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THREE CONCEPTS OF CHARACTER

abstract

The concept of character has a long history in moral philosophy. Three fundamental versions can be identified: the Aristotelian, the Humean, and the Kantian. The Aristotelian concept of character is based on the model of the wise person, who shapes her feeling according to reason. The Humean character is based exclusively on feelings, having as a criterion the feeling of approval for virtue and disapproval for vice. The Kantian character is based on freedom as autonomy and on the feeling of respect. I argue that the Kantian concept avoids the risk of depending on metaphysics (as the Aristotelian model does) and of lacking universal value (as the Humean model does).

keywords

character, norms, ethics, moral philosophy, respect, virtues, sentiments

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Quand on n'a pas de caractère,
il faut bien se donner une méthode
Albert Camus (1956, p. 15)

1. Having a character, following a norm

A method is a norm, a rule to follow when acting and when you do not have the ability or the will to specifically examine the circumstances, the roles of the persons involved and the benefits at stake. But having a rule to follow or apply risks allowing one to not think. Above all, it is a way of not facing the challenge of being a *character* – that is, a personality built around a strong and conscious identity and capable of autonomous judgment, of understanding how to make use of rules but also when to violate them.

The idea of character has a long tradition in the history of moral thought. Suffice it to say that the Greek term for what we call character is *éthos* (ἦθος) – that is, precisely the etymological root of ethics. This term, in its original meaning, indicates the habitual behavior characteristic not only of a people, but of an individual as well. It is a set of customs, a way of acting and at the same time the visible form of an identity. In ancient ethics, character is the essence of moral life, much more than following a norm or applying a principle. For Heraclitus, "The divine [*dáimon*, δάιμον] for man is his character [*éthos*, ἦθος]" (Diels-Kranz, 1973, fr. B 119 my translation); what establishes the identity and even the destiny of an individual is her *éthos*, her characteristic behavior, the implicit or explicit principle of her choices.

However, in the history of thought different conceptions of this notion have been formed, in which, from time to time, the criterion of a well-formed character has been seen as an expression of the intellect, of inner sensitivity, of reason or of a rule written by nature. Broadly speaking, and with an inevitable schematism, we can distinguish three basic conceptions of character, having at their basis three classic authors of the Western philosophical tradition.[1] These are the Aristotelian, Humean, and Kantian conceptions. I briefly sketch the essential traits of each tradition, highlighting their advantages and limitations. I then conclude by offering some reasons to favor the often-overlooked Kantian understanding of character over the other ones. The aim of this paper is essentially a synthetic, rather than an analytic

1 The Eastern tradition, especially in Confucian thought and in Buddhism, has developed a deep understanding of the idea of character. See Shun, Wong (2004) and Siderits (2016). For obvious reasons of space, I will have to confine myself to some examples in the Western tradition.

one: comparing the outline of the three models offers an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

2. The Aristotelian character

Aristotle's (2000) view in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) has been canonized as the historically longest and most influential model of moral theory. Aristotle himself consciously deepened and systematized an ancient tradition, dating back beyond Plato and Socrates, focused on the notion of virtue (*aretè*, ἀρετή). Aristotle defines virtue as "a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean [*mesotes*, μεσώτες] relative to us and determined by reason [*lògos*, λόγος] – the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person [*phronimos*, φρόνιμος] would determine it" (*NE*, II, 1106 b - 1107 a, p. 32). As can be seen, both the practical model of virtue (namely, the wise man) and its internal criterion (namely, *lògos*) are precisely indicated: the wise man is the character that results from the exercise of virtue, while reason is his norm – that is, the rule that makes choices good and that, through repetition, fosters the disposition to act according to the mean, which represents a kind of measure of virtuous action. In this perspective, the purpose of ethical life is to give oneself a stable and balanced personality, to make one able to regulate oneself according to circumstances (Russell, 2009, pp. 239-243). This was the purpose of Greek *paideia*: educating citizens to promote the harmony of the polis through individual virtue and character.

