

Preface

Character is of interest to philosophers, psychologists, historians, and legal theorists, among others. Thus, a moral philosopher may ask what it means to have a virtuous character or whether people have the kind of control over character that furnishes grounds for responsibility. A Kant scholar may want to know what conception of virtue, if any, underwrites Kantian ethics. A philosopher of art may be interested in whether the normative standards applicable to the evaluation of a fictional character's character – for instance, to the character of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov – are the same as those we apply in evaluating real people. A psychologist, for his part, may seek to determine whether people's characters remain stable in the face of situational pressures, or whether there is a clear boundary between traits and mental disorders (for instance, between shyness and social anxiety disorder). A legal scholar may ask whether it is appropriate to use character as evidence in the determination of guilt – for example, to appeal to a witness's testimony that a defendant is known to be irascible to support the conclusion that the defendant in question shot the victim. A historian may ask what is meant by an explanation such as "The Empire fell because of the Queen's vanity," and in what sense the vanity of a queen – a character trait – can be said to explain the fall of an empire. The historian may also wonder whether historical events can be said to shape people's characters, for instance, whether people who grew up during the Great Depression were, as a group, more thrifty than people who grew up in a time of abundance.

These different lines of inquiry are typically pursued in isolation from each other. While there has certainly been some fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue on issues concerning character recently, particularly between empirically-minded philosophers and social psychologists, such dialogue remains the exception and division of scholarly labor the rule.

There is a good explanation for this. Scholars in one field, even when they discuss the same phenomenon as that discussed by scholars in another field, tend to see that phenomenon in connection to other phenomena studied by their own discipline, rather than in relation to discussions of the same phenomenon in other fields. For instance, a historian interested in the role of character in historical explanation is likely to see the problem of character's role in historical explanation as part of the bigger issue of historical explanation, rather than as part of the problem of the role of character in human action. Similarly, a legal scholar who studies the role of character in the determination of guilt will tend to see the problem under the rubric "psychological issues in law," rather than under "character from a legal perspective."

For the most part, there is a good reason for this division of labor: after all, the primary purpose of the historian interested in character is not to understand character, but to understand historical explanation. Similarly, the main goal of the legal scholar who inquires about the role of character in the determination of guilt is not to understand character but to offer a defensible model of judicial practice. One may say that the interest in character on the part of a historian or a legal scholar is merely derivative: it is based on a prior interest in something else. Yet, there are at least two reasons to see work on character in different sub-fields of a given discipline as well as in different disciplines as aspects of a single inquiry into the nature of human character. First, even if one's interest in character is merely derivative, it may be a good idea to inform oneself of work on character in other fields. Thus, the historian who says, "The Empire fell because of the Queen's vanity" is making a claim about a historical event that relies on an assumption about character, namely, that there are traits, or at least that there is the trait of vanity. But what if there aren't any traits, as some social psychologists have argued? Surely, this is of relevance to the historian. Second, it is important to ask

what character is, in general, and how it explains action, where these questions are not meant to help us illuminate some other phenomenon but, rather, to enable us to make sense of who we are.

Such questions are likely to be of interest to any philosophically-minded person, not only to a professional philosopher. Character is so central to our sense of identity, to our moral and social practices, and to our view of ourselves and others, that perhaps every thoughtful person can be presumed to be interested in the topic. Thus, if I ask you to describe what someone is like, you will probably respond by listing character traits. You may say, for instance, “She is shy but dependable,” or, “He is fun to be around but a little vain,” or, “My son is so timid, I am afraid it may be pathological.” You may also appeal to common dispositions of character in an attempt to make sense of large-scale behavioral patterns, as in, “The housing bubble was due to our herd instincts, to our propensity to buy just because everyone else is buying.” Or you may appeal to character to predict what someone will do. For instance, if I tell you that I have accidentally revealed a secret to Kate, you may assure me that she is unlikely to share my secret with anyone, because she is trustworthy. And if you learn that a person has done something you would not have expected him to, for instance, you find out that Martin Luther King plagiarized large portions of his doctoral dissertation, you may conclude that you were wrong about what kind of person he was and what kind of character he had.

Once it is recognized that character is ubiquitous in moral and social practices, and paramount in our conceptions of ourselves and others, it is only natural to ask what character is, and what we can learn about it from the different disciplines that have studied it, albeit each for its own purpose.

