

Acquired character

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Introduction

Everyone knows someone who cannot, as the expression goes, *get their stuff together* (usually, more colorful language is chosen to describe this condition). Indeed, someone has probably already come into your mind. But what are we saying or doing when we ascribe this condition to a person? One thing we seem to be doing is calling attention to some defect in how they are *going about things*. It's not insignificant that the language used here is broad and vague, for what the person in question is failing to 'go about' in the right way is itself a broad, vague, and very large object. What they are failing to go about in the right way is *life*; more specifically, they are failing to go about their own life in a way that would allow us to judge that they've got their stuff together. A few examples will help us escape vagueness and zero-in on the agential defect in question.

First, there's the friend who bounced between studying Finance, Communication, and French in college, who then joined the Peace Corp, who then returned home and pursued a Masters degree in education, who then taught for a few years in public schools before getting bored, who then took different odd jobs in the city for a while, and who the last time you spoke to them said they met someone and they're thinking of starting a mushroom farm together, that, or they might get their pilots license and fly private jets. Second, consider the friend in graduate school who has an immense capacity for philosophical conversation, possesses one of the keenest, most perceptive intellects you've come across, yet they rarely complete any of their writing, have been kicking around one paper for the entire time you've been studying together (despite having loads to say on innumerable topics), and who seems on track for being kicked out of the program. Finally, and getting more mundane, there's the acquaintance who every time you dine together can't for the life of them make a decision about what to order that they are satisfied with. No

sooner is their order out of their mouth, the waiter walking away, that they're bemoaning their choice. And you're left thinking to yourself: 'Again?! They're expressing order regret again? Why can't they ever be sure of what they'd like to eat? Don't they know what they like?'

I believe that each of these examples illustrates some aspect of the phenomenon of a person's not having their stuff together, of a person's not going about things in the right way. As noted already, I take this particular problem to be one we are all familiar with. At this point, we can raise a few questions about it:

1. What is causing these agents to not have their stuff together?
2. How is it that this condition comes to count as an agential defect?
3. How can it be remedied?

There are surely other questions one could ask as well. For instance, we might wonder whether there is a unified causal explanation in the offing that would show all three of the above described agents to be suffering from the same defect. And if not, then that might push us in the direction of saying that the condition of one's not having their stuff together not only takes on many different forms (as the examples clearly attest), but it can be explained in many different ways. In other words, one could argue there isn't one thing that is going on when an agent doesn't have their stuff together. Going this route is tempting largely for the reason that there doesn't seem to be anything significantly in common in terms of missteps between the case of a person who can't settle on their life's vocation and the case of a person who can't settle on what to order for dinner. But is that true? Should we really be so skeptical about securing a unified explanation of the state these three agents are in?

At least one philosopher from the German tradition doesn't think so. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, what unifies our examples is that in each case we are confronted with an agent who lacks self-knowledge. The first doesn't seem to know what they want to do with their life; the second hasn't recognized either that their current work habits are not suitable for success in

graduate school, or, more harshly, that they are not suited for the academic life; and the third hasn't figured out what they really like to eat.

But Schopenhauer has more to say on the matter than this. Setting aside the third example for a moment (we'll come back to it later), what Schopenhauer will say about the first two agents is that their lack of self-knowledge is evidence that they have not achieved a certain state, he might permit us to call a 'state of mind', which he names 'the *acquired character*' (*den erworbenen Charakter*) (*W 1, 329*).¹ We can get an initial sense for the notion by considering the following passage from the prize essay on free will:

It is only the precise knowledge of his own empirical character that gives the human being what we call *acquired character*: someone possesses this who knows his own properties, good and bad, precisely, and thereby knows for certain what he may entrust to himself and demand of himself, and what he may not (*E, 69-70*)

As an initial foray into this terrain, what we should take away from this passage is Schopenhauer's claim that self-trust informed by precise (and accurate) self-knowledge is one of the important marks of acquired character. Thinking again about one of our examples, part of what might be wrong with our friend who is exhibiting signs that they are not suited for academic life is that they mistrusted to themselves a life they are not in fact suited to live. For example, perhaps they trusted themselves to overcome their poor undergraduate work habits now that they were in graduate school. But this wasn't to be. Or, more seriously, perhaps they trusted their decision to pursue the academic life to themselves, only to see that they're now coming up short. There are of course many stories we can tell about why our friend is in the spot they're in (diminished desire; a sober assessment of job prospects; crippling depression). But those won't concern us here. What

¹ For some extant discussions of the acquired character see Gardiner 1963, Young 1987, Atwell 1990, and Shapshay 2019. For worries that Schopenhauer can truly accommodate the picture of agency this notion implies, see again Atwell 1990 as well as Cooper 1998.

matters is seeing that, on some occasions, a lack of acquired character is exactly the right kind of explanation to give of a case where an agent does not have their stuff together.²

