Article

What moral character is and is not

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Louise Mitchell discusses character in “Integrity and virtue: The forming of good character” (The Linacre Quarterly 82, no. 2: 149–169). I argue that she is mistaken in identifying character as a potency and that it is rather the sum of one’s moral habits and dispositions. I establish this by showing that if one correctly applies the division Aristotle presents in the text that Mitchell relies on, it follows that character belongs in the category of habit. I further support this conclusion by considering how people commonly speak of moral character. I then show that the text from the Summa Theologiae Mitchell relies on concerns sacramental character and not moral character; moreover, if we apply the reasoning contained there to moral character, we are again led to see that it should be categorized as a habit. Lastly, I explain that a human being’s potency for character lies in the soul’s rational powers.

Summary: I defend the common-sense view that moral character is the sum of one’s moral habits and dispositions in response to Louise Mitchell who maintains that moral character is a potency. I do so by applying Aristotle’s threefold division of things that exist in the soul—namely, potency, habit, and emotion—and also by examining how Aristotle speaks about character and how the average person speaks about character. In addition, I show why humans are the only animals that have the potential to develop character, and how this potential lies in the rational faculties of our soul.

Keywords: Moral character, Habits, Rational potencies, Aristotle, Aquinas

Moral character is a crucial notion in ethics. Plato long ago raised the question of why one should refrain from wrongdoing. He put before us a scenario in which a person has a magic ring that, when worn, makes him invisible, and thus allows him to commit any crime he wishes without being seen (Plato 1961, 359e–60d, 367e).¹ Although initially, it might seem advantageous for the person to do things such as rob people and spy on his competitors, upon further reflection one realizes that if he were to do so, he would destroy his character, his very self, in the process.

Louise Mitchell takes up the important topic of character in her article “Integrity and virtue: The forming of good character” (Mitchell 2015). Her central theses are that the actions of a person who “is pressured or convinced or even willing to perform an action that [he] considers to be bad or wrong” corrupts his character and, more generally, that one’s actions both impact on and reflect one’s character (Mitchell 2015, 149). While I agree with these positions, I maintain that Mitchell is mistaken in identifying character as a potency.² In this paper I intend to set forth a correct understanding of character. Although my reasoning at

times may strike the nonphilosopher as technical, much of it is based on common sense. Given the central role that the notion of character plays in the discipline of ethics and in living a moral life, the reader stands to gain knowledge that amply compensates for any extra expenditure of effort.

My specific thesis is that moral character, rather than being a potency, is the sum of one's moral habits and moral dispositions. I intend to establish this by examining the text that Mitchell relies on in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1982), thereby showing that if one applies the division Aristotle presents there to the case of character, it follows that character belongs in the category of habit. I will then offer further support for this conclusion by considering how people commonly speak about moral character, including how Mitchell herself speaks about it.

I will then look at the specific text of Aquinas drawn from the *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 1953) that Mitchell relies on to conclude that moral character is a potency, as it is her reliance on this text that is the occasion for her error. First, I will show that according to this passage, moral character should be categorized as a habit, and not as a power. Secondly, I will show that the notion of character referred to in this passage is quite other than moral character. Now one might concede that when Aquinas concludes that character is a power, he is not talking about moral character, yet still maintain that moral character is nonetheless a power. I will then show that this view cannot be sustained by reiterating two arguments provided earlier.

I will then explain wherein a person's potency for good or bad character lies. Character is not itself a potency, but rather human beings have a potency to acquire a good or bad character due to the powers of the human soul, reason, and free will, along with the other appetites that are responsive to reason.

THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* WHEN APPLIED TO CHARACTER ESTABLISHES THAT IT BELONGS IN THE CATEGORY OF HABIT

Mitchell begins her argument that character is a potency by summarizing what Aristotle says about a division that he sets forth in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Mitchell 2015, 154). Let us look at Aristotle's own words:

Next to be considered is the definition of virtue. Since three things occur in the soul, passion/emotion [*pathē*], potencies/abilities [*dunameis*], and habits [*hexeis*], virtue must be one of these. I call emotion [*pathē*] desire, anger, fear, boldness, envy, joy, love, hate, longing, jealousy, pity, and generally those things which are accompanied by pleasure or pain. I call abilities [*dunameis*] that in virtue of which we are able to feel, e.g., according to which we are able to feel anger or pain or pity. I call habits [*hexeis*] that according to which we experience emotion well or badly; badly, as when we get angry too violently or not violently enough, well, when we feel a middle amount, and likewise for other emotions.³ (Aristotle 1982, bk. 2, chap. 5, 1105b19–6a13)

Mitchell goes on to use this division to determine what character is. Before we look at her argument, let us read the rest of the passage from Aristotle, and then apply his reasoning to the case of moral character in order to draw our own conclusion:

