

# Selecting virtues: *Philia and relational flourishing*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper has a threefold aim. First, it seeks to unveil the circularity in Hursthouse's account of Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics (EVE). To this end, I show that by framing *eudaimonia* as acting virtuously and virtues as stable dispositions of character needed to flourish, Hursthouse ultimately commits to a circular movement, where each concept is defined in terms of the other. In particular, virtues are not only seen as conducive to flourishing but also normatively constitutive of *eudaimonia*. I then demonstrate this circularity in action by discussing Rosalind McDougall's application of EVE to reproductive ethics, particularly with respect to parents selecting for a deaf child. Second, I argue that this circularity stems from an individualistic conception of flourishing, which is rooted in a phenomenological interpretation of *zoon politikon*, leaving no intermediate space between means (i.e., virtues) and the end (i.e., *eudaimonia*). Third, I propose a relational conception of *eudaimonia*, defining it as acting virtuously with and for others. I further contend that the normative structure of *philia* can lead to a linear relationship between virtues and flourishing, providing an intermediate selection criterion for virtues.

**KEYWORDS** Eudaimonia; relational flourishing; virtue ethics; philia; Hursthouse.

**RESUMO** Este artigo tem um objetivo triplo. Primeiro, procura desvelar a circularidade na concepção de Ética da Virtude Eudaimonista (EVE) de Hursthouse. Para isso, mostro que, ao enquadrar a *eudaimonia* como agir virtuosamente e as virtudes como disposições estáveis de carácter necessárias para florescer, Hursthouse acaba por cometer um movimento circular, onde cada conceito é definido em termos do outro. Em particular, as virtudes não são apenas vistas como conducentes ao florescimento, mas também como normativamente constitutivas da *eudaimonia*. Em seguida, demonstro essa circularidade em acção ao discutir a aplicação da EVE à ética reprodutiva de Rosalind McDougall, particularmente no que diz respeito aos pais que escolhem ter um filho surdo. Em segundo lugar, argumento que essa circularidade decorre de uma concepção individualista de florescimento, que está enraizada numa interpretação fenomenológica de *zoon politikon*, não deixando espaço intermediário entre os meios (ou seja, virtudes) e o fim (ou seja, *eudaimonia*). Por fim, proponho uma concepção relacional de *eudaimonia*, definindo-a como agir virtuosamente com e para os outros. Defendo ainda que a estrutura normativa da *philia* pode levar a uma relação linear entre virtudes e florescimento, fornecendo um critério intermediário de selecção para as virtudes.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Eudaimonia; florescimento relacional; ética das virtudes; philia; Hursthouse.

# Introduction

Virtue ethics (VE) is a multi-faceted normative framework hinging upon developing stable dispositions of character conducive to or constitutive of the good life. Since the backdrop of moral judgment concerns character rather than acts or intentions, it structurally contrasts with the normative metrics of deontology and utilitarianism. Given this divergence, the contemporary debate has strived to argue for the distinctiveness of VE by correlating virtue and rightness (Hursthouse, 1999; Slote, 2001; Swanton, 2021) – i.e., by explaining how VE is action-guiding and how virtues can consistently provide the criterion for the right action. Although this debate has significantly enriched the overall framework of VE, this paper sets it aside to concern exclusively the normative relationship between virtue and *eudaimonia* – human flourishing – as thematized by Rosalind Hursthouse.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, the genealogy of VE will unveil *eudaimonia* as the foundational notion of Aristotelian ethics, which contemporary scholars, notably Hursthouse, have utterly inherited within eudaimonist virtue ethics (EVE). Second, I will argue that Hursthouse's account of the relationship between *eudaimonia* and virtues risks leading to a circular argument where each is defined in terms of the other. To illustrate this circularity, I will examine the application of EVE to reproductive ethics, as proposed by Rosalind McDougall's discussion of parents selecting for a deaf child. Third, I will trace the origins of this circularity to the individualist framework that renders *eudaimonia* self-referential, preventing virtues from extending beyond their teleological self-fulfillment. To rescue EVE from losing normative appeal, I will then return to Aristotle's definition of *eudaimonia* as "complete excellence" and, drawing on the social ontology of *zoon politikon*, argue that flourishing is best understood in relational terms. This argument will rest on two key claims. First, following John L. Ackrill's thematization of the logical principle of inherence, I will contend that humans "inhere" in one another, meaning that the flourishing of others is a precondition for one's own *eudaimonia*. Second, I will explore the essential role of *philia* – understood as care rather than friendship – in flourishing, asserting that a good life can only be lived through meaningful relationships with others. This relational ontology will suggest that the normative structure of *philia*, by balancing one's own flourishing with that of others, dissolves circularity by mediating between *eudaimonia*

