Science, Aesthetics, Ethics[1]

Some Implications of Renaissance Discussions of Artistic Theory for Understanding Ethical Theory

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(1 ■ lecture)

In what follows I will argue for the thesis that the shift from pre-modern to modern ethics is a process of desymbolisation of ethical concepts. While virtue ethics is conceptually tied to symbolic relations, in modern ethics symbolism vanishes. (1) Therefore I will firstly have to clarify what symbolism in virtue ethics means. (2) Secondly I will present the sketch of an argument that in renaissance artistic theory one finds a parallel development. I will use Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) axiomatic discussion of perspective as entrance to the understanding of desymbolisation. (3) Thirdly I will present the concept of virtue in Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457) and David Hume (1711-1776) as specifically modern. Artistic theory and Ethics have in common that they are both occupied with conceptualising and establishing evaluative qualities.

Let me stress in the beginning that I am interested in contrasting premodern and modern features of ethical theory from a more systematic perspective. Right now I cannot say very much about the historical aspects of the development and I especially do not want to suggest specific dependencies between Alberti, Valla and Hume.

1.   Symbolism in Virtue Ethics

Let me first clarify my concept of "symbol" or "symbolism". I do not refer to a special theory of symbols or symbolic communication. By a symbol I mean one part of a relation, in which something refers to something other. The first part of the relation, its referring element, is visible or otherwise empirically perceptible. The second part of the relation, the element referred to, is not perceptible. A familiar example is a sceptre as symbol for royal power, hammer and sickle as symbol for communism or a ring as symbol for friendship. Neither royal power, nor communism, nor friendship are directly perceptible. These examples provide an invisible object of reference to which a visible symbol (as it is used in our

practice) refers to. We need symbols because invisible factors can be important in our life. Due to shortness of time I will leave my explanations at that.

Now, in what sense does virtue ethics use symbols or is a kind of symbolistic theory? There are features that render virtue a part of a symbolic relation. To begin with, in virtue ethics we have virtue traditionally defined as "habit of the soul" or as "a characteristic disposition" to act. And, defined in this way, virtue is imperceptible. If you do not see a person acting in specific circumstances, and if you do not know her for a considerable time you can not say whether a certain action of hers is virtuous or not. If you see a person lying, it may be a virtuous or vicious act due to characteristics of the situation and the lying person. In virtue ethics, actions as perceptible entities are symbols for the character of the person who's actions they are. Actions as perceptibles refer to the imperceptible virtue of the character of the acting person. They have a surplus of meaning. The identification of this surplus depends on two things: (1) experience in interpreting actions and bodily reactions revealing a person's character and (2) knowledge in moral psychology which is included in the theory of emotions.

This may be called the symbolism of premodern ethics. The shift to modern ethics may be described as desymbolisation of ethics. Virtue ethics conceptualises the direct awareness of a person acting as a first step to moral knowledge needing additional interpretation, which is supported by moral psychology. In what follows I will present three theoretical approaches, which conceptualise evaluative properties of something characteristically modern. These approaches rest at least in part on a concept of evaluative experience in which moral qualities are directly present. I will firstly discuss the theorist of art Alberti and secondly the ethicists Valla and Hume.

2.   Desymbolisation in Renaissance Artistic Theory

My aim in this paper is to throw light on some systematic aspects of the development of modern ethical approaches. But I do not want to historically *explain* the changes of cultural paradigms. Now, modern ethics is specifically modern in a sense in which renaissance artistic theory is modern. Let me (1) first sketch a sym-

bolic concept of beauty very briefly and (2) then non-symbolic aspects of Leon Battista Alberti's concept of beauty.

(1) There are many ways in which art may be symbolical. Let me mention only two. A painting may refer to a "higher reality" which is imperceptible and you need e. g. theology or philosophy to interpret the visible object. Think of art representing Christian truths or Platonic ideas. One may say that in this context a symbolic concept of beauty is central. A piece of art has beauty if the symbolic reference succeeds. Both, the creator and the beholder, are in need of concepts or theories which render the work of art epistemically understandable and justificatorily successful. You need theory to identify beauty and to create or criticize it.

