Part V

Character and Confusion
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*The Contours of Character: A Concept in Search of Content*

We have seen that Americans want leaders with character—they rally to the rhetoric that “character matters.” Yet they fail to specify the matter of which character is composed, or their specification is so crowded as to be rendered confused and contradictory. But there is more to the story than that. Chapter four revealed that certain moral communities elevate inherited moral rules in their understanding of character, while others accent personal happiness. Yet despite these differences, all of the moral communities, from Traditionalists to Permissivists, share a great deal in common—they all echo the importance of honesty, truthfulness, fulfilling one’s commitments, working hard, and obeying the law, as marks of character. These differences and similarities between American moral communities led us to dig deeper, to see whether the contours of a concept that is overpopulated with meanings could be drawn in a sharper fashion. We find that indeed, there is a subtle form lurking behind the indeterminacy in the way Americans think about character. This form is graphically depicted in the figure on the next page, “The Contours of Character.”
The Contours of Character

- Norms of Personal License
  - Enjoying Yourself
  - Protecting Own Interests
  - Sharing Feelings Openly
  - Material Success

- Norms of Civility
  - Following Conscience
  - Being Respectful of Others
  - Patient with Others
  - Working Hard
  - Being Law Abiding

- Norms of Moral Restraint
  - Obeying Authority
  - Avoiding Sexual Promiscuity
  - Avoiding Cursing
  - Preserving Marriage
  - Whatever the Cost

- Norms of Civility
  - Being Honest
  - Sticking to Principles

- Norms of Moral Restraint
  - Fulfilling Commitments
  - Being Law Abiding

- Norms of Civic License
  - Being Respectful of Others
  - Patient with Others
  - Working Hard
  - Being Law Abiding

- Norms of Civic License
  - Being Honest
  - Sticking to Principles
At the top right of this figure are the elements of character that Americans endorse most consistently. With only a few exceptions, respondents agreed that these marks of public civility—being respectful, honest, fulfilling commitments, obeying the law, and working hard—are all basic to character. The violation of any of these moral standards disrupts the flow of everyday relationships. Indeed, to lie, show disrespect, break the law, etc., frays the social fabric of a world that depends upon predictable relations between people who know little, if anything, of one another. In such a world, it is not surprising that norms of civility are the components of character that Americans most agree upon. (In the figure, these are identified by the small circle at the top right.) From this it is tempting to conclude that Americans share a communitarian sensibility, but it is communitarian only in the weakest sense of the word. Rather than locating “character” in an individual's response to the binding obligations of particular communities, Americans are communitarian only in their collective aspiration (echoing Rodney King) that we can all “just get along” by being truthful, patient, and orderly with others.

Scanning from the top right of the figure toward the lower left, one progressively encounters qualities that respondents consider of lesser moral import. Sharing feelings openly, sacrificing for others, preserving marriage whatever the cost, and material success are seen by some Americans as marks of character, but compared to the norms of civility mentioned above, these marks are softy drawn, which is to say that they elicit much more disagreement regarding their importance. Were one to draw an axis from the top right of the figure to the lower left, it would be labeled an axis of intensity—delineating the proportion of Americans who see a particular quality as central to character. Those who view “sharing feelings openly” (toward the bottom left) as an important mark of character are almost certain to see “being respectful” (in the top right quadrant) in the same light, but the reverse is not true—those who see being respectful as essential to character may or may not value sharing feelings openly.

