

# The Indispensability of Character

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In a recent paper Gilbert Harman has argued that it may well be mistaken to suppose that people have character traits. Contemporary social psychology shows, he contends, that 'it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character, no ordinary character traits of the sort people think there are'.<sup>1</sup> The psychological studies on which he draws most heavily are Nisbett's and Ross's textbook, and Milgram's pioneering report of his well-known experiment.<sup>2</sup>

The theme is continued in two short papers on the Gilbert Harman website. In that of July 14, 1999, he continues to urge that 'studies of actual individual differences do not support ordinary assumptions about character traits'. The main appeal this time is to Ross and Nisbett's more recent textbook.<sup>3</sup> 'We need', he says, 'to convince people to look at situational factors and to stop trying to explain things in terms of character traits.' In that of August 18, 1999, one claim is that 'What a person with a seemingly ideal moral character will do in a particular situation is pretty much what anyone else will do in exactly that situation, allowing for random variation.' The claim then is qualified in a way I will shortly discuss.

A subtext of the attack on character is that the idea of virtuous character is an illusion, and that accordingly moral philosophy might better concentrate on judgments of problem-solving in particular cases and forget about the idea that ethics might be concerned with good character that would be manifested in a range of situations. Harman's main appeal on this point is to the Milgram experiments, in which the great majority of subjects proved willing to administer what they thought were electric shocks of increasing severity to someone who they thought was another subject (but

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Harman, 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999), 315–331. The passage quoted is on 316.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Nisbett and L. Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1980); S. Milgram, 'Behavioral Study of Obedience', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, No. 4 (October 1963), 371–378.

<sup>3</sup> See L. Ross and R. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw Hall, 1991).

actually was a psychologist's stooge). People who presumably were in their general behaviour virtuous and decent did things, because they were told that the psychological study required them, that would have been terrible had the electric shocks been real.

Harman's attacks on the concept of character, and in particular the idea of virtuous character, are more adroit than they might appear to some readers at first. They raise interesting and important issues in the border area between social psychology and moral philosophy. This paper will consider these issues, in the course of arguing that Harman's attacks are misconstrued. The heart of the argument will be that the attacks gain much of what plausibility they have from his picking a soft target: a strain within folk psychology that offers an excessively simple view of what character is.

## I

Plainly we need to know what character traits would be, if there were such, in order to judge how effectively Harman argues against their genuine existence. His three papers do not offer any detailed analytical account of what they might be supposed to be.<sup>4</sup> Harman does say, however, that 'character traits are broad based dispositions that help to explain what they are dispositions to do. Narrow dispositions do not count.'<sup>5</sup> He goes on to give examples of narrow dispositions that do not count as character traits: being afraid to ride on a roller coaster (but not afraid of other things), or being reluctant to speak up in a history class (but nowhere else). The examples are adroit and convincing. The adroitness is partly that what is described seems more like a tic or a hangup than a character trait; and it may or may not occur to the reader to wonder whether there *are* character traits that are more broad than the ones Harman has excluded, but less broad than the disposition to be bold or to be honest in every possible kind of situation.

In some of the older folk psychology of character, a person might be spoken of as entirely reliable or honest in money matters but less dependably so in matters involving sexual relations, or as very courageous in relation to physical dangers but less so where the risks were of personal rejection. Further, character traits often would concern probabilities or mere possibilities. Someone could be 'capable of great cruelty', which was not thought of as an altogether common character trait. To have it did not imply that there was any specifiable

<sup>4</sup> For one such account, see J. Kupperman, *Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 1, 318.

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occasion on which cruel behaviour would be more likely than not. It did imply the likelihood that there would be great cruelty on *some* occasions, and that no one should be surprised. Another example would be the trait of tending to get angry when one's authority was challenged. A man who had this trait might be more likely than not to become angry on some such occasions, but this in turn need not imply that one ever could be certain he would become angry.

