



Tradition in the Formation and Development of Character and Practice

John Haldane

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John Haldane, University of St Andrews.

INCOMPLETE DRAFT

1. Character – some challenges.

As applied to human individuals, and by extension to groups and institutions, ‘character’ is a somewhat amorphous term. This, along with reservations about its purportedly moralising overtones, particularly when related to virtue and vice, has made it the subject of some debate in the various fields in which it has long featured (be it ambiguously), including psychology, moral philosophy, literary studies, and educational theory.

Within the first, it has been contended that behaviour is wholly, or more deeply and extensively influenced by agent’s goals and strategies and by situational features of choice, such as setting and social expectations, rather than by inherent personal character.¹ Within the second, there is an ongoing debate about the relative priority of motive, act and outcome in the evaluation of action overall, and about the underdetermination of choice by character (a point related in part to the psychological thesis that proximate goals and situational factors have greater bearing).² In the field of literary theory there has been a move from emphasising the interior life of fictional figures to conceiving of them as formed by, and blending with their material and social interactions. Writing of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, a focus of much literary and philosophical discussion, S. Pearl Brilmyer writes that it “[represents] character not as a hidden or buried kernel of personality, but instead as a

¹ See L. Ross and R. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991).

² See J. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and G. Harman ‘Moral Philosophy meets Moral Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 99, 1999, pp. 315-331. See also Haldane ‘Is Every Human Action Morally Significant?’ *Philosophy* 86, 2011, and ‘Some Questions about Virtue’ in E. Grimi ed., *Virtue Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Springer, 2019).

socially determined material figuration produced through the accumulation of soft forms or forces” (though in the final paragraph of the book itself, Eliot’s omniscient narrator makes the lesser claim that “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not *greatly* determined by what lies outside it” – my *emphasis*).³ Finally, in educational theory, character education (again especially when interpreted in terms of virtue formation) has been accused of promoting individualistic values of self-concern and self-reliance in place of a focus on societal critique and social justice.⁴

There have been many responses to these challenges⁵ and the upshot is a general tendency to draw back from contesting the very idea of character and virtue, to urging an appreciation of the diversity and complex interplay of psychological, social and contextual factors relevant to the explanation and evaluation of action – something that advocates of character as a significant element in the interpretation of action need hardly deny. An indication of this more moderate approach, coming from a much cited philosophical ‘character sceptic’, is John M. Doris’s recent assessment of his own earlier position. He writes: “The way I’d put it now is roughly this: in many cases, situational variables matter more, and personality variables less, than one might expect. This framing avoids the implication that situational factors generally matter more than dispositional factors; indeed, it is

³ See S. P. Brilmyer ‘Plasticity, Form and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch*’ *Representations* 130 (1) 2015, pp 60-83 at p. 71. The narrator’s observation comes in George Eliot, *Middlemarch* Vol. III (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1878) p. 464. For a short discussion of the debate about character in literary theory see Jill Galvan ‘Character’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46 (3-4) 2018: pp. 612-616. For a philosophical treatment see N. Yousef ‘A Novel Concerning Understanding: *Middlemarch* and the Philosophical Commonplace’ Ch. 2 of *The Aesthetic Commonplace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

⁴ See J. Suissa, ‘Character Education and the Disappearance of the Political’ *Ethics and Education* 10 (1) 2015: 105–117, A. Bull and K. Allen, ‘Introduction: Sociological Interrogations of the Turn to Character, *Sociological Research Online* 23 (2), 2018, pp. 392-398; and L. Jerome and B. Kisby, *The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons and the Myths of Character* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019).

⁵ These are usefully summarised and added to by Kristjan Kristjansson in a number of articles, most usefully in ‘Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education – Plus Three Well-Founded Misgivings’ in *British Journal of Educational Studies* 61 (3) 2013, pp. 269-287, and ‘Recent attacks on character education in a UK context: a case of mistaken identities?’ *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 42 (3) 2021: 363-377.

compatible with each factor mattering equally, or even dispositional factors mattering more”.⁶ So far as concerns the challenge about character education being associated with ‘conservative’ or neo-liberal social views if that were to be so it would be a contingent matter since there is no reason why an advocate of character formation should not be a socialist or a progressive liberal – and some have been.⁷

Reviewing earlier critiques, it is also clear that most have been less concerned with rejecting the general notion of character and even specifically moral character than with critiquing specific assumptions and associations. Furthermore, in describing, interpreting, explaining and appraising an agent’s behaviour it is often necessary and generally illuminating to refer to settled though not necessarily unchangeable cognitive, affective and volitional dispositions, as well as to ‘external’ factors such as cultural, social, political and other forces both present and past. In short, the notion of ‘character’ and of enduring character traits is a central part of the analysis of human activity.