and virtues. In doing so, it offers a linear criterion for identifying virtues as character traits that promote others' well-being and relational autonomy, ultimately providing a more coherent and normatively robust framework.

## 1 *Eudaimonia*, virtues, and the risk of circularity

In contemporary debates within ethical theory, Rosalind Hursthouse deserves special mention for her insightful neo-Aristotelian systematization of VE. In particular, she distinctively articulated the normative basis of EVE by framing *eudaimonia* as “conceptually foundational” (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 81) and the selection criterion of virtues. To illustrate this point, let me begin by examining the definitional issues.

Virtues can be generally characterized as stable dispositions of character to act out of distinctive motivations. Two terms in this definition are particularly relevant. The first is “motivation”, which distinguishes virtues from skills, such as reading quickly, or habits, such as waking up early. Virtues, for Aristotle, spring out of what he called *phronesis*, i.e., practical wisdom, which is “the ability to reason correctly about practical matters” (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 12). Moreover, in contrast to the neutral technicality of skills and the automatic repetitiveness of habits, virtues stem from intrinsic moral motivation, insofar as their behavioral guidance is rooted in the moral deliberation to bring about the good. In turn, virtues are intrinsically valuable, regardless of any external good, technical concern, or instrumental consideration (Zagzebski, 1996, 106-126). The second relevant term is “disposition”<sup>1</sup>, which separates VE from the normative metrics of other frameworks, such as deontology and consequentialism. While mainstream normative frameworks tend to focus on either acts or intentions, a disposition is neither purely intentional nor purely action-based. Instead, it stands for the normative tension that unifies intentions and acts under the agent's character. For example, the virtue of courage cannot be defined solely by a single courageous act

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1 The term “disposition” is translated from the Greek *hexis*, which can also mean “state” or “condition”. For the sake of this paper, I will use the term “disposition” due to its widespread usage in the literature and because it better captures the meaning of the dynamic, active, and steady disposal toward action implied by the original notion, whose translation as “state” may otherwise appear too static. Nevertheless, aside from any terminological disagreements, what matters is understanding *hexis* as involving “a kind of active holding of oneself in some respect” (Lu, 2015, p. 200), which stems from the causal power of the agent.

or by the intention to act courageously, but it must consistently manifest in behavioral conduct as a synthesis of acts and moral intentions. In turn, this means that virtues must be actively and characteristically exercised – that is, according to salient circumstances and embodied in one’s character – to qualify as “dispositions”. As a result, if virtues become recursive acts devoid of intrinsic moral motivation and do not maintain a steady familiarity with *praxis*, they surrender their moral status altogether (Hacker-Wright, 2007). While this operational definition is consistent among VE advocates (Slote, 2001; Swanton, 2021), what is distinctive about the neo-Aristotelian account endorsed by Hursthouse (1999) is the foundational role of flourishing: “a virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well” (p. 20). Correspondingly, the notion of virtue entirely derives from the concept of *eudaimonia* and is committed to its teleological attainment. As a result, Hursthouse (1991) frames flourishing as the selection criterion of virtues, which are indeed “specifie[d] [...] as the character traits [...] required for *eudaimonia*” (p. 226). This underscores that the relationship of dependence is twofold: not only do virtues ontologically depend on flourishing, as their *raison d’être* is to achieve *eudaimonia*, but they are also epistemically dependent on it, insofar as we can know virtues only by reference to the overarching goal of flourishing. Nonetheless, despite the cardinal relationship between virtues and *eudaimonia*, Hursthouse seems reluctant to explore their normative interconnection. To address this conundrum, we must clarify what *eudaimonia* means along with its normative correlation to virtues. Let me start by defining the Aristotelian semantics that underpins these questions.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], Aristotle holds that *eudaimonia* is the “end of the things that we do, which we desire for itself, desiring all other things on its account” (1094a 18-22). It represents the chief good, the overarching end towards which any action ultimately gravitates. This implies two main features. First, *eudaimonia* bears intrinsic value, as its attainment can never be a means for a further goal but it is an end in itself, desired “for its own sake” (Cooper, 1975, p. 92). Second, it is self-sufficient, for it is enough to achieve a complete life regardless of any consequence, such as wealth or honor. This is because *eudaimonia* unfolds throughout an excellent life, i.e., “the life that most fully actualizes the potentialities that constitute human nature” (McDowell, 1980, p. 371). As evident, the anthropological configuration of potentialities is crucial, as it can lead to very different conceptions of flourishing. In