Folk psychology can be discerned in patterns of discourse about how people behave and what they are like. There is no reason to assume that folk psychology is an entirely unified system, even in one cultural setting at one specific time. There also is no reason to assume that it does not change through time. If there is a strain within folk psychology that is influenced by the thought that psychology is like physics, then it would be tempting within it to suppose that character traits (if there be such) are invariant vectors of behavioral dispositions, remaining uniform among different sorts of contexts. Harman remarks that the parents of his students at Princeton sometimes react negatively to the Nisbett and Ross textbook in a way that seems to reflect this kind of thought. Such a view is of course naive and indeed a soft target.

This may be linked to the folk psychology of moral virtue. Arguably we are usually in a very poor position to determine what this has been like at various times or places, but occasionally a window opens that affords us a glimpse into something different from what we are used to. In Leibniz's *Theodicy*, for example, Leibniz defends the claim that this is the best of all possible worlds against anticipated objections. One such objection is that more people go to hell than to heaven. Leibniz concedes the point, but insists that the goodness per person of those who go to heaven is greater than the badness per person of those who go to hell: hence there is a favorable balance all the same. The entire discussion is presented in a way that strongly suggests that the estimate under discussion, of relative percentages of the heaven-bound and hell-bound, is not at all idiosyncratic to Leibniz. This then affords a glimpse of a psychology of virtue (and also an eschatology) at that time that was strikingly different from what most of my students are willing to express. It may be, conversely, that there is a major strain in current American folk psychology that regards virtue as roughly equivalent to 'niceness', and that tends to think (or tries to think) that most people simply are virtuous. In an extreme form this can lead to feeling troubled at the thought that an apparently virtuous person might make even a single moral mistake.

If the extreme idea that virtue is roughly equivalent to near-perfection is taken seriously, then it is plausible to suppose that

attributing virtuous character on the basis of some instances of good behaviour is (as Harman says) a fundamental attribution error. On the other hand, if one rejects the extreme view, is such an attribution necessarily an error? Compare the case in which someone is labelled a 'good philosopher', despite the occasional faulty argument or ill-considered line of thought now and then.

There is considerable evidence of a tougher, less rosy folk psychology to be found in the philosophy and literature of a number of cultures. The *Analects* of Confucius, for example, includes repeated remarks by Confucius that he is fallible in his choices, tries to learn from his mistakes, and in large part because of this welcomes dialogue. There is the striking suggestion, also, that faults and virtues form 'a set' (in the Arthur Waley translation of Book IV, 7.); if you know a person's faults, you may be in a position to make inferences to his or her likely virtues. Maxim 182 of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld suggests that qualities of mind that amount to virtues in some contexts can lead to faults in other contexts, so that prudent management and second thoughts can be important. Again the image appears to be of human beings as mixtures of good and not so good tendencies in such a way that the two sets, rather than being separate in the manner of Jekyll and Hyde, are intimately interconnected. (How representative this was of the contemporary French folk psychology is however open to debate. Nietzsche compared reading La Rochefoucauld to reading a grown-up after having read children.)

One sorting out of moral virtue that seems extremely different from much in current folk psychology emerges in Plato's *Republic*. There is a running preoccupation with the thought that true virtue must be reliable, which is one reason why it must represent knowledge rather than mere opinion. In Book II we are offered the thought experiment of Gyges' ring of invisibility. Glaucon suggests that, given the persistent temptations associated with being able to get away with anything, no one who got the ring would remain virtuous. The reader is meant to think, I believe, that at least Socrates would; and this interpretation is supported by the discussion in Book X of Er's after-death experience, in which he saw the souls of the dead choosing new lives. Someone who had previously lived a 'virtuous' life (in a well-regulated community in which there would be few temptations or disorienting and difficult situations) chooses to be a tyrant. The obvious comment is that this man had not been truly virtuous, because his 'virtue' had been a matter of habit rather than philosophy.

