Anthropology and Character [Special Section 1]

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Subjects of Character:
This special section, and the follow-up special section that will follow it in a later issue, aims to reintroduce the concept of character into anthropological discussion.[1] Such a change is overdue. Since the now long-dismissed mid-twentieth century flirtations with a comparative project to provide an account of the modal character types that were supposedly typical of human collectivities such as nations or cultures (Mead 1942, Benedict 1946; see Faubion this section), we have given the concept little deliberative attention. Of course, character still operates as a narrative term in anthropological description, but its use is largely that of the unthinking choice of our everyday language; ethnography, for instance, still regularly invokes the character of individual subjects as an obvious explanation for behaviour, or attributes certain actions or styles of expression to a character. Similarly, there is also a genre of 'person-centred' ethnographies, where the specificities of interlocutors in all their particularities are addressed, but this body of writing often prizes psychological individuality over the development of accounts of character as a local category or an anthropological analytic. Likewise, there is certainly a general awareness of the historical relationship between concepts of character and what we take to be modern forms of subjectivity. However, character has not been the typical lens through which that modern subject has been explored by anthropology. For the same reasons, character has not especially been an active marker of difference in ethnography; anthropologists don't often choose to identify an absence or the difference in formulation of the concept as a key aspect in the reflexive project of describing other societies and cultures. Sometimes this seems to be because character is regarded as epiphenomenal, an expression of more important assumptions around the modern subject (pertaining to freedom, self-awareness, and responsibility for example); at other times, because it is not regarded as a concept at all, merely as a taken-for-granted aspect of language or sometimes as a literary strategy for ethnographic writing.

We want to ask what the value for anthropology might be from thinking more closely with character? Is the concept worth reintroducing to our anthropological lexicon, and if so, how or on what basis? This is also an invitation for anthropologists to pay more attention to character as an emic concept, deployed by the subjects they work with in diverse fashion. Whether consciously reflected upon, taken for granted or perceived as newly introduced from elsewhere, character has a range of long and short histories in different places. Rarely presented as central to a regional literature (but see Wardle in special section two on its more explicit role in Caribbean ethnography), character is nonetheless not too hard to find. Either in its English or other European language derivations (see Pedersen in this section on the Danish version *personligheds*) from the original French, Latin and Greek sources, it operates across multiple sites of ethnographic encounter. Sometimes absorbed into non-European languages during missionization and colonialism, either directly or as a calque, character can at one moment appear as distinctly borrowed or alien in origin, at other moments as open to universal translations. We are interested in both the desire to locate the spread and

contemporary limits of the concept's influence or relevance, and the desire to recognise its possible analogues (with the acknowledgement that the latter move may differentiate as much as it connects [see Strathern this section]). This openness is reflected in the diverse ways contributors to this special section, and the next, have approached the theme Anthropology and Character. Ethnographic descriptions of the concept in action in specific locales sit alongside more exploratory work on what the concept could do for the discipline as a whole. The former invite us to complicate what precisely we think character is and what it does, to whom and by whom it gets attributed; this includes the *when* of character, the dynamics of its appearance and disappearance in time and of its conversion or transaction between kinds of subject. The latter enables consideration of the difference the concept could make at a meta-language level to traditional fields of anthropological inquiry.

As an introduction to this special section, we wish to highlight a few initial provocations or starting points for exploring what might make character good to think with. The first, taken up most directly and explored in one specific direction by Faubion (see this section), is the way in which the concept invites a convergence of ethical and aesthetic forms of practice, technique and judgement. One consequence of this combination is a certain blurring of the divide between subject (human and non-human creatures) and things; as Faubion identifies, historically speaking 'attributions of character do not depend on any absolute divide between the anthropic and the artifactual.' This is most obviously illustrated in the fact that today we can find the concept deployed in a wide range of modern knowledge practices, such as its common use in the courtroom to adjudge degrees of criminal responsibility but also in both heritage and conservation management practices to evaluate the nature of buildings and of landscapes (see Yarrow 2018). Of course, we are all familiar with the deployment of character in cultures of artistic production and reception (see Reed 2018), and as a concept linked to performance. As Lynch (1998) highlights for eighteenth century England, the concept's migration and the subsequent dialogue between subject and object-related contexts of attribution (from a term used to express the imprint of coinage to one taken up to articulate new principles in theatre, painting and literature and new economic principles) has always been central to its contemporary definitions. This includes the dynamics behind some of its more dramatic alterations or discontinuities; including the oft-told story of the re-articulation of the concept as a principle of interiority (see Manning 2013, Frow 2016). Some of these dimensions of the concept (in particular, its performative aspect and its quality as a key descriptor of material and modern practices not linked to knowledge of human subjects) will be taken up more fully in the follow-up special section. But for now, we just wish to reiterate the observation that an anthropology concerned with ethical lives and forms of ethical subjectivation might wish to also consider the artifactual dimension of concepts we typically treat as expressions of moral personhood.