2. Character – some complexity and ambiguity

Following the lead of ancient authors, systematic efforts to classify and explain the variety within human character and its formative factors have tended to be either descriptive/evaluative or causal/explanatory, or both. The first philosophers, the Pre-Socratic Ionians, seem not to have been much interested in ethics, but there is a lapidary fragment attributed to Heraclitus: ‘Man’s character is

⁶ J. Doris, ‘The Future of Character’ in *Character Trouble: Undisciplined Essays on Moral Agency and Personality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) p. 217.

⁷ The need of character education was a common theme among nineteenth century British radicals such as Robert Owen in his *A New View of Society Or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice* (London: Longman et al, 1816) which he dedicated to William Wilberforce; and F.J. Gould, ‘The Moral Instruction of Children’, in S. Coit, ed., *Ethical Democracy* (London: Grant Richards, 1900) and *A Socialist Plan of Education* (London: The Twentieth Century Press, 1918). For recent philosophical reflections on the importance of ethical dispositions which are held by him to be an essential part of character see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985) esp. Ch. 1 and Postscript, and ‘The Primacy of Dispositions’ in G. Haydon ed. *Education and Values* (London: Institute of Education, 1987).

his destiny' which is of interest and importance.⁸ The word for character, *éthos*, is the etymological source of the term 'ethics'; while the word here rendered as 'destiny', *dáimon*, referred to a force or spirit intermediary between men and gods that could bestow good or bad fortune. Heraclitus is therefore rejecting the view that a person cannot be held to account for his life because its course may be due to the direction given it by an external force. Instead, a man's character, over which he has some control, is the source of his actions and thereby of his destiny. The ethical on this account concerns qualities of character conducing to living well.⁹ Evidently this idea took hold as may be seen in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and in his *Characters* (c.319BCE) Aristotle's former student and friend Theophrastus sketches thirty types of men: the dissembler, the flatterer, the coward and so on.¹⁰ This work originated the genre of 'Character Sketches' which blossomed in the seventeenth century and continued to be popular thereafter, often becoming satirical as in George Eliot's last publication *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879).¹¹ While Theophrastus portraits are often wry,

⁸ Fragment 119 '*éthos anthropoi dáimon*', see G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp. 213-4.

⁹ It is of course a matter of debate to what extent agents do have control of the characters, and therefore to what extent they can properly be held accountable for actions expressing those characters. The issue I have in mind is not the general one of causal determinism but the specific one that Bernard Williams dubbed 'constitutive luck' - luck in the traits and dispositions that one has: see B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) essays 1 and 2. The idea of a good agent being one who is self-directed by his (good) character such that no external force can undo the value of his life does not appear until Plato attributes it to Socrates in the *Apology*.

¹⁰ *The Characters of Theophrastus* trans. C.E. Bennett and W.A. Hammond (New York: Longman, Green & Co, 1901).

¹¹ Given the philosophical and literary interest in *Middlemarch* it is surprising that there is little written about this her last work (though see Rosemarie Bodenheimer 'George Eliot's Last Stand: *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44 (3). In particular, its final chapter speaks to issues prominent in recent moral and political philosophy analogising communal and personal and identity using as its example the Jewish people – a matter relevant to the application of the idea of character to a group. Adverting to Mill, Theophrastus writes "A modern book on Liberty has maintained that from the freedom of individual men to persist in idiosyncrasies the world may be enriched. Why should we not apply this argument to the idiosyncrasy of a nation, and pause in our haste to hoot it down?" - then concluding "the effective bond of human action is feeling ... Will anyone teach the nullification of this feeling and call his doctrine a philosophy? He will teach a blinding superstition - the superstition that a theory of human wellbeing can be constructed in

his purposes in sketching them were more philosophical and educational. He was Aristotle's successor as head of the Lyceum and in general was concerned to extend and supplement Aristotle's investigations. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle famously identifies and analyses virtues and vices in an abstract theoretical framework, but in Book 2 of the *Rhetoric* he discusses the character (*êthos*) of various classes of people including the young, the old, the noble, and the powerful. What Theophrastus adds is the representation of the vices through the personalised observational description of many types of character acting within specific kinds of situations; and it is possible that these situational portraits were produced to illustrate his own lectures on ethics and on education.