The view then that seems to emerge from Plato is that there are very few genuinely virtuous people indeed. It may be that there are not many genuinely evil people either, in which case the vast majority

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of humanity are between good and evil, the virtuousness of their behaviour depending very much on the circumstances in which they find themselves. I emphasize this Platonic view in part because (if there is something to it) it blocks one element of Harman's interpretation of the results of the Milgram experiments. Harman takes the experiments to show that the idea of virtuous character is an illusion, but a Platonic response is that perhaps what they show is that it is much rarer than most people might suppose. Along these lines, the cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder has told me that the one student who, when the Milgram experiment was performed at Princeton, walked out at the start was also the person who in Viet Nam blew the whistle on the My Lai massacre.<sup>6</sup>

Of course none of us is perfect, including presumably even that former Princeton student. But then, in one traditional view, virtue requires a lifelong effort, in some cases getting things wrong and then learning from mistakes. There is a nice expression of this in a well-known American short novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. The hero gets the business of courage wrong, and then on a second try he gets it right. In somewhat this spirit, Milgram, in his retrospective discussion of the replications of his experiment around the world, seems anxious to emphasize the moral learning that he thinks the experiment led to for some participants.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up this part of the reply to Harman: whether recent results in social psychology show that the concept of character (or of character traits) cannot be retained depends very much on what concept one is talking about. It may well be that Harman is right about the concept embedded in the folk psychology of most American college sophomores (or of their parents). There are other strains, even in current folk psychology, though that are more resistant to Harman's attacks.

If one moves from folk psychology to recently published psychological studies, the picture is very mixed. Philosophers may be disillusioned to find, in a supposedly empirical and scientific subject, that there are persistent disagreements and debates comparable to those in philosophy. Since Walter Mischel's sceptical and influential *Personality and Assessment* (1968), there has been an ongoing debate among personality psychologists between 'situationists' (who emphasize the variability of any person's behaviour, and the role of what the situation is in explaining someone's behaviour) and their

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, April 5, 1996, reconfirmed February 23, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

personologist opponents (who insist that the kind of person one is often has a major role in explaining one's behaviour).<sup>8</sup>

An outsider to this debate among psychologists may get the impression that what seems at first like difference between two sharply opposed positions has over time evolved into difference in degree: especially in the degree of emphasis on the situational and variable in explanation of human behaviour. It is clear also that the differences between situationists and personologists are hardly a matter of the same experiment or kind of study yielding different results to representatives of the two sides. Experimental design is likely to differ, and personologists' views of what can be found (as a person-based element in the explanation of behaviour) also differ from situationist views of what they think most people expect and they fail to find.

This places philosophy in a double role. On one hand, any philosophical account of what human beings are like will count as folk psychology: suggestive perhaps, but not counting scientifically. On the other hand, much hinges on the way the concepts and categories (including the concept of character itself) with which a psychologist works are structured. Here philosophers can claim expertise. They cannot philosophically disprove any claims by psychologists, but they can cast them into doubt.

Further complications in the empirical literature should be noted. Psychologists look for correlations, and the temptation is to look for correlations between how people behave in a specific situation of a certain sort and one of a different sort. As Funder notes, Seymour Epstein in two papers has made the point that the correlations between personality and behaviour look higher when what are compared are aggregates of behaviour in situations of one kind or another than when what are compared are single instances of behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

Another complication is this. Character (if we allow that there is

<sup>8</sup> A good general account of the debate can be found in David C. Funder, *Personality Judgment: A Realistic Approach to Person Perception* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), Chapter 2; although one needs to bear in mind that Funder himself, along with Jack Block, has been a major figure on the personologist side. Ross and Nisbett, on whom Harman relies, have been leading situationists.

<sup>9</sup> See S. Epstein, 'The Stability of Behavior: I. On Predicting Most of the People Most of the Time', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, No. 7 (July 1979), 1097–1126; 'The Stability of Behavior; II. Implications for Psychological Research', *American Psychologist* 35, No. 9 (September 1980), 790–806.

