Are Character Traits Dispositions?

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Abstract
The last three decades have seen much important work on powers and dispositions: what they are and how they are related to the phenomena that constitute their manifestation. These debates have tended to focus on 'paradigmatic' dispositions, i.e. physical dispositions such as conductivity, elasticity, radioactivity, etc. It is often assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that the conclusions of these debates concerning physical dispositions can be extended to psychological dispositions, such as beliefs, desires or character traits. In this paper I identify some central features of paradigmatic dispositions that concern their manifestation, stimulus conditions, and causal bases. I then focus on a specific kind of psychological disposition, namely character traits, and argue that they are importantly different from paradigmatic dispositions in relation to these features. I conclude that this difference should lead us to re-examine our assumption that character traits are dispositions and, by implication, whether we can generalize conclusions about physical dispositions to psychological dispositions, such as character traits and their manifestations.

1. Dispositions: physical and psychological

> Disposition terms, such as 'cowardice', 'fragility' and 'reactivity,' often appear in explanations. Sometimes we explain why a man ran away by saying that he was cowardly, or we explain why something broke by saying it was fragile. Scientific explanations of certain phenomena feature dispositional properties like instability, reactivity, and conductivity.[1]

As this quotation states, we often explain why something happened by reference to 'dispositional properties' or dispositions. For instance, we explain why the poison dissolved by reference to the fact that it is water-soluble, or why the glass shattered by reference to its fragility. And, as the quotation suggests, this is not just true of what I shall call 'paradigmatic dispositions', that is, physical dispositions such as fragility, solubility or conductivity. It is also true of 'psychological' dispositions: human actions, especially intentional actions, are often explained by citing psychological factors that are

[1] J. McKitrick, 'A Defence of the Causal Efficacy of Dispositions', *Sats: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* **5** (2004) 110–130, 110.

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generally thought of as dispositions. Consider the following examples of psychological explanations:

(a) Alison went to the Police because she thought that her car had been stolen and wanted to get a certificate for the insurance company.
(b) Tom sits at the back of the classroom because he is shy.
(c) I exercise in order to keep fit.
(d) James shouted because he was angry.

Statements (a)–(c) explain by reference to psychological factors: (a) explains by reference to Alison's beliefs and desires; (b) explains by reference to a character trait: shyness. (c) explains by giving my aim or goal in exercising: to keep fit; and (d) explains by reference to an emotion: anger. These explanations are quite different from each other. But many philosophers think that they are all explanations that cite dispositions: mental or psychological dispositions. So wanting and believing something are said to be psychological dispositional states of the person that has the relevant wants and beliefs:[2] they dispose the person to act in certain ways; for instance, in our example, the belief and desire combined dispose Alison to go to the Police. Being shy is a character trait that disposes those who have it to act in certain ways, ways conducive to their not being noticed by others, etc.[3] Aims and goals are also regarded as dispositional concepts: having the aim of, say keeping fit, disposes one to do things that one thinks conducive to fitness. And anger is an emotion that disposes people to react and behave in certain ways.

As the above suggests, it is generally thought that physical and psychological dispositions feature in explanations of inanimate phenomena and of human actions respectively. Citing the fact that an object has a disposition can explain an occurrence or an action by

[2] C.B. Martin, for example, writes: 'The fact that belief and desire states are dispositional is both familiar and obvious', C.B. Martin, *The Mind in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 184. This is a widespread view in the literature on dispositions, see e.g. S. Mumford, *Dispositions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[3] See C.B. Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), fn 41 for a representative list of philosophers who conceptualise character traits as dispositions. John Doris, in his *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), along with other 'situationists', expresses scepticism about character traits. I can put aside that debate because their target is 'robust' rather than 'local' character traits and my argument requires accepting merely the latter.

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characterising the latter as a *manifestation* of the corresponding disposition.[4] But what exactly is a disposition?

The past few decades have seen a lot of work on the nature of dispositions or powers among philosophers. But before saying more about that, I need to put a side a possible complication. Many authors treat the terms 'power' and 'disposition' as equivalent;[5] while others restrict the use of the term 'disposition' on the grounds that, they say, not all powers are dispositional: one can have the ability to wash the dishes without having any disposition to do so; or the ability, but not the disposition, to murder, or to speak Russian.[6] To some extent, this is a terminological choice, although the second practice accords more closely with ordinary usage, while the first reflects the fact that the term 'disposition' has become a semi-technical term in philosophy, partly because powers are often characterised as 'dispositional' properties and contrasted with 'categorical' properties. As a result, powers of any kind get to be called 'dispositions'.[7] I shall have something to say about this issue towards the end of the paper but, for the moment, I needn't concern myself with this difference in use because in the immediate sections my discussion will focus on phenomena that both parties

[4] The precise character of these explanations is a controversial issue. For a discussion see McKitrick, 'A Defence of the Causal Efficacy of Dispositions' and 'Are Dispositions Causally Relevant?', *Synthese* **144** (2005), 357–371.

