



# **Pursuing Excellence: Global Traits and Character Development Strategies for Leaders**

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# ***Pursuing Excellence: Global Traits and Character Development Strategies for Leaders<sup>1</sup>***

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*"[...] Modern experimental psychology has discovered that circumstance has surprisingly more to do with how people behave than traditional images of character and virtue allow."  
(Doris, 2002, p.ix)*

*"Here is the predicament most of us seem to be in. We are not virtuous people. We simply do not have characters that are good enough to qualify as honest, compassionate, wise, courageous, and the like. We are not vicious people either--dishonest, callous, foolish, cowardly, and so forth. Rather, we have a mixed character with some good sides and some bad sides." (Miller, 2018, p.169)*

## **Abstract**

Character development is often both directed only at the individual agent and non-specific with respect to strategies for growth. In what follows, I will argue that character is a kind of competence and that we ought to be hopeful about the potential for character improvement. I will look at some strategies one might employ in service to character development. These typically focus on the individual agent. While a focus only on the individual agent is critical, it overlooks other "levels" in which individuals are situated, such as the organizations and institutions in which we live and work. These contexts shape us for better or for worse, and I will argue that they are therefore opportunities to support our aspirations toward better character. Finally, I will suggest that leaders bear a responsibility to those whom they lead to assist them in their own individual character growth.

## **1. Introduction**

Since Doris (2002) and Harman (1999, 2000) leveled their critiques of character traits, much work has been done to reply to the situationist position. At the heart of this debate is the question of whether character traits exist at all, and if they do, whether they are 'local' or 'global'. Annas has continued to embrace virtues as global traits (Annas, 2011). Snow has maintained a commitment to virtues as global traits and has offered an empirically grounded account of virtue (Snow, 2009). More recently, Miller has offered a "mixed traits" account which, based on extensive interaction with the empirical literature, proposes that most people possess global traits that are neither virtues or vices.

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Drawing primarily upon Miller's (2013, 2014), Snow (2009), and Sosa (2009), I will argue that character is a kind of competence and that we ought to be hopeful, while cautious, about both global traits and the potential for character improvement. A broad competence will entail sub-competencies and may be thwarted by any number of significant changes in situation. A change in situation that yields a change in behavior, however, does not tell against the existence of the competence; rather it highlights the level of competence (i.e. novice vs expert). The upside is that insofar as situation types can be reasonably anticipated, one might develop the competence required for success in situations of various types.

Typical character development strategies tend to focus only on the individual agent. While central, this overlooks other "levels" in which the individual is situated, such as the organizations and institutions in which we live our lives. Insofar as these contexts shape us, they are therefore opportunities to support our character aims. At both the individual and organizational levels, I will explore several strategies one might employ for oneself or, as a leader, in service to those under one's charge (in a non-paternalistic way). These strategies include exemplars (various), Nudging (Miller, 2018), goal-directed pursuits (Snow, 2009), and others. I'll focus on two strategies that seem most promising to me: goal-directed pursuits and a nuanced version of what Miller (2018) calls "selecting our situation," I will argue that some of these strategies can help us develop virtues and that leaders ought to consider ways in which they might aid those under their charge in virtue development through organizational interventions. Furthermore, these should be tailored to the particular aims of the organization as not all virtues are equally appropriate for all persons (e.g. school teacher vs soldier). In most cases, the appropriate virtues will be overlapping but not identical.

Regarding the stability and consistency of character traits, I will employ Sosa's (2009) analogy to the competence associated with driving a vehicle. This will provide a way of thinking about how traits might be global and yet fail, or appear to fail, to manifest with the expected cross-situational consistency. Furthermore, if the driving competence analogy holds, we should be reasonably hopeful that we can develop the appropriate competencies such that our moral character traits will be more and more cross-situationally consistent. In other words, they will travel across situational borders in proportion to the level at which our competency is increased *and* we recognize and account for the situation. This does not mean they all travel equally well or that the cross-situational consistency is simple. Indeed, much work will be required to develop the competencies required for such consistency, but we should be more optimistic than not.