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such) develops and changes. Because of this, we might arrive at a different view by looking at it through time rather than in a snapshot view at a fixed time. Block, in his longitudinal study in Berkeley of subjects from early childhood on, finds correlations through time. E.g. 'preschool children subsequently using drugs at age 14 were characterized as restless and fidgety, emotionally labile, disobedient, lacking in calmness, domineering, behaving immaturely when under stress, reluctant to yield and give in, aggressive, overreactive to frustration, teasing, and unable to recoup after stress.'<sup>10</sup>

### II

Let us return to Harman's suggestion that 'What a person with a seemingly ideal moral character will do in a particular situation is pretty much what anyone else will do in exactly that situation, allowing for random variation.'<sup>11</sup> Harman goes on to say that this does not deny individual differences: his short list of these includes 'different goals', and that 'people tend to be in or think they are in different situations'. These differences, he says, can affect what people will do.

The natural question is 'Can someone have a very good moral character without being different from most people both in goals and in the way she or he interprets morally problematic situations?' If the answer is 'No', then it would follow that Harman (in his remarks about individual differences, and the fact that they can lead to different behaviour) has given back what he first took away in his initial statement about 'seemingly ideal moral character' not really being displayed in behaviour.

Goals can be evaluated as impressive, worthy, likely to be rewarding, or as trivial, commonplace, crass, and perhaps demeaning. In most cases there is no moral element in such evaluations: there is nothing immoral in aiming for, or in settling for, what amounts to a trivial, boring life. Most contemporary ethical philosophers make a sharp separation between the study of morality on one hand, and on the other hand axiology (the study of what are genuinely worth-

<sup>10</sup> See J. Block, 'Studying Personality the Long Way', *Studying Lives Through Time: Personality and Development*, D. C. Funder, R. D. Parke, C. Tomlinson-Keasey, and K. Widaman (eds) (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1993), 9–41. The quotation is from p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Harman, 'Virtue Ethics Without Character Traits', Gilbert Harman website, August 18, 1999.

while goals or values). Indeed, axiology is usually ignored; and the study of morality then narrows in its focus, wrenching moral decisions out of the context of life histories and of whatever the nature may be of the people making them. The result is a preoccupation with what David Wiggins has called ‘the casuistry of emergencies’.<sup>12</sup>

It should be clear that I share Wiggins’ sense that this badly skews ethics as a subject. The problem is imbalance and partial blindness rather than mediocrity: some very good and valuable work has been done on ‘the casuistry of emergencies’. Imagined cases like that of the out of control trolley that will kill five people unless it is redirected, in which case it will kill only one person (one who originally would have escaped), raise serious general issues. But the overall effect of the preoccupations associated with these has been to encourage a very one-sided image of the subject matter of ethics. One aspect of this is a general discounting of the connections between goals and values, on one hand, and acceptability of moral behaviour on the other.

Clearly it is the case that acceptable moral behaviour in many routine situations—and also in dramatic emergencies such as that of the out of control trolley—can have rather little to do with what someone’s goals, and the values implicit in these, are. But a contrarian, Platonic line of thought is that there can be many unusual and difficult situations, which differ from the routine and also from cases like that of the runaway trolley, in which goals and values can have a great deal to do with someone’s moral reliability. Plato’s thought experiments provide good examples. But there are real-life examples in the choices that many people in occupied countries in Europe during World War II had to make, or in those made by someone who enters an occupation (say, in the Mergers and Acquisitions department of a large brokerage) in which normal practice seems to differ significantly from what this person’s previous moral training would have led him or her to expect.

Someone who values most a kind of psychic harmony (which Plato insists one should *know* is good) will be more likely not to abuse the ring of invisibility than someone who most values social position and money. This may well hold also in the other kinds of situations just mentioned. Conversely, the person who has been behaving virtuously, as Book X of the *Republic* puts it, out of habit without philosophy, may well not be highly reliable.

