

# TOWARD AN ETHICS OF CHARACTER

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NO ETHIC is formulated in isolation from the social conditions of its time. The contemporary emphasis in Christian ethics on the dynamic and self-creating nature of man is a reflection of the kind of society in which we live. Perhaps our ancestors were born to pre-established roles in a world where faithfulness to those roles guaranteed the fulfilment of moral duty. But we are born into a social world that forces us to be free, to be autonomous; for now the moral imperative is to actually fashion our lives by choosing among the numerous alternatives our social world presents to us.

In such a world it is not surprising that current moral discourse employs the language of freedom and responsibility to focus on man as self-creator.<sup>1</sup> The moral life is not constituted by correspondence to an objective moral order; rather it is to be constantly readjusted to the nuances and ambiguities of our ethical choices and experiences. Modern ethicists recognize that there is often more to our moral situation than our principles and rules contain; so much of our significant moral experience and life simply does not fall within the areas marked off by clearly defined roles or principles. "Responsibility" names the fact that often we are simply forced to fall back on ourselves in order to make decisions that have no relationship to objective standards of right and wrong.

In a social situation that seems to force the individual to be on his own, it is no surprise that the subject matter of ethics is centered around "problems," i.e., situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do.<sup>2</sup> Ethical discussion then focuses on the best way to respond to such "problems": Should an ethical decision be determined primarily in relation to principles and rules, or by a loving response to the peculiarities of the immediate situation? Those who argue for "principles" suggest that only their approach assures objectivity in morals, or that love is sentimentalized if it is not "imprincipled." Contextualists maintain that adherence to principles results in a false security that makes one insensitive to the complexity of modern moral issues.

<sup>1</sup> For a much fuller account of the idea of responsibility and its use in contemporary theological ethics, see Albert Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics* (Washington: Corpus, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> For an extraordinarily perceptive article that makes this point in a philosophical context, see E. Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind* 80 (1971) 552-71.

Ethicists on both sides of the "context versus principle" debate have made the same error: in focusing on "the problem," both have tended to ignore the ethics of character. "Problems" or "situations" are not abstract entities that exist apart from our character; they become such abstractions to the extent that we refuse to be other than we are. Perhaps the ethics of character has won a distasteful reputation because "having character" is associated with being set in one's ways, inflexible, or unbending.<sup>3</sup> But unless the positive significance of character is appreciated, freedom and responsibility cannot be understood in their proper moral context; for we are more than just the sum total of our responses to particular situations, whether the moral significance of such responses is determined by the situation itself or by its lawfulness.

To emphasize the idea of character is to recognize that our actions are also acts of self-determination; in them we not only reaffirm what we have been but also determine what we will be in the future. By our actions we not only shape a particular situation, we also form ourselves to meet future situations in a particular way. Thus the concept of character implies that moral goodness is primarily a prediction of persons and not acts, and that this goodness of persons is not automatic but must be acquired and cultivated.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay I will try to make clear the meaning of character, its nature in relation to the self, and its moral significance. Such an analysis will be primarily philosophical. This should not, however, obscure the fact that there are also basic theological issues at stake. For example, contemporary theological ethics offers many recommendations about the nature and shape of the Christian life: "Christians are to do the most loving thing"; "Christians are followers of God's will"; "Christians conform to the shape of grace." But it is not at all clear how such recommendations are to be taken. What does it mean for men to embody a particular way of life (imperative) as that which gives form to "what they really are" (indicative)? Not only do such recommendations seem too abstract to bear on actual living of our lives; even on their own terms, it is not clear what kind of proposal is being made about our actual moral formation.

These recommendations seem to summarize particular life styles, ways of living out what the individual proponents think it means to be a Christian in the circumstances of our times. Yet this does not add much clarification; as James Gustafson has pointed out, there are many

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of character viewed primarily as an "armour" or limiting aspect of our human freedom, see Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis* (New York: Noonday, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Johann, "A Matter of Character," *America* 116 (Jan. 21, 1967) 95.

ambiguities in the phrase "styles of life."<sup>5</sup> Not only do too many styles seem applicable to Christians, but the referent of the word "style" is by no means clear. Is a "style" meant to be a descriptive generalization that allows one to predict what the behavior of Christians will be, or is it an evaluative judgment of what Christians ought to be like? Both elements seem to be intended, but the relation between them remains very much a mystery. Furthermore, does "style" primarily denote deeds that are characteristic of the Christian, or does it refer more to dispositions, attitudes, and intentions? This raises an even more perplexing problem: Exactly how is the relationship between a person and his acts to be understood? Is there a difference between what the person is and what he does? Do a person's actions follow from the kind of person he is, or does his character depend on the kind of action he engages in? Beyond even these questions is the problem of what it means to act at all.

