

**PHILOSOPHY OF VIRTUES.  
THE WAY TO WISDOM IN ARISTOTLE AND PRIMO LEVI**

**FILOSOFIA DAS VIRTUDES.  
O CAMINHO DA SABEDORIA EM ARISTÓTELES E PRIMO LEVI**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In this article, I aim to investigate the relationship between Aristotle's ethics and Levi's idea of ethics based on practical virtues. Understanding the former, in fact, permits us to better comprehend the philosophical undergrowth of the latter. And above all, it permits us to better understand how Levi, who constantly dealt with the ethical and aesthetic difficulty of narrating experience from an empiric and anti-idealistic point of view, used philosophy of virtues and wisdom as hermeneutic keys to understanding life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Primo Levi. Aristotle's Ethics. Literature and Ethics. Virtue Ethics.*

**RESUMO**

*No presente artigo, pretendo investigar a relação entre a ética aristotélica e a ideia de ética em Levi baseada em virtudes práticas. Na verdade, o entendimento da primeira nos permite uma melhor compreensão da base filosófica da segunda. E, sobretudo, possibilita um melhor entendimento de como Levi, que constantemente lidou com a dificuldade ética e estética da experiência narrativa a partir de um ponto de vista empírico e anti-idealista, utilizou a filosofia das virtudes e a sabedoria como chaves hermenêuticas para o entendimento da vida.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Primo Levi. Ética aristotélica. Literatura e Ética. Ética da Virtude.*

Primo Levi has been widely studied in the field of Holocaust Studies, and more than once in combination with contemporary ethical theories such as those outlined in Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*<sup>1</sup> and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.<sup>2</sup> However, no study exists that investigates virtues in Levi's work from a philosophical point of view or by attempting a systematic comparison with Aristotle's

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas (1969) contrasts the ontological approach of Western philosophy, which privileges the spheres of the "self" and the "identical", with the ethical idea of meeting the Other, an encounter that turns the "face" into a symbol of humankind. Among scholars who have referred to Levinas to interpret Levi's approach to virtue ethics, I recall Gioanola (1995), Gordon (2001), Druker (2006) and Geddes (2018).

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre (1981) aims to submit modern moral philosophy (deontology, utilitarianism, and above all pragmatism), which he calls a "theatre of illusions", to rational critique. He therefore proposes a philosophy based on virtues by resuming the arguments of ancient Greek ethics, on which he superimposes modern issues and terminology, like for example moral responsibility, autonomy, social identity, and individualism. The scholar who most extensively used MacIntyre to interpret Levi's philosophy of virtues is Gordon (2001).

theory of virtues. Levi was partially acquainted with Aristotle's thought as far as he had come across his philosophy while in High School. In Levi's works, Aristotle is cited ten times,<sup>3</sup> sometimes to strengthen commentary but more commonly to emphasise an argumentation, as for example, where Levi states in "A Self-Interview" that "man is for sure a social animal (as Aristotle has told us)" (LEVI, 2001, p. 198), or when he writes in *The Periodic Table* that "a potentiality became actual, and wasn't that what Aristotle intended?" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 773). And again, as he speaks about asymmetry in "Asymmetry and Life", Levi quotes Aristotle's "final cause" and "efficient cause" (LEVI, 2015, v. 3, p. 2659 and 2662). However, the Italian author never refers to Aristotle's ethics. Nonetheless, his theoretical attitude towards interpreting and understanding experience always brought him to reflect on ethics and to develop an ethical conception very similar to that of Aristotle, based on virtues, wisdom, and the golden mean.

The first part of this article will focus on sketching the meaning of Aristotle's philosophy of virtues in order to point out its aspects that can be helpful to achieve a more insightful understanding of Levi's approach to virtue ethics. I will then move on to analyse Levi's conception of ethics, in order to highlight and discuss a number of points of contact between their reflection on virtues, wisdom, friendship, poetics, and fortune.

## ARISTOTLE'S SYSTEM OF VIRTUES

Aristotle opens his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>4</sup> by questioning the concept of good and by stating that it "is that at which all things aim" (*Nic. Eth.*, I, 1094a 1), as far as all human beings possess the same mind, feelings, and emotion and therefore constitute one unique form of life. For this reason, human beings cannot but aim for the same good. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle challenges Plato's claim that only one universal and univocal definition of good exists and states, instead, that the good can be said in a great variety of ways, which means to say that one can speak the good in connection with a broad range of diverse things: in all cases, Aristotle maintains that there are many relative meanings of "good", but that there is only one definition of "good" in an absolute way. To understand this statement, we must recall the *homonymia pro ben*, that is, the relation of homology that links different second meanings of one single word to its first meaning. In Aristotle's view, homonymy is an "essential tool for the philosophical investigation" that he uses "for the analysis of a number of concepts fundamental to him—he speaks of homonymy as to good, being, friendship, life, identity, and the One" (SEMINARA, 2002, p. 25).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the full list of passages where Levi cites or mentions Aristotle, see *Opere complete* (LEVI, 2015, v. 3, p. 1274).

<sup>4</sup> Beside the *Nicomachean Ethics* that he dedicated to his son Nicomachus, Aristotle wrote the *Eudemian Ethics*, named after his friend Eudemius. There is also one further treatise, the *Magna Moralia*, whose authorship is still today object of discussion. All references to Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Poetics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*) are taken from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Imprescindibile strumento per l'indagine filosofica"; "nell'analisi di molti concetti per lui fondamentali – egli parla dell'omonimia a proposito del bene, dell'essere, dell'amicizia, della vita, dell'identico e dell'uno" (translation mine).