(2) Alberti provides an example of a new or at least increased interest in non-symbolic beauty in his times. Non-symbolic beauty is a quality that reveals itself in experience. In the first book of his *De pictura libri tres* (ca. 1435/36) he develops his rudimentary lessons of perspective. The good painter uses perspective as a necessary methodological instrument of composing a good painting. Of course, he is not considering perspective as sufficient for beauty. But the result of using perspective is a non-symbolic aspect of beauty in general. His technical term is concinnity. A perspectival composition is constitutive of beauty in the work of art. On the one hand the method of perspective is axiomatic and at least analogous to mathematical theory (especially geometry). On the other hand, perspective is the way in which human sight itself functions. The laws of beauty are the same in the work of art and in the aesthetic experience. Now, *perspective* is an aspect constitutive firstly of beauty, secondly of the method of producing beauty and thirdly of experiencing beauty. The principles of outer beauty and of human aesthetic experience are the same. The artist, therefore, needs practical knowledge of perspective to produce good works of art. The result of his concept of beauty is that a beautiful work of art, in the act of seeing it, mediates pleasure. This pleasure is an effect of the beautiful work of art on the beholder, which is *not* mediated by theoretical knowledge.

Therefore, Alberti's concept of beauty is at least in part non-symbolic. Epistemically, the experience of pleasure is our access to beauty – as beholders and artists –, but in addition it is also a justificatory criterion for beauty, as Alberti states explicitly, when

he explains his empiricist methodology for the artist. In the following I will present two ethical accounts which are founded on a similar concept of evaluative experience.

3. Two Examples of Desymbolisation in Renaissance and Premodern Ethics

Theories of moral sense in the 17th century follow similar epistemological and justificatory paths. One example is David Hume. Lorenzo Valla's ethics does not belong to the group of thories of moral sense. But his approach can function as an early example for desymbolisation in ethical theories. I will discuss these two philosophers as philosophically independent and historically isolated examples. The concept of virtue is central to both approaches, and their notion of virtue is characteristically new. Firstly I will discuss Valla, secondly Hume.

(1) In the first half of the 15th century Lorenzo Valla conceptualised virtue at least in part as a non-symbolic ethical concept. The concepts of pleasure and Epicurean ethics are important for his writing. Now, in Epicurean ethics pleasure may either be conceived of as *goal* we are striving for or as an *epistemological criterion* of right or wrong. I concentrate on the last aspect. Were I to concentrate on pleasure as a goal, which persons are striving for, the third book of Valla's *De vero falsoque bono* would be the right location to turn to. It presents a more symbolic conception of ethics, because – he states there – what is really pleasurable is an essentially Christian way of choosing goals for action. In this respect his concept of pleasure refers symbolically to theological ideas, which do not reveal themselves epistemologically through perception or direct awareness. But in the first book, which is the right one to turn to in order to learn about Valla's *epistemological criterion* of right or wrong, he says as part of his Epicurean position (a) that there is no utility which is not pleasurable, (b) that everything felt or seen is either pleasurable or not pleasurable and (c) that the good is pleasure. The distinction between the good (*bonum*) and the right (*honestum*) is pivotal to Valla's discussion. Because honesty is defined as a result of virtue it is secondarily pleasurable

when it is praised by others. Virtue as the good is directly approved through pleasure. Therefore, in Valla's account, the concept of goodness seems to be epistemologically tied to actually sensing pleasure. In perception, nature reveals its practical norms via pleasure and reluctance. His position is justificatorily desymbolised in the sense that pleasure and reluctance motivate us to act virtuously without the need for a theory or interpretation. This is the core of a desymbolised conception of good and bad, because one does not need a mediating theory, which helps distinguishing actual responsiveness in relation to abstract normative truths.

