



Virtues in a post-traditional society

Patrick Giddy

*Dr P Giddy, School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Howard College Campus, Durban 4041; E-mail: giddyj@ukzn.ac.za*

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The shift from a customary, tradition-based society to a commercial and law-based one issues in an oppositional dialectic that pits a reactionary conservatism against a dogmatic individualism prioritising rights. Clark (2002) claims that the conditions of the new impersonal bureaucracy fail the basic needs of the human psyche for bonding and meaning. I argue, however, that the values associated with this modern society, namely equality, fairness and individual autonomy, are the internal goods of this particular “social practice” (in MacIntyre’s sense), and hence virtuous participation in such a practice can be regarded as implicit in this outlook. What prevents this being explicit is the blind spot about agency that characterises modern global culture. A recent example of this can be seen in attempts to re-think ethics and religion ‘naturalistically’.

In this article, I argue that the shift from a customary, tradition-based society to a commercial and law-based one tends to issue in an unhelpful oppositional dialectic that pits a reactionary conservatism against a dogmatic individualism prioritising rights. Clark (2002) identifies the causes of this as lying in the failure of the new impersonal bureaucracy to meet the basic needs of the human psyche for bonding and for meaning. I argue, however, that the values associated with this modern society, namely equality, fairness and individual autonomy, are the internal goods of this particular “social practice” (in MacIntyre’s sense), and hence virtuous participation in such a practice can be regarded as implicit in this outlook. What prevents this being explicitly fostered is the blind spot about agency that characterises modern global culture. A recent example of this can

be seen in attempts to re-think ethics and religion 'naturalistically'. This results in a systematic neglect of the conditions necessary to translate or transform our abstract freedom or autonomy (celebrated as key value in modernity) into an effective freedom. The latter brings into play the set of habits of behaviour, or virtues, incorporating both intellect and will, that are the necessary conditions for any individual's self-determination and flourishing. However, contemporary culture is not without the resources, or social capital, to make such an ideal a real possibility and I draw here on Jacobs' (1994) revealing typological study of the actual operative value clusters in our modernity.

The above summary determines the structure of my discussion. I first explain what is meant by characterising the transition to modernity in terms of a dialectic, and Clark's analysis of its basically destructive nature. I then introduce the Aristotelian-type engaged, rather than disengaged, inquiry into human behaviour and MacIntyre's way of explaining virtues not by reference to any normative idea of a human ideal or 'human nature', but in terms of participation in a social practice. The liberal ideal of individual autonomy, if abstracted from this context of growth as a person among other persons, growth in the virtues, can be contrasted to the idea of effective freedom, requiring growth in self-knowledge and personal integrity. I invoke evidence that the latter set of values does resonate with aspects of contemporary commercial culture, albeit in a secondary way. Finally, I give one example, the sociobiological reductionist account of human behaviour discussed by Clark, of the tendency of our modern scientific, post-traditional, society to overlook agency, in the normative sense, foundational for any ethic of virtues. The article, in general, covers a wide range of issues and aims at merely a 'framing' kind of suggestion for future research into the transition to modernity.

1. A destructive dialectic of development

I will now explain what I mean by the destructive dialectic of development and outline Clark's understanding of its basic aetiology. Clark argues that the rapid shift from a customary to a law-based society has, through its radical erosion of identity, created a level of personal stress that can only be harmful to the ideal of a good society. I will argue, in the following sections, that the dominant understanding of modernity – entailing a thin conception of value – needs a corrective, and that this can be plausibly found in the ethical approach of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. MacIntyre has reformulated Aristotle's key concept of virtue through the notion of a skill or internal good of a social practice and, I argue, can supply us with a way forward in broadening the dominant conception

of moral values to include goods of personal growth and identity lost in, or threatened by the transition to modernity.