Also indebted in part to Aristotle, though more influential than Theophrastus on subsequent theorising through to the nineteenth century, are several works by Galen that span physiology, psychology philosophy and ethics. Most immediately relevant are *On Temperaments*, *The Capacities of the Soul depend upon the temperaments of the Body*, and *About Character* or *On Character Traits*

¹² Galen uses the term *temperamentis* to refer both to what would later be described as 'personality types' of which he identifies four basic components: the *sanguine*, the *choleric*, the *melancholic*, and the *phlegmatic* and to the balanced mixing of physiological elements, the bodily fluids (humours) which he believed gave rise to them: *blood*, *yellow bile*, *black bile*, and *phlegm*. In this connection it is relevant that he rejects soul-body dualism and any sharp distinction between the psychological and the physiological.

disregard of the influences which have made us human" G. Eliot *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1879) pp. 292-3.

¹² The Latin titles being, respectively, *De Temperamentis*, *Quod animi mores corporis temperamenta sequantur*, and *De Moribus*. For translations see Galen, *On Temperaments* ed and trans. I. Johnston (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000). *The Capacities of the Soul* and *On Character Traits* are gathered in P.N. Singer. Ed. Galen Psychological Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) translated by Singer D. Davies, respectively. For an exploration of the relation between Galen's taxonomy of character types and their physiological causes, and some recent ones see R.M. Stelmack and A. Stalikas 'Galen and the Humor Theory of Treatment' *Personality and Individual Differences* 12 (3) 1991, pp. 255-263.

While subsequent theorising has become more complex and included psychoanalysis, brain sciences and social psychology, it has tended to remain imprecise in referring interchangeably to *character* and *personality* hardly noticing let alone analysing distinctions between them, while tending to moralise the first and psychologise (and aestheticize) the second. On the ethical side, it is important to note that while it has been a feature within recent philosophy to repeat the mantra that virtue has been a neglected subject in modern moral philosophy and to castigate Kant and Mill on this account, both of those thinkers gave attention to character in their account of ethical formation and appraisal.

Most discussions of Kant's ethics focus on the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* both of which are concerned with abstract issues concerning the nature of logic or pure practical rationality. Kant, however, also wrote extensively on character and virtue, as in a subsection of a treatment of 'On the way of cognising the interior of the human being from the exterior' titled 'The Character of the Person'. There he distinguishes between "a) natural disposition, b) temperament or sensibility [where he invokes the general terms of Galen's theory also saying that in this the subject is mostly passive] and c) character purely and simply, or way of thinking" adding that "The first two predispositions indicate what can be made of the human being; the last (moral) predisposition indicates what he is prepared to make of himself". In discussing the third predisposition he goes on to observe that

To be able to simply say of a human being: "he has a character" is not only to have said a great deal about him, but is also to have praised him a great deal; for this is a rarity, which inspires profound respect and admiration toward him.... temperament

has a fancy price, one can have an enjoyable time with such a person, he is a pleasant companion; – but character has an inner worth, and is beyond all price. ¹³

In his *Lectures on Pedagogy* Kant asserts that “Worldly prudence is a matter of temperament. Morality is a matter of character” ¹⁴ and that “The first effort in moral education is the grounding of character” whose fundamental traits are truthfulness and sociability. Mill is similarly appreciative of the importance of character and shares Kant’s view that the ideal of education, and of self-development is the perfection of human nature so far as this can be approximated to, through the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtues. He writes about this in personal terms in his *Autobiography* but also in his philosophical work. It is the main theme of Chapter 3 of *On Liberty* (‘On Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being’) where he writes that

“It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself. ...”¹⁵

While in *Utilitarianism* he is concerned to refute the accusation of critics that the theory ignores, or rejects the value of virtuous character:

¹³ *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History and Education* eds and trans. R.B. Loudon and G. Zoller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 389.

¹⁴ *Lectures on Pedagogy* in *Anthropology, History and Education* op. cit., p. 474.

¹⁵ J.S. Mill *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and other Essays* Second Edition, ed. M. Philip and F. Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 58

“But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself”.¹⁶

Among recent philosophers the one for whom character became a central theme around which other issues turned was Bernard Williams who wrote often and perceptively on the place of character in ethics writing at times of a person’s character as being partly constituted by their desires and concerns (‘projects’), then of its being identical to ‘a distinctive and structured pattern of desire and project’.¹⁷ To some extent the variability is due to the purpose to which these concepts are being put and it can also be a matter of emphasis or an indicator of psychological depth.

With the latter in mind, I am here using the concept *character* (in its primary application) to refer paradigmatically to a level of individual personal psychology that is deeper and more stable than *manner*, *temperament*, and *personality* though less profound than specific and individual *identity*.¹⁸ An individual can reform his or her manner more easily than they can change their temperament. Personality, though more extensive than temperament, is ill-defined, shallower than and lacking the value orientation associated with character, which is closer to, though importantly distinct from nature in the strong species-specific, constitutive sense. As it features in reflections on basic psychological dispositions, character spans various categories: primarily the *descriptive* (‘A has a complex character’) and the *evaluative* (‘B has a weak character’); the *innate* or *congenital* (‘C’s fearlessness first showed itself in her early infancy’) and the *acquired* (D’s reading poetry has made him more sensitive’); the *active* (‘E seeks out challenges’) and the *passive* (F is readily influenced’); the

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁷ See *Moral Luck* essay 1 ‘Persons, Character and Morality’ and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Ch. 1 ‘Socrates Question’.