Finally, in light of the above, I will argue that with respect to character, leaders are responsible not only for setting the example of good character but also for actively creating the conditions under which it is good character may be exercised repeatedly over time.

## **2. Character Traits**

The situationist claim has been more or less that, as Harman says, "[...] despite appearances, there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits" (Harman, 1999, p.330). Harman describes a version of situationism, quoting Flanagan as follows, "Good behavior is not the result of good character. It is the result of a certain kind of dominating environment. Take away the powerful external props, and what seems to be a consistently good character will evaporate into thin air." (Harman, 1999, p. 320). So behavior results not from the possession of virtues by an individual agent but from the environmental

forces under which that agent finds herself. The *situation*, in other words, determines good (or bad) behavior. Doris generally agrees but appears to take a less extreme view. First, he argues against global traits on the following basis. Says Doris, “[...]trait attribution requires *cross-situational consistency* in behavior,” and yet “Empirical evidence problematizes attribution of robust traits” (Doris, 1999, p.507). Even though Doris rejects the idea that persons possess robust, or global, traits, but he does allow for “local” traits that “reflect dispositional differences among persons” (Doris, 1999, p.507). Softer than Harman on this point, Doris summarizes, “According to the first situationist thesis, behavioral variation among individuals often owes more to distinct circumstances than distinct personalities; the difference between the person who behaves honestly and the one who fails to do so, for example, may be more a function of situation than character” (Doris, 1999, p.507).

It will be helpful to take a moment to say what I mean by various traits referred to throughout this essay. Traits divide into personality and non-personality. Non-personality traits would include traits like brown eyes and being six feet tall. Personality traits will break down into character traits and non-character traits. In contrast to other personality traits, I will take character trait to be “a personality trait for which a person who has it is, in that respect, an appropriate object of normative assessment by the relevant norms” (Miller, 2014, p.15). Further, following Miller, I will limit the scope to *moral* character traits. These traits warrant a moral evaluation. Non-moral character traits might include being logical or witty, and, Miller says, “We do not morally praise someone just for being logical or witty” (Miller, 2014, p.33).

With respect to character traits, the classical view is that virtues are what Doris calls ‘global’; they are robust traits which manifest consistent behavior across variable situations and time. Doris thinks that, based on empirical research in psychology, these sorts of traits do not exist. In contrast, he speaks of ‘local’ traits, which manifest relatively consistent behavior only across similar situations. For Doris, then local traits can explain the appearance of behavioral consistency. The consistency we observe in ordinary circumstances, and thus the reliability of the predictive power of past behavior, is actually consistency within only very “narrowly specified domains” (Doris, 2002, p.66). When the day after day situations within a domain are similar, we can expect to observe behavioural consistency. For Doris, these behaviors anchored in local traits will not be “not reliably expressed across diverse situations with highly variable degrees of trait-conduciveness” (Doris, 2002, p.66).

Contra Doris, I will argue that there is a way to account for the lack of cross-situational consistency without giving up on the idea of global traits altogether. Throughout, I will use the term ‘character’ to refer to a person’s “character traits and the relationships between them” (Miller, 2013, p.4).

### **3. Character as Competence**

“The degree of robustness of one’s competence, for example, will be directly proportional to the breadth of the span of situations wherein one would produce good driving” (Sosa, 2009, p.285).

In order to explain what he means by competence when speaking of character, he employs the analogy of driving competence. Driving competence is “a disposition to produce driving that is safe, when one is at the wheel, and efficient in routing to one’s destination upon getting directions” (Sosa, 2009, p.283). It is too simplistic to say merely that one has or has not driving competence. He takes behavior to have

what he calls a “two-ply” explanation. That is, when accounting for why a person behaves in a certain way, one must consider their competence (i.e. the possession and strength of the relevant character trait) and the “relevant triggering conditions” (i.e. the context within which the behavior occurs). “Of course, situations *will* affect how we explain the performance of drivers. But then any competence, indeed any disposition, will issue in a certain behavior only given certain triggering conditions” (Sosa, 2009, p.285).

