EMOTION AND CHARACTER

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ABSTRACT

Despite the tremendous growth of interest in both emotion and character in recent years, little has been said about the relation between the two. I argue that emotions have a *proximal* and *fundamental* role in determining character. The proximal role consists in the effects of emotion on the way that a person perceives and ensuingly cognizes the object of emotion. This plays a significant part in determining character-relevant actions. The fundamental role consists in the function that emotions have in sustaining values on which character traits are based. Emotions enable character traits to persist by maintaining the importance of these values and thus countering "axiological entropy," which is the diminution over time of the tacit sense of importance of such values. Emotions are thus essential to the possession of character traits, and character development involves developing an appropriate emotional repertoire.

I. INTRODUCTION

How is emotion related to character? In the domain of philosophy, the study of character typically focuses on character traits, that is, dispositions that are generally taken to be indicative of what kind of person someone is. This conception of character is descriptive rather than evaluative: character traits may be good or bad, desirable or undesirable, but in either case they are a particular kind of feature of a person. One might expect that philosophy offers a robust discussion of the relation between emotion and character traits. However, this is not the case. Though philosophical interest in both emotion and character has exploded in recent years, there has not been a sustained analysis of their relation.

Part of the reason for this is that philosophers have focused on virtue rather than character, leaving unattended the broader relations between emotion and character.[1] Another reason is that the resurgence of virtue ethics that began in the late 1950's has been primarily influenced by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, and philosophers have largely taken Aristotle's comments on the role of emotion in the virtuous person as a starting point rather than a position to be scrutinized and defended against various alternatives. The result has typically been a focus on developing a conception of emotion that is consistent with Aristotle's claim that a virtuous person has appropriate emotions rather than considering, more fundamentally, *why* this might be the case.[2]

The relation between emotion and character traits is something that we can't take for granted. Even if we believe that emotions bear on character traits, this can take many possible forms. Emotions might be a necessary component of what character traits are. However, this

doesn't seem to be the case because emotion is not part of the concept of character in the way that it is, for instance, part of the concept of joy: we can imagine character traits without emotion in a way that we can't imagine joy without emotion. Another possibility is that emotions are relevant to character because they reflect character, i.e. they are an indicator of someone's character traits. A person's arrogance may be revealed by their anger at the reasonable assertions of their colleagues. But if this is the case then emotions serve to provide other people with information about the person's character, which has nothing in itself to do with that person's character. A third possibility is that emotions underlie the possession of character traits because they produce or support such traits.

In what follows I'll propose something in line with this last option by arguing that emotions have two central roles to play in the possession of character traits. On a *proximal* level our emotional profile – the range of emotions that we have and the occasions in which they arise – can be a determinant of character by regulating the content of our perception, because such perception affects our character traits.[3] The content of such perception includes what we perceive and the significance that such perceptions have to us. On a *fundamental* level, emotions underlie the persistence of character traits by preventing "axiological entropy" – the diminishment over time of the sense of the importance of values on which character traits are based. Without emotions the significance of values related to those emotions would fade and the character traits that involve those values would diminish.[4]

The paper will address each of these two roles in turn. First it will identify four ways in which emotions affect our perception and thus our cognition of things, people, and events that we encounter. These four include attention, perceptibility, information processing, and import. It will then outline the nature and function of axiological entropy, providing evidence that emotions prevent such axiological entropy and, in doing so, serve to sustain character traits. Following this it will consider several possible objections to these claims about emotion and character.

II. EMOTION AND PERCEPTION

Emotions are among the determinants of character traits on account of the effects of emotion on perception. Emotional responses underlie patterns of perception and, as a consequence, cognition and action that are features of character traits. Below I will identify four specific ways in which emotions affect perception and consider the impact of each on character traits.

First, emotions affect the scope of our attention. There is a long tradition of psychological work on negative emotions and attention demonstrating that in states of emotional arousal the field of awareness is narrowed or funneled (Easterbrook, 1959). When in an emotional state, participants in one study were less able to report lights that briefly appeared in the peripheral parts of a display than when in an unemotional state, indicating that the focus of attention is broader in unemotional states. Moreover, when in a state of strong emotional arousal, there was no recognition of the peripheral lights. This indicates that the object of perception garners more attention in certain emotional states. More recent work provides evidence that emotionally significant stimuli are the subject of more perceptual processing, and that they are thus identified more easily than unemotional stimuli (Zeelenberg, Wagenmakers, & Rotteveel, 2006). In addition, there is evidence that emotions facilitate attention by increasing

"contrast sensitivity," the ability of visual systems to distinguish an object from its background.[5] This increase in contrast sensitivity is independent of attentional focus on the object, but can make such focus possible. Thus, there are several ways in which emotions affect the scope of attention and the ease with which objects are attended to. This indicates that if we are emotionally aroused by certain types of character-relevant actions or action possibilities then we will be more likely to focus on them rather than other parts of the mass of sensory information that we take in, and that this focus will be more intense in certain emotional states. So for instance we will be more likely to pay attention to the negative effects on other people of a possible course of action if we are emotionally aroused by such a prospect.[6]