My aim is to contribute to an interdisciplinary approach to social analysis. As a preliminary example, I can refer to the well-received analysis of Acemoglu & Robinson's *Why nations fail* (2013). In this detailed and convincing study, the authors pay no attention to the conditions for developing virtues of character among the ordinary members of society. Sustained economic prosperity, it is argued, depends on the shift from extractive to inclusive political and commercial institutions. We cannot engineer prosperity; what is needed is empowerment of local groups. But that empowerment, I want to contend, has as integral component considerations dealing with virtues of character and the type of self-conscious moral culture needed if the required shift is going to be effective. I want to suggest one way of framing development so as to foreground this ethical dimension. For these purposes, I judge Clark's (2002) well-researched and wide-ranging volume to be of ongoing relevance, in particular for interdisciplinary studies. Clark is, like myself, concerned with giving a fuller account than is evident in a great deal of social science studies of the conditions for good social development, which will necessarily be founded on an understanding of what makes for human flourishing.

My basic idea would be to think of modernity – characterised by the kind of economy that emphasises creativity and enterprise – not as a clean break with tradition-based society, but rather as a development of this. For many people, however, modernity is valued precisely as such a break, sweeping away all such traditions. Similarly, others resist it for these same reasons, taking tradition as essentially and importantly not adaptable, and believe that we need to turn back to tradition in order to give stability to an age of (for them, disvalued) change and upheaval. What is needed, I would like to argue, is to present a space for a plausible human vision, not necessarily at odds with the free enterprise model, of virtues as part of anyone's aims in their ordinary life. The greater individualism of the new social order includes, if thoroughly considered, a foundational virtue dimension.

As background to my argument, I take Clark's understanding of human nature (for which she argues over a number of chapters) in terms of three basic psychic needs, namely, for bonding, autonomy, and meaning. In developing her argument, I arrive at the following likely dialectic of positions in the process of modernisation:

- In a commercialised society, 'the bottom line' of policy discussions is, to a large extent, economic development, not meaningful lives. The neglect of this latter dimension results in the two psychic needs for bonding and autonomy being regarded as antithetic, opposed to each other.¹
- Modernity is thus viewed as breaking with traditions. A kind of procedural framework is offered, concealing the norm of being human it contains. I refer to the idea of autonomy as trumps, or – what amounts to the same thing – individual human rights as trumps, as operating not alongside other values such as participation, but at a different, higher level. In a thinker such as Kant, autonomy rather than heteronomy seems to define what ethics is.
- As a result of the threat to the loss of identity brought about by this attitude (and the consequent neglect of the psychic need for bonding), a closing-down of minds occurs, increased authoritarianism, and fanaticism-fundamentalism as a strategy of defence. Clark mentions Hitler's Germany, and some contemporary Islamic states.
- In a further counter-reaction to this counter move, more than ever is emphasis placed on the inviolability, the trumping nature, of autonomy and individual rights, to check the seemingly irrational, but passionately held views which resist modernity. This, in turn, generates resentment at what is seen as an imposed and self-righteous insistence on individual human rights.

2. Clark on the harm of modernity

I now want to sketch a mainly intuitive picture of why 'unchecked' modernity is destructive of the good life. Again, I take this from Clark's study and, in particular, her depiction of what she terms the "technologized megamachines" (Clark 2002) that characterise our global culture. She points to the effective distortions of the ideals of modernity in contemporary society. Her analysis is worth quoting at length:

By the end of the nineteenth century it was all too clear that the private ownership of wealth [...] was antithetic to the Enlightenment dream of equal rights and an equal say by all in

1 The meaning-giving traditions, based in general on an idea of how we are by virtue of our human nature, can explain how we can have them both, bonding and autonomy, being properly human through others. In this article, I am assuming rather than arguing for this.

the construction of social life. [...] It was a new form of feudalism, but without the Church's moral teachings [...] to ameliorate its excesses [...] A new 'scientific' morality was conveniently invented to justify human inequality. Darwin's theory of evolution as a process of selection of the most fit individuals in each generation [showed] the superior fitness of the winners in the economic competition for power (Clark 2002: 309).