Éthos, personal and political, is therefore the result of regulating the "natural dispositions" (*héxis*, ἕξις) of individuals. To get a sense of the effective synthesis that Aristotle realizes with this fusion of nature and reflection, it is necessary to clarify on the one hand his theory of decision and on the other his conception of practical rationality. Aristotle was the first to provide a theory of decision – or, more precisely, of choice (*prohairesis*, προαίρεσις) – and his contribution remains in some ways unsurpassed, especially because of the unity of his anthropological vision. At the same time, the idea of practical reason, as distinct from theoretical or speculative reason, finds in Aristotle its first clear formulation (Allan, 1955). This distinction allows us to not confuse observing, describing, and cognitively ordering the world on the one hand and the thought that lives within the action – which is critical reflection underlying movement, desire, and intention – on the other. Ethics deals mainly with the second – that is, the thought involved in practice. Practical thinking is entirely engaged in action.

For Aristotle, choice is the end of a process that begins in the body and ends in action, which is also carried out by the body based on conscious deliberation. The stages of this process are presented mainly in book III of *Nicomachean Ethics*. At the origin of the dynamism of all living beings there is inclination (*òrexis*, ὄρεξις) – that is, the natural tension toward the world by which the living beings search for light, nourishment, and water and enter relationships with each other. This is not yet conscious intentionality, since that presupposes a reflexive capacity that only some living beings have. However, Aristotle (rather curiously, for us moderns) attributes the second stage of his theory of action – namely, the will (*boulēsis*, βουλησις) – also to animals and children, clearly distinguishing it from choice: "Rational choice is obviously a voluntary thing, but it is not the same as what is voluntary, which is a broader notion: children and the other animals share in what is voluntary, but not in rational choice, and we describe actions done spontaneously as voluntary, but not as done in accordance with rational choice" (*EN* III, 1111 b, p. 41).

This poses the problem of interpreting the notion of will in Aristotle: it probably should be understood in terms of an elaboration of inclinations. Inclinations are movements in the direction of things, especially those that can serve to support and expand the individual. In the most complex living beings, inclinations take an auroral form of intentionality – that is, they orient themselves toward specified objects with the purpose of appropriating them in

some way (Sprague, 1987). Children want food and look for its source; animals hunt prey or get food specifically suitable for them. As Aristotle observes, it cannot be said that they choose the object of their inclinations, but it can be said that they want it – that is, that they make it the purpose of a movement that is to some degree intentional.
The real leap toward intentional action, however, takes place with the next stage – namely, deliberation (*boulé*, βουλή). The term indicates, significantly, the assembly – that is, the council of citizens or their representatives. Here, during the meeting, each citizen presents his reasons for or against a decision being taken or a strategy being outlined. Similarly, Aristotle seems to suggest, in the mind of the subject there is a competition of reasons, a debate that is the essence of discursive reasoning: it is a matter not of going through deductive syllogisms, but of comparing and weighing arguments, whose sources are the inclinations themselves and shared opinions (the *éndoxa,* ἔνδοξα) about what is to be done (Cooper, 1986). The premises of practical reasoning derive from a precise indication coming from the will. "I want this" is the first step of practical reasoning and is already in itself a reason to act; it is followed by the question: "What reasons oppose, and which support this course of action?" Aristotle explains how to make the deliberation:

> As in our other discussions, we must first set out the way things appear to people, and then, having gone through the puzzles, proceed to prove the received opinions about these ways of being affected – at best, all of them, or, failing that, most, and the most authoritative. For if the problems are resolved, and received opinions remain, we shall have offered sufficient proof. (*EN* VI, 1145 b, p. 120)