¹⁸ For an interesting and insightful exploration of the layered taxonomy of personal psychology see A. Quinton, ‘Character and Will in Modern Ethics’ in *From Wodehouse to Wittgenstein* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998) who suggests that “character is the reality ... of which personality is the appearance” p. 40. This latter, however, seems more symptomatic of elision than of distinction,

cognitive ('G is an acute thinker'), the *affective* ('H is highly empathetic'), and the *volitional* ('I is resolute');¹⁹ and the *individual* and the *social*.

It is, a complex task to understand how these various dimensions may be related, and it should not be assumed that all feature in the same way across different fields in which character may be at issue. Also, while character is primarily and most commonly thought of as an attribute of human persons, it may also be, to some degree, a feature of some kinds of non-human animals to the extent that their behaviour approximates to intentional action; and its application often extends analogically to human social and cultural institutions (and to non-human animal ones if and where they exist). That said I am principally concerned with it as a developed feature of human beings.

There is a further, often implicitly acknowledged but not explicitly articulated, dimension of character that it is important to note with respect to the understanding, formation and modification of it, particularly in regard to values and virtues. This is the concept's *polyadicity*. I have adverted to the possibility of attributing character not only to human individuals but to groups and institutions, and to non-human animals. This introduces the general relativity of character to the nature of its possessor. Further to that, since character has a dynamic profile there is relativity to stages and developmental phases, and finally and importantly it is aspectual. Although much of the literature in the fields mentioned at the outset refers to the concept of character unqualifiedly, such use is void for uncertainty as indeterminate and incomplete. Properly expressed, attributions of character are *secundum quid* and should be indexed to nature, phase and aspect. Casting the matter in the language of virtue, the question of whether a given disposition is in fact virtuous can only be answered by reference to the nature and stage of development of the agent, the domain of operation, and the aspect of their agency that is at issue. In some domains such as aesthetic appreciation and 'spiritual' or 'existential' contemplation, it might be that personal qualities conducive to individual receptivity (detachment, discernment, equanimity and the like) are what constitute appropriate character. In others, such as leadership and teaching, social capacities for command, direction, and inspiration are

¹⁹ All judgements of types that would be expected to feature in assessment reports and letters of reference.

central.²⁰ It may also be that there are incompatibilities between sets of qualities raising the question of whether, for example, there can be leadership in the spheres of the aesthetic or the spiritual – a matter to which I shall return.

Finally, on the matter of the complexity involved in attributions of character traits, where these are conceived in terms of tendencies or inclinations to act (or refrain from acting), is the fact that dispositions in general may be blocked or masked or be context dependent.²¹ This is relevant to the assessment of the evidence given in support of the situationist challenge. Hume, having observed that “[W]ere there no uniformity in human actions ... it were impossible to collect any general observations concerning mankind”, adds that

We must not, however, expect, that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length, as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions.

He then acknowledges that even where allowance has been made and a character trait attributed, there may be seeming exceptions:

²⁰ See J. Haldane ‘Virtuous Leadership: Ambiguities, Challenges and Precedents’ *Metaphilosophy* 2024.

²¹ On this as a general issue complicating dispositional analyses see Mark Johnston ‘Objectivity Refigured, Appendix 2 Complexities in the notion of a Disposition’ in J. Haldane and C. Wright eds, *Realism Reason and Projectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994

A person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer: But he has the toothache or has not dined. A stupid fellow discovers an uncommon alacrity in his carriage: But he has met with a sudden piece of good fortune.²²

Hume's concern is to defend against seeming counterexamples his doctrine of the regularity and uniformity of cause and effect in application to the relation between motive and action; but the phenomenon he describes is independent of the issue of determinism. The point is that whether a disposition is manifested depends on the existence of other dispositions and aspects of circumstance, and this has to be taken account of in judging whether it is correct to attribute possession or lack of a general trait.