[5] Mumford and Anjum, for example, claim that 'we have different terms for dispositions with different features, for instance, "tendency" (for dispositions with a frequent or reliable manifestation); "ability" (dispositions that it is an advantage to have); "liabilities" (a disadvantage)'. (S. Mumford and R. Anjum *Getting Causation from Powers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 4).

[6] See e.g. M. Fara, 'Dispositions and Habituals' , *Noûs* **39** (2005), 43–82 and P. Hacker, *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework*, (Oxford: Wylie Blackwell, 2007), esp. ch.4 Vetter says that 'is disposed to' is a sort of technical sense in these debates, and we should not to be misled by its ordinary connotations which is either something like 'is willing to' or, 'has a passing tendency to' with no grounding on the individual's intrinsic features. With plural subjects, she adds, it also expresses 'statistical correlation' (Vetter, *Potentiality. From Dispositions to Modality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 67).

[7] As Molnar, following Elizabeth Prior (1985), says '"disposition" and "potential" (in Aristotle's sense) are philosophers' artefacts' (Molnar, *Powers. A Study in Metaphysics* Oxford: (Oxford University Press, 2003), 57).

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agree are powers that do not merely enable but *dispose* their possessors to display certain forms of behaviour.

Although there is disagreement among philosophers on various issues concerning dispositions, there is also a degree of consensus about which are paradigmatic dispositions and specially about some of their defining features. I shall give a brief sketch of four such features. I start with two which I shall introduce using George Molnar's terms and characterisations: 'Directedness' and 'Independence'.

A power has **Directedness** 'in the sense that it must be a power for, or to, some outcome' or '*for* some behaviour, usually of their bearers';[8] the same idea, roughly, is sometimes expressed by saying that a power is defined by its exercise, or a disposition by its manifestation: what it is a power or disposition to do.

The second feature, **Independence**, consists in the fact that powers are ontologically independent of their manifestations: an object can have a power that is not being manifested, has never been manifested and will never be manifested. This feature is widely accepted to be defining of dispositions in general. For instance, a recent discussion of dispositions opens as follows: 'It's important to note that neither the activation conditions nor the manifestation conditions need ever actually occur in order for an object to have the disposition in question'.[9] And the authors of the entry on 'Dispositions' for the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* agree: 'In general, it seems that nothing about the *actual* behaviour of [the possessor of the disposition] is ever necessary for it to have the dispositions it has'.[10] This seems intuitively very plausible: there are plenty of things that have the disposition to break, to dissolve, expand, to poison humans etc. that never have broken,

[8] Molnar, *Powers*, 57, 60. Molnar lists five features which he says are defining of what he calls 'the family of dispositional properties'; the remaining three being: 'Actuality', 'Intrinsicality' and 'Objectivity'. See Molnar, *Powers*, chs 3–7 for further details. I shall put aside Molnar's somewhat controversial claim that we should understand directedness as a kind of physical intentionality, i.e. that 'something *very much like* intentionality is a pervasive and ineliminable feature of the physical world', Molnar, *Powers*, 62.

[9] Cross, 'What is a Disposition' *Synthese* **144** (2005) 321–341, 322.

[10] Sungho Choi and Michael Fara, 'Dispositions', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dispositions/>. See also Mumford, *Dispositions*, 21; and Mumford and Anjun *Getting Causes from Powers*, 5: 'a disposition or power … may nevertheless still exit unmanifested'.

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dissolved, expanded or poisoned and never will break, dissolve, expand, or poison anyone.

There are two further notions central to understanding paradigmatic dispositions, namely stimulus conditions and causal basis.

Dispositions in general require conditions for their manifestation. Most current literature on dispositions characterises these in term of stimulus conditions. **Stimulus conditions** or triggers are generally occurrences that change the extrinsic circumstances or the intrinsic properties of the disposition's possessor *other than* those that constitute the disposition.[11] Not all dispositions need have triggers: some may manifest spontaneously and/or continuously. For instance, radioactive material may start the process of decaying spontaneously, without there being an occurrence that triggers the manifestation. But we can put those possibilities aside for the moment.