It is disputed whether Aristotle's description of deliberation is representable in the form of a practical syllogism (Mele, 1981; Snider, 1988), but on the whole his understanding of the process is clear: from inclinations to choice, there is a sequence of acts of reason that include emotional elements. Therefore, the agent is involved in deliberation both as a rational and as an emotional agent.
The deliberation concerns the things "that we bring about" (*EN* III, 1112 b, p. 43) because "no one deliberates about eternal things, such as the universe, or the fact that the diagonal is incommensurable with the side" (*EN* III, 1112 a, p. 42). Rather, "we deliberate about what is in our power, that is, what we can do" (ibid.): reasons come into conflict about real practical possibilities for the subject, something at which the will aims but which needs to be examined. It is here, in fact, that the question arises of the criterion, i.e., of the norm: how can I distinguish, among all the things that I happen to want, those that really deserve to be chosen? Aristotle points to a procedure, that of comparing *éndoxa* and resolving conflicts, but does not define the ultimate criterion that guides the discussion, the principle that determines the superiority of one reason over the other. This principle is set out in his theory of practical reason, but, as we shall see, it lacks precision.
For Aristotle, a deliberation is followed by a choice. The term *prohairesis* literally means "the first grasp" (from *aireo,* αἱρέω [to grab] preceded by *pros-*, πρός- [before or in front]), or "the first of the things grasped". Metaphorically, the expression indicates both the gesture of grasping and that of placing the object of one's choice in front of oneself. In this sense, the choice is already within the action; it is action itself. Aristotle believes that a well-considered choice is always followed by the corresponding action: there is no space, between choice and action, for the phenomenon of "weakness of will" (*akrasia,* ἀκρασία) (Dahl, 1984). Rather, *akrasia* must be traced back to the time of deliberation: if, in weighing the reasons for and against, a weight or force greater than what is due is assigned to one reason or the other, an incorrect resolution is obtained. On the other hand, if hidden or silent reasons are not

considered in deliberating, such reasons will exercise their strength beneath the conscious choice, activating an implicit alternative that translates into action. In other words: if the action taken does not correspond to the declared choice, then the real choice has taken place below the explicit process of deliberation, and it has effect precisely because it represents the actual choice of the subject.

This brings to a normative definition of moral character: a character that usually lets a hidden deliberation be effective in her choices is, according to Aristotle, a weak character, who for this reason will be prone to vice (Müller, 2019). This inclination-will-deliberation-choice-action sequence is intertwined with the theory of practical reason. It is here that the subject of the internal criterion of deliberation is at play. According to Aristotle, virtues make us act "as correct reason [*orthos lògos,* ὀρθός λόγος] prescribes" (*EN* III, 1114 b, p. 48), and we know that the virtue of good deliberation is prudence or wisdom (*phronesis*, φρόνησῐς). To define the relationship between virtues and character, Aristotle uses an image: "In all the states of character we have mentioned, and in the others as well, there is a sort of target, and it is with his eye on this that the person with reason tightens or loosens his string" (*EN* VI, 1138 b, p. 103).

The correct deliberation weighs the reasons and assigns them the motivational strength necessary and sufficient to hit the target – that is, to take the appropriate action. The correctness of the reasons is the basis of their normativity, just as the force exerted on the string is the foundation of its effectiveness. However, Aristotle observes that "having grasped only this, someone would be none the wiser" (*EN* VI, 1138 b, p. 103), so one must determine the measure that defines the right reason. Now, practical truth can depend on three elements: feeling, intellect, and desire. But feeling is not a principle of action, because it is merely receptive. Therefore, practical truth is the correct relationship between intellect and desire (see Anscombe, 2005 for an influent articulation of this connection). The intellect is expressed in deliberation: "Since virtue of character is a state involving rational choice, and rational choice is deliberative desire, the reason must be true and the desire correct, if the rational choice is to be good, and desire must pursue what reason asserts" (*EN* VI, 1139 a, p. 104). The unity of desire and reasoning is precisely practical truth (Pakaluk, 2010). Practical truth is a principle of both justification and motivation because "mere thought, however, moves nothing; it must be goal-directed and practical" (*EN* VI, 1139 a, pp. 104-105) (Anscombe, 2005, pp. 149-158). Practical thought is transformed, concretely, into rational choice, and this is "either desire-related intellect or thought-related desire," and – Aristotle significantly adds – "such a first principle is a human being" (*EN* VI, 1139 b, p. 105). The criterion (that is, the norm that informs the virtuous character) is therefore this synthesis of desire and reason (that is, practical thought). *Phronesis* is therefore the virtue of that part of the soul that is oriented to a purpose and that for this reason is intrinsically connected to the irrational part of the soul and especially to emotions and desires. Therefore, *phronesis* is present in all the virtues and it is a necessary attitude of the virtuous character, as Daniel C. Russell (2009) convincingly argues at length. It is through *phronesis* that the wise man finds the right mean in ethical virtues. Wisdom is therefore an architectural principle that systematically connects emotional and intellectual life: it is the crucial point of the unity of the subject and of the human in general; it is the principle of choice and the fundamental norm of character.