Now the virtues and vices are not emotions because we are not pronounced good or bad according to our emotions, but we are according to our virtues and vices; nor are we either praised or blamed for our emotions—a man is not praised for being frightened or angry, nor is he blamed for being angry merely, but for being angry in a certain way—but we are praised or blamed for our virtues and

vices. ... And the same considerations also prove that the virtues and vices are not potencies [*dunameis*]; since we are not pronounced good or bad, praised or blamed, merely by reason of our capacity for virtue. Again, we possess certain capacities by nature, but we are not born good or bad by nature.... If then the virtues are neither emotions nor capacities, it remains that they are habits [*hexeis*].⁴ (Aristotle 1982, bk. 2, chap. 5, 1105b29–6a13)

Aristotle understands a habit (*hexis*) to be “a quality that is difficult to change” (Aquinas 1953, I-II, q. 49, a. 1).⁵

As Aquinas carefully notes, the three things Aristotle names do not exhaust all the things that are in the soul, but those things that are specifically “principles of certain operations of the soul” (Aquinas 1964, no. 290).⁶ If we assume that character is a principle of some operation of the soul, we may ask which of these three character is: emotion, habit, or potency? Character is plainly not some kind of feeling or being affected, but something we have or are. Also, although character can change, it is more stable than passions or emotions that readily come and go.

Is character a *dunamis*, that is, the ability to act or undergo in a certain way?⁷ We can adapt the aforementioned arguments that Aristotle concerning virtue to give three arguments against this, the first two of which go hand in hand: First, we are not called good or bad in virtue of our abilities. However, we are called good or bad because of our character. When we say so-and-so is “a genuinely good person,” we do so in light of what we perceive to be the person’s moral character. Secondly, we are not praised or blamed for our abilities or potencies. Yet, we are praised or blamed for our character. Terms of censure, such as “despicable,” “monster,” “brute,” and so

forth are applied to people when they are of bad character; whereas, terms of praise are applied to people when they are of good character, “an angel,” “exemplary,” or “foursquare and beyond reproach.”

A third argument that shows that character is not an ability or potency is that good character or bad character is not something we have by nature; yet, potencies are things we have by nature, for example, the ability to see, to feel desire, to think.⁸

Note that Aquinas offers a long and subtle treatment of the powers of the soul in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 1953), one that starts with general considerations, such as how powers are not identical with the soul and how they flow from the essence of the soul, and then proceeds to an examination of the particular powers of soul (see Aquinas 1953, I, qq. 78–83). The latter consideration starts by determining the five genera of powers of the soul (vegetative, sensitive, intellectual, appetitive, and motor) and goes on to examine in detail the powers that are specifically subject to virtue (the intellect, the two sense appetites, and the will). Nowhere does Aquinas name character as one of the powers. Since moral character belongs to the natural order,⁹ and Aquinas in the *Prima Pars* is speaking about human powers that belong to the natural order, it would be a gross omission on his part to have failed to mention character, if it were in fact a power. The same can be said of Aristotle, who engages in a systematic examination of the powers of the soul in his treatise *On the Soul* (2000), yet also does not name character as one of the powers. Did it somehow escape his notice that character was a power of the soul? He certainly has the concept of character, as he mentions it, with a certain frequency in the *Ethics*.

Returning to the main argument, since moral character is neither a passion, nor a power, by elimination it follows that moral

character falls in the category of habit. The difference between it and moral virtue or vice is that character refers to all of a person's moral virtues or vices and other moral dispositions taken together. What I mean by disposition here is "nothing other than a certain incomplete habit" (Aquinas 1956, bk. IV, q. 1, a. 1). Prime examples of such are continence and incontinence (also called "self-control" and "lack of self-control"¹⁰), which fall short of having the stability of virtue. For example, the person who is self-controlled in her desire for drink is still tempted on occasion to drink excessively, which is not the case for the person who has the virtue of sobriety. A person may even get somewhat beyond mere self-control in a certain area while falling short of virtue due to the lack of other virtues; that is, assuming that the view that the acquisition of one virtue depends on the acquisition of all the other virtues is correct.¹¹ When it comes to vice, however, it is possible to have one without having them all—just as one flaw can render a face ugly, whereas for a face to be beautiful every part has to be intact and fit harmoniously with every other part.

In light of the aforementioned, we can see that a given person may be close to having the virtue of honesty, lack self-control when it comes to pleasures of the table, possess self-control when it comes to anger, and have the vice of pusillanimity when it comes to striving for excellence. These dispositions, habits, and near-habits taken together constitute this individual's moral character.

EVIDENCE THAT MORAL CHARACTER IS NOT OTHER THAN ONE'S MORAL HABITS AND MORAL DISPOSITIONS

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines "character" as "the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation." This definition corresponds to the one I have given of

moral character, if one leaves out "mental"¹² and restricts it to a person. Although one is hardly going to settle a philosophical dispute by looking at the dictionary, dictionary definitions do provide common opinions that philosophers need to take into account.

