Christian Miller (Wake Forest Univ.)

“A New Approach to Character Traits in Light of Psychology”

The goal of this paper is to summarize a novel empirical framework that I have developed for thinking about the moral character traits which I claim are widely possessed by many people today. Given limitations of space, though, I will not be able to motivate or defend the framework. Instead I will simply outline some of the main ideas. Also, to help make the discussion less abstract, I will focus on harming motivation and behavior, but the framework is intended to generalize to all domains of our moral lives.

Section one begins by distinguishing between virtues, vices, and what I call ‘Mixed Traits.’ Section two then looks at the patterns of behavior we should expect on my framework. Second three ends by shifting the focus to the motivation behind morally relevant behavior.

William Fleeson (Wake Forest Univ.) & Michael Furr (Wake Forest Univ.)

“Do Broad Character Traits Exist? When Individual Differences

Matter More than the Average of People”

When considering the implications of psychological research for ethical philosophy, many conclusions have been drawn on the basis of results describing averages, percentages, or other summaries of groups of people. Some of these results include that on average people are more likely to help a stranger when they find a dime in a phone booth, or that average people are more likely to help a stranger when they are not in a hurry, or that average people are more likely to help a stranger when they recently smelled something pleasant. These results are striking, in that slight changes in situational characteristics appear to lead to large changes in virtuous behavior. Because situations appear to be so powerful in their average effects, it seems that traits cannot be very powerful in determining people’s actions, that broad traits of virtue either do not exist or are inconsequential and that people are not virtuous. Although the results for the group may matter for some conclusions, we argue that the results for the group do not justify many of these conclusions because individual differences matter more than such group summaries matter for many of the most important questions. In particular, two centrally important questions are “What is the nature and determining power of the character traits that exist, if any exist?” and “What are people like and what are they capable of?”

Individual differences matter more for the first question because the question of the nature, power, and existence of broad character traits (i.e., virtues) cannot be answered by looking at group summaries; the effects for the group do not address how much people differ from each other, how much those differences determine their behavior, nor the ways in which people differ from each other. For example, the fact that the more of the group helps when in a good mood than in a bad mood does not address whether people differ in how much they help or the determinative power of those differences in various helping situations.

Individual differences matter more than group summaries for the second question because group summaries reveal what some people do, but may not reveal what most people or even the most virtuous do. When researchers investigate errors or norm violations, experiments reveal only what the most error-prone or the least norm following individuals do. Just as it would be incorrect to make conclusions about what people are like and are capable of mathematically from the mathematical mistakes some people make, it would be incorrect to make conclusions about what people are like and are capable of ethically from the ethical mistakes people make on average.

In this essay, we (1) distinguish between results describing average effects and those describing individual differences; and (2) explain why we believe that individual differences are what matter for these two questions. We also consider potential exception cases in which group summaries may matter more than do individual differences. We conclude that clearer understanding of individual differences would make a substantial difference in the use of empirical results for understanding character.

Walter Sinnott-Armsrong (Duke Univ.) & Jesse Summers (Duke Univ.)

“Scrupulous Morality”

Scrupulosity (a form of OCD involving obsession with morality) raises fascinating issues about the nature of moral judgment, about what is morally permitted in therapy, and about moral responsibility. After defining scrupulosity, describing its common features, and discussing concrete case studies, we will focus on some peculiar aspects of moral judgments made by scrupulous patients (such as thought-action fusion) and on the issue of whether these patients are reasons-responsive in the ways required for control and moral responsibility.

Michael Munger (Duke Univ.)

“A Desert Theory of Profit and Loss: The Entrepreneurial

Virtues”

The concept of a moral mean is an apt description of entrepreneurship. Aristotle's virtue of "liberality" lies between the shortcoming of *meanness* (taking too much, spending and investing too little) and the excess of *prodigality* (overspending, failing to take care to watch costs, and so on). The real question that faces the researcher who wishes to adapt the concept of virtue to fit the character of the entrepreneur is the roles of intention and consequence. Must the entrepreneur consciously intend to improve the welfare of his customers? Or is it sufficient that an honest entrepreneur, even one intending only to increase his own profits, cultivates the habits of awareness and alertness to opportunities to correct "mistakes" in resource allocation in the world around him? To the extent that entrepreneurs improve the allocation of resources, they reduce waste and ensure that people use only their "fair" share. Is this virtue?

Daniel Little (Michigan Univ.–Dearborn)

“Character and History”

This paper addresses an aspect of an old question in philosophy of history, the role of actors in history. Specifically, how do features of character play into the fabric of history? The first subject has to do with psychology, motives, and agency; the second has to do with large events and processes.  So how might a better understanding of the domain of individual character contribute to better historical understanding?

