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# Character

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the pursuit of excellence. Conceptually, then, attention to the notion of character accents the dynamic and intentional process of formation that shapes the predispositions of an individual's moral and intellectual terrain.

### *Character in the Old Testament*

The first source of Christian thought on character is the OT, with its rich vocabulary of related terms (e.g., *'emûnâ*, "integrity" [1 Sam. 26:23]; *'ōrah*, "way of living" [Job 34:11; Ps. 119:9]; *tām*, "integrity" [Ps. 26:1]; *'āšûr*, "step" [Ps. 44:18; Prov. 14:15]; *'ēmet*, "faithfulness, reliability" [Neh. 7:2]; *derek*, "way" [Ps. 50:23; 2 Kgs. 22:2; cf. Deut. 5:33]; *'šēm*, "name" [Ps. 41:5; Prov. 22:1]). The OT narratives are of particular importance because they, in providing the historical, communal, and theological context for the scriptural conception of character, are inextricably bound with biblical modes of characterization. In other words, the correlation of narrative and character highlights the ways the character of biblical persons and communities is displayed through narrative and, in so doing, situates narrative as the fundamental category for a biblical concept of character. This correlation has prescriptive implications for contemporary believers because the kind of character esteemed by the biblical authors, and therefore enjoined upon the community that recognizes the scriptural text as authoritative, takes its bearings from the sweep of the narrative. For example, antebellum slave preachers frequently read themselves and their congregations into the exodus narrative. By situating themselves inside the story, these antebellum preachers challenged their hearers to cultivate character appropriate to the controlling narrative. Thus, in telling and retelling the story of the exodus, they not only nurtured a powerful social memory but also fostered in themselves and their communities an image of salvation that included the call first to trust patiently in the deliverance of God their liberator and then to receive from God formation into a distinctive way of life. In such cases, the narrative scripts the lives of those who read the biblical world as their own, thereby determining the kind of character that will be formed in them. In sum, biblical narratives are both descriptive and determinative of character.

The formative power of these stories underscores the fact that biblical narratives were written in and for the community of God's people. The result is a notion of peoplehood (Jer. 7:23; 1 Pet. 2:9–10) in which a particular community is bound together in a particular time and place by a sense of its distinctive identity, shared memory,

## Character

Character denotes the particular set of qualities, both natural and acquired, that serves to identify a person or community. These qualities are relatively stable and will be manifest as a consistency of action that can be termed "integrity." Accordingly, in the context of Christian ethics, character names an established disposition (or set of dispositions) with respect to the particular conception of the human good exemplified by Christ. Such character is developed over time and, as such, can be formed either toward or away from virtues, understood as those intellectual and affective habits that enable



and unique vocation in the world. More than the aggregation of discrete stories about individuals in relationship with God, the biblical narrative is the story of a covenant people into which individual stories are variously nested within the stories of others and that of the community. As a result, members of the community, whose individual stories are embedded within the communal narrative, derive their sense of meaning and coherence from the larger narrative. Accordingly, character in the OT is frequently a quality of the community in which the individual participates. The people are in covenant relationship with God, and the particular character that God expects of Israel—one marked by traits such as justice, mercy, and humility (Mic. 6:8), and ideally instantiated by the king—is defined with reference to that communal relationship. The biblical story of God's dealings with his people, therefore, is both logically prior to and determinative of the individual's story. Correlatively, there is no individual story apart from the narrative of God's people, since to join God's people means being swept up by grace into this larger drama, receiving eyes to see the world through this narrative and to live accordingly in the world depicted in the Bible.

Finally, the OT wisdom literature (represented by Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, as well as the apocryphal books Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon) also constitutes an important locus for reflection on character. This literature contends that the abundant human life is found by walking in the "path of life," guided by the wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 9:10). The aim of such wisdom goes beyond simple rule-following to embrace the formation of responsible moral character, by which one is conformed to the underlying order of the world, itself a reflection of the wisdom by which God created the world (Prov. 3:19).

