



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

*A Psychology of Character*

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It is very tempting to psychologise a topic such as “the psychology of character”, especially because my training is in psychology. But that would be a significant mistake, in my view, because character is about much more than an individual’s psychology. As I see it, character is about how well one aligns oneself with what is good. That is, a proper understanding of the psychology of character requires a much wider field of vision within which we can situate that psychology. That wider field is constituted by an understanding of what is good for humans. The most exciting part of this topic is that the key to being a good person, from a character standpoint, is to learn to recognize what is good, which will lead to being attracted to the good, and that attraction motivates the cultivation and practice of virtues.

In this essay, I will discuss four specific elements of what is good for humans. First, what is good for humans is always part of what it means to be human. For example, positive close relationships are good for humans because we are the kind of beings that depend on those relationships to live well. Second, because goods are part of what it means to be human, we are naturally attracted to the goods. This means that we do not need rules or imperatives to push us to seek what is good; we are drawn to what is good. Third, human goods are intersubjective. That is, we seek and experience these goods within a social and cultural world. Finally, the pursuit of goods requires virtues because consistently seeking a good depends on becoming the kind of person who has a proclivity to act in a way that brings that goodness into the world. All I can do in this short piece is to set these ideas out. Making an argument for this perspective has been and continues to be my labor of love for over 20 years.

In a bit of modesty, I have titled this essay “A Psychology of Character” rather than “The Psychology of Character” because I am aware that my views are not universally held. Ideas about what is good or if there is anything we can call good, have been the focus of discussion, debate, and disagreement probably since the beginning of humanity. For example, many people see some reference to the supernatural as necessary for any discussion of what

is good, but I will offer a thoroughly this-worldly view, a perspective that is drawn from everyday human experience on planet earth. Such a view can be linked to the supernatural, but I will not take that path.

The most widely known ancient Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicurus) believed that the focus of ethics should be on living the best kind of human life. They differed in how they defined the good life, but I believe all of them saw a good human life as an arrangement that transcends subjective experience and possessions. These philosophers called the best human life *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as happiness. I prefer to translate it as flourishing. The term happiness works for philosophers because they do not mix up the subjective and ephemeral connotations of happiness as an emotional state in the way that most people do. To pursue a eudaimonic psychology, we must recognize that it cannot be psychologized as subjective experience, nor can it be materialized as possessions. In what could flourishing consist if not in these commonly understood meanings of a good life?

My interpretation of eudaimonic philosophers is that they saw flourishing as something that we can and should seek. But flourishing is not the kind of aim that we can accomplish and then retain, in the way we can acquire a possession or know a fact. Rather, flourishing is a way of life, an arrangement of one's life that takes a particular form and is a process rather than an outcome. Aristotle (1999) said this well in the first sentences of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he clarified that there are two general types of aims. The first are aims that can be seen as outcomes in which what matters most is the product of an activity, not the activity itself. There are many worthwhile outcomes that matter to us, such as traveling to a destination where getting there is more important than whether one drives or takes a train. The second type of aim is one in which the activity itself is what is important. When the activity is paramount, this means that acting well or with excellence is the primary

aim, and this is a continual goal rather than one that can be completed with a specified outcome. Going for a walk is a simple example because it is the activity of walking that is valued rather than a destination.

The distinction between these two types of aims helps us to understand that flourishing is a way of life rather than an outcome, but flourishing remains rather abstract so far. What could qualify as the kind of ongoing activity that conduces to flourishing? Of course, there are many kinds of activities that contribute to flourishing, but I follow Aristotle in focusing on human functions, and the two overarching functions he cited are that humans are reasoning, social beings. In his view, people flourish when they fulfill these functions excellently. That is, the best kind of human life ensues when one has good reasons for one's actions and participates in high quality relationships and groups. It will be helpful to get even more specific about these two functions and some of their attendant virtues.

### **Reasoning Beings and Meaning**

There are many forms of good reasoning, and one could focus on excellence in reasoning such as practical wisdom, meaning, and gaining knowledge. Let's take meaning as an example and explore the four features of what is good (human interest, attractiveness, intersubjectivity, and attendant virtues).

