

## **Critiquing - and Rescuing - 'Character'**

Andrew Sayer,  
Department of Sociology,  
Lancaster University,  
Lancaster,  
LA1 4YN

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### **Abstract**

The paper looks at how sociology might regard the concept of 'character', both in terms of the way it is used in public discourse and in its own accounts of social life. In the former, the concept is likely to be regarded with suspicion, especially where it is used to explain individuals' life outcomes in a way that ignores social structures and depoliticizes inequalities. Such usages are to be found in political discourse on welfare and in the character education movement as a solution to problems of 'social mobility'. Yet if character refers to individuals' settled dispositions to act in certain ways, then it has some affinities with the Bourdieusian concept of habitus. The paper argues both for developing the critique of ideological uses of the concept and for considering how it might be used in ways that do not misrepresent its explanatory and normative significance.

Keywords: character; political discourse; education; virtue ethics; habitus; inequalities

### **Introduction**

'The major reason why Britain is rougher and more uncivilised than it was in the early post-war period has been the collapse of the politics of character. These politics dominated the debate from the mid-Victorian period up until the middle of the last century.' (Frank Field, (2010) 'Demos Launch its Commission on Character')<sup>20</sup>

'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.'" Martin Luther King, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1963

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<sup>20</sup> Available at <http://www.frankfield.co.uk/latest-news/press-releases/news.aspx?p=102332>

How should social scientists regard the concept of 'character'? The term is rarely used in sociology, perhaps because, along with the concept of 'personality', it is seen as too 'psychological' and as implying an under-socialized view of individuals. And in Britain, given its history of ruling class moralizing about alleged character deficiencies of the working class and of foreigners, there is good reason to be suspicious of the concept. Further, there are echoes of this history in contemporary political discourse and in some aspects of the 'character education' movement. Here we find claims that it is character that primarily determines individuals' life chances, and that character education will somehow reduce inequalities by increasing 'social mobility'. 'Grit' and 'resilience' are particularly popular traits in this discourse, coupled with an implausible implicit assumption that it is the disadvantaged, rather than the advantaged, who tend to lack these qualities. 'Character' has also entered workfare and welfare discourse in many countries, with recipients of benefits being seen as in need of character training (Peck, 2001; Taylor, 2018). In other words, the political discourse on character has been associated with victim-blaming. Not surprisingly, in diverting attention away from the effect of structural inequalities, it has come under fire from sociologists (Allen and Bull, 2018; Burman, 2018; Jensen, 2018; Morrin, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Tyler, 2013). It's therefore tempting to treat the concept purely as an object of critique, and not as one which social theory should use itself. Nevertheless, as that unforgettable sentence from Martin Luther King's remarkable speech suggests, the concept can also be used in quite different ways.

In particular, if 'character' refers to the set of learned, settled dispositions to act in certain ways that are acquired by an individual, it is actually not far removed from a concept of central importance in contemporary sociology: habitus. Socialisation, or subjectivation, shapes characters. Refusing the concept also implies glaring theory-practice contradictions, for in everyday life, sociologists, like others, pay close attention to the character of individuals; when they recruit new colleagues, they ask for references and are concerned that the appointee will be conscientious, honest, collegial, respectful to others, non-sexist, etc. Our judgements of someone like Donald Trump are not only about his particular actions, but his character – the ingrained dispositions that incline him generally to act as he does. Parents are likely to be concerned about the kind of character their children develop. So, while the concept of character can certainly be misused, some version of it is unavoidable.

The word 'character' has several meanings, but I want to concentrate on its use in referring to an individual's moral qualities, or virtues and vices. The character education literature draws upon philosophical theories of virtue ethics, albeit selectively, and social policy documents referring to character sometimes invoke it too (e.g. DEMOS 2011). However, if we look at what virtue ethics has to say about character, particularly regarding the importance of influences beyond the control of individuals, we can see that politically, it can point in quite a different direction. I shall argue that while it's important to develop a critique of the misuses of 'character', it could, if properly understood, be incorporated in social theory and at the same time challenge some of the misuses, while correcting some of the shortcomings of the concept of habitus. Character *should* be seen not only as influencing behaviour but as itself significantly shaped by social and

cultural structures. As such it might better be understood through a dialogue between sociology and virtue ethics in philosophy, and perhaps psychology too.

I begin by identifying the meanings of character that are relevant to this discussion, noting the contestation of what counts as *good* character. I then discuss political uses and misuses of the concept, and their recent history, followed by comments on the character education movement and its support. I next discuss how the concept of character might be 'rescued', drawing upon virtue ethics, and suggest how social theory might incorporate some of its ideas. Given that the latter's dominant interest is likely to be on how character is shaped by society, I go on to discuss how inequalities affect character, producing injuries of class and gender. I conclude with some comments on the implications for explaining social behaviour.

### **Meanings of 'Character'**

In its most neutral sense, character refers to the "collective qualities or characteristics that distinguish a person or thing" (Oxford Dictionary). Thus, in everyday life, when we describe individuals as being laid-back or intense, friendly or unfriendly, and so on, we are referring to their character, to the traits that characterise them. As traits, they are assumed to be relatively durable dispositions. Their descriptions are often clearly evaluative, and while some of the qualities identified may have no particular moral valence, others may refer to moral strengths or failings such as honesty, courage, kindness, selfishness or callousness. In everyday uses, character overlaps with 'personality', which also suggests durable traits, but the former tends to be used to highlight *moral*<sup>1</sup> (or immoral) dispositions, those that influence how individuals treat others (Kupperman, 2001). For example, character references for job applicants are supposed to describe these, as well as other qualities. It is mainly this moral sense of character that is theorised in virtue ethics, an ethical theory which focuses primarily not on particular actions or their consequences but on what it is to be a good person. Here, character refers to a person's set of virtues and vices, that is the set of dispositions to behave in ways with respect to self and other that involve and promote flourishing (*eudaimonia*) or suffering.

