



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## **Good character as the practice of integrity and adaptability**

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December 2012

*'These are unpublished conference papers given at the inaugural conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, Character and Public Policy: Educating for an Ethical Life, at the University of Birmingham, Friday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2012. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.'*

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Character is a useful concept because it traverses a number of dichotomies: it appeals both to a performance paradigm and a moral one; and it bespeaks individuality, but can be used to promote general standards of behavior. However, to be able to promote good character as an aim in our own or others development, we need to be able to make it a unified object that can be discussed, *recognized* and understood. This means we require a conception that is sufficiently concrete to be identifiable in lived situations, but can still be rendered in the abstract to be justified and made coherent. To do this, this paper develops a particular moral theory (that of Christine Korsgaard) to offer a useable model of good character that reflects and entails standards for acting well. In this way, it aims to just slightly tighten the net of reasoning which underpins the place for character in a vision of moral and social development, and produce a unified account of the constitution of good character so that it can be taken as an object of our thought, or aim of our actions.

In the liberal, English-speaking context, the closest we currently have to a workable conception of character resulted from the work of the Demos 'Character Inquiry' (2009, 2011). Construing character as something both ethical *and* instrumental, the Character Inquiry presents character as a set of capabilities – that is, as something latent, to be realised should a person choose. The first report of this project refers to 'character capabilities' as the "crucial ingredients in enabling people to pursue and achieve their individual wellbeing" (Lexmond and Reeves, 2009, p. 12). Character was identified as the abilities of application, self-direction, self-regulation and empathy (Lexmond and Grist, 2011, p. 14). I do not disagree that these traits make suitable ingredients for a good life. However, they are just that – ingredients – and they do not become ethically valuable unless realized in a sustained and particular way. Placing too much weight on the identification and promotion of abilities must be reevaluated as neuro and behavioral science increasingly urge that behavior can only be considered a product of person *and* context (e.g. Fischer & Biddell, 2006; Mascolo & Fischer, 2010). Abilities, dispositions or skill level do not exist in substantive form, and are liable to change in relation to context when instantiated. This is *not* to argue that there is no such thing as character – the situationist argument is dealt with

well by the Inquiry<sup>1</sup>. Yet it is one thing to say individuals may have habitual patterns of acting, and another that we can readily establish whether a certain capability is present in a person. Dynamic skill theory urges that, whether in the realm of formal education or character development, it is at actions-in-context we should look for the manifestation of (cap)ability, rather than being drawn to isolate internal qualities.

We therefore need to make a distinction, where the Inquiry elides capabilities and virtues (p. 29). Capabilities can be put to diverse ends. Virtues are humanized, philosophical concepts which, when practised in lived situations, we expect to endorse. Describing good character as the practice of particular virtues is not in itself much of an advance on describing it as capabilities, other than to provide a moment to stress the point that a virtue is not something we 'have' but something we 'show'. This underpins a picture of character as something constituted by our behaviour, which in itself is an important if uncontroversial moral message.

So if (as has always been said) good character is constituted by good action, the first important question to address is: how do we recognize a good action?

### *What is a good action?*

This paper takes as the most compelling case of what it means to act well Christine Korsgaard's theory of self-constitution (1996, 2009)<sup>2</sup>. The notion of 'self-constitution', in short, is that with every action we commit, we contribute to the creation of an identity: an identity under which (and by means of which) we value ourselves. This identity in turn provides us with reasons for action and is re-endorsed every time we act. Korsgaard's model is valuable as, in my view, the sole meta-ethical theory which includes a powerful account of moral motivation, by connecting the will (or need) to be rational (or to make reason), with

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Lexmond and Reeves, p. 32, Bagginni, p. 38 do well to put forward the case that evidence that our behavior often results largely but not entirely from the conditions of a situation does not render the character debate obsolete, but rather all the more important.