These are extremely hard questions, but their difficulty does not excuse the failure of contemporary moralists to consider them. In the Protestant context, this failure may reflect the traditional concern to deny that the actual shape of a man's life has any efficacy in the attainment of his righteousness. Protestant ethics has taken seriously its mission to guard against "the temptation to confuse the shaping of life in accord with one's belief with the attainment of grace and God's righteousness."<sup>6</sup> In order to do this, Protestants have tended to emphasize the dual nature of the self: the "internal" justified self is divorced from the "external" sinful self, the passive self from the active. This has been more than just a theological description; there are enormous practical consequences if what a man does and how he acts have relatively little to do with his real "internal" justified self,<sup>7</sup> if man's "external" acts are only the ambiguous manifestations of his "true internal" self. Because of this emphasis, Protestant ethics has paid relatively little attention to how men's disposition, intentions, and actions actually embody whatever is considered to be the normative "style" of the Christian life.

Roman Catholic moral theology has continued to be more open to the language of character and virtue, as these concerns have played so important a role in the Catholic tradition as it has been shaped

<sup>5</sup> James Gustafson, "Christian Style of Life: Problematics of a Good Idea," *Una sancta* 24 (1967) 6-14; reprinted in his *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971) pp. 177-85.

<sup>6</sup> Gustafson, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> This kind of problem can already be found in Luther, especially in *The Freedom of the Christian*. See *Three Treatises*, tr. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) p. 297.

by Aristotle and Thomas. Moreover, recent Catholic moralists have emphasized the "whole person" rather than judgments of particular acts divorced from the total development of the moral agent.<sup>8</sup> Yet even in the Catholic context it is hard to find sustained analysis of the nature of the idea of character that its ethical significance would seem to demand. I am sure any explanation for this would be extremely complex, since it would have to combine sociological insight with a history of moral theology. Even if I were competent to supply such an account, it would direct me too far away from the main purpose of this essay. Rather I want to try to begin the kind of analysis of the nature of the idea of character and its moral significance that is required if we are to adequately account for this aspect of the Christian moral life. I do not pretend to say anything that Aristotle and Thomas did not say as well or better.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps this essay will at least provide the impetus to read their work with fresh eyes.

#### MEANING OF CHARACTER

It is no accident that the concept of character is most appropriately used in contexts suggesting individuality; for, etymologically, the word "trait," which is often closely associated with it, is connected with making a distinguishing mark.<sup>10</sup> In this sense a character may be a distinctive figure in arithmetic or it may be used to point out a particular feature of an inanimate object. Therefore it is not surprising that character is also used to mark off the distinctive in a human being.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Charles Curran, *A New Look at Christian Morality* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1968) pp. 204-7; and John Milhaven, *Toward a New Catholic Morality* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) pp. 22, 87, 107. Milhaven, in a recent article "Objective Moral Evaluation of Consequences," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 32 (1971) 407-30, emphasizes Thomas' understanding of the relation between virtue and moral knowledge, but he thinks psychological analysis is now more appropriate for such issues. While this may be the case, it certainly is a matter that must be demonstrated rather than assumed. It is not clear how completely Milhaven integrates the emphasis on the significance of the agent into his general position; he continues to defend a form of consequentialism in which the impersonal moral judgment of the spectator makes irrelevant the agent's own understanding of what he was doing. One cannot help but get the feeling that many of the so-called "new-liberal Catholic moralists" still continue to accept the "old morality" presupposition that ethics is primarily concerned with judgments about particular problems. If this is the case, the difference between the new and old moral theology is not primarily in method but in style and specific conclusion. Put in historical terms, this means that the new Catholic ethics, like the old, has not provided an adequate account of the relation between the virtues and the more "objective" and problem-oriented ethics traditionally associated with the confessional.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of Aristotle and Thomas on virtue and character, see my *Moral Character as a Problem for Theological Ethics* (New Haven: Yale Ph.D. dissertation, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> R. S. Peters, "Moral Education and the Psychology of Character," *Philosophy* 37 (1962) 38.

