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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Good Life* Ethics

Abstract: There has been a long standing agreement among literary critics to view Nathaniel Hawthorne as a Twilight Romanticist and a somber moralist exploring the dark recesses of the human heart. The critics also agree uniformly that while pondering on the natural human propensity for evil, Hawthorne is not so much concerned with the religious, metaphysical consequences of human sinfulness as with the psychological impact of guilt on human life. Accurate as the above-mentioned criticism is, it neglects the larger societal scope of Hawthorne's preoccupation with moral issues. Considering the hitherto meager critical interest in Hawthorne's understanding of commonly desirable morality, this paper makes an overview of the author's fiction with regard to his ethical views. The first ethics to come under scrutiny is that of hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. The second is the deontological system of morality based on a rigorous observance of religious duties and faithfulness to religious convictions, as represented by American Puritans and Shakers. The third is utilitarianism promoting the idea of the greater good for many and the fourth is the virtue ethics, a system going back to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. An analysis of Hawthorne's fiction with regard to the four ethics aims at establishing what recipe for a good, happy life the writer propounded.

There has been a long-standing agreement among literary critics to view Nathaniel Hawthorne as a somber moralist exploring the dark recesses of the human heart. As early as 1850, in his review essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Herman Melville makes remarks on the writer's preoccupation with the "Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin" to which the latter owes his "great power of blackness" (Melville 2002: 51). In 1879, Henry James in his book *Hawthorne* states:

> the imagination, in this capital son of the old Puritans, reflected the hue of the more purely moral part, of the dusky, overshadowed conscience. The conscience, by no fault of its own, in every genuine offshoot of that sombre lineage, lay under the shadow of the sense of sin. This darkening cloud was no essential part of the nature of the individual; it stood fixed in the general moral heaven under which he grew up and looked at life. It projected from above, from outside, a black patch over his spirit, and it was for him to do what he could with the black patch. (James 1997: 45–46)

More modern comments follow in the same vein. Hyatt Waggoner points out the great Puritan moralists Spenser, Milton and Bunyan as Hawthorne's models (Waggoner 1964: 175), while more recently Sculley, Beatty and Long state "He was absorbed by the enigmas of evil and responsibility," thus routinely underscoring Hawthorne's fascination with human inborn sinfulness (Sculley et al. 1996: 47). Additionally, Hawthorne's critics agree uniformly to the statement, here made by Arlin Turner, that while pondering on the natural human propensity for evil, Hawthorne might have infrequently employed situations and rhetoric appropriate for a religious context, but "his main concern was for the effects wrought on human character and his approach was mainly psychological" (Turner 1961: 52).

Accurate as the above-mentioned comments are, they neglect the larger societal scope of Hawthorne's concern with moral issues. One should not skip lightly over the apparently too obvious a fact that the nineteenth century both in Europe and the United States was morality-sensitive. As such, the age "wanted its literary authors to be moralists" (Turner, 53), which Hawthorne both knew and responded to. Throughout his writing, most notably in his tales and sketches, he depicted morally charged situations and decisions of his characters that interpreted in their totality set a pattern of a proper way of life that the writer seemed to advocate. In consideration of the hitherto meager critical interest in Hawthorne's understanding of commonly desirable morality, the objective of this paper is to make an overview of his fiction with regard to his ethical views in order to establish what recipe for a good, happy life he was likely to promote.

Considering the Victorian ascetic moral slant of the time, it would have been eccentric for Hawthorne to propound any form of hedonism, either of the Cyrenaic or the Epicurean brand, for both conceptions of the *good life* give pride of place to bodily pleasures. The Cyrenaics, the more radical of the two philosophical schools, "held that pleasure is the only natural good there is. That is to say, pleasure, and pleasure only, is universally recognized by all human beings to be desirable" while "conversely, pain is the natural evil" (Graham 2004: 40). Epicureanism, in turn, was a lighter version of hedonism for it mitigated the excesses of the Cyrenaic philosophy by encouraging moderation in one's pursuits of happiness so as to obviate the pains accompanying uncontrolled indulgence. The differences between the two shades of hedonism notwithstanding, their celebration of the body and its pleasures must have been suspect to the nineteenth-century moral sensibility, which finds its confirmation in Hawthorne's handling of the war of ethics in "The Maypole of Merry Mount" where "jollity and gloom were contending for an empire" (Hawthorne 1959c: 40).