What is "character"? When we talk about a person's character, we are usually thinking of a set of fairly durable characteristics of thinking and acting that go beyond the choices of a minute.  So character is a feature of agency that is more fundamental than motives or purposes. It is an embedded disposition of behavior, a way of looking at the world of action and choice. There is also a suggestion of moral valuation involved in making assessments of character. We often describe people who act according to principle or who act out of virtue as having "good" character, whereas people who lie, betray, break commitments, or act viciously are thought to have bad character.

Here we explore several ways in which character might be important in history. There are several possible reasons. (1) It might be held that a key actor's choices were crucial for a turning point in a historical sequence, and those choices were influenced or determined by his/her character. (2) We might observe that a large population acted collectively in a critical moment -- say, the Solidarity struggles in Poland or ordinary African-American people in Montgomery during the boycott -- and their decisiveness was influenced or determined by a widespread feature of character -- courage, obstinacy, perseverance. (3) It is possible that important features of character are historically conditioned or instigated by key historical experiences -- the Great Famine in China creating widespread fearfulness about the future, the 1960s anti-war movement creating optimism about collective action. In this respect "character" is historically conditioned and collective rather than purely individual. (4) We might look at some historical events or episodes as being particularly important because they embody or exemplify certain features of character that we want to valorize -- the defense of Stalingrad or the protection of Jewish children in Le Chambon, for example.

A reasonable answer to the opening question comes down to this: History is composed of and propelled by socially embedded actors whose behaviors are themselves complex outcomes of an internally embodied system of reasoning, feeling, and acting.   We do not have particularly good theories of the actor on the basis of which to analyze them. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the features of individual thinking and behavior to which we refer with the concept of "character" are indeed important aspects of agency.  So "character" is relevant to history because it is a constituent of agency and a potentially insightful component of our theory of the actor.

David Wolfsdorf (Temple Univ.)

“Morality and Aristotelian Character Excellence”

The phrase "*aretê êthikê*" expresses one of the central concepts in Aristotle's ethical writings. It is often rendered as "moral virtue." A more literal and arguably much better rendition is "character excellence" or "excellence of character." To what extent, then, is Aristotelian character excellence moral? My aim in this paper is to make progress toward answering this question. Advancing an answer evidently requires clarification of two things: the nature of Aristotelian character excellence and the nature of morality. The task of defining morality is enormous. Less so, but nonetheless a tall order, is articulating a satisfactory account of Aristotelian character excellence. So how should one proceed? I proceed in a circumscribed and imperfect way by engaging some familiar and important contributions to the following broader question: Is Aristotle's ethical theory a moral theory? I use these contributions to cast light on my narrower question and to shape it into a more manageable form. Precisely, I draw out of the works of Bernard Williams, Terence Irwin, Christine Korsgaard, and Julia Annas seven supposed conditions of morality, six positive and one negative. I then assess these conditions with respect to Aristotelian character excellence. My basic conclusion is that Aristotelian character excellence is for the most part non-moral. Instead, Aristotelian character excellence is a sort of civic category. Character excellence is required for flourishing within a city-state, more precisely, within the best kind of city-state, an aristocracy. Still more precisely, given Aristotle's non-egalitarian views about the characterological capacities of various kinds of human being and accordingly about the correct socio-political structure of the city-state, Aristotelian character excellence qua civic excellence is the excellence of the free male Greek aristocratic citizen.

Kate Abramson (Indiana Univ.)

“On the Complexity of Humean Character”

In everyday life, we sometimes condemn people tempted to bad behavior, even if they don’t act on those temptations. For instance, we will be relieved if a person who feels tempted to act out of prejudice refrains from doing so. But it is a mark of bad character to feel drawn to bigoted conduct in the first place. We hold it against such folks, partly because we expect that one can over time come not to even be tempted to act in such appalling ways. To make sense of this aspect of our moral practices, I contend, one must hold that a virtuous agent’s moral commitments can play a very particular kind of practical role in her character. It must be possible, I argue, for an agent’s moral commitments to alter the very structure of an agent’s desires and passions in specific ways, and to inform the place of those desires within her larger motivational psychology. Hume’s conception of character and of morality’s practical influence upon it is complex in just this way. But to see this, I argue, we need to pay attention not only to Hume's writings on ethics in his *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, but also the rather more neglected *Essays*.

Mark Alfano (Princeton Univ.)

“How One Becomes What One Is”

I argue that Nietzsche’s conception of character development is the most empirically adequate of any historical view. Character trait attributions – whether they target oneself or others – tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. The structure of the paper is as follows.

In section 1, I sketch the Aristotelian, Humean, and Kantian conceptions of character development. For Aristotle, one becomes virtuous through habituation and the cultivation of practical wisdom. According to Hume, one becomes virtuous through the joint influences of sympathy, (dis)approbation, and natural development. The Kantian view has two levels. At the noumenal level, one becomes virtuous by choosing a universalizable supreme maxim over self-love; at the phenomenal level, this choice is manifested as a disposition to do one’s duty, even and especially when it conflicts with narrow self-interest. As I spell out in more detail in section 3, none of these theories enjoys as much empirical support as the Nietzschean conception of character.