Aristotle refers to character on a number of occasions in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In one place he says: "Virtue too is distinguished into kinds...for we say some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom...being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character [*ethous*], we do not say that he is wise or has understanding, but that he is good-tempered or temperate" (Aristotle 1982, bk. 1, chap. 13, 1103a3-7). Plainly, Aristotle thinks that to talk about a person's moral character is to talk about his virtues. Character is not something separate from them.

Another place where Aristotle refers to character is when he speaks of three kinds of friendship: one based on utility, another on pleasure, and another on character. He says that in the case of a character friendship, the friend is loved for himself and not because of some incidental attribute (such as being a delightful dance partner):

Such disputes occur when pleasure is the motive of the friendship on the lover's side and profit on the side of the beloved, and when they no longer each possess the desired attribute. For in a friendship based on these motives, a rupture occurs as soon as the parties cease to obtain the things for the sake of which they were friends; seeing that neither loved the other in himself, but some attribute he possessed that was not permanent; so that these friendships are not permanent either. But friendship based on character [*tôn êthôn*] is for its own sake and therefore lasting, as has been said.¹³ (Aristotle 1982, bk. 9, chap. 1, 1164a7-13)

We can see from this that Aristotle regards character to be most of all who a

person is. And this makes sense, for while other aspects of a person are largely a matter of natural endowment (e.g., beauty, health, a good memory, etc.), virtues and vices are the results of one's own choices. As Aristotle notes elsewhere: "For deliberate choice is what is principal in virtue and in character" (Aristotle 1982, bk. 8, chap. 13, 1163b24). There seems, then, to be no difference between character and virtue or vice other than the difference of whole and part.¹⁴

Aristotle's discussion of why it is that what is good and bad appears to be different for different people also points to the identity of character with one's virtues and vices. Aristotle observes that people of different characters view what is good and bad differently.¹⁵ For example, people of good character see giving others their due as an end to be aimed at, whereas people of bad character see swindling the gullible as an end. The reason, though, that each sees things differently is due to their moral habits, that is, justice and injustice respectively. Virtue gives a person the eyes to see aright: "the Supreme Good only appears good to the good man: vice perverts the mind and causes it to hold false views about the first principles of action" (Aristotle 1982, bk. 3, chap. 5, 1144a34–36). A person's character then is not something separate from his moral habits.¹⁶

We have seen what one wise person has to say about character. What about the average person? Everyday descriptions that are specifically of moral character are hard to find on the Internet, but not of character in the broader sense, which embraces nonmoral qualities as well.¹⁷ For example, English teacher Anne Colbeck gives some examples of character adjectives: "This is Homer Simpson. How would you describe his character? Homer is lazy, greedy, ignorant, affectionate, easy-going. This is Marge Simpson. How would you describe her character?

Marge is wise, tolerant, loving, a problem-solver, a home-maker" (Colbeck 2016). Plainly, some of these are not moral qualities (e.g., being a home-maker), but many of them are (e.g., being lazy, greedy, and tolerant). In addition, if one asks people at random to describe a given person's moral character, one generally gets a reply along these lines: "so-and-so is impatient and drinks a little too much, but is also trustworthy and generous." In general, they list the person's various moral strengths and weaknesses.

Mitchell herself comes close to acknowledging that moral character is none other than one's virtues or vices and other moral dispositions when she speaks of "Aristotle's famous four categories of character (the virtuous, the continent, the incontinent, and the vice-filled)" (Mitchell 2015, 151) and goes on to say "these categories admit of degrees; one person may be more continent or less incontinent. Also, persons are not static; they (usually) move within a category or between categories during the course of their lifetime" (Mitchell 2015, 151). In addition, in other places, Mitchell comes even closer to endorsing the notion of character that I propose: "Being of good character is not a description of the uniqueness of Joe in the same way that physical indicators, such as fingerprints or DNA, are, but Joe does have a unique character in that it is a unique mixture of strengths, weaknesses, virtues, vices, knowledge, and experience" (Mitchell 2015, 153). If we set aside nonmoral traits, such as nonmoral knowledge (e.g., knowing Greek does not, as such, contribute to the moral goodness or badness of a person), it seems Mitchell is affirming that a person's character consists of his moral traits. Yet, further in the text, she states: "Once a physician starts writing prescriptions for contraception when a patient asks and no longer thinks about it overmuch but just does it, *then this becomes*

a habit and consequently becomes part of his or her character” (Mitchell 2015, 145, emphasis added). Indeed, a vice is part of a person character; it is not something other than a person’s character (just as a hand is nothing other than a body part, though it is not the whole body.) Mitchell asserts later on:

Acts which are “deliberate and chosen are essentially self-determining—that is, internal to and constitutive of an individual’s character.” A simple way in which this happens is when a bad (or good) action becomes a habit. *That habit then becomes part of one’s character.* (Mitchell 2015, 158, emphasis added)

Why then does she hold that character is a potency, rather than the totality of one’s moral habits and dispositions?