What I aim to do in this chapter is offer Schopenhauer's notion of the acquired character as a philosophical illumination of the familiar condition we've been discussing so far of an agent's 'not having their stuff together'. As we'll see, by introducing the acquired character into his reflections on human action and agency, Schopenhauer means to weave a certain eudaimonistic strand through his ethics. This, at any rate, is how I understand his claim that the acquired character 'is not as significant for ethics proper as it is for life in the world' (*W 1*, 334). For though it is true that Schopenhauer rejects eudaimonism as a theory of morality in the 'narrower sense', namely, the sense having to do with the *grounds* of our other-regarding motivations and actions, it doesn't follow that he is without a picture of individual flourishing, that is, a picture of what it is for our lives as a whole to go better or worse. It will become clear that the central ingredient that causes one's life to end up for the better in the sense relevant to individual flourishing is self-knowledge regarding one's individual character, as well as the sense of personal autonomy that follows in its wake.

The acquired character

The way to enter Schopenhauer's discussion of acquired character is by seeing that he subscribes to an *empirical* model of self-knowledge. According to Schopenhauer, 'it is only *a posteriori*, through experience that we get to know ourselves, just as we get to know other people' (*W 1*, 329).³ This is an important claim to keep in mind. If the self-knowledge of the kind relevant for individual flourishing is primarily acquired on the basis of experiencing oneself acting and being

² Not only that, but it can also be the right way to explain the accompanying devastating feeling that one is failing at life, the only one they have.

³ Whether Schopenhauer means for this 'empirical model' of self-knowledge to apply to knowledge of what we believe as well as knowledge of our character is not something that should concern us here. For our purposes it is enough that it apply to knowledge of our individual character.

in the world, then it follows that there is no 'substitute for experience', as the popular saying goes, when it comes to getting to know ourselves. This helps us to see that part of what Schopenhauer aims to do with his discussion of acquired character is take seriously that bit of our everyday ethical outlook which assigns significant value to 'life experience'.

This point about the value of life experience becomes especially clear in Schopenhauer's main statement of acquired character, which comes in Book IV, §55 of *The World as Will and Representation*.

We must first learn through experiences what we want and what we can do: until then we do not know it, we are characterless, and we will frequently have to be driven back onto our own true path by sharp blows from the outside. But if we finally learn this lesson, we will have achieved what the world calls character, the *acquired character*. This is nothing other than the greatest possible familiarity with our own individuality: it is the abstract and therefore clear knowledge of the invariable qualities of our own empirical character, of the dimensions and directions of our mental and physical abilities, and thus of the total strengths and weaknesses of our own individuality (*W 1*, 331).

It is clear from the passage that Schopenhauer conceives of acquired character as an achievement of a robust sort of practically-oriented self-knowledge. The achieved self-knowledge is 'practically-oriented' because it concerns, as he tell us, what I 'want' and what I 'can do'. Knowing what I want in the sense relevant here could mean knowing something small about myself, for example, the way I like to take my coffee, my favorite flavor of ice cream, or the kinds of shirts I tend to find stylish. It could also mean knowing something larger about myself, like my moral priorities or fundamental projects. In this case, we might say that a person of acquired character knows how they want their life to go as well as what they wish to spend the bulk of their time doing. Here again Schopenhauer seems to be gesturing at a bit of commonsense talk, like when

grown adult who devoted their life to veterinary science recounts the moment when they just knew that what they wanted to do with their life is help animals.

The example of the veterinarian also helps us see what Schopenhauer has in mind when he says that persons of acquired character know what they 'can do'. Such persons have accurate knowledge of their abilities and capacities. Part of the story of how our veterinarian came to know that they wanted to devote their life to helping animals will likely include a bit about how they came to see that they had a talent for the kinds of activities required of that profession. For instance, maybe in their youth they had the formative experience of rescuing a baby robin that had fallen from its nest and nursing it back to health. Looking back on their choice to devote themselves to animal well-being, they see that this particular experience was the catalyst for that decision.

Schopenhauer also mentions how persons of acquired character know the strengths and weaknesses of their individuality. Later in the discussion, he will say that by investigating 'where our strengths and weaknesses are, we will develop our salient natural talents, make use of them, try to apply them however we can, and go where they are appropriate and effective [...]' (*W 1*, 332). And so part of what is involved in acquired character is that we come to know the sorts of activities that we have a knack for. But I don't think we should limit this claim to practical abilities. It also seems true to say that a person who really knows themselves will possess some knowledge of their *emotional* strengths and weaknesses as well, and they can use this knowledge to structure their lives in such a way that they possess some level of control over their emotional output, perhaps by finding the right context for someone with their emotive orientation.