*Homonymia pros hen*, therefore, concerns both ontology and language: in the *Categories*, Aristotle only defines homonymy, while in *Metaphysics* he considers *homonymia pros hen* when he investigates the meaning of Being and states that “the term ‘being’ is used in various senses, but with reference to one central idea” (*Metaphysics*, III.2, 1003a, 33-34). From the point of view of language, this means that each word has more than one meaning, but that one alone is the “first” meaning, toward which all other meanings have a relation of homonymy, which means to say that they “contain” some reference to the first meaning (BERTI, 1971, p. 176). As to the concept of good, then, we call “good” a number of things that constantly refer to the first meaning of good. In terms of ethics, this implies that good actions are such in analogy with the category of “good life”, which could mean diverse things: the life of the rich could be good, or that of healthy, powerful, or beloved people and so on. However, on the basis of *homonymia pros hen*, everyone will agree that the universal good, toward which everyone strives, is *eudaimonia*, or happiness.<sup>6</sup>

It is then necessary to tell what happiness is. To Aristotle, happiness should not be identified with material wealth. However, the absence of a minimum amount of goods that permit to live with dignity and not in poverty (with enough food, for example, and a roof for shelter) would eventually impede one from being happy, “for it is impossible, or at least not easy, to play a noble part unless furnished with the necessary equipment” (*Nic. Eth.*, I, 1099a 15). And because no one can provide for their basic needs by their own strength alone, Aristotle states in *Politics* that no one is self-sufficient (1.2 1253a 26): without others, and above all friends, it is practically impossible to be happy. Happiness is not the same as pleasure too, despite the fact that being happy also implies feeling pleasure. Happiness produces some kind of pleasure that is not the same that descends from the fulfilment of the senses, but rather that kind of pleasure which we feel when we use our abilities in an excellent (or virtuous) way and we act wisely. Finally, happiness is not the same as virtue because it does not suffice to possess virtues to be happy, for one must know how to use them correctly: as “Olympic prizes go to those who actually compete and win, and are not awarded on the basis of one’s physical condition; similarly, happiness should be equated with using the virtues, and not merely with having them” (KRAUT, 1991, p. 235).

If the good being consists in “the active exercise of [one’s] soul’s faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue” (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, I, 1098a 16), and if the typical activity of the human being is the use of rationality, then one can attain happiness by making excellent use of the intellect, which on the one hand rules over passions and restrains them from causing excess or defect, and on the other hand permits to formulate good judgements.

To Aristotle, virtue (*arete*) literally means excellence. It therefore refers in general to any action that is carried out in an excellent way: for example, we say that the eye is virtuous when it allows sharp

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<sup>6</sup> The English translation of the Greek word “*eudaimonia*” (in Latin *felicitas*) is problematic. Some philosophers translate it with “happiness”, e.g. Annas (1993) and Kraut (1979). The majority of scholars, though, prefer such terms as well-being, flourishing or prosperity, see for example Nussbaum (1986), Charles (1995), and Sumner (2002).

sight (we say that one has got *good* eyes). Therefore, Aristotle defines virtue as “a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it” (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, II, 1107a 15). There are two types of virtues, respectively related to the two parts of the soul: ethical virtues are connected with the irrational side, which concerns emotions and desires and is ruled by reason; and the dianoetic virtues are connected with the rational side, which concerns the *nous*, or intelligence. Unlike Plato, who thought that desires impede to see the good, which only intellect can do, Aristotle believes that desires do not hinder virtues because desire actually urges the body to become active. In ethics, the problem is not desiring, but what we desire: we are virtuous when we desire good things. Ethical virtues descend from the righteous desire to live in accordance with the concept of absolute good (excellence) and are temperance, courage, liberality, meekness, and generosity. One can attain such virtues by imitating virtuous examples, by being trained during childhood to use reason to control emotions and desires, and by getting used to performing good deeds. For this reason, it is necessary to grow up in a just society ruled by good laws that permit the correct development of virtues in the youth: to Aristotle,

[...] it is by taking part in transactions with our fellow-men that some of us become just and others unjust; by acting in dangerous situations and forming a habit of fear or of confidence we become courageous or cowardly. And the same holds good of our dispositions with regard to the appetites, and anger; some men become temperate and gentle, others profligate and irascible (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, II, 1103b 7).

However, developing ethical virtues and the habit of performing excellent deeds is not sufficient to attain the good. Once the possess of ethical virtues has been secured, ripe human beings also have to grow aware of their behaviours and to learn how to make good choices: then, those who learn how to imitate excellent deeds will not be really virtuous until they have become fully able to choose deliberately. Aristotle includes the latter ability in the group of dianoetic virtues that, unlike ethical virtues, can be acquired via learning.

Two kinds of dianoetic virtues exist: the practical virtues of poetic creation and wisdom, and the theoretical ones such as knowledge, which is a merger of science (the ability to demonstrate something starting from principles) and intellect (knowledge of principles). While ethical virtues present themselves as the predisposition to perform good deeds in accordance with the golden mean, deliberation is the outcome of the evaluation. Ethical virtues are as necessary as the dianoetic in order to perform good deeds: through the former one can find the golden mean relatively to passions and desires; through the latter one can ponder and choose what action to perform in any given situation. There are no laws or universal rules that can be extracted from mathematical propositions capable of telling what the golden mean in any circumstance is because in ethics the balance between two excesses must be evaluated on the basis of both circumstances and the individual character of the agent.