Indeed someone who habitually behaves pretty well in familiar

<sup>12</sup> See David Wiggins, ‘Truth, Invention and Meaning of Life’, *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 87–137. The phrase quoted is on p. 88.

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situations may be motivated mainly by desire for social approval, and a sense of fitting in, and be very unreliable in the kinds of unfamiliar situations in which there is no reliable link between a good choice and social approval. It is because of this that Confucius (*Analects*, Book XVII, 13) says that ‘the “honest villager” spoils true virtue.’ Confucius seems here to have anticipated an interesting line of the thought in a current paper by Sabini and Silver: that in experiments like those of S. E. Asch on perceptual judgments and apparent misjudgments, or Milgram’s, a desire to fit in carries overwhelming weight for many subjects.<sup>13</sup>

Someone who takes the contrarian view just outlined would want to argue that of course people with different goals will behave differently in many morally difficult situations. This will be because of a difference crucial to the degree of virtue: namely that of the value system implicit in these goals.

What of the way in which someone takes, or perceives, a situation that calls for choice? Again, there is a strong case for holding that this factor is closely connected with moral virtue (or the lack of the most reliable kind of moral virtue). John McDowell has argued for the importance in moral judgment of a sense of what is salient.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that an important element in moral virtue is how someone sees (or interprets) morally problematic situations (something that Harman allows can lead to different behaviour). A more radical line of thought that leads in somewhat the same direction is as follows. It can be argued that a distinctive feature of value judgments (in the broad sense that includes moral as well as axiological judgments) is that they are a form of ‘seeing as’ (interpreting the world)—that are typically expressed in a way that on the face of it seems designed to propel us in a certain direction.<sup>15</sup> The conclusion again is that judgments associated with genuine virtue would of course involve a different way of seeing morally problematic situations.

### III

The discussion thus far has combined two elements. One is a reply to Harman’s attacks on character, which insists that a properly con-

<sup>13</sup> J. Sabini and M. Silver, ‘Why Psychologists Haven’t Killed Off Character: Disappointing Harman’, unpub. ms.

<sup>14</sup> J. McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’, *Monist* 62, No. 3, (July 1979), 37–53.

<sup>15</sup> For extended discussion, see J. Kupperman, ‘How Values Congeal Into Facts’, *Ratio* 33, No. 1 (March 2000), 37–53.

sidered concept of character is immune to the attacks (although the concept in some strains of folk psychology is not). A second is the attempt, drawing in part on traditional patterns of discourse about character and also on earlier philosophical treatments of character and virtue, to suggest the complexity that a properly considered concept of character would have.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to explore further this complexity, especially in relation to a major difficulty. This is what might appear to be an indefiniteness within character, some of it linked to the ways in which what we take to be someone's character can change. Perhaps it might be tempting to think of a person's character as analogous to the colour or shape of a thing, but there are important disanalogies.

One is that, even though what a person wants—or what it is that she or he believes—is relevant to character, often there is no entirely definite answer to the question of what so-and-so wants or believes. Alternatively there can be competing answers, each of which has some truth to it.<sup>16</sup> A second is that asking what someone's character is like (even if the question is what the character is like now) cannot be, as one might suppose, simply like taking an inventory at a given moment. Descriptions of character imply confidence (or lack of confidence) in predictions of future behaviour. But then decision emerges as a relevant element. For a judgment of X's character that is based on past behaviour to be roughly true, X must decide to behave in similar ways, or at the least must fail to decide to change.<sup>17</sup> Self-ascriptions of character thus can be as much resolutions as they are descriptions.

This suggests a case for discontinuing our practices of ascribing character traits that is different from—but not entirely different from—Harman's. The traits that we ascribe cannot be the whole truth, and as we speak may be transforming themselves into something that makes the ascriptions downright false. In the light of this, can we continue to speak meaningfully of character?