#### **Meaning as a Human Interest**

One way that reasoning is central to human life is that we require reasons to choose one form of action rather than another. Those reasons may be better or worse, more or less consciously available, and they are always revisable in view of feedback from our environment or changing circumstances. Contrary to some who have claimed that reasoning about how one acts is always after the fact (Haidt, 2001), it is both obvious and well documented that people frequently think prospectively about the future they would like to

have and pursue that future because they have good reasons to think that it is a desirable future (Railton, 2016). Examples include obtaining an education to become a professional, saving money for retirement, and planning vacations or get-togethers. Some of our activities are short term (e.g., I will take a nap because I am drowsy and grumpy, with the goal of being focused and affable later) and some are longer term (e.g., I write a proposal to submit to publishers with the goal of publishing a book five years from now).

The reasons we have for our actions is one source of giving meaning to those actions. In addition, many of our actions are interwoven and undertaken to fulfill a broader life plan or to embody the identity that we want to have. McAdams (2009) calls this a narrative identity because it involves a story about the overall meaning of one's life. Questions include how does that life come together? What does it mean to be the person I am? What is the overall meaning of the life I am living? This narrative helps us to have unified, coherent, and purposeful lives. Of course, the narrative changes over time due to unexpected successes and disappointments, unforeseen opportunities and losses, simple maturation, and the finite amount of time and energy that all of us have.

One way to see that meaning is an important function for humans is to examine what happens when it is present and when it is absent. When individuals see their lives as meaningful, it is well documented that they are happier (Krause, 2007; Steger & Kashdan, 2009), healthier (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009), and have longer life spans (Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009; Krause, 2009). The reverse of these relationships indicates that the experience of one's life lacking meaning is associated with reduced happiness, health, and longevity. In addition, meaninglessness is an important risk factor for suicidal thinking and action (Heisel & Flett, 2004). As Steger (2012), one of the most widely known scholars of meaning put it, "Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years"

(p. 65). This evidence suggests that meaning is an important function for humans, with the presence of meaning contributing to several important indicators of flourishing and its absence contributing to key indicators of languishing. Indeed, it is difficult to consider a life that lacks meaning to be a flourishing life.

### **The Attractiveness of Meaning**

The second feature of meaning is that people are naturally drawn toward meaning making. The function of meaning making is not taught to infants who lack this capacity. Rather the search for meaning shows up at the very beginning of life, as Trevarthen and Aitken (2001) stated: “the human mind is, from the start, motivated...for cooperative psychological learning—the mastery of socially or interpersonally contrived meaning specified in reciprocal social engagements” (p. 7). Infants actively search for the reasons that adults act the way they do by nine months of age, often in situations where the infant cannot enact the action they are observing (Csibra, Biro, Koos, & Gergely. 2003; Gergely & Csibra, 2006).

On a larger scale, all cultures and religions have accounts of where humans come from and why we exist. Although these stories differ in many ways, they all give a general explanation of what human life means and how it fits with the natural and supernatural worlds. People search for the meaning of events, whether they see those events as positive or negative. Indeed, one of the most effective forms of dealing with setbacks and losses is to find meaning in it (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017). These facts suggest that we are naturally drawn to identifying and articulating the reasons for acting in the ways we do.

### **The Intersubjectivity of Meaning**

The most common error in discussions of meaning for humans is to understand meaning as a completely subjective take on the world. Of course, the idea of meaning must include subjective meaning, but limiting meaning to subjectivity introduces serious

difficulties (cf. the exchange between Heintzelman & King, 2014, 2015 and Fowers & Lefevor, 2015). If meaning is construed as entirely subjective, then we cannot distinguish between meaning and positive illusions or outright delusions. This is because there is no standpoint from which purely subjective meaning can be questioned. The individual has the last word on whether something is subjectively meaningful. A subjective approach to meaning makes it very difficult to critique problematic meanings that support racism, genocide, and all manner of crimes. If meaning is entirely subjective, on what basis could someone critique another's chosen meanings? After all, destructive, evil, and deluded meanings are extremely vivid and compelling to those who hold them. It is not just that such meanings are socially problematic, it is that an exclusively subjective account of meaning provides no avenue for challenging the meanings themselves.