The dianoetic virtue of *phronesis*, or wisdom, is critical to ethical judgment.<sup>7</sup> It does not investigate what could not be but how it is, which is the proper object of science: it rather investigates what variably depends on the individual. Moreover, it does not deal with ends but with the most adequate means to attain goals: “Virtue ensures the rightness of the end we aim at, Prudence ensures the rightness of the means we adopt to gain that end” (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, VI, 1144a 6). Wisdom is, therefore, a form of knowledge that is not rigorous but practical, a merger of feelings, desires, reason, and intellect that Aristotle calls “a truth-attaining rational quality, concerned with action in relation to the things that are good for human beings” (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, VI, 1140b 6).

Without wisdom, it is hard to deliberate over practical issues, no matter if one possesses knowledge: it is therefore true that to know the theory is no guarantee of sound judgement about particular circumstances. The learned man who lacks wisdom is like the physician who “has theory without experience, and knows the universal, but does not know the particular contained in it [and] will often fail in his treatment” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book A, 981a 21-24).

## LEVI'S ETHICAL VIRTUES

Levi's reflection on ethics, virtues, and wisdom unfolds on different plains and through storytelling, both as first-hand testimony and as fiction. Levi inclines rather toward theory than practice, and his quarrel with the idealistic doctrines mostly refers to his rejection of the kind of education that he received in High School during Fascism. He grew aware of the limits of that educational model through the uplifting experience of doing things with his own hands, that is, by experimenting with chemistry in the lab and by mountaineering. Levi was an “empiric-theorist” in the sense that he sought the meaning of life through the observation of empirical data; and he was also partly a technician because in order to perform practical actions one must possess specific technical skills.<sup>8</sup> Levi revealed his theoretical predisposition already as a young student, as he recalls in *The Periodic Table*, where he remembers the practical and utilitarian attitude of his friend Enrico, who “asked of chemistry, reasonably, the tools for an income and a secure life”, whereas to Levi “chemistry represented a vague cloud of imminent powers” (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 771). As the two friends understood that chemistry would imprint their future academic studies, they decided to try and electrolyse water and Enrico questioned Primo's knowledge: “Who says it's really hydrogen and oxygen?” he said rudely. “What if it's chlorine? Didn't you put salt in it?” To me the objection was offensive: how could Enrico doubt my assertion? I was the theorist, I alone”

<sup>7</sup> About the concept of *phronesis*, see Anscombe (1958) and Chamberlain (1984)

<sup>8</sup> Botez (2012) analyses the concept of *techné* in *The Periodic Table* by referring to the meaning of this concept in the Greek philosophical thought, especially of Plato and Aristotle. However, the argumentation is flawed because of relevant historical mistakes. In the first sentence of the section “TECHNE-TECHNICS-TECHNICITY-TECHNOLOGY”, the author states that “Aristotle first coined the term *techné* 2,500 years ago” (29), which is false because the term *techné* already features in Hesiod's *Theogony* in ca. 700 BC. The intuition that lies at the basis of the article is good, although the argumentation is weak and based on one title of secondary literature alone (*Technicity* by A. Bradley and L. Armand), which is not adequate to understand the philosophically complex importance of *techné* in Aristotle's work.

(LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 775). In another chapter of *The Periodic Table*, Levi recalls that he explained to his friend Sandro

[...] that the nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, consisted in making himself master of matter, and that I had enrolled in Chemistry because I wished to keep faith with this nobility. That to conquer matter is to understand it, and understanding matter is necessary in order to understand the universe and ourselves (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 787).

Levi knows, however, that theory without practice is dangerous because it could convey abstract values and empty concepts that lack sound connection with reality: practical application alone can confirm the theory and avoid catastrophes. Thus, Levi remembers, in the same book, that during the elaboration of his thesis the analytic method ceased to be a

[...] bookish dogma; it was retested every day, it could be refined, made to conform to our purposes, by means of a subtle game of reason, of trial and error. A mistake was no longer a vaguely comic accident, which spoils an exam and lowers your grade: a mistake was like climbing a rock face, a measure of yourself, an awareness, a step higher, which makes you more capable and fit (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 812).

Levi understood that theoretical knowledge is often insufficient to evaluate real-life circumstances when wisdom and practical virtues turn out to be more adequate.