<sup>2</sup> It is not possible in a paper of this length to do justice to Korsgaard's theory of self-constitution, which has been developed and argued over the course of 15 plus years. It can be noted, though, that it developed from a Kantian picture of morality, and uses some of the language, but in my argument does not necessitate accepting his metaphysics.

the requirement to act morally. To briefly show this connection, here in steps is Korsgaard's picture of human morality (2009):

1. We have to act
2. We are rational and self-conscious, so we have to have reasons for acting
3. We ourselves are our only source of reasons, so we have to be able to respect ourselves as a source of reasons
4. To respect ourselves in this way, we have to be unified
5. To be unified over the course of a whole consistent life we have to constitute ourselves according to the principle of reason (the categorical imperative)
6. So we have to act according to the principle of 'universal(izable) reason'

Standards of goodness have little determinate meaning in a non-attributive context, and so to defend this picture of what it is to act well requires viewing it with an eye to the conditions these standards are attributed to<sup>3</sup>: the conditions of human action.

#### *What is the context for human action?*

To establish the non-arbitrary contextual conditions of human action, we can look at that which is inherent in any instance of (reflecting and) acting<sup>4</sup>. Firstly, any question about 'what one ought to do' calls on the use of our awareness of the dimension of time. The ability to think outside of time – to think in *the subjunctive mood* – is a distinctly human capability. Secondly, questioning human morality relies on our language, and our ability to communicate with each other about hypotheticals. This *shared* awareness<sup>5</sup> that there are multiple possibilities for action produces the environment of reason-asking which, as we will

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<sup>3</sup> This section builds on Philippa Foot's argument that 'good' only exists in relation to "a certain network of interrelated" functions and purposes (2001, p. 40). The following argument emerges in contradiction to Judith Thomson's (2006) view that what we ought(morality) to do is all-encompassing; on the contrary, what we 'ought(morality)' to do depends on certain (albeit universal) conditions of humanity.

<sup>4</sup> The arguments of this paper apply to that which we choose to do (as opposed to that which we might be said to do 'unthinkingly'). Having said this, whether or not someone actually reflects before acting does not change what it would or would not have been acceptable for them to do had they reflected, and chosen. This is not an attempt to avoid the problems posed by evidence of our limited capacity to control our actions and behavior, but to take the position that to see our behavior as less than in our control, at least in the abstract, is to strip away grounds for morality we would do better to uphold as long as we can.

<sup>5</sup> Or 'shared belief', for a compatibilist position on free will.

see, underpins the requirement for an agent to uphold universal rationality. These two contextual conditions are non-arbitrary, because they are entailed in the very act of asking questions about agency and morality.

### *What is rational action?*

If one agrees with the above, then it can be argued that to be a *rational human* is not simply to take the means to one's ends (as per instrumentalism), but to construe one's actions to accord with those conditions which are a permanent part of one's context. As a rational being who is aware of the subjunctive, and aware that others of your communicative group can call on the subjunctive, it is unacceptable to be unable to reason in relation to it. To be able to whole-heartedly endorse the principle upon which you act, in a way that you could justify it to yourself and others and *expect and intend to continue to endorse that principle* (a basis for self-consistency), requires it to meet some standard of universality (i.e., that principle could be applied by anyone in your position)<sup>6</sup>. This will towards full and non-provisional endorsement of one's actions is the basis of integrity. I will not at this point press the exact nature of what it means for a principle to be universalizable, because I believe that almost everyone understands what this means in the abstract, but argument about individual cases can continue incessantly. I am, however, of the view that the abstract understanding of the categorical imperative<sup>7</sup>, if reasoned about not only whole-heartedly but at sufficient levels of complexity<sup>8</sup>, results only in action that most would call moral. The above conception therefore, in the abstract at least, means that to act with integrity *entails* acting morally – that is, not contravening the principle of the categorical imperative.

This might seem to be the end of the argument, and it is close to where Korsgaard's argument comes to. I want to push a potential weakness in her case, in order to move closer to a picture of good action that can be worked through in a lived context.

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller defense of this line, see part 9 of Korsgaard (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Philippa Foot (2001) and Korsgaard, at more length, draw on a similar line to argue that acting well and acting rationally are the same.

<sup>8</sup> On this conception, acting in accordance with the categorical imperative involves an artful process of deliberation about human situations. Reasoning, and the ability to apply the steps of universalization, is only valuable if coupled with (thick) knowledge of what can and cannot be done to a human. This of course carries certain implications for what is entailed in 'moral education'.