Consider that we expect a good veterinarian not just be technically excellent at their craft, but to also possess certain emotional capacities. They should be patient, calm under pressure, and exhibit grace in their interactions with individuals grieving the loss of a pet. If I enter the veterinary profession, yet find myself so emotionally invested in the animals I care for to the point where I cannot perform my surgical duties well, say, because my compassion for their suffering

animal is interfering with the task at hand, then that is some evidence that I do not have the right emotional orientation for this role. Maybe I am better suited for expressing my love of animals in a different context, one where my compassion can truly be felt as a strength, rather than a weakness of my character. On the flipside, we might think that no matter how skilled at surgery someone is, if they're incapable of showing understanding towards the families whose pets they work on, always interacting with them in a cold and robotic fashion, or simply passing that emotional labor off to their assistants, then perhaps their technical prowess would be best expressed in a different line of work.⁴

At this point, we're in position to comment directly on the unifying theme of the examples discussed so far, namely, that people are often mistaken about themselves. Not only do we lack accurate knowledge of the actual abilities and capacities we have, whether physical, practical, or emotional, but, even when we do have such knowledge, we still might lack knowledge of the domains or 'atmospheres' that are best suited to our abilities and capacities. 'Just as fish do well only in water, birds in the air, and moles underground', Schopenhauer tells us, 'everybody can do well only in the atmosphere they find congenial; not everyone, for instance, can breathe in the atmosphere of a court (*W 1*, 331).

You might take yourself to have the abilities and capacities for veterinary work, only to come to find out that you are too emotionally overwhelmed in that sort of setting. Notice that this need not mean that you were wrong about the fact that compassion is a predominant feature of your individual character. It very well could be. It's just that you were wrong about the context in which your compassion could best express itself. But now that you know that this atmosphere is not suitable for you to express your compassion in a way that is both good for yourself and others, you will be able to rethink exactly how it is that you can attain this more positive expression.

⁴ Then again, one could argue that they don't care at all about the emotional intelligence of their doctor or veterinarian as long as they get the job done. But that itself is not an argument that there are better and worse forms of emotional attunement when it comes to certain professions such that in certain cases mastery of the technical skill involved may not be enough to make one a good fit for that line of work.

Maybe what you discover is that you're better suited for volunteering at the animal shelter a few days a week. For Schopenhauer, from this point on it will make sense to say that you have truly achieved some share of acquired character, that you have, in Julian Young's words, come to 'understand the subtle chemistry' of your individuality.⁵ At the very least, you will have come to understand that aspect of your individual chemistry dealing with your compassionate disposition and the sorts of activities it suits you for.

It is worth pausing for a moment to think about an implication of what has just been said. The claim one might wish to contest is that a person can attain a 'share' or degree of acquired character. The worry is that Schopenhauer speaks at times as if acquired character is an all or nothing affair, which means it cannot come in degrees. For example, he talks about acquired character as being 'a third' kind of character, one we should place alongside an agent's empirical character and intelligible character (*W 1*, 329). And just as empirical and intelligible character don't come in degrees, neither does acquired character. There is also his remark that acquired character 'is only acquired over the course of a life and through contact with the world' (*W 1*, 329). Here, it sounds like 'acquiring' acquired character is some singular achievement which you either accomplish at some point in your life or you don't.

On the other hand, if acquired character is acquired 'over the course of a life', as Schopenhauer says, then that would suggest its boundaries are more fluid. Otherwise, why wouldn't Schopenhauer simply be more specific about the precise point in life at which one is likely to achieve it? Perhaps because there is no such point. Think of the friend bouncing between career paths. Given their trajectory, they may not ever know what it is they want to do with their life. Or maybe they finally figure it out when they open their mushroom farm. Now consider the wholehearted butcher, the person whose been butchering since they were a teenager. If acquired character is about knowing what one wants and where one's talents lie, then we should say that the mushroom farmer achieves acquired character late in life, whereas the butcher achieves it

⁵ Young 1987, 59.

much earlier. But then this suggests that the butcher exemplifies acquired character for a longer period of time than the mushroom farmer. In short, they got their stuff together much sooner than the mushroom farmer.

But notice that even here we're still talking about acquired character with respect to just one aspect of a person's life, i.e. their career or vocation. Schopenhauer would likely admit that there is a higher or final stage of acquired character, a stage at which one truly comes to embody the Delphic wisdom, that is, when they finally know themselves in a comprehensive sense.⁶ The idea would be that acquired character consists of a degree of self-knowledge below which one has not yet achieved the final stage, despite nevertheless having enough self-knowledge to exhibit acquired character in several domains. And, of course, that might be a good thing: it could mean that one is keeping their options open with respect to what they want most in life.

This brings us to another problem with acquired character, which is that as an ideal it encourages a narrowing of horizons. A central element of acquired character is what Schopenhauer calls 'self-restraint' (*Selbstüberwindung*). According to Schopenhauer, if we have acquired character that means 'we will always exercise self-restraint and avoid projects where we do not have much natural aptitude; we will guard against unsuccessful efforts; (*W 1*, 332). Earlier, he explains the value of self-restraint in terms of the form of agency it allows us to avoid.