Like Aristotle, Levi too believed that one develops virtuous habits – as well as the vicious ones – during childhood, through education. He grew aware of that during his captivity in Auschwitz when, like his fellow prisoners, he had to learn how to steal in order to survive. The Lager was designed to annihilate its population physically and psychologically, which was achieved by inflicting a series of experiences whose violence was so gratuitous as incomprehensible. Before the average prisoner could grasp that life-conditions were aimed at killing and not at preserving, he or she had to go through the systematic dismantling of all civil habits and ethical principles. For this reason, also, the greatest difficulty that prisoners (who were not already criminals) were confronted with in the Lager was that they had to willingly abjure their ethical principles if they wanted to survive. Levi refers to this issue in *The Periodic Table* when he states that it is quite hard to perform given deeds if one has not got used to that since childhood:

I was a chemist in a chemical factory, in a chemical laboratory (this, too, has been recounted), and I stole in order to eat. If you don't start as a child, learning to steal isn't easy; it took several months for me to repress the moral commandments and acquire the necessary techniques, and at a certain point I realized (with a flash of laughter and a pinch of satisfied ambition) that I was reliving, I a respectable university graduate, the involution-evolution of a famous respectable dog, a Victorian and Darwinian dog who is deported and becomes a thief in order to live in his "Lager" of the Klondike. (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 867)

As Levi was admitted to the chemical lab of the Buna-Monowitz Lager, he had already been a prisoner for months and the processes of the demolition of social habits and adaptation to the new regime of the struggle for survival were already complete. Together with food to eat, Levi stole anything

he could, except the bread of his companions (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 867). As this passage shows, he suggests that ethical virtues that orient one to perform good deeds, if they have been attained during childhood, cannot be totally erased but only suspended, when the agent should be forced to deliberate and act in accordance not with a social but with a biological imperative, which is to say when the agent must survive almost at all costs in such a place as the Lager.

Like Aristotle, then, Levi too believes that one can learn virtues by imitating virtuous examples. One model of a virtuous person was Levi's friend Sandro Delmastro, from whom young Primo learned the virtue of courage. When he remembers his friend in *The Periodic Table*, Levi expresses his gratitude for having dragged him into perilous mountaineering excursions that required guts and “for having knowingly got [him] in trouble, in [...] adventures senseless only in appearance”, because he knew “absolutely that these were useful to [him] later” (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 792).

Finally, both Aristotle and Levi believed that one can learn ethical virtues not only by observing others' behaviours but also from literary art. Aristotle, in accordance with the *paideia*, or the educational system of his time in Athens (JAEGGER, 1946, p. 3), considered poetic art as a paramount part of ethical education. Poetic production, unlike historical narrative, tells how things could be rather than stating how they are or were.<sup>9</sup> He wrote in the *Poetics* that tragedy is essentially *mimesis*, that is, it does not reproduce real actions but represents possible actions. To recognise that tragedies are mimetic representations is important because human beings learn through imitation: “From childhood man has an instinct for representation, and in this respect, differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things. And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations” (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1448b 5-7). Tragedies provide examples of ethical deeds that are useful for the education of the individual because they show what could happen if we live excessively by indulging unrestrained desires and passions.

Levi too believed that one can learn from literature and in *The Search for Roots* he mentioned literary works that represented for him important examples of ethical speculation. One fundamental author was Joseph Conrad, whom Levi numbers among his “deeper and more lasting loves” (LEVI, 2003, p. 6) because he makes “a good example of how a man can remake himself” (LEVI, 2003, p. 63). Levi cites Conrad by explicitly referring to his novella *Youth*, which tells the story of how young Marlow got his first command during the difficult experience of a shipwreck: to Levi, this story is an example of the “initiation to adulthood, which often follows failure and in all cases leads one to self-revelations” (CINELLI, 2017, p. 100).<sup>10</sup> In the interview “Mountaineering”, then, Levi states that reading Melville, Conrad, Kipling, and London was a way to discover the world and oneself (p. 62). Levi looked at many other authors as “masters” because they were able to “teach” by their art something about life (not in a

<sup>9</sup> For the presence of ethics in the *Poetics*, see Guastini (2004b).

<sup>10</sup> “L'iniziazione alla vita adulta, che spesso passa per un fallimento e che in ogni caso conduce alla rivelazione di sé a se stessi.”

didactic or moralistic way), among whom feature Manzoni, Dante, Pavese, Mann, Dostoevsky, and others.

## DIANOETIC VIRTUES: WISDOM

Levi grew fully aware of the importance of practical wisdom during his captivity and the long journey home, by joining individuals who were gifted with strong practical virtues and the innate ability to calculate the best thing to do in any given circumstance. Examples of Levi's ethical ripening can be found in the chapter "Cerium" of *The Periodic Table* and in *The Truce*. In "Cerium", Levi recalls the time he spent in the Lager's lab as a chemist when he repeatedly stole stuff to exchange for food. He first subtracted "a few hundred grams of fatty acids, with difficulty obtained through the oxidation of paraffin" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 867) that sated hunger but whose taste was "so unpleasant" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, 867-868) that he gave up on selling them. He then tried to make pancakes with "cotton wool", but they were unsuitable for selling too. And even when he attempted to "ingest and digest glycerine", by relying on the theoretical consideration that "as a product of the splitting of fats, it must surely in some way be metabolized and provide calories" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 868), his theoretical knowledge did not secure any practical success. One day, finally, he managed to steal some cylinders whose nature and scope remained at first obscure. As his friend Alberto "took a knife out of his pocket and tried to cut into one", the yellow sparks bursting out revealed that they were made of ferrocerium, "an alloy used for common flints in cigarette lighters" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 868). Despite his theoretical understanding of the chemical nature of those things, Levi did not figure out how to make good bargains out of them, thus demonstrating his lack of discernment, which is the virtue that permits to spot the most perspicuous connections among things. Cunning Alberto, who insightfully recognised their value on the black market, rebuked Levi and said that one must be "more astute" (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 869) in life.<sup>11</sup> A remark is now due: in this specific case, Alberto acts cunningly, but he is in general described by Levi as a person who possesses that virtue that Aristotle called "practical wisdom", which he distinguished from the mere ability (*δευότης*) to find the most convenient means, whatever the end is: "Prudence or practical wisdom