In "The Maypole of Merry Mount" two contending ethics are put to the test — the hedonistic pursuit of unrestrained revelry on the one hand and the Puritan deontological ethics on the other. The Merrymounters' carefree life of seemingly endless bliss appears to be glamorous and tempting at first glance. The cheerful throng attending the nuptials of the Lord and Lady of the May that might be

fancied "the crew of Comus" (Hawthorne 1959c: 41) are hailed by the narrator as "people of the Golden Age" whose chief "husbandry was to raise flowers!" (Hawthorne 1959c: 40). They are said to be flitting through a world of toil and care, living in never-ending May that "dwelt all the year round at Merry Mount, sporting with the Summer months, and reveling with Autumn, and basking in the glow of Winter's fireside" (Hawthorne 1959c: 40). Judged by appearances, they seem to have chosen and pursued the right philosophy of the *good life* which consists in seeking contentment, relaxation and sensual excitement. This, however, is a false impression which Hawthorne belies soon by disclosing the merry revelers' incapability to sustain their hedonistically desired state of *hedonia*,[1] a subjective experience of pleasurable happiness. They are loud and frolicsome but they have lost "the heart's fresh gayety" imagining instead "a wild philosophy of pleasure" (Hawthorne 1959c: 42–43). They have apparently fallen victim to the hedonistic paradox, first identified by the nineteenth-century English philosopher Henry Sidgwick, that views any conscious and continuous pursuit of pleasure as debilitating for the possibility of attaining sustainable happiness since pleasures that are not attainable lead to frustration while those that are too easily obtained lead to boredom.[2] As it is, among the Merrymounters only "the young deemed themselves happy" (Hawthorne 1959c: 43), whereas the elder members of the community "knew that mirth was but the counterfeit of happiness" whose "false shadow" they followed for "they would not venture among the sober truths of life not even to be truly blessed" (Hawthorne 1959c: 43). Their elusive imaginings of a happy life are fraudulent but the people cling to them making it "high treason to be sad at Merry Mount" (Hawthorne 1959c: 42). For all the pretenses, however, the dream is threadbare. Edgar and Edith, the Lord and Lady of the May, sobered by a presentment of future care and sorrow, see through the deception. As the narrator says, "no sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion than they were sensible to something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures" (Hawthorne 1959c: 42). At the same time they start perceiving their jovial friends as "visionary, and their mirth as unreal" (Hawthorne 1959c: 42). The hedonistic way of life comes to an end not only because the bellicose Puritans led by John Endicott destroy the Merry Mount colony physically, but because the philosophy of pleasure propounded by

[1] On „hedonia" as a subjective experience of pleasure see (Waterman 2011: 359).

[2] Aristotle intuits on the paradox in Book X of his *Nicomachean Ethics* saying: "How is it, then, that we are incapable of continuous pleasure? Perhaps the reason is that we become exhausted; for no human faculty is capable of continuous exercise" (Book X, 329). Henry Sidgwick addresses the paradox directly in *The Methods of Ethics* claiming that a direct pursuit of pleasure virtually defeats the aim: "I should not, however, infer from this that the pursuit of pleasure is necessarily self-defeating and futile; but merely that the principle of Egoistic Hedonism, when applied with a due knowledge of the laws of human nature, is practically self-limiting; i.e. that a rational method of attaining the end at which it aims requires that we should to some extent put it out of sight and not directly aim at it. I have before spoken of this conclusion as the 'Fundamental Paradox of Egoistic Hedonism'" (Sidgwick 1981: 136).

its inhabitants does not correspond with the tough frontier existence. As Crews writes, "To the May couple the rigors of Puritanism finally appear commensurate with the hard realities of life, and are therefore morally preferable to the 'vanities of Merry Mount'" (1970: 18).