Philosophers sometimes discuss a different but overlapping concept of character, one which has similarities to what Richard Sennett discusses in *The Corrosion of Character* (Sennett, 1998). This views character as formed by an individual's commitments, projects and attachments to others, which are relatively enduring and matter to them greatly and are critical for their well-being (e.g. Williams, 1981; see also Archer, 2000, and Sayer, 2011). On this view, to lack such things is to lack character. I shall return to this later, but it is the *moral* concept of character that is most prominent in the political and character education movements and that I most want to discuss in relation to social theory.

A striking feature of everyday references to 'character' is a common slippage between those which are neutral as regards what constitutes good and bad

character, and those which evoke what is held by the speaker to be good, so that 'character' stands for *good* character. Just which traits are good is contestable, but the slippage can easily allow particular normative claims about character to be hidden. In this regard it is striking how 'character' has often been taken to be synonymous with *strong* character - with having a commanding, forceful, and perhaps charismatic personality - an attribute possessed by a Hitler as much as a Mandela.

Lists of the virtues that make up good character vary somewhat across different philosophies, religions and cultures and tend to belie their classed and gendered origins. (The root of virtue, *vir*, is Latin for a man.<sup>2</sup>) Friendliness and being disposed to care for others are rarely included in such lists, or else they are marginalized and labelled as 'feminine virtues', as if they were not appropriate for men, and as if women did not need or were not capable of the supposedly more masculine virtues. This reflects a masculinist tendency to view vulnerability and dependence on others as weaknesses, rather than part of the human condition; the 'man of character' is allegedly independent, in no need of care. However, normative models of good character could in principle be de-gendered, and there are feminist virtue ethicists (e.g. Sherman, 1995; Nussbaum, 2001; Tessman, 2005), and debates about the relationship between virtue and care ethics (Held, 2006; Sander-Staudt, 2018). Nevertheless, patriarchal elements are still evident in everyday references to character. Models of 'character' regarding what good men and women are supposed to be like, often embodied in stories of heroes and villains, populate our cultural past and present. References to character have figured prominently in class and gender politics and in racist forms in orientalist discourse (Said, 1978; Tharoor, 2017). In the British context, despite multiculturalism and the rise of feminism, the preceding elite, imperial, patriarchal model of character keeps coming out of the woodwork.

### **Political (Mis-)Uses**

Historical references to character over the last two centuries in the UK have involved a mixture of celebration of the character of the elite and concern about the alleged 'defects of character' of the working class and of foreigners, though there have been some more critical commentators too. The historian John Welshman has traced the subtle changes regarding the poor in this discourse from 1880 to 2007 (Welshman, 2006; 2007), showing how representations of the poor reflected shifts both in politics and society and in the interaction between social research and social policy. Debt and unemployment were frequently seen as outward signs of 'moral failure', and there were calls – not only from the Right - for character training for the lower orders. For some, including eugenicists, character was hereditary. For others, like Charles Booth, Octavia Hill and Helen Bosanquet, character was seen as significantly shaped by circumstance, and arguments were advanced both for reforming character and changing conditions.

According to Stefan Collini, the Victorian period in Britain was one of particular concern with character (Collini, 1985). Whereas in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century virtue was associated with upholding established values, character in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was more about adaptability in the face of change, whether in the marketplace or elsewhere, and about avoiding 'sentimentalism'. There was an emphasis on 'manliness', reflected in Rudyard Kipling's emotionally stunted view of masculinity in his poem 'If'. It was unmistakably a classed, gendered and imperial project, with public schools cultivating the special character to provide the self-discipline deemed necessary for going out to the colonies and for leading the forces (keeping their heads while all around them others were losing theirs . . .). As Shashi Tharoor puts it, "The wild frontier was a place for the hardy Englishman to test his mettle, demonstrate his toughness, and celebrate the virtues of manliness, fidelity to a band of brothers, and loyalty to Queen and country." (Tharoor, 2017: p.66). Similarly, public schools' promotion of cricket and rugby were seen as a moral preparation for the challenges of service and leadership in the colonies.

There were also common notions of 'national character' that were held to account for national success or failure. According to Kipling in 'The White Man's Burden' (written for US imperialists in the Philippines), colonial subjects were "lesser breeds", "half-devil and half-child" (Bellamy Foster and McChesney, 2003). Similar views of character were also present in social science. Stanley Jevons, one of the founders of neoclassical economics, attributed poverty to failings of character, particularly an alleged lack of a capacity for foresight and saving: "the untutored savage" . . . "like the child, is wholly occupied with the pleasures of the moment", whereas "in a state of civilisation, a vague though powerful feeling of the future is the main incentive to industry and saving." (Jevons 1911, cited in Taylor, 2017, p. 112; see also Taylor, 2018). He also saw unemployment as "voluntary" – a product of the "habitual loafer".

Structural explanations of unemployment and poverty became more common in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, though at first not to the exclusion of concern with character, some of it framed in terms of eugenics, as in the case of the Webbs, J.M. Keynes, Richard Titmuss, Marie Stopes, and William Beveridge. Even though socialists like R.H. Tawney emphasized that poverty was an 'industrial problem', he and many others considered that the personal factor in unemployment could not be ignored altogether. According to Welshman, Beveridge considered that 'defects of character' increased the probability of a person being unemployed. However, he thought improving character would only have minor effects on social problems of unemployment and that such improvements could best be achieved "by eliminating the social and industrial conditions that tended to perpetuate idleness and irresponsibility" (Welshman, 2006, p.28).

In the post-war boom, a time of unprecedented reduction in economic inequality, social policy discourse relating to poverty emphasized its structural determinants and resisted 'judgementalism' and 'the politics of character' that Frank Field later defended (Welshman, 2006, xxvi). Establishment models of character may have lost influence in popular culture in the 1960s and 70s with the 'the end of deference' (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018), and the lampooning of

the upper class in satire and comedy such as *Beyond the Fringe* and *Monty Python*. Yet antagonism towards the poor did not disappear, and towards the end of the 1970s, in both popular culture and politics, the pendulum began to swing back the other way, and blaming the poor for their poverty began to re-emerge (Deacon, 1987; 1996).

