"Character: A Persistently Developmental Account"

Forthcoming in early 2020 in a special issue of *The Journal of Value Inquiry* devoted to the work of Julia Annas, edited by Richard Hamilton and Tom Angier.

I.

Neo-Aristotelian ethical theories usually give a central practical and explanatory role to *character*. Character traits like kindness, impatience, bravery, curiosity, and so on help to explain our actions, determine their moral worth, and promote or undermine our wellbeing. For example, being overly curious may explain why a person is caught listening at a door. 'Improper curiosity' may also be part of the explanation of that act's impropriety. And if it continues unchecked, excessive curiosity may impede a person's happiness in life: as we know, curiosity actually killed the cat. Thus character is an important explanatory concept in character-based ethical theories because it is taken to have such a central practical role in human life.

But what, exactly, is character? As it happens, neo-Aristotelian philosophers often do not say much about character in general. Instead, as Aristotle does in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, they focus on the question 'What is virtue?' (That is, what is *excellence* of character?) And, again following Aristotle, for the most part contemporary philosophers treat virtue as a "firm and unchanging disposition" to deliberately and knowingly do what is excellent (1105a32-34). The implicit consensus, however, seems to be that virtue is both the ideal and the paradigm, so that character traits in general are thought of as firm and unchanging dispositions, whether they are virtuous or not.

In what follows I propose an account of character-in-general according to which character is not a firm and unchanging disposition(s). Instead, character is *persistently developmental*: it is always inherently and properly susceptible to change as life goes on. To live, to have new experiences and to evaluate those experiences and respond to them with decisions and actions, is also necessarily at the same time to have one's character shaped and reshaped, often in small ways but also often drastically, especially when considered over time. From this perspective, one's character is literally never fully formed until one dies.

One of the great strengths of the Aristotelian approach to ethics is its sensitivity to the developmental nature of human beings. As Rosalind Hursthouse wryly puts it, Aristotle "never forgets the fact that we were all once children, [whereas] to read almost any other famous moral philosopher is to receive the impression that we, the intelligent adult readers addressed, sprang fully formed from our father's brow" (14). The idea that the mature state of character is actually an active, dynamic process builds on this strength of the Aristotelian approach, and I will draw on the work of various neo-Aristotelian philosophers, especially Julia Annas, Hursthouse, and John McDowell, in articulating and arguing for the view. In particular, the persistently developmental conception of character generalizes an important feature of Julia Annas' account of virtue. Annas says that virtue "is not a once for all achievement but a disposition of our character that is constantly developing as it meets new challenges and enlarges the understanding it involves" (38). And although she says that "it is natural for us to think of a virtue as a disposition," we must bear in mind that *skilled* dispositions of the sort she takes virtues to be "are not static conditions; they are always developing, being sustained or weakened" (8). I follow Annas in using the term 'persistent' to capture character's dynamic quality.

I'll proceed by first contrasting the persistently developmental view of character with the view of character as a firm and unchanging disposition (Section II). I will then try to motivate and further explicate the developmental alternative by discussing how it fulfills some of the central explanatory and action-guiding aspirations of Aristotelian character-based ethics (Section III).

II.

The view that character consists in a (fairly integrated) set of firm and unchanging dispositions derives from Aristotle's account of virtue, according to which a virtuous person performs truly virtuous actions "first, if he does them knowingly, secondly if he decides to do them, and decides to do them for themselves, and thirdly if he does them from a firm and unchanging disposition" of excellence (1105a31-4, 115). The firm and unchanging dispositions that constitute a person's character are the product of *habituation*, where habituation is the intensive, extended process of socialization and mentored practicing of various attitudes and behaviors which we all go through in childhood and early youth. Aristotle observes that, as children, we all behave as we do without full understanding and "at another's prompting" (1103b15, 112). But eventually we take the reins, so to speak, from our parents and other elders, and act increasingly autonomously or deliberately, and increasingly out of the firm and unchanging character traits that we are being habituated to possess. Thus the end result of the process of habituation is normally a fully formed character: a set of settled dispositions to act (and feel, and choose, and think) in ways that are reliable or consistent through time and across different contexts.[1] These habituated traits are "deep" features of who we are (Annas (9)); they are not easily changed and have simply become "second nature" (McDowell (184 ff.)).