Aristotle's case, since the human being is primarily understood as *zoon logon* – i.e., a rational animal – *eudaimonia* ultimately coincides with “[rational] activity of soul in accordance with virtue” (*NE*, I7 15-16). Indeed, given that virtues are the excellence nurtured by the agent and entrenched in her dispositional character, and that *eudaimonia* stands for the full-fledged development of human character and *telos* of human life, it follows that flourishing is attained through the active practice of virtues in accordance with reason. In this sense, virtues are not only conducive but also normatively constitutive of *eudaimonia*, as we ought to cultivate them to reach and maintain a flourishing life. Following the categorization proposed by Gabriel R. Lear (2004), this means that Hursthouse ultimately endorses an inclusivist account of *eudaimonia*, according to which virtues are intrinsically valuable precisely because they are constitutive of human flourishing.

Notably, Hursthouse's account of flourishing is never treated systematically (Jovanović, 2011). However, her work aligns closely with Aristotle: *eudaimonia* corresponds to a “life lived in accordance with the virtues” (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 137). As evident, this definition risks falling into a circular argument. If *eudaimonia* corresponds to “a virtuous activity of soul” (*NE*, I9 1099b), and virtues are defined as character traits that a “human being needs for *eudaimonia*” (Hursthouse, 2013, p. 647), it follows that each is defined in terms of the other. One might attempt to rescue this position by claiming that *eudaimonia* is not merely characterized by virtues, but also by external goods such as “wealth and political capability” (*NE*, 1099a 33). I reply that, even though these goods are relevant, they cannot be considered constitutive due to their chance-based status. Indeed, Aristotle contends that a person is *eudaimon*:

*not by reason of any external good, but in himself and by reason of his own nature And herein of necessity lies the difference between good fortune and happiness [eudaimonia]; for external goods come of themselves, and chance is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance. (Politics VII, 1323b 10-11)*

This passage clearly states that flourishing cannot depend solely on external circumstances, as this would entail chance and luck, which, unlike virtues, cannot be characteristically mastered by the agent. Rather, to hold a person fully responsible for her flourishing, we need a disposition of character that can be exercised (i) steadily, (ii) rationally,

and (iii) independently of factors contingent on life circumstances. In other words, Aristotle contends that *eudaimonia* results from personal cultivation: flourishing can only be achieved by nourishing our inner dispositions in accordance with reason<sup>2</sup>. As a result, by rejecting the idea that flourishing depends on external goods, *eudaimonia* ultimately “consists in, or is identical with, virtuous activity” (Baril, 2014, p. 23).

What are the implications for the selection of virtues? The answer is normatively disappointing. Given that Hursthouse’s EVE “tells us that a life lived in accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is” (Annas, 2007, p. 522), it follows that we have no foothold on which grounding the selection of virtues. The guiding question “What is conducive to *eudaimonia*?” can now be reformulated as “What is conducive to living virtuously?”, which seems to admit only one answer: virtues. Accordingly, *eudaimonia* ends up aligning with the very dispositions it was supposed to select. However, if flourishing is “specified partly as morally good action, or better, a life of such action, it cannot provide a *criterion* of moral virtue” (Cooper, 1975, p. 114). To elude this issue, many advocates of EVE tend to rely on a “random heap of intuitions” (McDowell, 1980, p. 372), which gives *eudaimonia* a further yet surreptitious normative weight. To illustrate, consider the application of EVE to the morality of reproductive actions.