Since that time, feminism and anti-racism have challenged some aspects of these models of character, but with regard to class the picture is different, for there has been a resurgence over the last 40 years of Right wing views on character, as economic inequalities have widened and the wealth and political influence of the rich have soared. Structural explanations of those inequalities in policy discourse in terms of material circumstances gave way to concerns about parenting, cycles of disadvantage, social exclusion and mobility (Welshman, 2007), and, either implicitly or explicitly, character (Jensen, 2018). In both Conservative and New Labour policy discourse, the welfare state itself was held to create dependency and weaken character. But we can also see qualitative changes in the models of character: as one might expect in neoliberalism, there is an emphasis on striving to compete against others, on resilience in riding the ups and downs of markets, and on 'leadership' rather than public service. Strikingly, it is 'executive virtues', like grit and resilience, which are not directed to any particular goal, that are emphasized, rather than substantive, moral virtues, like kindness or gratitude, which are goal- and other-oriented (Alfano, 2016). While one might notice echoes of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* in the neoliberal emphasis on self-discipline and self-fashioning, it is geared to survival in precarious markets, and definitely not to the pursuit of a vocation or calling.

Claims about alleged character deficiencies have also been made by the Right to explain riots and social unrest. Former Conservative cabinet member and old Etonian Oliver Letwin, who did a PhD related to virtue ethics at Cambridge, attributed the 1985 Broadwater Farm riots to racially- and class-marked deficiencies of character. Together with Hartley Booth he urged Margaret Thatcher "to ignore reports that rioting in mainly black urban areas was the result of social deprivation and racism." . . . "Riots, criminality and social disintegration are caused solely by individual characters and attitudes." After the 2011 riots, fellow Etonian, PM David Cameron claimed they were not about poverty but about "behaviour . . . people showing indifference to right and wrong . . . people with a twisted moral code . . . people with a complete absence of self-restraint."<sup>3</sup>

### **The character education movement**

Interest in character education has also risen in the UK in recent decades, with much but by no means all of the impetus coming from the Right. The Jubilee Centre at Birmingham University has become a leading advocate and a prolific source of materials for it, as well as producing academic publications on virtue ethics. It defines character education as "an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal

strengths called virtues” (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2013: p. 2), so they “know the good, love the good, and do the good” (p.1), and can flourish - that is, develop and fulfil their potential. As the same report says, schools can hardly avoid influencing the character of their pupils, for better or worse, so the question is not whether there should be character education but what its content and form should be. As they also note, such concern need not be conservative or individualist: ‘(t)he ultimate aim of character education is not only to make individuals better persons but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish.’ (p.2).<sup>4</sup> The Centre’s output contains a variety of messages, including special programmes for the educationally marginalized that appear sympathetic (e.g. ‘Flourishing from the Margins’<sup>5</sup>). Yet however unobjectionable such themes may seem – who, after all, could be against virtue? – there are many aspects of character education, its political uptake and funding that should give us pause.

A promotional video for the Centre asks: “what would it take for society to truly flourish?” and answers that character could be important: those who cultivate and practice certain key virtues like courage, compassion, justice, humility and gratitude will “achieve excellence and experience greater flourishing”, helping to make society as a whole flourish. Further, good character can be taught and be learned by anyone. “We’ve seen lives transformed, schools revitalized and communities strengthened, all by people simply pursuing virtue.”<sup>6</sup> So, notwithstanding the correct argument that, in principle, a concern with character need not necessarily be individualist or right-wing, in practice, some prominent examples of the Centre’s publicity definitely are. Further, the emphasis in the wider character education promotional literature on grit and resilience belies a masculinist bias.

There is also an academic literature on character education, much of it neoliberal (for example the *Journal of Character Education*). Many of those who have contributed to academic publications on character and character education are philosophers. Given the unfortunate divide between philosophy and social science, they tend to regard society as an unstructured setting of individual action and to develop ‘ideal theories’ of justice that ignore actually-existing social sources of injustice (Young, 1990; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). Although philosophers tend to analyse virtues such as courage or gratitude in abstraction from social structures and processes and wider cultural meanings, for example gender roles, it does not follow that they function and are understood in this supposedly neutral way in everyday practice. Unless it addresses such matters, philosophy may find itself being used as a Trojan horse for neo-conservative troops who represent political problems as moral ones and turn matters of justice into ones of charity, as in David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’.

A typical consequence is to recast problems of inequalities as ones of social mobility and flawed meritocracy. The fallacy of composition – the assumption that what is possible for an individual or small number of people must therefore be possible for all simultaneously – is rife in such literature. As Elizabeth Anderson puts it, it’s like “blaming those left standing in a game of musical chairs, while denying that the structure of the game has anything to do with the

outcome” (Anderson, 2017, p. 33). If, say, 10% of jobs are low-paid and insecure, then 10% of the workforce will have such jobs, regardless of character.

Concerns have been heightened by research on the funding of such research (e.g. Allen and Bull, 2017; Jerome and Kisby, 2019). The Jubilee Centre is supported by the John Templeton Foundation. This

‘aims to advance human well-being by supporting research on the Big Questions, and by promoting character development, individual freedom, and free markets. The Foundation takes its vision from its founding benefactor, the late Sir John Templeton, who sought to stimulate what he described as “spiritual progress.”’<sup>7</sup>

Templeton (1912- 2008) was a very successful rentier, acquiring his millions on Wall Street; in other words, his income came primarily from the control and trading of existing assets, rather than in return for goods or services provided. He became a tax exile in the Bahamas, reportedly saving himself \$100million (Maney, 2016). He thereby became a British subject and was knighted by Margaret Thatcher (Bains, 2011). However, the Foundation has contributed \$20.2 million to climate change denial<sup>8</sup>, has links to the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society (Ball et al, 2017; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015; Allen and Bull, 2018), and to right wing US think tanks such as the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Mercator Centre and to the billionaire Koch brothers, leading providers of ‘dark money’ to the far Right (Mayer, 2016). On a webpage now withdrawn, the Foundation illustrated its Character Development theme with a painting of a man in a small boat on the ocean, blowing into its sail to power it forward. Of course, this is a physical impossibility, but it perfectly illustrates the central fallacy of the Right’s character agenda: that we can determine our own life course through pure strength of will.