Second, emotions affect perceptibility, which includes how a given object of perception appears to us and whether we perceive an object at all. One recent study shows that when people see an ambiguous figure that has a positive association with one possible way of perceiving the figure and a negative association with the other way, they will perceive it in line with the positive association (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006). In this study, the participants were shown the figure very quickly so that they did not have time to recognize it as an ambiguous figure, and thus were not consciously choosing which way to perceive the object. This indicates that emotional states can have a significant effect on, quite literally, what we see when we attend to an object. Regarding character, it provides evidence that, for instance, a sympathetic person will be more likely to perceive an ambiguous situation in one way, and a contemptful person will be more likely to see it another way, such as seeing someone as a victim of circumstances versus seeing them as deserving of their station in life.

In addition, whether an object is perceived can depend on emotion relevance. This is demonstrated by the effect on "attentional blink," the phenomenon where people often fail to detect the appearance of an object when it is presented a fraction of a second after another object in the same space. The visibility of the second object is increased when that object is emotionally-relevant, such as a fearful face, and the visibility of the second object is decreased if the first object is emotionally relevant (Anderson & Phelps, 2001; Schwabe & Wolf, 2010). Thus emotion-relevance enables us to perceive objects in a given area of attention that we might otherwise not perceive. An implication of this is that in a complex situation with a succession of stimuli, someone who is emotionally aroused by the distress of another person will be more likely to spot someone in distress than someone who is not emotionally aroused. This can promote a character trait of compassion by making compassionate behavior more likely. This is distinct from the attentional aspect discussed above because here emotion affects whether the object is seen rather than how strong the attention to the object is.

Third, emotions alter the way that information about our environment is taken in and processed. The psychological function of emotion has been characterized in terms of information processing as an "interrupt system" that sets aside programs currently running and shifts information processing resources to important real-time needs. The capacity for such shifting allows the management of multiple goals and their hierarchy (Simon, 1967). On this account, emotions can interrupt an operative goal program and substitute it with a new goal program. Recent research supports something like this view: initial states of emotional arousal can direct further processing of information that the arousal is associated with and thus increase processing of information about the object of the emotion (Le Doux, 1996; Zeelenberg et al., 2006). One instance of this is the ability of emotional response to voice tone to affect cognitive processes before what is said is fully comprehended (Kitayama & Howard, 1994). The enhanced processing of emotionally relevant stimuli includes both the creation and recall of memories

relevant to the stimuli. Moreover, the memories created in this way are often more vivid and accurate than unemotional memories, and thus can have a greater bearing on subsequent information processing (Reisberg & Hertel, 2005). Emotional arousal at perceiving a risky but beneficial course of action can increase the direction of cognitive resources to the situation, which is likely to encourage the gathering of more information and facilitate problem-solving directed at successfully acting in the face of the risks. Similarly, an emotion directed at the goal of an act as opposed to the risk can increase the likelihood of courageous behavior.

Fourth, emotions affect the import of the object of the emotion. We continually encounter objects and events, but they do not have the same import to us. "Import" refers to the experienced significance of an object of perception, which includes, in part, the interpretive meaning of the object and inferences about its relation to our goals, desires, etc. One influential conception of emotion that supports this is the "affect is information" model, according to which emotions provide information about the relation of the object of the emotion to our goals and desires (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007).[7] So our discomfort at seeing someone else mistreated can provide us with information about our attitude toward fair treatment. On this account the information is, in part, embodied: the affective changes in the emotion state are associated with its object and so the emotion becomes part of the information presented about the object. The fear of a snake on the walking path becomes part of the representation of the snake. Here there is not a simple divide between the emotion and the cognition or understanding of the object, and the emotional representation is forceful and provides the object with a significance that it would lack otherwise. For this reason it has been argued that emotions cut across the distinction between the content of a statement (the information that a statement conveys) and the force of the statement (Gunter, 2004). This is independent of the effects of emotion on attention, information processing, etc. discussed above, as we can pay attention to something, such as a brightly colored object or other novel stimulus, without it having any significance for us. Returning to the example of fair treatment, the pairing of the emotional response with the recognition of this event can also give it more gravity than it would have otherwise and can thus encourage us to respond to the mistreatment.