3. Domains of Virtue

In his *Politics* IV, 11, Aristotle asks what is the best constitution and best mode of life for most states and for most of mankind, and he distinguishes between standards proper to the individual and those proper to a community. He mentions what he has said elsewhere of matters relating to character (*Ta êthika*), and of the good life for man being one lived in accord with virtue. He then concludes that the same applies to the goodness and badness of a state and a constitution since the latter is 'the state's mode of living'. Here all that is referred to is the formal character of moral virtue; and while more generally he regards all such virtues as turning on justice (*dikaiosyne*), courage (*andreia*) and temperance (*sophrosune*), exercised in conjunction with practical wisdom (*phronesis*), he also recognises that specific determinations of these, and additional subsidiary moral virtues are relative to the domains of action in which good is to be done. Besides this, there are also the intellectual virtues regulating the work of the mind: themselves further divided between those concerned with speculative enquiry: conceptual understanding (*nous*), scientific ratiocination (*episteme*), and theoretical wisdom

²² D. Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) VIII, 1 'Of Liberty and Necessity' pp. 84-86.

(*sophia*), and those relating to the design and production of things (*techne*) again to be exercised in association with practical wisdom. All virtues at various levels of specification, are aspects of character conducive to excellence in respect of kinds of activity. This is in a way more important than the classifications and sub-classification he proposes, since in different times and places other domains of human activity have been acknowledged and thought of in ways that don't easily correspond to the Aristotelian taxonomy- notwithstanding efforts to subsume them. Spiritual development and art-making and art-criticism are just such examples, as are nursing and social care.

Interest in the development of character, particularly practical and educational interest, is apt to be concerned with the causes, conditions and limits of character formation, and the prospects for resolving apparent tension between various qualities which it would seem desirable to conjoin – such as between *docility* (in the sense of being teachable: *docilis*) and *innovativeness*. A trio of possible routes to character formation is captured by the slogan '*caught, taught, sought*': *caught* through the experience of others who exemplify certain traits; *taught* by explicit and implicit instruction, and *sought* through taking opportunities to develop various qualities. While these routes may be mutually compatible, there are questions about how they relate to one another, and to what extent they may fruitfully be interwoven. I shall approach these questions by introducing a factor not hitherto mentioned, namely *tradition*, which provides a means of connecting catching, teaching and seeking qualities of character and behaviour, and I will illustrate its role in the shaping of outlooks and practices considering two spheres: art, and religion (and relatedly modes of 'spiritual' development in comparison with psychotherapy). This raises the further matter of the potential for applying the conclusions to the contemporary theory and practice of character education.

4. Tradition and authority

Here I am concerned with tradition both in the active sense of 'handing over' (*tradens*) to another that which one has received, and in the broader sense of inherited communal assumptions, ideas, beliefs, practices, skills, values (*tradita*) which provide contexts in which one learns, thinks and acts. The idea

of tradition is often conjoined with that of authority and there are several important connections, but it is important to address common confusions between tradition and traditionalism, and again between authority and authoritarianism. It will be useful to do so by considering examples in which tradition involves handing over and receiving that which is deemed authoritative, and which is taken to confer authority on relevant agents. One such is the passing of the seal of office and associated powers from one US President to their successor. Another is the process by which the status and powers of the Dalai Lama are determined to have passed to a new embodiment of the spirit of a particular bodhisattva: observing signs, consulting oracles, searching for likely incarnations and applying tests to candidates. In both of these cases there are certain ritual accompaniments some more central, others more peripheral, some long standing others more recent. Among these may be those which are taken to be partly constitutive of the transition of position and power, while others are ritualistic additions. So far as the essence of the handing on is concerned, however, this is usually characterised by reference to some abstract notion such as in these examples, the democratic will of the electorate or the transmigration of spirits. These are the loci of the traditions: the passing of occupancy of a position and its functions. By contrast, their empirical manifestations and confirmation are relatively contingent and likely to vary over time and circumstance. For many people, however, these features and yet more contingent accretions are the object of strong attachments, and they strongly oppose moves to reform or remove them. These people are traditionalists. Evidently, however, tradition and traditionalism are distinct: each neither entailing nor being entailed by the other.

Similarly with authority and authoritarianism. There are many kinds of authority but most fall within one (or more) of three categories: A) *authority of expertise* (epistemically warranted); B) *authority of directive role* (practically warranted); and C) *authority of office* (institutionally warranted).²³ The examples of tradition in the ‘handing over and receiving’ sense fall within the last

²³ For a related taxonomy and discussion of the nature of moral authority as that attaches to the work of parents or teachers of young children see Elizabeth Anscombe ‘Authority in Morals’ in *Collected Philosophical Papers, Vol. III Ethics, Politics and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) and ‘The Moral Environment of the Child’ both in M. Geach and L

of these, but their origins may derive from the pragmatic need of direction.²⁴ How far authority of these kinds extends and how it is appropriately exercised will depend on type, context and circumstance. Whether in any case the holder of authority acts in an authoritarian manner is a distinct issue. Beyond the everyday sense of strictness and demanding obedience, ‘authoritarianism’ has specialised meanings within personality psychology and political science - in the latter case being connected with strong narrowly centralised government maintained through political repression.²⁵ In a given context an individual or group exercising authority of expertise, of directive role, or of office may do so in an authoritarian manner, but authority *per se* neither entails nor is entailed by authoritarianism. There may be factors that tend in the latter direction but if so that makes it all the more important to form or modify the characters of those likely to serve as authorities in line with the virtues of leadership.²⁶