A frequent contributor to the work of the Jubilee Centre has been Anthony Seldon, former Headmaster of Wellington (public) School and son of Arthur Seldon, member of the Mont Pèlerin collective and co-founder of the neoliberal Institute of Economic Affairs. Seldon junior recommended the practice known at Eton as “oiling’, which is learning how to win friends and influence others, and how to clamber over them to get what you want. It’s a mixture of ambition, self-confidence and bloody-mindedness . . .” (Seldon, 2011). He acknowledged that this will “nauseate many on the left” and that for many the obsession with character is a “rightwing obsession, redolent of empire and all that is wrong with the class system.” Further, he recommended state schools should encourage oiling and the arch confidence that he admired in the public schooled habitus. Though it sounds like a parody, he was serious.<sup>9</sup>

But support for character education has also come from very different parts of the social field. The Dame Kelly Holmes Trust promotes character development in young people, and pitches to “Ministers, policy advisors, business leaders, academics and influencers from across the education and youth sector” stressing “the importance of developing character, resilience and soft skills.”<sup>10</sup> Holmes, a double Olympic gold medallist in athletics, is black and from a working class background. Former Manchester United footballer Gary Neville has launched the UA92 University Academy, whose primary concern, even before ‘academic



learning', is 'character development'.<sup>11</sup> It aims to attract applicants from a different demographic in terms of class and race from the usual dominant white middle class. Several photographs in its prospectus show young people striking formidable poses, showing 'edginess'. These are interspersed with phrases like "passion, drive, resilience and commitment", "educating the whole person to become exceptional in work and life", "unlocking your greatness", and calls to "ignite your potential". There are many references to becoming a 'leader': "Through tasks, challenges and presentations, students find their inner leader and gain the skills to inspire a team and take on the world." As a case of 'cruel optimism', it could hardly be clearer (Berlant, 2011). Here again there is little connection to moral qualities, and instead, character traits are advocated for largely instrumental reasons of winning in competition.

The rise of leadership rhetoric itself marks a new tendency in the discourse of character. It follows from the weakening of labour over the last 40 years, the concentration of wealth at the top, and the strengthening of 'private government' within organizations (Anderson, 2017), and puts a favourable gloss on the increase of autocratic managerial power: the managed are not dominated, but are willing followers, inspired by their leaders. It encourages delusions of heroism, charisma and positivity ('Prozac leadership', Collinson, 2012), and beliefs that leaders know better than their subordinates what is good for them, and that organizational performance is an effect of leaders' actions (Martin and Learmonth, 2012). It ignores social structures and the hysteresis of inherited inequalities: leaders emerge through character plus merit. It implies that roles other than that of leaders are inferior, so that a successful, good life can only mean being in a position of dominance relative to others.

But then we cannot pretend that good leaders are not needed in certain circumstances, so the challenge is not to refuse any and every notion of leadership, but to substitute better versions for them. Similarly, while many aspects of the character education movement are problematic, it would be bizarre to dismiss the *very idea* of character education, for parents are likely to care about how schools influence their children's character. As Martin Luther King said "Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education."<sup>12</sup> And some academic literature on character education is critical of the dominant right-wing political discourse, attacking its individualism and its ignoring of the virtues of sense of social justice and injustice, and sense of the public good (e.g. Walsh, 2018; Jerome and Kisby, 2019; Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). Some call for an alternative that can promote "critical citizenship and address the ethical imperative to alleviate human suffering" (Giroux, cited in Hedge and Mackenzie, 2015).

So, despite its often-murky history and present, I suggest we take a cool look at character, treating it not only as an object of study, as an emic concept, but as potentially an etic concept that can benefit social theory, and seek better ways of theorising it – a task that requires both empirical inquiry and normative evaluation.

## Rescuing Character

### (i) Virtue Ethics

Moral character is a central concern of virtue ethics and Aristotelian philosophy, and is also central to African ethics (Gyekye, 2010), Buddhism (Goodman, 2015) and Confucianism (Wong, 2017). As we noted, virtue ethics focuses primarily not on actions or their consequences and justifications but on what it is to be a good person. It defines character as “a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct” (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue). A virtue (vice) is an acquired, settled disposition to act spontaneously in a certain way in appropriate situations that enables self and others to flourish (suffer). They are embodied, engrained, and may be difficult to change, once acquired. The actions that flow from these dispositions at any time are associated with and motivated by emotions that are appropriate to the situation, such as sympathy, gratitude or anger at injustice. Thus, emotions are seen not as counter-posed to reason, but as often-intelligent responses to circumstances, and virtues themselves are ‘intelligent dispositions’ (Williams, 1985). For example, in my hometown, if an old person ‘has a fall’ in the street, a few other people – usually middle-aged or elderly women – are likely to rush to their aid spontaneously, motivated by emotions of concern and compassion. But while they may do this without having to think what they should do first, they would be able to justify their actions if asked.<sup>13</sup> In other words, their acquisition of virtues of compassion and kindness over time has involved an interplay between reason and emotion or indeed ‘emotional reason’ (Nussbaum, 2001; Sayer, 2011). Contrary to the dominant view in modernity, including much of social science, of emotion and reason as incompatible opposites, virtue ethics treats them as working together in dialogue and enabling rational behaviour. Further, unlike Weber or Bauman, for example, virtue ethics does not see values or individuals’ choice and balancing of ends in life as beyond reason (Nussbaum, 2001; McMylor, 2001), but as involving assessments of objective capacities for flourishing and suffering. This is consistent with research in neuroscience that shows that inability to experience emotions undermines rationality, preventing subjects from making decisions and functioning in social life (Damasio, 1999).