However, character takes on an added meaning when it is applied to persons. It denotes not only what is distinctive but what is in some measure deliberate, what a man can decide to be as opposed to what he is naturally. Because a man chooses to have a kind of character, we can assume that by knowing his character we have some indication about what he is likely to do. For example, we think of a man as naturally and incurably slow, but we feel that one can choose to be more or less honest or selfish. A man's

inclinations and desires, which are part of his "nature," may suggest goals; but such inclinations and desires only enter into what we call a man's "character" in so far as he chooses to satisfy them in a certain manner, in accordance with the rules of efficiency like persistently, carefully, doggedly, painstakingly, or in accordance with rules of social appropriateness like honestly, fairly, considerately, and ruthlessly.<sup>11</sup>

Probably because the notion of character seems to have this fundamental connection with personal effort, it is often thought of an implying effort done for moral praise or blame. Nowell-Smith expresses this by saying: "Pleasure and pain, reward and punishment, are the rudders by which moral character is moulded; and 'moral character' is just that set of dispositions that can be moulded by these means."<sup>12</sup> Supporting this argument is the fact that so many individual character words imply a moral judgment. Yet, as R. S. Peters points out, the relationship between the descriptive and evaluative aspects of character language is actually much more complex than this. An indication of this is the fact that we may be quite hazy about the spheres in which praise and blame apply and yet talk with some assurance about a person's character.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of ambiguity is clarified if we distinguish between "character traits" and "having character." A "character trait" usually refers to a distinctive manner of carrying out certain activities. Thus we can describe a person as being a perfectionist in his work without implying that he exhibits this trait in all his activity. Sometimes we use certain trait words to characterize the way a person carries out all the various activities of his life. We sometimes use such trait words to imply a negative evaluation of a person whose adherence to one particular style of behavior causes him to act inappropriately in certain situations.

The notion of "having character" is clearly set apart from the idea of

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) p. 304.

<sup>13</sup> Peters, p. 39.

a "character trait." To speak of a man "having character" is not to attribute to him any specific traits; rather the point is that, whatever activity he takes part in or trait he exhibits, there "will be some sort of control and consistency in the manner in which he exhibits them."<sup>14</sup> We often speak of integrity of character, thereby closely identifying integrity and consistency with the meaning of having character. We talk of strength or weakness of character as a way of indicating whether a man may be relied upon and trusted even under duress. Character in this sense is what Hartmann calls moral strength, which is the capacity of "the person to speak for himself, to determine beforehand his future conduct not yet under his control, therefore to guarantee for himself beyond the present moment."<sup>15</sup>

Character understood in this way implies that man is more than that which simply happens to him; for he has the capacity to determine himself beyond momentary excitations in the acts.<sup>16</sup> This is not just a matter of being able to will one's present decision as determinative in and for the future; as Hartmann argues, this volitional possibility ultimately depends on the identity of the person himself.

One who promises identifies himself as he now is with what he will be later . . . . The breaking of a promise would be a renunciation of himself, its fulfillment a holding fast to himself. On this personal identity depends a man's moral continuity in contrast to all natural and empirical instability; on it, therefore, depends at the same time the ethical substance of the person.<sup>17</sup>

Thus it is character that gives a warrant for our expectation of a link between what the individual is and the sequence of his actions and attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Once the distinction between "character traits" and "having character" has been made clear, we can better appreciate the complexity of the evaluative and descriptive aspects of character language. When we think of a person's character, a distinguishing trait such as honesty or kindness is usually what we have in mind; but when we speak of a

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics 2* (tr. Stanton Coit; London: Allen and Unwin, 1963) 287.

<sup>16</sup> In the light of this understanding of the idea of character the problem with situation ethics is that, in spite of its claim to provide men with autonomy, it is working with a very passive model of the self. The self is always lost amid the contingencies of the particular situation. For men to have autonomy in any meaningful sense, they must be able to meet "the situation" on grounds other than those which the situation itself provides. Such grounds must be based on their character. Situation ethics seem but a secular restatement of the passive view of man associated with the traditional Protestant insistence on the centrality of justification by faith.

<sup>17</sup> Hartmann, p. 288.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1955) pp. 104-17.

man as "having character," we are more apt to be thinking of something like integrity, incorruptibility, or consistency. The former denotes more the common meaning of "virtues," while the latter indicates a more inclusive and unitary concept. Both usages denote the distinctive, and both require effort on the part of the agent. They not only differ in level of generality, but having character also denotes a more basic moral determination of the self.

The use of "character" (mainly implied in specific character words such as "honesty") in the sense of denoting specifiable traits usually suggests an immediate moral evaluation, whereas to say a man "has character" is much more ambiguous; for even though normally to say that a man has character is to praise him, we do not think it odd to say that a man has character and yet deplore a large part of his conduct. For example, we might well say that a thief has character (he can be trusted to be a thief, and perhaps one who is clever or courteous), but we would not wish to imply by this that he is thereby a good man. This simply makes the point that, though most of us would give positive valuation to the consistency, integrity, and reliability that "having character" implies, yet these alone do not completely specify either the nature or the moral value of the traits which are part of such character.