Following Hursthouse, Rosalind McDougall (2007) proposes a virtue-based approach to reproductive ethics grounded in human flourishing, addressing the case of parents selecting for a deaf child. Although the argument is multifaceted, what interests us is the correlation between virtues and *eudaimonia*. In particular, consider the disposition of “acceptingness”, which is enlisted along with “committedness” and “future-agent-focus”. Given that the “primary purpose of parenthood is the flourishing of the child” (p. 184), McDougall argues against selecting for deafness, claiming that virtuous parents should accept whatever physical and psychological characteristics their future child may have. This is because, in addition to the normative assumption outlined above, McDougall introduces another normative premise that is presented as a

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2 To be sure, this conclusion is also underpinned by the distinction between ends and desires proposed by Lear (2004). While an object is desired for its instrumental consequences, ends are valuable regardless of whether they are desired or what their effects may be. Rather, human ends are valuable in themselves, insofar as they provide the “good of an activity that determines its form and what it is to be a successful instance of that activity” (33). This entails that *eudaimonia* cannot depend on contingently desired elements, such as external goods, but must instead be grounded in factors that stand as ends. In turn, virtues can be seen as particular kinds of ends – namely, middle-level goods that are “choiceworthy both for their own sakes and for the sake of the most final good” (p. 30), that is, *eudaimonia*.



fact: “acceptingness is a parental virtue because it is an inherent feature of human reproduction that a child’s characteristics will be unpredictable” (p. 185). Nonetheless, this conclusion seems arbitrary, as it relies on a concept of flourishing that is already embedded in the premise and framed by common intuitions about the good life. This is because unpredictability *per se* can give rise to two opposite attitudes: either accepting the newborn child as it is, or trying to master this unpredictability – for example, through eugenics. As a result, opting for one attitude over another underscores that unpredictability is coupled with a normative conception of the good life, which is subtly framed as revolving around acceptance. For a life that is to be *eudaimonic* needs to enjoy parental acceptance, and therefore acceptingness is considered a virtue. As evident, this means there is no straightforward reason why the fact of unpredictability must lead to acceptingness, except that the notion of flourishing is charged with the normative semantics of the virtue it was supposed to select. In this sense, *eudaimonia* and acceptingness are co-extensive, such that the overall argument loses its normative appeal.

One might object that Aristotle considers virtues to be selected not through the normative device of *eudaimonia*, but through the so-called “doctrine of the mean” (Hardie, 1965). To be sure, this doctrine is not a monolithic method but encompasses various interpretations. Consider first what Müller (2004) calls “one-dimensional conception of the mean”, which holds that virtues occupy a middle ground within the “characteristic dimensions” that define the “range of possible answers” appropriate to a given circumstance. This aligns with the traditional view that virtues are the mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. For instance, courage is understood as the intermediate disposition between recklessness and cowardice, balancing fear and confidence in neither excessive nor deficient measures. However, this interpretation faces several criticisms. First, some virtues cannot be viewed as standing between extremes – such as justice, integrity, or trustworthiness – since they do not admit of degrees that can be stretched in terms of excess or defect. Second, this argument introduces a first-order circularity, as it requires knowing in advance the vices, which are defined in opposition to the virtue we are supposed to detect. In turn, as Kant (1964 [1797]) noted, this understanding of the mean “cannot serve as a definition” (p. 404), since it ultimately relies on individual, empirical, and contextual discretion that is logically inconsistent. Third, this suggests that the doctrine of the mean implicitly relies on an underlying conception of

*eudaimonia*, as no balance, excess, or defect could be identified without the prior definition of the normative scale provided by flourishing. This aligns with Zagzebski (1996), who understands the “mean” as an exemplar of practical wisdom. In turn, this further means that the doctrine of the mean is not a standalone criterion, but rather a heuristic that is subsidiary and instrumental to *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*.