Young Edgar and Edith's acceptance of the Puritan way, while signifying their rejection of the hedonistic stance, does not mean a deliberate, wholehearted preference of Puritan morality, for as Ziff comments, they do it "in the absence of the third alternative" (1964: 260). While pleasure seeking hedonism obviously is not Hawthorne's ethics of choice, neither does the ethics of Puritanism seem to be. What makes the latter humanely unappealing is its rigorously deontological character.

Deontological ethical systems hold that "some behaviors are morally obligatory regardless of their effects and that the ethics of duty is comprised of the rectitude of one's inner disposition or loyalty to an unconditioned command" (Hester 2003: 62). The most well-known philosophical deontological theory is that of the German eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, who held that

> nothing is good without qualification except a good will, which is one that wills to act in accord with the moral law and out of respect for that law, rather than out of natural inclinations. He saw the moral law as a categorical imperative — i.e., an unconditional command — and believed that its content could be established by human reason alone. Reason begins with the principle "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Deontological ethics")

While Kant's ethics situates the locus of absolute moral obligations in the inherent moral faculty of human reason, there are also religious deontological systems, the Divine Command ethics,[3] which are bound for their moral prescriptions to the demands of their scriptures and their faith, as embodied for instance in the Ten Commandments. As Hester writes, "For many, their religious faith binds them to the 'will of God' unconditionally and their interpretation of scripture is usually literal, allowing little room for interpretation" (Hester, 62).

Such is the strictly deontological religious morality of the Puritans depicted by Hawthorne in "The Maypole of Merry Mount," "Endicott and the Red Cross," "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," "The Man of Adamant," "The Gentle Boy" or "The Scarlet Letter."[4] Historically, the Puritans were religious fundamentalists driven by divine Providence. Having entered into a covenant with God as His chosen people, they were zealous to obey God's ordinances, accept God's will and do His work in the New World. They believed that they were elected to fulfill a manifest destiny of founding a godly community of believers who would

[3] For a discussion of the Divine Command Theory and its problems see (Rachels 2009: 522–526).

[4] Worth noting is Hawthorne's tale „Dr. Bullivant" where the writer gives a more objective picture of American Puritans, presenting them as less stern and more humane than they were thought to be.

set an example for the whole world as God's "City upon a Hill."[5] Their beliefs were strict for they were based on divine sanctions. Any threat to the welfare of the Puritan experiment in New England had to be stamped out, notable examples being the banishment of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts Bay Colony, the persecutions of Quakers and Baptists as well as acts of enmity towards Indians. A critique of George Ellis's book *The Puritan Age in Massachusetts* published in 1888 seeks an explanation of the harshness of the Puritan ways, stating:

> They were themselves subject to the stern and iron rule of their own principles … The Bible, supremely valued and trusted, was the only infallible guide… This it was which led directly to much of their intolerance and cruelty, those Massachusetts settlers believed that *God's* way, as set forth in the Bible, was the only *right* way to conduct oneself. As such, all Puritans — including the leaders — had to subordinate themselves to God's will … those seventeenth-century colonists believed that obeying the moral law of God was the best way to live. ("Puritans and *The Scarlet Letter*")

Sustained by their infallible notion of election, divine sanction, and high purpose, the Puritans felt superior to the non-Puritan world and believed they had the right to perform any deed whatsoever that would satisfy God's will. Criticized for their intolerance, cruelty and unyielding severity of moral custom, they argued, as Brauer says, that "if one wished a godly nation as well as godly individuals, one must be willing to keep men in line by laws. The Commonwealth was dedicated to God, and the aim was to make certain that it remained so committed" (Brauer 1965).