One case in which tradition and teaching authority are intrinsically conjoined, and which has a claim to be the oldest extant institutional example is that of tradition as conceived in the ecclesiology of Eastern Greek Orthodoxy and Western Latin Catholicism. This is of special interest in the present context since it involves a number of elements the standing and relations between which

Gormally eds *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe (Exeter: Imprintacademic, 2008).

²⁴ The issue of the pragmatic origins of a practice and the seeming non-contingency of its structure of requirements and prohibitions (or relatedly of the hypothetical character of the former and the categorical status of the latter) is an important one. It is relevant to such issues as the nature of promising, of political authority, and of the relevance (or otherwise) of evolutionary explanations to the internal understanding of social practices. On the subject of the first two issues see Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘Rules, Rights and Promises’ and ‘On the Source of The Authority of the State’ in *Collected Philosophical Papers, III Ethics, Politics and Religion*; and on the third, see David Wiggins, ‘Hume’s Genealogy of Morals’ Ch. 2 of *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (London: Penguin, 2006) and Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

²⁵ The classic text which combines the psychological and the political, and from which much of the contemporary conception of authoritarianism derives, is T. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York Harper, 1950).

²⁶ See again J. Haldane ‘Virtuous Leadership’.

have been extensively discussed within the tradition itself; both at the level of theoretical analysis and in relation to exercises of the authority deemed to be conferred by the tradition.

In the second century, Irenaeus (125-200) who was born in Anatolia and served as bishop of Lyon, addressed a number of religious controversies in his *Adversus Haereses*. In this he noted what he had been taught by Polycarp who is believed to have been ordained bishop of Smyrna by the long-lived John the Apostle, a disciple of Jesus. Among the reasons for Irenaeus's importance is his proximity to the apostolic age, his quotation from the canonical Gospels, the fact that he spans both Greek and Latin branches of early Christianity, and his reference to the idea of a threefold foundation for orthodoxy (right belief): *sacred scripture, sacred tradition* and *apostolic teaching*. The second and third refer to the claim that not all of what Jesus did and taught is contained in the scriptural record (*John 21:25* and *Acts 1-3*); and that further teachings were given directly to the apostles. Along with this is the idea that Jesus empowered them to teach authoritatively and that this 'magisterium' is transmitted to their chosen successors. In brief, this constitutes a foundational canon, a body of supplementary teachings, and a means of handing on this corpus and the authority to promulgate and interpret it.²⁷

Here the question of the truth of these ecclesiological claims is not at issue, but the structure they comprise suggests one model of the nature and role of tradition which can be seen to have secular counterparts. Consider, for example the notion of speculative or creative disciplines. These can be identified by three broad criteria: 1) a set of ideas, works and figures that constitute an originating canon and set of progenitors, 2) a set of methods or techniques for engaging with matters raised in and by the canon, and 3) a tradition of handing on aspects of the canon and the means of engaging with it and its subsequent development that is to some degree authoritative. This is, of course, a very schematic and abstract characterisation but it is not difficult to see how it can be made specific in relation to different fields and subfields of intellectual enquiry and creative practice.

²⁷ This last element is reflected in the final part of the Creed adopted by the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381 which continues to be shared by the Catholic and Orthodox churches: [we believe in] one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Consider the development of critical ethical reflection initiated by Socrates, rendered constructive by Plato, cast in a naturalistic idiom by Aristotle, modified again by Roman stoicism, carried into a theological key by Augustine, synthesised with naturalism by Aquinas, further developed as natural law by Iberian scholastics, adapted by Grotius and Locke, and so on. As well as charting a course through times and cultures, it is important to recognise the extent to which the ethical works of Plato and Aristotle (subsequently supplemented by writings indebted to, even when critical of them) became and continue to serve as *canonical*. Along with this their methods continue to be treated as exemplary and as models for ongoing enquiry, again inspiring (*caught*), instructing (*taught*) and encouraging further enquiries and serving as regulative ideals (*sought*).

A similar narrative may be told about the central strands of western painting. There is a body of figurative work beginning with Egyptian and Roman sarcophagi portraiture that leads to Byzantine icon painting, which in turn influences but is transformed by the naturalism of Giotto and Fra Angelico, and sets the proximate foundation for the neo-classical humanism of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. This major development both extended the existing canon, and to a degree established a new one: inspiring generations of would-be artists, providing the form and content of art training, and encouraging others to seek out ways of extending the tradition in their own work singly and in collective movements – again conforming to the caught, taught and sought pattern.