A MISAPPLICATION OF A PASSAGE FROM THE *TERTIA PARS*

After Mitchell summarizes the three things that Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1982), mentions as being in the soul, she goes on to state:

Aquinas took these up interpreting them as passion (*passio*), power (*potentia*), and habit (*habitus*). He then analyzed in which of these three character resides. Character is not a passion because passions come and go but character is indelible. Character is not a habit because a bad habit cannot be a good habit nor a good habit bad, but character can be good or bad, in other words, it is indifferent to goodness or badness. Therefore, character must be a power, a *potentia*. (Mitchell 2015, 154)

Mitchell’s footnote sends us to the *Tertia Pars* of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*

(Aquinas 1953) and here we find the text that inspired her argument:

The Philosopher [Aristotle] says in Bk. II of the *Ethics*: “there are three things in the soul: potency [*potentia*], habit [*habitus*], and passion [*passio*].” But character is not a passion because a passion quickly passes, whereas a character is indelible, as will be clear later on. Similarly, it is not a habit; for there is no habit which is capable of good and evil. Character, however, stands open to both; for some use it well and others badly—which does not happen in [the case of] habits; for no one uses the habit of virtue badly, and no one uses the habit of vice well. Therefore, it remains that character is a power. (Aquinas 1953, III, q. 63, a. 2)

On the face of it, it appears that Aquinas agrees with Mitchell and disagrees with my aforementioned conclusion that character should be situated in the category of habit.

However, what is the question that Aquinas is addressing? It is whether a character that is imprinted by a sacrament is a power. He is not at all talking about moral character which is formed through habituation.¹⁸ This is crystal clear when one reads the article that precedes this one (Aquinas 1953, III, q. 63, a. 1). I will return to that article in a moment. However, note first that even in this article, there are two indications that moral character is not what is being discussed here. First, moral character is not indelible, but rather is subject to change, whereas the character Aquinas is speaking about here is indelible.

Second, the same argument that is given to show that the type of character spoken of here is not a habit can be used to show that moral character is *not a potency*: For, just as no one who acts in accord with virtue acts badly and no one who acts in accord with vice acts well, so too no one

who acts in accord with good character acts badly and no one who acts in accord with bad character acts well.¹⁹ Thus, good and bad moral characters are not open to being used well or badly. Therefore, neither good moral character nor bad moral character is a potency. As Mitchell notes: “Being of good character means that some actions are excluded, but also that some are included and expected. We expect to perceive the virtues being expressed in the actions of one of good character” (Mitchell 2015, 159). Mitchell affirms that if Mother Teresa were to “throw a sick person into the gutter, such an action would be out of character for her” (Mitchell 2015, 159).²⁰

The article in the *Tertia Pars* that is immediately prior to the one Mitchell relies on explains what kind of character is being discussed. According to the Catholic faith, certain sacraments imprint characters on the soul (see Aquinas 1953, III, q. 63, a. 1). In the very article Mitchell relies on, Aquinas says that a character of this sort “implies a certain spiritual power ordered to those things which pertain to divine worship,” and that “divine worship consists either in receiving certain divine things or in handing them to others” (Aquinas 1953, III, q. 63, a. 2). To put this in terms of examples, the character imprinted on a man’s soul when he is ordained to the priesthood gives him the power to consecrate the Eucharist and forgive sins, and the character imprinted on a person’s soul at baptism gives him the power to receive the other sacraments, such as Confirmation and Matrimony.²¹ Aquinas observes that unlike virtue and other moral habits, the sacramental character can be used well or badly. For example, a bishop can ordain a priest illicitly or a priest can offer absolution to someone who confesses a mortal sin while clearly indicating that he has no intention to try to avoid that sin in the future. The ability to use a sacramental

character well or badly is why it does not belong in the category of habit.

Aquinas also clarifies that a sacramental character has to be put in the category of potency *by reduction*. The reason is that potency as Aristotle originally presents it in his threefold division is something that is possessed by nature, but a sacramental character is clearly not such:

[I]t [character] is reduced to the second species of quality, and is other in mode from what the Philosopher posits there [in the *Categories*]; for the Philosopher was not familiar with operations other than natural, and so not with potencies other than natural. However, it is the case with us that we posit spiritual potencies, such as the power to consecrate the Eucharist and to absolve sins and things of this sort, and they are reduced to the second species of quality: just as infused habits are in the same species of quality with natural or acquired habits. (Aquinas 1956, bk. IV, d. 4, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2)

We see then that Mitchell takes an argument that Aquinas applies to a completely different type of character (one that belongs to the spiritual order), and presents its conclusion as if it were meant to apply to moral character (something that belongs to the natural order).²² Although the two types of character are found in the soul, they are quite different things: a baptized infant has as yet to develop moral character, but already has a sacramental character.