On closer inspection, the priority of the normative scale of flourishing holds even in the case of the second interpretation of the doctrine, which relies on a “many-dimensional conception of the mean” (Müller, 2004). This view contends that virtues should be selected as the mean between “critical dimensions” encompassing multiple circumstances, defined by the appropriate goal that the virtue serves. Accordingly, the assessment of a virtue must take into account “a) the point of practising V [virtue] any way (i.e., what V contributes to humans’ living well), and b) the various respects in which it may, in consequence, be appropriate or inappropriate to exhibit V’s characteristic response here and now” (26). As is evident, this approach implicitly subordinates the doctrine to the normative scale of *eudaimonia*, since the evaluation of a virtue epistemically depends on its contribution to human flourishing. Moreover, the very notion of “appropriateness” cannot be merely empirical; rather, it must be grounded in a normatively and logically fundamental concept such as *eudaimonia*. This is further exemplified by the fact that the “critical dimensions” relate to the notion of rightness. As Aristotle comments when discussing fear and confidence in the case of courage, “to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue” (*NE*, II, 1106b18–23). This underscores that, to understand what the right mean is, we must first examine to what extent practicing such a disposition contributes to flourishing, which is thereby recognized as having normative priority.

## 2 Relational flourishing and the normative structure of *philia*

Although the eudaimonist account outlined so far is normatively untenable, this does not necessarily mean that the notion of *eudaimonia* should be erased altogether. Rather, its foundational role



might be preserved if there were a way to amend the underlying circular logic. As we will see, circularity ultimately stems from an individualistic configuration of *eudaimonia*, where flourishing is encapsulated within the individual and thus is unable to provide the normative bridge for an intermediate selection criterion. By contrast, I will argue that the triangulation inherent in a relational approach to flourishing – as traced back to Aristotle – establishes a linear relationship between *eudaimonia* and virtues, mediated by *philia*.

According to Aristotle, “[f]lourishing is the activity of a complete life in accordance with complete excellence” (*Eudemian Ethics*, II 1 1219a 38-39). As outlined, Hursthouse inherited this view but grafted it into the individualism of modern moral philosophy. For she identifies virtues as agent-centered dispositions that are essential for the individual to flourish. This means that her conception of agency is anchored in a framework where the individual is both the point of departure and arrival, with relationships considered only secondarily and instrumentally. This leads to a twofold corollary. First, *eudaimonia* is the flourishing of *this* person, achieved through *this* person’s cultivation of *her* virtues. While some virtues, such as generosity, are relational in nature, they are still means to an individual’s flourishing. Second, the justification of virtues lies in the internal, self-regarding benefits they bring to the individual. The individual flourishes in herself; *eudaimonia* is self-referential. Consequently, the normative core of flourishing is co-extensive with virtues because the unit of analysis is the individual alone. For if the individual ought to flourish, but there is no normative bridge between herself and others, then the only alternative is to rely on her inner dispositions, i.e., virtues. And without any interstitial mediation, the content of virtues can merely be drawn from their teleological self-fulfillment, which leads to circularity. Indeed, given that the normative horizon is flattened on the individual, there is no outward reference that can outdistance the end from the means – *eudaimonia* from virtues – and no possibility for an intermediate criterion.

One might object that accusing Hursthouse’s account of individualism is misleading, given the normative emphasis she places on human sociability. Indeed, Hursthouse (1999) follows Philippa Foot’s ethical naturalism in establishing a naturalistic, objective, and yet evolving baseline that emphasizes the normative significance of humans as social animals. According to this revised form of naturalism, a good social animal strives for four key ends: (1) individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species,

(3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group in ways characteristic of the species (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 202). At first glance, this framework appears to contradict the charge of individualism, as virtues are closely tied to social life. However, this is precisely where its limitations emerge. For Hursthouse endorses what could be called a “sociological” interpretation of Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* (NE 1097b11), arguing that humans naturally tend to live together and form groups. Yet, rather than engaging with the deeper social ontology implied by Aristotle’s formulation, Hursthouse (1986) adopts a naturalistic phenomenology where natural politicality only entails “enjoy[ing] the company of others” (p. 49), portraying human sociability as an innate tendency rather than a constitutive element of human agency. While this view does not overlook the role of human sociality, it ultimately reinforces the individualism embedded in Hursthouse’s social ontology. For the relevant unit of both empirical and normative analysis remains the individual alone. Ethical life is centered on the individual, who may form relationships with others but only in an external, instrumental manner. Relationality, rather than being a fundamental dimension of moral agency, is treated as merely an auxiliary feature of human life, one that arises due to the natural imperatives of sociability and survival. This becomes particularly evident in how Hursthouse treats the continuation of the species and the preservation of social groups. For the former reduces relationality to a biological constraint, framing it as a natural necessity rather than a moral good. Meanwhile, the latter underscores the instrumental nature of the social group, whose significance lies primarily in the fact that it provides the conditions under which individuals can cultivate virtue. The social order, in this sense, is not valued for its own sake but as a means to individual moral flourishing. As a result, even the broader notion of humanity as a species functions as a non-relational unity rather than as a genuinely co-imbricated moral community.