An object may have a disposition but not manifest it because of the absence of the stimulus or trigger event. But the occurrence of the trigger is consistent with a thing's having a disposition but not manifesting it because of the presence of 'masks' or 'antidotes', which prevent the manifestation of the disposition:[12]

> Consider a fragile glass cup with internal packing to stabilize it against hard knocks. Packing companies know that the breaking of fragile glass cups involves three stages: first a few bonds break, then the cup deforms and then many bonds break, thereby shattering the cup. They find a support which when placed inside the glass cup prevents deformation so that the glass would not break when struck. Even though the cup would not break if struck the cup is still fragile.[13]

[11] Occurrences that change those intrinsic properties of a thing that constitute the relevant power are 'finks'. There are also 'reverse'-finks (see Martin, *The Mind in Nature*.)

[12] For discussion see, A. Bird, 'Dispositions and Antidotes', *The Philosophical Quarterly* **48** (1998), 227–234; S. Choi, 'Improving Bird's Antidotes', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **81** (2003) 573–580; M. Johnston, 'How to Speak of the Colours', *Philosophical Studies,* **68**(3) (1992): 221–263; Lewis, 'Finkish Dispositions'; Martin, *The Mind in Nature*; Molnar, *Powers*, 83ff.; D. Manley & R. Wasserman, 'On Linking Dispositions and Conditionals', *Mind* **117** (2008), 59–84 and 'Dispositions, Conditionals, and Counterexamples', *Mind* **120** (2011), 1191–1227; and Vetter, *Potentiality*, 35ff. – to give just a representative sample of the debate.

[13] Johnston, 'How to Speak of the Colours', 233.

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The final concept I wish to introduce is that of a disposition's **categorial** or **causal basis**. The categorial base of a disposition can be characterised as a property (or property complex) that is conceptually distinct from, and grounds, the disposition – that is, it's a property, conceptually distinct from and in virtue of which the bearer has the disposition.

The concept of a categorial basis is at the heart of the Molière's famous joke about opium in the *Imaginary Invalid*. Molière ridicules scholastic doctors who say that opium puts people to sleep because it has 'a *virtus dormitiva*', i.e. the power (in our terms 'disposition') to induce sleep.[14] But note that the joke depends on the fact that the question *presupposes* that opium has that power, and so the answer that it has it because it has a 'soporific power', even if said in Latin, is not remotely informative. If the question had been 'Why did the man fall asleep after taking opium?', the answer that opium has the power to put people to sleep *would be* informative, at least for someone who didn't know it.[15] This is the kind of thing we discover when, for example, we discover that tobacco smoke is carcinogenic: we learn that tobacco smoke has the power to cause cancer. But of course the question in Molière's play is about the *categorial* basis of opium's power to do so: what is it in opium that gives it this power? What explains the fact that opium has this power? The beginning of an answer, which the doctors didn't know but we do is that opium has certain chemical compounds, such as morphine and codeine. That is only the beginning of an answer because in turn we need to understand how these compounds work so that opium has the effects it does: we investigate what dispositional properties these substances have, and in virtue of what categorial bases, if any. And if they do, the same questions can be asked about those. And so on.[16]

[14] Quia est in eo /Vertus dormitiva,/ Cujus eat natura/ Sensus assoupire (*Le Malade Imaginaire*).

[15] See Mumford, *Dispositions*, 136ff. for further discussion.

[16] Which raises the question whether 'science finds dispositional properties all the way down', Blackburn, S., 'Filling in Space', *Analysis* **50** (1990), 62–65, 63, quoted by Vetter, *Potentiality* 8. See also Mumford *Dispositions*; Molnar *Powers* and Bird *Nature's Metaphysics: Laws and Properties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and, relatedly, the question whether all dispositions have categorial basis, on which, see, e.g., J. McKitrick 'The Bare Metaphysical Possibility of Bare Dispositions', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **66** (2003), 349–369 and S. Mumford, 'The Ungrounded Argument', *Synthese* **149** (2006), 471–489.

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The last two concepts introduced help explain Independence. First, we attribute dispositions to particular objects even when they've never manifested them because of the kind of object or stuff they are (or are made of). So it makes sense to say of *this tumbler* that it is fragile because it is made of glass and *glass* is fragile, even though the tumbler has never broken; and it makes sense to say this piece of copper wire has the property of conductivity because *copper* (or copper wire) has that property, even though this piece has never conducted electricity. And so on. And the reason is, partly, that things that belong to the same (relevant) kind have the same constitution, so that there is a categorial basis in virtue of which they have the disposition and, on account of that, it makes sense to attribute it to them, independently of their manifestations. Second, a thing may have a disposition but have never manifested it because it is never subject to the stimulus conditions or because the disposition is being masked.