Clark (2002: 309) goes on to emphasise the all-pervading influence of this economic culture on contemporary life:

This mindset, this belief system, this new religion, is today more firmly entrenched than ever in the dominant social institutions of not only the industrialized world but also the now-global compass of transnational corporate capitalism. The drive for ever-more efficiency in production, for ever-more competition in the accumulation of wealth and the power it holds, and for ever-more rapid technological change is beyond the control of any single government, whether elected or not.

The last point is pertinent for the case of the rest of the world's attitudes to weak human rights records in developing countries. Clearly, a solution to the problem lies beyond simply the implementation of human rights. Clark (2002: 310) continues by pointing to the human costs of this situation:

The psychic insecurities of having to compete throughout one's life; of perhaps becoming a 'loser' in the eyes of others; of having no stable future, no trusted, supportive community to contribute to and be accepted by; of being deprived of any familiar social story that gives one a meaningful identity and a realistic social goal to strive toward – all these wreak enormous psychic stress on people around the planet.

Some backing to this, on the surface pessimistic, view of things can be found if we simply list the changes that have accompanied the move from a customary to a law-based society, to one in which the contract between individuals (regulated by law) is most prominent. I will now summarise, in my own words, Clark's (2002: 297) suggestive picture of this change.

Let us call these, society A (customary), and society B (law-based). In customary society (A), the basis of social order lies in the beliefs of the community (common to rulers and ruled) expressed in value-laden stories, myths, and so on. In 'modern' society (B), the authority for social order is distant – God, the king, 'the majority', and inflexible. In A, the judges/interpreters are the commonly acknowledged elders of the community; in B, it is the state judiciary or priests appointed from a

central body. In A, 'wrong' is perceived as personal harm (corrected by remediable compensation) or community harm (corrected by shame; exile); in B, all crimes are crimes against the state, which controls restitution. In society A, enforcement of social order is through disapproval coupled with the desire to belong; in B, it is fear of armed authority (police, military). In A, the goal of justice is apology, restitution, reconciliation; in B, it is whatever is prescribed by law. In A, the basis of social relations is trust, duty, customary kinship, family bonds, and friends; in B, it is repression and punishment. In A, rules of social order are changed by means of group consensus; in B, by means of edicts, or majority rule.

In summing up, we can say that personal participation in the community has been displaced by a formal adherence to impersonal laws and institutional rules. Your individual character is now your private affair, not of public concern. Virtues of character are concerned with our internal attitude of meaningful consent to requisite kinds of behaviour. This is at least Aristotle's understanding, as he explains in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, of how virtues are taught: the commitment must already be somehow there, in the student of the virtues. But now, in society B, much less attention is paid to the conditions necessary to foster such attitudes and behaviour. When authorities are distant, the emphasis is on conformity to procedures, and such conformity is measured by laws and rules administered legalistically.

Because the constrictions on our public behaviour are now deprived of the kind of support from others provided in the earlier social set-up, the stress to conform to those requisite behavioural principles is all that greater. Clark argues for the helpful role of religion in this regard, softening the psychic harm of modernity. Religion "helped offset the psychic stress civilizations created for such a large proportion of human beings" (Clark 2002: 298). But are not religions, for good reasons, marginalised in public life in a secular culture? Be that as it may, my aim in this article is to present a way of thinking about these conditions of modern culture which can furnish a framework, at both the individual and the social or political level, for resisting the resultant degeneration of the quality of human life, hinted at in the earlier description of the changed conditions of our ordinary life. In contrast to my aim, Giddens (1990: 4, 38) has argued that modernity means that there can be no tradition in the sense of drawing on the citizen's sense of motivational identity. Poole (1991: 63) again has claimed that

[a]ny process of *evaluating* these identities is liable to undermine them. For an individual to subject her or his identity (as wife/mother or breadwinner/head of household) to such a scrutiny is to render that identity vulnerable [...] To ponder the identity in question is to render contingent what must be assumed as necessary and inescapable if it is to found an ethic of virtue.