Therefore, despite Hursthouse’s explicit emphasis on the species and the social group, her ethical naturalism remains fundamentally tied to an individualistic social ontology. However, this perspective ultimately overlooks the possibility of a genuinely relational construal of *eudaimonia* – advocated by Nussbaum (1986) and Sherman (1987), among others – which, while open to hermeneutical criticisms, may nonetheless provide a means of addressing the circularity inherent in Hursthouse’s account.

To begin with, what does Aristotle mean by “complete excellence”? One viable answer hinges upon the definition of the human being as

*zoon politikon*, i.e., a political animal. Recall that by “political” Aristotle means not only the activity of doing politics, but the communal bond that relates humans with one another. Unlike the phenomenological or naturalistic interpretation, the ontological account advocates for a more radical outlook that entails a metaphysical claim of relationality. According to Martha Nussbaum (1986), this means that “all human activities and therefore all candidates for inclusion in a plan for the good human life are in some way relational” (p. 343). Indeed, not only love or political engagement are constituted by relations, but even self-sufficiency can be understood relationally:

*the sort of self-sufficiency that characterizes the best human life is a communal and not a solitary self-sufficiency. The complete (teleion) good seems to be self-sufficient (autarkes). “But by self-sufficient we mean not a life for the individual alone, living a solitary life, but for parents as well and children and wife and in general philoi and fellow citizens, since the human being is by nature political” (1097 b9-11). (...) Aristotle argues that these vulnerable relationships and their associated activities have both instrumental value as necessary means to, and intrinsic value as component parts of, the best human life. (pp. 344-345).*

Since the solitary man is “lacking in something so fundamental that we could hardly call it a human life at all” (p. 350), a relational life is the very lymph of flourishing. There are two arguments that underpin this conclusion: the first is logical, while the second concerns the role played by *philia*.

Through a brilliant reading of *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, John L. Ackrill (1963) contends that Aristotelian logic introduces a novel principle labeled “inherence”. This holds “if and only if (a) one could naturally say in ordinary language either that A is in B or that A is of B or that A belongs to B or that B has A (or that . . .), and (b) A is not a part of B, and (c) A is inseparable from B” (p. 74). Hence, two entities are said “to inhere” when there is no overarching unity between them and yet are priorly bound. Correspondently, Nussbaum (1986) seems to suggest that natural politicality should be interpreted through the lens of inherence: humans cannot but live in *poleis* because their existence is co-imbricated. In ethical terms, this means that Aristotle endorses the principle that if X inheres in C, “then no account of the ends of C’s life would be complete without mention of X, and no account of the

sort of self-sufficiency appropriate for C could omit X” (p. 351). Thus, when two entities are priorly related, neither overrides the other, and both maintain their distinctive individuality, then one’s ends encompass those of the other. If this is the framework underlying the claim that we are “naturally disposed to living-with” (*NE*, 1169b 3ff), a first reply to the question “What is complete excellence?” can be outlined in logical terms: given that humans inhere by nature, one’s flourishing must take into consideration that of others.