It is important for us to be able to frequently and productively contest meanings. For example, the struggle against human trafficking requires attention to the meanings of human life and liberty and contesting the narratives that rationalize the enslavement of others (e.g., "might makes right," dehumanization).

The entirely subjective view of meaning is a reaction to the general recognition that there is no purely objective source of meaning. Of course, many people have claimed an objective source of meaning, primarily through some form of contact with the divine or supernatural, but these claims are so manifold and inconsistent that it is difficult to accept any one of them. The people within a given tradition often accept the claims of objective truth made by the tradition, but there is no generally accepted objective source of meaning. The evident plurality of putatively objective meanings and the lack of unimpeachable evidence for any of them leaves us without a widely recognized objective source of meaning. The real problem, however, is not that there is no objective source of meaning, it is the idea that we

should (or even can) split reality into subjective and objective realms. Like most dichotomies, the subjectivity/objectivity split is unnecessary and leads to dead ends.

The alternative to a subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy is readily available if we recognize that meanings are intersubjective. This means that meanings are neither solely in the individual's mind nor are they given objectively. Rather, meanings are held in common by groups of people and enacted in their communal lives (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Taylor, 1985). From this perspective, subjective meanings are very real, but they are secondary to the shared meanings of historical communities. Meaning is very commonly seen in collective activities (e.g., activities that constitute democracy, justice, and service) and in cultures, professions, and virtually any form of group identity. In these collective activities, people transcend their subjectivity through participation in communal activities. The meaning of collective activity is never restricted to an individual's subjective experience because the meaning is constituted by sustained, coordinated activity. Such meanings are not identical among all the participants, but the collective understanding of the activity serves as a touchstone with which everyone can compare their interpretations. Humans are very good at comparing their subjective perspectives with a general intersubjective perspective, and we develop the rudiments of that capacity in our preschool years (Tomasello, 2019).

Generally, the meaning that people find arises because it is acknowledged and shared by a group and endures through being practiced by many people. Indeed, one of the most commonly identified forms of meaning is found in participation in relationships, family, and other social groups. People find the good of meaning simply through their everyday associations as well as in the purposes or goals pursued by those social groups.

In addition, the meanings that individuals hold are typically drawn from those available within the social group or culture. Everyone adopts some set of the available meanings and adapts them to fit their circumstances. These individual interpretations increase



the meaningful nuances and possibilities available to the social group and, at times, can lead to new possibilities. These individual interpretations are one of the ways that meanings can change and evolve, and the open-endedness of meaning is important to recognize.

### **Meaning and Virtue**

If meaning is a human good, then what personal characteristics make it possible for a person to participate reliably and successfully in meaningful activities? In other words, what virtues or excellences could help a person to fulfill this aspect of the human reasoning function? Several virtues support meaning development, maintenance, and change. In the development of meaning, open-mindedness and curiosity are key virtues because we must be willing to explore and understand a set of meanings for them to become active in our lives. It is possible to simply follow traditions and examples without reflecting on their underlying meaning and import, but blind adherence would not amount to virtuous or excellent meaning seeking.

Various degrees of courage are necessary for meaningful activity. In two very topical domains, medical professionals and first responders find meaning in saving lives, restoring health, and offering compassionate care. Engaging in first response and medical activities requires great courage in the face of Covid-19. Another topical domain is the protests of police violence against Black people. Working to protect Black lives also involves courage in facing potential police violence and the disapproval and violence of counter protesters. Even in prosaic pursuits such as education or youth development, courage may be called for in defending the meaning and value of teaching to those who devalue it and attempt to limit its scope.

The virtue of open-mindedness is vital to exploring the meanings that animate our activities because this is the avenue through which meanings can be elaborated and innovations can occur. It is not possible to finalize human meanings and to gain a once and

for all version of what human activities are about. Meanings have developed and changed throughout human history, and there is no reason to think that open-endedness will cease, especially given the unprecedented intercultural contact of the present time. All of us have a great deal to learn from others, and the variety of meaning systems in the world gives us many opportunities for reflection on what is meaningful to us and how that meaning can be fruitfully deepened, elaborated, or altered.