#### CHARACTER AS QUALIFICATION OF OUR SELF-AGENCY

We have already indicated in several different contexts that man's capacity for self-determination is crucial if he is to "have character." At the very least, this capacity implies that a man is more than that which happens to him. Though the importance of physiological and environmental factors is not to be underestimated, a man is not simply formed by the interaction of these forces. Rather man is in his essence self-determining; through his heredity and environment he acts to give his life its particular form. A man's present choices and actions control his own future by shaping the kind of man he is. Man is at the mercy of external forces only if he allows himself to be, for man is not just acted upon but agent. To be a man is to be an autonomous center of activity and the source of one's own determinations; all he knows, all he wills, all he does issues from that very act by which he is what he is.

This strong sense of agency, however, does not deny the aspects of man's life that can be thought of as his destiny. We do not have unlimited possibilities, we are "destined" to a certain range of choices by our culture, society, and our particular biographical and psychological situation. It is our destiny to be born at a particular time in a certain society rather than another. In this sense we do undergo much, and much happens to us in our lives. However, we recognize that a man

can gain character by responding in significant ways to events beyond his control. In so responding, he is not just being a passive agent, but he is actively forming himself to endure what he is undergoing in a particular way. Though it is undeniably true that we are destined men, we are also agents who have the capacity to give that destiny a form appropriate to our character. Though character may grow out of what we suffer, its main presupposition and condition must remain the agency of man.

It is impossible in this essay to adequately explicate or defend this understanding of self-agency, even though a complete exposition of the idea of character would require it. Suffice it to say that this idea of self-determination has much in common with recent developments in the philosophy of action where the self is understood primarily in terms of man's ability to act.<sup>19</sup> Metaphysically, this notion of the self rests on the irreducible difference between what happens to a man and what he does (though for certain purposes or disciplines the language of action might be translated into the language of passion). In this context the self is neither understood as a mysterious entity that somehow exists behind our actions nor reduced to the external conditions of the act. Rather the self is not different from our agency, for we have the power of efficient causation through our capacity to intentionally form our action.

This last point is crucial, for there is a vast difference between calling human action purposive and calling it intentional. The concept of intention is confined in its application to language-using, reflective creatures who are able to characterize their own conduct, whereas the concept of purpose is not so limited.<sup>20</sup> Only men can be characterized as intending what they do, whereas animals may be said to have purposes. Thus to argue that action is basically intentional is to point to the fact that action can only ultimately be described and understood by reference to the intention of the agent. Only the agent can supply the correct description of an action, whereas purpose can be characterized from the observer's point of view.

<sup>19</sup> For an introduction to the philosophy of action, see *Readings in the Theory of Action*, ed. N. S. Care and Charles Landesman (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1968). A few of the important books in this area are: Austin Farrer, *The Freedom of the Will* (New York: Scribner's, 1958); Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (New York: Viking, 1960); A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958); Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966); D. G. Brown, *Action* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1968).

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hampshire, "Reply to Walsh on *Thought and Action*," *Journal of Philosophy* 9 (1963) 413.



Action is not called intentional in this sense as a way of indicating some "extra" feature that exists when it is performed, but as a way of denoting what makes it human action at all. To say action is intentional is to clearly differentiate intention from the kind of cause that is known by observation, for intentions represent a class of knowledge that can be known without observation;<sup>21</sup> Hampshire calls this nonpropositional knowledge.<sup>22</sup> To characterize our knowledge of our actions in this way may be a bit misleading, because it makes our intentions appear to be some strange kind of private knowledge accessible only in a mysterious way. But these philosophers characterize our knowledge of our actions in this way in order to suggest that such knowledge does not conform to the validating conditions ordinarily prescribed for empirical knowledge. The idea behind nonobservational knowledge is that the agent knows what he does, not because he observes himself doing what he does, but simply by doing it. Melden puts the matter correctly when he suggests that knowledge of our own actions is noninferential. The agent knows what he is doing directly, by no process other than translating his intention into action.<sup>23</sup> I do not intend to write this sentence by observing what I do. I know what I intend immediately because that is what I intend and thus do. In other words, the knowledge I have of my intentions and my doings is not something I acquire, it is something I have simply because it is I who am acting. I cannot be an agent and fail to have such knowledge, for the condition of my agency is that I have a reason for what I do. Our actions cannot therefore be considered apart from our agency; they are intelligible only on the basis of that agency.