Thanks to the central role of habituation in character-formation, on the "firm and unchanging" view of character, it is developmental in roughly the same sense of the word at play in a biological or psychological account of child development. To develop the firm and unchanging set of dispositions that is *character* is to reach (characterological) maturity, just as to attain adulthood is to reach (human, or biological, or psychosocial) maturity. Obviously the developmental process in either case does not always have the normal result. But where it does, the end product is a "grown up" individual – a person, an organism, a formed character – with a strong core of characteristics that remain the same over time and change slowly, if at all.

Now, to say that character is persistently developmental is not to deny that character is developmental in the sense just described. A person's character does normally grow towards characterological maturity during childhood and adolescence. But on the persistently developmental account of character, character is also developmental in a *further* sense: namely, the 'state' of characterological maturity is itself more aptly conceived, not in terms of settled dispositions, but rather as a dynamic process or activity. One's character is not the fixed *result* or product of an early-life process of habituation. Rather, the distinctive, especially formative experiences and activities of early life are just the first stage of a lifelong process of character development; or the first stage in the life of one's character.

This shift towards a persistently developmental conception of character pressures us to reconstrue the role of habituation in the constitution of character, while still acknowledging its vital importance. Consider the way John McDowell connects habituation and character, in his account of what it is to acquire a *second nature*:

> The concept of second nature [is] all but explicit in Aristotle's account of the acquisition of virtue of character. … What it is for the practical intellect to be as it ought to be, and so equipped to get things right in its proper sphere, is a matter of

> its having a certain determinate non-formal shape. The practical intellect's coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities… (184-5)

The idea of second nature is an intuitive and powerful way to capture the developmental character of character, in the narrower sense of 'development' that means *resulting from* a developmental process of habituation. Habituation here is like the process of throwing or molding a clay pot into a particular, "determinate" shape, in preparation for firing into a firm and unchanging set of "propensities" or dispositions. But this conception of character-formation resonates strongly with Aristotle's teleological natural philosophy, according to which each thing has its own proper essence. And one might worry that the resonance is too strong. For Aristotle, a thing's essence determines the range of traits and behaviors that are possible for it. If, for example, I grow up to have a second nature that is determinately selfish then if character is essence the implication is that I will inevitably remain selfish all along, in much the same way that, for Aristotle, a stone is (and will remain) essentially heavy, and immutably disposed to fall towards the earth. And indeed McDowell takes seriously the idea that a change in character requires something like *conversion* – a kind of precipitous, un-chartable transformation that is opaque to reason, and that fits with the idea that one's essence cannot be changed by natural (that is, intelligible and non-mysterious) means (102, 107, 191).[2] But a philosopher who accepts a modern scientific conception of the natural world cannot cite Aristotle's metaphysics in support of their firm and unchanging conception of character. So if character is to be a legitimate component of a contemporary ethical theory, then either the theory must provide a fresh justification for the old essentializing model. Or it must develop a new conception of character that does not construe it in the mold of Aristotelian essences. I opt here for a new conception.

A first step towards countering character-based ethics' too-easy resonance with Aristotle's teleology is to develop a new set of explanatory metaphors. On the persistently developmental account it is helpful to think of character *itself* as a living thing, with its own life trajectory, and identity conditions that have to do with continuity over time, as opposed to qualitative consistency or determinateness or sameness over time. Just as a living thing persists as a continuous individual in an active, dynamic way, renewing itself, possibly suffering illness or damage, thriving or failing to thrive, and generally carrying on being the same organism through changes great and small until it dies – so a person's character has integrity, identity and continuity over time even while it continues to develop and, as Annas says, be "sustained *or* weakened" in its current tendencies.

In the terms of this metaphor, habituation is not like the process of throwing and firing a clay vessel. Instead it is like the process of staking and pruning a fruit tree, so as to set it on a healthy (or not so healthy) trajectory of growth. Once established, certain kinds of growth patterns can be altered (for better or for worse) more easily than others. A botched job early in the life of a sapling can create permanent vulnerabilities – to disease, to limbs that shear off under their own weight to rot; to lack of symmetry. Some trees will tolerate being pruned farther back than others, but in no case can the growth that has already occurred be simply undone or reversed. And throughout the life of the tree, some kinds of dramatic changes are possible and others are simply impossible. For example: a gardener could cut down surrounding trees, thus providing more light, and get a record yield the following autumn. But she cannot add an equally well-developed third main branch five years after she has already pruned down to two; in this sense the shape of the tree has been 'determined' by the habituation process. She could, however, let develop a third branch that may eventually match the others in importance to the overall structure of the tree, even though it will have less girth. And so on. Character thus visualized is something temporally extended and

dynamic, with different types of growth and change taking place at different rates and for different reasons, in both idiosyncratic and kind-typical ways.