Debates about dispositions have focused on whether it is possible to provide an analysis of the concept of disposition and, in particular, whether the conditional analysis associated with Gilbert Ryle – or an improved version of it – succeeds. On this, the consensus seems to be that it isn't possible to provide non-circular accounts of the manifestation conditions for any disposition precisely because of the myriad possibilities of masking, antidotes, finks, etc. Philosophers have also debated the relationship between dispositions and causation and, relatedly, between dispositions and their underlying basis. Further, they have disagreed about whether dispositions have causal efficacy and whether they genuinely contribute to explaining their manifestations.[17]

To sum up the received view of paradigmatic dispositions I have sketched: a disposition is a property of an object, defined by its manifestation but ontologically independent of its ever being manifested. Many, though perhaps not all, dispositions have stimulus conditions, which trigger their manifestation. And many, though perhaps not all, dispositions have a categorial base, which are properties in virtue of

[17] Some of the main contributions to these debates are Bird, *Nature's Metaphysics:* Fara, 'Dispositions and Habituals' D. Lewis, 'Finkish Dispositions', *The Philosophical Quarterly* **47** (1997), 143–158; Martin, *The Mind in Nature*; Molnar, *Powers*; Mumford, *Dispositions*; E.W. Prior, R. Pargeter, F. Jackson, 'Three Theses about Dispositions', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **19**(3) (1982), 251–57; Vetter, *Potentiality*. See also A. Marmodoro (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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which the object has the disposition in question. I now turn to character traits.

2. Character traits as psychological dispositions

In this section I examine the extent to which character traits, which as we saw above are thought of as psychological dispositions, fit this received view of paradigmatic dispositions. I start with their manifestations.

2.1 Character Traits and their Manifestations

How is a character trait defined? What are its typical manifestations? In *the Concept of Mind*, Ryle distinguishes two kinds of dispositions. First, what he calls 'single-track' or 'determinate' dispositions, that is, dispositions whose manifestation takes one form. So for example, dispositions like 'fragile' are manifested in the object's breaking or shattering. Then there are 'multi-track' or 'determinable' dispositions, whose manifestation can take many forms. For example, the disposition 'elastic' can be manifested in the object's expanding, contracting, etc. Although some have questioned whether there are any single-track dispositions, the idea that psychological dispositions are multi-track seems plausible. Ryle illustrates his point about character traits as follows:

> When Jane Austen wished to show the specific kind of pride which characterised the heroine of 'Pride and Prejudice', she had to represent her *actions, words, thoughts and feelings* in a thousand different situations. There is no one standard type of action or reaction such that Jane Austen could say 'My heroine's kind of pride was just the tendency to do this, whenever a situation of that sort arose' (*The Concept of Mind*, 32. My italics).

So as Ryle notes, a character trait such as pride is multi-track in two important respects. First, it is a disposition to engage in a variety of 'overt' behaviour (including e.g. omissions and failures), such as (not) talking, (not) dancing with certain people, etc. And, second, it is also a disposition to certain 'inner' phenomena such as thinking, judging, reasoning, desiring and feeling in certain ways. And this complexity of possible manifestation does not seem peculiar to Elizabeth Bennet's type of pride, nor even to pride in general, but to character traits in general. For instance, cowardice is a disposition

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to avoid danger or pain when it behoves the person to face the danger or pain – which will result in very different forms of behaviour (even if these forms can all be brought under the label 'pain-' or 'risk-aversion behaviour'); but it is also a disposition to have certain thoughts, to reason in certain ways, to have emotional reactions, to feel certain sentiments, etc. which are characteristic of cowardice.[18]

So character traits are manifested not just in action and omission (behaviour) but also in thoughts, desires, feelings and emotions. In other words, we may say that character traits have *external* manifestations (i.e. manifestations that can be perceived and are typically changes, though refrainings, i.e. absence of change, should be included too), which may be behavioural, whether purposive, e.g. intentional actions, including linguistic behaviour; or merely expressive behaviour: laughing, cringing, etc. And they also have *internal* manifestations (i.e. purely mental phenomena): thoughts, which may be unbidden or the result of intentional mental acts and include practical reasoning; imaginings, and also emotional reactions, feelings and sensations: sadness, joy, fear. These internal manifestations can be expressed externally by behaviour of either kind, or they may be kept private, unexpressed.

But, it might be objected, is it right to think of thoughts, emotional reactions, sensations, etc. as *manifestations* of a psychological disposition? Aren't manifestations things that are externally available – available to an observer, so that only overt behaviour should count as the manifestation of a psychological disposition? I cannot see why we should accept this restricted view. First, although the manifestation of physical dispositions may always be observable in principle – though perhaps not always directly – this seems no reason to apply the same restriction to the manifestation of a psychological disposition such as a character trait. It seems perfectly plausible that character traits are dispositions not just to act overtly in certain ways, but also to think, reason, feel, etc., certain things, and that all these are characteristic manifestations of a trait.

