

VIRTUE ETHICS AND CARING: The Ethical Presuppositions of Taking Mortality Seriously

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INTRODUCTION

In his most recent book, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*¹, Martin Hägglund argues that life is finite and that the certainty of death endows our life and our time with intrinsic value. He claims that without death to relate to, all questions about value and prioritization would lose their relevance, and then attempts to trace the plausible and practical implications that would follow if we took mortality seriously both as individuals and as a society. According to Hägglund, the main implications of such a consideration would be the emergence of secular faith and the endorsement of democratic socialism. While Hägglund is clear in explaining both of these points, he does not explicitly discuss the ethical presuppositions of his theoretical commitments. He does argue, however, in ways that are compatible with a virtue ethical perspective, and advocates, for example, a practice-oriented view of human flourishing. Thus, this essay attempts to make explicit the connection between Hägglund's ideas and a virtue ethical standpoint; in particular, I argue: (i) Hägglund's position is more compatible with a virtue ethical standpoint than a deontological or consequentialist standpoint, and (ii) it is compatible with the view of caring as a virtue. The essay is divided into three parts: first, I will give a brief overview of Hägglund's philosophical position; second, I will present the virtue ethical framework that lays the groundwork for my arguments;

¹ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, (London: Profile Books, 2019).

third, I will attempt to demonstrate why Hägglund's philosophical standpoint is most easily accommodated within a virtue ethical framework which includes the idea of caring as a virtue.

I. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THIS LIFE: WHY MORTALITY MAKES US FREE

The main idea of *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* is that life has intrinsic value because it is finite and that we appreciate our time because it is limited. Mortality is what fills our lives with meaning and value, and it keeps us committed to everyone and everything that we care about.² Our motivation to sustain whatever we value comes from realizing that it can be lost and that, therefore, the flourishing of anything we value depends on our actions.³ If we were infinite, we would never feel a need to pursue any goals or to spend time with loved ones since we would be fundamentally indifferent to everything given the infinitude of immortality and possibility.⁴

The belief that the finite is valuable because it is unique and in need of sustenance is called secular faith⁵. Such faith must always manifest itself in practice. For example, in order for a friendship to exist, it is not enough to simply state that someone is your friend; that friendship needs to be mutual and maintained in order to both survive and flourish.⁶ To have secular faith is to realize that we ourselves are responsible for the flourishing or withering of what we value. It is also to realize that the justification of our actions depend on us, and that what we value and who we think ourselves to be is expressed in what we do.⁷

The ability to take responsibility for one's actions in this fashion presupposes that agents have will, can form intentions, and possess the freedom to choose and prioritize what projects to cultivate and strive for (a freedom of this kind is called spiritual freedom⁸). It is also important to note that one of the preconditions for being able to ask questions about "who to be" or "what to do" is that there exist no determinate answers in advance. If there were, there would be no point in asking in the first place. Thus, to have spiritual freedom is to be capable of treating the material, social, and historical conditions for one's existence as dynamic rather than predetermined⁹. This does not mean, however, that we are atomistic individuals. On the contrary, if we seek to transform or maintain our historic-normative framework, we are then bound to take a stand in relation to it and towards one another.¹⁰

The opposite of secular faith, as one might expect, is religious faith. This kind of faith interprets life as eternal and our earthly existence as a mere trial in the attempt to attain

² Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 43–44.

³ *Ibid.*, 45–51, 68–74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶ Martin Hägglund, "Utblick: Martin Hägglund och det ändliga livet", interview by producer Thomas Lunderquist, *Filosofiska rummet [podcast]*, SR, November 10, 2019, <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/1385980?programid=793>.