If we could act like children at a fair, grabbing at everything that tickles our fancy without stopping to make up our minds, this would be a wrong-headed attempt to change our line into a plane: we would zigzag all over the place without getting anything done (*W 1*, 330).

Notice the parallel between the child at the fair and the friend who can't make up their mind on what to do with their life, or even the acquaintance who never seems to know what it is they really

⁶ For an argument that those interested in self-knowledge ought to spend more time considering it along the lines of the Delphic model, see Renz (2017).

want to order at the restaurant. For Schopenhauer, what attends their lack of self-knowledge is a lack of self-restraint. For it's possible that they've already landed on something they enjoyed doing, and which drew on their capacities, and yet they lacked the self-restraint to stick with it. And if this is not the case, then we can still make sense of the idea that part of the reason acquired character came late in life for our mushroom farmer is that it was only then that they exercised self-restraint, for example, by seeing clearly that this line of work really did play to their strengths, a realization which then closed off other enticing possibilities.

Reason, maxims of character, and well-constituted agency

More needs to be said to show why Schopenhauer finds this narrowing of possibilities to be crucial for individual flourishing. But first, I want to treat an additional aspect of the discussion of acquired character that is directly relevant to the issue at hand. What I have in mind is the role Schopenhauer assigns to reason when it comes to achieving acquired character, as well as the particular problems it causes in pursuit of it.

As we've seen, what we find in the discussion of acquired character are several claims to the effect that many of an agent's practical missteps in matters small and large are adequately explained by appealing to their lack of self-knowledge. Interestingly, rather than blame this epistemic deficiency on an individual's particular reflective shortcomings, Schopenhauer opts instead to place the blame on our rational capacities themselves. In other words, there is something about reason generally speaking that gets in the way of accurate self-knowledge. This is worth dwelling on.

Reason, Schopenhauer tells us, is 'the *faculty of concepts*' (*W 1*, 548). Concepts are 'universal, non-intuitive representations' (*W 1*, 548). We form concepts via a process of 'abstraction', where what gets abstracted and stored in a concept is some feature shared by several particular intuitive representations or empirical perceptions. From this Schopenhauer thinks it follows that a concept is a 'unity reassembled from plurality by means of the abstraction of our reason [...]' (*W 1*, 261). For example, after experiencing several intuitive representations of

an object being used to hold a liquid, and then that same object being brought to a person's mouth, with the liquid traveling down their throat, our reason abstracts from this plurality of representations and forms the concept 'cup' (it might also form the concept 'taking a drink'). Likewise, after multiple encounters with fluffy, four-legged, obedient, and treat-loving animals, a child forms the concept 'dog' via rational abstraction. This process iterates for any instance of concept formation; and therefore for any instance of conceptual knowledge acquisition.

We find an interesting application of this element of Schopenhauer's epistemology in his discussion of acquired character. He is interested in the role that reason, with its knack for abstraction, plays with respect to the acquisition of practically-oriented self-knowledge and our subsequent character-expressive behavior. As it turns out, reason's offerings in this area are something of a mixed bag. Although we'd like reason to perform the helpful task of determining the unified character underlying the plurality of actions that we are all capable of performing so that we might know, of the many actions we perform, which are in fact expressive of who we really are, what often ends up happening is the opposite. Instead of walking us towards knowledge of our individual character, reason walks us away from it.

This is because these rational qualities show him and even reproach him with what is appropriate for *human beings in general*, as a species character, and what is possible in willing and doing. This impedes his insight into what he alone wills and what he alone can do, by virtue of his individuality. He finds in himself a disposition for all the many human aspirations and abilities; but without experience, he is not aware of the extent to which these are present in his individuality: and if he now limits himself to projects that are in keeping with his character, there will be certain moods and moments when he will feel impelled in the opposite direction, towards incompatible schemes that must be entirely repressed if he wants to pursue the first set of projects without disruption (*W 1*, 330).⁷

⁷ For additional discussion of this passage see Atwell 1990, 126-8.

Here, Schopenhauer shows how the ‘the abstraction of our reason’ gets in the way of our achieving genuine self-knowledge of our individual character, and therefore in the way of our acting in ways that are expressive of who we are.

Unfortunately, Schopenhauer is disappointingly opaque when it comes to working out the details of this element of his philosophical psychology. He looks to be saying that reason causes us to have a natural interest in understanding ‘*humans beings in general*’, that is, in understanding the human as a species, where this interest then gets in the way of self-understanding.⁸ In heeding to this interest, we end up succumbing to a fairly large set of false beliefs regarding our own individuality; in particular, we end up with false beliefs about the sorts of motivations and actions we are *individually* disposed towards. That we could be so misled about our own individuality is explained by the fact that we all have the species character ‘human being’. From having this species character it follows that we each have within us a disposition towards every possible action-type that the human being is capable of. Thus, when we see how other people are behaving, we might think to ourselves that we too can behave that way, for we too are human. This might not in itself pose a problem, since Schopenhauer thinks that some of these species dispositions will in fact turn out to be our individual dispositions, and when we act on just those we’ll be in a good place. The trouble starts when we witness actions brought about by a human disposition that is not really ‘present’ in our own individuality, yet we mistakenly believe that we too are capable of being that way. Recall the analogy between the person lacking acquired character and the child at the fair. The child surveys all of the goodies available to them, believes they can have them all, and runs around snatching them up, only to find out that some of what they grabbed did not suit them (‘Garlic popcorn? Gross!’). The same point applies to the human being who faces the