Part of any adequate reply must be to acknowledge that ascriptions of character traits when they are third person always have an element of prediction (unless, of course, the person whose character is described is dead), and when they are first person always have an element of decision (which can be very tentative). This is a rea-

<sup>16</sup> See J. Kupperman, *Value ... And What Follows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Part 2, 'The Fluidity of Self'.

<sup>17</sup> See J. Kupperman, 'Character and Self-Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 85 (1985), 219–128.

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son for limiting somewhat our confidence in any ascription of character to a living person. But it does not preclude the possibility that there are some such ascriptions of which one can be highly confident. It is now widely agreed by philosophers that someone can be said to have knowledge of something even if the level of certainty is not quite the Cartesian one hundred percent. In this spirit, we can be said to know of some people that they are reliably honest (or are likely to be dishonest) in certain sorts of situations, etc.

This still leaves the problem of the fluidity of self, especially if one accepts the analysis in Chinese daoist texts such as the Zhuangzi (in the older romanization, Chuang Tzu), that the self must be viewed as multi-layered, with aspects going back even to earliest childhood, and in general with an openness (that one can try to deny only at great cost) to large areas of behaviour and experience. Is it possible for someone who accepts this to have a character, or to ascribe it with confidence to others?

Part of any plausible answer is to point to the fact that openness typically is not unlimited: e.g. to characterize someone as open to a range of possibilities is not to say that there is a real chance that within the next year she or he will torture a small child. Even in the case of someone who very noticeably is not always 'the same', there can be some imaginable forms of behaviour that we can be highly confident in not expecting. Part of someone's character may be that, in a range of cases, one simply does not know what to expect. But it would be extremely unusual (and would look pathological) if this were true of someone across the board.

Thus far we have been focusing mainly on ascriptions of character. It is important to bear in mind also that character, as a structure within what a person is, can have distinctive functions. It can function as a set of constraints and inhibitions specific to a limited range of situations and choices. One can be open to a variety of new experiences—in (say) the arts, travel, and personal relationships—but have a character that forbids deliberately harming people one cares about, and also that tends to avoid behaviour that could lead to being alone and friendless.

One of the differences in ordinary speech between 'character' and 'personality' is that we tend to speak of 'character' largely in relation to moral choices or choices important in the pursuit of happiness. If it makes sense to talk of some people as having 'strong' characters, this in some contexts may mean that they persevere in a steady way (despite obstacles) in the pursuit of projects they care about, or in living up to what they claim are important moral standards. They may be open and fluid in much of life, but processes of

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self-control kick in when issues arise that matter to central projects or to morality. For someone to be like this with some degree of consistency may be less common than many people think, but the fluidity and indefiniteness of self give no reason to rule it out as a possibility.

These processes of self-control can be regarded as a central function of character. In this role, they would appear to contribute both to moral reliability and to reliability in the personal concerns and relationships that are most closely related to happiness. Their absence, conversely, would contribute to a lack of steadiness that is not conducive either to moral virtue or to most forms of success. Because of this, the second word of this essay's title has a two-fold application. I have given reasons to think that the concept of character is, despite Harman's attacks, indispensable in our knowledge of other people and of ourselves. If this is so, then it would appear that character (the reality, not the concept) is indispensable in a good life.

### Conclusion

Perhaps virtually everyone would be, in some difficult or disorienting situation, not reliably virtuous. This in broad outline fits a character ascription: decent enough in familiar situations (especially when things are going well), but not altogether reliable in situations of types X, Y, and Z. Plato held that the great majority of people at best have characters of this sort, and the results of the Milgram experiments along with other recent data bear him out. None of this counts against the notion that people in general have character traits, unless of course one has an exceedingly simple idea of what a character trait would be. Nor does it count against the notion that there is genuine moral virtue, which perhaps even someone who has made some faulty moral choices might approach by degrees. Finally, character can be viewed in terms of control mechanisms, which promote reliability in areas of life in which reliability matters, and which would appear to be indispensable to a good life.

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