Another aspect of this import is the role that emotions have in conveying the significance of action possibilities. Zadra and Clore (2011) argue that "emotions provide embodied information about the costs and benefits of anticipated action, information that can be used automatically and immediately, circumventing the need for cogitating on the possible consequences of potential actions" (p. 676). Emotions thus provide information about not only external objects of perception but also the mental conception of possible courses of action. Feeling fear as we walk toward a cliff provides immediate information about the consequences of continuing to walk forward. Someone's discomfort at the prospect of dodging the truth in a conversation can provide information about the cost of doing so (in terms of compromising their values), and in this way provide immediate information about it even before they explicitly think about the consequences. Emotional responses can work in the other direction as well: the discomfort can be paired with the unpleasant consequences of being truthful. In this latter case the emotion could increase the likelihood of behaving dishonestly. In either event, the emotional responses affect the associated character trait of honesty or dishonesty.

In summary, emotions affect where attention is directed, what is seen when attention is directed, the amount of information gathered about the object of emotion, and the experiential significance that the object has for us. This has implications for character traits because

collectively emotions significantly alter our perception of our environment as we move through the world, and accordingly play a significant role in determining perceptual dispositions that underlie character-relevant cognition and behavior.

The principal aim of this discussion has been to substantiate the important links between emotion and perception and thus character traits. However this has clear implications for morality and, most pertinent to the topic here, morally relevant character traits. Someone who is emotionally aroused by the opportunity for personal advancement in relation to others is more likely to perceive a situation as one involving such opportunity for advancement, more likely to attend to and gain more information about the relevant situation, and will see the opportunity as more important than if there were no such arousal, and will be more likely to take the opportunity for the sake of personal advancement and thus perform an act with the act-character of competitiveness. Likewise, somebody who is emotionally aroused by helping others will have a different perception of an opportunity to perform some community service than someone who is emotionally aroused by the visibility that such service will bring to them, and the act-character of each will be different as a result of the different perceptual and motivational sets.

Possessing a certain sort of character then involves possessing, among other things, a certain emotional repertoire. Likewise, aspiring to a certain sort of character involves developing an emotional repertoire that promotes the proper sort of perceptions, and working against responses - or their absence - that prevent such perceptions. We should feel a certain amount of anger toward injustices to facilitate the recognition of instances of injustice and to have the proper sense of its significance, and feel a certain amount of sympathy toward those suffering from injustice. It isn't a matter of simply having or not having the emotional response, because excessive emotion can create false perceptions or excessive sensitivities to conditions and thus a tendency to perceive and cognize situations in line with a certain emotion, even when the perception and cognition are not justified. Someone with an excessive emotional response to disapproval may see situations as instances of disapproval when in fact they are not.[8] Thus the goal of emotional development is appropriate emotional balance.

III. EMOTION, VALUE, AND AXIOLOGICAL ENTROPY

In addition to affecting character-relevant perception, emotions play a role in fundamentally sustaining character traits. This aspect of the relation between emotion and character is based on a reasonably uncontroversial assertion that I will only briefly outline here, namely that character traits are dispositions to a range of attitudes and actions that instantiate certain values. A person's attitudes and choices are typically determined, when there is a plurality of possibilities, by the level of importance they attach to the various choices they perceive, that is, their values, and the decisions they make between competing interests are indicative of their character traits. Choosing to help a friend in need rather than enjoying one's leisure time is indicative of one sort of trait. Character traits are thus dependent on our values when we evaluate and choose. A generous person is someone who in part is disposed to a range of actions that instantiate the value of giving more than necessary or expected to others without the expectation of receiving something in return, and an honest person is someone who in part is disposed to a range of actions that instantiate the value of truth. Traits of character are thus different from other traits in that traits of character necessarily involve our values in a way that other traits do not.

Axiological Entropy

Here I will argue that emotions are necessary to the sustenance of character traits because emotions prevent "axiological entropy" – the diminution over time of the tacit sense of the importance of values on which character traits are based. Without the ongoing reinforcement of emotions, we would not be able to preserve the sense of the importance of values. Once again, the decisions we make between competing interests are indicative of our character traits. Such decisions, in turn, are determined by our values. Honesty involves in large part the value of truth outweighing the value of personal benefit: an honest person values truth more than personal benefit. In the ongoing absence of relevant emotions, a value such as truth would cease to be important to a person, and would thus be unable to drive the person's perceptions, choices, and actions. They would be less likely to choose and act for the sake of truth, and the corresponding character trait of honesty would be diminished and, over time, extinguished.

There are several lines of support for the phenomenon of axiological entropy and its effect on character traits. One stems from reflection on the relation between emotion and belief. In a discussion of the Stoic view of emotion, Martha Nussbaum refers to the "freshness" of propositions (what I will call "beliefs" here for sake of simplicity) that are given a significance by an emotional state. Her central example is grief at the death of a loved one. The fact of the death – the belief that the loved one is dead – is very significant and at the forefront of our mind when we feel grief. The emotion subsides as time passes and with it the level of significance of the death relative to other things, that is, other beliefs that are in our mind. She explains this diminution of emotional force as the fading of the freshness of the belief. Over time the belief regarding the death loses "its extreme sharpness, its intrusive cutting edge" and in relation to other beliefs "It does not assault the other[s]…it sits alongside of them" (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 382). The belief no longer dominates other beliefs that are in our mind. The same can be said of other emotionally laden thoughts. The pride we feel at winning an award places the fact of the award in the forefront of our mind, but over time the fact of the accomplishment diminishes in significance and it no longer occupies the same place in our mind. The larger point is that we not only have various beliefs, but these beliefs have a certain level of significance to us and this level is variable.