ONE MIGHT ARGUE THAT DESPITE THE EQUIVOCATION MORAL CHARACTER IS NONETHELESS A POTENCY

One might concede that Aquinas, in the aforementioned passage from the *Tertia Pars*, drew no conclusion regarding moral character, and yet maintain that it still

could be the case that one could use Aristotle's threefold division to conclude that moral character was a potency. However, I have given two arguments based on this threefold division to show that this is not so. The first takes power in the division to be restricted to natural power (which is what Aristotle had in mind): Moral character is neither a passion (this is obvious—it is not something we feel) nor a potency (we do not have it by nature); therefore, it must be in the category of habit. The second argument takes power more broadly: Moral character is neither a passion (again, it is not something we feel) nor a potency (since one can act well or badly in accord with a potency, whereas acting in accord with a habit determines one to acting either well or badly). Therefore, it must be in the category of habit.²³

THE RELATIONS AMONG POTENCY, HABIT, AND CHARACTER

The relation between potencies and habits is treated at great length by Aquinas in a number of places, and to go into all the subtleties involved in a full understanding of this matter is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us consider, however, some of the summary statements that Aquinas makes in regard to the two:

And to the one considering the matter universally, this appears to be the difference between habit and power, for power is that by which we are able to do something simply speaking, whereas habit is that by which we are able to do it well or badly: as the intellect is that by which we consider and science that by which we consider well, and the concupiscible is that by which we desire and temperance is that by which we desire well and intemperance that by which we desire badly.²⁴ (Aquinas 1956, bk. IV, q. 1, a. 1)

The virtues do not make one able to perform prudent acts and just acts (and so forth) and the vices, acts of the opposite sort. An unjust person is able to perform just acts because of his rational potencies of soul, namely, reason and free will.²⁵ The virtues make one *able* to perform good acts *in certain manner*, namely, promptly and with pleasure, and the vices make one able to perform bad acts promptly and with pleasure. In the words of Aquinas:

Virtue is generated from acts that are in a certain manner virtuous and in a certain manner not virtuous. For acts preceding virtue are certainly virtuous as to what is done, insofar as, namely, a man does brave and just things; not, however, as to *the manner* of acting: for before the habit of virtue is acquired, a man does not perform works of virtue *in the same manner* in which the virtuous person does, namely, promptly, without hesitation, and delightfully, without difficulty. (Aquinas 1965, un., a. 9, ad 13, emphasis added)²⁶

Virtue and vice confer ability in a qualified sense, namely, as to the manner of acting; but again even without moral habits one is able to perform morally good and bad acts.

On the other hand, given that Aquinas says: that “virtue is generated from acts that are in a certain manner virtuous and in a certain manner not virtuous,” (Aquinas (1965, un., a. 9, ad 13) one could argue that acts of virtue in the fullest sense of the word are those that are not only chosen because they are in accord with right reason, but are also performed promptly, consistently, and with delight, and in light of this, one could go on to conclude that one is *not able* to perform such acts without possessing virtue. On this understanding of moral virtue, a moral habit confers ability or potency. Still, this potency is not of

the same sort as the one that Aristotle speaks of when he divides potency against habit. The potency that moral habit confers is plainly not the natural ability or potency that it perfects; nor is it a potency that stands indifferently to good and bad acts, which is the sort of ability that Mitchell maintains character is.²⁷ Thus, regardless of whether it is better to understand moral habits as making one able to act in a certain manner or to act virtuously or viciously in the fullest sense of the terms, they are other than the natural potencies which they perfect or degrade, and they specifically incline these potencies to good or bad acts.

The acquisition of moral habits is not possible unless the being possesses rational potencies.²⁸ Additionally, the same is true of character. As Aquinas, following Aristotle, explains in regard to virtue:

in us is a natural aptitude to receive them [i.e., the moral virtues], insofar as namely the appetitive power in us is apt to obey reason. They, however, are perfected in us through habituation, insofar as namely from our acting many times according to reason a form is imprinted in the appetite from the power of reason. (Aquinas 1965, no. 249)

The appetitive powers are able to be perfected by virtue. They go from being in potency to virtue and to vice to being determined in act to one or the other as the result of habituation in accord with or contrary to reason. These same powers, the appetites (the will and the concupiscible and irascible appetites), along with reason are what make human beings potential in regard to character. Nonrational animals have no potential for moral character because they lack reason and, consequently, also appetites that can obey reason.²⁹ Moral character is formed the same way virtue and vice are formed:

through an individual's choices in accord with or contrary to reason.