Besides, as I noted above, many of the internal manifestations can be expressed, so that they are then observable: my feelings of joy, fear, compassion, etc. may be visible in my face, gestures, posture, expressive behaviour etc. And I may speak my thoughts aloud, instead of

[18] For an analysis of character traits that is consistent with this view and sees them as 'patterned dispositions distinct from garden-variety, instrumentally bundled sets of beliefs and desires' see D. Butler, 'Character Traits in Explanation', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **49**(2) (1988), 215–238.

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keeping them to myself. So it is hard to see why the fact that these phenomena may be unexpressed or concealed should undermine their status as genuine manifestations of a character trait.

Finally, it is true that external manifestations (i.e., overt behaviour, and in particular intentional actions) are often criteria that determine whether the inner phenomena are genuine, rather than, say, expressions of sentimentality or wishful thinking. Pious thoughts and feelings about the plight of those in need unaccompanied by deeds to provide help may be rightly judged as only bogus manifestations of compassion, pity or generosity. This, however, does not show that inner phenomena of the right kind cannot constitute genuine manifestations of a character trait. Moreover, external behaviour also counts as a manifestation of a character trait only if it is genuine: for something to be an act of kindness, or generosity it must be done for the right reason and 'in the right spirit'.[19] If I donate money to a worthy cause but do so grudgingly, or do it to further my interests, then my act of donating may still be helpful but is not a manifestation of generosity.[20] Thus, there is reason to treat both the internal and external phenomena (which, for ease of exposition I shall call 'behaviour broadly understood') as potentially manifestations of character traits; even though there are constraints on when each constitutes genuine manifestations – and whether it does depends, largely, on the interrelation between the two.

I shall now turn to the second feature, Independence.

[19] I should say the behaviour must be 'permeated' by the right inner phenomena. However, I am here trying to remain neutral on whether the interrelations between inner and outer manifestations should be understood causally: the inner causes the outer; or – as I think is right – in terms of internal, non-contingent relations.

[20] On what seem the most plausible conceptions of virtue, in order for you to act virtuously, it is not just enough to do the right thing but you must to do it for the right reasons and having the appropriate desires, feelings and emotions. As Aristotle puts it, 'moral excellence is a state concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a 22–25). I shall have to leave aside the complications introduced by Aristotle's highly demanding conception of virtue and of the unity of the virtues.

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2.2 Character traits and Independence

The first thing to note about character traits is that, in general, their attribution seems to require *actual* manifestation in some form: a character trait is attributed to someone only if the person to which it is attributed behaves, thinks, reacts emotionally, etc., in ways that are typical of the character trait.

This could be merely an epistemic point: the only way we know whether someone has a character trait is whether they manifest it in any of the possible ways just outlined. That is right, but my contention is that the point about attribution is not merely epistemic but rather constitutive. In other words, it is not simply about how we establish whether someone is a generous, cowardly or shy person but what *it is* to be a generous, cowardly or shy person. Manifesting the character trait in the relevant circumstances is *constitutive* of what it is to have the character trait. In order to be generous one must manifest generosity, to be punctual one must manifest punctuality, to be greedy one must manifest greed, and so on. So a person does not have a character trait unless she has manifested it in some way, at some time: someone who has never had a generous thought, feeling, reaction or action is not a generous person; and someone who has never had a malicious, courageous, or timid thought, feeling, or has acted accordingly does not have the corresponding character trait.[21]

If this is right, then character traits, at least some of them, seem to violate *Independence*; in fact they are characterised by **Dependence**: they are dispositions whose possession requires (ontologically) that the object display the sort of behaviour (broadly understood) that is characteristic of the disposition.[22]

This may appear to be false because it may seem possible for a person to have a character trait that she has never manifested. Surely, there may be people who are malicious, or greedy, deceitful, or generous, courageous or kind but who have not manifested those character traits: perhaps they haven't had the opportunity to manifest those traits. Indeed, Dependence is rejected on this grounds by

[21] This view is defended by S. Hampshire in 'Dispositions', *Analysis*, **14** (1953), 5–11, esp. 6. It is also endorsed, though expressed differently by Hacker, *Human Nature*, ch.4.

[22] In my paper 'Desires, Dispositions and the Explanation of Action' in *The Nature of Desire*, J. Deonna and F. Lauria (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2016), I argue that desires are also manifestation-dependent dispositions.

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Christian Miller, for whom 'it seems conceivable that someone could have a trait such as heroism, but never be presented with an opportunity to actually exhibit it in either thought or action'.[23] And so it might seem that someone can have a character trait even though they have never manifested it. But is this right?