Accounts of how virtues and vices are acquired and develop differ in terms of the relative weight given to circumstances beyond the individual’s control, particularly their family and social circumstances in early life and the kind of care and education they had, and to active, conscious learning by the individual (Jacobs, 2001).<sup>14</sup> All accounts emphasize the role of repetition and habituation: through repeatedly standing up to bullies, we gradually become courageous; the school teacher who repeatedly puts on an authoritarian act gradually *becomes* authoritarian. But as is clear in the latter example, the roles individuals occupy and the influences and expectations of others are important too in this process (Keane, 2016). Some dispositions may be acquired largely through osmosis, with little or no reflection or deliberation, but others may require reflexivity, indeed conscious practice, emulation and monitoring. Further, as Joseph Dunne argues,

while virtues and vices are dispositions to act spontaneously in certain ways, we can also reflexively monitor and adjust their influence in the flow of daily life, indeed this is what virtue ethics prescribes (Dunne, 1993). We don't have to choose between explaining behaviour in terms of either reflexivity or character/habitus; they are mutually implicated (Archer, 2009).

As Nancy Sherman argues, we need an account of the development from birth onwards of cognitive and affective capacities involved in the acquisition of traits (Sherman, 1995). In early life, through attachment relations to their principal carers, infants acquire dispositions and gradually develop the capacities to become moral subjects and consciously choose certain behaviours that may gradually become ingrained. Any form of parenting, education or socialization affects character, whether intentionally or inadvertently. While this process continues into adulthood, the way in which this happens is itself constrained and enabled by traits acquired earlier.

Both the acquisition and the exercise of the virtues and vices that make up an individual's character are encouraged or discouraged by social structures, institutions, discourses and norms. For example, it's hard to develop the virtue of kindness to others in an environment of scarcity and hardship and in a culture that rewards the narrow pursuit of self-interest (Charlesworth, 2000; Wacquant, 1999). To varying degrees, virtue ethics acknowledges this, with the implication that moral concern should be directed to the social contexts in which individuals develop, as well as to individuals themselves.

So character is shaped by much that is beyond our control, by what philosophers term 'constitutive moral luck'. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, "much that I did not make goes towards making me whatever I shall be praised or blamed for being" (Nussbaum 1986, p.5). As a result, in Aristotle's words, we are only 'part-causes' of our behaviour. John Rawls went further, noting, in the gendered language of his day, that

'... no-one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his fortune depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can't claim credit.' (Rawls, 1971, p. 104).

As social scientists know and philosophers often overlook, the most significant forms of 'luck', good or bad, are typically neither random nor merely individual, but derive from the lottery of birth as regards our starting position within structures of inequality. While Aristotle acknowledged the influence of luck on the formation of character, he was not thinking of the structures of his own patriarchal, slave society, which he accepted without question, but more incidental external influences on the circumstances of his own class and gender (Tessman, 2005). Contemporary philosophy's tendency to discuss the actions of hypothetical individuals in a seemingly structureless context has encouraged similarly blinkered views of character, one that fits comfortably with a Right-wing position. But precisely because, like habitus, character owes much to the

influence of social structures, then as Lisa Tessman says, “There is injustice already at work in the formation of character; the fact that something is based on character does not imply that is not also rooted in an oppressive social system.” (2005, p.36).

So, if we take the influence of social structure and context seriously then considerations of character are likely to head in a different, more progressive direction, though one that has serious hazards too, as we shall see later. And after, all, part of the reason for challenging structures of domination is to allow those situated within them to develop the kind of virtues and other qualities that enable them to flourish. For example, in relation to gender, Tessman points to the desire of feminists not only to change social structures and norms, but to engage in a ‘politics of personal transformation’ of their own characters, so, for example, they become assertive rather than submissive and self-abnegating (Tessman, 2005). And of course, feminism implies the need for men to challenge dominant conceptions of masculine character.

## **(ii) Sociology, character and virtues: potential complementarities**

Given the affinities between moral character and habitus, and the popularity of the latter concept in the discipline, one might expect sociologists to be interested in how social processes shape character. It would also be in keeping with C. Wright Mills’ famous call to connect the private troubles of individuals to the public issues embedded in wider social forces (Mills, 1959; Gane and Back, 2012). From its title, Flanagan and Jupp’s collection *Virtue Ethics and Sociology: Issues of Modernity and Religion*, might be expected to pursue a dialogue between the two, but although virtue is mentioned many times, apart from Peter McMyler’s contribution (already noted) it says little of a systematic nature about the philosophical literature on virtue ethics or about character as defined here, being mainly a set of essays reflecting on religion, ethics and values in contemporary secular societies and conservative critiques thereof (Flanagan and Jupp, 2001). It scarcely engages with the secular theory of moral character outlined above.

A better known contribution is Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character*, a study of the effects of redundancy on groups of workers. There he writes “The old English speakers, and indeed writers going back to antiquity<sup>15</sup>, were in no doubt about the meaning of “character”: it is the ethical value we place on our own desires and on our relations to others.” It’s “expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for some future end.” He continues “Character concerns the personal traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others.” (1998; p.10).<sup>16</sup> However, although there are hints here of *moral* character, what follows in the book is an examination not so much of workers’ sets of virtues and vices, but of the loss of their work-related commitments and attachments to work mates and their loss of skills, and with this, loss of meaning in life, trust in others, and sense of personal identity. These are undoubtedly important issues, but they relate to the conception of character

defined by commitments and attachments noted earlier rather than to the conception of moral character that it is emphasized in the political discourse of character and which is the prime subject of this article.

I would suggest that certain features of contemporary sociology inhibit dialogue with philosophical conceptions of moral character.

