? Exhortations and admonitions about virtue are probably useless. A dialogue setting is the more appropriate for the cognitive and linguistic search for contextual nuance that might lead to moral learning.

The virtues and the narrating Self

The virtues are part of our composite "character", and character in turn is an important part of The Self. Any investigation of the virtues will require examining various properties of The Self, e.g. its "situated' nature and its emergence in social interactions with others. Here I shall only briefly touch on the question, How is The Self "held in place" and to an extent stabilized within network(s) of Others, so that it becomes predictable from the point of view of these Others?

No Self can persist in isolation. A very important aspect of the maintenance of The Self is narrative. We tell narratives to ourselves and to others about intentions, plans, motives and actions. Others in turn tell their narratives to us, and these may in part be about us and agree or disagree with our own narratives. The social Self is, hence, embedded in a web of narratives about Selves. Each person's narrative may support and validate, but also modify, augment, contest, deny, derogate, joke or ironize about his/her own or the narratives of Others. Some narratives are lies in part or in the whole, others are cover stories or "screen-narratives". In commentary on The Golden Bowl, The action there is not as closed as it would seem on a first reading; the seemingly obtuse Ann may get her spouse back because of her refusal to confront.

It is interesting that much of the best recent work on The Self has been done by feminist philosophers. A useful review of their work is given in Diana Meyers, "Feminist Perspectives on the Self", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2004 edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed.

analogue with Freud's "Deckerinnerungen" we should think of some narratives as "Deckberichte".

Some works of fiction, e.g. first-person novels, contain very useful examples of self-narratives. One good example that I studied during the work on this paper is Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*. The story is about Charles Arrowby, a theater producer, who has retired to a house, in what he thinks is a quiet seaside town, in order to write his memoirs. He makes a good beginning, but soon it turns out that many of the people from his past, including several of the women, show up in the town and begin to confront him. The novel is about these confrontations and about the growth in understanding (cognitive and emotional) and willingness to take personal responsibility that Charles slowly undergoes. Iris Murdoch has cleverly put herself into the story as a male narrator so that she can unmask the misogyny that underlies and distorts much of his self-narration.

A good way to learn about self-narration and its (perhaps) inevitable ambiguities lies and inconclusiveness, is to read closely, "live inside" for a while, the story told in *The Sea, the Sea*. The title is from a poem by Paul Valéry that begins "La mer, la mer toujours recommencée"; In Murdoch's novel *The Sea* becomes a strong presence that is uncanny, malevolent, haunting, dangerous, the ultimate scary Other, something irretrievably repressed and unknowable (in the Lacanian, not the Freudian sense). Iris Murdoch has cleverly put herself into the story as a male narrator so that she can unmask the misogyny that underlies and distorts much of his self-narration. Iris Murdoch has cleverly put herself into the story as a male narrator so that she can unmask the misogyny that underlies and distorts much of his self-narration.

17 In Valéry's poem the sea is a benevolent presence. The first three lines of the second stanza read "Quel pur travail de fins éclairs consume/Maint diamant d'imperceptible écume/Et quel paix semble se concevoir!" Murdoch's earlier novel *The Black Prince* is also about self-narration and its deceptions. Peter Conradi has written useful commentaries on both novels in *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*. (A misleading title; Conradi's much later *Iris Murdoch: A Life* makes it clear that a saint she was not. She was more interesting than that.)

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the sea, and the sea almost kills him by taking away the ropes he tries to affix to the rocks to climb out of the sea after swimming. A reductive précis of the novel will not be as informative as a gradual appropriation of the story by the reader, who, while reading, may reflect on his or her own experience with self-narratives.

Virtues and actions

Virtues are expressed in actions, but actions express virtues only when they are "authentic", i.e. when they "belong" to the actor and are not simply part of someone else's script. If an action is part of a script given to the actor by someone else, then we can infer nothing about the actor’s virtues. Here we touch upon a crucial problem for action theories (as well as for one's personal ethics): How does an actor know that an action he or she performs is authentic, and how do bystanders, Others, know? Our self-narratives may, in general, exaggerate the extent to which our actions are authentic, express who we are. "Machiavellian" manipulators can be good at giving us scripts and at the same time concealing that they are doing this, letting us believe that our actions express who we are. Avowals and attributions by actors and Others sometimes tell us little of relevance about virtues.18

The virtues also seem to be tied to actions in the sense that one way to acquire a virtue is to start acting as if one believes that one possesses it and then one may quite gradually come to possess it. This is in line with arguments given by thinkers such as Pascal and William James, Their ideas need to be incorporated in our action theories.

18Murdoch's novel An Accidental Rose contains good treatments of how actions do not "belong" to actors, even though they think they do. The character Emma Sands is an example of the skilled Machiavellian manipulator.
The philosopher Robert Pippin in an essay with the intriguing title “Morality as Psychology, Psychology as Morality: Nietzsche, Eros and clumsy Lovers” takes off from some statement of Nietzsche that read together point to the strong intrinsic connection between virtue and action. The first statement says “Das Thun ist alles”. Taken by itself this sounds like an exaggeration, but added to the second statement it may express what is true and poignant: “Der Glaube ‘so und so ist es’ zu Verwandeln in den Willen ‘so und so soll es werden.’” The important words are, of course, “in den Willen”. Actions come from the will but we may also learn to change ourselves through the will. Only through the will, Nietzsche seems to be saying.19

Concluding remarks

I cannot write a conclusion, because I have not presented an argument that leads up to one. I have rather attempted to highlight some areas of thinking and inquiry that might help develop a social psychology of the virtues. Such as psychology has to deal with a learning process, in which perceptual acuity, the highest forms of cognition and attention, and the mastery of the resources of ordinary language are essential features. The roles of teachers, mentors and peers in virtue learning need to be studied further. Exemplars of moral reasoning and moral insight need to be studied closely. What I have presented is very incomplete and full of gaps, but I take some comfort in Keynes' observation that "you can think accurately and effectively long before you can...photograph your thought".