The Aristotelian framework is deeply unified and effective in describing the dynamics of reflexive action. The fundamental criterion of character remains the right reason, but it has a measure (the mean) and a concrete example (the wise man). Persons of character are moral exemplars, objects of admiration and endowed with epistemic authority (Zagzebski, 2017). However, there are at least two difficulties with this perspective. First, the order of practical truth evidently depends on the corresponding order of "right" desire and "right" reason.

Aristotle does not specify what this rectitude consists of, but it is clear that its background is a form of naturalism, based on the teleological understanding of nature. Correct desire is desire addressed to its "natural" place; just as right reason is that which thinks "according to nature". The understanding of this naturalism is open to metaphysical and essentialist interpretations (MacIntyre, 2007; Annas, 2011) as well as to rather empiricist and reductionist ones (Foot, 2001, Cagnoli Fiecconi, 2018). Overall, it seems that a good character is one that "follows nature" and that practical reason depends on a cognitive understanding of the natural order, so that the subject applies a theoretical knowledge to practice. The naturalistic assumptions of this theory are not easily granted by modern visions of practical reason and imply a thesis that seems to threaten the supposed autonomy of practical thought from theoretical thought: if the rectitude of practical reason depends on knowledge of the order of the world speculatively known, then ethics depends on physics or on metaphysics. This is a renunciation of the impartiality of ethics with respect to speculative theorems, empirical sciences and, under some interpretations, even theological doctrines.

Secondly, Aristotle does not clearly specify the criterion of practical rectitude. To say that practical thinking is both desire and intellect is not very illuminating. Above all, it does not make it clear what the principle of practical thinking is. Actually, interpreters are divided into intellectualist and non-intellectualist readings, with some proposing a form of character pluralism (Elliott, 2018). In analogy to what Aristotle claims for speculative thought, it is natural to think of the principle of noncontradiction as a criterion, but he himself warns us that things, in practical thought, are not so simple (e.g., in the discussion of the practical nous in *EN,* VI, 1143 a; 1143b). In general, although clearly distinguishing between theoretical and practical thinking, Aristotle does not seem to distinguish as clearly between theoretical and practical non-contradiction. For example, if practical thought determines the means to pursue a purpose, in what sense is there a "rectitude" of the means with respect to that purpose? At first glance, it seems to be a merely instrumental criterion – that is, the effectiveness of the means. But this is a rather technical/instrumental rationality, not so much a strictly practical/moral one. The principle could also be a principle of coherence between means and purposes (for example, if I intend to treat sick people by killing other people, this – although effective – is clearly inconsistent). Yet the vagueness of the principle leaves us with a certain ambiguity about the rule to which character should conform (Carr, 2016): what are the normative and practical bases of the virtuous character?[2] For Aristotle, it may well be that the parameter of the mean and the model of the wise man are sufficient to suggest concrete behaviors, but for us, modern inhabitants of far more complex societies, it is not so simple. So, in this perspective, practical rationality is not articulated in such a way that the norm of character is clearly traced within the subject. The criterion of character seems to be entirely in things, and this leads to an understanding of character which does not take enough into account the individuality of the agent.