In contrast to the hedonistic crew of Comus living lives of indulgence in sensual pleasures, the Puritans of "The Maypole of Merry Mount" comprehend the idea of the *good life* as one of ascetic self-denial and steadfast surrender to God's Will. Hawthorne depicts them as

> most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the corn-field till evening made it prayer time again... When they met in conclave, it was never to keep up the old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long … Their festivals were fast days, and their chief pastime the singing of psalms. Woe to the youth or maiden who did but dream of a dance! The selectman nodded to the constable; and there sat the light-heeled reprobate in the stocks; or if he danced, it was round the whipping-post. (Hawthorne 1959c: 43)

The condemnation of the Puritan ways that a reader can sense in the description reflects the author's unfavorable attitude to Puritan moral philosophy. Absolutist in its emphasis on the fulfillment of God's commands, the Puritan life ethics is radically anti-humanistic for it is uncompromising in its denial of the whole earthly dimension of human existence, including family relationships, the tolerance of otherness, the pursuit of personal interests and the spontaneity of behavior. Not only would Hawthorne have likely subscribed to Henry Mencken's definition of Puritanism as "the haunting suspicion that somewhere, someone, may be happy"

[5] The phrase comes from John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" written in 1630.

(Mencken 1949: 624), but he would have also criticized Puritan hypocrisy with regard to their idealistic ideological disavowal of worldly pleasures. As Pfister comments, the writer hinted that the Puritans

> projected impulses they denied in themselves onto others and then from these same tabooed impulses received substitutive satisfactions when persecuting the others. Consequently, the Puritans who persecute the pagan merrymounters for frolicking around the phallic maypole gain similar — though displaced and disguised — satisfactions from lacerating them on their erect whipping post. (Pfister 2004: 41)

A similar observation comes from Crews, who remarks that placing light-hearted settlers in the stocks and watching them "dance" at the whipping-post "suggests an element of pleasure in legalized violence — and this is in fact the essence of the Puritan mentality as Hawthorne portrays it" (Crews, 18). Eventually, also Pfister depicts the Puritans as perverse hedonists finding sadistic pleasure in acts of seemingly rightful retribution (Pfister, 37) when he refers to Hawthorne's dramatization of the public whipping of a bare-breasted Quaker woman in "Main-street" which reads as follows:

> A strong-armed fellow is that constable; and each time that he flourishes his lash in the air, you see a frown wrinkling and twisting his brow, and, at the same instant, a smile upon his lips. He loves his business, faithful officer that he is, and puts his soul into every stroke. (Hawthorne 2009: e-book)

In all the above examples, the Puritan rigorous ethics stressing unconditional subjection to God's law is found faulty as it refutes natural human impulses, encourages intolerance and perverts social relationships.

Besides his Puritan narratives, Hawthorne's critical stance with regard to absolutist deontological systems of morality rooted in strict religious beliefs is also evidenced in his tales featuring the American Shakers. The sect, established in America in 1774 by a group of English Shaking Quakers led by Ann Lee, was a millenarian society of believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Since they looked forward to the future Kingdom of God on Earth in which there was to be no marrying and no giving in marriage, they observed celibacy. Their lives were simple, subjected to work and religious devotion, and strictly ordered with laws covering every aspect of everyday existence (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Shaker").

The Shaker duty based ethics of the good (godly) life is arguably best dealt with in "The Shaker Bridal."[6] The goals towards which the Society members aspire have all appearances of being lofty and commendable for the elders open the gates of their villages "to all who will give up the iniquities of the world, and come hither to live lives of purity and peace … who have known the vanity of the earth" (Hawthorne 1959d: 204). What makes the Shakers' moral philosophy questionable is the inhumanly thorough self-sacrifice that the believers choose to practice. An

[6] Another Hawthorne's indictment of the Shaker ethics can be found in his tale "The Canterbury Pilgrims."

indictment of their ways is expressed in Martha's, the female protagonist's description of the Society's elders in "The Shaker Bridal":

> They have overcome their natural sympathy with human frailties and affections. One when he joined the society, had brought with him his wife and children, but never, from that hour, had spoken a fond word to the former, or taken his best-loved child upon his knee. Another, whose family refused to follow him, had been enabled — such was his gift of holy fortitude — to leave them to the mercy of the world. The youngest of the elders, a man of about fifty, had been bred from infancy in a Shaker village, and was said never to have clasped a woman's hand in his own, and to have no conception of a closer tie than the cold fraternal one of the sect. (Hawthorne 1959d: 203)