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An important further feature is the growth, from within an intellectual and artistic tradition, of divergent genre and methods still recognisably indebted to earlier roots and corpora. The most obvious art historical examples are the development of still life and landscape painting. The first originates, as with figurative painting more generally, in later Egyptian and Roman funerary art: partly in remembrance of the dead and partly in service of their afterlives. Later in medieval art, objects are depicted as elements in interior scenes, generally sparsely and without attention to their pictorial relationships. By stages, however, they became subjects of attention: filling more of the

²⁸ See J. Haldane ‘Virtue and the Art of Teaching Art’ *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72 (4) 2024.

picture space and ascending to the status of portrait subjects. This latter mode was deepened by representing tableware, food, and drink as prepared, or in the process of being used and consumed, with the eaters presupposed or depicted, and scenes of domestic life replacing those of feasts. In this way still life became a medium of social observation and commentary, even, as in the work of Chardin in the 18th century, Cezanne in the 19th, and Morrandi in the 20th, a form of existential reflection on the human condition.²⁹

Similarly, landscape painting emerged out of the practice of providing a generic natural, or minimal built background for the depiction of figures and episodes, then by stages becoming a subject in its own right equal to and even displacing human figures and subsequently becoming abstracted to the point of colour field painting as in the diverse manners of Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin and Kenneth Noland in north America, and of Robin Denny and John Hoyland in England.

Of course, the roads that lead from Plato to Parfit or Aristotle to Anscombe, and from Giotto to Rothko, or Piero della Francesca to David Hockney, are long and winding ones. In a tradition, however, the content connections are more enduring and often closer than the causal ones; and the communities of practitioners though divided by time are held together by ideas, ideals, and imagery. Writing in relation to literature, but with a broader range of artistic creativity in view, T.S. Eliot writes that:

[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense [which itself] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence ... with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This ... sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of

²⁹ For an interesting and informative treatment of 20th century still life painting see M. Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997) a well-illustrated catalogue to a MOMA exhibition of the same title.

the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. ... You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. ... The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. ... Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.³⁰

Three centuries after Irenaeus described the pillars of orthodoxy, the Gallic monk Vincent of Lérins wrote of “taking care that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all”; but also of how “it behoves doctrine to follow the same laws of development [as a living body], so as to be consolidated by years, enlarged by time, and refined by age”.³¹ Fifteen centuries thereafter the Second Vatican Council wrote of how “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles”.³² Separated by almost two millennia, and by the fall and rise of several empires, by wars, plagues and revolutions, by ages of discovery and by many other factors, the same tradition, in its substance and in its modes, has informed, educated and inspired – as well as alienated, enraged and frustrated – eighty

³⁰ T.S. Eliot ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in Eliot *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932) p.14.

³¹ *The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins* translated by C.A. Heurtley in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 11*. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.)

³² *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*

generations. The present point, therefore, is not about truth or goodness but about the way in which traditions convey content and how that same content shapes the lives both of those who embrace and of those who reject it.

Returning to the traditions of Western art, it happened that in 2025 there were three major public retrospective exhibitions of contemporary painters: *Wayne Thiebaud: Art Comes from Art* at the Legion of Honour in San Francisco, *David Hockney 25* at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris (supplemented by *Some Very, Very, Very New Paintings Not Yet Shown in Paris* at Annely Juda in London), and *Kerry James Marshall: The Histories* at the Royal Academy in London.³³ These stood out from the international art calendar for four reasons: 1) the fullness of the bodies of work exhibited, 2) the fact that the artists are all figurative colourists, 3) their avowed, erudite and manifest indebtedness to relevant aspects of the Western tradition, and 4) the enthusiastic receptions they received from critics and public alike. At times, all three artists have been associated with ‘Pop Art’ but this is a shallow, ephemeral and misleading classification. What marks them out is a deep commitment and developed mastery of the practice of representational painting in several genre, and respectful deference to historical ancestors.

To take them in turn, and by their own accounts. Wayne Thiebaud is famed for producing highly colourful depictions of modern commercial and everyday items: displays of decorated cakes and pies, arrays of ice cream cones, groupings of tins of paints, ranges of lipsticks and the such like, all rendered in overstated colours of the sort that might feature in commercial displays. Yet the subtitle of the exhibition (‘Art Comes from Art’) gives a clue to his real concerns and sources of inspiration. He comments that

³³ For images and supporting texts see the following substantial and comprehensive catalogues published in association with the exhibitions: T. A. Burgard ed. *Wayne Thiebaud: Art Comes from Art* (Oakland, CA.: University of California Press for Fine Art Museums of San Francisco, 2025); N. Rosenthal ed, *David Hockney* (London: Thames & Hudson for Fondation Louis Vuitton Foundation, 2025); *Some Very, Very, Very New Paintings not Yet Shown in Paris* (London: Annely Juda, 2025), M. Godfrey et al, *Kerry James Marshall: The Histories* (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2025).