This connects to our second opening provocation for a treatment of Anthropology and Character. It is commonly assumed, certainly in many non-anthropological accounts of character and modern identity and in the manner in which character is often unthinkingly used in ethnographic description that the concept is about the fixing or stabilization of a self. Character, for instance, is typically linked to a notion of a biographical arc and to an idea of a subject who is the source of action, and hence responsible and accountable to others. However, even when one looks in a most

cursory fashion at the major forms of modern knowledge regimes linked to such character assessments, it becomes clear that constancy is a less than a straightforward achievement. Legal judgements of character, for example, seem to exert as much attention and energy on identifying and extracting the aspects and actions of the subject that do not belong, may be deemed out-of-character, as they do on describing what defines character (see Tadros 2005: 9). Indeed, much of the work of character assessment in law but also in heritage and conservation is precisely about deciding what to take away, how to safely remove or discount attributes of the subject/object to render it characterful in the right way. Fixing then can be a purificatory action, and to the degree that character does stabilize the self, it can also enact a division or split of that envisaged self. In this special section and the next, we wish to pay attention not just to what gets made constant but additionally to what gets removed at moments of attribution or in endeavours of self making, and to where these excised fragments of the self are perceived to go.

In addition, the fixing or stabilization of one character often occurs in transaction with other acts of fixing or stabilizing of character. Subjects attributed character may co-exist in a field of equivalent characterful subjects who recognise each other as such, or may co-exist with radically non equivalent modes of character which operates through a conversion or eclipse of the other (see Bialecki this section). Further, the question of who is assigned character in a set of relations may be central to the tone and definition of that scenario and to the perceived status of those subjects not the focus of character assessment. As legal scholars have noted, alterations in that assignment may also be marked as vital to historical shifts. Lacey (2008: 23), for instance, describes what she regards as a key moment in English law in the nineteenth century, from a system where guilt is measured by assessing the 'quality of character' as shown by conduct and through the testimonies of others on the accused's reputation and social position (in which the character and status of the witness is also paramount), to a system of 'responsibility-attribution' more familiar to us today, where character is principally relevant as an indicator of intent. Throwing light on the character of one subject may therefore have consequences for other subjects, whose character is not highlighted; indeed, it may be more consequential for them than for the subject whose character is fixed. Likewise, the active ending of attention on the character of a certain kind of subject may index transformative moments either within a character complex or between character complexes. Finally, the identification of character does not inevitably require a long time stabilization of that subject (it may occur for a brief moment and for a specific purpose, directed outwards at other subjects) nor does it necessarily require that subject attributed character to become self-aware or even possessive of that character. Even within very familiar modern knowledge practices, we need to pay attention then to the directionality behind the assignment of character (which subject is really being assessed?), to the eventfulness of that attribution (is the assignment processual and/or grounded in self-awareness, or is it momentary and elicitatory of something else? Does character necessarily responsibilize?). In the rest of the introduction, these questions are explored by asking what difference a closer examination of character might make to two current lively fields of anthropological inquiry where one might expect the concept to be more significant: the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of Christianity.

Anthropology of Ethics:

The first thing to note is the remarkable absence of wide reflection on the concept of character in the emergent literature known as the anthropology of ethics. As a field in large part defined by attention to ethical self-fashioning, the situations in which subjects are invited to respond to the 'invitations or injunctions to make oneself into a certain kind of person' (Laidlaw 2002: 321-322; see also Faubion 2010) one might expect character, at the very least in its emic status as a concept ripe for ethnographic description in diverse contexts, to loom large. The absence is even more puzzling when one considers the emphasis placed in that literature on describing 'the possibilities of human freedom' (Laidlaw 2002: 311), on the centrality of the 'ethical entailments of speech and action' (Lambek 2010: 5) and of the ordinary acts of 'assigning responsibility' (Laidlaw 2010), making judgements, reasoning and questioning. When character is invoked, it tends to fairly uniformly borrow from a virtue ethics working definition of the concept, such as that offered by MacIntyre: i.e. as a 'set of dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular kind of life' (2007: 38); thus we can have authors like Mahmood (2004) make claims about how Islamic ethical practices produce a certain kind of moral character, without discussing the range and variation of either the character that is worked on, or of the character that is produced (see Bialecki 2016). It is in this light that Mattingly (2014), for instance, can announce an interest in exploring 'how character is cultivated as part of on-going experiments in everyday life'. However, despite the compelling ethnography of African American parents' projects of moral care that ensues, character itself never really surfaces as a lively concept, either for the anthropologist or her subjects; individual parents may 'cultivate' their character in particular ways but the thing they are taken to be cultivating does not really develop on the page beyond its take-for-granted definition. In part this is because Mattingly assumes a chiefly narrative role for the concept of character, as an obvious aspect of what she regards as the larger 'inherent narrativity to ethical practice' (2014: 19). The question of how these African American parents themselves might, if at all, deploy the concept seems to be somewhat eclipsed as a consequence. This somewhat denuded or passed-over quality in the way the concept of character is used (or not used), even more apparent among other key players in the anthropology of ethics, is puzzling. Indeed, one might ask what a reinvigorated attention to the concept might add to that field's becoming-conventionalised terms of description and analysis.