⁷ Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 176.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 176–177.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 177–181.

eternal salvation from fragility and loss.¹¹ One of the most famous examples is perhaps that of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac upon God's command given his belief in the existence of an eternal state (*i.e.* "Heaven") after death. By showing that he is willing to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham demonstrates how his devotion to an eternal God is greater than his devotion to his mortal son.¹² However, the reason for Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is that God has promised that Isaac will flourish if he is sacrificed. This is, of course, fundamentally paradoxical since it means that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son stems from his faith in the eternal. His action is only sensible in the light of his implicit conviction that life is finite since only that which may perish may also flourish.¹³

The story of Abraham and Isaac therefore demonstrates how an eternal god cannot teach us anything about responsibility on Hägglund's account since such a being cannot comprehend vulnerability or the binding nature of commitments. Thus, religious faith inhibits spiritual freedom since if God's word is law, we stand in no legitimate position to question it.¹⁴ Another example of how religious faith inhibits spiritual freedom is illustrated through a thought experiment in which two children are left alone with an artwork that they are told not to touch. One child is told not to touch the artwork because it is unique and fragile, and because many would be upset if it were to be broken. The other is told that the piece is being monitored and that he or she will be severely punished for either touching or breaking it. While neither child touches the work, it is easy to discern that they are motivated for quite different reasons (one by a sense of responsibility; the other from a fear of punishment). Without the presence of a monitor, the latter child would lose any trace of responsibility since he or she is not taught to use spiritual freedom for personal orientation¹⁵ like the first child.

In the same way that we are subordinated to the eternal in a religious faith, we are subordinated to capital growth in capitalism. As the Marxist argument goes, when capital growth is seen as the measure of social welfare, our life and our time are only instrumental and valuable insofar as they give birth to a productive kind of labor. Consequently, capitalism undermines democracy as an institution because it inhibits discussions about value, as well as those related to reform, since "making a profit" has already taken over as the incontestable value that society ought to follow.¹⁶ Unlike capitalism, Hägglund claims, democratic socialism promotes democratic discussions since the means of production are owned collectively by citizens, and social welfare is measured in terms of socially-available free time. This is time freed to cultivate our spiritual freedom, either by engaging in pursuits that we find intrinsically valuable, or by confirming and challenging each others' perceptions about what is inherently valuable.¹⁷

One particularly important idea in democratic socialism is that a person's freedom

11 *Ibid.*, 52.

12 *Ibid.*, 125–128.

13 *Ibid.*, 134–138, 150, 164–167.

14 *Ibid.*, 169–170.

15 *Ibid.*, 208–210.

16 *Ibid.*, 250–251.

17 *Ibid.*, 275, 301–303.

is dependent upon other people's freedom since we cannot have spiritual freedom in isolation.¹⁸ Thus, the purpose of democratic socialism is to minimize alienating labour so that we can both spend time on what we value and become active citizens responsible for answering to each other. This explains, in part, the importance of collective ownership under democratic socialism, and is meant to replace all forms of abstract ownership where property can be classified as any random range of various commodities. Instead, collective ownership is a type of concrete ownership wherein one can only own an object if they possess a concrete relation to it.¹⁹ For example, in capitalism one can own artwork as a status symbol without actually caring about its intrinsic worth as an art piece, whereas in democratic socialism, only those that sincerely appreciate the artwork can be said to properly own it.²⁰

II. THE VIRTUE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The two main ideas of virtue ethics are, first, that virtues are commendable character traits that guide us in different situations, and second, that we lead “flourishing” lives by acting virtuously on a continuous and voluntary basis.²¹ Consequently, people's actions are seen as comprehensible in light of their intentions and motives – a view which seems almost second-nature today. To lead a virtuous life is to achieve one's *telos*, which means “final end” in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle contends that this *telos* is biological and universal. He holds that we flourish when we use our *phronesis* (i.e., practical wisdom²²), and claims that this means that there must be some natural hierarchy in society where only a small elite²³ are privileged enough to cultivate all of their virtues. The rest are natural slaves who need to sacrifice themselves so that mankind, as a species, might strive towards its *telos* through the victories of the elite.²⁴