The *good* they propound amounts to a negation of anything worldly. An individual is obliterated by the sect's unyielding commitment to the idea of the coming millennium "when children shall no more be born and die, and the last survivor of mortal race … shall see the sun go down, never to rise on a world of sin and sorrow!" (Hawthorne 1959d: 203). Hawthorne's abhorrence of the inhumanely perfectionist Shaker design is made evident in the final scene in which Martha, abandoned by the man she has loved, who is now a new Shaker leader, sinks helplessly at his feet unable to endure the weight of her desolate heart's agony. As Turner comments, "The same logic which had convinced Hawthorne that the Merry Mounters … did not have a way of life acceptable in the world of reality, convinced him also that the Shaker sect, with its rule of celibacy, was founded on nihilism" (Turner, 25). Like the Puritans of his tales, the Shakers failed as moral guides for their uncompromising elevation of duty over common human sentiments crippled their humanity.

Apparently, neither hedonism nor rigid religious deontological ethics met with Hawthorne's requirements of the *good life*. That the author was at least suspicious about still another moral philosophy, that of utilitarianism,[7] can be evidenced through his depiction of Hollingsworth, one of the major characters in *The Blithedale Romance*. In pursuit of his philanthropic *telos*, Hollingsworth seems to be acting in accordance with the ideological tenets of classical *act utilitarianism* propounded by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The English philosophers and humanist reformers believed that "morality should serve humanity, not vice versa" which meant that instead of observing the law because of the rightness of the act itself, people ought to act in such a way as to secure "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (Pojman and Vaughn 2007: 235). Bentham and Mill were active in promoting penal reform and so is Hawthorne's character. His plans to establish a reformatory facility for criminals is clearly in line with the English thinkers' contentions that preventive and reformation measures should take the place of retributive punishment. While his endeavor is not deprived of nobility, Hawthorne

[7] An observation to the point is also made by Davidson, who in his essay "The Unfinished Romance" writes about Hawthorne "devising a bitter commentary on nineteenth-century meliorism, Utilitarianism, and the illusion of earthly progress" (Davidson 1964: 158).

seems to find fault with the way his character pursues his goal. Obsessed with the higher social utility he targets, he disregards the good of the Blithedale community, which stands in opposition to *act utilitarianism* that admittedly requires that everyone should work towards maximizing utility but at the same time stipulates that no one's particular good should be favored. To Hawthorne, a severe judge of human nature, the assumptions of utilitarianism were obviously too demanding and thus untenable. Hollingsworth fails Mill's principle which holds that "the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (Mill 1863). While his motives are utilitarian, his obsessive attachment to them smacks of egotism. If he could have had his way, he would have sacrificed Blithedale to realize his "nobler purpose." As Grossberg comments, "It isn't just that he has his own utopian vision, but that his vision is contingent upon the failure of Blithedale; it requires the very same real estate" (Grossberg 2000). The uncompromising pursuit of his reformation undertaking, the seemingly utilitarian "greater good for many," changes imperceptibly for Hollingsworth into a vehicle of his laudable but also self-serving ambitions, thus making the reader view utilitarianism as a questionable ethics.