I think the analogy with a slow-growing, rooted living thing like a tree can help to make intuitive the shift to thinking of character as persistently developmental, and I will rely on this analogy in motivating and continuing to articulate the view below. But the analogy has its limits, in part because there *is* a kind of teleological structure to the life trajectory of a given kind of living thing, even if that structure does not involve or depend upon essences of the sort Aristotle postulated. Therefore, in embracing the analogy, we run some risk of slipping back into an overly-essentializing conception of things. To avoid doing so it is important to bear in mind that the changes that occur in a person's character over the course of her life are developments, not in the sense that they necessarily constitute *progress*, and not in the sense that they are inherently striving towards some specific *telos* or state of completion. They are developments rather in a backward-looking sense: they *develop from*, are continuous with, and make sense in the light of a person's practical and experiential history, and in light of the corresponding current state of what Annas calls her "practical intelligence" (86). This is why it is appropriate to evaluate character much as Aristotle told us to evaluate happiness: as a feature of a *complete* life, and not as something that can be considered conclusively formed or settled as long as we continue to live. "For a single swallow does not make spring, nor does a single day; in the same way, neither does a single day, or a short time, make one blessed and happy" – or virtuous, or vicious, in whole or in part (1098a20-21, 102).

III.

So far I have suggested that character is something that develops in a double sense: (i) it issues from habituation, and (ii) what issues from habituation is itself something that continues to grow and change over the course of its existence. And I have suggested that character is therefore aptly likened to a slow-growing, rooted, and rugged living thing, like a tree. Habituation is, accordingly, aptly likened to the process of development and pruning that a cultivated fruit tree might undergo. In this section, I want to motivate and further explicate this conception of character, by considering what light it can shed on the role of character in action.

I will approach this question initially in terms of an epistemic concern: how does character *show up* as such in a person's actions? Character skeptics and critics of character-based ethics tend to insist that if character shows up at all in action, it does so in the form of temporal and cross-situational *consistency*. In contrast, proponents of character-based ethics tend to say that a virtuous person is *reliable*, in the sense that others can rely on her to act in ways that are in keeping with the virtue she possesses. There are some differences corresponding to these different locutions, as we will see. But both correspond to the basic idea of character as a firm and unchanging disposition. Thus a curious person will be consistently curious: in college and in hospice, in biology class and in the subway station. A patient person will be consistently patient: while waiting in line, waiting for a marriage proposal, and waiting for the dentist to finish drilling out a cavity. And the patient person can be relied on not to bite the dentist, dump the boyfriend, or jump the line. The curious person can be relied on to take an active interest in the anatomy of the pickled piglet, the graffiti on the subway platform, and the process of her own demise. And so on. Temporal and cross-situational consistency or reliability in action serves as our principal evidence both for character's sheer existence, and for its role in determining what we do.

On the persistently developmental conception of character, character shows up not in the form of consistency or reliability in action, but rather in the *continuity* of a person's actions with

her practical and experiential history. The evidential test of continuity is closer to reliability than it is to consistency, but it departs from both standards in substantive ways, corresponding to the differences already sketched between the canonical conception of character and the persistently developmental alternative.

First let us consider what, if any, differences really obtain between the standards of consistency and reliability. As I mentioned, consistency tends to be demanded by character critics or skeptics. John Doris, for example, in a chapter entitled "Character and Consistency," associates what is essentially the firm and unchanging conception of character with the claim that "if a person possesses a trait, that person will exhibit trait-relevant behavior in trait-relevant eliciting conditions" (26). That is, if character traits show up in our actions, we should expect them to show up in the form of "cross-situational consistency": a kind person will be kind in any number of different situations, a selfish person selfish, and so on. Doris observes that "an emphasis on robust traits and behavioral consistency is entirely standard in the Aristotelian tradition of character ethics" (18).