To summarize the good of meaning, I have argued that meaning seeking is a natural function of humans, beginning very early in life and persisting through all aspects of human action. This means that individuals' and groups' interests in seeking meaning in their actions and lives are inherent for them rather than imposed from external sources. People naturally seek a way to understand what they do and why they do it, which indicates that meaning is an attractive ideal that we are drawn toward. Meaning seeking is not driven by causal forces or impelled by obligation or imperative. Meanings are also fully embedded in our social world because meanings are typically held in common and inform collective activity at least as much as individual activity. Finally, there are multiple virtues necessary for cultivating, maintaining, and elaborating meaning in action. I briefly alluded to curiosity, open-mindedness, and courage.

### **Social Beings and Belonging**

Humans have been called an ultrasocial species (Fowers, 2015; Tomasello, 2014). Being ultrasocial characterizes human activities ranging from playing peekaboo to sending probes to Mars. We constantly participate in shared activities involving language and culture. Let us explore belonging as one aspect of human social being through the four features of a good.

## **Belonging as a Human Interest**

The second domain Aristotle (1999) highlighted as a major function was the social character of human activity, stating plainly that “man is by nature a social and political being” (p. 15). On the briefest reflection, it is obvious that human beings are profoundly social. We are a group-living species in which the rare hermit is the exception that proves the rule. From our very beginnings, neonates’ earliest features include facial recognition and a need for physical touch (Field, Cohen, Garcia, & Greenberg, 1984; Johnson et al., 2005). These interests quickly grow into an attraction to mutual gaze and a proclivity to attachment that leads to close personal relationships and an interest in belonging in groups. These quickly emerging developmental features make it clear that engagement in relationships and group belonging come naturally to people.

Another form of evidence for the social nature of humans is that we tend to flourish when we have good personal relations (Lee & Ono, 2012; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014) and when we experience belonging in one or more groups (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013). In contrast, individuals who feel excluded, isolated, or chronically lonely have significantly worse happiness, health, and longevity (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2007; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015).

I noted above that having good reasons for our actions is partly dependent on our social relationships because people find a great deal of meaning in friendships, family, and group membership. Thus, having good reasons for choosing particular actions and participating in well-functioning groups and high-quality close relationships are not generally independent, because having good reasons for our actions is not just a matter of a lucid self-understanding, but also being able to discuss, explain, justify, and persuade others about the value of our actions. The converse is also true. The maintenance of high-quality relationships

and groups requires us to coordinate our actions with others, and a key component of that coordination is that we share good reasons for our collective actions.

### **Attractiveness of Belonging**

I believe it is clear from this description of human social functioning that relationships and group memberships are attractors for our activity, but I want to state explicitly that humans are drawn toward relational and group attachment. It is important to people to be loved and valued (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2020). That is, meaning shows up in relationships when we matter to others; our existence and involvement has meaning to them. This highlights another way in which meaning is intersubjective. The meaning of my life is partly evident in what I mean to those with whom I am in a relationship; this meaning cannot possibly be entirely within me (i.e., subjective).

### **Intersubjectivity of Belonging**

It almost goes without saying that participation in high-quality relationships and groups is an intersubjective phenomenon. Intersubjectivity means that belonging is not simply a subjective impression, nor is it entirely objective. Rather, belonging happens *between* people. It includes subjective experience, but it cannot be reduced to subjectivity. If it were not for the powerful tendency to psychologize these relational experiences, it would be obvious that they occur between people, not within individuals. But many writers attempt to reduce relationships and group memberships to an individual's attachment style, feeling of belonging, satisfaction with relationships, perceived intimacy with others, etc. These are real and important experiences that can grow out of strong relationships and group memberships, but they are inadequate for describing these relations. These relations have a real-world tangibility that can be observed in their continuity over time, the coordination of aims and actions among participants, the shared identity the participants have, and so on. In addition, although the relationships and groups are partly comprised by the individuals in them, the

relationships can also be distinguished as distinct from the participants. As is often said, relationships and groups are more than the sum of their parts because the relationships can be recognized and characterized as having features that transcend individuals (cohesion, coordination, collective identity) and they can be assessed as better or worse friendships, organizations, or societies.