Some of the following claims made by Mitchell are thus incorrect:

Potency is diminished by being put into act. Character is a potency, and when it is put into act, it become good character or bad character. Virtue is the act of good character, and virtues are the “principles of good action.” (Mitchell 2015, 162)³⁰

It is not the case that character exists as a potency eventually to be actualized as good or bad. Character only comes into existence through one's acts of choice which are either in accord with reason or contrary to reason. Prior to those acts it does not exist. Infants and very young children have no moral character at all. They may be born with inclinations towards certain virtues or vices which Aquinas, following Aristotle, refers to as “natural virtue” and “natural vice:”

particular habits of virtue or vice appear to exist in some men naturally; for certain men immediately from birth seem to be just, or temperate, or brave on account of natural disposition, by which they are inclined to the works of virtue. (Aquinas 1964, no. 1276)

These natural virtues and vices, however, are not genuine moral virtues because the element of prudence is absent.³¹ The naturally brave child, for example, will do things that are rash on occasion because he lacks the discernment of reason. Infants and toddlers definitely have their own little personalities, which one could refer to as their “characters,” but they lack moral character.³² The reason for this is that they are incapable of moral action. Although they are plainly capable of voluntary acts (they push the peas away, while gobbling up the applesauce), until

such time as their intellects acquire certain basic moral notions, and they subsequently begin to reason using them, they are not capable of choice, for without deliberation there can be no choice. Once they arrive at a stage that they are able to choose, the choices they make in regard to the exercise of faculties that are amenable to reason begin to produce virtues or vices in them, and at that point they begin to have moral character; and, this character necessarily must be either good or bad, depending on whether their choices are good or bad.

It is certainly true that the young at first have but little character. The initial couple of choices a young person makes (e.g., in regard to doing something difficult) is not going to instantly turn him into a coward or a brave person, or even into a person who is self-controlled or lacking in self-control in regard to fear and confidence. However, these choices produce the rudiments of character that will develop further as further choices are made. Note that there are certain facets of moral character that only develop when people are older. For example, before a certain age, there is no question of making choices in regard to sex, as sexual desire is yet to be experienced, and generally this is also true when it comes to drinking alcohol. Thus, the virtues and vices that concern these things only develop later on. An adult of irreproachable character must be sober and chaste, whereas a young person, before a certain age, is unable to develop these traits of character.

It is the complexity of human nature that calls for the concept of character in addition to those of virtue and vice. Human nature consists of both nonphysical powers (reason and free will) and physical powers that are responsive to reason (the concupiscible and irascible appetites), and consequently humans are able to

acquire more than one type of habit. The four cardinal virtues are the perfections of these four powers:

For there is a fourfold subject of the sort of virtue about which we are now speaking [i.e., as relates to the natural good of reason and not to supernatural good]: namely, what is rational in essence which prudence perfects, and what is rational by participation, which is divided into three: i.e., in the will, which is the subject of justice, and in the concupiscible, which is the subject of temperance, and in the irascible, which is the subject of courage. (Aquinas 1953, I-II, q. 61, a. 2)

The various vices degrade the same powers that the virtues perfect. They are greater in number than the virtues, since virtue lies as a mean between two vices.³³ If humans only had one power perfectible by virtue, there would be little reason to speak of character, as it would be more or less equivalent to a person's single virtue or vice. I say more or less, because "character" could still refer to variations in a person's possession of virtue or vice (e.g., self-control or the lack thereof). The utility of the word "character" thus corresponds to the multiplicity of moral habits human beings can acquire and the variations in their possession thereof.

We can now see that Mitchell is also mistaken in holding that "virtues 'forge' character" (Mitchell 2015, 164). What forges character are actions; Mitchell herself says so much: "Good moral actions... form a good character" (Mitchell 2015, 160). Actions are the efficient cause of character. The habits that result from repeated actions are accidental qualities determining the rational powers of the soul for better or worse, and stand to them as formal causes;³⁴ these formal causes taken together are one's character.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Mitchell has taken a passage that applies to character in the supernatural order and read it as if it applied to moral character in the natural order. This is what led her to overlook numerous indications that character is not a power; some of the weaker of which are: this does not fit with how the dictionary defines it and neither Aristotle nor Aquinas's meticulous investigation of the powers of the soul include it. The more decisive reasons to reject the notion that character is a power are the following. First, character is not something we have by nature. It is something that originates as a result of our free choices. Powers, however, are possessed by nature. Second, just as the person who acts in accord with his virtue cannot act badly, so too the person who acts in accord with his good character cannot act badly. A power, on the other hand, is open to being used well or badly.

Moral character, rather than being a natural potency, does not exist prior to one's choices, and when it comes into existence it is necessarily good or bad in function of those choices. The four cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance perfect the powers: intellect, will, irascible appetite, and concupiscible appetite, respectively; the various vices degrade the same powers that the virtues perfect. The totality of these qualities, along with dispositions that fall short of full-blown habits, as lacking their stability, is a person's moral character. This understanding of moral character is confirmed by experience, as it fits with the understanding of wise persons, such as Aristotle, as well as with the opinion of the average person (who generally describe a person's character by listing his moral traits); even Mitchell herself feels compelled at times to say things that accord with this view.