(2) My second example is the 17th century philosopher David Hume. In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* he defines virtue in the appendix, where he provides an additional discussion of the notion of "moral sentiment" he says "virtue [is] [...] whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation". Virtue as "quality of the mind" superficially seems analogous to virtue as habit of the soul. But it is not a holistic conception of virtue in that virtue is identified with certain mental actions or the immediate evaluative character of these conscious processes. The moral sense judges a perceptive quality as pleasurable. This is identical with morally approving this quality. Hume's notion of a moral sentiment refers to an anthropological responsiveness of human beings which is partly inborn and partly cultivated through their biography and education. In an impulse of the sentiment, both aspects are actually inseparably present to a person. It is important that the moral sense makes a moral judgement in an actual perception. This judgement is justificatorily sufficient because approval or disapproval rest on an emotional aspect of the mental activity of approving or disapproving itself. There is no need of a mediating theory in order to morally understand the actual response of a person to a situation. The judgment of the moral sense is what it is. It has no symbolic dimension.

Let me conclude my paper with some summarising remarks.

4. Conclusion: The Paradigms of Premodern and Modern Ethics

While Hume's ethics is explicitly non-symbolic Valla's is more ambiguous. It is important that Valla's conception at least in part offers a glance at new ethical conceptions. He has the beginnings of a concept of virtue, which ties knowledge of virtue and vice to actual consciousness without the need for a mediating moral psychology. Therefore, I do see him as an early and conceptually ambiguous example of desymbolisation of ethical theory. Alberti shows that this process is not limited to ethics or philosophy alone.

The main point, which I want to stress by using the concept of desymbolisation, is that there is a change in paradigm of conceptualising ethics and evaluative qualities. In Hume, Valla and Alberti one finds a conspicuous empiricism of evaluative properties. Less in Alberti and Valla, but certainly in Hume, this change of paradigm results in subjectivism of the evaluative properties. This subjectivism is of epistemological nature and has no immediate tendency to cover the concept of justification as one can see in Valla and Hume. This result seems to be initiated by changing conceptions of the epistemology of values and evaluative qualities. The changes sketched in this paper result in a significant loss of relevance of moral psychology to modern ethics. This loss was first diagnosed by Elizabeth Anscombe in the last century. The function of moral psychology in virtue ethics is to establish knowledge of right or wrong by reference to a symbolic relation between an action and the character of the acting person.

Why is desymbolisation characteristically modern? One could object that Alberti, Valla, and Hume all just promote their individual concepts of aesthetics and ethics respectively, with no significance for conceptually distinguishing modern and premodern ethics. Why is my diagnosis pointing not only to a plurality of idiosyncratic approaches, but to a more important change in cultural paradigms? The answer is rather short and sketchy: A symbolic conception of virtue conceives the moral dimension of an action or the actual response of a person to a situation as referring success-

fully or unsuccessfully to the virtue of the person as a *whole*. This whole is to be accounted for as a concept of *a successful life*. But it is one characteristic aspect of modern ethics that it loses theoretic interest in seeing a particular type or token of action in front of the background of a successful life. What may be considered to be a flourishing life is more and more to be evaluated be the person living that life.

(2 ■ bonus track)

Ancient and premodern ethics are dominated by virtue ethics. Debates about moral problems are discussed in terms of virtues. Different approaches in premodern ethics argue about conceptual problems of virtue: Is there only one virtue or a plurality of virtues in ethics? Is it possible to have one virtue while lacking another? Is virtue a matter in ones life to be realised gradually or absolutely? Virtue and happiness of life are conceptually joined together, but *is* virtue the happy life or is it a means to the happy life? Questions like these loose significance and importance in modern ethics. Even a rather superficial glance at modern texts on ethics reveals that questions of virtue are of rather secondary *importance*. Modern deontological or consequentialist approaches are founded on universal principles of reason or some sense of utility. These principles are said to be discovered by philosophical reflection and are to be applied to everyday life, or so it is reasoned. Virtues will mainly be relevant in questions of applying ethics; i. e. after having established all necessary theoretical principles of ethics. The *significance* of virtues changes in that the main target of valuation is no longer holistic (i. e. a biography as a whole or a person as such) but rather individual (i.e. a specific action or type of action). Modern ethics gives answers to whether this or that maxim or this or that action or type of action is allowed or imperative. Concerning virtues it is difficult to evaluate an action or a type of action in isolation from situations or acting persons. One and the same action may be courageous in one situation and daring in another. The same type of action may be a sign of virtue in one person (a trained soldier for instance) and a sign of silliness in another (an academically trained professor occupied with metaethics for example). This superficial glance at the characteristics of premodern and modern ethics will be scrutinized and stated more precisely.