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<sup>11</sup> Mooney (2016) notes that Levi seemingly shares with Aristotle a similar opinion about character and ethics in connection with the friendship between Primo and Alberto. However, the discussion of Aristotle is quite slack because the author does not develop the part on Aristotle's ethics properly, for example by discussing the distinction of ethical and dianoetic virtues, which is of paramount importance in that ethical system. Moreover, the author blurs contemporary moral with ancient ethics: as she considers the resemblance between Levi and Aristotle, the author states that "Levi gives moral weight to people's character rather than to their acts" (6) and therefore that "the potential of character to transcend circumstance meant that it came to represent a small window through which we could make out even a shadow of the autonomous, that is to say, moral, person" (6-7). This statement is false because: 1. In Aristotle the character is good when the person acts in a good manner, *ergo* actions are fundamental in the Aristotelian ethics; 2. the autonomy of moral was absolutely alien to Greek moral philosophy and has begun to influence contemporary philosophy since the Enlightenment; 3. Autonomous and moral are not and should not be synonyms. One previous study devoted to the friendship between Levi, Alberto, Mordo, and Cesare considered from an Aristotelian perspective is that of Homer (2001). The philosophical argumentation here is more sound and convincing. However, Homer does not specifically focus on virtue ethics nor does he refer exclusively to Aristotle, as far as his argumentation includes discussions of Plato, Locke, Tocqueville, Hobbes, Mills, and so on, in order to uphold a broader discourse of political philosophy rather than of ethics.



(φρόνησις) [is] an intellectual virtue that is responsible for moral knowledge and discernment, but not so much about norms and principles from a general viewpoint, as about their relevance to actual and often unique situations” (PAREDELLA, 2005, p. 1). This fundamental distinction can be useful to understand the ethical personality of the other two characters represented in *The Truce*, Mordo and Cesare, who respectively embody two examples of “practical ability” and “practical wisdom”.

Frederic Homer devoted a part of his book *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* to the comparison between Mordo and Cesare (HOMER, 2001, 72-75). In this study that focuses more on politics than philosophy, the author highlights as a fundamental factor of agency determinateness, which on the basis of the end can produce good or bad effects. Homer recognises the moral attitude of Mordo and Cesare by focusing not much on their personalities as on their moral agency, by distinguishing between the action of Mordo, who acts by considering the success of his deeds (heteronomous motive), and that of Cesare, who acts considering principles (autonomous motive). Homer interprets the two characters implicitly through the distinction between Mills’s utilitarian moral and Kant’s deontology of the categorical imperative. I will now analyse the difference between the two characters from the point of view of virtue ethics.

With both of them, Levi had a business-like relationship; with Cesare, though, he also became a friend. In both cases, Levi’s contribution to the relationship was mostly based on his theoretical knowledge of languages, despite the fact that in almost all circumstances in which he had to use such knowledge it turned out to be hardly useful or even useless at all. This is one reason why Levi admits in *The Truce*, by recalling Cesare’s effective communication skills even in languages that the man did not speak at all, that in dealing with people “it is not strictly necessary” to know a language perfectly, because what one desires to buy or sell can be deduced “with excellent approximation from the other’s facial expression, from his gestures, and from the number of his replies” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 244).

Mordo Nahum represents the utilitarian man who seems to possess only “practical ability”, which corresponds to what Marcel Detienne describes as a “type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experience acquired over the years” (DETIENNE; VERNANT, 1978, p. 3). After the liberation of Auschwitz, Levi was overwhelmed by the hectic dismantling of the camp and he began the journey home (which he later on called the most vital adventure of his entire life) with other “deformed, defective, abnormal human examples” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 235), among whom there was Mordo. Their train soon broke down, so Levi and Mordo decided to make the rest of the journey together:

We had hoped for a short and safe journey, toward a camp equipped to welcome us, toward an acceptable surrogate for our homes; and that hope was part of a much larger hope, hope in a right and just world, miraculously reestablished on its natural

foundations after an eternity of disruptions, mistakes, and slaughters [...] it was a naïve idea (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 238).

The first lesson that Levi receives from Mordo about wisdom and wit concerns understanding the priority of necessary things. Levi, in fact, began his journey wearing “a pair of odd shoes such as in Italy I’ve seen worn only by priests: of very delicate leather, up to the anklebone, with two large pins and lo laces, and two side pieces of an elastic material that supposed to ensure that they closed and stayed on” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 233). According to Mordo, only a fool would do something of the like, someone whose stupidity descends from not taking into account “the reality of things” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 242): to him, a pair of sound shoes was worthier than food, in the face of the long journey ahead. As they reached Cracow, Mordo made again the right choice by deciding to travel on the tramway without a ticket, given the state of general confusion in town, their exhaustion, and the lack of money (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 242). Levi comments that his companion, once more, “was right; and, as will be seen, he was right in all the affairs that followed, except one” (LEVI, v. 1, 2015, p. 243): he is talking about the only time when Levi’s theoretical knowledge of languages proved itself of some use, as he had to communicate with a Polish priest and did it by using Latin as a bridge-language (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 249).