NOTES

1. Plato himself does not speak explicitly about character, but about the soul.
2. See Mitchell (2015, 154): "Therefore, character must be a power, a potentia."
3. The translation here is my own. Unless otherwise noted the translation is Rackham's.
4. I have slightly modified Rackham's translation.
5. Aquinas paraphrases Aristotle, *Categories*, 9a3–10. All translations of Aquinas are my own.
6. There are other things that exist in the soul, in addition to the three that Aristotle names; for example, various intellectual operations, such as opining.
7. Note that "dunamis" can be translated as "potency," "ability," and "power." Mitchell generally uses the word "potency," and for that reason I will also generally do so, though occasionally I will use "ability" and "power."
8. I am adapting here what Aquinas says about virtue to character. As Aquinas notes in his commentary on the passage in question from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Powers are in us by nature, because they are natural properties of the soul. But virtues and vices according to which we are called good or bad, are not in us by nature.... Therefore, virtues and vices are not powers" (Aquinas 1964, n. 304).
9. Moral character can belong to the supernatural order as well, as occurs in the case of the infused virtues.
10. The continent or self-controlled person has unruly desires, but restrains them, whereas the incontinent or person lacking self-control yields to them; see Aquinas (1953, II-II, q. 137, a. 1).
11. See Aristotle (1982, bk. 6, chap. 13, 1144b30–5a2) and Aquinas (1964, nn. 1286–1288). An explanation of why Aristotle and Aquinas maintain that the acquisition of one virtue depends on the acquisition of all the other virtues lies beyond the scope of this paper. An example, however, might help make this view more palatable. Parents may have raised their children to be honest and they themselves may generally take pleasure in performing acts of honesty and do so without hesitation, and yet

- when it comes to their college-age child making a career or job decision, they may suppress relevant information because they do not want their child to pursue a certain career or job. Their general honesty is tainted by their excessive fear for their child's well-being.
12. While more often than not when we speak of a person's character, we are referring to their goodness or badness, we do sometimes use a broader definition of character, in function of which someone might say, for example, "I was surprised to learn that she is auditing a history course; it is not in her character to take interest in history"; or "she is phlegmatic in character." Mitchell notes that Ricoeur seems to understand character according to this broader definition (see Mitchell 2015, 150). However, whether one is interested in history (or an expert in it) or not does not make one a good or bad person, nor do traits of temperament; thus, such things are not part of one's moral character.
 13. I have slightly modified Rackham's translation.
 14. This passage from Aristotle (1982) also speaks of virtue and character as being related as part to whole: "The mean opposed to boastfulness has to do with almost the same things. It also is without a name; but it will be as well to discuss these unnamed excellences as well, since we shall the better understand the nature of moral character if we go through each quality; and we shall also confirm our belief that the virtues are means if we notice how this holds good in every instance" (Aristotle 1982, bk. 4, chap. 7, 1127a13–18; I have somewhat modified Rackham's translation).
 15. See Aristotle (1982, bk. 3, chap. 5, 1114b22–25): "and in fact we are in a sense ourselves partly the cause of our moral disposition [hexeon], and it is our having a certain character [poiointes] that makes us set up an end of a certain kind." "Poios" is not specifically a word for moral character; it means "of a certain nature, kind, or quality." The context, however, makes it sufficiently clear that moral character is what is being spoken of.
 16. Aquinas refers to character in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* far less frequently than Aristotle does in *Nicomachean Ethics*. The reason for this, at least in part, is that the Greek word for character was translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke sometimes as "mos" and sometimes as "mores," which is the plural of "mos." "Mos" means: 1) Character (pl.), behavior, morals; 2) custom, habit; 3) mood, manner, fashion (Lexilogos, http://www.lexilogos.com/english/latin_dictionary.htm). When Aquinas sees "mos" in Moerbeke's translation, this does not clue him in to the fact that Aristotle is talking about character. And when he sees "mores" (which can mean both character and morals), there is often ambiguity as to whether he takes it to mean character or to mean morals. When one searches "mores" in his works, it turns out that he mainly uses the word when he is quoting other people. Thus, Aquinas does not give us much insight into the notion of character.
 17. See note 11 above concerning "character" in the broad sense.
 18. Aquinas never uses the Latin word "character" to name moral character, as can be seen from examining the passages that come up using the Index Thomisticus. This is not surprising since the Latin word for moral character is "mores." The Latin word "character" means: 1) branded/impressed letter/mark/etc; 2) Marking instrument; 3) stamp, character, style. (Lat-dict, <http://www.latin-dictionary.net/search/latin/character>). Aquinas virtually always uses character to talk about spiritual "marks" that give one the authority to do or receive things in the context of divine worship; he generally opens such discussions by talking about physical marks by which some authority is assigned to a person.
 19. Note that Aquinas is not saying that habit as a logical genus as such is not open to the further determinations of good and bad, as plainly habits can be good or bad; he is talking about using those virtues and vices, i.e., relying on them as a principle of action. Similarly