⁸ Schopenhauer talks about this in his aesthetics, where he attributes our interest in art forms which specialize in presenting us with perspicuous representations of determinate character types, like historical painting and literature, to our interest in understanding the human character in its variegated expressions. See e.g. *W 1*, Book III, §48 and §51.

challenge of discovering which individual character, of all the ones they *could* have, they *actually* have.

For example, reading the news, we might witness that the human species is capable of acting courageously in the face of great personal danger, and from that we might believe that we too are disposed to courageousness. And maybe we are. But we have to be sure we understand what courage looks like for us; that is, we have to understand the differentiated expression courage finds in us. It might not be the same expression it finds in someone suited to fighting wildfires or campaigning for workplace reform. If this is what I think courage must look like after reading the news, I might conclude that this is how it must be with me. And so I set about fighting wildfires or campaigning for workplace reform, when really my sort of courage is better realized in a different set of circumstances. If this happens to me, Schopenhauer thinks (a) that I lack acquired character, and (b) that my conduct in these domains will leave me feeling embarrassed and dissatisfied with myself. This second point is relevant to the question why narrowing our horizons would be valuable for us, since doing so will help us avoid the embarrassment and self-dissatisfaction of acting in ways that are not suitable to, because not expressive of, our individual character.

The agent who lacks acquired character in the way just described is someone who 'will not set off on a straight line but rather take a shaky, crooked line, deviating, wavering, turning back, and setting himself up for pain and remorse [...]'*(W 1, 331)*. Schopenhauer has a name for this kind of person: they are what he calls 'characterless' (*charakterlos*). Of course, such a person does not lack an essential way of being in the world; we all have a character in that sense as a matter of metaphysical fact.⁹ Rather, the characterless person is the person who has not been reflectively vigilant and single-minded enough to discover just those human dispositions that find a home in the individual manifestation of the human character (the human will) that they are.

⁹ 'Just as each thing in nature possesses forces and qualities that react to determinate influences in a determinate way and constitute the character of the thing, a human being has his *character* as well, from which motive call forth his actions with necessity' (*W 1, 313*).

Instead, 'he sees before himself, in matters both great and small, everything that human beings can and do achieve, and does not yet know what portion of this is appropriate or practicable or even just enjoyable for himself' (*W 1*, 331).

We can see, then, that to avoid the state of characterlessness, agents must direct their reflective powers to the task of uncovering a certain unity within a plurality; they must discover the actions that are expressive of their unified individual character within the plurality of actions they are capable of performing given their species character as human, which they may very well feel disposed towards from time to time. Indeed, not only must they discover their individual qualities of character, they must also discover the differentiated form of expression that quality will take in them. Not everyone is courageous, compassionate, or impatient in the same way; and not everyone who loves animals should be a veterinarian.

One lesson to draw from the preceding discussion is that when it comes to the relationship between reason and individual character, we *do* want to take advantage of 'the abstractions of our reason', but we want to do so in a very particular way. When it comes to acquired character, Schopenhauer believes we should use our rational/reflective capacities to arrive at 'the abstract and therefore clear knowledge of the invariable qualities of our own empirical character [...]'. It follows from what Schopenhauer says about reason's concern with abstraction that if self-knowledge is abstract, then it will have some measure of generality to it. Still, instead of seeing this generality in terms of reason informing us about what '*human beings in general*' are capable of doing, Schopenhauer sees it in terms of our coming to know our individual character on the basis of an abstraction from the various dispositions we find in ourselves and the various actions we observe ourselves performing.¹⁰ It is self-directed reflection of this kind that is central to the initial task of acquiring self-knowledge of my own individuality.

¹⁰ A different reading of these passages would take Schopenhauer to be casting doubt on the thought that reason has any appropriate role to play in the discovery of one's individual character at all, given its tendency to generalize. If what we're doing here is trying to get specific about ourselves, then we might need to call on intuitive cognition, rather than rational cognition to get the job done. This is an interesting possibility, though one I am not going to explore here. The difficulty would lie in explaining