For Korsgaard, a right action must have the property of ‘universality’, which she glosses as “the proper action for anyone in exactly the circumstances specified” (2009, 1.3.4). This presents a problem. If this is the condition for right action, this threatens to require a person to respond in one right way to any given situation. For some, this implication is unacceptable as it makes the ideal human an automaton, carrying out calculations to act in a way prescribed by universal reason<sup>9</sup>. This in turn brings with it the possibility, challenging for a non-consequentialist ethics, that an ideal human is no more than an instantiation of perfect universal reason. However, this picture of automated action is not what Korsgaard’s theory presents. For her, any one action is “an act done for the sake of an end” (1.2.5). And action is made not upon a principle, but upon a maxim that we formulate ourselves, in accordance with a particular *interpretation* of a principle:

...we choose the principles of our own causality, and in doing so we constitute our identities as individual human agents. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we choose the hypothetical and categorical imperatives themselves. The Kantian imperatives are principles that instruct us in how to formulate our maxims...  
(6.4.9)

Therefore each action includes within it an *additional* end, of self-constitution. What kind of self-constitution occurs arises from the whole way we commit the action (1.2.3). The self-constitution is not itself the *only* end of the action (indeed, Korsgaard would not describe it as an end at all, see 1.4.5): if asked to give the reason for studying for a test, for example, we would probably say ‘to do well in the exam’, not ‘to be a good student’.

To act with integrity, therefore, is to draw yourself together in a way that you can rationally endorse the principle of your action. A whole set of processes go into this – reflection; reasoning with thick knowledge of human affairs about the implications and effects of your action; and making a judgment about whether it could be defensible to others<sup>10</sup>. If you judge that it can, you can act as a whole person. To do anything less is to act on less than

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Lavin (2004) argues that rational agency requires the possibility of error.

<sup>10</sup> The language here coming closer to Thomas Scanlon’s (1999) conception of moral action than a Kantian picture is indication that the Kantian model, attractive as it is in the abstract, leaves many unanswered questions when it comes to lived situations.

the principle of your reason, and be governed by an external power (a desire, for example, or the will of another).

### *The role of identity*

Further to the above, our motivation to act well cannot arise directly from a will to act in accordance with universal reason. In order to have a reason to act *at all*, we have to develop some sense of identity that prompts us to further constitute ourselves. As Korsgaard writes:

the human plight [is that we] must act, and we need reasons in order to act. And unless there are *some* principles with which we identify we will have no reasons to act. Every human being must make himself into someone in particular, in order to have reasons to act and to live" (1.4.7)

Our self-consciousness requires us to create ourselves as a source of reasons. What this argument opens up is space for an *internal sense of consistent identity*: a sense of self which we have a will to further and maintain through action. Without this, we are simply another instance of humanity, and might as well be an automaton.

To further explain the need for this sense of identity, I will demonstrate why the universal grounds of rational action (the categorical imperative) cannot alone supply reasons to act. There are a number of reasons for this, and together they provide the place for the role of identity and character in morality.

The first reason why we cannot expect humans to maintain personal consistency purely through rationality appears when we consider the subject of children, development and education. Korsgaard's theory is threatened by the question: what does a picture of morality based on rational agency mean for those who do not have access to full rationality? The task of self-constitution involves making oneself into a coherent whole even in the knowledge that you have not always been entirely rational. You may not be 'responsible' for those earlier acts, but they still constitute for *others* part of the human who is *now* responsible for what it constitutes itself as. Therefore, to maintain the unity by which you can respect yourself as a source of action requires having a sense of personal identity that weaves together potentially *irrational* action.

The second reason why our grounds for acting cannot arise solely from a will to abide by (and manifest) universal reason is that the conditions of action are usually too limited to supply the 'data' such calculations call for. As humans, although we can think outside of time, we are not capable of fully predicting the outcomes of our actions. However, we are capable of inferring intent even when it diverges from outcome, and so the (inferred) intent and outcome of an action can have separate consequences. 'Action' is a messy concept beyond individual control, and if our identity were constituted by the 'outcomes' of our actions, it might be outside of our control, but the principles on which we act *are* under our control and we can rightly be held responsible for them. The way in which an action is committed – or the principle on which an action is committed – is important separate from its outcome. How we choose to act can be guided by principles as to what we wish to communicate by our action (our self conception of our personal identity). So, a distinctive space emerges for something which:

- a) governs action in situations of limited rationality or incomplete information;
- b) arises from our ways of acting when intent diverges from outcome;
- c) is created by the possibility for divergent yet equally principled behavior in the same contexts<sup>11</sup>.