*First*, even though their writing is often clearly critical of many things, for example, sexism and racism, and in favour of others, such as inclusiveness and democracy, sociologists are generally wary of talk of virtues and vices, perhaps regarding it as a form of repressive moralising, with suspicions extending to 'flourishing', 'well-being', morality and indeed normativity itself, as a restrictive 'normalizing' of behaviour. There is also a common aversion to any kind of naturalism, humanism or universalism that might imply that some things are good or bad for us simply as human beings, notwithstanding cultural variation (Sayer, 2011; Chernilo, 2014, 2017). This may be based on fear of ethnocentrism but as Mary Midgley said, "You cannot have a plant or an animal without certain quite definite things being good and bad for it." (2003, p.54). To be sure, we have differently-cultivated natures, but then for it to be possible for us to exhibit so much cultural variation, we must have a common susceptibility to socialization. Just how far lay moral values are universalistic is an empirical question that is far beyond the scope of this article. But ironically, refusal of the possibility of any cross-cultural commonalities can lend support to racist ideas such as that certain kinds of people do not experience physical or psychological pain like others. Normativity as such is not a problem, just mistaken forms of normativity.<sup>17</sup>

Suspicion of normativity is also ironic given that sociologists are far more aware than most people of certain vices - those that involve systematic domination and oppression: sexism, racism, class contempt, homophobia, etc. Of course, these aren't *just* vices or character failings, for they are bound up with cultures and social structures, which philosophy tends to ignore: for example, racism doesn't simply derive from individual attitudes but is present in discourse and imagery and objectified and reproduced in the division of labour, residential segregation and selective schooling. But insofar as they are harmful, causing suffering and restricting flourishing, they are indeed also vices; why else would sociology and feminism be so concerned about them? As Tessman puts it,

'Without some notion of what is a greater rather than a lesser degree of flourishing or, put differently, a better rather than a worse sort of life, one would not have any basis for objecting to oppression; one would not struggle for social change if one did not believe the changes to be for the good.' (Tessman, 2005, p. 52.)

Despite their conflicted view of normativity, sociology and feminism could therefore be said to be deeply moral or ethical subjects, though apart from some recent exceptions (Holmes, 2017; Brownlie and Anderson, 2016), their main concern tends to be with vices rather than virtues. One might infer from this that virtues are seen as just the absence of vices, so a good person is defined in terms of being free from sexism, racism, etc.; little attention is paid to vices such as selfishness which can exist independently of these. Interestingly, the opposite situation is common in moral and political philosophy, which tends to treat evil

merely as the absence of the good and abstracts from socially-structured and structuring evils such as sexism and racism (Young, 1990; Tesson, 2005; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). Thus, social theory and philosophy have complementary strengths and deficiencies that call for an attempt at synthesis (Sayer, 2011).

*Second*, one of the curious features of sociology is that although socialization or subjectivation is its signature concept, it takes little or no interest in the most formative period of socialization – the early years – leaving this to psychology, a discipline it tends to regard with suspicion. Such suspicion may be heightened by awareness of attempts on the Right to use neuroscience and psychological research on attachment to blame parents for the life trajectories of their children (Edwards et al, 2015; Jensen, 2018). But the problem here is the *misuse* of that research by those who seize any opportunity for victim-blaming and ignore the effects of poverty and widening inequalities on life experiences and opportunities. Bourdieu said that “sociology is a cognitive science” (2014, p.164), but the concept of habitus functions as a place-holder for social-psychological processes which are poorly understood. The issues raised by virtue ethics on the formation of character are also largely empirical questions that fall through the gap between sociology and psychology.

More generally, socialization or subjectivation can be “indifferent” concepts, as Raymond Williams once said, if they allow us to by-pass explaining how the multiple processes by which individuals learn to become a functioning member of society work (Williams, 1974, p.122). Lofty formulations such as ‘the construction of the subject’ also tend to replace such empirical questions with crude assertions about discursive constitution. To be sure, the individual is not prior to socialization but formed through it, but the challenge is to explain how this happens without denying the fact that for society to be possible, individuals must recognize their own agency and that they can and must make choices (Archer, 2000; 2007). Socialization in early life involves not only the passive acquisition of dispositions but active learning and demands on us that we deliberate, reason and make choices. In turn some of those choices may produce repeated actions that - largely inadvertently - develop our character and habitus in certain ways (Jacobs, 2001).

*Third*, while many accounts of character in virtue ethics insist on a significant degree of personal responsibility for character relative to the effects of ‘moral luck’ (e.g. Jacobs, 2001), sociology tends to ‘bend the stick the other way’ and downplay reflexivity and personal responsibility and emphasize the effects of social structure and socialization or subjectivation. Margaret Archer has presented a counter-argument to this dominant tendency, criticising what she terms ‘social hydraulics’ – the practice of ignoring individuals’ reflexivity and hence their capacity to mediate the effects of social structure, or else reducing it to the unmediated effects of external social and cultural influences (Archer, 2003; 2007). While she is heavily critical of the concept of habitus, others have responded by arguing that it is possible and indeed necessary to acknowledge both habitus and reflexivity in explaining behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2007; Fleetwood, 2009; Sayer, 2011). I would add that the reconciliation of habitus with reflexivity could be facilitated by a consideration of virtue ethics as this has

much to say on the nature of practical reason (Dunne, 1993). Such a reconciliation would also be consistent with ‘dual process theories’ that describe behaviour as involving both fast-acting responses based upon acquired dispositions and emotions, and slower responses based on reflection and reason (Keane, 2016). Bourdieu’s own elaborations of the concept of habitus vary in the extent to which they allow space for individuals’ awareness of circumstances and options open to them in the flow of everyday life (compare for example, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 and Bourdieu, 2000). And as critics have noted, the interviewees recorded in *The Weight of the World* exhibit significant reflexivity about themselves, their behaviour and their situations (Bourdieu et al, 1999). I would suggest that the degrees of automaticity and self-conscious steering involved in individuals’ behaviour varies according to the significance of the tasks for them.

Bourdieu also makes little mention of the emotional aspect of the dispositions of the habitus, or indeed the presence of *ethical* dispositions – which are central to moral character (Sayer, 2005). These curious absences are corrected somewhat in the many fine ethnographies of class and gender influenced by Bourdieu, where we see individuals’ evaluative descriptions of living in unequal relations (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998, 2017; McKenzie, 2015). If we ignore these emotional and ethical responses it becomes impossible to understand resistance – or conformity.