Clearly, driving competence ranges over a variety of skill levels. Just as it is too simplistic to say one has or has not driving competence, it is also too simplistic, when explaining why a person crashed his car, to appeal to competence alone. If anyone has a high level of driving competence, surely a NASCAR driver does. And it seems reasonable to say that teenagers with newly minted drivers licenses have minimal driving competence at best. This is not enough, however, to predict outcomes. If a NASCAR driver is told to navigate turns on an icy road at a high rate of speed, it is reasonable to expect that such a driver, despite a high level of competence, may crash the vehicle. A new driver, on the other hand, might be able to navigate orange traffic cones in an empty parking lot on a sunny day without too much trouble. Surely the latter is not a more competent driver, despite having come through the test without a scratch on the vehicle.

With the competence, or disposition, in place, the triggering conditions serve to “elicit the manifestation of the competence” (Sosa, 2009, p.285). The fact that competence should be explained by factors other than competence does not tell against the existence of competence. Sosa explains, “Variability of marble rolls is not explicable through the universally shared disposition of marbles to roll, but each marble roll might still be explained in essential part through that disposition and its underlying basis, the rigid sphericity of a marble” (Sosa, 2009, p.287). So too, the fact that many experiments suggest that behavior ought to be explained by appeal to external, non-dispositional factors, does not tell against the existence of global traits. If it is true that most of us lack full virtues and that situational factors must be included in any psychologically realistic account of human behavior, appeal to global traits might still be a key ingredient to such an explanation. We can both possess a genuine competence *and* display variably levels of success exhibiting such a competence under a variety of conditions.

In other words, the variation in behavior across diverse situations does not mean that there are no global traits. It could mean that most of us do not possess virtues (or vices). It may mean that we do possess virtues, but we do so at variable levels of moral competence, and, as such, they manifest in ways that vary with the eliciting conditions. We have a limited competence such that we reliably exhibit character traits in similar situations, and yet we may fail to exhibit these same character traits when the situation is sufficiently complex or unfamiliar. This does not tell against the existence of a competence; it merely indicates that our competence is perhaps not as high as we would like it to be. One might ask how we can improve our moral competence or how we might we develop our own character. We will consider some strategies in the section that follows.

#### **4. Strategies for Character Development and Implications for Leaders**

Possible strategies for character development include exemplars, nudging, and goal-directed pursuits. Miller reviews a number of strategies in his recent work (2018) to include “do nothing” and “virtue labeling” among others. The idea of moral exemplars, or role models, as a way to motivate virtue

cultivation may, perhaps, be the oldest strategy around. If one wants to develop in the virtues, then look to the virtuous person, and do what that person does. This remains promising as a strategy today, and Miller's mixed-trait view does not, I think, eliminate the possibility of true moral exemplars. Furthermore, one might look to a variety of other agents who, however imperfect, exemplify one or more virtues. One need not have a perfectly virtuous exemplar for that exemplar to be helpful in moving one forward.

For my purposes here, I want to focus on two strategies. One involves the pursuit of goals, the achievement of which would entail virtuous behavior. This comes up while she is arguing that "one can understand habitual virtuous actions as rational actions that are directed to achieving virtue-relevant goals" (Snow, 2009, p.39). Snow does not offer this primarily as a strategy for developing virtue, but it seems to me nicely suited to do just that sort of work. Rather than aim at any particular virtue directly, aim instead at a "virtue-relevant" goal. This is particularly interesting in light of the inherent difficulty in pursuing virtues directly. The skill analogy is powerful, but it does not translate easily when it comes to pursuing the development of virtue as skill. For example, if one wants to develop the skill of running a mile faster, it is not terribly mysterious how to do this. Run a mile, and record the time. Do the sorts of exercises associated with speed, leg strength, and increased cardiovascular capacity for a period, say six weeks. Run a mile again, and record the time. Both the "how" of skill development and the metric are relatively straightforward. This is not so with respect to the character trait of courage or perseverance. How would one measure how courageous one is today. How would one train to be more courageous? It is even less clear how one would measure progress in courageousness. Yet, if one selects a goal such as "run a marathon next spring," it seems reasonable to think that one will see strengthening in a variety of traits in pursuit of this goal, including courage and perseverance.