What we perceive in this space is what we can understand as character. Korsgaard does not fully distinguish between the inner sense of identity which provides reason for action, and the outer identity which is constituted by a person's actions – which is apparent to others and which we are responsible for (2009, e.g. 1.4.2-8). She tries to elide these two, but they are not the same. The outer face – and that which we are morally responsible for – is what I<sup>12</sup> call a person's character.

### *Good character in a changing world*

I argued above that the motivation to submit our actions to standards of justifiability and consistency arises from a constant feature of our environment: our situation amongst other rational, self-conscious, subjunctive-mood-reflecting beings. If we 'matter', it is only under

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<sup>11</sup> See also fn. 10 above

<sup>12</sup> Along with F. Scott Fitzgerald and all use the maxim 'action is character'



the valuation of these other people. If our character is what we are responsible for – all that we are – we have reason to maintain the integrity of it as best we can. Therefore insofar as you can matter you have grounds to protect your character.

The above argument might seem to prompt a conclusion that the highest ethical goal is to strive for the greatest possible integrity. An individual who reflects and considers each action with utter rationality would be able to proceed through life without committing any inconsistent acts, and be able to continually instantiate a fully consistent identity where she identifies with the reason for each of her acts. This would only be so, however, were her external environment to remain fixed. If this were the case, the particular role she cast for herself – the more particular instantiation of the human form she chose to manifest – might remain a good and rational source of reasons over the course of her life. However, our environments do change, and nowadays more quickly than ever before. Our identity may provide us with reasons to act in a certain way, but a change in environment could render these reasons unsuitable.

In this vein, Philippa Foot reflected that in the case of other species – plant or animal – whether their *form* provides them with a good life is often down to chance. The form of a giraffe may have developed to carry out its function in the world as best as possible, but a sudden change in the external environment – the culling of all tall trees for example – might suddenly render it less suited to carry out its function. In the case of a human, however, we have proved able to adapt to a very wide range of situations. Moreover, more than any other species<sup>13</sup>, we show variety in the way we instantiate ourselves. Because of this ability, we (rightly) hold each other responsible when we fail to adapt. Maintaining *good* character – the particular instantiation of personhood which is manifest to others through our actions – requires ensuring that the more particular role and set of reasons you have chosen to endorse with your actions remains consistent with the requirements of the categorical imperative.

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this point, see Foot (2001), chapter 4

The process of self-constitution therefore remains a dynamic, creative activity. We are faced with the need to reflect and make choices that might favour flexibility over reasserting prior principles. The virtue of integrity, the practice of which sustains moral action, must be tempered by that of adaptability. This particular term highlights that not only must we seek consistency with our past self and the requirements of universal reason, but that doing the latter may require us to readjust and reform our self-conception.

### *Conclusion*

The aim of this paper has been to develop a conception of good character as arising from the maintenance of integrity tempered by adaptability, and in doing so offer a model that is sufficiently robust that it can stand up to reason and reflection and sufficiently simple to be both action-guiding and recognizable across diverse situations. The thesis which underpins this argument is that the concept of character is more valuable as an ethical prize than as a capability we seek to identify or build.

If we take this unified conception, it offers some practical implications. It suggests we do more to uphold examples of integrity, and identify cases of adaptation. It asks us to value personal identity and character as that which makes us whole and real to ourselves and others. Finally, it foregrounds the importance of reasoning skills, encouraging alertness to hypocrisy and post hoc rationalization. Moral educators will be familiar with the pitfalls of placing reasoning at the centre of ethical education, but just because we can recognize the thought-action gap does not mean we should defer to behaviorist approaches; the effort should be to use all we know about our imperfect rationality to shape environments and behavior to make reasoning and reflection occur more easily, and more often. To contribute to that, we can acknowledge that such reasoning serves our need for coherence as well as our moral obligations. In line with this, it is hoped that by drawing together a model of what it means to act well in a diverse world, the above conception of character can be a helpful part of our inner life as well as of mental models of the social world.

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