Nussbaum's discussion provides a vehicle for understanding axiological entropy. There is reason to believe that this emotional highlighting and diminution captured by the idea of freshness and fading can occur with the values on which our character traits are based. The particular occurrence of an emotion can enable the specific object of the emotion to have an adequate significance to us, but can also support the significance of broader values. For instance, feeling pride about a particular accomplishment may give us an adequate sense of the importance of our accomplishment, but the emotion can also more generally support our sense of the importance of accomplishments, so that we are likely to have a similar sense of the value of accomplishment in the future. Conversely, their importance relative to the many other concepts and values that we deal with will lessen in time - they will lose their freshness. Were we to go through years without feeling pride or satisfaction in our accomplishments, we would not attach this significance to possible accomplishments. In this way, the sense of the significance of particular types of values, in other words their importance to us, will diminish over time.[9]

Conditioning

This characterization of axiological entropy is supported by conditioning theory. Both the pairing of emotional responses and values and the concept of the flux in the significance of values corresponds with the principles of classical and operant conditioning, particularly the

concept of the extinction of learned responses. I'll review these two types of conditioning before discussing extinction and their relation to axiological entropy.

The attraction (and aversion) to values can involve classical conditioning – the pairing of a neutral stimulus with an unconditioned response to transform the neutral stimulus into a conditioned stimulus. A noted example of this is that of Albert, a boy who at nine months was exposed to a white rat. He initially displayed no fear of the rat, but in repeated exposures the presence of the rat was paired with a metal pipe hit with a hammer, a jarring sound that scared the boy and made him cry. After repeated pairings Albert would cry when exposed to the rat without the noise. The unconditioned stimulus (the harsh noise) brought on the unconditioned response (fear), and as a result of conditioning the rat was transformed from a neutral to a conditioned stimulus, which was accompanied by the conditioned response of fear of the white rat (Watson & Rayner, 1920). Discussions of studies like this focus on the production of an emotional reaction, but it is also the case that the rat became an aversive stimulus, one that provided motivation for avoidance. In addition, such studies involve conditioning with specific objects, but as I'll discuss below after reviewing operant conditioning, this conditioning can include broader properties, including general values.

Such aversion and attraction can also result from operant conditioning. Operant conditioning involves voluntary behavior that is rewarded with incentives or punished with disincentives (Skinner 1948). Behaviors or behavioral dispositions are developed or diminished through such reinforcement or punishment. Here rewards and punishments are understood broadly, so someone can be punished for cutting in line by facial expressions, gestures, and verbal condemnation rather than a formal penalty, and they can be rewarded in similar ways. Operant conditioning comes out of the behaviorist tradition, but it need not be limited to the conditioning of observable behavior in considering its role here. People display "reactive attitudes" of gratitude and anger in response to the perceived affection and good will or contempt and malevolence of others (Strawson, 1974). In this way, reactive attitudes can reinforce or deter certain attitudes and intentions. Praising someone's telling the truth for the sake of being honest can reinforce that intention, as can the positive feelings within that person that can result from thinking of their intentions as good intentions that are approved by others. The same can be the case with negative feedback directed at bad intentions. Thus, through this sort of conditioning people can be encouraged not only to act in certain ways but with certain motives and intentions. This is relevant to character because acts of a certain character involve specific intentions: giving more than is necessary or expected to someone for the sake of that person's good is generous, but giving more than is necessary or expected because of anticipated benefits for oneself is not generous.

The features of classical and operant conditioning shed light on axiological entropy because conditioning creates attractions and aversions to not only the specific object involved in the conditioning process, but through *stimulus generalization* to more general properties possessed by that object, and these properties can include values. Stimulus generalization supports the relation between Nussbaum's concept of freshness and general values proposed above. This phenomenon was observed in the Albert study. After the fear conditioning toward the white rat, Albert became fearful of a variety of other white objects as well as the rat. An aversion had been created toward the broader property of "white." Stimulus generalization can occur in cases where the objects have minimal physical similarity; here the objects share the same stimulus concept, though little in the way of physical features (Martin & Pear, 2010). In this way, two instances of generosity can share the same conceptual features of a generous act

but otherwise different characteristics, and a positive emotional response to an episode of generosity can inform the evaluation of not only the specific instance of generosity, but also the broader property of generosity, and thus affect a broader range of decisions where generosity is at stake.