3. The Humean character

The union of thought and desire in the Aristotelian vision is broken in the modern age. This is less because of an abstract separation of reason and passions, rather than because of the decline of the naturalistic-teleological framework that held them together: if right reason and desire converge, in the Aristotelian scheme, it is because both belong to a rational and speculatively known cosmic order, in which the knowledge of being corresponds to the knowledge of good. Modernity has called into question this correspondence, mainly by virtue

2 See Russell (2009) for a possible answer. The point I want to make here is rather relative to the status of the ultimate principle of practical reason, which does not seem to be quite explicit in Aristotle as it is in Kant.

of the decision to "not to tempt the essences" and stick to empirically verifiable knowledge. From this framework, therefore, the metaphysical meaning of "end" (*tèlos*, τέλος) is excluded. The results of an empirical interpretation of nature (today we would call it a process of "naturalization of morality") left much less hope of tracing a moral order in nature and in the historically given relationships between humans. Perspectives such as that presented by Hobbes (1998) in *Leviathan* establish "a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (p. 66). These theories indicate that, in an empirical study of passions, the passions cannot be a priori assigned to a predetermined order in which they converge with reason. On the contrary, they seem to oppose the idea of rational order in nature.

Yet not all the authors who start the investigation with empirical observation share the Hobbesian conception of passions. Indeed, within the empiricist tradition – for example, in Hume – there are direct criticisms of the Hobbesian thesis and there is a search for an alternative image of passions. The sentimentalist perspective on ethics has a long tradition that can be traced back at least to Shaftesbury and includes authors such as Hutcheson, Hume, and especially Adam Smith, though Smith differs from Hume on this topic (Sayre-McCord, 2013). The common thesis among these authors assigns a crucial role to the "moral sense," although it is understood differently by each author. If for Shaftesbury this is a kind of *synesthesia*, which makes possible at the same time the perception of beauty and good, for other authors it takes a more specifically moral profile, and, for Hume and Smith, it essentially connects to *sympathy*, the ability to see another's emotions and judgments. Hume is, among them, the author who most emphasizes the opposition of feeling and reason and who for this reason insists on the notion of character as decisive for ethics (Reed, 2017).

Hume's ethical conception is certainly focused on ideas of virtue and vice, as in the classical tradition. However, the interpretative framework and his whole theory of character are profoundly different. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume (2007, *THN*) says that a virtuous man is "a man of temper and judgment" (*THN,* p. 304), but he traces moral distinctions between virtue and vice to their source in passions – or more generally feelings – rather than reason. According to Hume, "No action can be either morally good or evil, unless there be some natural passion or motive to impel us to it, or deter us from it" (*THN,* p. 341). An action or trait of character is virtuous or vicious because "its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind"; having a sense of virtue, therefore, is "nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character" (*THN,* p. 303). There is therefore a natural and observable convergence of feelings with virtue, in particular the peculiar feeling that is the "moral feeling" or "feeling of humanity" that unites all human beings. According to Hume, in fact, feelings of disgust in response to vice and approval in response to virtue are "so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease or madness, 'tis impossible to extirpate and destroy them" (*THN,* p. 305). Indeed, more generally, "the minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations; nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible" (p. 368). The natural virtues of greatness of mind and benevolence immediately correspond to emotional approval by the good character through the sense of humanity (Taylor, 2015, pp. 159-184), and the main artificial virtue, justice, awakens a sense of approval that "arises artificially, *tho' necessarily* from education, and human conventions" (*THN,* p. 311, emphasis added).