In a sense this is perfectly correct. But you will not find Hursthouse, Annas, or McDowell – three prominent neo-Aristotelian philosophers – actually using the term *consistency* anywhere in their accounts of virtue. Instead they argue that virtue is *reliable*. For example, Hursthouse says:

> Suppose someone were described as having the virtue of honesty. What would we expect them to be like? Most obviously we expect a reliability in their actions; they do not lie or cheat or plagiarize or casually pocket other people's possessions. … We expect a reliability in the actions that reflect their attitude to honesty, too. We expect them to disapprove of, to dislike, and to deplore dishonesty, to approve of, like, and admire honesty … [etc.]. (10-11)

Annas says something similar: "If Jane is generous, it is no accident that she does the generous action and has generous feelings … our friends' virtues and vices enable us to rely on their responses and behavior – to a certain extent, of course" (9). And, in McDowell's words, "A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires. … A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on his behavior" (51).

To trace the differences between continuity and reliability as indicators of character in action, we must distinguish two different senses in which a virtuous person acts reliably. First, to say that a virtue is a reliable disposition means that it is *no accident* that the virtuous person acts as she does, when she acts in keeping with the virtue she possesses. In this sense, character is reliable on the persistently developmental conception, even though it is not a firm and unchanging disposition. For character does non-accidentally shape a person's actions, and it does so in ways that can in principle be seen and understood, and which can figure in predictions and explanations. A person who has a highly developed sense of what it's like to be physically vulnerable (as, say, children and the elderly are vulnerable), but who had an abusive childhood, may act in conflicted and inconsistent ways towards elderly men whose belligerent and caustic affect resembles that of his late father. But this behavior is best explained by appeal to both the person's characteristic sensitivity to the vulnerability that comes with frailty, and his adverse childhood experiences. There is certainly a non-accidental, intelligible explanatory connection between this person's character and what he does.

But Annas, Hursthouse, and McDowell also say that virtue is reliable in the sense that we can *rely on* virtuous people to act in keeping with their character. This sense of 'reliable' seems to connote not just dependability, but also regularity and predictability. And in this sense character

is not necessarily reliable, and neither is the particular character state of virtue. No doubt in some general way, it is part of being a good person to be dependable. Dependability, we might say, is itself a virtue. But it is not the case that character, construed developmentally, is always reliable in the sense of dependably and predictably yielding certain actions (or types of action). This is so for at least two reasons. First, even if *virtue* reliably issues in conduct that is regular and predictable, this will not be true of all conditions of character. Part of the moral problem with a dishonest, cowardly, unkind, or weak-willed person is that we cannot count on them. And yet cowardice, dishonesty, cruelty and flakiness are all possible character traits, or tendencies that a person's character could develop. Second, whether or not a character trait issue in conduct that is predictable and reliable has everything to do with the vantage point of the person who is predicting and expecting the behavior. Someone's conduct may seem bizarre to a stranger, or to a friend from whom one has kept something secret, where the same conduct would seem all but inevitable to someone more completely "in the know". Thus 'reliable' is a relational term and its application must be understood accordingly.

More generally, there is a sense in which, if indeed character is persistently developmental, then the test of reliability looks in the wrong direction in time, even in the case of virtue. For on the persistently developmental view, when a person acts in character, or in keeping with her character, what she does is to bring her practical and experiential history – her accumulated inner resources – to bear on her present situation. And this is what we ought to look for, in order to see the impact of character on action. If a person acts in a way that is out of character, or not in keeping with her character, that means she has failed to bring her practical and experiential history to bear in some way. Not – failed to bring it to bear in a virtuous way. Rather, failed to bring it to bear in a way that was congruous with the actual shape and contents of that experiential history. She acted not from character, but perhaps out of ignorance or whim. This is why historical *continuity* is the most organic indicator of an act's being in character.

Part of virtue, then, on this picture is bringing one's history to bear *in the right way*, or excellently, over the course of a full life. And part of doing that is having the right sort of history to bring. One cannot bring a thoroughly vicious, or thoroughly blighted, set of life experiences and actions to bear in the right way, at the right time, and so forth. But if continuity is what counts, this means that we will normally be able to perceive the impact of character on actions retrospectively, rather than prospectively. Thus even where it is possible to predict what a person will do, or reliably expect that they will do one thing rather than another, that fact is not, I think, the clearest way in which the influence of character is revealed. Rather, it is in the continuity of a given action with the agent's accumulated inner resources that we find the best evidence of whether or not the action was in keeping with her character-thus-far.