Snow elaborates on virtue-relevant goal pursuit in a recent (forthcoming) work. Under this sort of strategies, one does not pursue virtue directly. In fact, Snow even argues that some people can develop virtue "without realizing that they are indeed acquiring virtue (Snow, forthcoming, p.68). While pursuing being a good parent, one will develop virtues such as patience. The acquisition of virtue in this case "is not conscious or deliberate, but takes place as a kind of by-product, mainly outside of conscious awareness" (Snow, forthcoming, 68). This requires a conception of "good parent" and some sense of what that person might do in a variety of parenting situations. Presumably any respectable conception of "good parent" will include the exercise of some virtues such that in simply pursuing being a good parent, one necessarily will have to practice those virtues, thereby coming to possess them in a substantive way, even if acquired indirectly.

Another strategy that I find promising, in light of Sosa's analysis, is a form of what Miller calls "selecting our situation." This strategy involves recognizing that we are subject, perhaps more than we care to admit, to a variety of situational factors and avoid situations in which we are likely to fail to act according to our virtue-relevant aspirational aims. Interestingly, Doris seems to endorse this strategy. In *Lack of Character*, Doris provides an example situation where a colleague with whom you have had a "long flirtation" invites you over for dinner when your spouse is away. He notes that on a view that places a high level of confidence in the causal powers of robust global traits, one might enter this situation without a second thought. A different response, one that Doris thinks makes more sense in light of the empirical research, is that one might avoid such a dinner "like the plague, because" he continues "you know that you are not able to predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values" (Doris, 2002, p.147).

In his discussion of “selecting our situation,” Miller references the above example and expresses two worries. One is that we cannot always avoid difficult situations. The other is that we cannot even know *that* a situation will be problematic unless we are aware of the features of situations that are likely to derail us. Yet, most of us are not aware that we might be swayed by, for example, the smell of freshly-baked cookies (Miller, 2018, p.206). To the latter point, yes, it is imperative that people both become self-aware of the features of situations that tend to derail them and also become informed about the kinds of situational factors, whether smells or temperatures or hurried conditions and so forth, that one might not consider as having the potential to derail their good intentions in a difficult situation. To the other point, however, the emphasis needs to be primarily on *avoiding* problematic situations. Instead, I suggest we place emphasis on recognizing and assessing those situations and making more informed decisions.

One need not avoid driving in icy conditions where there is good reason to do so. But one will greatly increase the chances of successfully navigating icy roads and bridges if one is robustly aware of the many ways failure could manifest. The strategy is not to avoid all problematic situations but rather to enter them “eyes wide open” and with good reason. Consider the way one might informally (or formally) conduct a risk assessment prior to driving in snowy conditions. One might think through which tires are on the vehicle and where they’ll be driving, main roads versus those roads that are less likely to be plowed and so forth. In this case, I might add a third “ply” to Sosa’s explanation of behavior. There is the competence, the triggering conditions, and the degree to which the individual was aware of the conditions and acted accordingly. If one is surprised by an icy corner, one might run off the road. If one is aware of an icy corner, one might slow down and navigate it successfully. In this case, the competence and the conditions are stable. But the competence is exercised in such a way as to increase the likelihood of success.

On the view of global traits I have advocated, one in which we both possess them in a “mixed” form and, for those virtuous traits, we possess as a weak or minimal competence, this strategy takes a slightly different form. Rather than a “see and avoid” approach, one would take a risk assessment approach. Granted, there may still be some situations one might avoid out of prudence or an “abundance of caution.” But most situations are not to be avoided merely because they are risky. Rather, one ought to enter them with an eye for risk and a full awareness of the potential dangers. In the military, for any given combat mission a unit may encounter, the question is never simply, “should we do this or not?” The question is something more like, “Does the potential payoff of this mission warrant the level of risk involved?” Sure, there are some missions upon which no sane commander would embark. But most missions are simply assessed and pushed forward to the appropriate level for approval or disapproval. For those that are disapproved, the calculus is typically not “this is too risky”. It is “this is too risky *for the potential payoff*”. That is, the mission itself is not out of bounds *simpliciter*. If it is out of bounds, it is because the level of risk involved outweighs the perceived benefit. We should think about difficult moral situations in the same way. When entering into morally risky situations, we should consider the relevant factors and make an informed decision as to whether entering such a situation is