One important and quite late exception to this relatively thin treatment of character can be found in the work of Keane (2016). In *Ethical Life*, we might say that character surfaces for the first time as a concept for anthropological reflection. Indeed, he has a brief section in that book precisely entitled 'A Semiotics of Character.' Keane's rationale for paying attention to the concept is very much linked to his own idiosyncratic entry-point into the debates within the anthropology of ethics; more specifically, it emerges from his desire to find a way for what he terms 'natural and social histories' of ethical life to converge. The former, which he delineates as third-order types of explanations common to disciplines such as psychology, present certain challenges, he tells us, for disciplines such as anthropology but especially for moral philosophy which might make self-awareness, free choice and acts of reasoning a defining feature of any culture of ethical practice. Interestingly, for our purposes, Keane defines this as a problem for the concept of character. For, if experiments that examine the micro consequences of situational differences for ethical life are to be taken seriously, then such practice and choices cannot be purely or even mainly understood at the level of subjectivity or self–production. Citing the observations of the philosopher

Anthony Appiah, Keane identifies these natural history explanations as first and foremost a challenge 'posed to the reality of personal character' (2016: 56), that is to the common assumption found in both virtue ethics and Euro-American folk assumptions 'that an individual has a stable character, with certain dominant virtues and vices, which is consistent and therefore more or less reliably predicts his or her behaviour' (ibid). His anthropological reflections on the semiotics of character emerge as a response to this apparent dilemma.

Indeed, Keane's solution to the challenge presented by natural histories of ethical life is to re-present the stability or coherence of character as an artefact of the relations between an individual subject and others. Anthropology can serve to highlight the public ways in which character is 'co-constructed', established in 'interactive' fashion through acts of mutual recognition (2016: 107). Partly inspired by Goffman, Keane emphasises that the concept emerges through 'imputation' rather than automatically from within the individual and that the tensions inherent in any face-to-face work render character not just an accomplishment of interaction but also a concept always 'vulnerable to an unpredictable future' (ibid). Nevertheless, it is the social and linguistic 'regularities' of these exchanges with others that 'help shape the public exo-skeleton of character' and which provides the frame 'that can help support consistency where merely psychological factors do not' (ibid: 97). In this rendering, character is not just moved centre-stage, it is a concept that requires a social history and more particularly an anthropological understanding to sustain its relevance to ethical life.

Keane's call for an interactive or relational appreciation of the ways in which the concept gets established is of course a very welcome intervention for any project on Anthropology and Character. In fact, one can readily see how the semiotic methodology he proposes might allow an exploration of some of the provocations we highlighted earlier. However, we have some reservations. His desire to have Anthropology rescue or salvage a sense of character's consistency might make sense as a response to the challenge of psychological explanation, but to us it seems to overly prefigure what an anthropological analysis of the nature, actions and qualities of the concept might be (Keane may introduce the public or interactive contexts for the establishment of character but in other respects he still seems to assume the working definition of MacIntyre). While his semiotic methodology can clearly be generative of ethnographic description, it is unclear how it might explain the concept's capacity to combine ethical and aesthetic judgement or to resist the division between the anthropic and artifactual. Keane's notion of 'affordance' is clearly one productive way to introduce issues of materiality into descriptions of ethical life, but it is in no way equivalent to the kinds of convergences that the concept of character can contain. Perhaps more pressingly, despite his invocation to attend to the diverse interactive contexts for character production, we find a strange reluctance to open the concept up to its emic status as a concept that subjects themselves may imagine themselves interacting with, whether imputing character to themselves or others, and which they may present as in transaction between different kinds of characterful states or between incommensurable kinds of subjects of character. In a sense we should like to push Keane's passing reference to the vulnerability of the concept -its unpredictable future as an inherent aspect of its very interactive or co-constituted status- a good deal further. This emphasis might allow that subject consistency or stability is not the overriding or inevitable aspiration for the concept's deployment, that ethical life may sometimes require character to be eclipsed as well as cultivated, to give space for the action of extraction from the subject or splitting of that subject at the heart of many acts of character

judgements, and finally to open up accounts of the limits of character as a concept relevant to all accounts of ethical lives.

