Character Through Thick and Thin

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December 2012

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O'Brien smiled slightly. "You are a flaw in the pattern, Winston. You are a stain that must be wiped out. Did I not tell you just now that we are different from the persecutors of the past? We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. We make him one of ourselves before we kill him. It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be."

George Orwell, *1984*

There are very good reasons why the thought of governments intervening to "reshape" the workings of citizens' "inner minds" should make us nervous. A free society is rooted in the capacities of its members to make their own choices about the most fundamental aspects of how they live their lives. Totalitarian regimes have known that to be effective, it is not enough to limit those choices, they must also change the way people think so that they make the "right" choices for themselves. We rightly want to make sure that in our more democratic countries, we do not freely or unwittingly give over powers to the state that elsewhere have been seized by despots.

And yet it is simply not true that we draw a clear line between the private and the civic, and that this line is drawn around the skull. We have an education system that imparts values as well as facts (not least because it is a matter of value which facts we choose to teach). We also have mental health and counselling services that help people to think and feel better, sometimes whether they want that help or not.

Furthermore, many of us are interested in social justice, desiring that as many people as possible have the capacities to thrive and to make the best of their potentialities. If we then discover, that a person's ability to succeed in life depends in a large part on what we call "character", and that some interventions can change this, why would we not at least take them seriously?

I am no expert on which of these proposed interventions do actually work or not. As in so many cases, it often seems to me that the empirical basis for much of what is being proposed is weaker than evangelists often claim. On that score, I would simply urge caution. My main concern is rather with the question of what principles and tests we should apply to such interventions as are proven effective before validating them as instruments of state.

I will take as an assumption that in considering any possible state intervention we start with the desideratum of maximising individual autonomy and that anything which reduces this

requires a strong justification. That is not, of course, to say that maximisation of autonomy trumps all else: it clearly doesn't, otherwise here would be no taxation. It is rather a question of burden of proof. Often, in weighing up such considerations, it is a matter of balancing competing goods: a small infringement of personal liberty is justified because of a large gain for the general good, for example. I don't have anything in particular to say about these cases, which I think defy all but the vaguest generalisation anyway and are always best assessed on a case by case basis.

My concern is rather with two ways in which considerations of how far the state should be involved with character are informed by the distinctive nature of character itself, rather than simply by generic considerations of the public good and individual autonomy. These suggest two principles, based respectively on the situational and normative dimensions of character.

Character and situation

The concept of "character" carries with it the idea of something which is reasonably stable and constant which belongs to the agent and is expressed through her actions. Many things are collected under the category of character, from personality traits to "psychological skills" such as resilience and mindfulness. Despite this heterogeneity, however, virtually everything that is considered an aspect of character is almost certainly much more determined by situation than we think. Situational factors are often better predictors of behaviour than personal attributes. As John Doris put it in *Lack of Character*, "In very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly determinative of behaviour. To put things crudely, typically, people lack character."

There is lots of evidence for this, both in the psychology literature and familiar experience.So, for example, "honesty" is considered a character trait, but how willing people are to pay for their coffee when an honesty box system is used varies enormously depending on whether the picture above the box is of a landscape or a pair of eyes. (People are more honest when the eyes are present, it is thought because it creates a sense that they are being watched.) When it comes to compassion and kindness, even trainee priests are less likely to act as good Samaritans when they are in a bit of a hurry, even if it is not for something urgent.

I am not aware of any experimental evidence for this, but ordinary experience suggests that traits such as resilience are also very context-dependent. Some people who are able to be stoical and constructive in the face of serious disease fall to pieces if their homes are infested with fleas. Some people bounce back from personal failure well but are crushed by professional setbacks.

My own view is that this does not destroy the idea of character as a reasonable consistent and robust set of dispositions, it merely shows that it is not as common as we assume. Far from being something we all have, character in the full sense is something we have to work on to build, and most fail to do so. To employ a term of art, character in the "thick" sense – robust, constant, a good predictor of behaviour in novel situations – is rare; and that most of what we think of as character is "thin": much more dependent of circumstances than we assume.

But what it also means is that if we are interested in what we generally think of as character, very often we need not look into the minds of individuals, but to the social structures and settings that encourage or discourage the manifestation of certain thin character traits.