This argument seems not to be convincing to scholars in one society presently undergoing rapid transition to a commerce-based culture, that is to say China. On the contrary, there is among these thinkers a burgeoning interest in the virtue approach. In fact, the occasion for my own formulation of the ideas in this article was a conference in China directed towards the problem of how virtue ethics finds a place under the modern conditions of economic freedom.² It is clear – for example, from a glance at the contents of recent issues of *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* – that Chinese scholars are taking up the task of re-presenting the virtue traditions, whether of the Confucian or the Aristotelian or Christian variety (see, in particular, Yu Jiyuan 2008). Without this kind of philosophical bridging, modernity is likely, as argued earlier, to spin into a destructive downward spiral of liberals versus conservatives, in other words to spawn Confucian traditionalists as it has Christian and other fundamentalists in other parts of the globe. The central Chinese government is calling upon the virtue tradition to bolster the sense of ethics in the changing times; for this reason, this could be regarded cynically as yet another attempt at centralised control (and it is indeed regarded as such, from my discussions with scholars in China). However, this should not affect our analysis, but simply make it that much harder to convince intelligent listeners.

Furthermore, Marx – of particular relevance for rethinking virtue in the context of contemporary China – found no place for virtue in his view of ‘human nature’ and its flourishing. Marx, for one, disparaged such an ethics – whether “an ethics of enjoyment (utilitarianism) or of asceticism” (utilitarianism or Kantianism) – but failed to see the need to offer a sustainable alternative: “history” was going to accomplish what can only be brought about by human effort!³ His theory of a human being (derived in part from Hegel via Feuerbach and coming down to us through the 1844 Paris Manuscripts) included the notion of the human being as a “species being”, being able to think of him-/herself and his/her nature in a critical way and thus develop his/her ideas and put them into practice, expand the scope of his/her self-determination, for example. But it omitted the crucial aspect of freedom of choice, the aspect of human transcendence that allows the possibility of ethics. Social transformation takes conscious effort and virtue, without which the best ideals will be corrupted.

2 The conference was organised by the Philosophy School of the Renmin (People’s) University of China in Beijing at the beginning of June 2012. The theme was the virtues in a modern global society. In his paper at the conference, “Similarities and differences between the School of Confucius ethics and modern public ethics”, Xiao Qunzhong has a similar description of modernity to the one developed in this article.

3 See my earlier article, Giddy 2000: 84 and footnote 1. Marx’s remark comes from “The German ideology”.

3. Possibilities for an ethic of virtue

I now want to introduce the framework of virtue ethics as a plausible way forward. The two crucial elements defining modern culture might be said to be a greater degree of individual freedom of choice (which finds expression in democratic forms of government) and the critical scientific evidence-based method for arriving at the truth. Poole seems to think of these as a curse, in some sense. I want to argue that both these elements can be fully affirmed once we view them as constituent of our normative human nature, or human flourishing, and re-expressed to indicate this. More specifically, I will suggest that liberal modern culture has to be understood by means of its 'internal goods' (I will explain this term), and the mechanisms for being critical (for example, consensus democracy) understood as furthering those goods. The mistake would be to take the mechanisms as ultimate values in themselves (see McCloskey 2006).

Untroubled by the modern paradigm of true knowledge as (deterministic) science, Aristotle views ethics as a perfectly legitimate and important practical enquiry conducted not neutrally by the scientific observer, but by those already engaged in the quest for the best, the most worthwhile, kind of human life to lead – but who are looking to clarify their goals, their hierarchies of preferences: “The end aimed at is not knowledge but action” (Aristotle 1954: 1095). Only in this way can we properly understand the idea that “every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good”, as the opening sentence of his *Nicomachean Ethics* reads (Aristotle 1954). He is pointing to an engaged attitude. We do not have to take his outline of the conditions for the good life (crucially involving virtues of character) as being challenged by modern empirical science, because the scientific attitude is precisely a self-consciously disengaged one.