A further difference between the concepts of character and habitus concerns the relation between their objects and the social field. This derives from the fact that many moral sentiments involved in moral character, particularly a sense of justice, have a generalizing tendency, involving principles or rules of thumb which are supposed to apply to relations with *all* others and hence have a universalising, egalitarian character - most obviously ‘treat others as you would want to be treated yourself’. ‘Putting oneself in the place of the other’ is another (Benhabib, 1992). While this generalizing tendency often fails to extend to those outside individuals’ own social groups, it is possible for moral sentiments such as compassion, concern for others and resentment of injustice to reach across to different others; charities depend on this. So moral values are ‘inherently universalistic’, even though this is imperfectly realised (Alexander, 1995, p.137). As Adam Smith argued, moral norms are therefore likely to vary less among people in different social positions than other features, such as “custom or fashion” (Smith, 1759: 1984, V.2.1, p.200). This is because how you treat me matters much more to me and my well-being than does your taste in art, literature or clothing. Ethics, concerning such interactions between people, therefore tends to be more strongly socially regulated across the social field. This means that, as Michael Walzer argued:

‘The moral world and the social world are more or less coherent, though never more than more or less coherent. Morality is always potentially subversive of class [and other forms of unfair inequality] and power.’ (Walzer, 1989, p.22 [author’s addition]).

King’s comment on race and character was itself an example of speaking morality to power. Hence Bourdieu’s claim that the dispositions constituting the habitus reflect the particular position with respect to the social field in which the

individual finds herself to the extent of exhibiting ‘ontological complicity’ (Bourdieu, 1981) is overstated, involving an oversocialized view of the individual as a blank sheet on which anything can be written, as if we could adjust as easily to oppression as to respect. Further, the lack of space for dissonance between the social and the moral obscures a key source of resistance, reinforcing the fatalistic tenor of his work that many critics have attacked.

However, as Smith also noted, inequalities commonly produce a “corruption of moral sentiments” that allows different standards to be applied so that the dominated are judged more harshly than the dominant.<sup>18</sup> It is also common for features of differences of accent, status and appearance to be misread by class others as evidence of differences in moral character (Kuklick 1979, p. 26; see also Reay, 2017; Sayer, 2005). Thus, while, as Walzer noted, morality can challenge inequality, social structures of inequality can produce effects that compromise morality too. The two tendencies are in opposition, though it would be a mistake to assume that either necessarily wins out.

Given that moral sentiments and dispositions can be at odds with dominant social pressures, it is common for some individuals and groups to resent and resist having to behave in the conventional ways expected of them. As Tessman points out with respect to gender, individuals who encounter and come to accept ways of thinking and valuing actions that challenge gendered dispositions that they had acquired and embodied find themselves conflicted. They may also develop what she calls ‘burdened virtues’, that is, ways of acting virtuously in the face of injustice but which come at a cost (Tessman, 2005); for example, activists may find that their commitments to fighting injustice prevent them meeting commitments to their family and friends that are important for their well-being.

In these ways, combining insights from virtue ethics with social theory can enlarge understanding of the habitus and reflexivity by highlighting their moral dimensions and hence their moral sources of resistance.

### **Do inequalities affect character?**

As we have seen, many virtue ethicists accept that character is likely to be affected by social contexts, though it is generally assumed that adult individuals have at least some responsibility for their character too. Where commentators blame inequalities on character defects, those on the Left may be tempted to challenge not only such claims, but the very idea that individuals’ characters might be damaged by inequalities. This response may be motivated either by a very reasonable fear that accepting such a possibility risks inviting victim-blaming by the Right, or by a common tendency on the Left to romanticise the character of the oppressed (Nussbaum, 2001; Sayer, 2005; Tessman, 2005). But given the overlap between habitus and character, it would be strange to argue that while the former is strongly shaped by social position, the latter is entirely unaffected by it. If inequality had no effect whatsoever on character, it would be less problematic than it is. Poverty and oppression are not ennobling. In developing critiques of feminine traits such as submissiveness and masculine



traits such as sense of entitlement and superiority, feminism shows how relations of domination have a bad effect on the characters of men and women. This critique addresses both social structure, cultural norms *and* character. However, as regards class, notwithstanding references to 'hidden injuries', acceptance of equivalent effects is less common, presumably because of fear of giving support to victim-blaming. Yet poverty, insecurity, exclusion, stigmatisation and a poor environment may produce anxiety, depression, difficulty in making decisions, conflict, lack of faith in legitimate ways of making a living, and drug dependency (Charlesworth, 2000; Wacquant, 1999). Although the incidence of such pathologies correlates with poverty, most who have to endure poverty avoid them (Shildrick et al, 2012). There may also be strengths fostered by living in such conditions, such as resilience, toughness and experience in dealing with heavy responsibilities.

While both Right and Left tend to focus on the poor, inequalities can harm individuals' characters across the board: positions of dominance may foster arrogance, inflated sense of entitlement and lack of empathy, while those in the middle may become deferential upwards and snobbish downwards. Such correlations between character and position in the social field are likely to be weak, because personal circumstances can vary somewhat independently of this and because of the generalizing tendency of morality that we noted earlier, but to the extent that character is shaped by individuals' situations, then it is those situations we should focus on. Tessman argues that it is particularly the beneficiaries of oppression whose character is likely to be damaged, citing male violence against women, bullying, greed, selfishness, callousness, arrogance, and lack of openness to others. Robert Jackall's classic study of the lives of American corporate managers shows how the Hobbesian pressures facing them rendered consistent moral behaviour a recipe for failure: success required careful impression management, instrumentalism, avoidance of the weak, ingratiation with the strong, appropriation of credit due to others, evasion of personal responsibilities that clashed with corporate demands, and willingness to abandon commitments (Jackall, 1988). Interestingly, similar observations regarding managers were made by the American working class men studied by Michèle Lamont who saw them as lacking integrity, sincerity, and interpersonal skills (Lamont, 2000). Convergenly, Joan Williams' study of white working class Americans notes how they value moral character more than achievement and "what you do" (Williams, 2017)