Contre Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre argues instead for a social and dynamic understanding of our *telos*. He thinks that humans are story-tellers who understand actions based on the historical and social situations that make their endeavours meaningful and sensible.²⁵ This would mean that we interpret actions in light of the various narratives that give us context, and that it is in course of writing these narratives that we lead “good lives”. Additionally, one important aspect of such narratives is that they can never be fixed or predetermined, and therefore, always require some element of uncertainty in order to motivate action²⁶. Thus, living the good life is to constantly search for what it is *to live a good life*, and the virtues that one gathers along the way constitute the inner compass that guide such a search.²⁷

18 Ibid, 225–231.

19 Ibid, 305–307.

20 Ibid, 319–320.

21 Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics”, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The reviewed Oxford translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2, Bollingen Series: 71:2, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1746–1752.

22 Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics”, 1734–1737.

23 The elite were mainly seen as the citizens of the polis, the ancient Greek city-state.

24 Aristotle, “Politics”, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The reviewed Oxford translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2, Bollingen Series: 71:2, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1989–1992.

25 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame press, 1985), 204–205.

26 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215–218.

27 Ibid, 219–220.

MacIntyre's view of virtues in the good life stems from his view of their role in practice, the latter of which being defined as such²⁸:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.

Music, for example, is a practice with internal goods. These internal goods are certain skills and abilities that can only be cultivated through practicing one's instrument, and all of those who partake in the practice of music can develop the necessary skills and abilities of music (or of the musician). However, many practices also have contingent goods attached to them, such as money or status.²⁹ If someone is motivated by contingent goods instead of internal goods, the practice is simply an instrument for one's own interests and treated as an arena in which one competes for resources.³⁰

The alternative is to treat the practice as a social community of intrinsic value that can only flourish and advance through cooperation. Those who revere a practice strive for the internal rather than the contingent goods, and thus, have a relationship to its members, history, and tradition characterized by virtues like honesty and justice.³¹ They are active in discussing what the internal goods actually are and take part in the narrative development of the practice, which in turn reflects the practice's unique history. If society as a whole was considered to be a practice, MacIntyre thinks that a capitalist society would be one in which the political, economic, and social focus were focused on contingent rather than internal goods constituting the good life.³² Thus, competition and social atomism prosper in a capitalist society since the idea of psychological egoism is legitimized through political and social institutions. In the same vein, MacIntyre criticizes the consequentialist inclinations of modern capitalist societies, which results in legitimizing indifference to internal and contingent goods.³³

The deontological trait of modernity is also criticized from a virtue ethical standpoint. According to Anscombe, the idea that one should follow the law for the sake of the law presupposes that there exist a superior authority that can impose and enforce that law³⁴ (*i.e.* God). But since so much of modernity hinges on the non-existence of such an authority,³⁵ moral duties become anachronistic and lose their relevance; in other words, they become disconnected from the context that initially made them comprehensible. Therefore, Anscombe thinks that human beings in modernity face a dilemma: either re-establish God as "the superior authority," or embrace a virtue ethical standpoint based on the

28 *Ibid.*, 187.

29 *Ibid.*, 188.

30 *Ibid.*, 190.

31 *Ibid.*, 191, 194.

32 *Ibid.*, 226–228.

33 *Ibid.*, 198–199.

34 Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern moralfilosofi", trans. Joel Backström, in *Filosofin genom tiderna: Texter 1900-talet. Före 1950*, 2nd edition, ed. Konrad Marc-Wogau, Staffan Carlshamre and Martin Gustafsson, (Stockholm: Thales, 2010), 453–456.

35 Anscombe, "Modern moralfilosofi", 459–460.

assumption that our responsibility resides in our relationship with our fellow human beings.