Thus, these two types of conditioning constitute two different mechanisms through which emotional conditioning can affect the level of importance of values. The associated phenomenon of extinction, which will be considered next, counters conditioning and provides a theoretical grounding for the operation of axiological entropy.

Extinction

The converse of conditioning is extinction. In a way resembling Nussbaum's description of the fading of the force of beliefs over time, the repeated presence of a conditioned stimulus in the absence of an unconditioned stimulus will decrease the occurrence of the conditioned response. This is a feature of emotional as well as behavioral responses. Affective responses to stimuli diminish over time, as studies on the "fading effect" have shown (Holmes, 1970; Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997). This can also include our sense of the importance of general concepts or values upon which our character traits are based. Over time, their importance relative to the many other concepts and values that we deal with will lessen – they will lose the freshness that Nussbaum refers to. Thus, the import and value of particular classes of goods can be lost.

The implication of this is that in an environment of competing possible observations, situations that involve values that have diminished will not only be less noticeable, but will not have the same weight when standing against competing values that they have had before the diminution. If the value of accomplishment diminishes, we will not value particular accomplishments as much and will be less likely to notice and care about situations where accomplishment is at issue. This is not to deny that judgments could be made in such cases. However, we would not be as likely to recognize an accomplishment were the value of accomplishment to lose its freshness, and such a value or the judgments that relate to it would have little significance. Similarly, in the absence of reinforcement the value of honesty would diminish and eventually cease to be of particular significance to a person, and would thus be unable to drive the person's perceptions, choices, and actions. They would be less likely to perceive instances of honesty or dishonesty as such, and would be less likely to choose and act for the sake of truth. The corresponding character trait of honesty would be diminished or extinguished. This diminution of the sense of importance of general values, if unchecked, will degrade both our ability to see various things that should be made salient because they involve those values, and the ability of our practical reason to function properly.[10] In this way, without periodically having the relevant emotions, the significance or weights attached to particular values would fade and the character traits that involve those values would cease to be.

Support for this conception of the relation between emotion and value comes from research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One manifestation of PTSD is the phenomenon of emotional numbing, including feelings of detachment and a reduced range of affect (Shay, 1994). Such emotional numbing is associated with callousness and antisocial behavior (Keurig & Becker, 2010; Allwood, Bell, & Horan, 2011). This broad emotional numbing is consistent with the display of anger and thus some emotional responses may be numbed while others are still operative, but the numbing that exists is closely associated with maladaptive behavior. This indicates that without the support of emotions, the values that underlie character traits lose their force.[11]

Countering Axiological Entropy

Of course in the proper amount this diminution of the importance of particular objects is a good thing. If the pride of winning a grade school spelling contest filled our mind and caused us to gloat in the recollection of the accomplishment a decade later, we would be distracted from our present work and from many other things that are, at this later place and time, much more important. Similarly, mourning over a friend should subside over time to enable one to deal with our other concerns, though the death of the friend is still a tragic loss.

However if unchecked this diminution will, once again, affect the importance of things to us that should remain valuable, particularly certain types of things, including the values associated with character traits. Though much of the discussion of psychological conditioning centers on *creating* associative links and responses, the same principles apply to *maintaining* such responses, that is, keeping existing responses from fading. What prevents this axiological entropy associated with extinction from occurring is the successive emotional pairing with a value – the having of emotions that are directed at objects that involve these values, and serve to maintain or strengthen our sense of their importance. Here the having of relevant emotions from time to time reinforces or refreshes general values through stimulus generalization. To return to examples above, associating negative emotional arousal with an instance of harm gives the broader concept of harm a greater weight than it would have otherwise, and it informs our evaluation of situations where harm or the risk of harm is at issue. In the same way, the association of negative emotion with episodes of dishonesty gives the value of truth a particular significance, including in decisions where truth is at stake.

This emotional pairing can take several forms. An emotional reaction to a perceived value can produce the pairing of emotion and value in a way that reflects classical conditioning. We may see someone behaving callously to another person, which arouses indignance on our part directed at the callous act and reinforces within us the sense of the significance of callousness and sustains the aversion to callous acts. In addition, the expression of emotion by people can elicit similar feelings in other people directed at that object – what Bernard Rimé describes as "emotional communion." He notes that "The shared episode and the expression of associated emotions by a member of the social group have the power to vividly elicit analogous feelings in people around them, so that a reciprocal stimulation of emotion follows" (Rimé, 2013, p. 95).

In addition, observing reactive attitudes of others toward what we do functions in a similar way. This is different from emotional communion because here the reinforcing emotion within us is not the same as the emotional reaction of other people. For instance, negative reactive attitudes (anger and resentment) in response to a rude act on our part can elicit shame in us and, in line with classical conditioning, produce an emotional association with the act so that the thought of that type of act itself is aversive. And in line with operant conditioning, this can also produce an association with the negative *consequence* of the act that deters us from acting in that way. For instance, when we behave rudely and feel shame after observing the anger of other people toward the behavior, the shame that is induced marks the consequences of rudeness (the condemnation of others) with a negative association. Positive reactions to behavior, such as gratitude, operate in the same way, but produce positive associations with the type of act and its consequences.