- character as a logical genus can be further subdivided into good and bad; however, when one acts in accord with good or bad character one's action will be determinately good or bad respectively.
20. Note that Mother Teresa would also not be acting in accord with her virtue of mercy if she threw a sick person in the gutter—another indication that virtue is not something separate from character, but is rather part of it.
 21. Aquinas explains the rationale behind these spiritual characters: “Sacraments of the new law are ordered to two things, namely, as a remedy against sin, and for perfecting the soul in those things which pertain to the worship of God according to the rite of the Christian life. However, it is customary to affix a seal [or mark] to whoever is deputed to something determinate; just as soldiers who were enlisted in military service in ancient times were accustomed to be marked with certain bodily characters [e.g., tattoos], because they were deputed to something bodily. And therefore when men through sacraments are deputed to something spiritual pertaining to the worship of God, consequently through them the faithful are marked by some spiritual character” (Aquinas 1953, III, q. 63, a. 1).
 22. Aquinas maintains that there is such a thing as divinely infused virtues and these too would determine a person's character. However, Mitchell's paper concerns character as it pertains to the natural order.
 23. Whereas moral character falls under the first species of quality spoken of in the *Categories*, sacramental character, by reduction, falls under the second.
 24. This passage is a cross reference to Aquinas (1953, III, q. 63, a. 2).
 25. See Aquinas (1953, II-II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1): “And such an act of virtue can be without virtue, for many not possessing the habit of justice do just things, either from natural reason, or from fear, or from the hope of obtaining something. In another way, something is said to be an act of virtue formally, as an act of justice is a just act in the manner in which the just person performs it, namely, promptly and with pleasure. And in this manner, the act of virtue is not without virtue.”
 26. See also Aquinas (1886, 4, q. 10 a. 1): “It happens, however, that the same deed which is done according to some perfect virtue is not only also done by someone possessing little virtue, but even by one not possessing virtue; just as someone not possessing justice is able to perform some just action. But if we look to the mode of performing, the one who does not have virtue is not able to act as that one who does, nor can the one who has little virtue act as does the one who has great virtue; the latter operates readily and promptly and with delight, whereas the one who lacks virtue or has little virtue does not act in this manner.” See also Aquinas (1964, bk. II, lec. 4).
 27. See Mitchell (2015, 154): “character can be good or bad, in other words, it is indifferent to goodness or badness.”
 28. As Aquinas (1965, un., a. 1) explains, not all powers are subjects of habit. Powers that are always active (such as the agent intellect) and powers that only act when moved by another (such as the sense of sight) are not subjects of habits. It is only powers that are both active and acted upon in a way that does not determine them to one act that are subjects of habits. This is the case of the rational powers of human beings; they stand indeterminately to more than one act, e.g., one can mitigate or fan the flames of one's anger—as opposed to fire which burns necessarily according to natural law. One's repeated choices concerning anger result in a habit.
 29. Animals do have character in the broad sense; e.g., some dogs are ferocious and most rabbits, timid.
 30. See also, Mitchell (2015, 149): “Virtue is the act of good character.”
 31. See Aquinas (1886, 12.22): “For someone is able to have a natural inclination to the act of some virtue without prudence; and the greater an inclination they have without the habit of virtue, the worse it is, and the more it is able to push someone to action without prudence: as is manifest in the person who has natural courage without discretion and prudence.”
 32. See Aristotle (1982, bk. 6, chap. 13, 1144b4–9): “All are agreed that the various characters [ēthōn] are in a sense bestowed by nature; we are just, and

- capable of temperance, and brave, and possessed of the other virtues from the moment of our birth. But nevertheless we expect to find that true goodness is something different, and that the virtues in the true sense come to belong to us in another way. For even children and wild animals possess natural habits, yet without intelligence, these may be harmful." (I have slightly modified Rackham's translation.)
33. We sometimes speak of people of bad character as lacking character. Since we are rational animals, by nature we are ordered to living in accord with reason and to developing habits that allow us do so easily, promptly, and with pleasure. Thus, people who develop habits that are opposed to reason have failed to develop their character in accord with their nature. Their character in this sense is defective. Accordingly, to the extent that people have failed to become the type of person they were meant by nature to become we speak of them as lacking in character; to the extent that they have become the opposite of the type of people they were meant to become, we speak of them as being of bad character. See Aquinas (1953, I, q. 71, a. 2): "Whether vice is contrary to nature."
 34. Aquinas maintains that virtue makes the one having it good by way of formal causality, and not by way of efficient causality; see Aquinas (1953, II-II, q. 27, a. 3): "On account of implies a relation to a cause... according to the genus of formal cause, as we love a man on account of his virtue, for it is namely by virtue that he is formally good, and consequently loveable."
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