Since virtue ethics frees us from pre-established principles, it is essential that we cultivate virtue through practical experience. That is, we need to practice how to apply our experience and different virtues under unique circumstances. According to Philippa Foot, some virtues might also be considered more genuine if they come naturally rather than reluctantly.³⁶ For example, someone whose benevolence derives from an innate sense of empathy and kindness might be considered more genuine than someone whose benevolence originates from a mere sense of duty.³⁷ Caring, as defined by Nel Noddings, might be considered a virtue in this sense. To care is to be receptive to, and wholeheartedly engaged in, another person without projecting one's own preferences, feelings, or conditions onto that person³⁸; additionally, to feel cared for is to feel recognized as a subject.³⁹ When we feel recognized as subjects, our inspiration and motivation to pursue and to cultivate what we value can be expected to grow.⁴⁰ On the contrary, when we are treated according to pre-established, rigid, and abstract principles, our reality is overlooked, and we risk being reduced to objects.⁴¹ Caring is thus an essential virtue in the realization that our choices and actions affect other people as subjects.

While it might be easier to genuinely care for those whom we love, our motivation to also care for others comes from what Noddings calls our *ethical ideal*. The ethical ideal is the memory image from our experiences of caring, both shown and received.⁴² When we look inward to the ideal and remind ourselves of the affinity that we can have with other people, it motivates us to care. Since the ethical ideal consists of memories, it is not abstract, but deeply personal and dynamic.⁴³ If we do not cultivate it, it will fade, and we might become more inclined to objectify others or to act in self-interest.⁴⁴

III. HÄGGLUND'S MOVE TOWARD THE VIRTUE ETHICAL STANDPOINT

Anscombe's dilemma stems from her argument that we cannot incur moral duties if we do not submit to a superior moral authority, as we cannot be both superior in authority, but also subordinate to the mandate of that authority.⁴⁵ While Anscombe says that God's laws do not belong in a secular context, Häggglund holds that human beings have no choice but to reject God as a moral authority since God cannot teach us anything about responsibility. Because God is eternal, and thus lacks an understanding of fragility and commitment⁴⁶,

36 Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices", in *Virtues and Vices: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8–11.

37 Foot, "Virtues and Vices", 11–12.

38 Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd edition, (Los Angeles: University of California press, 2013), 14, 16, 30–35.

39 Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 19–21.

40 *Ibid.*, 74.

41 *Ibid.*, 65–67.

42 *Ibid.*, 49–51.

43 *Ibid.*, 79–81

44 *Ibid.*, 83–85, 113–120.

45 Anscombe, "Modern moralfilosofi", 455.

46 Häggglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 169–170.

He cannot understand mortality either conceptually or definitionally. Thus, Hägglund's stance against God in Anscombes' dilemma is clear: if morality does exist, it cannot be reaffirmed by God's command without also being entirely incomprehensible to Him

Having rejected divine authority as a possible source of moral authority, Hägglund opts in favor of Anscombe's second alternative: we should embrace a virtue ethical standpoint wherein we realize that our responsibility stems from our commitment to our fellow human beings. This position appears quite evident in Hägglund's advocacy for collective ownership since the very reason for advocating collective ownership in the first place was to promote a type of democratic discussion where citizens are answerable to each other.⁴⁷ The same conclusion follows from the argument that our mortality makes us dependent on each other for sustenance, and makes us realize that we have a responsibility to treasure our fellow human being's uniqueness given their mortality and intrinsic worth.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Hägglund seems to agree with Anscombe that judgements should be well-grounded, and that motives, intention, and will should matter in the assessment of any person's actions (a point which rings particularly true in the case of the two children with the artwork). Though neither one of the children touch the work, Hägglund argues that the one who is motivated by a sense of responsibility and care for the fragile has a more well-grounded argument for refraining to touch the artwork⁴⁹; that child would act just as carefully regardless of the presence of an external authority. But the child who acts out of fear of punishment is instead motivated by a thinly substantiated argument, as he or she could, in theory, act quite carelessly with the artwork in the absence of authority. Thus, being guided by spiritual freedom can be compared to giving well-founded arguments for one's actions.

The reason why one should consider aspects like motive, intention, will, or circumstance is that our actions are only comprehensible in light of their context, which in turn is grounded in the previous conviction that human activity is teleologically-motivated. When Hägglund says that our motivation to act comes from our desire for a future in which everything that we find intrinsically valuable flourishes, he argues *teleologically*. Crucially, such teleological reasoning can be interpreted as Hägglund taking a virtue ethical stance.

