Character and . . .

Identity

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Identity

Annalee R. Ward

David lived his integrity. Whether it meant returning a grocery cart to its place, even in the rain, or returning the 57 cents given in too much change from a clerk's error, David did what was honest, kind, and right. These practices carried over to work life. Accept gifts for Christmas from company suppliers? Absolutely not, as it could create the perception of conflict of interest. Fudge the numbers on supply costs—no way.

Even as memories fade, our identity retains its foundations of good character.

David's habits of integrity reduced his decision-making stress and formed his life. Doing the right thing did not need to be debated; he just did it. Today, David, in his sunset years, has lost his short term memory, but he has not lost his identity of moral character. Ask him for help with the vacuuming, he's right there. Hear a report of a politician caught in a lie, he's disappointed, even disgusted. David's character forms the foundation of his identity even as his memories fade.[1]

Age-old questions of human identity begin to multiply when put into the conversation with moral character. What is the relationship between who I think I am and how I live? Am I defined by how others perceive me, by my intersections with others and the world, or is there something that stands alone? How much does the situation or locale shape me? How do my practices, my habits, form me? And is that formation the imprint that is my identity, and my identity, my character?

What is the relationship between who I think I am and how I live?

These questions and more began this Wendt Research Team's work together. We quickly realized that we would not be able to delve deeply into the relationship between character and identity—this issue's theme; rather, each author would follow different paths hoping to start this journey of exploring the continent of knowledge and questions of human identity. Beginning with the familiar—our own failures, Lindsey M. Ward helps orient our thinking about ways our character grows through failure by being willing to reflect on and share those failures. In so doing, we teach not only ourselves, but leave a trail for others to learn how to avoid our mistakes. From there Joseph Sabin explores identity and character in the context of sports, urging participants to be more deliberate in naming and pursuing character growth even in the setting of competition. Timothy Matthew Slemmons reminds us of the need for the spiritual on our life's journey. He challenges us to open-mindedly listen for God's voice, particularly in scripture, in order to discover the potential for a transformed identity. Failure stories can deepen our character, sport identity can lose sight of character, and scripture can transform our character. Taken together, these essays, while divergent, suggest some definitions of key terms and proceed on presuppositions about the nature of humanity.

Complicated Definitions

Clear definitions of character were not a destination for us; rather, we sought to put moral character in conversation with ways we discern our identities. Thus, these essays do not take the usual paths of identity politics. The landscape of character and identity is vast and these authors chose to go in different directions. I believe this is so because the relationship between our identity and our character contains multiple facets, scattering light on a variety of topics and disciplinary places.

As we considered the relationship between identity and character, we considered identity to often be defined by individual choice while character is revealed in one's interactions with others and the world.

Yet even that is a bit reductive; one might have active choice in both. Identity might be shaped by understanding of one's own character. One might choose to say "I am a person of high moral character," or "I am someone who tells the truth." Choosing character habits joins the individual to a broader community of people choosing to be moral.

Very often, identity emerges in description of physical qualities, experiences, education, work, etc., that remain outside of moral character identifiers. We use identity as a way of distinguishing between people. We speak of moral character as a way of being. Joining these personhood markers together challenges us to think more holistically. Central to these discussions were the influence of context and/or culture, cries for authenticity and the need for horizons of significance to guide our understandings.

Choosing character habits joins the individual to a broader community of people choosing to be moral.

One way we come to define ourselves is in dialogue with our context and culture. External forces shape and form us. Interactions with people inform our self-understanding. Our responses in turn impact our perceptions of self and our practices of virtue. Philosopher Charles Taylor has spent much of his career exploring identity and morality. He reminds us of the centrality of that kind of give and take. "[M]y discovering my own identity doesn't mean I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others" (*Philosophical Arguments* 231). Similarly, Miroslav Volf in his exploration of identity writes:

> I will explore what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others. My assumption is that selves are situated; they are female or male, Jew or Greek, rich or poor—as a rule, more than one of these things at the same time ("rich Greek female"), often having hybrid identities ("Jew-Greek" and "male-female"), and sometimes migrating from one identity to another. (10)

The dialogic struggle between identity and context is a common experience, especially evident when we encounter new situations, new people, and life's upheavals. How we respond to this dialogue, whether out of habits or reactions, reflects our moral character, its strengths and weaknesses. When we are able to move toward a self-fidelity, toward consistency, we see another concern of character and identity expressed in the concept of authenticity.

How do we define ourselves?

In an attempt to distinguish integrity, honesty, and authenticity, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, leading researchers in positive psychology on character strengths, define authenticity as "emotional genuineness and also psychological depth" (250). Unfortunately, this rather clinical definition doesn't move us toward any evaluative judgments. And we need those to recognize that following our own hearts (desires) doesn't always lead us to good character. Equating authenticity to this latter definition does nothing for encouraging positive moral identity.

A common concern of authenticity might be that the front we present to the world doesn't always match the way we feel inside or in our private lives. We may question whether we are being authentic and truthful when we don't "let it all hang out." Scholar Greg Spencer describes his frustration with this phoniness and duplicity as a longing for authenticity—for moral character that matches the person's presented identity. But again, the call for this kind of understanding of authenticity is one that begins with a self-focus. Spencer challenges us to look outside of self when he redefines authenticity as "a rigorous, inside-out consistency that courageously cares for others" (72). Other-care adds a radical dimension to authenticity, taking out self-centered naval-gazing and the sole focus on one's own desires. Spencer's outward gaze returns us to the work of Charles Taylor.