First, a brief clarification: of course someone may conceal the inner manifestations of their character traits, in the sense that they may repress any external expression of them. This possibility does not, however, undermine Dependence because in that case the character trait would have been manifested – albeit only internally. Indeed, it is those internal manifestations that give substance to the claim that the person is *concealing* the manifestation of the trait.

More importantly, although Miller asserts that the possibility he describes is conceivable, it is not clear that it is. If having a trait such as heroism means that one is heroic, we can ask what it would mean to say that someone who has never displayed heroism either in thought, word or deed *is* heroic: what would her being heroic consist in? Unless that can be given an answer, the claim that she is heroic seems an empty claim. Perhaps the thought is that certain counterfactuals are true of this person, for instance, that were she to be faced with a situation that requires heroism, she *would* act heroically. Let us suppose that such a counterfactual is true of Annie. Does this mean that Annie *is* heroic? I do not see that it does. What it means is that, in that counterfactual situation Annie *would act* heroically, perhaps even that she *would be* heroic. It also means that Annie is now *capable* of being heroic. But those are different from the claim that Annie, who has not betrayed any hint of heroism to date, *is* heroic.[24]

[23] C. Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, 19ff. Miller is criticising the so-called 'summary view' of character traits which shares the claim of Dependence with my view. I do not, however, endorse the reductive account that some defenders of that view seem to endorse – for details and references see Miller,18ff. In this context, if should be noted that Dependence is not the claim that you only have the trait *while* you manifest it; it is, rather, that you don't have it *unless* you've manifested it in some way, which is consistent with thinking of character traits as dispositional.

[24] Mumford *Dispositions*, 8, considers the possibility described by A Wright in 'Dispositions, Anti-Realism and Empiricism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **91** (1988), of someone who has never been in the circumstances to act bravely, or has but was 'drunk or affected by food additives'. Mumford admits that there would be a question as to what 'such a person's bravery consists in' and asks rhetorically whether there is a fact of the matter in this case. I think that the answers is that the person is not

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Richard Brandt seems to trade on this modal thought in his argument against Dependence:

> Is it contradictory to affirm that a person is T, or, on the evidence probably T, and at the same time to say that certainly or probably he has never acted in a T-like way in the past? I fail to see that it is, at least for the traits of moral character with which we are concerned (…) take 'courageous.' Suppose we knew a given person had lived a very sheltered life and had never been required to act in the face of a serious threat. (…) Would we infer of such a person that he cannot be courageous? Surely not.[25]

But even putting aside the fact that Brandt's argument is restricted to 'acting', it misses its target. For his opponent's claim is not that the person Brandt describes *cannot* be courageous, if that means that he would be incapable of acting courageously if faced with a serious threat. The claim is, rather, that he *is not* courageous. Perhaps Brandt's point depends on taking the 'can' of 'he cannot be courageous' as expressing epistemic possibility: although a person has never displayed courage in any way he may, for all we know, be courageous.[26] But if that is Brandt's claim, then his argument also fails. For, while there is nothing wrong with the claim that a person who has never manifested courage is, for all we know, capable of acting courageously, the claim that someone who has never manifested courage in any way whatsoever is, for all we know, a courageous person is a claim that is, if not contradictory, at least in search of meaning. For if we know that he's not ever manifested any courage we know that he's not courageous (though we don't know that he's not capable of being courageous, or that he won't be when the moment comes- nor, for that matter, do we know that he is cowardly!).

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brave although it may be true that she *would* have been brave, had she not been incapacitated or had she found herself in the right circumstances.

[25] Brandt's target is certain related claims made by W.P. Alston in 'Toward a Logical Geography of Personality: Traits and Deeper Lying Personality Characteristics', in H.E Kiefer & M.K. Munitz (eds), *Mind, Science and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970) 59–92.

[26] It is worth asking what evidence Brandt thinks would be relevant here. And it seems that the only relevant evidence would be manifestations of characteristics that the person has displayed whether in action or in psychological tests, such as fearlessness, independence, integrity, etc., that are suitably related to courage, which again supports Dependence.

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A somewhat different reason why one might think that Dependence is false is the following. Surely it is possible to *discover* that one has a character trait. Suppose I find myself in a dangerous situation and react with great courage: I risk my life in order to save others from serious danger even though I have no duty to do so and even I am surprised at my behaviour. In such a situation it seems plausible to say that I would have discovered that I have a character trait, courage, that I'd never manifested before. And, if this is right, it would follow that some character traits are not manifestation-dependent. But is this right? Is this a good objection to Dependence?

To deal with this point we need to distinguish between acting with a motive and having and displaying a character trait. Consider the statement

'Jim ran away because he is a coward.'