Aristotle suggests using, as guideline for this quest, the idea of human fulfilment, fulfilment of our human nature, of our most basic desires. According to him, these are the desires for rationality and for political participation. This is what MacIntyre and others refer to as the standard of “human flourishing”. For ‘us’, however, (that is for the dominant global approach) this standard no longer operates, first because of the greater degree of individual freedom in deciding which version of human flourishing we want to adopt and, secondly, because any such version could not claim to be objective knowledge, because objective knowledge – according to the dominant default idea of knowledge properly speaking – is never normative; it is simply the facts, and no facts can lead to a value conclusion, as Hume famously showed. In countering the view of the dominant ‘us’, MacIntyre

is useful – as indeed the presenters at the China conference, to a large extent, concurred, along with the ethics of Confucius and Aristotle.⁴

4. Excellence in social practices: skills and virtues

MacIntyre (1981: 181) has argued that, in the very ordinary notion of a social practice, we can see that objective values do continue to operate in some parts of our modern, non-tradition-based culture. According to him, objective value judgments are linked to these large-scale cooperative activities with internal goods in part constitutive of those activities or practices. Examples are the medical and legal professions, sports, and family life. In each case, there is an ideal of objective excellence which is not simply a matter of preference. We might debate, as philosophy practitioners, about the merits of a particular philosophy essay, but we agree more or less on the criteria for what makes for a good one. These internal goods are transcendent of the agent; in other words, they are objective values, and they are shared. They make us more than ourselves: we become soccer players, or chess players, or ice-skaters, or philosophy journal referees, with objective skills, skills judged as true values for participants in that social practice, for people who appreciate that practice.

Are excellences and skills in the practice the same as moral virtues? Not exactly. We can be skilled at playing badminton, but not particularly virtuous. However, there is a connection between the two. The reason is as follows: All practices, defined by their internal goods, need institutional supports; players often need to be rewarded; rules are required for allocating positions, for promotions, and so on: medicine needs hospital administrators and chess needs chess societies. The efficient execution of these supports is also of value, but not an internal value of the practice. Practices are threatened when players focus more on those external goods than on the internal goods, when lawyers and doctors do their jobs not in order to bring about justice, or health, but primarily for the money and prestige. When this happens, the practice is, in a technical sense, corrupt – even if the profession's ethical code has, strictly speaking, not been broken. The principle of resistance to corruption is the set of traditional virtues of character: those dispositions or habits of character that leads one to be a certain kind of, not soccer player or lawyer, but person: qualities of good judgement; of courage in the face of disapproval; of balance when the temptation to override the internal

4 MacIntyre's influence in contemporary Chinese academic thought is big; there are two Chinese translations of *After virtue*, one entitled "Beyond virtue" and the other "In pursuit of virtue". The Japanese translation is entitled, "After the time of virtue".

goods is strong; of truthfulness when others are fudging the issues, and a sense of justice when the easiest route is to give undue preference to some or other group. It is these qualities of character that are so needed in the current global situation characterised by Clark (2002) as “technologized megamachines”.

An example can illustrate why this is not so difficult or idealistic as it may seem: learning how to enjoy reading.⁵ A child might read a novel, because his teacher tells him to do so, and because he wants to please the teacher; however, he really only becomes a reader of novels properly speaking when he discovers, one night while reading in his room until far past his usual bedtime, the pleasures of reading for its own sake. He now does it primarily because he appreciates the internal goods of the activity, the places one goes in one’s imagination, the larger world one takes part in, the identification with the characters through which one learns so much about oneself. While still appreciated, the external goods – praise from the teacher – become secondary. Similarly, we can think of medicine or the teaching profession, which are called vocations because those who practise them can truly appreciate their internal goods, health and learning.