For example, people behave more honestly when they feel they are interacting with real people. So if you want to encourage honesty, don't teach it as virtue, make sure that people operate in an environment where the personal is always present. The more the benefits system, for instance, relies on automated processes and telephone calls, the more people will feel fine about cheating it.

Take another example of resilience. There are indeed skills one can learn to help with this. But it is often easier and more effective to ensure that in any given domain, the system makes that resilience easier. In the economy, for example, the more confident workers are that their rights are protected and that they is some kind of decent safety net if they lose their work, the less anxious they are and the more able they become to deal with redundancy when it comes. Insecurity in the system is a major determinant of lack of confidence that people can bounce back, arguably more than individual character.

Take a final example, perseverance. This has again been correlated with success in various domains of life, professional, personal and creative. But if we want to promote it, we need to make sure society is structured in such a way as not to reward short-termism. If people see that experience and commitment are rewarded, they will be more inclined to persevere. If they see that the winners are those who duck and dive for immediate gain, why on earth would they value taking the long view?

So here is then the first principle for how government should interest itself in issues of character: Make sure that the systems and rules are conducive to the character traits that you want to foster and only even consider trying to improve the characters of individual citizens after all these external factors have been optimised. In other words, create the right environment for good character to flourish; do not try to create the good society from character up.

Character and values

There is a second sense in which character can be thick or thin. There is always a normative element to character. It is impossible to think of any character trait without having at least a minimal sense of whether it is good or bad. However, this evaluative element can be "thicker" or "thinner". Usually, this is not simply a function of which trait we are talking about, but how exactly it is understood.

Take "courage". The thinnest version of this is the idea that it is a positive trait which enables people to confront difficult situations, make difficult choices and expose themselves to justifiable risk for a greater cause. This is normatively thin because it says nothing about the specific instances to which courage is appropriate. If however, we say that courage involves being willing to lay down your life for your country, then the idea is "thick" because it expresses a endorsement of a value – love of country – that is disputable by reasonable people.

One difficulty with this in practice is that, like porridge, conceptions of character tend to thicken when left unwatched. Take resilience, for example. In its thin form, this merely means the ability to bounce back from setbacks and deal with problems constructively. But it is hard to teach this without bringing in some assumptions of what sorts of things one should bounce back from, and how quickly. So someone who is still grieving after 12 months, for example, can be pathologised as a person who is not sufficiently resilient. Similarly, the person who does not accept the insecurity of their employment can be dismissed as someone unable to deal with uncertainty, not someone with a legitimate complaint about labour law.

The issue of thickness or thinness in this respect is extremely important when thinking of how, or if, character skills should be taught in schools or perhaps to the unemployed. Of course we do not want to deny to children the kinds of skills that can help them to get on in life. But nor do we want to train them to do whatever it takes to deal with the modern world if the modern world is the problem. (I sometimes wonder if the meditation classes at Wellington College fall into this trap: children are put in a stressful, high-achieving environment and then taught how to relax. Maybe they should not be in the stressful environment in the first place.)

So here is the second principle for how government should interest itself in issues of character: Make sure that if you are providing training in character skills, you do so in as thin a way as possible. In other words, teach the skills that help people to achieve success as they understand it, do not teach them how to achieve a culturally determined and contentious idea of success.

Conclusion

There are many advocates of bringing character into public policy who dismiss all mention of Winston Smith, mind control and state coercion as paranoid scaremongering. It would indeed be just that if it were suggested that this is where we will inevitably end up, and soon. But that is not the point of such concerns. The point is that autonomy can be harmed in significant ways far before we get to the extremes of *1984*. Diminishing the capacity of individuals to determine and live by their own conception of the good life is something to avoid, even in small measure.

So it is not excessive to point out that, if we are not careful, character building by the state could well become a means by which, in the words of *1984*'s O'Brien "We convert [the citizen], we capture his inner mind, we reshape him." To minimise this risk while maximising the real gains that can be achieved by fostering positive character traits we ought to keep our focus on the thin rather than the thick: on those enabling character skills that can be used to achieve whatever legitimate end the individual choses, and on the social conditions that enable good character to thrive. If we do this, then public policy can indeed concern itself with character without intruding into the corners of the self which should remain the exclusive domain of the individual.