This statement explains Jim's action of running as being motivated by cowardice. But as well as saying what motivated him on that occasion, the statement attributes a character trait to Jim, namely, cowardice, and says that Jim's action was a manifestation of that character trait. In other words, this statement says that Jim's *motive* to run away on that occasion was cowardice, and also that he has a *disposition* to be motivated by cowardice – a disposition that, on the occasion at issue, was manifested in his running away then.[27]

But the fact that we can distinguish between being motivated by an emotion such as cowardice or courage, and *having* the corresponding character trait suffices to bring out the point that it is possible to act out of a motive now and then even though one does not have the corresponding character trait. This is something that Ryle famously appears to deny in *The Concept of Mind*, where he says that 'the statement that a man boasted from vanity' should be construed as

> He boasted and his doing so satisfies the law-like proposition that whenever he finds a chance of securing the admiration and envy of others, he does whatever he thinks will produce the admiration and envy of others (89).[28]

Ryle has been criticized for implying that it is not possible to act out of a motive, such as vanity or greed, only once – which is clearly false: a person can act out of vanity or greed once without being a vain or

[27] For a discussion of motives and their role in action explanation, see my *Kinds of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010), sections 3.1.1 and 6.4.

[28] Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 89.

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greedy person:[29] there's a difference between acting once or twice in a mean or courageous way (acting with the motive), and being a mean or courageous person (having the character trait). Indeed, the possibility is conceptually necessary given that having a character trait is precisely having a tendency to be motivated by the corresponding motive. In other words, to have the character trait of, say, malice, is to often be motivated by malice. But one can act out of character: be motivated by compassion even though one is malicious (and *vice versa*).

Still, one might say that some acts are *so* courageous, or magnanimous, or treacherous that they suffice to attribute the corresponding trait to the person. So the fact that a particular action or thought is the first need not imply that the act so motivated is not a manifestation of a character trait.[30] Perhaps so. Nonetheless, the one act of courage, however impressive, does not imply that the person *had* the disposition beforehand, independently of this first manifestation. For it is plausible to say that what I discover in that sort of case is that I *have* the disposition and not that I *had* it all along. It may be that particular act of courage that generates the disposition: perhaps the situation helps me to, as it were, see the point of courage, or of generosity, etc. And, similarly, with negative character traits like being treacherous or corrupt, where the one act of betrayal may be the act that sets one off on the path of treachery or corruption – the disposition is acquired through the treacherous or corrupt act. Though it is more likely that, in these cases, what we discover is that we were capable of acting courageously, contrary to what we thought; or that we are *more* courageous (or generous or *more* treacherous or corrupt than we thought): we have already in the past manifested those character traits and we discover that we have the disposition to a higher degree than we suspected (I come back to degrees of disposition below).

Thus, it seems that character traits are characterised by Dependence: behaviour (broadly conceived) within the range typical of a character trait is *necessary* for one to have the character trait. On the other hand, we have seen that occasional behaviour

[29] For further discussion, see Alvarez 'Ryle on Motives and Dispositions', *Ryle on Mind and Language*, D. Dolby (ed.), (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 74–96.

[30] Although it is also true that if, after the incident, the person doesn't ever again display any signs of courage, then it is doubtful that they really are courageous, rather than that they *were* courageously on that occasion, which reinforces dependence. For an interesting discussion of these issues see, B. Powell, 'Uncharacteristic Actions', *Mind* **68** (1959), 492–509, where she also endorses Dependence though not under that name.

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characteristic of a trait may not be enough to have the trait: it is possible to act and react meanly or generously now and again without thereby being a generous or mean person.

If this is right, there's the question what degree or extent of manifestation is necessary and sufficient for an attribution of the trait to be meaningful. The answer is complex because, as is the case with many dispositions, having a character trait admits of degrees: that is, one may be very or a little generous, slightly or quite greedy, terribly or just a little vain, etc. Partly because of this, and partly for other complications that limitations of space prevent me from examining, there cannot be a general answer to how often or in what conditions one must manifest a character trait or what form the manifestation must take, in order for someone to have the character trait.[31] The possibility of degrees is, however, consistent with Dependence, which says that total absence of manifestation implies (constitutes) absence of character trait.

Still one may wonder whether Dependence, even if true, is a feature that cuts as deep as I am claiming: are character traits as different in their logical features from paradigmatic dispositions as I am claiming? After all, we could in the future discover the categorial basis of certain character traits, so that we might know someone has a trait because she has the categorial basis, even though she's never manifested it. Indeed, the absence of manifestation might be explained, as in the case of paradigmatic dispositions, by the absence of enabling conditions or stimulus for the manifestation of the dispositions. So really a person may have a trait she's simply been unable to manifest due to lack of propitious conditions.