The second argument for relational flourishing hinges upon *philia*<sup>3</sup>. Traditionally translated as “friendship”, this notion holds an essential role in Aristotelian ethics because it is “necessary for and intrinsic to happiness” (Sherman, 1987, p. 594). Indeed, while it is undeniable that *eudaimonia* amounts to a self-sufficient life, it is equally clear that the ontology of *zoon politikon* leads to rejecting any individualistic account of self-sufficiency. As suggested in *Eudemian Ethics*, the solitary man may fare well, but he will never enjoy a complete life, because, given that “our well-being is relational” (1245 b18), he will still “need others to share ends and design a life together with those ends in mind” (Sherman, 1987, p. 596). Thus, since friendship is “most necessary for life” (*NE* 1155 a4), self-sufficiency cannot be framed as individual independence but rather as relational enablement. A person is *eudaimon* when she is self-sufficient, and she is self-sufficient when she has been enabled to flourish by “friendly” relationships. Following Sherman (1987), this leads to a relational account of flourishing where “my happiness or complete good comes to include the happiness of others”, making *eudaimonia* “ascribable to me, not as an isolated individual, but as an extended self with attachment” (p. 595). Given that “the *relation itself constitutes the good*” (Bruni, 2008, p. 130) and that “all true excellence of character has a relational nature” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 352), virtues should be selected based on the balance between one’s own flourishing and that of others. For “a creature whose conception of the ultimate good made mention only of his own good would not be able to possess any of these items [i.e., virtues] in the true sense” (p. 352).

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3 The reader well-versed in Aristotelian ethics will certainly recall the threefold distinction of *philia* into pleasure, utility, and virtue (*NE*, VIII, 1156a10–30). However, this paper sets this phenomenology aside to focus exclusively on the role played by the normative structure of perfect *philia* – that is, *philia* by virtue – in human flourishing. This focus also aligns with the semantic choice to associate *philia* more closely with care than with friendship. In turn, this further entails setting aside the debate over whether *philia* should be classified as a virtue (1155a), a feeling (1105b22), or an external good (1169b5–10). For regardless of its ontological or epistemic status, what matters is that perfect *philia* is essential for *eudaimonia* and that it possesses a distinctive normative structure.

Therefore, the meaning of *eudaimonia* as “living virtuously” (Baril, 2014, p. 22) can be understood through a relational ontology where virtues are cultivated *with* and *for* others. In this view, flourishing is no longer co-extensive with virtues but exceeds them, as *philia* introduces an interstitial space of mediation where others play a constitutive and intermediary role. Two key considerations follow from this paradigm shift. First, this relational approach eschews the risk of circularity. Since relationality is a third element that stands between *eudaimonia* and virtues, it provides a normative bridge that mediates between the means and the end. Virtues are still seen as a means of flourishing, but this is first characterized by harmonious and “friendly” relationships that normatively constrain them. The relational status of *eudaimonia* circumscribes the agent’s prescriptive space and outdistances it from subjectivist arbitrariness, as it is already charged with the normative structure of *philia*. This leads to the second point. In this context, friendship should not be understood in traditional terms, as this would annihilate the semantic richness of the Greek term. Rather, *philia* can be more appropriately construed as “care”. This redefinition is not only for hermeneutical reasons (Redgrave, 2014) but also for the normative alignment of the terms (Cruzer, 2007). For to behave friendly toward a person means “wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about” (NE, 1380b36-1381a2). As evident to the reader well-versed in the Ethics of Care, this definition aligns closely with the characterization of care provided by Nel Noddings (1986), Joan Tronto (1993), and Virginia Held (2009).<sup>4</sup> Without discussing whether the two notions can be completely overlapped, or whether VE could be rightfully merged with the ethics of care, the next paragraph aims to discuss the normative structure of *philia*, assuming it can be construed as a form of care.

Normatively, *philia* entails two attitudes. First, since flourishing depends on holding inherently vulnerable relationships (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 343-372), it implies the recognition of our interdependence and fragility. Accordingly, we ought to actively care for relationships, as it is through acknowledging and cherishing their precariousness that

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4 Noddings (1986) claims that care means acting “with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation [...] to protect or enhance the welfare of the cared-for” (p. 24). Tronto (1993) builds on this idea: care “involve[s] taking the concerns and needs of the other as the basis for action” (p. 105). Similarly, Held (2009) posits that “the well-being of a caring relation involves the cooperative well-being of those in the relation, and the well-being of the relation itself” (p. 540).

*eudaimonia* can steadily unfold. Second, it fosters concern for the other's flourishing "for his sake and not for your own" (*Rhetoric* 1380 b37), otherwise the separateness entailed by the principle of inherence would be violated. However, this moral posture is not a form of self-sacrifice. Rather, "if friendship extends the self, then one is not so much sacrificing oneself, as acting in the interests of this new extended self" (Sherman, 1987, p. 608). This leads to a significant corollary: given that "any desire to be moral presumes a motivational posture of caring about self and other" (Sander-Staudt, 2006, p. 24), *philia* entails balancing one's interests with those of others "in a way that is nonetheless mindful of the mature rational agency of each" (Sherman, 1987, p. 607).