Before such a conclusion can be drawn, it is important to note that actions are also evaluated teleologically from a consequentialist standpoint since consequentialists justify actions based on their actual or expected consequences. Hägglund's argument about how value should be measured in socially available free time instead of capital growth can actually be interpreted as a consequentialist perspective (mainly in utilitarian terms). From a utilitarian point of view, Hägglund's criticism of capitalism is that we are optimizing the wrong good, and not, challenging the idea of evaluating actions based on the benefits which they produce.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 225–231.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 43–51, 62, 68–74.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 208–210.

We must not forget, however, that Hägglund says all that we value must be sustained in practice in order to not perish.⁵⁰ For instance, Hägglund claims that the activities of spending time together and showing interest in one another are constitutive of friendship.⁵¹ Friendship does not follow contingently from such activities, but is directly dependent for its existence on them; that is, Hägglund thinks that actions have a value in-themselves since they are manifestations of the things that we value. Consequentialism cannot account for this kind of reasoning as it focuses only on the contingent result of actions and can only evaluate actions in purely instrumental terminology. In general, the flourishing of that which we value is not a contingent result of our actions, but is constituted by the actions themselves. In sum, Hägglund distances himself from a consequentialist standpoint where the ends justify the means, and he can be rightly described as moving towards a virtue ethical standpoint. In advocating for socially-available free time as the true measure of value, he portrays ends as time-bound and as expressed rather than maximized by actions.

Moreover, Hägglund opposes capitalism because it inhibits us from seeing our own activity as an end-in-itself. Capitalism forces us to assume an instrumental position in relation to capital growth.⁵² In Hägglund's view, it allows us to accept a reversed relationship between what has instrumental and intrinsic value since the value of our life and our time depends on how much capital growth we generate. This Marxist standpoint can be reconciled with MacIntyre's equally Marxist critique of the consequentialist trait in capitalism. The gist of that critique was that capitalism legitimizes a preference for contingent goods, like money or power, over internal goods constituting the good life.⁵³ As such, Hägglund seems to share some of MacIntyre's concerns regarding consequentialism.

Hägglund also argues for a virtue ethical and teleological standpoint in his account of spiritual freedom. According to Aristotle, our primary *telos* is to use our *phronesis* since it enables us to be virtuous and to flourish.⁵⁴ Likewise, Hägglund proposes that our overall purpose is to practice spiritual freedom since it is this that enables us to take responsibility for our actions and to sustain and cultivate what we value. Aristotle's view of *phronesis* as merely based in biology, however, leads him to conclude that there is a natural hierarchy in society where the elite prosper at the expense of natural slaves.⁵⁵ Hägglund is not willing to sign on to such a biologically-grounded teleology, and he also opposes capitalism and religious faith as teleological determinants since they cannot account for the intrinsic value of human life and time given their subordination to capital growth⁵⁶ or the eternal⁵⁷. When Aristotle says that there is a predetermined hierarchy in society deriving from human biology, he argues in a way that is similar to the idea of seeing capital growth or God's law as the predetermined purpose of society. As one might expect, Hägglund rejects this type

50 Ibid, 176.

51 Hägglund, interview.

52 Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 250–251.

53 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 226–228, 198–199.

54 Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics", 1734–1737.

55 Aristotle, "Politics", 1989–1992.

56 Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 250–251.

57 Ibid, 10.

of reasoning since it prohibits us from seeing the historical-normative framework of our existence as dynamic and changeable.