I want to argue, in other words, that the characteristic institutions of a liberal society, valuing individual freedom and equality above all, are only practically feasible when the culture as a whole considers itself in terms of a social practice with these virtues of character as internal goods. What is important then, as I shall now show, is for society framed in terms of liberal ideas to embrace a sense of communitarian values.

5. Abstract freedom and effective freedom: liberal and communitarian values

Modern liberal society is characterised by the procedural values of fairness and individual autonomy. My argument is that the substantive value of growing participation is, however, implicitly affirmed in the liberal approach. For a liberal or modern outlook, making a normative issue out of participation seems to be a throwback to a premodern culture defining persons in terms of their social roles rather than as individuals with choice. Participation is a communitarian, not a liberal value. My argument, based on MacIntyre’s perceptive analysis, is that the procedural values are not true values at all, but emotively justified preferences of a dominant culture – unless they are relativised in the way suggested earlier,

5 See McCabe 2005: chapters 1 to 3.

considered to be internal goods of a social practice, modernity. They are relativised by a notion of human flourishing and its concomitant virtues of character.

The link can be seen, however, if we distinguish the bare capacity for freedom or autonomy (essential freedom) from its realisation (effective freedom). The latter requires the development of virtues of character, openness of self-learning, an enabling milieu of good parenting, and so on – about which utilitarian and deontological ethics have little to say. In particular, it involves habits of good behaviour, on both the intellectual level – qualities of attentiveness, intelligence, good judgment – and the level of practical decision-making – courage, temperance, justice, and so on. The liberal culture, and the philosophical ethics associated therewith, to that extent misunderstands itself and the conditions for its own sustainability. Its blind spot has to do with a normative idea of human nature: the bias of the human sciences is to see all such ideas as fully conditioned by the particular values of its own culture, for example to do with how it frames its ideas about ‘woman’. The default position is to abscond from any such framing, in other words, cut the bonds with nature at all. The human person is reduced to a choosing point or self. This fits well with a culture in which the self, to a large extent, manipulates its world through technology. It does not fit well with the value of participation which, according to MacIntyre, is the key to all ethical values, because we are by our nature social beings.

6. Moderating the commercial moral syndrome by virtues of character

What has happened in the change from premodern to modern is a shift in the kind of default social interaction. Whereas the premodern culture puts the focus on our place or social role in the group, modern culture emphasises a greater degree of freedom. The duty of a parent and priest in the premodern period would be to oversee the adherence to the sets of rules governing the social behaviour of his children or subjects. The duty of the child or subject would be to affirm the authority of the parent or priest or king. Ethics would be essentially understood in terms of this kind of social grouping.

Is there any space in contemporary, modern culture for the kind of ethics of virtue that seems more at home in the premodern world? Or will advocates of the virtue ethic approach be confined to a kind of ‘ghetto’ Aristotelianism, an Amish-like existence on the fringes of society? Jacobs’ (1994) descriptive study of contemporary moral values in North American society suggests otherwise. Her study found that our operative moral ideas form two quite distinct clusters of values, the guardian moral syndrome (premodern; key value: loyalty) and the

commercial moral syndrome (modern; key values: equality and productivity).⁶ The latter cluster is currently the dominant one. However, the former cluster, emphasising obedience, but also, crucially, participation, gives identity, and it can be argued that it expresses a crucial element in any ethical framework. This is because an action is deemed morally good when the right thing is done for the right reason (and in the right way). If a person, in passing, bumps me painfully in the ribs with his elbow, I have to know: Was it an accident? Or did he have some grudge against me because of some past action of mine? Only when I know what was intended, or aimed at by the action, can I judge it as morally neutral or morally bad, or simply an immature and petty act of spite. It is the same action from the point of view of its consequences (my sore rib), but not in itself. The guardian moral ideas come into play when we perceive ourselves to be members of, say, a family or a nation or a religious organisation, identifying ourselves – as members alongside other members – with common ideals or sets of intentions. The latter then provide the standard for the moral evaluation of our own and others' actions – going beyond simply pragmatic considerations. From the point of view of consequences (the commercial moral syndrome aiming at productivity without regard for intention), we can say nothing, strictly speaking, of the moral quality of the act, neither morally praise nor morally blame the agent. It makes sense to say that the ethical foundation for a modern society lies, paradoxically, in the typically premodern ideas which respond to the need for bonding and for meaning, for this kind of participation.