Character, therefore, is formed in correspondence with human practices that can be very different from each other but reflect a common natural root – namely, a type of sentimental reaction spontaneous in its origin and codified in conventions through education. Although codes may differ and reactions change from time and place, the origin of all morals is in

common and is the ability to experience a particular type of pleasure in (approval of) virtue and a corresponding displeasure in vice. The norm of character is firm in the practical thought of the subject: she does not take the norm from the outside – from natural order or customs or religious precepts – but finds it in her own spontaneous reactions when immersed in the challenge of action. The goal of moral life, in this perspective, is analogous to the classic one: to form a good character, to become fully virtuous. But here, unlike in Aristotle, the regulation of feelings and passions has its ultimate criterion in a particular feeling or, more precisely, perception: "To approve of one character, to condemn another, are only so many different perceptions" (*THN,* p. 293).
On the other hand, on the role of reason in ethics Hume is blunt:

> Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood. Truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounc'd either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (*THN,* p. 295)

In other words, reason does not directly participate in the life of desire and passions. Reason indicates the relationships between things and ideas relevant to the pursuit of a desire, but it has no authority over them. The error of reason simply generates, in the action, an exchange of objects (as when I confuse a pleasant fruit with an unpleasant one) but not a moral error (see Zimmerman, 2007 for a different view). For Hume, the judgment of an action depends entirely on the perception of the subject and has nothing to do with the object. If you consider an action, Hume says,

> In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. (*THN,* p. 301)

It is not in the things that the rule of morality resides, but only in the subject herself, and more precisely in her feelings. Therefore, in this perspective, the formation of character is the purpose of moral life (Taylor, 2015, pp. 101-104), and its success depends not on the application of rational criteria or adherence to a cosmic order known by theoretical means, but on the good balance of passions. In summary, we could say that while the norm of morality for Aristotle is good life in accordance with reason, for Hume it is good character in accordance with moral feeling.
The advantage of this perspective is to put the subject and her feelings at the very heart of moral experience. Yet the separation of sensibility and reason threatens the notion of character, making it a purely psychological notion. The norm that should judge and regulate feelings comes from the subject herself, but it does not seem to be communicable to other persons unless they share the same feelings. The presupposition that there are some universal, shared feelings would be very difficult to demonstrate with empirical findings,

notwithstanding some recent attempts (Churchland, 2011), and it even seems to violate Hume's Great Division between facts and values: the fact that a feeling or a set of feelings is empirically very common – or based on neurobiological findings – does not make it a value or a morally normative criterion. To be normative, the internal criterion of character, its norm, cannot be a de facto statistically prevalent feeling. Prevalence does not tell us how we should be. Universality is not a matter of statistics; it depends on the authority of the norm to be followed.

The moral authority of feelings can derive only from either a hypothetical natural destination toward the good (as in the Aristotelian perspective) or a critical relation to reasons that can be universally confronted. Being a good character should mean the ability to stand not only in front of an "emotional" observer but, as in Adam Smith (who in this respect is very different from Hume; see Sagar, 2017), a sympathetic one: a person who takes the position of the other in both sentimental *and* rational terms. And yet, not even Smith succeeds in indicating a principle within the feelings, apart from suggesting the image of an impartial observer which points in the direction of a universalization of maxims, but without the identification of a universal principle. Thus, the sentimentalist perspective can account for the individuality of feelings, but lacks universality as far as the simple empirical generality of some feelings can be contradicted by examples of opposed feelings in the face of the same experiences There can be no common definition of a good character if the feelings of a subject are not normative for another subject: what feelings are good characters supposed to feel?