To view the terms of our existence as biologically predetermined inhibits spiritual freedom and stands in direct contrast to the conviction that life is finite. If everything were already predetermined, we would not be able to prioritize different values or feel motivated to act in order to sustain and cultivate what we value. Thus, if the terms of our existence were rigid, it would not be possible to set out one of Hägglund's main arguments for democratic socialism; namely, the argument for the interdependence of free subjects who can validate or challenge each other's different perspectives and standpoints.⁵⁸ The notion that human flourishing presupposes a natural hierarchy in which some people's freedom is made possible by the objectification and alienation of other people is irreconcilable with Hägglund's perspective. One person's spiritual freedom and flourishing is directly dependent on the recognition of other people as subjects with spiritual freedom. If Aristotle had taken full account of mortality, he would have regarded the conditions of existence as dynamic rather than predetermined.

While a biologically-based teleology does not seem compatible with Hägglund's account, a socially-based one might be. MacIntyre, for instance, says that there cannot be any determinate answers as to what our *telos* is since we are narrative beings who understand themselves, their pursuits, and their companions in relation to their historical and social situation.⁵⁹ This reasoning appears to be echoed by Hägglund's belief that humans have spiritual freedom which enables them to treat the material, social, and historical conditions of their existence as dynamic.⁶⁰ There are also clear similarities between MacIntyre's conception of the human *telos* as an overall narrative involving an element of uncertainty as a source of motivation and Hägglund's description of secular faith. This description emphasizes that our motivation to sustain and to cultivate certain aspirations comes from realizing that these aspirations are dependent on our action for their existence and flourishing. While MacIntyre views uncertainty as a motivating force⁶¹, Hägglund views the constantly present risk of loss as an ever present source of motivation to act.⁶²

Furthermore, the entire point of democratic socialism is to give citizens the ability to participate in, and to influence, discussions about the very form of society and what goals one ought to pursue in accord with what they find intrinsically valuable (something that cannot be fully embraced in capitalism given that the object of society is already set in advance). Thus, the point of democratic socialism is for people to constantly inform themselves about what the good life is and what they ought to pursue. This notion is comparable to a socially-based teleology according to which the internal good of the human *telos* is to try to discern what the good life consists in. Democratic socialism can,

⁵⁸ Ibid, 225–231.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–205.

⁶⁰ Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 176–177.

⁶¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215–218.

⁶² Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 46.

therefore, be seen as a practice whereby its members (*i.e.* its citizens) strive to realize and to promote internal goods together. By the same token, MacIntyre says that it is virtue that commits us to such internal goods and that it plays a primary role in practices. They keep us committed to cultivating the practice and its community instead of treating it, or its members, as instruments for opportunistic ends.⁶³ Therefore, virtues can be said to play a primary role in Hägglund's vision of democratic socialism as a practice too.

Furthermore, Hägglund actually argues in ways similar to MacIntyre's advocacy for internal goods in his argument for collective and concrete ownership of the means of production. In concrete ownership, we can only be said to own that which we have a relationship to, which excludes objects that we merely have a commercial self-interest in.⁶⁴ You can, for example, only own artwork insofar as you appreciate and value it both as an end-in-itself and with respect to art-in-itself (*i.e.*, not as a sign of status or riches)⁶⁵. If this were the case, then there would be no incentive to treat art as commerce since one would not be able to make a profit from it. It would only be a manifestation, expression, or part of *art as a practice*, which would belong only to those truly interested in caring about it.

So far, I have argued that virtues find their primary function in the striving for and in the constitution of the internal goods in various practices. However, I have also said that caring as a virtue finds its primary purpose in close relationships. Taking Hägglund's main premise that life is finite, I think that *caring* is a virtue in-itself and should be acknowledged as such. Caring as a virtue is namely compatible with the idea that we should value the finite above the eternal since it is the fragility in the finite life that keeps us committed to one another. For example, viewing caring as a virtue strengthens Hägglund's criticism of religious faith in the example of Abraham and Isaac. In Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he demonstrates that his faith and loyalty to God are greater than his love for his mortal son, even though his motive appears to stem from a conviction that Isaac's life will flourish. In Noddings's words, Abraham was not wholeheartedly receptive to Isaac; he does not view Isaac as the subject in focus, but himself, since he projects his own preferences and beliefs onto Isaac. Even though Abraham is motivated by fatherly love, he treats Isaac based on a predetermined principle which objectifies him in favour of his own religious belief and conviction.⁶⁶ He does not truly act with care since he does not realize that Isaac is a subject affected by his choices and actions.