In section 2, I lay out the Nietzschean conception of character development, which is aptly condensed in the formula, “how one becomes what one is.” A crucial feature of this view is that the dispositions a person ends up with are the ones that she is taken to have – either by herself, if she exhibits an active, masterly, creative tendency, or by others, if she exhibits a reactive, slavish, mimetic tendency. Someone who thinks she is honest will tend to behave in honest ways; someone whom others consider dishonest will tend to behave in dishonest ways. This view can be found throughout Nietzsche’s writings, but especially in *Human, All Too Human* 51 (“If someone obstinately and for a long time wants to *appear* something it is in the end hard for him to *be* anything else”), *The Gay Science* 58 (“The reputation, name, and appearance […] of a thing […] nearly always becomes its essence and *effectively acts* as its essence”), and throughout the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals*.

In section 3, I argue that the Nietzschean view is the best empirically supported conception of character. The basis for this argument is my own theory of factitious virtue, which I develop in *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge UP 2013) and elsewhere. On this view, character trait attributions tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies through the mechanisms of self-concept and social expectations.

Neil Sinhababu (National Univ. of Singapore)

“Virtue and Desire”

This essay is about the mental states that explain how virtuous people recognize moral reasons for action. My opponent is John McDowell, who cites a variety of phenomena as evidence that virtuous people recognize moral reasons using a perceptual capacity that doesn't include desire. His arguments have been influential against Humean views on which recognizing a reason is seeing some consideration as promoting the satisfaction of a desire. I'll show that a Humean view better explains the phenomena McDowell cites against it than his own view does.

First, I'll present McDowell's position, on which moral reasons are perceived through a perceptual capacity that doesn't include desire. Second, I'll show how the salience of moral considerations to the virtuous exemplifies the effects of desire on attention-direction and emotion, likening it to the salience of food to the hungry. Third, I'll consider how moral considerations can silence other considerations when virtuous people deliberate, and provide an explanation compatible with Humean views, in terms of how knowing that one won't get something prevents one from weighing it in deliberation. Fourth, I'll argue against McDowell that moral phenomenology is just the sort of empirical data that a broadly scientific approach can address. I'll conclude by arguing that animals can be virtuous by having the appropriate desires.

Paul Katsafanas (Boston Univ.)

“Autonomy, Character, and Self-Understanding”

Autonomy, traditionally conceived, is the capacity to direct one’s actions in light of self-given principles or values. Character, traditionally conceived, is the set of unchosen, relatively rigid traits and proclivities that influence, constrain, or determine one’s actions. It’s natural to think that autonomy and character will be in tension with one another, for two reasons. First, autonomy is defined in terms of self-chosen principles, character in terms of constraints on choice. Second, when we attribute an action to an agent’s capacity for autonomy, we treat it as issuing from exercises of reflective, self-conscious choice; when we attribute it to the agent’s character, we treat it as caused by potentially unreflective motives, emotions, and dispositions.

How deep does this tension run? Of course, the answer depends on which conception of autonomy and character we accept. For example, if we construe autonomy as authenticity—as acting in a way that’s true to one’s deep character—then there may be no tension whatsoever. On the other hand, if we conceive of autonomy as libertarian freedom—as the capacity to choose in a way that’s wholly undetermined by factors external to the will—then there may indeed be a conflict. So, to answer our question, we need to render it more determinate. We need to fix a conception of autonomy and ask how character comports with it.

I want to work with the broadest possible account of autonomy. Thus, I’ll begin, in Section One, by discussing core components that are shared by most accounts of autonomy. I suggest that autonomy requires the capacity to engage in causally efficacious, content-restricted choices that are not determined by the motives upon which one is reflecting. Section Two briefly clarifies the notion of character. With this groundwork in place, Section Three considers the ways in which character can limit the scope of choice and influence the reasons upon which one acts. I argue that these limitations and influences present no problem for autonomy. However, Section Four articulates a different and more problematic way in which character affects choice. There, I argue that character can limit autonomy when it operates in a certain manner. As a first approximation, character limits autonomy when it influences the agent’s choice in a way that were she aware of it, (1) she would disavow the influence, and (2) the influence could no longer operate in the same way. Put a bit differently, I argue that character undermines autonomy when it generates reflectively unstable perceptions of warrant. Section Five considers the way in which the effects of character are sometimes dissolved by self-understanding.

In short: I’ll argue that the mere fact that character constraints and influences choice is unproblematic. What matters is a *particular kind* of surreptitious influence that character can generate.