This volume offers ideas and insights regarding such questions. It brings together first-rate philosophers with a variety of backgrounds, as well as scholars from a number of other fields – psychology, economics, law, and so on – in order to deliver a collection that enables the reader to appreciate the complexity and the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon of human character, with the hope of providing a stimulus for further thought, discussion, and inquiry. I would encourage the reader to consider engaging with at least some of the essays which are not, at first sight, directly relevant to his or her research. Unexpected insights are likely to come about this way.

The essays are organized thematically and grouped under 5 headings. Part One, “Character in Ethics,” contains six careful essays discussing character in relation to a number of different moral philosophers and philosophies: Aristotle (Wolfsdorf, Leunissen), Kant (Cureton), Hume (Kauppinen), Nietzsche (Alfano), and consequentialism (Bradley).

Part Two, “Character in Psychology and X-phi,” contains six essays on character informed by different psychological traditions – social psychology and personality theory (Cohon and D’Cruz; Fleeson and Furr; Miller; Hayes, Emler and Hogan), psychopathology (Sinnott-Armstrong and Summers), and psychoanalysis (Stolorow).

The essays in Part Three, “Character in Moral Psychology,” constitute careful attempts to illuminate key aspects of character important to moral psychology: the connections between being an autonomous agent and having character (Katsafanas), the role of alienation from one’s motives (Arpaly), the conative and cognitive aspects of virtue (Sinhababu, Hills), the explanatory role of traits, and the connections between traits and reasons explanations of action (Mele, Fileva).

Part Four, “Character and Society,” includes an essay co-authored by two economists on the question whether there is any tension between virtue and free market values (Coyoumdjian and Munger), an interesting essay by a legal scholar on the role of character in the legal system (Huigens), and a paper by an erudite philosopher of history on the role of character in history and historical explanation (Little).

Finally, Part Five, “Character in Art,” offers an essay on the ways in which characters from artistic works become models for prototypical personality syndromes, which audiences can then apply to actual persons (Carroll), an essay on the effect that reading fiction has on empathy

(Munevar), a paper on the implications of situationist critiques of character for fiction (Stecker), a chapter on miscasting characters in film (Mag Uidhir), and one on character in opera, with a focus on Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte* (Davies).

Each section opens with an introduction in which I briefly discuss the different chapters, note resonances among essays (both those in the same section and essays elsewhere in the collection), and make suggestions for further thought and discussion. I have tried to be maximally helpful and would encourage the reader to take a look at those introductory parts.

Most of the volume's contributors have been invited to address specific questions aimed at breaking some new ground. For instance, I invited Alfred Mele, who has written much about action explanation but always with a focus on reasons and intentions, to write a paper on the role of traits in action explanation. Again, I asked Walter Sinnott-Armstrong to write an essay on the boundary between traits and psychiatric conditions (Sinnott-Armstrong teamed up for his project with a young philosopher, Jesse Summers). I looked for novelty in the case of essays on the views of great philosophers – Hume, Kant, Aristotle, and so on – as well. For example, Mariska Leunissen mentioned in conversation with me that situationist criticisms of Aristotelean virtue ethics present a problem for Aristotle's views on the matter only if by "Aristotle's views" we mean Aristotle's ethics, but that the picture is very different if one takes one's cue from Aristotle's biology, Leunissen's focus of research. It had never occurred to me to think of Aristotle's views from that angle, and I invited Leunissen to write an essay defending the idea. Mark Alfano, to take another example, provides a paper on Nietzsche's view of character informed by research in psychology and experimental philosophy, a direction of inquiry by no means typical of Nietzsche scholars.

I wish to note, however, that I did not aim for novelty for novelty's sake. My purpose was to have authors illuminate the issues from angles at once unusual and compelling.

In the cases of some chapters, serendipity helped. For example, I heard Rachel Cohon mention that she holds the view that situationists about character cannot make sincere promises. I was intrigued by the suggestion and followed up with her. It turned out that she and her colleague Jason D'Cruz were already working on a paper on this very topic. Similarly, I asked Noël Carroll to contribute a chapter on character in art. It turned out he was already pondering an idea in the vicinity – he'd had the thought that characters from fictions, such as Don Quixote, become social metaphors that seep into our thinking and conversations about real people. I thought the idea was fantastic, and we agreed that he would develop it in a chapter for the volume.

The contributors are a mix of distinguished scholars and promising young authors. I've brought on board people whose work combines originality, theoretical rigor, and an elegant writing style, with the ultimate goal of producing a collection that is informative and thought-provoking as well as engaging to read.