### *Classical Account of Character*

The classical account of the acquisition of character through human activity is that of Aristotle (fourth century BCE), whose influence helped shape the linguistic world in which the NT emerged. Distinguishing between virtues of intellect and virtues of character, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* explains that the latter are acquired through habit, a relationship that explains the similarity of the two words in Greek: *ēthos* ("character") and *ethos* ("habit") (Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1103a15–18). Since character results from the repetition of particular activities, Aristotle concludes that we are responsible for our character. Accordingly, the pursuit of virtuous character constitutes a way of life in which the whole of

an individual's life is transformed. That is, the self is the subject of a process of formation that is both the means to and the goal of that formation. There is an undeniable degree of circularity in Aristotle's account of character: one can be a virtuous person only by acting as a virtuous person would act (which includes right intention and desire); at the same time, one can become a virtuous person only by having regularly acted virtuously (Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 139). Nonetheless, given the reciprocal relationship between our actions and our character, such circularity may be unavoidable: our actions shape our character, even as our character constrains the set of available alternatives that we are able to see and to enact.

### *Character in the New Testament*

Although *ēthos*, the technical Aristotelian term for *character*, occurs only once in the NT ("Bad company corrupts good character" [1 Cor. 15:33 TNIV]), the NT is suffused with the concept (though often reflecting the greater influence of the Jewish, rather than Greek, tradition of thought), which recurs through a variety of related terms (e.g., *dokimē*, "character" [Rom. 5:4; Phil. 2:22]; *tropos*, "way of life" [Heb. 13:5]; *katastēma*, "behavior" [Titus 2:3]; *semnos*, "honorable, of good character" [Phil. 4:8; 1 Tim. 3:8, 11; Titus 2:2]). More important, even where such terms are absent, the notion of character is present through the closely related NT concept of discipleship. In other words, character formation is at the heart of the numerous NT passages dealing with discipleship (and the related notions of training, obedience, and sanctification), which is understood as a training process by which the character of Jesus comes to be formed in the lives of his followers. Thus, Jesus says that the disciple who has been fully trained becomes like the teacher (Matt. 10:24–25 // Luke 6:40). Such mimesis goes far beyond slavish imitation, consisting instead of the cultivation of the skill to make a host of subtle judgments and to attend to the world in a particular way. The result of this process of formation is a new way of life that entails the embodiment of Jesus' character in one's own time and place, a way of life that is partly constitutive of salvation itself, since "salvation" refers to more than a change in juridical status, embracing also an increasing participation in the abundant new life of the body of Christ. As John Howard Yoder says, "When God lets down from heaven the new Jerusalem prepared for us, we want to be the kind of persons and the kind of community that will not feel strange there" (Yoder 207). Discipleship entails the transformation of



the self, effected through the repetition of particular practices—for example, the Eucharist, prayer, evangelism, hospitality, care for the poor, confession, forgiveness, worship—which, when properly undertaken, help to fashion the Christian's character in the likeness of Jesus.

A strong indication of the concern for character in the NT is found in Jesus' discussion of a tree and its fruit (Matt. 7:16–20 // Luke 6:43–44; cf. Matt. 12:33). Teaching his disciples that a tree is known by its fruit, Jesus closely identifies a person's (or community's) character with the fruit of his or her (or the community's) actions while maintaining that a tree can be made good. In other words, character can be properly formed (just as it can be deformed) so as to produce good fruit. Contrary to much popular understanding, then, character cannot be reduced to interior, private values, since, being intrinsic to the person, character cannot be lightly or easily chosen or changed. This observation suggests the paradoxical nature of character, which is not only deeply individual but also social and is at once both retrospective and prospective. Retrospectively and socially, Jesus' teaching suggests that character can be read off the history of past actions that a person trails behind: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). Prospectively and individually, the character that one has developed significantly determines and delimits the available actions that one sees, desires, and even is able to perform: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matt. 7:18).

Furthermore, by linking character and actions, Jesus' teaching challenges any divorce between the individualistic and social components of discipleship, and together with it a host of related dichotomies, including those sometimes thought to exist between belief and practice, doctrine and ethics, and spirituality and morality. To overcome such false dichotomies is to realize that one's thinking about beliefs and doctrine is bound with one's character, such that deficiencies in the latter will inevitably cripple the former. Holy thinking demands holy living, and vice versa. This truth was recognized by the early church fathers, as witnessed by Athanasius, who wrote the following in the fourth century: "For the searching and the right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life" (Athanasius, *Inc.* 57).

Perhaps the most systematic treatment of character belongs to the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, who adapted the newly rediscovered Aristotelian account of the acquisition of character, radically and fundamentally transforming it according to the Christian gospel. Whereas the content of Aristotelian virtue had been defined according to the natural end, or *telos*, of the flourishing Greek city-state, resulting in a set of virtues disposed to the maintenance of the status quo, Thomas held that the true end of human life is supernatural and eschatological—that is, eternal life with God (*ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 8). As a result, the content of Thomistic virtue differs markedly from that of Aristotle, as epitomized by Thomas's choice of martyrdom as the paradigm of courage (as opposed to Aristotle's paradigm, the soldier) and of charity as the heart of all the virtues. Moreover, Thomas maintained that perfect virtue—that is, virtue proportionate to the supernatural end—cannot be acquired through merely human action but rather must continually be received as a gift of God's grace.