Now while it is true that Schopenhauer thinks that much self-knowledge comes about through experience, in order for a person to actually achieve acquired character they have to *do* something with that experience-informed self-knowledge, something that again draws on our rational capacities. For Schopenhauer, abstract reflection on our individual character ‘enables us to organize the unalterable role of our own person in a thoughtful and methodical manner [...] and under the direction of solid concepts, we can also fill gaps in it left by whims or weaknesses’ (*W 1*, 331-2). A crucial element of the kind of self-organization Schopenhauer discusses here is the formation of a certain kind of maxim, what I will call a *maxim of character*. He says that having acquired character means that ‘[we] have now put the ways of acting that are necessitated by our individual natures into clear and conscious maxims (*Maximen*), maxims that are always present to us’ (*W 1*, 332). He adds that we will ‘follow these maxims as deliberately as if they had been learned, without ever being led astray by a present impression or the fleeting influence of mood [...]’ (*W 1*, 332). The claim here is that actions performed from a maxim of character have a kind of decisiveness that actions performed from some other state or for some other reason lack. In saying that someone who acts this way is not influenced by moods or whims, Schopenhauer means they are someone who has circumscribed the portion of the species character that befits them, thereby insulating themselves from other dispositions that would get in the way of their individual character’s expressing itself. Not only does this give their conduct a kind of decisiveness, it gives it a kind of seamlessness as well. And this is something that is lacking in the case of the characterless agent who, again, is more likely to be seen ‘fumbling around’ as they try to figure out what they ‘really want and are capable of doing’ (*W 1*, 332).

what it means to grasp one’s individual character ‘intuitively’, and, likewise, how one can be sure that such an intuition is not mistaken. At least in the case of a rational grasp of one’s character, there can be some standard one could appeal to in judging whether one has grasped things accurately, namely, the wide variety of self-experiences which one is subsuming under the concept ‘X’s individual character’. It is interesting, however, that Schopenhauer sometimes likens an agent’s intelligible character to the Platonic Idea of their character (e.g. *W 1*, 183). And since the Platonic Ideas are grasped via intuitive intellect, there could be something to the idea that our individual character is grasped in the same manner.

Schopenhauer doesn't appear to place any restrictions on just how coarse or fine-grained the content of a maxim of character must be. All of the following would count:

Black coffee: Take your coffee black (for that is how you like it best)

Tongue biting in general: Bite your tongue (for you tend to make little comments when they're not appropriate)

Tongue biting around Ed: Bite your tongue around Ed (for you don't like him, but there's no need to be combative and to make him feel bad about himself)

Each of these is a subjective principle of action aimed at streamlining the agent's behavior in a certain practical context.¹¹ Hence, Schopenhauer's description of someone who acts on maxims of character as needing only 'to apply general principles to the individual case in order to reach a decision right away' (*W 1*, 332). Rather than dawdle over how I'll take my coffee, as the novice does, I have a principle that handles my actions in this domain. Hearing someone in my presence mispronounce the name of a German city, I give the desire to make a little correcting comment no weight; I simply bite my tongue; and I will be especially vigilant about biting my tongue when it is Ed who mispronounces the word, since our personal history makes it such that that sort of thing could very quickly ruin the night for everyone involved.

It is important to recognize the everydayness of these maxims of character, since this indicates the ways in which Schopenhauer's discussion of acquired character has implications for

¹¹ Note the intriguing parallel with the role Schopenhauer assigns moral principles in his discussion of compassion, namely, as *reservoirs* of compassion. 'Without firmly formed *principles*', Schopenhauer says, 'we would be irresistibly at the mercy of the anti-moral incentives when they are excited into affects by external impressions' (*E*, 206). Thus, in both discussions principles are praised for their ability to help us avoid acting on whims. In the case of compassion, we avoid anti-moral whims; in the case of acquired character, we avoid the whims that would cause us to act in ways that are not reflective of our individual character.

the smaller aspects of life as well. I think it would be a mistake to think that the only thing Schopenhauer is trying to accomplish with the notion of acquired character is to remind us how important it is that we get the big decisions in our life right. Rather, part of what is going on in the discussion of acquired character is that we're being offered a picture well-constituted agency, that is, of what it is for agency to function well.

The idea is that well-constituted agency consists of a certain underlying functional arrangement involving an agent's individual character, her capacity for reflective cognition, and her actions. What results from this is the formation of maxims of character which, when acted upon, result in actions that are expressive of the agent's character and therefore which leave the agent satisfied.¹² Thus, while it is true that 'basic' agency in Schopenhauer need not involve anything more than an issuance of will in action, quite a lot more needs to happen if one hopes to attain the sort of agential fluency that is constitutive of acquired character.¹³ To see this, we need only to remind ourselves of the deficiencies that befall the characterless agent, who by now looks like a prime candidate for someone who does not have their stuff together.