or is not worth the risk. This shrinks the list of “would never do” items reframes everything else as “might do depending on a variety of situational factors and realistic risk assessment.” In other words, the very approach requires the exercise of practical wisdom. Repeatedly assessing situations in this way is itself an exercise of practical wisdom and one which helps continuously develop practical wisdom on the part of the agent. Among several conclusions, Sosa includes the following:

*As for the situationist recommendation that we should assess the situations we enter for the relevant risks, this surely will be endorsed by virtue theory, which will take the discernment of and proper weighing of such risk to be among the most important virtues pertinent to any given domain of human performance (2009, p.288).*

We should be hopeful that we can, in fact, improve various virtues, and we need not merely avoid problematic situations. Rather, we need greater awareness of ourselves and our situations so that we might make better moral decisions on the basis of informed assessment. In doing so, one is facilitating both the exercise of one or more virtues as well as the practical wisdom required to exercise them in ever-increasingly difficult situations. It seems to me that the above strategies might be employed not only for oneself but also, for those in leadership roles, in service to the character aspirations of those under one's charge. If persons who work inside an organization and have explicitly or implicitly agreed to behave in ways consistent with the organization's values, leaders have some obligation to aid them in doing so. It is not sufficient, for ourselves or for others, to simply say "do this and not that." Rather, like a good coach on a developing team, one ought to provide strategies and resources and support to aid the development of those under their charge. Much more could be said here.

## **5. Some Concerns**

One concern is that these strategies lack empirical evidence to support their long-term effectiveness. Another concern is that over-indexing on strategies may have the reverse effect. If we take every precaution against the risks of a situation and create pathways for ourselves that are so smooth, we may end up with actions in which all will, intention, and decision making has been removed from the equation. This seems contrary to virtue development. To this point, one upside of the account Snow gives of habitual virtuous actions is that when understood properly, with enough information, one can distinguish between virtuous actions and what she calls "truly or genuinely" virtuous actions (Snow, 2009, p.53). I prefer to think of these two types of actions along the lines of virtue-consistent and virtuous actions, where virtue-consistent actions are those actions which are identical to virtuous actions but without the practical wisdom and appropriate motivation that must accompany virtuous actions. To illustrate, Snow gives the example of Tim, who consistently performs just actions because he wants to be like his father, and his father was a just man. But Tim does not aim to be just; he aims to be like his father. Were his father an unjust man, Tim would be unjust. Surely Tim's consistently just actions cannot alone qualify Tim as just. Tim habitually performs virtue-consistent actions by doing what his father does. On the other hand, Tim's brother Tom might perform the same actions as Tim, but Tom, by contrast, aims to be a just man himself. He may even look to Tim's father and "do what he does." But the difference here is that Tom aims to be just, not merely to be like his father. He aims to be just. He sees that his father is a just man, and he does what his father does on account of his aim to be just. Addressing these and other concerns in turn deserves more attention than I can give here.

## **6. Conclusion**

Given the recent spate of empirical research around human behavior, it seems that we are indeed not very good at being good. Yet, as I have argued, we are not without hope. We ought to strive to be virtuous, but if we pursue virtue as a product of sheer will and self-discipline, we are likely to fail. I have proposed some strategies that one might employ to aid the pursuit of virtue. I have further suggested



that leaders bear some responsibility to aid, in a transparent way, those under their charge in the pursuit of virtue as agreed upon, whether tacitly or explicitly, by voluntary participation in the organization. There are no bonus points for developing driving competence unaided by instruction, practice, and support of various sorts. So too, if our aim is to develop virtue, we ought to do so in ways that actually move us toward that end. Becoming virtuous is neither a solo act nor a sheer act of the will. It is my hope that, in ways that are appropriate for their particular organization and context, leaders will employ some or all of the strategies above, or others not mentioned here, and that this feature of leadership will be seen as essential to leading well.

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