Man's capacity for self-determination is dependent on his ability to envision and fix his attention on certain descriptions and to form his actions (and thus his self) in accordance with them. A man's character is largely the result of such sustained attention. His reasons for his action, his motives and intentions are really explanatory because they are the essential aspect in the formation of the act and consequently in his own formation. His reasons do not "cause" him to act, but by embodying them he as the agent effects the corresponding action.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>22</sup> Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Melden, *Free Action*, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> "Cause" here appears in inverted commas to indicate an issue of controversy. Philosophers such as Melden, Anscombe, and Richard Taylor argue that since actions are only intelligible in terms of reasons or motives, they are not open to an account in terms of Humean causality (Melden, p. 53; Taylor, pp. 9-98). They argue that since Humean causality presupposes a contingent relation between cause and effect, the relation of logical necessity between the agent and his act precludes causal explanation; for the in-

Man's agency may not be determined by any external cause, but it is only effective when it is determined in one direction rather than another, i.e., when a man chooses to live his life by certain beliefs and intentions rather than others, and embodies this fundamental choice in his concrete choices. Man chooses within an indeterminate range of possibilities by ordering them in accordance with his intentions. To be free is to set a course through the multitude of possibilities that confront us and so to impose order on the world and one's self.

Character is thus the qualification of our self-agency, formed by our having certain intentions (and beliefs) rather than others. Character is not a mere public appearance that leaves a more fundamental self hidden; it is the very reality of who we are as self-determining agents. Our character is not determined by our particular society, environment, or psychological traits; these become part of our character, to be sure, but only as they are received and interpreted in the descriptions which we embody in our intentional action. Our character is our deliberate disposition to use a certain range of reasons for our actions rather than others (such a range is usually what is meant by moral vision), for it is by having reasons and forming our actions accordingly that our character is at once revealed and moulded.

The idea of character, therefore, involves the complex question of the relation between our "reasons" and the "corresponding action." Aristotle was fond of saying that "virtues develop from corresponding

tention of the agent is necessarily connected with the external act simply because the intention to do a certain thing cannot be described without making reference to its object. But even if this argument is sound, it need not preclude that "reasons"—insofar as they are wants and desires—are still properly thought of as the "cause" of our action. For two excellent discussions that argue this way, see Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970) pp. 76–85, and Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ., 1971) pp. 95–131. For the purpose of this essay it is not necessary to make a decision about this issue; however, it is obviously of great significance for any full theory of agency and especially for basic methodological questions concerning the nature of the social and behavioral sciences and their relation to ethics; for at the least the agency theory of human behavior makes clear that the social sciences cannot model their explanatory patterns after the natural sciences. See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior*; Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958); *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, ed. May Brodbeck (New York: Macmillan, 1968), and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York: Schocken, 1971) pp. 211–279. In the context of these methodological questions the kindest thing that can be said of Milhaven's statement that "the use of the behavioral sciences is morality" is that it displays a rather shocking naïvete and innocence (*Toward a New Catholic Morality*, p. 125). The important relation between ethics and the social sciences is not well served by the ethicist's accepting at face value the procedure and conclusion of the social scientist on the grounds they are "empirical."

activities," which implies that it is possible to establish a rather direct relationship between the virtue and a certain set of actions that have a publicly agreed-on description (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a21). But Aristotle's understanding of this relationship is far too simple; it rests on the assumption that the standards of morality of the current Greek society are normative. No doubt, even in the context of our extraordinarily pluralistic society such an assumption can account for a great deal of our moral behavior, but it is not sufficient. It fails to explain why at times our description of an action ceases to be in conformity with its established public description. Nor does it allow for the possibility that my individual reasons for an action may be far different from the public understanding of such an action; for example, a courageous man may have to perform an act that is publicly associated with cowardice. Perhaps the creative moral life can be understood as the constant struggle to enliven and enlarge the relationship between the established description of an action and its moral basis.

Put another way, this kind of problem indicates that our character has both a public and a private dimension. Our character is always secret to some extent; no matter what our public actions may look like to the observer, only our own avowal can finally be taken as the description of what we were doing. To be sure, moral or legal considerations force us to judge certain kinds of acts from the observer's understanding of what "has happened."<sup>25</sup> Such judgments do not strike us as coercive, since the descriptions according to which our intentions form our character are already socially determined (and thus observer-determined).<sup>26</sup> Yet character, even though it must be at least po-

<sup>25</sup> This involves the very complex question of the relationship between responsibility and action. We are often held responsible for an action we did not do strictly speaking, but for which we are responsible because we failed to employ knowledge of skills that one would expect normal persons under similar circumstances to employ. Implied by this is a denial that the moral life can be interpreted primarily as a choice between the subjectivity of the agent or the objectivity of the observer. The important ethical question is not whether moral options are subjective or objective, but whether they are true or false.