In what follows I will argue for the thesis that the shift from premodern to modern ethics is a process of desymbolisation of ethical concepts. While virtue ethics is conceptually tied to symbolic relations, in modern ethics symbolism vanishes. (1) Therefore I will firstly have to clarify what symbolism in virtue ethics means. (2) Secondly I will present the sketch of an argument that in renaissance artistic theory one finds a parallel development. I will use Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) axiomatic discussion of perspective as entrance to the understanding of

desymbolisation. It is relevant for my aim because Alberti's discussion is characteristically modern in epistemic and justificatory respects. (3) Thirdly I will present the concept of virtue in Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457) and David Hume (1711-1776) as specifically modern. Artistic theory and Ethics have in common that they are both occupied with conceptualising and establishing evaluative qualities. I will present both approaches very roughly. Let me stress in the beginning that I am interested in contrasting premodern and modern features of ethical theory from a more systematic perspective. Therefore I cannot say very much about the historical aspects of the development and I especially do not want to suggest specific dependencies between Alberti, Valla and Hume.

1.   Symbolism in Virtue Ethics

Let me first clarify my concept of "symbol" or "symbolism". I do not refer to a special theory of symbols or symbolic communication. By a symbol I mean one part of a relation, in which something refers to something other. The first part of the relation, its referring element, is visible or otherwise empirically perceptible. The second part of the relation, the element referred to, is not perceptible. A familiar example is a sceptre as symbol for royal power, hammer and sickle as symbol for communism or a ring as symbol for friendship. Neither (1) royal power, nor (2) communism, nor (3) friendship are directly perceptible. These examples provide an invisible object (*) of reference to which a visible symbol (as it is used in our practice) refers to (**). We need symbols because invisible factors can be important in our life.

(1*) Royal power is a way of practicing governmental power which is spread over time and place, which consists in several tokens and various types of acts and which determines the status of citizens and their mutual attitudes. (2*) One may say that communism is a system of ideas which may be the foundation of a nation's governmental and societal practice. (3*) And friendship may be said to be the sharing of ideas and activities with certain emotional implications. For several reasons neither of these is perceptible as such.

Sometimes it is necessary to refer to royal power, to communism or to friendship as such and not to something which is a concrete and specific expression of the imperceptible. (1**) Think of coronations, which publicly endows one person with royal power. One cannot reduce practical importance of royal power to factual exercising royal power.

(2**) Think of political events in which an audience needs the right political spirit. Without visual or audible symbols a political speech may be less successful, because the audience may not be effectively convinced by a new idea. (3**) Think of friends living a long distance apart. In cases where unusual loyalty to a friend is necessary (think of torture in tyranny), to feel the ring at ones finger may strengthen the habit of friendship. There are countless occasions where we have to refer to something via condensing it symbolically (examples are sceptres, hammer and sickle or rings).

Symbols may depend on conventions or may be natural sings. Clouds of a certain appearance are a natural sign of future thunderstorm which is actually imperceptible. The symbols mentioned above are conventional, however. For my aims it is important that recognizing any kind of symbol requires *experience*. In addition symbols may be more or less ambiguous and symbols can have an impact which potentially is not achieved without them. The sceptre is ambiguous in that each king has a certain style of pursuing royal power. The impact of the sceptre may be for instance submissive loyalty even if the king is rather ridiculous and without natural authority.

To sum up: As symbols perceptible entities (which may be things, actions, verbal communication etc.) have a surplus of meaning. They signify something beyond themselves by referring to something imperceptible. The relation of symbolic reference therefore depends either on natural or conventional conditions and presupposes experience. Symbols additionally have effects on those, who understand them.