Taylor argues in both *Sources of the Self* and in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that authentic, morally good identity must be anchored in a "horizon of significance." In other words, definition, authority, and clarity of who I am lies outside of myself and guides my sense of self. By tethering the sense of self in a "horizon of significance," which acts as a "moral

source" (*Sources* 93), evaluation is possible. We have something to look to, to compare with in order to determine the better or worse, good or bad of our character. Slemmons agrees with this and demonstrates how this external horizon becomes internalized as he shares historical stories of transformed lives, all because the individuals became open to the external authority of God speaking through scripture.

The authority the horizon of significance exercises enables one to grow into an identity that, as Miroslav Volf describes, learns "*what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others" (21; italics his). While identity is not as simplistic as it sounds because we all inhabit multiple identities, the unity found in this common purpose, a purpose that lies outside of self, a horizon toward which we aim, anchors the expression of all of our identities. Our identity(ies), then, becomes visible in our practices as does our character.

Character and . . . Identity Issue

Various experiences shape us, reflect our character, and feed our sense of self, our identity. Shared dialogue, reflection, even argument contribute to our identity and illumine our character. Assuming the power of community formation, the authors of the three essays read together, discussed, debated, wrote, and gave feedback in weekly meetings with the hope that their varying interests would uncover insight. The time we spent in this community sharpened ideas, bringing people together only to send them out to a wide set of topics that somehow find common ground in thinking about character and its relationship to our identity.

A horizon toward which we aim anchors the expression of all of our identities.

Our respondent, Wally Metts, came to this topic with fresh eyes and a gracious engagement with each essay. As he wrestles with definitions, he concludes that we are to take the topic of character and identity at face value, approaching it with humility and a focus on story. To that end, our authors share many stories from the power of failures

to the dangers to character posed by identity tunnel vision, to the possibility and reality of lives transformed.

Using multiple examples from diverse fields, Lindsey Ward eloquently argues for the necessity of sharing failure stories in order to teach and mentor well. Acknowledging our failures should not be something that is abnormal; rather, they present an opportunity to learn and grow as we own them and reflect on them. Too often our culture promotes perfection both on the individual level and on the organizational level. That false image damages identities and carries catastrophic potential, as Ward illustrates. Being willing to share stories of failure—even minor ones—at appropriate times contributes to both normalizing failure as an acceptable occurrence (when minor) and not an identity, and it helps us learn from one another's mistakes.

Joseph Sabin invites us to question the truism that "sports build character." While not denying that they can do so, it's not inevitable, he argues. Far too many athletes seek sports as the means of defining their identity and not their character builder. Far too many parents, coaches, and administrators dream about wins, fame, and fortune, forgetting the power of losses and bench-sitting to teach lessons in character. The current structure of youth sports is biased toward the former goals and not the lessons to be learned, Sabin says. Using the examples of Andrew Luck, retired quarterback, and Ryan Leaf, a released quarterback, Sabin illustrates how there is not a causal connection between playing sports and good character.[2] Building an identity outside of one's sport is critical for healthy development, and building one's character while playing sports takes effort on everyone's part but leads to a better sports culture and a better world.

Timothy Slemmons delights in contemplating how reading scripture can both shape character and ultimately "write" the narrative of our lives. Using multiple examples from history, Slemmons eagerly invites readers to "suspend their disbelief" and open their Bibles. He promises no magical interventions or dramatic conversions, although some of his examples suggest the possibility, but rather, he winsomely encourages his audience to consider taking a serious look at the Bible as the Word of God. This Word will open up possibilities of shaping one's identity in a

direction of positive moral character and will be anchored to a significant horizon. Who knows, it could even be transformative.

Conclusion

In a world where too often the question of "who am I?" is answered with what we do to earn a living, this journal issue reminds us that while various experiences, work, and roles contribute to shaping us, they do not equate with who we are at our core, as we see in David. We are humans created as beings stamped with their Creator's imprint, holding gifts and talents, emotions and intellect, preferences and expressions, but marred by an innate brokenness that can only be healed by the Creator's touch.

Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Who Are We?* explores identity from this standpoint of human fallibility, particularly our tendencies toward pride and slothfulness or laziness, and points us toward the hope of a redeemed humanity. But until then, she finds hopeful identity in being Christ-followers who seek to live out their faith in a contextualized, involved engagement with the world by "*display[ing] what incarnational being-in-the-world is all about*" (142; italics hers). We are flawed people who have the opportunity to find identity outside of our flaws and inside of a perfect human in the form of Jesus Christ.

Writing the story of our identity begins with caring about good character.

Whether tunnel-visioned or failure-focused, character and identity can grow and change for the better. Writing the story of our identity begins with caring about good character. Let's strive to be people who consistently live out their identities in ways that recognize that failures are not the last word. Let's define ourselves as people who cast their vision outward toward horizons of significance that call us to genuinely care about others and this world.

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purpose. Ward researches and writes on communication, ethics, and popular culture.

Photo credit p. 2: Annalee R. Ward; composite: Mary K. Bryant
Photo credit p. 5: Mary K. Bryant

Notes

[1] Scientists are studying the relationship between moral character and identity and have developed the moral-self hypothesis which looks at how even some neurological diseases like Alzheimer's and ALS, while affecting a person's ability to function, do not change their fundamental moral identity. How people live their lives, the habits and practices of daily living, shape and form people. "A study published in the journal *Psychological Science* has found that 'who one is' is largely defined by one's moral behavior and not by one's memory capacity or other cognitive abilities" (Azarian; Strohminger and Nichols).

[2] After Leaf got out of rehab and prison, he said: "I was told how great I was at something, and I tended to believe it," Leaf says. "I thought I was a god. I was more important than you, because I could do this thing where I played a silly sport that made me a better human being, in my eyes" (Waleik).

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