<sup>26</sup> This has extremely important implications for ethical reflection, for it makes clear the correctness of Plato and Aristotle's assumption that ethics is a branch of politics. The work that has influenced my reflection in this respect is G. H. Mead's conception of the social self, even though it is obvious that I reject some of his strong behaviorist assumptions. See, e.g., *The Social Psychology of G. H. Mead*, ed. Anselm Strauss (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1956). Alfred Schutz's *Collected Papers* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962) is also very suggestive for an understanding of the social dimensions of the self. Dewey's thought, of course, also has tremendous importance for understanding the relations of the self to society.—The implications of this idea of the self for the social sciences are numerous. Very generally, however, I suggest that the social sciences investigate the core of

tentially public, is also irreducibly private; we alone form our character by choosing among the descriptions society offers and deciding how to combine and order them. This is but a way of restating the assertion that our character is the qualification of *our agency*; thus it is and can only be ours in a way no one else can duplicate or share.

In emphasizing the agent's perspective, I am not recommending ethical solipsism. Thinking something right or wrong does not make it so. Kurt Baier has rightly suggested that the minimal condition for being a morally serious person is willingness to judge our action from the point of view of anyone—i.e., we are willing to defend our action on grounds that are open to public debate.<sup>27</sup> Only as we are willing to subject our reasons (descriptions) for our actions to something like the universalizability principle is ethical judgment and argument possible at all.<sup>28</sup> This emphasis on the agent's point of view, then, does not undercut the importance of moral argument, judgment, and practical reasoning; it does indicate that the moral life involves more than these issues. Willingness to examine our actions from a moral point of view is certainly a condition of morality; but such investigation makes no sense unless we are willing to first engage in certain actions or ways of life. A man is good not only because his acts are justifiable, but because he is willing to face hard decisions entailed by his embodiment of commitments that go beyond the minimal conditions for moral argument.<sup>29</sup>

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descriptions generally accepted by the participants in a society; in this way social scientists could analyze the limits within which action can take place in one society. The rate of change in a modern society is a function of the pluralism of its basic descriptions.

<sup>27</sup> Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (New York: Random House, 1966) pp. 100–109.

<sup>28</sup> My affinities with the Kantian tradition are obvious. However, for the exposition of the generalization principle closest to my own, see Marcus Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

<sup>29</sup> As Richard Price observed, most men whose behavior is in the main decent and regular "are perhaps what they appear to be, more on account of the peculiar favorableness of their natural temper and circumstances; or, because they have never happened to be much in the way of being otherwise; than from any genuine and sound principles of virtue established within them and governing their hearts. The bulk of mankind is not composed of the grossly wicked, or of the eminently good; for, perhaps, both these are almost equally scarce; but of those who are as far from being truly good, as they are from being very bad; of the indolent and unthinking; . . . the wearers of the form without the reality of piety; of those, in short, who may be blame-worthy and guilty, not so much on account of what they do, as what they do not do" (*A Review of the Principle Questions In Morals*, ed. D. Daiches Raphael [Oxford: Clarendon, 1948] pp. 230–31). The ethics of character is an attempt to indicate that "what men do not do" is important for the kind of men they are; and "what men do not do" is not just their failure to judge their own individual actions from a "moral point of view," but their failure to take a stance out of which all their action develops.

To understand character as the qualification of our agency is not to affirm that we can and should become whatever we wish. To strongly emphasize our agency is not to deny the significance of the passive aspects of our existence. Much that we are is that which "happens to us." Our intentions embody the "given" aspects of our existence as elements in the envisaged project. Through such an embodiment we conform our lives to what we think to be "reality," in its descriptive as well as its normative mode. The point I have tried to make, however, is that part of what constitutes "reality" for men is what we are able to contribute through the active ordering of reality by our intentional action.

These last two points can be brought together, since our society and its stock of public descriptions form large parts of the passive aspects of our existence. Yet no man can simply be passively formed by his society. He may find it easier to simply acquiesce in the expectations and demands of his society. But such a conformity is not completely passive, for it must still become a qualification of his agency. His resulting character is still uniquely his, as much as the character of other members of the society who have interacted more creatively with that society and are more visibly different from the society's normal expectations. It is certainly true that much of our life consists in assuming societal roles or patterns of behavior, which may be good or bad. Yet it must still be our agency that embodies and enacts these roles.

It is not possible to establish abstract criteria that can accurately indicate how much our character is determined and how much we determine ourselves. These obviously vary from society to society, from one position in society to another, from individual to individual. Our original genetic temperament and social position largely determine the range of descriptions which will be possible for us. My point is the more general one that, regardless of the way our character is actually formed in its concrete specification, it must be nonetheless *our* character if, as I have argued, men are fundamentally self-agents.