Now, in what sense does virtue ethics use symbols or is a kind of symbolistic theory? There are features that render virtue a part of a symbolic relation. To begin with, in virtue ethics we have virtue traditionally defined as "habit of the soul" or as "a characteristic disposition" to act. And, defined in this way, virtue is imperceptible. If you do not see a person acting in specific circumstances, and if you do not know her for a considerable time you can not say whether a certain action of hers is virtuous or not. If you see a person lying, it may be a virtuous or vicious act due to characteristics of the situation and the lying person. In virtue ethics, actions as perceptible entities are symbols for the character of the person who's actions they are. Actions as perceptibles refer to the imperceptible virtue of the character of the acting person. They have a surplus of meaning. The identification of this surplus depends on two things: (1) experience in interpreting actions and bodily reactions reveal-

ing a person's character and (2) knowledge in moral psychology which is included in the theory of emotions.

Additionally, actions are ambiguous symbols: One and the same type of action (e. g. lying) may be virtuous at one time, and vicious at another time or carried out by another person. According to virtue ethics this may be true despite the fact that lying in general tends to be malicious in that it renders persons insincere and destabilizes cohesion of social relations. Depending on one's experience in interpreting actions one will reach different results and, additionally, it seems that moral psychology offers no algorithmic method for interpreting actions. Actions, therefore, are ambiguous symbols. To go further: One and the same action may be an action, which is appropriate to the circumstances, but is to be judged differently depending if it is the the action of (*) a virtuous person or (**) a person which merely restrains itself. Depending on this last feature, one would judge the action as (*) more or (**) less virtuous. But the action, which is less virtuous, but situationally appropriate and carried out by a self-controlled person has an impact on that person. Actions make persons more or less virtuous.

This may be called the symbolism of premodern ethics. The shift to modern ethics may be described as desymbolisation of ethics. Kantian deontology argues lies to be wrong, because they are irrational. Utilitarian rule-consequentialism argues lies to be wrong, because they generally result in a less stable practice. An action is what it is: right or wrong. According to this line of reasoning, a moral judgment is not ambiguous. Its validity is not dependant on a person's character or situational circumstances. Modern ethics rests on a methodology, which makes judgements about actions perspicuous and transparent. Idealistically justified, moral judgements are impartial. That means that actions can be judged morally without reference to the acting person. Kant and Utilitarians would not deny that actions have an impact on acting persons but this repercussion on the person is an addendum, which is not central to their ethical approach.

In what follows I will present three theoretical approaches, which conceptualise evaluative properties of something. Alberti instructs the painter to shape, design, mould or frame works of art so that they possess the property of beauty, which induces a corresponding experience in the act of perception. There is a direct and transparent correlation between the evaluative property and the experiencing person. This is a desymbolised version of beauty. In Valla and Hume one finds a compara-

ble relation between a quality to be valued and the evaluative experience. I will firstly discuss Alberti and secondly the two ethicists.

2. Desymbolisation in Renaissance Artistic Theory

My aim in this paper is to throw light on some systematic aspects of the development of modern ethical approaches. But I do not want to historically *explain* the changes of cultural paradigms.

Now, modern ethics is specifically modern in a sense in which artistic theory and (one could add) theory of natural sciences are modern. I have chosen artistic theory as non-philosophical example because aesthetic qualities are evaluative and resemble, therefore, moral or ethical qualities. Nevertheless, one may diagnose a parallel shift of epistemic and justificatory paradigms in direction of desymbolisation in natural sciences too. Let me (1) first sketch a symbolic concept of beauty very briefly and (2) then non-symbolic aspects of Leon Battista Alberti's concept of beauty.

(1) There are many ways in which art may be symbolical. Let me mention only two. A painting may refer to a "higher reality" which is imperceptible and you need e. g. theology or philosophy to interpret the visible object. Think of art representing Christian truths or Platonic ideas. One may say that in this context a symbolic concept of beauty is central. A piece of art has beauty if the symbolic reference succeeds. Both, the creator and the beholder, are in need of concepts or theories which render the work of art epistemically understandable and justificatorily successful. You need theory to identify beauty and to create or criticize it.