Although the church fathers and many medieval theologians acknowledged the strong connection, implied by Jesus, between character and actions, thereby rejecting any bifurcation between the inner and the outer, this insight sometimes was abandoned or repudiated altogether by later thinkers. For example, Martin Luther's reaction against the Roman Catholic Church led him initially to emphasize punctilious acts of obedience over the habitual formation of character—a view that he reconsidered at the end of his life (Gaebler). Moreover, his suggestion that Christians are simultaneously righteous and sinful (*simul ius et peccator*), though intended to give assurance in the face of ongoing struggles with sin, has, in practice, sometimes eviscerated the motivation for holiness, since one can rest content in the present reality of forensic justification. Thus, the possibility of a disjunction between the inner and the outer, anticipated by the voluntarism of the thirteenth-century nominalists (e.g., John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham [see Oberman]), increased during the early modern era, only to be radicalized by later philosophers, especially Descartes and Kant.

### Conclusion

The biblical concept of character sketched above strongly indicates that character formation is a necessary precondition for growth in theological knowledge. That is, formation precedes knowledge, just as doing often precedes comprehension. This pattern is not surprising, since in the Gospels the call for the disciples to follow Jesus precedes



their understanding of his ministry. (That Jesus' progressive healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22–26 is bookended by explicit references to the disciples' lack of understanding [Mark 8:17–21; 9:31–32] may suggest that spiritual vision too is attained progressively.) In the same way, 2 Pet. 1:5 exhorts its hearers to support their faith with "virtue" (*aretē*), and their already developing virtue with increasing knowledge (cf. Col. 1:10). In this light, Scripture ought not be taken as a mere repository of principles and rules whose truths are uniformly accessible to all regardless of character. On the contrary, Jesus says that those whose hearts are dull and whose ears are hard of hearing cannot understand his message (Matt. 13:15). Instead, Scripture offers an alternative vision of the world that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, gives those who follow Jesus eyes to see and so to live differently. Thus, Heb. 5:14 differentiates between Christian novices and the mature, "whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." By grace and practice, the character and vision of these mature Christians have been formed, and they can now see how to live truthfully in the world because they see the world and themselves as they really are. In short, since knowledge cannot be separated from character, proper understanding of oneself and the world requires conversion, by which one comes to see the world anew through the lens of God's revelation in Jesus.

Finally, the role of Scripture with respect to character is manifold. First, Scripture presents the grand narrative that governs and norms Christian formation. Second, Scripture relates the stories of Christianity's exemplary characters and, most important, the story of *the* exemplary character in the drama, Jesus, the *dramatis persona* in whom the Author himself is present and who therefore reveals the fullness of the divine dramatic intention. Third, the dynamic interplay between Scripture and character occurs most properly in the context of the believing community. Since an understanding of Scripture cannot be divorced from questions of character and individual stories are always woven into a wider communal tapestry, any individual act of exegesis is always implicated in a much larger context than the discrete encounter between the text and the isolated reader. On the contrary, the reading of Scripture is bound up with the communal life of the interpreters, the character of which will, to a large extent, determine one's ability to read Scripture (whether well or poorly). Finally, any account of biblical character must underscore the centrality of God's grace. Thus, the sort

of communal formation of Christic character requisite for the right reading of God's word is itself both a task and a gift of God's grace. In other words, the transformation of believers into a people of character can happen only by the power of the Spirit, who, as Eph. 2:22 shows, fills not only individual believers but also the community as a whole (thus early theologians such as Augustine and Cyprian insisted that there is no salvation outside the community of God's people [*ad extra ecclesiam nulla salus*]). Accordingly, 2 Cor. 3:18 notes that believers are being transformed into the image of Jesus by the work of the Spirit. Similarly, Col. 2:19 asserts that the growth experienced by the body of Christ (as a whole) as it comes to maturity under its head is from God. Character, then, is not something that Christians achieve on their own; it is bound up with the transforming mercies of God.

See also Conversion; Moral Formation; Narrative Ethics; Biblical; Practices; Sanctification; Virtue Ethics

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