Another device is the experience of art and literature where emotional reactions are encouraged through contextual devices – music, lighting, the appearance of the people involved, etc. All of these serve to prompt and support particular emotional responses directed at objects

with particular values. In the film *The Sweet Smell of Success* the dark, atmospheric camerawork and Burt Lancaster's icy vocal delivery, as the semi-fictive columnist J. J. Hunsecker, work together to heighten our chilly distain at the megalomania that is at the core of Hunsecker's character. More generally, art and literature are valuable because of their ability to induced emotions and pair them with values.[12]

Support for this role of emotions in preventing axiological entropy comes from studies of clinical psychopaths, which show that they display both a lack of emotion to adverse events and diminished ability to empathize (Blair, Colledge, Murray, & Mitchell, 1997; Blair, Jones, & Clark, 2001; Kiehl et al., 2001). Along with this emotional deficit they lack, as Patricia Greenspan notes, "the normal measure of receptivity to moral reasons – the capacity to appreciate their force as moral reasons, which involves the capacity for a certain kind of immediate emotional response" (Greenspan, 2003, p. 420). Note that what appears to be present in such psychopathology is the diminished or missing *capacity* for certain emotional responses, not merely the absence of emotional response in many specific situations where such a response would be appropriate. Greenspan's reference to appreciating the force of moral reasons is telling: though her focus is on deficits in emotional response to moral norms, the point applies to character traits as well. It follows from this model that people with an impaired capacity for emotional response will have an impaired moral character because emotions do not function normally to prevent axiological entropy, and this research on psychopaths is not only consistent with this but provides support for the model by their diminished appreciation of moral concepts which appear to stem from the diminished emotional capacity rather than vice-versa.[13] Moreover, impulsivity, a hallmark feature of psychopathy, can be explained by the weak set of values that would keep impulses in check.

Thus, emotional association with values counters axiological entropy and maintains or enhances the importance that these values have for us. Such values include the general values that character traits are based on. A consequence of the above is that the maintenance of beneficial character traits takes place at both an individual and cultural level. Part of character improvement involves recognizing and fostering cultural forces that support the values that underlie character traits and the correct level of importance of these values. As the above discussion suggests, this can involve eliciting appropriate emotions in ourselves and others and the social sharing of emotions in the form of emotional communion. These are not sufficient for the possession of beneficial character traits, as it also requires the ability to discern when and how these values apply to particular situations. This ability can be provided in part by the role of emotions in regulating our perception that has been discussed. It also requires practical wisdom in adjudicating between different values, such as when compassion and justice conflict. But though the proper emotional repertoire is not sufficient, it is necessary for possession of these traits.

IV. OBJECTIONS

One possible objection to the ideas presented here is that emotions reflect perceptual states rather than cause them. So, emotions do not determine character traits, but rather character traits and their associated perceptual states determine emotion. For instance, our disposition to recognize instances of injustice might make us angry at such instances, rather than our anger helping us recognize the injustice. In response, the first claim is correct but the second one is too

strong. Emotions do certainly reflect perceptual states because recognizing to some degree an emotionally arousing object is a precursor to having an emotion. But perception is an ongoing process and, as indicated in the literature cited earlier, emotions change the nature of the perception by altering various aspects of the processing of information and the force of the representation. The relation between emotion and perception is dynamic so that the perception of properties can activate emotion systems but emotion systems in turn modify what is perceived (Le Doux, 1994).

Another objection is that responsiveness to basic values is innate, so that emotional reinforcement is not needed for such values to be significant, and thus is not a requirement for the possession of character traits. One study concludes that three-month-old infants show an aversion to antisocial actors (Hamlyn, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010). Another study concludes that six-to-ten-month-olds have a strong preference for prosocial (nice) actors over antisocial (mean) actors (Hamlyn, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007). Other research provides evidence that children develop a sense of fairness in distribution of resources between twelve and fifteen months (Sommerville, Schmidt, Yun, & Burns, 2013). However, these findings are consistent with emotions playing the fundamental role outlined above. The first two studies are consistent with rudimentary emotion systems marking prosocial and antisocial behavior, and thus consistent with the capacity for emotional response being required for the preference for prosocial actors. Similarly, the findings of the last study are consistent with the necessity of emotional responses to care about fairness in distribution. This possibility is underscored by Paul Bloom, who notes that "What we see in these emerging emotions [in infants] is the development of mattering" (Bloom, 2011, p. 78).