I look upon art history as a kind of anthology of human experience and as a horizon of potential critical concerns. ... I guess one of my quarrels with modernism is the emphasis on the so-called self. I'm not sure we have one ... I think the challenge and responsibility of painting really is to merge with your tradition, to respect it. This is what allowed you to do what you do.

Hockney is by far the best known of this trio and is generally regarded as an unambiguous modernist (or post-modernist): painting fashionable people and settings, celebrating the 1960s overthrow of conventional social life and mores, and advocating individual takes on the world as in the 1960s refrain of 'do your own thing'. Yet again his own account of his concerns belies the standard representation:

If you try and depict the visible world you are trying to get outside yourself and connect with other human beings. Points of reference are recognised and the limits begin to connect in”.

Kerry James Marshall's is an African-American artist, discussions of whose work most often emphasise and celebrate its social commentary aspect. Growing up in Birmingham Alabama and then in Los Angeles he experienced racial prejudice and witnessed the intertwining of the civil right and radical black power movements. As his interest in visual art grew he also became aware of the turn against the traditions of Western art among members of the Black Arts Movement. His own expression of social and political consciousness was inspired by reading Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* in which the unnamed narrator reflects on his own social invisibility as a black man in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. Marshall began to produce paintings in which black

male and female figures rendered in colours deeply darkened by the inclusion of various black pigments were often set against a dark ground thereby being barely visible to the viewer. Of this he comments:

To be sure the mode of black figure representation I employ is a clear departure from most popular treatments of the black body. I am trying to establish a phenomenal presence that is unequivocally black and beautiful. It is my conviction that the most instrumental, insurgent painting for this moment must be of figures, and those figures must be black, unapologetically so.

In obvious respects Marshall's thematic concerns fall within a familiar area of social protest and progressive politics; but what is of relevance here is the extent to which his work is influenced by and seeks to conform itself to aspects of traditional Western figurative painting. He says

"I've always wanted to be a history painter on a grand scale like Giotto and Gericault ... I've always considered myself a history painter. I think it is important for a black artist to create Black figure paintings in the grand tradition. ... I wanted to claim the right to operate at that level.

The elevation visible in work achieved through his career to date, however, is not just one of increasing mastery of a genre, but also of pictorial composition, of delineation, of chromatic invention, and tonal subtlety in other words of painting and like Thiebaud and Hockney he has looked (literally) to the tradition of Western painting for inspiration and guidance. In his *Lectures on Pedagogy* Kant writes that "a tree which stands alone in the field grows crooked and spreads its branches wide. By contrast, a tree which stands in the middle of the forest with the pressure of other trees around grows tall and straight towards the sun and air above it". His concern was with the

education of rulers, but his imagery needs only a little adjustment to represent the contrast between one who lives outside the environment of a tradition and one who develops and thrives within it. But to do that one must, at least in stages of learning dispose oneself as a recipient, a learner acknowledging be it implicitly the authority of the tradition. In the course of inquiring into the nature of prudence, which he Aquinas asks whether docility has any special relation to it and answers

Since prudence is concerned with particular matters of action, and since such matters are of infinite variety, no one man can consider them all sufficiently; nor can this be done quickly, for it requires a long time. Hence in matters of prudence man stands in very great need of being taught by others, especially by seniors who have acquired a sound understanding of the ends in practical matters. ... Now it is a mark of docility to be ready to be taught: and consequently docility is fittingly reckoned a part of prudence.³⁴

There is an interesting parallelism between this passage and remarks of Wittgenstein's in his last work *On Certainty*.

310. A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc. the teacher says "Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all".

311. Or imagine that the boy questioned the truth of history (and everything that connects up with it) – and even whether the earth existed a hundred years ago.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q.49, a. 3, respondeo.

...

315. ... And it would be just the same if the pupil cast doubt on the uniformity of nature, that is to say on the justification of inductive arguments. The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress – And he would be right. It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens the drawer and doesn't see it here; then he closes it again, waits and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned to look for things. And in the same way the pupil has not learned how to ask questions. He has not learned the game we are trying to teach him.

By 'game', of course, Wittgenstein means a rule governed practice, a way of going on through which one grows in understanding, or as it is now apt to say a tradition into which one is inculcated and is then able to contribute to.³⁵

TO BE CONTINUED

³⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) p. 40e