Self-righteous, intolerant, cruel, cold-hearted, obsessed, egoistic, most Hawthorne characters make a colorful crowd of sinners but they are hardly exemplary figures to follow as moral paragons. The exponents of the ethics that the writer seemed to endorse are relatively few in his writings but they stand out distinctly from the others because of the quality of goodness they all share — a virtuous heart. As Flibbert asserts, Hawthorne got familiar with the rudiments of the virtue ethics, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle, during six months in 1827 "beginning in March when he borrowed Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) from the Salem Athenaeum and ending in August with the withdrawal of Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry Into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725)" (Flibbert 2007: 138). While an adept of philosophy would say that Hutcheson differs form Aristotle in that he views virtue as a disposition of the heart and not as a disposition to action (Eagleton 2008: 33), Hawthorne does not appear to pay attention to the finer points of the ethical theories. His concern is with how to achieve the state of well-being or happiness (Greek: *eudaimonia*). The moral recipe that he offers inscribes itself in the tradition of ethical systems based on the concept of *arête*, that is virtue or excellence.[8] As Pojman states, the *aretaic* systems "Rather than viewing the heart of ethics to be in actions or duties … center in the heart of the agent — in the character and dispositions of persons" (Pojman 2002: 329). Instead of *doing* they emphasize *being*, which was aptly put forward by a nineteenth century English philosopher Leslie Stephen as follows": "Morality is

[8] For more information on virtue-based ethical systems see (Pojman 2002: 329–398).

internal. The moral law … has to be expressed in the form, 'be this,' not in the form, 'do this.' … [T]he true moral law says 'hate not,' instead of 'kill not.'… [T]he only mode of stating the moral law must be a rule of character" (Stephen 1882: 155, 158).[9] Moral excellence, however, though some philosophers attribute it to a "moral sense,"[10] is not a quality that is given to an individual. Unlike the intellectual virtues that can be taught directly, the moral ones, according to Aristotle, "must be lived in order to be learned. By living well, we acquire the right habits" (Pojman and Vaughn 2009: 486). Thus, a *eudaimon* life is an assiduous process of challenging one's weaknesses and developing one's potential not away from but necessarily within a human society.

Hawthorne's support of the aretaic, virtue-based ethics is beyond doubt in a less-known tale "Little Daffydowndilly," a piece with which the author contributes to didactic nieneteenth-century "Juvenile fiction [teaching] honesty, charity, piety, industry, and self-control" (Sanchez-Eppler 2004: 144). The story features Daffydowndilly, a naturally good boy of "very ingenuous disposition … [who] had never been known to tell a lie in all his life" (Hawthorne 1959b: 514). Though truthful, he is not accustomed to regular work and thus finds school and particularly the schoolmaster Mr. Toil unbearable. To avoid Mr. Toil, the lad runs away from school. While on a ramble, he meets all kinds of people doing various jobs. To his amazement, he recognizes in all their faces, even in the face of the elderly man accompanying him, the features of his old schoolmaster. In the end he "learned a good lesson, and from that time forward was diligent at his task, because he knew that diligence is not a whit more toilsome than sport or idleness" (Hawthorne 1959b: 517). In the allegorical narrative, in which Mr. Toil is a personification of the cardinal virtue of hard work, Daffydowndilly undergoes a moral evolution, transforming an external compulsion to do one's duty into an internalized virtue. At first at odds with the world, he achieves gradually the state of well-being (*eudaimonia*) since he readily learns to appreciate Mr. Toil, admitting now that "his ways were not so very disagreeable, and that the old schoolmaster's smile of approbation made his face almost as pleasant as even that of Daffydowndilly's mother" (Hawthorne 1959b: 517).

"The Great Stone Face" is another distinct acknowledgement of virtue ethics. The life story of the main character Ernest is an account of an individual's growth towards moral perfection, epitomized in the symbol of the eponymous face. The Great Stone Face is a natural rock formation resembling a visage whose "features were noble, and the expression was at once grand and sweet, as if it were the glow of a vast, warm heart" (Hawthorne 1959a: 462). The local legend holds that "at some future day, a child should be born hereabouts, who was destined to become the greatest and noblest personage of his time, and whose

[9] As cited in (Pojman 2002: 329 — emphasis mine).
[10] E.g. Adam Smith.

countenance, in manhood, should bear an exact resemblance to the Great Stone Face" (Hawthorne 1959a: 462). Ernest grows up in the shadow of the uncanny rock outcropping. Though his mother cannot afford to give him good education, he finds a teacher and an ideal to live up to in the Stone Face. While the more foolish and gullible people in the valley see the fulfillment of the prophecy in the successive arrivals of a rich merchant Mr. Gathergold, a war hero general Old Blood-and-Thunder, a famous politician Old Stony Phiz and a great poet, Ernest is never deceived for long. As Dunne says "Ernest's great simplicity of heart enables him eventually to understand that none of the four claimants can be accepted as the long-awaited great man" (Dunne 2007: 112). Ironically, though in his natural humility he does not perceive it, "by the end of the tale, Ernest's virtues have transformed him into the great man. He has come to resemble the Great Stone Face himself" (Dunne, 112).