This suggestion raises several issues that require much more careful treatment than I am able to give them here. However, I shall say two things in response to it. One is that, as we saw, paradigmatic dispositions may be attributed sensibly to an individual on account of its belonging to a kind or its having certain categorical basis. But this is not so with character traits for, even if we discovered reliable correlations between certain character traits and, say, genetic make up, or neural features, or upbringing, or nationality, etc., we still could not attribute the trait to the person independently of whether she had manifested it. Note: I do not mean we could not do so with confidence or certainty; the claim is that it would *not make sense* to attribute it in the

[31] See Vetter *Potentiality*, §2.4 for a discussion of the issue of degrees of dispositions in general. Aristotelian 'virtues' do not seem to admit of degrees as I am suggesting – an interesting complexity that I cannot examine here.

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absence of some kind of manifestation, for the reasons given above.[32] Second, character traits do not seem to need very special circumstance to be manifested, and often don't seem to need any triggers. For even someone in solitary confinement can have malicious thoughts, generous intentions or mean reactions even if only to imagined scenarios; moreover, failure to have certain thoughts, images, etc. may also, given certain conditions, constitute manifestation of a character trait. It seems that being conscious and having basic mental abilities is all that is required to be able to manifest one's character traits.[33]

3. Conclusion: Are character traits dispositions?

If character traits are, as I have argued, characterised by Dependence, should we conclude that character traits are not really dispositions? The question cannot be answered without revisiting the issue about kinds of powers and terminology mentioned in section 1.

As I noted above, it is widely held that Independence is defining of dispositions. If it is, then character traits are not dispositions and we would need a different term for them, one that still connotes that they are dispositional powers – that is, they are powers that their possessors have a tendency to manifest, like paradigmatic dispositions and unlike abilities; but which cannot be attributed to their possessors merely on account to their belonging to a kind. As I said above, Dependence is consistent with thinking of character traits as dispositional: attributing a character trait is partly a record of past and present behaviour, broadly understood, but it also provides grounds (albeit defeasible ones) for predictions of future behaviour. Perhaps the term 'tendency' captures this feature of character traits. But we should remember that the decision to call character traits 'tendencies' rather than 'dispositions', though reflecting a real difference between them and 'paradigmatic dispositions', would to some extent be a terminological choice that introduces a degree of regimentation relative to our ordinary use of these words. We could, therefore, instead chose to continue

[32] This is an important reason why relying on national, gender, racial, ethnic, etc. stereotypes concerning character traits in order to judge individuals is at best perilous. It is not just that the statistical regularities on which the stereotypes are based are often deeply flawed but also that, even if they were accurate, attribution of a trait to a particular person still requires manifestation of the trait *by the person*.

[33] A different question is what conditions are needed for the acquisition of character traits but I cannot discuss that here.

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to call character traits 'dispositions' but deny that Independence is defining of all dispositions: it would then become defining of a special kind of disposition.[34]

Whatever terminological choice we make, we can draw some conclusions that go beyond it. We have seen that we can explain both human action and the behaviour of inanimate things by reference to their so-called dispositions. I have argued that (at least some of) the psychological dispositions that explain human actions have quite distinctive features.[35] I have also claimed that, because of Dependence, character traits cannot be attributed to particulars on the basis of their belonging to a kind, or their being (made of) a certain kind of stuff, as is the case with paradigmatic dispositions. These considerations raise many issues about what psychological dispositions are, whether they have causal bases, and if so, what these might be. And, importantly, they also suggest that we ought to re-examine whether the model of how paradigmatic dispositions explain their manifestations is the best model to understand how character traits explain *their* manifestations, which include intentional actions. But these are issues that are beyond the scope of this paper.[36]

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[34] It is interesting to note in this context that Hampshire takes Dependence and related features of character traits to be grounds for arguing that they *are* dispositions, unlike what he calls 'descriptions of the causal properties of things – e.g. "electrically charged", "magnetised", "soluble in *aqua regia*"' ('Dispositions', 7), that is, the paradigmatic dispositions of contemporary philosophers!

[35] I do not mean that character traits, or psychological dispositions in general, are the only dispositions that display all or some of these features. At least some of the dispositional terms applied to some artefacts, such as being unreliable or 'temperamental', are similar in this respect but I do not have space to explore this here.

[36] Versions of this paper were presented at research seminars at Edinburg, King's College London, Essex, Zurich, the May 2016 'Ascription, Causation and the Mind Workshop' at the University of Utrecht, and at the 2016 UNC/KCL Workshop on Explanation, as well as at the RIP Lecture Series on 'Action', 2016–17. I thank organisers and participants for their very helpful comments. Work on this paper was carried out during my tenure of a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship and I thank the Trust for the award of the Fellowship.

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