#### CHARACTER AS MORAL ORIENTATION OF THE SELF

Character is tremendously important for our moral behavior; for what we do morally is not in itself determined by the rules we adhere to or how we respond to one particular situation, but by what we have become through our past history, by our character. Experiences like facing death and falling in love are very important for what we are and do; yet they are often ignored in the analysis of moral experience simply because they are not in propositional form. It is our character that

gives orientation and direction to life. The clarity and singleness of men's characters vary greatly in their concrete manifestations. Perhaps the clearest example of character is one in which a life is dominated by one all-consuming purpose or direction. The moral value of such a character depends on the substance of the purpose to which it is dedicated. Most of our characters do not exemplify such an all-consuming aim; rather each of us has a set of intentions and descriptions integrated in some hierarchy of priority which provides a general orientation.

If character is understood as the orientation of our self-agency, it cannot be finished once and for all; it is impossible to perceive beforehand all that is implied in the descriptions which we have made our own. We often find that the patterns we use to form our actions have more to them than we originally suspected. To have character is necessarily to engage in discovery: by our continuing action we discover unanticipated new aspects and implications of our descriptions. For example, we may find that we have embodied two different descriptions which we originally felt to be in harmony, but which prove to be contradictory as they are further specified in concrete actions. We discover the conditions for the success of the other. Thus we may find that we cannot wish to gain as much money as we can and at the same time treat all men fairly. At some point, in relation to a particular situation, we discover that though our agency can be determined by either one of these descriptions, they cannot both be harmonized in the same act. We must choose one or the other, and thereby become as we have chosen.

It is possible, of course, that we shall simply be inconsistent, one time acting to gain money and the other time to be fair. Such inconsistency does not mean that we do not have character, it only means that there are inconsistent elements in the character we do have, or that our character is determined primarily in view of expediency, accommodation, etc. We may think that this does not provide a very successful or particularly attractive way to be, but nonetheless it is the way we are. Of course, it is possible that both these ways of being, gaining money and acting fairly, may be harmonized in terms of a further goal, such as ambition. Thus one may find that he can further his ambition by acting in one situation to gain money, in another to leave the impression that he is a fair person. But his criterion for being one or the other is determined by his ambition.

I have thus tried to clarify the idea of orientation that I am associating with character. Character may be a general direction without necessarily being conceived in a highly specific manner or in terms of

a definite goal. We may consider such definite formation morally important, but this is not a conceptual necessity. Our character may consist of simply meeting each situation as it comes, not trying to determine the direction of our lives but letting the direction vary from one decision to another. Or we might even approve of the man who at times acts inconsistently with his character.

Such inconsistency may be important in providing a transition from our past to our future, especially when our character is so formed that we are closed to the future and fail to acknowledge the significance of new elements that confront us and challenge our past determinations. We may expressly try to protect ourselves in some narrow way from the vicissitudes of living life in a creative manner. This can be done by simply limiting our actions to a well-laid-out routine which allows a safe boredom and protects us from the ravages of the unknown. But it is equally true that our character can be formed in such a way that it provides the means by which we reach new appreciation of the possibilities of our future. Indeed, if we are to determine our own future, it is precisely upon our character that such an openness depends.

In arguing that character need not inhibit our ability to react responsibly to new circumstances, I do not wish to leave the impression that welcoming novelty is the main problem of the moral life. This would be true only on the assumption that the future brings nothing but good; but it may in fact be good to ignore the new which denies the good of the past. Character is morally significant because, if rightly formed, it provides a proper transition from our past to our future; for the task of this transition is not to accept the future unconditionally, but to respond and remake the future in the right kind of way. Our future is what we determine it to be from the depths of who we are; it can be as rich or as narrow as we make it. It is not enough that we as moral agents take into account all that is in the situation objectively understood, for what is also "in" the situation is the possible change we can make by the fact that we are certain kinds of persons. Our moral life is not limited to passive accommodation to the good; it includes changing the world through intentional activity rooted in our character. Moreover, the kind of person we are, our character, determines to a large extent the kind of future we will face. Only if we have a morally significant character can we be relied upon to face morally serious questions rather than simply trying to avoid them.