Anthropology of Christianity:

Keane's discussion of the social and natural histories of character was no 'one-off.' Indeed, his interest in the ethical goes back to his account of modernity's origins in Protestant processes of self-purification. Like thinkers such as Talal Asad and Charles Taylor, he posited that a religiously inspected, continually intensifying stripping away of the material and formulaic elements of speech was an essential part of the West's transformation and the birth of a secular modernity. This process of semiotic regimentation was not solely communicative; the act of refining and foregrounding the agency of the speaker brought together a broad list of concerns: 'language, social interaction…freedom…regimes of truth' and, of interest to us, 'character' (Keane 2007: 202 & 211). However, what constitutes 'character' goes unexamined. Ultimately Keane is interested in broad typologies, and not specific gradations or formulations of difference. Like Mahmood, Keane shows little interest in variations found within the token, only in the architectonic structure of the type. We have a virtue, but without differing displays of virtuosity, or a theory of how categories and notions of virtue map onto arrangements of differentiating and evaluation. Character is assumed, but not described or theorized.

Of course, this is not the way that things must necessarily be. Robbins (2004) offers a depiction of the Urapmin, a recent and apparently guilt-ridden set of Papua New Guinean converts to Christianity, that is full of depictions of individuals differentiated in their realization of what they understand to be Christian virtue. There Big Men may be taken as 'characters' (2004: 206)- Robbins' use of the term is intended to signify that these figures serve as public embodiments of traditional Urapmin ideals- but they are also to a certain extent defeated by the exercising of their will, must stand outside the church space precisely because of the way that their Christian personalities have been compromised by the very achievement of bigness. Likewise, less prominent or socially recognised sinners must struggle with both the imputed and the subjectively observed particularity of their desires and flaws. Here, moral weakness can define topography with different individuals situated in different positions, even if these differentiations come in recognizable forms. The same is true of the Saints as well as the Sinners. Austin-Broos's *Jamaican Genesis* takes up the Pentecostal reimagining of the earlier Methodist concept of sanctification, showing how a literal spiritual infilling reconfigures the ethical self of these believers; while Austin-Broos does not use the word character in her own authorial voice, the invocation of the term by others in the book, in both quoted archival material and in epigraphs, shows that character is at least one acceptable descriptor of what it is that the spirit works on (1997: 34, 57). And in Harding, character is seen in all its manifestations: the act of being 'convicted' by the Holy Spirit involves recognizing oneself as a 'character' in a grander narrative, and the typological North American fundamentalist hermeneutics that allows this to happen is based on events and personages that are recapitulations of Biblical characters. (Harding 2000: 28, 44). Even more telling is that Jerry Falwell tests and ratifies the faith of his adherents by demanding that they endorse his own moral character (97). In fact, Harding states that it is not 'miracle making gifts of the spirit,' but rather Falwell's 'character,' which stood as the guarantor of holiness in his autobiography. (Harding

2000:87). But the scope of character is not limited to the human alone. Bielo has stated that for some evangelicals, it is 'the character of God' that stands as the guarantor for the Bible's commissives (2011: 649).

In each of these cases, we are not dealing with the architectonic and structuralist logic of in and out, but instead we are seeing character as relays of associations, as a tool for implementing reconfigurations, and as evaluations that individuate at the same moment that they re-instantiates larger typifications. But despite this manifold pre-eminence of character, it is either never theorized or is under-theorized. Given this dearth of reflection on the recurrent role of character in ethnographic description and analytic charting, one wonders what an anthropology of Christianity that embraced the concept of character would look like. What sort of figure-ground reversal would such a reconfiguration grant us? The contributions in this special section suggest that whatever offering appears would not be a moment of monological uniformity. So we have character as the target of a reactionary existential imperative to fidelity at the expense of all else in Pedersen, but also as waxing and waning psychological, ethical, and narrative continuums in Bialecki.

Whichever forms a character-infused anthropology of Christianity might take, it would be important to see it as only a set of resolutions to the problem of character, and not as the chief terrain for the formation of an anthropology and character writ large. As Strathern observes in her essay, the suturing of character to the evaluation of some essential internal feature of individuated actors, objects or collectivities may be one common expression of the concept, but it is a parochially Christian and Western one in genealogy and effect, and far from being the only way that character can be instantiated. Character may be autonomous, distributed not just in the socially constructed nature of the concept and in its manifestations of judgements of others, but in the way that it is unmoored from being tied to specific figures. Character might also be envisioned as a pattern, a transitive mode of operating in the world that is capable of being evaluated and perhaps memorialized, and which may be more common in one time, or population, or even individual, but is not in any way a possession or an essence.

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