(2) Alberti was neither the first theorist who developed a desymbolised concept of beauty nor does his non-symbolic concept of beauty exhaust his ideas of beauty. Alberti provides an example of a new or at least increased interest in non-symbolic beauty in his times. Non-symbolic beauty is a quality that reveals itself in experience.

In the first book of his *De pictura libri tres* (ca. 1435/36) he develops his rudimentary lessons of perspective.[2] The good painter[3] uses perspective as a necessary methodological instrument of composing a good painting.[4] Of course, he is not considering perspective as sufficient for beauty.[5] But the result of using perspective is a non-symbolic aspect of beauty in general. His technical term is concinnity.[6] A perspectival composition is constitutive of beauty in the work of art.[7] On the one

hand the method of perspective is axiomatic and at least analogous to mathematical theory (especially geometry).[8] On the other hand, perspective is the way in which human sight itself functions.[9] The laws of beauty are the same in the work of art and in the aesthetic experience. Also, they are universal in two senses:

(i)   anthropologically: sight as part of the human constitution, which is usually present in human beings,

(ii)   mathematically: perspective as geometric proportion.[10]

Now, *perspective* is an aspect constitutive firstly of beauty, secondly of the method of producing beauty and thirdly of experiencing beauty. Nature, production of works of art and the experience of the beholder follow the same laws.[11] The principles of outer beauty and of human aesthetic experience are the same. The artist, therefore, needs practical knowledge of perspective to produce good works of art. The result of his concept of beauty is that a beautiful work of art, in the act of seeing it, mediates pleasure.[12] This pleasure is an effect of the beautiful work of art on the beholder, which is *not* mediated by theoretical knowledge.[13]

Therefore, Alberti's concept of beauty is at least in part non-symbolic. Epistemically, the experience of pleasure is our access to beauty, but in addition it is also a justificatory criterion for beauty, as Alberti states explicitly.[14] Neither the artist nor the beholder are in need of more than their attention to their immediate experience in which aesthetic concepts are directly present as evaluative properties of the experience – the concept of concinnity does not refer to something abstract but to a quality of a concrete evaluative experience. There is no need of a mediating theory, which to the perceiving subject reveals the essence of the beauty of a work of art.

3.   Two Examples of Desymbolisation in Renaissance and Premodern Ethics

Theories of moral sense in the 17th century follow similar epistemological and justificatory paths. One example is David Hume. His theory is one of the most important approaches in modern ethics. Lorenzo Valla's ethics does not belong to the group of thories of moral sense. But his approach can function as an early example for desymbolisation in ethical theories. Right now I cannot say very much about the historical aspects of the development of non-symbolic concepts of evaluative qualities in modern ethics. I will, therefore, discuss these two philosophers as philosophi-

cally independent and historically isolated examples. The concept of virtue is central to both approaches, and their notion of virtue is characteristically new. Firstly I will discuss Valla, secondly Hume.

(1) In the first half of the 15th century Lorenzo Valla conceptualised virtue at least in part as a non-symbolic ethical concept. The concepts of pleasure and Epicurean ethics are important for his writing. Now, in Epicurean ethics pleasure may either be conceived of as *goal* we are striving for or as an *epistemological criterion* of right or wrong. I concentrate on the last aspect. Were I to concentrate on pleasure as a goal, which persons are striving for, the third book of Valla's *De vero falsoque bono* would be the right location to turn to. It presents a more symbolic conception of ethics, because – he states there – what is really pleasurable is an essentially Christian way of choosing goals for action. In this respect his concept of pleasure refers symbolically to theological ideas, which do not reveal themselves epistemologically through perception or direct awareness. But in the first book, which is the right one to turn to in order to learn about Valla's *epistemological criterion* of right or wrong, he says as part of his Epicurean position (a) that there is no utility which is not pleasurable, (b) that everything felt or seen is either pleasurable or not pleasurable and (c) that the good is pleasure. The distinction between the good (*bonum*) and the right (*honestum*) is pivotal to Valla's discussion. Because honesty is defined as a result of virtue it is secondarily pleasurable when it is praised by others (i. e. honour is to be approved *additionally* by the person itself or others, wherefrom a different pleasure is induced). Virtue as the good is directly approved through pleasure.[15] Therefore, in Valla's account, the concept of goodness seems to be epistemologically tied to actually sensing pleasure. In perception, nature reveals its practical norms via pleasure and reluctance.[16] His position is justificatorily desymbolised in the sense that pleasure and reluctance motivate us to act virtuously without the need for a theory or interpretation. This is the core of a desymbolised conception of good and bad, because one does not need a mediating theory, which helps distinguishing actual responsiveness in relation to abstract normative truths. This conception, again, is to be found in the last book.[17] The obvious differences between the Epicurean and Christian position are essentially normative. Valla's epistemological foundations seem to be the same throughout his *De vero falsoque bono*.