A third objection is that because we can obviously *act* when we are not in an emotional state, we can have character traits without emotion. One can help a friend, arrive at a meeting on time, and perform many other tasks indicative of a certain character without being emotionally aroused, so emotions are not necessary for possessing character traits. This objection is unsuccessful because we perceive and understand the objects and situations around us in terms of various goods and interests, and our perception and motivation is driven by these evaluations. Most long and short range planning is based on values, not simple pains and pleasures. Hunger by itself is a pain, but it is not evaluative; it is not concern or frustration about our hunger. Thus, action that is prompted by hunger or other simple pleasures or pains does not instantiate a character trait: character traits involve acts that are based on values and broad patterns of perception, cognition, and action that are dependent on emotions for reasons given above. Moreover, our ability to act without emotion can be explained by conditioning, which can affect evaluations and choices even when there is no occurrent emotional state.[14] In addition, even if emotions were not necessary for some occasional character-relevant acts, they would still be necessary for character *traits* because such traits are based on ongoing dispositions that would be unlikely to exist in the total absence of emotions.

A more substantial criticism of the proposal that emotions play an important role in causing or sustaining character traits is that character involves rational will power – resisting the force of emotions that can compromise our ability to reason or our resolve to do the right thing. G. H. von Wright for example believes that this is a mark of the virtues, claiming that "In the case of every specific virtue there is some specific passion which the man of that virtue has learned to master" and that "the role of a virtue, to put it briefly, is to counteract, eliminate, rule out the obscuring effects which emotion may have on our practical judgment" (von Wright, 1963, p. 147). Von Wright does note that it does not seem "unplausible" that emotions may at

times serve the good of people, but does not consider this possibility further, nor does he seem inclined to do so: he refers to the issue of this possibility as "bewildering" (p. 147).

The attitude that von Wright exemplifies has its point: reason and emotion often conflict, and in many of these cases *performing* the proper course of action involves ignoring the promptings of our emotions and instead following the dictates of our reason. We may be tempted to flee in the face of danger, though we clearly know that we should face the danger because of the consequences of not doing so. In addition, recognizing the proper course of action and acting accordingly can involve suppressing our emotions or counteracting their "obscuring effect." Extreme anxiety, anger, or even pride can disable our practical reason and make us unable to decide or cause us to lose sight of what we should do. In cases such as these, there is surely a virtue in remaining calm and counteracting the effects of emotions as best we can.

Though von Wright's focus is on virtue, this idea can be extended to character traits by claiming that character traits should be the product of rational reflection and resolve rather than emotional disposition. However, such pure rational resolve is both unrealistic and, ultimately, undesirable. As argued above, emotions play a key role in perception and in maintaining our sense of the importance of various values and their representation as something that we are attracted or averse to. Since emotions are determinative of what we see, take note of, and regard as important, emotions play a part in the formation of rational resolve itself. Thus, a strict rationalist requirement violates the principle of *minimal psychological realism*. According to this principle the demands of any moral theory should consist of things that humans are at least capable of, even if they are difficult – things that are "possible for creatures like us" (Flanagan, 1991, p. 32). This principle applies to a conception of character traits as well: what these traits are or ought to be should be consistent with the psychological constitution of humans.

Moreover we should not let the negative effects of emotions mask their positive role. We should not, of course, always act according to the promptings of our emotions, but on the other hand emotions can direct attention and encourage action in ways that are beneficial and that reason alone is incapable of. Even in cases where we do not, and should not, act according to occurrent emotional prompts, our broader emotional repertoire can be operative in steering us toward what is important. In this way, proper emotions and reason have a positive relation. The apparent conflict between reason and emotion may in fact be a sort of conflict between emotions: a conflict between the prompts of an occurrent emotion on the one hand, and on the other hand a sense of what is important, which is a product of a broader, ongoing emotional repertoire.

In sum, none of these objections to the role of emotions in determining and sustaining character traits are compelling.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by affecting our perception and maintaining the importance of our various values, emotions play a critical role in the possession of character traits. The consequences of this, as outlined above, is that character development must involve working toward an appropriate emotional repertoire, including proper emotional balance, and supporting character-relevant values on both an individual and cultural level through eliciting emotions in ourselves and others.

Two concluding observations are in order. First, one might take the position that

emotions determine the ends of our actions: we decide and act for the sake of what we are emotional drawn to and against what we are emotionally repelled by.[15] The account proposed here is both narrower and more complex: emotions set parameters on our deliberation and actions in the service of our ends, whatever the source of our ends may be. By influencing both our perception and deliberation, these emotions limit what we conceive of doing and what we eventually do. We could want very much to sell our house and strive to sell it, but answer questions about its condition accurately because of the importance of honesty to us. In this way emotions direct the process of deliberation itself, which is importantly distinct from setting the ultimate ends of deliberation.

