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Insight Series

How I Got Interested in the Philosophy of Character

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As someone who works on character most of my time these days, including directing the Character Project at Wake Forest University (www.thecharacterproject.com), it would only be fitting for me to have a grand systemic narrative about how I strategically planned to work on this topic all along. I'm sorry to disappoint you, though. The story of how I came to work on character and direct the Character Project is largely a story of restlessness and luck.

When I declared my major in philosophy at Princeton University in the spring of my sophomore year, the study of character was not on my mind. I was primarily interested in philosophy of religion, but was in a bind at Princeton because no one really worked in the area. During the summer after my junior year, though, I read After Virtue by Alasdair MacIntyre, and like many readers I was captivated by the book. MacIntyre sold me on virtue ethics, at least at the time, and I decided to focus my senior thesis on defending contemporary virtue ethics.

But who would I work with at Princeton? There were not many options in that area. The main one I was steered towards was Gilbert Harman, and I must admit that he was extremely generous with his time during the entire year. As an ignorant undergraduate, I had no idea what I was getting myself into philosophically when it came to working with Harman. In fact, this was about the time when he was writing papers like "The Nonexistence of Character Traits." Thankfully he did not give me too much of a hard time about my views, and I was able to graduate with a BA in philosophy.

A few months later it was off to the University of Notre Dame for a Ph.D. in philosophy. Again my hope was to work in philosophy of religion, and Notre Dame was certainly the place to be at the time. But that hope was against short-lived. For I was advised to stay away from philosophy of religion since there were no jobs in the area (very wise advise, I later came to see). So once again I returned to ethics.

This time, though, it was meta-ethics, not normative theory. I spent my fourth year at the University of Michigan, which had an amazing group of ethicists working together in 2003 (Railton, Gibbard, Darwall, Anderson, and Velleman, among them). Meta-ethics was very much in the air in Ann Arbor, and I was hooked. I then returned to Notre Dame for my fifth year to complete a dissertation on issues at the intersection of meta-ethics and moral psychology, such as motivational internalism, the Humean theory of motivation, motivating reasons, and so forth. Michael DePaul was my adviser, and was a superb director and friend as well.

I don't regret this work in meta-ethics in the least. It helped me land a tenure-track position at Wake Forest University, and lead to publications which were the basis for receiving tenure five years later. Plus I am still persuaded by the positions I took back then. But by my third or fourth year at Wake Forest, I was growing restless. Meta-ethics as a field was becoming increasingly technical, and gravitating towards what I thought were very difficult and not as stimulating debates about the

semantics of moral language and the metaphysics of moral properties. A lot of the papers I was reading seemed to be making small contributions to an already vast literature.

Fortunately, the topic of character had always been lurking in the background. In my second year of graduate school, I read John Doris's paper in Noûs on situationism and character, and wrote a response as my final paper for David Solomon's graduate seminar. This response, thanks in part to very helpful comments from Doris himself, ended up being published in The Journal of Ethics in 2003, and so I was able to contribute to the discussion of what would become a very hot topic during the early stages of the literature. If only I had realized at the time that this issue was going to take off in the subsequent years! But I did not have this vision, and put the topic aside for several years.

That is, until Candace Upton invited all the people who had engaged in the situationist discussion to a conference at the University of Denver in 2005. That forced me to get back into the literature to write a paper for the conference, and in doing so I discovered a thread that, unbeknownst to me, would end up binding me for years to come.

The thread was to try to examine the psychology literature on moral behavior in a lot more detail than had previously been done before, in order to see what the best picture of character really is. Some people said that psychological research supports the widespread presence of traditional virtues, others that it supports the presence of traditional vices, still others the presence of local character traits, and so on. I had to see for myself. And was I found was what I would come to call the Mixed Trait view.

Hence around 2007 or so I moved away from meta-ethics and really dove into issues about the empirical nature of our characters. This was very fortuitous (here is one of those cases of luck) as it was a good time to be trying to publish in the area. I was fortunate enough to get several pieces accepted (here is luck again), and was beginning to dream of a book project.

Then luck struck again (or providence, depending on how you think about these things, I guess). I had met Michael Murray all the way back in graduate school when he was visiting Notre Dame for a year. Now he was the director for philosophy and theology at the John Templeton Foundation, and was interested in supporting a large scale project on character. So the stars aligned, I put together a great team of philosophers and psychologists to work together for three years, we received a grant from the Templeton Foundation and launched the Character Project in 2010, and I wrote two books developed the Mixed Trait approach in the following year. The thread that was my interest in questions of character and virtue had always been with me, and now it had gotten me completely entangled. I hope to stay that way for many more years to come.

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