Nick Duffell is a British psychotherapist who specialises in the pathologies of parental deprivation consequent upon boarding school education, and who himself had such an education. His book, *Wounded Leaders*, examines the pathologies he has experienced personally and encountered professionally (Duffell, 2014). Denied the daily reminders and security of unconditional parental love, boarding school pupils tend to develop self-protective personas that conceal vulnerability and doubt so as to avoid bullying and ridicule. They tend to acquire what he calls a 'strategic survival personality' in which instrumentalism and the pursuit of self-interest are the norm, and mistakes must always be hidden or denied. They fear and deny their own vulnerability, and tend to project it onto others, as something to be detected and taken advantage

of. At the same time, the pupils enjoy exceptional facilities, as well as their inherited cultural capital, and hence develop a habitus characterised by a sense of entitlement and superiority. For those who can survive the experience, it makes for success in the careerist world of politics, through instrumental treatment of others, unwillingness to admit mistakes, weaknesses or doubt, and a tendency to use attack as the best form of defence. This upbringing tends to produce emotional illiteracy and avoidance of intimacy, and various other pathologies, including 'splitting' – repressing feelings that they are unable to tolerate and projecting them onto others; hence the projection of vulnerability onto others, particularly women. Duffell gives many examples of these traits in recent UK politicians. To make sense of these tendencies one has to understand the formative influences of both the interpersonal relations of family and school and of the individuals' position within the unequal social field.

Thus, if we notice that not only poverty but inequalities in general may have damaging effects on character at all levels, then we can counter elitist representations of character without implausibly denying that social position has any effect on character.

## **Conclusion and implications**

There is no *necessary* link between belief in the importance of character and the political Right, but while advocates of character education have ranged from the Hitler Youth Movement<sup>19</sup> to Martin Luther King, the political and economic dominance of the Right has ensured its take on character has had most influence on policy. Although it is certainly important to research and critique the 'turn to character' in education and political discourse, we should also ask whether character can be theorised in a way that isn't tainted with elitism, individualism and victim-blaming. As the opening quotation from King made clear, character is not something that is only of value to the dominant, for it can be valued and upheld against domination and stigmatisation. Particularly in light of the damaging effects of inequalities on character, including that of the dominant, we can strengthen the critique of inequality and domination. Rather than dismiss character, we need to contest and reposition it, for example by degendering virtue, rather than merely rejecting it. Similarly, a character education that was linked to citizenship education and emphasized sense of social justice could be progressive, especially if supported by the cultivation of a sociological imagination.

While the concept has affinities with that of habitus, it highlights ethical or moral evaluative dispositions that accounts of the latter generally ignore, and it thereby helps us identify and assess well-being and ill-being more clearly. Yet, in accepting 'character' as a concept - suitably adapted and qualified - that social science might usefully incorporate, we expose a fundamental uncertainty as regards the extent to which individuals can be held responsible for their actions. Further, in trying to work out how different influences on behaviour - social and cultural situation, habitus, character and individual reflexivity - are interwoven,

we realize how uncertain social research is about the basic task of explaining why people are like they are and why they do what they do.

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<sup>1</sup> I shall use the terms moral and ethical interchangeably to refer to all of what they are sometimes taken to identify separately.

<sup>2</sup> “Virtue and success have been explicitly tied to ideas of manhood and masculinity throughout history . . . The Roman virtue, *virtus*, has been translated as ‘manliness’, ‘courage’, ‘valor’ and ‘character’ itself . . . Similarly, a failure to be manly, or effeminacy, is linked to poor character – cowardice, impotence and ineffectiveness.” (Lexmond, in Lexmond and Grist, 2011, p.80).

<sup>3</sup> 15.08.11 David Cameron

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots>

<sup>4</sup> The Deputy Director, Kristján Kristjánsson, has written on why a concern with character should not be regarded as necessarily overly individualist or right wing (Kristjánsson, 2013). See Jerome and Kisby’s response (2019).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1587/projects/current-projects/character-in-marginalised-young-people>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07jEYUqbbQc>

See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvOI6riltzw>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.templeton.org>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2013/12/22/1264731/-The-Dark-Money-Funding-Climate-Change-Denial>

<sup>9</sup> F. <https://www.tes.com/news/so-called-character-education-offensive-working-class>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.damekellyholmestrust.org/character-development>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.ua92.ac.uk/storage/app/media/UA92%20Master%20Prospectus\\_Digi%202018.pdf](https://www.ua92.ac.uk/storage/app/media/UA92%20Master%20Prospectus_Digi%202018.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://projects.seattletimes.com/mlk/words-education.html>

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that these dispositions are neutral with respect to the identity of those needing help; we might wonder if they would go to the aid of someone less like themselves.

<sup>14</sup> This issue figures prominently in Aristotle: ‘Now some think that we are made good by nature, others by habituation, others by teaching.’ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179 (p.270)

<sup>15</sup> Sennett provides no references for these.

<sup>16</sup> Although the last definition might appear to be similar to our concerns, it is curiously self-centred and implicitly instrumental in its emphasis on the value of external recognition, rather than the value of the internal goods of virtues which exist regardless of whether others grant us recognition for them (see MacIntyre, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> In philosophy normativity is primarily about evaluation, value, good and bad, right and wrong, whereas sociologists tend to reduce it to norms, giving them a purely conventional character. Some

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norms may be primarily products of power and domination and it is important to identify them as such, but the need for evaluation is inescapable (Sayer, 2011; 2019).

<sup>18</sup> This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect, persons of poor and mean condition . . . is . . . the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.” (Smith, 1759:1984, I.iii.2.III, p.61).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theconfidentteacher.com/2015/01/problem-teaching-character/>

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Andrew Sayer is Professor of Social Theory and Political Economy at Lancaster University. He has worked mostly on these themes in relation to the philosophy of social science and method, inequalities and moral economy, using a postdisciplinary approach that links social science and philosophy. His most recent book is *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2014. He also has a new interest in the implications of neuroscience for social science.