7. Clarification by contrast: the neo-Darwinian or naturalist approach to ethics

We have based our approach on the supposition of the three basic psychic needs for bonding, autonomy, and meaning. Through the meaning-giving traditions, and the reworking we have suggested through the ideas of MacIntyre, the need for autonomy and the need for bonding or participation can be reconciled. Going beyond Clark's analysis, we can see here an implied affirmation not simply of the 'human right' to freedom, but of the ethical value of personal growth in our freedom. This presupposes the natural human capacity for what we can call agency – which we can also describe as self-transcendence. We are influenced by our environment in all we think and do: our sense-experience is the beginning of our knowledge, and our desires the starting point for our actions. However, to the extent that someone comes to hold a belief on good grounds (exercising

6 See also my article 2007.

their capacity for reasonableness), they are cognitively self-transcending; to the extent that their will conforms to their understanding (say, on what the most worthwhile course of action is), they are volitionally self-transcending. Both achievements require virtues of character.

Another approach might be attempted at such a reconciliation, namely one that bypasses the very idea of human agency and human selfhood (and, hence, growth in freedom), namely the burgeoning neo-Darwinian paradigm to re-think ethics and religion 'naturalistically'. The latter approach would not be unexpected if it is true, as Robinson (2010) has argued, that modern global culture is, to some extent, autistic, having a blind spot about agency. Clark has argued that such an approach is not convincing.

The neo-Darwinian viewpoint Clark attacks is based on the idea that the basic unit of evolution is the gene, understood as operating under the compulsive ends of survival, adaptation and reproduction; furthermore, genes are in competition for scarce resources. Clark (2002: 70) notes, the "obvious fact that there are social organisms had to be explained somehow. How could cooperation with a supposed competitor ever be adaptive?". The answer was provided by game theory. It was thought in the 1940s that we would be able to predict behaviour, if we assume individual actors, whether in a war situation or in an economy, optimise their choices by taking into account all the information. As applied to evolution, it would seem that any gene would be eliminated, if it promoted cooperation with another gene. The cooperation that exists can be explained by noting kin selection (I help those closely related to me, so sharing in most of my genes), and reciprocal altruism (they help me exactly as I help them, so costs and benefits equal out).

Clark notes two major problems with this notion. It is incorrect to correlate a particular piece of behaviour (say, cooperation) with a particular gene. It is illegitimate to extend a genetic paradigm from the simple level of genetic coding to the complex level of cellular behaviour. Behaviour is the result of "complex, reciprocal interactions among genetic instructions, current environments and remembered experiences (learning)" (Clark 2002: 76). Secondly, survival is only assured to the extent that the gene fits in with the entire genome; hence, the starting assumption of 'individual benefit' falls away. She concludes that we can observe different behaviour patterns depending on the stress levels of the agents (she is discussing primates) – "low stress tends to lead to egalitarianism, high stress to hierarchy with the possibility of more aggressive behaviours" (Clark 2002: 97). She concludes that both outcomes are in accordance with the basic propensities of primates for bonding, on the one hand, and for autonomy, on the other: "Stressful conditions tend to restrict autonomy, which in turn

creates potential frustration and tends to increase frictions which strain social bonds. Excessive stress leads to coercive hierarchies and, ultimately, to violent conflict" (Clark 2002: 97).