In addition to differences in intensity, the figure offers a tantalizing first glance at differences in kind—substantive differences in the way Americans think about character. Even though the general tendency, as we have seen, is for Americans to extol everything as central to character, the figure suggests that the content of character is defined more sharply by a small minority of Americans. Beyond the axis of intensity, a second axis—an axis of discrimination or definition—can be drawn from the top left to the bottom right. Among the minority who discriminate in their view of character, some rate the emotive or therapeutic qualities in the top left—enjoying yourself, protecting your own interests, sharing feelings openly, and being patient with others—as more important than those in the bottom right. Others highlight an ethic of restraint—sticking to principles, obeying authority figures, avoiding sexual promiscuity, avoiding cursing, and preserving a marriage whatever the cost—while eschewing the libertarian qualities in the upper left quadrant of the figure. While it is only a minority of respondents who sharpen their definitions in these ways, and the distinctions are complex enough that they do not leap immediately from the data, differences exist nonetheless. Those who embrace a distinctively therapeutic view of character share in common with those who define character in terms of moral restraint a commitment to the standards of public civility in the upper right portion of the figure. Where they differ is in their relative embrace of personal license or restraint as they reflect upon the content of character. It must certainly be difficult to classify either of these as primary in a cultural milieu where license, restraint, and civility are all touted as indispensable.

The differences in both intensity and kind that have just been highlighted can be summarized in a simple classification of American views: The largest group of Americans (43%) are enthusiastic about character, so enthused in fact that they pour anything that sounds good into the symbolic vessel. Ask them to explain it, and they may be at a loss for words, but this fuzziness does little to dampen their enthusiasm. A little more than a third of respondents (38%) discriminate somewhat in their conceptualization of character, elevating either an ethic of restraint above personal license (21%), or vice versa (18%). All three of these groups, which together account for eighty-two percent of Americans, endorse an ethic of public civility as a basic ingredient of character. The remaining 18% of Americans are difficult to classify. Some are hesi-
tant to place any label upon character and some are less enthused about public civility than their fellow citizens. For the purposes of this report, we will designate them as “nondescript”; their amorphous views do little to further our understanding.

Americans' View of Character
by Intensity and Kind

- “enthusiastic” 43%
- “nondescript” 18%
- “ethic of personal license” 18%
- “ethic of restraint” 21%

Experience and Moral Expectations

In the effort to understand the nature of the contradiction and confusion surrounding character in public opinion, personal experience is a factor that invites consideration. As we noted earlier, there were only three questions we posed about the respondent’s actual moral behavior—concerning cheating on a test or plagiarizing work in school, lying to a partner about a romantic or sexual involvement with another person, and lying to an employer about being sick or unable to work. Do these experiences influence a respondent's view of character, the moral life more broadly, or the moral character of political leaders?

On the matter of general public ethics, there is a noticeable but small difference between those who say that they have not engaged in these behaviors and those who say they have. Overall, those who have admitted to these behaviors are slightly less likely to embrace established moral codes and more likely to accept pluralist and even relativistic standards. They are, for example, slightly more likely to embrace tolerance toward different lifestyles and a view that “everything is beautiful—it is all how you look at it.” They are also less likely to think they should “help others to lead more moral lives,” or to say that “we would all be better off if we could live by the same basic moral guidelines.” They are also less likely to embrace the dictum that “honesty is the best policy” and slightly more likely to hold the view that “a little white lie never hurt anyone.”

As to the content of character, those who have admitted to these behaviors are slightly less likely to say that “sticking to one’s principles, no matter what,” “being honest and truthful,” “following through on commitments,” and “being respectful of others” are very important to character. But again, these differences are small.

On the matter of political leadership the story is much the same. On the question of whether politicians can be effective even if they have little personal character, there is no difference at all between those who had and had not engaged in this conduct. Nor do they differ in their assessment of the character of politicians, compared to the character of the “average American”—each is as likely as the other to say that politicians have less character.

Experience in these matters does not influence their assessment of Al Gore or George W. Bush, either. It does, however, affect their view of both Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton. Those who have engaged in this conduct are slightly more likely to call Bill Clinton a “man of character” and somewhat less likely to agree that he should have resigned over the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In the same way, they are more likely to call Hillary Clinton a “woman of character.”

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In all of these issues, the pattern is consistent, with statistically significant differences. In our view, however, the differences are not socially meaningful. Experience seems to have an influence, but it does not account for much of the random quality of people’s views of the matter.