While Hawthorne praises the life of moral virtue in the innocent Daffydown-dilly and the naturally noble Ernest, he arguably gives his strongest support of virtue-based ethics through his depiction of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. The assertion sounds paradoxical in light of Hester's initial presentation as a sinner, a fallen woman who has committed the crime of adultery. As far from being virtuous as she appears to be then, she gradually develops, progressing towards a virtual moral perfection. She is the first to provide for the poor and attend to the sick in need of care. As the narrator says:

> In such emergencies Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich — a well-spring of human tenderness … She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy … Such helpfulness was found in her — so much power to do, and power to sympathize — that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able. (Hawthorne 1983: 257)

As she gains social esteem, the stigmatizing designation of the scarlet A for "adultery" gives way to a favorable equivalence of A for "able." Ultimately, her rise to virtue is affirmed when after several years' sojourn away from New England she voluntarily returns to Boston and resumes wearing the letter A again. In time "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (Hawthorne 1983: 344) — the shameful "adulteress" has been transformed into the "Angel of Mercy." Considering her earlier rebelliousness against the social mores of Puritan Boston, her later life choices cannot be interpreted in terms of a deontological ethics demanding doing what is right for its own sake. Neither is her behavior driven by the utilitarian idea of "the greater good for many." Hester listens not so much to the judgments of reason as to the stirrings of the heart. If she eventually becomes a woman of an excellent character, it is because, in accordance with Aristotle's assumptions, she has developed it through living an *aretaic* life.

It is the virtue ethics then that appears to be prescriptive of the *good life* in Hawthorne's writing. A morally valuable human existence is not one of egoistic,

self-indulgent pleasure seeking, nor is it a Puritan or Shaker-like lifelong commitment to obeying God's law. Despite its popular appeal, Hawthorne did not embrace the ethics of utilitarianism either, for while it promoted acts and rules that would be most beneficent to society, it disregarded the quality of motivations. Moreover, in the ethics' hedonistic terminology, the value that the acts and rules promoted was "happiness" reductively understood as a greater "pleasure" for the greatest number of people. Hawthorne's, similarly to other romanticists' "quarrel with utilitarianism [was] over its insistence that hedonic value is or ought to be the sole end of human action" (Lockridge 2005: 130). He would certainly have agreed with Coleridge who criticized utilitarian hedonism for its assuming total equivalence of "good" and "pleasure," even if it were to be a greater pleasure for many. Hawthorne would have agreed with Coleridge that it is not tautological to say "pleasure is good and pain is evil," meaning that pleasure is only *a* good and not *the* good (Lockridge, 130). The American author allowed for self-denial and pain as constituents of the *good life*, as long as the end result was noble self-fulfillment. What is interesting about his reflection on ethical life is that it combines influences of Romanticism and Victorianism, which can be accounted for by the fact that delayed American Romanticism and the Victorian period overlapped.[11] The outcome of this combination is an individual aspiring towards a life of natural virtue, working towards a moral perfection on his or her own, but remaining in touch with society. Certainly less conspicuous than the great unpardonable sinners, Hawthorne's moral paragons nevertheless can even today inspire readers with their quiet and worthy lives led in accordance with the Aristotelian ideal of the golden mean.

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[11] With reference to Hawthorne's affiliation with Victorianism, Schriber mentions Martin Green noting "that Nathaniel Hawthorne wanted to be a good Victorian writer … warm-hearted, bourgeois, full of honest sentiment and stout common sense" (Schriber 1987: 195).

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