### **Belonging and Virtues**

If I am right about social ties being natural human goods to which individuals are attracted, then it raises the question of which virtues make the pursuit of belonging possible? Aristotelians will be quick to suggest that character friendship is the key virtue. Some features of character friendship are that the friends reliably express their deep attachment to one another, their valuing of the other as a person, their commitment to one another's welfare, and their shared goals. The expression of mutual care and valuing is both verbal and behavioral. Character friends show how much they value one another in their actions. This is why I often assert that love is a verb that shows up in action, not just a feeling one has inside. The best kind of relationships and groups will be comprised of people who consistently express this mutual valuing and the pursuit of shared goals.

A second key virtue supporting belonging is loyalty. If we are to have ongoing relationships that are stable and important to us, we must be loyal to the people involved in those personal relationships and groups. Being loyal means wholeheartedly standing by one's fellows, endorsing the aims of the relationships, defending, and protecting those individuals and relationships, and remaining faithful to the commitments we have made to the people involved. This loyalty will be evident in our behavior in publicly standing up for the relationships, maintaining a public commitment to being a member of the relationship, and acting in ways that honor the commitments we have made.

There is a natural form of generosity that accompanies group membership known as ingroup favoritism (Brewer, 2007; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). This natural favoritism can be cultivated into a full virtue by enhancing the given motivation to benefit ingroup members through developing one's cognitive understanding of it, cultivating the wisdom to be appropriate in how one favors group members, and understanding why it is important to give group members the benefit of the doubt. Maintaining high-quality, long-term relationships means that we must come to grips with one another's weaknesses, frailties, and shortcomings. It is inevitable that close relations and group members will fall short, disappoint, and even hurt us from time to time. Forgiveness is one vital manifestation of generosity wherein we forgive important others when appropriate (i.e., when remorse and cessation of the transgression are evident). Similarly, giving others the benefit of the doubt, and offering them kindness and gratitude are important contributors to smooth functioning and enjoyable relationships.

Finally, treating others justly is a key virtue for ongoing relationships and groups. Unfairness leads to mistrust and ruptures in relationships (Sanfey, Rilling, Aronson, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2003), whereas treating others fairly appears to be positive in itself (Tabibnia, Satpute, & Lieberman, 2008). In addition, the quality of marital relationships has been found to relate to how fairly spouses interact (Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, & Yang, 2007; Veldorale-Brogan, Bradford, & Vail, 2010).

To summarize the discussion of the good of belonging, I have argued that participating in social ties is a natural function of humans, from the first moments of life and persisting throughout all our activities. Because social ties are a natural and ubiquitous interest for humans, the quality of our social relationships is an inherent concern for us rather than an imperative imposed from some external source. People naturally seek relationships and group memberships in which they experience belonging, meaning that belonging is an

attractive ideal toward which we are drawn. One can see belonging as driven by causal forces such as the avoidance of isolation or loneliness, but that would define belonging as the absence of isolation, which is a very impoverished view. Instead, belonging is embodied through the patterned sets of activities that render one a member of a dyad or group. In addition, belonging is constituted by the acknowledgement and valuing of one's membership by the other members of the social group. Although loneliness can be observed, it can be a subjective state that contradicts what is observable, as in feeling lonely at a lively party at which one is socializing. Belonging cannot be a purely subjective state because it requires others' participation whereby, they include a person in the group. Finally, there are multiple virtues necessary for cultivating, maintaining, and elaborating belonging. I noted how friendship, loyalty, generosity, and fairness facilitate belonging.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that the love of what is good is at the center of this psychology of character. This means that people cultivate virtues because those characteristics are necessary to successfully pursue goods about which they care deeply. The attractiveness of what is good is the basis for cultivating and practicing virtue, and we seek what is good because we are drawn toward it. When people recognize what is good, we are moved to act in ways that bring that goodness into the world. This is one of my favorite features of seeing human action through the lens of virtue. It is transformative, and one is inherently motivated to act consistently for one's own and for others' good.

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