Mordo’s abilities struck Levi again when they reached the military barracks in search of shelter, and the feeble arguments of the Italian did not convince the Polish sentry. Mordo, instead,

[...] knew how all the military services of the world function, and while I was talking he was digging in the sack hanging on my shoulders. Suddenly he pushed me aside and silently placed under the nose of the Cerberus a dazzling can of pork, adorned with a multicolored label, and with futile instructions in six languages on the right way to handle the contents (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 243).

Once they have been admitted, they find a group of Italians, mostly captured by the Germans in Greece. Surprisingly, it was not Levi to socialise with them but Mordo, who

[...] possessed the right equipment: he could speak Italian, and (what was more important, and is lacking in many Italians themselves) he knew what to talk about in Italian. He astonished me: he proved to be an expert in girls and spaghetti, in Juventus and opera, war and gonorrhoea, wine and the black market, motorcycles and dodges (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 244).

Mortified by Mordo’s effective practical skills, Levi made one last attempt to beat him by asking if he could tell a boiled egg from a raw one, a trick which the Italian was rather proud of: “I hoped that the Greek didn’t know it, and so I would be able to rehabilitate myself in his eyes” (LEVI, v. 1, p. 252). Yet, Primo had to give up once again, for his Greek companion had also traded in eggs.

The other example is embodied by Lello Perugia, who already appears in *If This Is a Man* as the character of Piero Sonnino. However, Levi made a more extended description of Lello Perugia in *The Truce* under the pseudonym of Cesare, a character that is modelled – as Cavaglioni (2014) notes, by

focusing on Belli's influence on Cesare's language but not on whether any connection exists between Levi's ethics and Belli's moralism – after those of Belli's Roman sonnets:

Cesare, on the other hand, I scarcely knew, since he had come to Buna from Birkenau a few months earlier. He asked for water, before food: water, because he had had nothing to drink for four days, and the fever was burning him and the dysentery emptied him. I brought it to him, along with the remains of our soup: and I didn't know that I was thus bringing the basis of a long and singular friendship (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 270).

After the liberation, the Russians split the surviving prisoners into several groups in order to take the prisoners still able to work to Gleiwitz, where they had to dig an anti-tank trench. Cesare grasped the danger of being declared fit and “acting with admirable astuteness, had just missed getting away” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 272). Nonetheless, he was found and sent to Gleiwitz, where he was forced to endure “a dog's life” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 272). Cesare, who was a perspicacious and wise young man, could not but feel humiliated to have himself “get caught like that, like a kid, he who had had a stall at Porta Portese” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 272.). In Levi's portrait, Cesare is cunning but neither bad nor cynical. Levi found amusing to get involved in his adventures, like when they used Primo's badge to deceive the sentry and leave the camp one after another; or when they tasted strawberries from several stands in the market but bought none, arguing they were not good, and thus walked away without paying.

Despite his being sharp, Cesare is “full of human warmth” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 277): Levi recalls one episode in particular when Cesare traded in fish and invented the fraudulent trick of injecting the fish with water to make them heavier. One day, he came back without fish, penniless, and with a long face. Later on, he confessed to Primo that he had met a woman with very poor children, who “had looked at him with such eyes that Cesare had thrown down the fish and run away, like a thief” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 338).

Unlike Mordo, Cesare is a positive figure. While Mordo is sly, interest-focussed, and inflexibly subjugated to his own prejudices, Cesare is conversely a free spirit gifted with the virtues of prodigality and empathy: “Cesare was a child of the sun, a friend of the whole world. He didn't know hatred or scorn, he was as varying as the sky, joyful, sly, and ingenuous, reckless and cautious, very ignorant, very innocent, and very civilized” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 277). If we compare these qualities with the Aristotelian ethical virtues of “courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1366b 1), we see that Cesare represents a popular specimen of the wise man, for his virtue is spontaneous and – as Levi puts it – “good in itself, in an absolute sense” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 278). The difference between the practical virtue of *metis* (cunning), which is useful to solve problems in given circumstances, and virtue good per se lies in that the latter “confers nobility on a man, redeems many possible defects, saves his soul”; and also in that it made “a precious store for one who intended to engage in commerce in the public squares” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 278).

The different ethical inclination of Mordo and Cesare brings Levi to share with them two different kinds of friendship. To better point out these kinds of friendship, I will go back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, whose author recognises three types of friendship: by usefulness, by pleasure, and by good. The main difference lies in that the first and second forms of friendship are oriented to given ends (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, 1156a 2) because they might be of use or pleasant. In the latter case, people befriend each other for no other reason than love. That is why Aristotle calls this being friends "in an absolute sense" (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, 1157b 6). In view of this, the friendship between Levi and Mordo is usefulness-oriented, while the one between Primo and Cesare is based on the good. Levi, thus, affirms the Aristotelian principle that being able to manipulate situations and people is not enough to perform good deeds, for it takes just and good premises to do that: the best, rarest and longest friendship is possible only between people who are inclined to the good in an absolute sense.