(2) My second example is the 17th century philosopher David Hume. In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* he defines vir-

tue twice: In the appendix, where he provides an additional discussion of the notion of "moral sentiment" he says "virtue [is] [...] whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation"[18]. In a footnote Hume defines virtue as "a quality of the mind agreeable to or approved of by every one, who considers or contemplates it". Virtue as "quality of the mind" superficially seems analogous to virtue as habit of the soul. But it is not a holistic conception of virtue in that virtue is identified with certain mental actions or the immediate evaluative character of these conscious processes. The moral sense judges a perceptive quality as pleasurable. This is identical with morally approving this quality. Hume's notion of a moral sentiment refers to an anthropological responsiveness of human beings which is partly inborn and partly cultivated through their biography and education. In an impulse of the sentiment, both aspects are actually inseparably present to a person. It is important that the moral sense makes a moral judgement in an actual perception. This judgement is justificatorily sufficient because approval or disapproval rest on an emotional aspect of the mental activity of approving or disapproving itself. There is no need of a mediating theory in order to morally understand the actual response of a person to a situation. The judgment of the moral sense is what it is. It has no symbolic dimension. It is as a conscious perception, which does not refer to something imperceptible like virtue of the character of the perceiving person. – Let me conclude my paper with some summarising remarks.

4. Conclusion: The Paradigms of Premodern and Modern Ethics

While Hume's ethics is explicitly non-symbolic Valla's is more ambiguous. It is important that Valla's conception at least in part offers a glance at new ethical conceptions. He has the beginnings of a concept of virtue, which ties knowledge of virtue and vice to actual consciousness without the need for a mediating moral psychology. Therefore, I do see him as an early and conceptually ambiguous example of desymbolisation of ethical theory. Alberti shows that this process is not limited to ethics or philosophy alone.

The main point, which I want to stress by using the concept of desymbolisation, is that there is a change in paradigm of conceptualising ethics and evaluative qualities. In Hume, Valla and Alberti one finds a

conspicuous empiricism of evaluative properties. Less in Alberti and Valla, but certainly in Hume, this change of paradigm results in subjectivism of the evaluative properties. This subjectivism is of epistemological nature and has no immediate tendency to cover the concept of justification as one can see in Valla and Hume.[19] This result seems to be initiated by changing conceptions of the epistemology of values and evaluative qualities. The changes sketched in this paper result in a significant loss of relevance of moral psychology to modern ethics. This loss was first diagnosed by Elizabeth Anscombe in the last century.[20] The function of moral psychology in virtue ethics is to establish knowledge of right or wrong by reference to a symbolic relation between an action and the character of the acting person.

Why is desymbolisation characteristically modern? One could object that Alberti, Valla, and Hume all just promote their individual concepts of aesthetics and ethics respectively, with no significance for conceptually distinguishing modern and premodern ethics. Why is my diagnosis pointing not only to a plurality of idiosyncratic approaches, but to a more important change in cultural paradigms? The answer is rather short and sketchy: A symbolic conception of virtue conceives the moral dimension of an action or the actual response of a person to a situation as referring successfully or unsuccessfully to the virtue of the person as a whole. This whole is to be accounted for as a concept of a successful life. But it is one characteristic aspect of modern ethics that it loses theoretic interest in seeing a particular type or token of action in front of the background of a successful life. Instead, moral psychology is biographically individualized. In Alberti and Hume one finds a universal residuum of moral psychology in non-normative and empirical laws of psychology of perception.