Obviously whether you can see the continuity between someone's present actions and their practical and experiential history is going to have everything to do with how intimately acquainted you are with the person whose character and actions are under consideration. For you will need to know enough of her history to have some idea of the resources she does or does not have to bring to bear. Whether you can see the continuity, assuming it exists, is also going to be partially determined by your own acuity and virtue (or lack thereof). Perhaps the action is in character, and is moreover the best thing to do in the circumstances, but you can't tell. On the other hand, if you can say with confidence whether the person acted, so to speak, from character, then this means that you can see the explanatory connection between her actions and the condition of her character up to that point. You are then also therefore in a position to consider how this action not only reveals, but further constitutes her character. We will return to this point below.

But first, what of consistency? On the persistently developmental conception of character, we will not usually look for character to show up in measurable cross-situational consistency of behavior, especially where 'consistency' has connotations of similarity. Instead, we will be interested in whether a given action (decision, emotional reaction, etc.) is consistent with a person's character, where the latter is understood in the dynamic, developmental sense. For example, a person who is somewhere midway through a whole-life trajectory that is trending away from misogyny and towards a more just orientation towards women may be both unpredictable and not dependable in the relevant respects for quite a while – possibly even permanently – and possibly even to those who know him best. When it comes to consistency across situations, the best we may be able to say of such a person is that he will be consistently inconsistent. That is, he will regularly, predictably, dependably or consistently stumble and fall as often as not when it comes to his treatment of women.

But in saying this, we are nonetheless saying something true and quite specific about his character. We are saying that his actions are perfectly *consistent with* or intelligibly continuous with what we take to be the current condition of his character, conceived developmentally as something that is on a trajectory and thus always susceptible to change. And when he does manage to treat women as he should, this will be intelligible as a moral success in the context of his personal struggle, rather than seeming like a fluke. But again – such assessments of his character are possible only if we know enough of the back story to be aware that he is indeed laboring away, perhaps with indifferent results but in good faith, aiming away from misogyny and towards something better.

So if character is persistently developmental, this reveals certain limitations on both reliability and consistency as markers of character's role in action. And this suggests something important of a more general nature, concerning the kind of epistemic access that one can expect to have to facts about character.

Character-skeptics are no doubt concerned with cross-situational consistency because they are focused on the fact that questions about character are empirical questions that ought to be answerable by empirical means. As Doris puts it, "I take it that human beings and the ethical problems they encounter are in some fairly substantial sense natural phenomena that may be illuminated by recourse to empirical methodologies with affinities to those of the sciences" (4). If so, then any evidence that character traits explain behavior should be held to the standard of repeatability (if you run the same test under relevantly similar conditions you ought to get the same result, or else the first result is invalidated). And the notion of 'cross-situational consistency' certainly seems to capture this requirement. Thus if proponents of character-based ethics reject this test then it is reasonable to expect them to give their own account of how character can be observed and understood.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that virtue ethics is sometimes accused by its critics of being grounded in, or of actually being, "folk psychology".[3] These are fighting words; 'folk psychology' is a pejorative term. It is also frankly a very gendered criticism, dismissing an emerging approach to ethics that has been pioneered and chiefly articulated by women philosophers as irrational, old wives' tales. But dismissing character-based ethics in this way is shabby empiricism, and for that matter so is dismissing folk psychology. Experiment-based knowledge is *one* very important kind of empirical knowledge. It is the philosopher's paradigm of scientific knowledge. But equally important and, as things stand, far more fundamental to the grand sum of human knowledge is non-scientific *experiential* knowledge; knowledge based either on

first-hand experience or on the rich, social and domestic aggregation of first-hand experiences that is exemplified by culture.

If character is persistently developmental in the way that I am suggesting, then knowledge of character is *always* going to be knowledge of the personal, first-hand, experiential sort; it is always based on particular experiences that are sufficient to yield the most intimate understanding of a particular person. For one's character at a given time is just the accumulated available inner resources that one brings to bear at that time, when facing a situation where decisions and actions are called for. And how can something that is an inner accumulation be perceived and understood without intimate, long-term knowledge of the individual whose innards are being inspected? The short answer is that it can't. (This is why I chose to argue for this conception of character initially with an in-depth discussion of the character of a particular, fairly realistically rendered literary figure. See "The Character of Huckleberry Finn" (*Philosophy and Literature* 2018).)

To the extent, then, that it is the case that character does not show up in experimental contexts as one might expect it to, this may be explained by the fact that a well-designed scientific study will tend to edit out precisely the highly particular information about individual persons through which character is revealed to those who know them (sufficiently) well. That is, the generalizability and repeatability that are virtues in an experimental context may tend to be incompatible with the intimate, particular, personal, perspective that one must adopt in order to perceive the role of character in a person's actions and decisions. If so, then we should not be surprised if character's role in action does not show up vividly in experimental contexts.