Schopenhauer is explicit that characterless agents 'act like novices (*als Neulinge*)' (*W 1*, 332). This indicates that he means to distinguish between different levels of competence within agency itself, where it is clear from what we've seen that the characterless agent is lacking a certain competence when it comes to their exercises of agency that the person of acquired character is not. Schopenhauer will describes the novice as one who 'will not set off on a straight line but rather take a shaky, crooked line, deviating, wavering, turning back, and setting himself up for pain and remorse' (*W 1*, 331). Earlier, we saw him describing such persons as zig-zagging

¹² There is a fruitful connection to be made between Schopenhauer's discussion of acquired character, especially the idea of maxims of character and their relation to personal autonomy and Michael E. Bratman's (2007) 'planning theory' of autonomous self-government. Indeed, I believe that what we find in the discussion of acquired character is a non-homuncular, reductionist model of autonomy of the kind we find in Bratman. And by taking satisfaction with oneself to be closely associated with successful agency, Schopenhauer also would appear to align himself with the work of another reductionist theorist of autonomy, namely, Harry Frankfurt (1988).

¹³ For a discussion of 'fluent agency' in contemporary work on agency see Railton (2009).

and ‘fumbling’ in their actions. By contrast, we know that persons of acquired character exhibit a seamlessness in their conduct due to their self-knowledge and the single-mindedness and self-assurance this seeds. From this it would seem to follow that the main weakness of the characterless person is that they are *indecisive*. Because they don’t know who they are, characterless persons don’t know what they want and what they are capable of, making them indecisive on matters small and large.

Indecisiveness and violence to character

Once we see the way Schopenhauer intends the acquired character to be offered as a remedy to agency-undermining indecisiveness, we can start to make sense of the idea that there is a unified explanation of the agential defect on display in the three examples I began the chapter with. At least one thing that the person who never knows what to order and the person who can’t get their life together have in common is that they are indecisive. The former lacks decisiveness when it comes to what they like to eat, the kinds of foods that make them happy; the latter lacks it with respect to what they want for themselves in life. Two very different forms of indecisiveness, no doubt, but two forms of indecisiveness all the same.

But surely, the thought goes, it is much worse for us to be indecisive about what we want to do with our lives than it is to be indecisive about what we really like to eat. After all, openness in one’s gustatory preferences seems like a good thing as it allows us to experiment with all different sorts of foods. Of course, the same can be said about life, up to a point. An objection I’ve been putting off for a while would say that there’s nothing wrong with the person who spends their whole life sampling different vocations. Schopenhauer will agree, provided that person *knows* that that is what they want for themselves and is satisfied with the results. The wholehearted wanderer is a very different kind of person than the one who wanders, zigzags, and fumbles because they don’t know what they want and what they can do. What this tells us is that our impartial judgments about whether or not a person ‘has their stuff together’, whether they

are going about things in the right way, do not always track the person's own assessment of their situation.

You might very well have a talent in quite a lot of areas, and so derive pleasure from dabbling a bit in each. It is easy to imagine a person who excels at mushroom farming, teaching, and piloting, and who spends their life doing all three. But it is just as easy, Schopenhauer says, to imagine someone who spends a good portion of their life teaching when that is not where their talent lies.¹⁴ Similarly, we can imagine someone who is so committed to trying new foods, perhaps because they wish to cultivate a kind of cosmopolitanism in their culinary taste, that they've never discovered their go-to meal, the thing that can lift them out of a depressive episode. Nor do they have a go-to dish, the thing that brings upon them an endless barrage of compliments from their friends when they make it. In this case, they seem to be missing out on some good; perhaps we should call it the good of having a settled personality.

'Nonsense,' the refrain goes: 'you'd have to be completely oblivious to not have settled on a go-to meal'. That's probably true. Though I think by now we can see that one of the lessons Schopenhauer wishes to draw from his discussion of acquired character is that we should not underestimate how oblivious to ourselves we can be.

There are all sorts of reasons why a person might not wish to admit to themselves that they don't like what they're doing, or that they don't know who they are. Maybe they're wishing to keep up the appearance they've presented to the world (and to themselves) of the person they are. Imagine the inner dialogue of a person who feels completely out of place in fine dining environments: 'Why am I here? I can't believe I had to wear a certain kind of shoe to get in; and that I had to go out and buy the stinkin' things! If only my grandfather could see me. Oh, well, the things you do early in the relationship, right?' If this is something that only happens from time to time, there isn't much to worry about: it won't disrupt one's having a settled personality. Yet, if

¹⁴ Atwell worries that this is absurd, since the suggestion is that one could be 'really' good at something and never know it; similarly, one could be 'really' compassionate despite never acting that way. See Atwell 1990, 134.

this is the kind of environment one continues to put themselves in despite not feeling comfortable in it, and if one brushes off those feelings, then it seems we do have a case of someone trying to keep up appearances and playing games with themselves in the process.