8. Conclusion

The explanatory category of 'stress' introduced earlier assumes a normative vision of what a life free of undue or un-negotiated stress might be, which amounts to a notion of the most basic human needs. We have used this normative model throughout. It has offered us a way through the stresses brought about by the change that we call modernity. Our framework modernity can be regarded as a development of the customary society, a sophistication thereof, rather than a break therewith. The key value of modernity, namely autonomy, can be viewed as one value among others, the value of community or belonging, for example. It is misleading to ask if there are, in addition to individual rights, community rights. This is to frame an ethical question in terms of the 'modern' vision, namely where autonomy (thus 'rights') is trump. The organisational measures needed to secure the values of human flourishing in community, the internal goods of human community, of being human in point of fact, these measures are necessary, but not sufficient. They are the rules of procedure for arranging rewards, respecting each participant equally, and so on. The internal goods of the human community are concerned, on the other hand, with virtues of character, trustfulness, generosity, self-knowledge, self-affirmation, and personal growth. These come about through others, and if the transition to modernity is to be a success in human terms, society has to facilitate this interpersonal interaction. These are meanings which can be shared by all, without limit. One central character-virtue is that of including others rather than simply getting one's own way. This is what we have understood as self-transcendence, and it is an ordinary everyday virtue. Each individual must resist the unauthorised yet dominant procedures and assumptions of the "megamachine" in their own sphere of activity, through virtues, and at a social level by supporting the alternative structures – the traditional-religious central among these. These conclusions are not drawn by Clark, but it is of interest for public policy implications that she affirms (2002: Chapter 10) the move (counter-cultural in the context of modernity), in the case of South Africa, of holding a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I have argued that the shift from a customary, tradition-based society to a commercial and law-based one seems to preclude any ethic of virtue actually having motivational traction. However, social inquiry of whatever kind (I avoid saying social science, as this seems to prejudge the issue) neglects the ethical

dimension at its peril.⁷ I have introduced the notion that the values associated with this modern society, in particular individual autonomy, are the internal goods of a particular social practice, making the skilled or virtuous participation in such a practice a further (implicit) value. Making it explicit would, I have suggested, moderate the harmful aspects of modernity. Indeed, the effective realisation of our capacity for autonomy requires the development of virtues of character, openness of self-learning, habits of behaviour, and so on – about which an ethics of principles and ‘rights’ has little to say. A virtue-based ethic (associated in China with the philosophy of Confucius) can only succeed if the harmful aspects of a commercial, open society are identified, as for example in Clark’s *In search of human nature* (2002). Modern global culture, I suggest, has a blind spot about agency. For this reason, a foundation is lacking for the values of individual autonomy and equality – and for the virtues of character. A recent example of this, which has been shown to have crucial weaknesses, can be seen in attempts to re-think ethics and religion ‘naturalistically’. In conclusion, I can mention, as a matter for further research, that much impetus for inserting ethics in our conception of understanding the transition to modernity has come from a familiarity with the perspective offered by analyses sourced from underdeveloped parts of the globe.⁸

7 From a somewhat different perspective, Brian Levy (2014: 94) argues that “Manichean campaigns to root out corruption polarize: instead of bringing people together they demonize potential allies [...who] may be key parts of any effective change effort”. He has in mind the human rights triumphalism criticised in this article; he does not, however, take consideration of a different kind of moral approach, namely that to do with virtues of character.

8 Bringing ethics into our understanding of development has a short history, its origin often placed in the studies of French scholar Louis-Joseph Lebret, O.P., and the group *Économie et Humanisme* in the 1940s, and carried on, in particular, by Denis Goulet (for example, 1995) and, more recently, by the International Development Ethics Association (IDEA). See the tribute to Goulet by Gasper 2006. The influence of liberation theology on this kind of analysis would also seem significant. See Goulet 1974 and Donal Dorr 1992 and the recent study of “the preferential option for the poor” by Curnow 2012.

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