Furthermore, caring fosters spiritual freedom, which in turn makes us free subjects and enables us to take responsibility for our pursuits. One could even argue that it is by caring that we make our counterparts feel recognized as free subjects, which enables and encourages them to find motivation to grow as persons and to engage in the things or pursuits that they value. In capitalism, the reverse prevails insofar as capitalism commodifies and objectifies people, which means that our spiritual freedom is diminished both when

63 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191, 194.

64 Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*, 305–307.

65 *Ibid.*, 319–320.

66 Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 43–44.

we are not cared for and when we do not care. By not caring for one another, we are more easily objectified and treated by predetermined, rigidly enforced principles.

Since caring is mainly expressed in the concrete meeting between two people who have a close relationship, one might worry whether such a virtue applies to non-interpersonal or institutional contexts. After all, discussions about people on the collective level are very difficult since it requires that we take into account the complexity of everyone's personal situations and needs. In these contexts, our ability for rational problem-solving justly and indiscriminately seem to take center stage. So, perhaps, the same thing should also be expected under the conditions of democratic socialism. Nonetheless, if the main reason for advocating democratic socialism is that it recognizes humans as spiritual creatures who are dependent on, and stand in relation to, other humans, then caring should be considered to have a legitimate place in democratic socialism. It keeps us committed to people as subjects with spiritual freedom, and as such, it enfranchises citizens as *subjects* who have a voice that deserves respect.

Although it might be too demanding to ask of members of society to care for each other in the same way that they might care for their loved ones, it is important to remember that caring as a virtue can be expressed in one of two ways: either through genuine care in relationships, or through the ethical ideal.⁶⁷ So, in relation to those to whom we are not close, or to whom we do not even like, our responsibility is to act based on the ethical ideal. And since the ethical ideal is personal and dynamic, and requires maintenance in practice,⁶⁸ one could argue that it is the citizens' personal responsibility in democratic socialism to try and cultivate his or her ethical ideal. Adherence to that ideal is required to establish individuals as subjects of intrinsic value, which all inevitably boils down to Hägglund's main argument that life is finite, and thus, precious.

IV: CONCLUSION

I have presented four arguments to show that Hägglund's position is best compatible with virtue ethics, or at least significantly more so than with deontological or consequentialist ethics. Firstly, Hägglund rejects a strictly deontological standpoint as he questions God as a moral authority. Duties presuppose an independent superior authority, such as God, but he rejects theism for all of the complications that Anscombe gives. Secondly, virtue ethical teleology does a better job than consequentialist teleology of accounting for actions that have intrinsic value and for viewing pursuits as temporal and as dependent for their flourishing on human activity. Thirdly, Hägglund shares MacIntyre's idea of a socially-based teleology in which humans are story-tellers, and the good life is thought of as a narrative with an element of uncertainty. Fourthly, Hägglund thinks that modern humans lack the right conditions for cultivating a virtuous approach to social practices in a capitalist society. I have also presented two arguments for the thesis that Hägglund's position is compatible with viewing caring as a virtue. Firstly, I have argued that the fragility of the finite makes

⁶⁷ Ibid, 79–81

⁶⁸ Ibid, 79–81, 83–85, 113–120.

caring important since it is by caring that we sustain all that we value. This means that focusing on the virtue of caring does justice to the idea that all we have is the time that we spend together in this life. Secondly, caring is the virtue that nurtures and cherishes spiritual freedom since when we care about them, we treat our counterparts as subjects. In conclusion, these arguments indicate that virtue ethics, and specifically caring as a virtue, undergird Hägglund's complex account that life is finite, and that democratic socialism is the best form of society for recognizing the intrinsic value and spiritual freedom of humanity.

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