4. Kantian ethics as an ethic of character

Kantian ethics is essentially an ethic of character (Garthoff, 2015). The statement will sound strange only to those who do not consider that Kant's normative ethics are not what one finds in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and even less so in *Critique of Practical Reason*. These works deal with the foundation of ethics, but if we look for Kant's moral duties, we must look at two other fundamental works, *The Doctrine of Virtue* (the second part of *The Metaphysics of Morals, MM*) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (*AP*) (Wood, 1999). In these texts, an image of ethics emerges as the cultivation of character (Munzel, 2002), a notion that occupies the entire second part of *Anthropology* (entitled "Anthropological Characteristic") and that is underlying *The Doctrine of Virtue*. In the latter, Kant says, for example, that the two purposes that are at the same time duties of virtue are one's own perfection and the happiness of others. As for the first, Kant (2017) states:

> Man has a duty to carry the cultivation of his *will* up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the law becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty. This disposition is inner morally practical perfection. Since it is a feeling of the effect that the lawgiving will within man exercises on his capacity to act in accordance with his will, it is called moral feeling, a special sense (*sensus moralis*), as it were. It is true that moral sense is often misused in a visionary way, as if (like Socrates' daimon) it could precede reason or even dispense with reason's judgment. Yet it is a moral perfection, by which one makes one's object every particular end that is also a duty. (*MM,* pp. 191-192)

This interweaving of law and moral feeling is, for Kant, character. And character is what deserves moral praise: "To be able to simply say of a human being: 'he has a character' is not only to have said a great deal about him, but is also to have praised him a great deal; for this is a rarity, which inspires profound respect and admiration toward him" (Kant, 2006, p. 191). We know that, for Kant, respect is the fundamental moral feeling; it derives from the inner perception of the autonomy of the subject as a self-legislator. A person of character is one

who acts according to her subjective maxims – that is, on her own personal reasons – but who has the authority, because of the way in which she has shaped her sensitivity, to make them universal laws. The person of character is an exemplar because the principle that informs her actions is recognizable and approvable by any rational agent. This position of moral excellence derives from having built her personality around stable principles: she has developed a sharp practical judgment and a recognizable wisdom (Wood, 2008).
As Kant (2006) writes,

> But simply to have a character signifies that property of the will by which the subject binds himself to definite practical principles that he has prescribed to himself irrevocably by his own reason. Although these principles may sometimes indeed be false and incorrect, nevertheless the formal element of the will in general, to act according to firm principles (not to fly off hither and yon, like a swarm of gnats), has something precious and admirable in it; for it is also something rare. (*AP*, p. 192)

For this reason, Kant concludes, "temperament has a fancy price, one can have an enjoyable time with such a person, he is a pleasant companion; – but character has an inner worth, and is beyond all price" (ibid.). However, in *Anthropology* Kant does not dwell on the criterion that he himself made the basis of moral judgment. The evocation of the law may seem formalistic, but it is precisely in the formality of the law that the possibility that everyone has an *individual* character lies (Louden, 2000): the categorical imperative does not say either how to behave or what personality to have. It only requires action based on maxims of universal value, which simply means that the subject has worked out her reasons so that they inform the overall action and are recognizable by any other rational agent (O'Neill, 1975).
As Kant (2006) points out, moral character is a personal achievement: "The human being who is conscious of having character in his way of thinking [*Denkungsart*] does not have it by nature; he must always have acquired it" (AP, p. 194). Moral character is the ability to bring one's acts together in a sense appreciable by anyone else. This act is described by Kant as an original decision, not as a natural and almost-unconscious product: having a character derives from an act of will and not from nature or habit. This effect does not take place spontaneously, but only because of a firm decision. Indeed, Kant writes that "wanting to become a better human being in a fragmentary way is a futile endeavor, since one impression dies out while one works on another; the grounding of character, however, is absolute unity of the inner principle of conduct as such" (AP, p. 194).
The criterion that informs the virtuous character in Kant is the idea of *respect*. For Kant, respect is a feeling, precisely the one aroused by the awareness of the moral law. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, respect is defined as the only authentically moral feeling because it comes not from sensitivity but from internal awareness. Therefore, it is a feeling that is originally informed by the presence of a principle dictated by the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative consists not only of the search for the universality of the law, as in the first formula, but also of the consideration of humanity in each person always as an end in herself (second formula) and the idea of the will as autonomously legislative (third formula). Respect is therefore a reflexive feeling, but it cannot but be originally part of the emotional dimension of the person. The regulation of inclinations, desires, and feelings that respond to sensitivity has an internal guiding principle. It is not a matter of imposing abstract reason on the separate world of sensitivity: Kantian anthropology is deeply unitary, and the search for the formal principle of morality does not imply an anthropological dualism between reason and passions (Louden, 2000).
Awareness of the internal law of the will raises awareness of the reality of individual freedom: the foundation of the law can only be the freedom of the will, and this means, in the end, that