Second, the arguments above do not imply that emotions determine character traits in any simple way. We may have excessive emotional reactions that, if taken as infallible indicators of the importance of their object, would deliver a very inaccurate sense of such importance. But emotionally driven perceptions and action tendencies can be moderated by a wider range of experience or reflective consideration, so that we may not follow the promptings of a particular emotion. Just as one may be disposed to be afraid of dogs and, knowing that this is the case, temper their sense of the actual danger that dogs pose, one may be emotionally aroused by a value such as loyalty and place a premium on it, but may also be reflectively aware of this and temper the motivational salience of loyalty with a broader range of knowledge and experience. Beliefs about the significance of loyalty here do not simply correspond with the degree of one's emotional response to situations where loyalty is at issue. More broadly, emotional responses do not rigidly determine the level of importance of values. Nevertheless, emotions are the groundwork for this sense of importance as well as for the perceptual dispositions that underlie character traits.[16] [17]

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[1] Between 1950 and 2000 there were nearly five times more publications on virtue than on character, based on a keyword search in *Philosophers Index*, the main inventory of

philosophical work on character. Virtues are commonly considered a species of character trait, namely the class of good or optimal character traits. For reasons I can't elaborate on here, I believe that virtues are not character traits (i.e. they are not conceptually related), but that character traits have a very important contingent relation to virtues. So in either event understanding character traits and their foundation is an important task of moral psychology.

[2] See for instance Rosalind Hursthouse's discussion of virtue and the emotions in *On Virtue Ethics*. Other recent work proposes that emotions are relevant to virtue because they skew attention (Goldie, 2004; Sherman, 1989). But this is insufficient because empirical research demonstrates that emotions can have the opposite effect – that they broaden attention. This underscores the point that work on emotion and character should be informed by and consistent with relevant empirical psychology, as has been the case in the recent debate over situationism.

[3] By *perception* I mean cognitively "thick" perception, where we come to a robust representation or interpretive conception of the object of perception, not minimal sensory perception. We see a particular pattern of lines and shades on a wooded path in front of us as a snake or a stick, not as a pattern of lines, etc. And we do so immediately rather than as a result of an inference. See Robert C. Roberts' concept of construal for a related account (Roberts, 2003).

[4] I won't address the demonstrated relation between emotion and motivation here. The interaction between the two is complex but uncontroversial. See Cunningham, Steinberg, and Grev (1980).

[5] In one study, participants were asked to judge the orientation of an object as the contrast between it and the background varied. The level of contrast needed to correctly report the orientation of the object was lower in the condition when participants were shown a fearful image for a fraction of a second prior to judging the orientation than when shown an emotionally neutral image (Phelps, Ling, & Carrasco, 2006).

[6] There is a growing consensus that some positive emotional states broaden the scope of attention (Frederickson, 1998; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010). This is relevant to character because it can allow the person to notice more of what is happening in their environment, so that a potentially generous or courageous person is more likely to notice when someone is in need and thus more likely to be able to act in line with those traits.

[7] For a similar view see Elgin (2008).

[8] See Amélie Rorty's discussion of magnetizing dispositions (Rorty, 1978).

[9] Nussbaum notes that the ancient philosopher Chrysippus holds that in order to form passions, judgments must be "fresh," and that "the point of this seems to be to allow for certain sorts of affective distancing, especially over time, compatibly with the retention of the same belief or judgment." This is similar to my claim that concepts and values lose their force, except that I hold that a belief or judgment with a different level of significance is not entirely the same belief. See Nussbaum (1994), p. 381.

[10] Ronald de Sousa discusses the determination of the significance of various facts in practical reasoning and its relation to the "frame problem" in artificial intelligence. See de Sousa (1987).

[11] There is reason to believe that this fading of the level of importance of values can take place at a larger cultural level as well as an individual level. The decline of honor culture in the West (Bowman, 2007; Wyatt-Brown, 1982) illustrates this. Over the past century honor has become less important in Western culture, and this can be explained as a decreasing emotional

resonance that issues involving traditional concepts of honor have. Thus axiological entropy can affect larger cultural values.

[12] See for instance Ronald de Sousa's discussion of the reinforcement of "paradigm scenarios" provided by art and literature (de Sousa, 1987).

[13] People with localized damage to brain regions associated with emotions tend to not have the same response to moral scenarios that involve what are typically emotion-inducing events, though their cognitive functioning appears to be normal. See Koenigs et al. (2007). In addition, the perceptual effects of emotion discussed earlier result from the emotional state rather than prior to the emotional state, and these can affect the significance of such scenarios for the perceiver.

[14] One way of explaining this is the somatic marker hypothesis put forward by Antonio Damasio. According to this hypothesis, subtle bodily responses to stimuli and the brains representation of such responses even in the absence of such responses serve to bias deliberation in line with the responses (Damasio, 1998).

[15] See for instance de Sousa (2004).

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