

# Character

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## **Penultimate draft.**

‘Of all the difficulties which impede the progress of thought and the formation of well-grounded opinions on life and social arrangements’, wrote John Stuart Mill around 150 years ago, ‘the greatest is now the unspeakable ignorance and inattention of mankind in respect of the influences which form character’. Aristotle is never far in the background of Mill’s moral and political philosophy, a presence weightier than Jeremy Bentham’s in the foreground. That this is often overlooked is not only because thinkers tend to be pigeonholed into a single school and Mill eschews the language of virtue. It is also because moral and political philosophers did not heed Mill’s words and continued for over a century to pay very little attention to the nature and development of character.

Part of the reason for this is the separation of psychology from philosophy as a distinct discipline. While psychologists developed experimental methods for measuring the workings of the mind and explaining and predicting behaviour, philosophers began to carve a distinct identity from the normative and purely conceptual aspects of their tradition. Moral and political philosophy in the English language became insulated from the growing experimental science of the mind.

Even after Elizabeth Anscombe argued forcefully for the reliance of secular ethics on understanding the mind, there was no immediate rapprochement with psychology. Moral philosophers first engaged in a priori analysis of commonsense psychological concepts, trading intuitions about what counts as an action, a desire, an intention, a disposition, or a trait, and how these are related to one another. But as psychologists began to recognise the importance of this kind of thought, the interdisciplinary movement of cognitive science was born. Philosophers turned their analytical scalpels, sharpened in discussion of folk psychology, to the dissection of the categories and claims of scientific psychology.

Anscombe also influenced the direction of moral philosophy in another way. In response to her portrayal of rule-based ethics as profoundly theistic, secular moral thought turned to ancient Greece. Philosophers became increasingly interested in the idea of ethics as concerned with identifying the character traits we ought to encourage and those we ought to discourage. Some argued that ethical evaluation is first and foremost evaluation of character. Others that it is primarily evaluation of actions, but good actions are best secured by developing certain traits. By the end of the twentieth century, this broad church of virtue ethics had become central to moral philosophical discussion.

Over the past decade, these two streams have met in debate over the relevance of empirical psychological findings to philosophical accounts of virtue and character, debate that would hearten Mill for its empiricist method as much as for its subject matter. This discussion centres on *Lack of Character*, in which John Doris draws on an impressive range of experiments to argue that people do not possess such ‘global’ traits as courage, temperance, honesty, or kindness. We really possess ‘local’ traits, he argues, such as office-party-temperance or sailing-in-rough-weather-with-friends-courage. If this is right, then the virtue ethics of preceding decades that assumes that we do have ‘global’ traits must be either radically rethought or abandoned altogether.

One kind of response to Doris has been to criticise the experiments he cites, his synopses of their results, or his selection of these particular experiments. Another has been to argue that he misunderstands the view of character traits embodied in the virtue ethics tradition. Given the confidence with which these critics tend to diagnose this alleged misunderstanding, it is perhaps surprising how much they disagree over what the traditional view is. The gist of this counter-argument, though, is that the experiments Doris cites measure only actions, where one's character is traditionally construed as a matter of the way one sees situations and how one thinks and feels about them.

Doris has defended both his understanding of character and the experiments he cites and the debate has become more sophisticated in response. One new influence is recent philosophical discussion of the physical sciences, which has paid much attention to the nature of dispositions generally and to criteria for deciding between competing theories. Another is information from neighbouring psychological inquiries into personality traits, practical reasoning, and automatic or unconscious responses to environmental stimuli. As this discussion becomes more sophisticated, it is in turn influencing philosophical debates about agency, autonomy, and free will.

Beyond the academy, this empirically informed discussion of character is filtering into debates over education, crime, public health, community cohesion, individual well-being, and even economic sustainability. The influential British political think tank Demos, for example, is currently investigating the nature and development of character and the relevance of this to public policy. It is perhaps no coincidence that the director of Demos, Richard Reeves, has recently published a major intellectual biography of John Stuart Mill.