But even if so, in making this suggestion I do not mean to imply that the social sciences cannot examine or illuminate the phenomenon of character and its contribution to what people do. Quite the opposite. I am suggesting that study design, especially including choice of methods and framing questions, should take into account the fact that character is persistently developmental, or else it will not be surprising if the phenomenon that interests neo-Aristotelian moral philosophers goes missing in the experimental context. I have no doubt that this kind of study design can be done, and done well, by those with the relevant expertise, and thus that the conception of character that I am sketching here can be put to the test. Meanwhile, experience-based, first-hand, inherently particular insight into human social and practical matters is a kind of knowledge that is valuable, highly germane to ethics, and well suited to philosophical study. Therefore, if philosophical proponents of character-based ethics are doomed to be mere 'folk' theorists, then I think we should embrace our fate and wear the label as a badge of honor.

Let us now return to the question with which we began this section: what is the role of character in action? What contribution does (or can) character make? In discussing how character shows up in action – how it can be perceived and understood – we began to answer this question. What it is for a person's character to shape and inform her actions is for her to bring to bear her personal practical and experiential history – the accumulated inner resources she has acquired through experiences and actions – on her decisions and actions. Virtue, then is what we get when a person excellently brings to bear a set of accumulated inner resources that are themselves excellent (that make the person practically well equipped to act well and wisely). And characterological imperfection is everything else, shading down into vice.

I want to unpack this conception, starting with the idea that character informs action when it is 'brought to bear' by the agent. What does it mean for a person to bring something to bear in or on her actions? The most obvious answer is that a person's accumulated inner resources are brought to bear on her actions if they figure in her deliberations about what to do. But this is too quick for a number of reasons. First, while of course one can bring things to bear in action in ways

that are immensely thoughtful and carefully deliberated, not all actions are preceded by deliberation, including many actions that have the right sort of continuity with a person's history to count as being done in, or from character. Thus we need to avoid over-intellectualizing agency and practical 'rationality', in order to appreciate what can be involved in bringing one's accumulated inner resources to bear in action. Some examples will indicate the broader possibilities.

First, someone might recognize fear or dejection in the body language of a friend and simply extend a reassuring or comforting hand. The recognition that her personal history afforded informed her action; this action was from character but not something about which she deliberated. Or, someone might avoid persons of a certain race or gender in certain situations, not out of deliberate choice but thanks to implicit bias. If this bias is part of the accumulated inner resources (or in this case, lack thereof) that this person bring to the situation, then the biased avoidance is from character, and it both reveals and continues to partially constitute her character even though she is not aware of it.

Emotional reactions, too, are part of character, as Hursthouse has persuasively argued. Someone who feels great shame or apprehension at the prospect of apologizing for some fairly inconsequential injury may reveal an aspect of her character in having that disproportionate emotional response. Perhaps she had role models for whom needing to apologize was always shameful. If so, then her current feelings of shame are part of her character at that time and they are being brought to bear in what she does. (Perhaps she postpones apologizing, or downs a shot of whiskey beforehand, or simply apologizes in a way that is unmarred but for the fact that she is in an agony of unwarranted shame.) Finally, bringing things to bear in action involves more than their figuring in deliberation because one can bring things to bear in action precisely by neglecting to deliberate about them, as is the case when one is influenced by implicit bias. If one deliberated about one's (by hypothesis subjectively inaccessible) bias, then let us assume that one would not engage in the avoidance behavior. But one does not deliberate and so the bias bears on the action.

Now we are finally in a position to say what, exactly, character consists in on the persistently developmental account. I have been talking about bringing character to bear in action in a way that suggests that character consists in the accumulated inner resources that a person has at a given time. But surely the *way* in which one brings those resources to bear is part of one's character as well. As the refrain of a folk song by American songwriter Si Kahn has it, "It's not just what you're given/ It's what you do with what you've got." And indeed, these things are only distinct from one another in a present moment of action; once the action is complete the activity of bringing to bear accrues to the history and becomes part of it. (This corresponds to the feature of the Aristotelian picture according to which practical wisdom is a kind of master virtue that straddles the intellectual and character virtues, participating in some measure in both.) Thus 1) character *at a given time* is a work in progress that involves bringing to bear, or failing to bring to bear, one's accumulated life experiences and moral comprehension of those experiences, in ways that vary in their emotional sensitivity, deliberateness, self-awareness, justifiability, and overall appropriateness. And 2) strictly speaking, a fully formed character is the total accumulation of these undertakings over the full course of an individual's life.