the essence of character is defined by freedom. We are who we are because we are free and we can shape, more or less harmoniously, our emotional energies on the basis of a principle freely placed at the foundation of our personality (Frierson, 2019). The universal criterion of this principle is and remains that of respect. It commands to recognize and respect the authority and dignity of free will as the source of personality and as the founding nucleus of the person as an individual. Through respect, the formal law of the imperative becomes a substantial law, which has concreteness in the body, in the real life of the subject – that is, precisely in her character. This is the set of habitual movements, thoughts, attitudes, and individual ways of feeling that make each person unique.

The most relevant difference between Kant's account of character and the other traditions is that it is grounded in freedom. Having showed in *Critique of Practical Reason* that our awareness of the moral law implies that we must postulate an autonomous will as its source, Kant obtains two results: on the one hand, he grounds normativity in the acting subject, not in things themselves or in a metaphysical order of the world. On the other hand, he directly connects the norm to a principle of noncontradiction in the will that is reflectively present to the *desiring* subject. We must remember that, experientially, the moral law presents itself in the feeling of respect we experience when faced with examples of a good character. We "feel" the norm in the presence of someone practicing it before we can formulate it in a principle. Respect is the key to a good character, and respect derives from the recognition of the autonomous source of value in an acting subject. Having a character means recognizing that one's autonomy is the legitimate source of the rule that harmonizes one's inclinations, emotions, and feeling. The principle around which we design our personality is not the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative only asks that the principle we pose as the basis of our identity be comprehensible and acceptable by any other person, that it can be seen as an expression of respect for oneself and any other. I can be whoever I want to be, provided that the principle that informs my character respects persons.

5. Character as the expression of freedom

These three concepts of character offer an articulate vision of what it means to develop a strong personal identity. The idea of a *moral* character, though not so common in our everyday language, combines the notion of individuality with that of an appreciation of and even a praise for the way a person has shaped her feelings, thoughts, and actions. But how do we unify a set of personal traits with a claim to universal appreciation?

The Aristotelian conception reaches the goal by connecting personal character to an essentialist model of human being. But this model depends on a "natural" convergence of feelings and norms that cannot be taken for granted and that requires a substantial teleology that not many would accept. The Humean conception implies no teleology but encounters difficulties in grounding the claim that a good character should be appreciated anywhere, because the feeling of appreciation is severed from any normative relation with reasonableness.

The Kantian conception goes a step further: the relation between feelings and reason is mediated by respect on the one side and freedom on the other. Respect, in a Kantian framework, is a feeling and, as such, offers a normative force within the realm of emotions. Freedom is the ultimate source of this feeling since it is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the awareness of which generates respect. More directly, respect is the feeling of the unconditioned power of our freedom: it is what we feel when we perceive the power of our own freedom and of the freedom of other rational agents. Around this feeling, a character can be built that finds a norm in the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom itself – that is, the moral law. And again: the moral law does not impose a uniformity of character. Quite the contrary: each person has to create her own concrete "principle of character", the only limitation being that

no character can be built around disrespect for oneself or another as a person. The advantage of this perspective is that the principle of noncontradiction in the will is a universal rule, but one such that every person must fill it with a material content that considers individuals' characteristics, feelings and the circumstances in which they live. A strong and good character is not a method, as Camus rightly observed, but requires the harmonization of freedom and feelings in such a way that the unity of the person is recognizable by any rational agent.

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