But we can only engage in this kind of self-directed subterfuge up to a point. If we take things too far, we inevitably do 'violence' to our individual character (*W 1*, 331). While Schopenhauer does not fully spell out all that this involves, we are safe in assuming that part of what it means to do violence to oneself is that you have done something to jeopardize your conception of your own worth. When he remarks that only certain people 'can breathe in the atmosphere of a court', part of what he is saying is that the person who pursues a legal career despite not finding that atmosphere congenial has committed the wrong against themselves of not acknowledging their own worthiness to live a life suited to their individual character. This is why he says that a good source of evidence that one has done such violence are feelings of worthlessness and self-dissatisfaction. The following remark is revealing:

Imitating other people's qualities and idiosyncrasies is much more shameful than wearing other people's clothes, because it is a judgement we ourselves pass on our own worthlessness (*W 1*, 333).¹⁵

These is, however, a philosophical problem in allowing Schopenhauer to even say that one person is capable of imitating another, since that would imply that one is able to take on traits and styles of behavior that go against their individual character. But if our individual character is fixed, as he often says it is, this shouldn't be possible. As far as I can tell, the way around this is to remind ourselves of the significant role that reason and reflective cognition play in structuring our behavior and getting to know ourselves. It is because we're rational that our actions do not

¹⁵ In his discussion of 'Schopenhauerian virtue ethics', Patrick Hassan notes that this claim puts Schopenhauer at odds with Aristotelian virtue ethics, since it his prescription that we precisely do not try to imitate others, not even the paragons of virtue. See Hassan 2019, 25.

express our character from the word 'go'. And yet our rationality in the form of experience-informed and reflective self-knowledge is also what is going to allow us to achieve the state where we do, on balance, tend to act in ways that are expressive of our individual character, i.e. the state of acquired character.

Taking stock

I began this chapter with some examples meant to illustrate the familiar phenomenon of persons who do not have their stuff together. I then posed the following questions about the examples:

1. What is causing these agents to not have their stuff together?
2. How is it that this condition comes to count as an agential defect?
3. How can it be remedied?

What I've argued here is that Schopenhauer's notion acquired character provides a good set of answers to these questions. To recap, with acquired character in hand, we can answer question 1 by saying that the cause of an agent's not having their stuff together is lack of self-knowledge of their individual character. Turning to question 2, Schopenhauer will say that lack of self-knowledge brings about characterlessness, a state in which an agent experiences indecisiveness with regard to a plethora of matters relating to their wants and abilities, and which, when taken to an extreme, leads to violence to self and feelings of self-worthlessness; it also disrupts their chances at having a settled or coherent personality. This condition undermines agency in that causes an agent to act without self-restraint and without defined maxims of character. And this, I think we should say, gets in the way of the agent's achieving a robust form of personal autonomy. Finally, turning to question 3, we now see that Schopenhauer's remedy to this condition is that we work to achieve a substantial degree of self-knowledge of our individual character, and, on the basis of that self-knowledge, proceed to act in ways that are expressive of who we are.

As a concluding thought, I would like to briefly note a connection between Schopenhauer's discussion of acquired character and a thesis floating around contemporary

ethics which Dale Dorsey calls ‘the normative significance of self’ (henceforth NSS).¹⁶ According to Dorsey, the standard account of the normative significance of self [...] holds that facts about an individual’s self (such as their projects, commitments, practical identities and so forth) create or give rise to new reasons’.¹⁷ Dorsey sites as an example of this Christine Korsgaard’s remarks on the normative import of an agent’s ‘practical identity’. For Korsgaard,

Practical identity is a complex matter and for the average person there will be a jumble of such conceptions. You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on. And all of these identities give rise to reasons and obligations. Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids.¹⁸

While I don’t wish to argue here that Schopenhauer shares all of the NSS theorists commitments (I don’t have the space left for that), I am persuaded that his notion of the acquired character commits him to something approximating NSS. For, as we’ve now seen, one of the guiding ideas behind the acquired character is that there is value for us in acting in ways that are expressive of who we are; and that there is almost no value in trying to be somebody we are not, given the feelings of self-dissatisfaction and self-worthlessness doing so engenders. And, where there’s value in acting as oneself, there seems to be reasons and obligations to do the same.¹⁹

¹⁶ Dorsey 2016

¹⁷ Dorsey 2016, 6.

¹⁸ Korsgaard 1996, 101.

¹⁹ If this line of thought has any legs at all, then it might be nicely suited as a response to Nietzsche’s criticism of Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion, namely, that it fails to take account of the normative importance that an agent’s own interests have for her as her own, not in virtue of their epistemic proximity to her, but in virtue of the role they play in her individual flourishing. For an excellent discussion of this, see Reginster 2017.

The problem of course is that NSS tends to be developed against the backdrop of either constructivist, relativist, or subjectivist theories of value.²⁰ And as recent work on Schopenhauer's ethics reveals, such theories do not sit well with some of his other expressed commitments.²¹ But I leave sorting through this mess for a different day.

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²⁰ Along with Korsgaard, Dorsey also lumps Bernard Williams into this camp, who in certain essays, like those found in Williams 1981, appears to advocate for a kind of value subjectivism or relativism.

²¹ For interpretations of Schopenhauer as a value realist, especially when it comes to moral value, see Marshall 2017 and Shapshay 2019.

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