In one very real sense, then, our character at any given time is something that we *do*, because it is something that we continually constitute, or create, or bring into being. If anything, then, character is actually practical as opposed to dispositive in nature, just as being alive is an active as opposed to static condition of being. But to say that character is practical in this sense is not to reduce it to action or to behavior. This is so, firstly, because a character-based decision or

action (or judgement, or emotional reaction) is what *issues* from the active process of bringing one's accumulated resources to bear (or failing to bring them). Secondly, the process of bringing or failing to bring to bear the relevant elements of your characterological history is not a temporally tidy, discrete episode; it can vary in complexity and different elements of the activity may take different amounts of time. One can, for example, be in the process of bringing charity to bear in one's relationship with a difficult in-law for years, building up gradually until one finally succeeds for the first time in doing so (as Iris Murdoch's mother in law M did towards her daughter in law). And finally, character is only practical in part, in real time so to speak. One's character both overall and at a given time is also, in addition, the upshot of the whole developmental back story that constitutes a person at a given time.

This brings us finally to the question of how virtue is to be understood on the persistently developmental conception of character. The short answer is that virtue can be understood much as Annas invites us to understand it: as a *skill* that continually develops and deepens over the course of a whole lifetime. She says, "Skilled dispositions are not static conditions; they are always developing, being sustained or weakened. … virtue is like practical skill in this respect" (8). But this answer must be qualified in two ways. First, Annas sees virtue as a skilled *disposition,* whereas I have argued that character is not a disposition but is rather a temporally extended, active thing; a matter of bringing one's accumulated inner resources to bear in action over the course of a full life. And second, Annas's account of virtue gives a central role to *theoretical* rationality, since the virtuous person's skillfulness is distinguished from a mere "knack" by her ability to "give an account" of the reasons for her actions (20). I disagree with this latter position, for two reasons. First, as the above examples show, a person can often bring her accumulated inner resources to bear in her actions without reasoning at all. And second, even when rationality is involved in bringing one's resources to bear in action, the kind of rationality that is involved is *practical*, not theoretical.

I have argued elsewhere that what distinguishes the practically wise person from everyone else is that the practically wise person "is *good at* a certain kind of activity: she is good at being good, or good at doing what's best in an ethical or very broadly moral sense of 'best'" (*The Journal of Value Inquiry,* 2016). The current discussion of character allows us to give slightly more content to this general specification of practical wisdom. The practically wise person is good at bringing her accumulated life resources to bear in thought, word, and deed. She does so excellently, or 'in accordance with excellence', whatever excellence turns out to be. And she does so over the course of a full life. In so doing, she also thereby constitutes her character, day by day, action by action, so that when we look at the developmental trajectory of her character over the course of her life, we see that everything that *she* brought to the table was good: her actions, her emotions, her deliberations, the way she met, processed, and learned from experiences both good and bad, etc. This is what virtue consists in on the persistently developmental account of character.

There remains much to be said both to fully articulate the persistently developmental conception of character, and to determine its plausibility and explanatory power. Still, I hope I have said enough here at least to motivate the account and demonstrate some of its potential merits vis-à-vis the core explanatory and action-guiding aspirations of neo-Aristotelian character-based ethics.

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1. *Akrasia* is the obvious possible exception to a character-based tendency to act (feel, think) consistently. But weakness of the will might be construed either as *lack* of character (in whole or in part), or as a firm and unchanging disposition towards certain kinds of instability (say, a consistent weakness for bacon in an otherwise committed vegan). The latter construal makes sense to the extent that a *person* can be weak willed, and not just particular actions. I assume that *akrasia* can be both a character trait and an instance of acting against one's character.

2. This is not the only way that character can change in McDowell's view, but it does seem to be the only way in which changes can occur that are not already reasonable or attractive *given* one's formed ethical outlook. Thus conversion is required to change the structure of one's formed character itself. Hursthouse also notes that rapid or drastic changes in character would require something like conversion, though she notes that character can (and usually does) change slowly in much the way I am describing here. See *On Virtue Ethics* (12).

3. See principally Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 99 (1999): 315-31.