## THE DIANOETIC VIRTUE OF POETIC CREATION

Aristotle and Levi shared also a very similar idea of poetic production. Among the dianoetic virtues, Aristotle mentioned the poietic ability, which is the ability to produce good artistic objects. In his *Poetics*, which is devoted to the art of tragic theatre, the efficacy of dramatic composition does not depend on what we today call staging but rather on the construction of the plot (*mythos*), because a tragedy that relies on staging alone, "while highly effective, is yet quite foreign to the art and has nothing to do with poetry" (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1450b 18-20). In order to create a good tragedy, the poet should arrange a balanced plot with a beginning, a development, and a conclusion and should forge it in a way that it be neither too extended nor too small: "As then creatures and other organic structures must have a certain magnitude and yet be easily taken in by the eye, so too with plots: they must have length but must be easily taken in by the memory" (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1451a 3). Any composition, then, to be virtuous and to fit its end, that is, to represent an ethical example, must be of average dimensions and be "clear and not commonplace" (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1458a 19).

In Levi's view too, narration must be balanced to make a good story. Unlike Aristotle, who considers tragedy from a theoretical point of view, Levi uses storytelling as a practical tool: it is the instrument by which he can tell his terrible experience of captivity and to provide an opportunity for pondering over such past events. To be good, then, a tale must have virtues. Levi states in "The Essential and the Superfluous" that "there isn't a great deal of difference between putting together a lab apparatus and putting together a good story. It needs symmetry, it has to fit the purpose, it has to have nothing superfluous, but not to miss out anything essential. And it has to work" (LEVI, 2001, p. 167-168). For Levi, writers have got their individual style and are free to use any rhetoric and poetic *escamotage*, but "it comes spontaneously and naturally" to him "to abstain from embellishment, from extras added in just

to make the writing look good” (LEVI, 2001, p. 171): he loved straight and clear storytelling, without aestheticism or embellishment, and not excessive.

More in general, this was Levi’s attitude towards “doing”, which characterised his wisdom, his being “measured” and his rejection of all forms of excess, as he explained in an interview: “Perhaps there is a sort of wisdom that seeps through from my books which I don’t feel within myself. For me, it is just a case of good measure, not running before you can walk” (LEVI, 2001, p. 174). The virtue of measure or golden mean, though, is a necessary and yet insufficient condition of an ethically virtuous tale.

To not stumble into misunderstandings when speaking of something new or unusual, it is paradoxically more effective not to rely on the habitual correspondence of word and thing, but rather to use metaphors, which permits to activate the hermeneutic process of comprehension.<sup>12</sup> Thus, using words differently than usually helps us form new expressions with the original meaning and this in turn permits us to attribute new meanings to common or worn-out words. The use of metaphors, however, is no guarantee of good communication because they might be used to produce aestheticization rather than to make clarity. How is it then possible to understand if metaphors make things plain, whereas usual language-games reveal themselves inadequate? To answer the question, I find helpful referring to Aristotle, who was the first to elaborate a systematic theory of metaphor in the *Poetics* and in the *Rhetoric*.

According to him, metaphor must be well-made, like any other composition, which is to say that it must avoid excess (to be too evident) and defect (to be too obscure) and must be adequate to the situation in which it is used. When they are well-made and adequate to their context, metaphors make clarity because their adequacy is “based not on the certainty of identity, which is also tautological, but rather on the more complex and subtle criterion of similarity” (GUASTINI, 2004a). Conversely, a metaphor that fails fitting its context is destined to produce confusion and false opinions (PIREDDA, 2014, p. 117-139). The dangerousness of metaphor, therefore, lies in the use one makes of it, which is the reason why the autobiographical character and narrator of *The Wrench* warns Faussone to bear in mind that one should “be careful with these comparisons, because, although they may be poetic, they don’t actually tell you very much” (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 1021). It is easy to use metaphors to deceive and the narrator goes on to say that writers can be irresponsible individuals because “the pylons [they] build do not carry high-tension cables, if they fall no one dies, and they don’t even have to hold up against the wind [...] and you’ll never see a writer be brought to trial or end up in prison because his structures fell down” (LEVI, 2015, v. 2, p. 996-998). Metaphors should therefore be used with caution because they can be effective in communicating new experiences that might be otherwise difficult to share, but they can also cause confusion and false opinions. Not unlike for ethical judgment, there is no mathematical

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<sup>12</sup> About the hermeneutic circle of comprehension, see Gadamer (1989, p. 267). In a summary, Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle is based on Aristotle’s ethics and is characterised by a) dialogue; b) rehabilitation of prejudice; c) the historically-effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*); and d) the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). See also Vedder (2002).

rule capable of telling the right measure of a metaphor: its golden mean depends on one's ability to see and evaluate the connections (even the most hidden) that link the parts of the metaphor with another.

In writing, then, measure concerns not only style but also contents. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that tragedy must represent a likely story about a character that should be neither too mean (as in comedy) nor too sublime (as in lyric poetry), but rather average: someone “who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the fortune, but rather through some flaw in him” (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 13 53a 9-11), which is to say someone whose disgrace depends on his or her inability to restrain passion and desire through reason. The ethical worth of a tragedy lies, for Aristotle, on the measure of the composition that conveys a general sense of balance and likelihood, which permits the spectator to feel awe and piety for the character's error. To enjoy the ethical depth of tragedy, therefore, rational evaluation is as important as emotional response. To challenge Plato's idea that ethical judgment is a rational process free of any emotional implication and to provide at the same time an effective example of ethical action, Aristotle cites the story of Neoptolemus in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By speaking of this mythological character, Aristotle shows how an action borrowed from “literature” can trigger reflections that in turn will help to develop virtues: the specific example reminds us that feelings are important for judgement but also that they must be adapted to the circumstances if one is not to repeat Neoptolemus' mistake that almost causes him to harm his friend Philoctetes (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, VII, 1151b 4). In the *Poetics* he adds that the poet should not arouse passions and “follow the wish of the spectators” (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1353a 35) by means of aestheticization and scenic machinery: “one should not seek from tragedy all kinds of pleasure but that which is peculiar to tragedy” (Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1453b 11), that is, the pleasure one feels when the observation of exemplary actions contributes to the development of one's ethical knowledge and sensibility, which is wisdom.