Running through my discussion of the idea of character has been an understanding of freedom I wish to make more explicit at this point. Freedom, or the autonomy of the self, is not a status to be assumed but a task to be undertaken. Put differently, "free will" does not de-

scribe a faculty of the self, but the way we decide to engage in actions under certain descriptions rather than others. To be free is the successful embodiment of the descriptions we choose as morally true. Freedom is not the will jumping from one isolated instance to another; the correlate of freedom is not the will at all, but the truth of our intention. Freedom is genuinely a virtue, a determination of the self, that protects us from being at the mercy of the moment. Our freedom, therefore, is not antithetical to our determination through our character; our freedom is possible just to the extent we are so determined.<sup>30</sup>

Especially since character is thus formed in freedom, no one type of character is normative for all men. The actual character of a man is too much the product of the contingencies of his life for such a concrete recommendation to be viable. Men are simply different, and the difference does not necessarily denote degrees of goodness or badness. Individuals have formed themselves differently in relation to their individual circumstances. Such variety of goodness frustrates the philosopher's desire for a simple description of the moral life, but the reality is undeniable.

To accept the variety of the good embodied in our actual lives, however, is not to refuse all recommendations about the kinds of character a man should have. It is simply to recognize that such recommendations do not necessarily determine their concrete specifications. In this essay I have attempted to describe the significance of the idea of character for the moral life, but a descriptive argument is not enough. The question of the kind of character one *ought* to embody cannot be avoided. This normative question involves such complex issues that it is best discussed in another context. However, I would like to make two brief normative suggestions, one moral and one theological.

The question of how our character is acquired and developed is a morally significant question. The most general statement about the character of morally serious people is that it has not been left to chance. One of the constant themes running through moral philosophy has been that the unexamined life is not worth living. This theme is very much at the heart of the moral significance of character, for it is through consciousness (intentionality) that we shape ourselves and our actions. And

<sup>30</sup>The many issues surrounding this interpretation of freedom are too numerous to consider here. For a good collection of essays concerned with this problem, see *Free Will and Determinism*, ed. Bernard Berofsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). For an extended discussion of freedom very similar to the position I am suggesting, see Austin Farrer, *The Freedom of the Will*. I suspect this understanding of character and freedom will provide a fresh way of dealing with the problem of grace and free will, for it makes intelligible the Christian claim that we are most free when we are completely determined by God's will.



what else does consciousness mean but the effort to see and understand our actions in terms of their most significant moral descriptions? For the idea that the moral life is the examined life is but a way of saying that we can choose to determine ourselves in terms of certain kinds of descriptions rather than others. Thus, to live morally we must not only adhere to public and generalizable rules but also see and interpret the nature of the world in a moral way. The moral life is thus as much a matter of vision as it is a matter of doing.<sup>31</sup>

This recommendation that we consciously strive to develop our character does not imply an unwarranted concern for the moral man with his own perfection or righteousness. I wish to give no comfort to the prig or prude. Character as I have analyzed it is not an end in itself but that which gives our lives moral orientation by directing us to certain kinds of activities. The possible moralizing misuses of character in no way detract from the moral value of character properly formed. It is not finally a question of whether we have or do not have character, but rather the kind of character that results from our way of seeing the world. The moral importance of the idea of character is not that good men think a great deal about acquiring and having character; rather it is that the concerns represented by the idea of character play an essential part in their being good men.

On a theological level, the idea of character provides a way of explicating the normative nature of the Christian life. The Christian life is not simply a matter of assuming a vague loving attitude, but rather it is a concrete determination of our being developed through our history. The Christian is one so formed as he assumes the particular description offered him through the Church. This formation is the determination of our character through God's sanctifying work. Sanctification is thus the formation of the Christian's character that is the result of his intention to see the world as redeemed in Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Iris Murdoch has written persuasively on the importance of "vision" for the moral life; see her "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Ian Ramsey (New York: Macmillan, 1966); and "The Idea of Perfection," *Yale Review* 53 (1964) 343-80. For a full exposition of Miss Murdoch's thought, see my "The Significance of Vision: Toward an Esthetic Ethic," *Studies in Religion*, June 1972. Also see my suggestion about the relating of language and ethics, "Situation Ethics, Moral Notions, and Theological Ethics," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, July 1971, pp. 242-57. For an extremely suggestive article that indicates how some of the implications of this article might be developed, see James McClendon, "Biography As Theology," *Cross Currents* 21 (1971) 415-31.

<sup>32</sup>For a fuller exposition of the relationship between character and the doctrine of sanctification as it appears in Calvin and Wesley, see my *Moral Character as a Problem for Theological Ethics*. Also see the last chapter of James Gustafson's *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) for some similar suggestions.

The Christian life so understood is not made up of one isolated "loving" act added to another. Rather it ought to be the progressive growth of the self into the fuller reality of God's action in Christ. Such growth in the Christian life is necessitated not only by the new contingencies we face as individuals; it is called forth by the object of the Christian's loyalty. The Christian tradition possesses rich images to characterize such a life. The primacy of one image or set of images is a theological question I cannot settle here. Rather I have developed a position from which such an argument can be meaningfully carried on.