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Character

The original assignment asked that I explore the relationship between studying, presumably for a class, and character, with particular focus on the “intertwining of the two.” Given the student who made this out-of-the-blue writing assignment, it’s a great temptation to start by pointing out that most people would probably rather be thought of as *having* character instead of *being a* character, unless, of course, a person is a college prof, in which case he/she might actually take pride in *being a* character, while giving little if any thought to *having* character. So because the original assignment was linked to studying, I’m going to try to answer this non-credit test question seriously, drawing on about a half-century of encounters with various characters, mostly academics, some of whom also had character, but others, indeed the ones who taught me most about character, who had little or none. Now that I think about it, the most educational of these encounters were with people who not only had no character, but might truly have had what I’ll call negative character (= less than zero). In other words, they were a danger to society, although not always in a criminal way defined by the laws of the land.

I don’t know that there is anything in the literature suggesting we are born with character. Instead, we hear and read quite a bit, usually from athletic coaches, especially football coaches, about “building character.” The fact that so much character-building conversation comes from football coaches is perhaps a clue to what we Americans, at least, mean when we use the term “character.” I suspect the definition would be something like: showing up for work every day, “giving 110%,” facing adversity with courage, showing strength and resolution when challenged, seeking to improve one’s performance [at anything], being honest, being graceful but not accepting in defeat, and generally living in accordance with Boy Scout law: trustworthy, loyal,

helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. The Boy Scouts also work to “Be Prepared!” and are expected to “Do a good turn daily!” (motto and slogan, respectively.) So we have a place to start, namely, a question: does studying for some class have anything at all to do with what a football coach and/or Boy Scout leader might define as “character”? Personally, I think not, but that opinion is discussable.

The term “character” has potential for evolving into a rather constraining label, if not an outright weapon, in the hands of authority, especially authority with an apparent link to even higher authority, including the Highest Authority of All. Thus I believe it’s very important, in any discussion of either character or the people who may or may not have it, to obey the law of separation of church and character. That’s not a real law, of course, but it’s a pretty good one, modeled after our constitution, or at least after what the liberals believe the constitution to state, or mean, or imply. In other words, we might just ask: how should humans behave toward one another so that all may live with dignity? The answer is: exhibiting a humanistic definition of “character” is probably the best we can hope for. By “humanistic definition” I mean being honest and trustworthy most of the time, especially when it truly counts, and being ugly and vengeful, or maybe just ornery and irritating, to those who deserve, or have earned, it. Ideally, within this range of character manifestation, we don’t actually break the law.

Does studying for some class have any relationship at all to the development, or maintenance, of behavior that is honest and trustworthy most of the time, especially when it truly counts, but ornery and irritating, maybe leading to ugly and vengeful, toward those who deserve, or have earned, it? My answer is a categorical “NO!” Studying does not build, or change, character, although in a few instances it might help. Let’s consider the 110% idea. At some point, a student might admit that in order to accomplish a personal goal, he/she has to exert some kind

of effort that is 10% beyond what he/she believes is a total effort, and that personal goal could easily involve studying for some class. Suppose the personal goal is simply to demonstrate to himself or herself that he/she is indeed capable of putting forth a certain level of effort if asked, and suppose such demonstration comes as a pleasant surprise. Has studying influenced this person's character? Certainly. But such influence is not unique to studying, and especially not to chemistry, history, accounting, or whatever subject or prof inspired the extra 10% effort. Besides, after having demonstrated to himself or herself that he/she can indeed exert 110% effort, what used to be 110% is now the new 100%.

What's really being said in the paragraph above is the old familiar idea that people really don't use all their capacities on a regular basis, and that's especially true of their mental capacities. Thus having re-established 100% as the old 110%, what's to prevent someone from exerting a new 110%, which will then become a new 100% just like happened previously? Nothing; indeed this exertion probably occurs fairly regularly, leading not so much to development of character, but to increase in personal satisfaction and skill level. The only problem with this line of thought, of course, is that the increase in [presumably] successful effort is exponential, i.e., compounded. Thus after ten or eleven such increases and re-establishment of 100%, you're giving two and a half times as much effort as you did originally. Then, it only takes a couple more instances of "giving 110%" before you're at three times the original effort. But we're also only talking about one task, e.g., writing an essay about character, or about studying, or even about the intertwining of the two. So all this football player behavior of giving 110% probably will be distributed among a variety of tasks, given that no individual human activity can increase exponentially forever, or even for a lifetime. Now we get to the interesting part, and perhaps a way that studying can contribute to the building of character.

At this point, we're back to my original description of "studying," in which we study faces, postures, clothing, events that occur over short periods of time, phrases that reveal characteristics such as political beliefs, financial status, sexual orientation, objects such as vegetation, automobiles, buildings, eating utensils, electronic gadgets—that is, all of the various non-living elements in our environments, things made, found, or naturally occurring—and finally, motives and intentions. What's the potential outcome of all this increased effort, the giving of 110%, to our studying in all these different realm of information and reality? The answer is: you'll end up far better educated, with significantly more perspective on the human condition, the planet, and the universe, than you could ever have imagined, and certainly more perspective, perhaps by two orders of magnitude, than most everyone else on Earth. For certain you'll be miles ahead of some tyrants and dictators in positions of power in this regard, and probably at least half a mile ahead of any duly elected American president.

What will you do with all this added knowledge of faces, postures, clothing, events that occur over short periods of time, phrases that reveal characteristics such as political beliefs, financial status, and sexual orientation, objects such as vegetation, automobiles, buildings, eating utensils, electronic gadgets—that is, all of the various non-living elements in our environments, things made, found, or naturally occurring—and finally, motives and intentions, all as a result of showing up for work every day, "giving 110%," facing adversity with courage, showing strength and resolution when challenged, seeking to improve one's performance [at anything], being honest, being graceful but not accepting in defeat, and generally living in accordance with Boy Scout law? That's an interesting question that might not have an answer. Will you be far better educated than most humans? Of course. Will this education prevent you from making irrational decisions? Maybe. Will this education shape the way you interact with fellow humans?

Certainly. Will “studying” have contributed to what others might call “character” when talking about you behind your back? Probably.

In essence, then, the extent to which “probably” can be converted into “probability,” i.e., a decimal fraction that predicts the fraction of times you’re talked about behind your back that the talkers actually credit you with “having character,” given the total number of times you’re talked about behind your back, that is the extent to which “studying” is “intertwined with character” (or the development thereof.)