Similarly, Levi believed that storytelling, in order to be ethically worthwhile (like his Auschwitz-witnessing), must be free of any form of aestheticization. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he accuses Vercors' *Les Armes de la nuit*, whose main theme is the “death of the soul”, of being “intolerably contaminated by aestheticism and literary prurience” (LEVI, 2015, v. 3, p. 2448). Similar criticism also hit Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte*: what Levi blamed in this “fine but mendacious” (LEVI, 2015, v. 3, p. 2439) movie was the aestheticization of evil through the kitsch representation of a sadomasochistic relationship between an officer of the SS and a young Jewish woman. While aestheticism aims to rouse emotions and passions, which in the case of testifying to the horror of Auschwitz risks to blur the object of the tale or even to compromise its comprehension, Levi's ethical attitude toward writing consists in recounting the experience of deportation in a rhetorically measured way, in order to stimulate critical reflection.

## CONCLUSIONS: ON FORTUNE AND THE WISE ONE

To conclude, I would like to focus on how Levi, the “theorist”, borrowed those practical virtues and wisdom (that he so brilliantly poured into his books) from the adversities which he experienced and from the virtuous human specimens he came across in life. To Aristotle, the wise person is a quiet, self-controlled, and courageous person who spends his or her life to comprehend oneself by analysing one’s own experiences:

Nor yet assuredly will he be variable and liable to change; for he will not be dislodged from his happiness easily, nor by ordinary misfortunes, but only by severe and frequent disasters, nor will he recover from such disasters and become happy again quickly, but only, if at all, after a long term of years, in which he has had time to compass high distinctions and achievements (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* I, 1101a 14).

It is not difficult to recognise in these words a portrait of Levi. There is one more point that Levi shares with Aristotle. In the framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics, fortune plays a paramount role in the attainment of a happy life: not only must one be virtuous and possess the basic material wealth, but it is also necessary that destiny (τύχη), which is neutral in itself, swerve toward good luck (εὐτυχία) rather than toward bad luck (ἀτυχία). Also for Levi fortune is an important contributing factor for happiness. In the *incipit* of *If This Is a Man*, Levi states that it was his “good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 5). The statement is only apparently ironic because the chances of survival in Auschwitz in 1944 were actually better than before. In that year, in fact, “the German government had decided, because of the growing scarcity of labour, to lengthen the average life span of the prisoners destined for elimination; it allowed noticeable improvements in the camp routine and temporarily suspended killings at the whim of individuals” (LEVI, 2015, v. 1, p. 5). The deportation to Auschwitz was the cataclysmic event that shook Levi’s life to its fundamentals. Any juvenile joy and playfulness that Levi links in *The Periodic Table* to the years of youth and university studies, despite racial segregation, was swept away by the deportation. Nonetheless, Levi managed to survive and to recover from that catastrophe, extracting good teachings from such a negative experience and a substantially positive attitude towards life. In that, he was not different from Aristotle's virtuous man, who

never stops behaving as he has always done, thanks to his virtues of character and intellect, and with such instruments he will know how to react to unfortunate events, as he will know how to welcome the fortunate ones, being aware of the absolute unpredictability of destiny and meanwhile of the fragility of goodness (CARDULLO, 2014, p. 554).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Non cesserà mai di operare come ha sempre operato, grazie alle virtù del carattere e dell’intelletto, e con questi mezzi saprà reagire agli eventi sfortunati, così come saprà accogliere quelli fortunati, consapevole dell’assoluta imprevedibilità della sorte e, nel contempo, dell’immane fragilità del bene.”

Thanks to the change of fortune from bad (deportation) to good (survival and success in life), Levi never renounced challenging his destiny, like when he tried and managed to be admitted as an assistant to the Buna-Monowitz chemical lab, which increased dramatically his chances of survival.<sup>14</sup> The factors that contributed to this were the possession of virtues, first of which friendship; being able to secure sustenance; the theoretical attitude towards life and the world; and the capsizing of bad fortune into good luck. By recounting his experience of hardship, that brought him “to the bottom” and then to rise again to the heights of professional and literary success, Levi’s work unfolds a profound ethical parable that in the end recalls Aristotle’s portrait of the wise person who has found happiness in facing his or her destiny with courage and strength:

But the accidents of fortune are many and vary in degree of magnitude; and although small pieces of good luck, as also of misfortune, clearly do not change the whole course of life, yet great and repeated successes will render life more blissful, since both of their own nature they help to embellish it, and also they can be nobly and virtuously utilized; while great and frequent reverses can crush and mar our bliss both by the pain they cause and by the hindrance they offer to many activities. Yet nevertheless even in adversity nobility shines through, when a man endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul (Aristotles, *Nic. Eth.* I, 11 1100b 12).

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<sup>14</sup> On the themes of fortune and chance see also Gordon (2010) and more recently Ghelli (2018).



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