Endnotes

1 I am gratefull to Marcus Birke for revising the text.

2 Cf. *rudimenta*, Alberti, *De pictura*, 1.23, Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.5.1.

3 Cf. § 23: *pictorem optimum, artificem bonum*.

4 Cf. § 21: *compositio* und § 35.

5 Cf. explicitly § 36 f. where he adds to composition and functionality *conventional* aspects of beauty.

6 Cf. § 35: *concinnitas*, cf. 42, and § 46: *concinnitas* of colour.

7 Cf. § 35: *Ex superficierum compositione illa elegans in corporibus concinnitas et gratia extat, quam pulchritudinem dicunt*.

8 Cf. §§ 15 f.

9 Cf. the analysis of sight §§ 5-12. § 56: *cognitus tamen vultus omnium spectantium oculos ad se rapit, tantam in se, quod sit a natura sumptum, et gratiam et vim habet.*

10 Cf. § 5: *intuitu metimur*, and § 6.

11 Cf. § 58: *At pictores maximo in errore versantur, si non intelligunt eos qui pinxerint conatos fuisse tale simulacrum repraesentare, quale* nos ab ipsa natura depictum in velo intuemur.

12 Cf. § 29: *Tametsi haec una ars et doctis et indoctis aeque admodum grata est, quae res nulla fere alia in arte evenit ut quod peritos delectat imperitos quoque moveat. Neque facile quempiam invenies qui non maiorem in modum optet se in pictura profecisse. Ipsam denique naturam pingendo delectari manifestum est.*

13 Cf. § 29: *voluptatem haec ars affert dum eam colas* (also §28) and § 40: *Historia vero, quam merito possis et laudare et admirari, eiusmodi erit quae illecebris quibusdam sese ita amenam et ornatam exhibeat, ut oculos docti atque indocti spectatoris diutius quadam cum voluptate et animi motu detineat. Primum enim quod in historia voluptatem afferat est ipsa copia et varietas rerum.*

14 Cf. § 40: *Fit enim ut cum spectantes lustrandis rebus morentur, tum pictoris copia gratiam assequatur.* And § 5: *Quod ipsum ita esse demonstrant pictores dum sese ab eo quod pingunt* ammovent longiusque *consistunt* natura duce *cuspidem pyramidis quaeritantes unde omnia* rectius *concerni intelligunt.*

15 Cf. book 1, cp. 14-16, 36, 47; 14: *Idem enim utile est quod voluptuosum, rectum quod honestum, licet aliqui sint qui utile a voluptuoso separent, quorum inscitia apertior est quam ut confutanda sit. Quid enim utile vocabitur quod non sit aut honestum aut voluptuosum? Nihil est utile quod non sentiatur; quod autem sentitur aut iocundum aut iniocundum est. Melius qui omne bonum in rectum et voluptuosum, quod habet in se utilitaten, diviserunt.*

16 Cf. book 1, cp. 35: *Cuius rei ut fundamentum iaciam, nihil est generi animantium tam a natura tributum quam ut se, vitam corpusque tueatur declinetque ea que nocitura videantur. Nunc autem quid magis vitam conservat quam voluptas, ut in gustu, visu, autidtu, odoratu, tactu, sine quibus vivere non possumus, sine honestate possumus? Ita si quis in aliquem sensum acerbus et iniurius fuerit, contra naturam facit et contra suam utilitatem.*

17 Book 3, cp. 5 (esp. 2 and 4), 8.3 (decision in favour of the Epicureans and pleasure), 13 (esp. 2 and 7).

18 Cf. App. 1, § 10.

19 Cf. Hume, David, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford, New York: OUP, 1998 (2, § 1, epistemology, 5 § 42, justification).

20 Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Maragret, „Modern Moral Philosophy", in: Philosophy 33, 1958, S. 1-19.