

Commentary on *Laws of Character* by Kiran Bhardwaj

By Lauren Schaeffer, Ursinus College

I want to thank Kiran Bhardwaj for the opportunity to read and to comment on her engaging paper. I hope that my remarks will help to extend discussion about the arguments she proposes.

Let me begin with a brief recount of the arguments: Kiran Bhardwaj begins with the claim that determinism fails to account for our experience of making decisions. If everything can be determined by the full state of the world at a given time or the laws of nature, there is no place left for what we experience as decisions to fit in to the picture. Bhardwaj proposes character determinism as a solution. While a character persists over time, the features of character change with an individual's changing desires, beliefs, and attitudes. Through meta-level reasoning, character can be changed. Character itself impels a person to act: given a person's character and the state of the world, we can predict what a person will do. At the same time, certain aspects of character are predetermined by genetics and environmental causes. So simply having the capability of changing character through meta-level reasoning makes us morally responsible: part of our character is of our own making. Even if we do not explicitly choose our actions, in some sense we construct the cause of our actions and therefore have responsibility for them. In Bhardwaj's analysis of Frankfurt's 'Joneses' example, we can see that character is responsible for moral responsibility according to our intuitions. Furthermore, complete freedom would mandate capriciousness which seems wrong; if we are capricious, then it is part of our character, according to Bhardwaj.

I think this is a great argument and on many points I agree. However, there is one point in particular where I have some questions. I worry about Bhardwaj's use of Dennett's meta-level reasoning for an account of how we can include decisions in the picture. Even if we can be aware of our own beliefs and desires, it seems as though moving to the claim that we have the power to change them is too abrupt. I think we need a more detailed account here because it is contrary to ordinary experience. Given ordinary experience, it does not feel like we have control over such things. Imagine being asked to believe in a god if you don't already. Even if you have the desire to comply, ordinary experience shows that it does not happen this way. It's not entailed logically that we can change beliefs and desires because we can be aware of them. And given ordinary experience, we can't simply do some thinking and come out with a radically new character. Bhardwaj allows for genetic and environmental factors in determining parts of our character, so perhaps this accounts for enough that character cannot change radically. But since character is a collection of desires, beliefs, and attitudes, I am not sure how genetics determines these things. So overall, I think while we can be aware of beliefs and desires in meta-level reasoning, without a further account of how we can change beliefs and desires in this state I think the decision experience needs to fit in somewhere else.□

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