The resulting ethics, therefore, implies reciprocal enablement. On the one hand, the agent is enabled by her "friends" because *philia* "provide[s] the contexts in which we learn how to act virtuously" (Redgrave, 2014, p. 73). On the other, the agent's virtues should be developed to express *philia* and enable others to flourish. This is not another instance of circularity. Rather, the normative structure of *philia* establishes a linear relationship between *eudaimonia* and virtues by providing "a template for acknowledging the interests of all affected" (Pettersen, 2011, p. 57), which entails "actively working for the prevention of harm" and "contributing to the promotion of good" (p. 54). Accordingly, virtues should always be filtered through the normative lens of *philia*, which prescribes two main constraints. The first is familiar, as it entails "a deep desire for the wellbeing of another person" (Cruzer, 2007, p. 221), while the second concerns fostering autonomy (Walsh, 2017). To the end of this paper, it suffices to adhere to a minimal understanding of autonomy, which involves nurturing capabilities to lead a self-sufficient life and embracing the other's irreducibility. For just as care would become paternalism without the "faraway closeness" (Mortari, 2022, p. 170) between the agent and the patient, *philia* would violate the "mutual respect for separateness" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 355) if bent to the agent's will. This is aptly exemplified by Tronto (1993), who derives from care the virtues of responsibility, commitment, competence, and responsiveness – all of which figure in the traditional accounts of relational autonomy (Oshana, 2020) and *philia* (Mortari, 2022, pp. 31–35). In conclusion, virtues can be reconceptualized as stable character dispositions that lead to relational *eudaimonia*, carrying the normative structure of *philia* understood as mediation between oneself and others. Returning to McDougall's case, this implies that the immorality of selecting for deafness can still be



upheld by virtue of acceptingness, but only because the latter can be justified as adhering to the constraint of separateness prescribed by *philia*.

One might object that the notion of *philia* cannot stand as the selection criterion of virtues because it only refers to particular others with whom we already share a significant relationship. First, I reply that although the role of particular others is prominent, the same holds for ethics of care, whose advocates have found a number of replies to address the impartiality of morality (Noddings, 1986; Held, 2007). Second, while Aristotle considers friends as particular others, this does not prevent us from extending the normative structure of *philia* to those who are not in close proximity. For this structure is formal, meaning that it does not depend on any specific context or content, but merely prescribes “disinterested benefit, sharing, and mutuality” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 354). Third, the prohibition of extending it applies only to the phenomenological interpretation of *zoon politikon* outlined above, in which relationality is a non-constitutive attribute that most people naturally enjoy (Hursthouse, 1986). In contrast, a relational approach to flourishing inherently expands the outreach of *philia*: since any relation normatively counts, *eudaimonia* ultimately depends also on people with whom we do not yet have any established relationship. This is also acknowledged by Nussbaum (1989), who claims that “[*p*]hilia, loving the whole of another person for that person’s own sake, loves humanity and mutability as well as excellence” (p. 357).

### 3 Conclusion

This paper had a threefold aim. First, unveiling the circularity of Hursthouse’s account of eudaimonist virtue ethics. To this end, I showed that by framing *eudaimonia* as acting virtuously and virtues as stable dispositions of character needed to flourish, Hursthouse ends up committing to a circular movement where each is defined in terms of the other. I then demonstrated this circularity in action by discussing Rosalind McDougall’s application of EVE to reproductive ethics, particularly with respect to parents selecting for a deaf child. Second, I argued that circularity can be traced back to an individualistic conception of flourishing, stemming from a phenomenological interpretation of *zoon politikon*, which leaves no intermediate space between the means – i.e., virtues – and the end – i.e., *eudaimonia*. Third, I upheld a relational con-

ception of *eudaimonia* which defines it as acting virtuously *with* and *for* others. I further contended that the normative structure of *philia* can lead to a linear relationship between virtues and flourishing and provide an intermediate selection criterion for virtues.

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