**CHARACTER AND ORGANIZATION**

**Introduction**

In recent years, questions of ’character’ have become increasingly prominent in a range of policy contexts, from education to social welfare, and from business to healthcare (Brooks, 2015; Badaracco, 2006; Lexmond and Reeves, 2009; Lexmond and Grist, 2011; Seldon, 2013, 2015; Wright and Goodstein, 2007). The analysis of economic and organizational life has not been immune from this development as is evidenced, inter alia, by the prominence accorded to Richard Sennett’s (1998 – see also Ailon, 2015; Kelly et al., 2007) award-winning critique of the ‘corrosion of character’ manifested in contemporary management and organizational cultures, through the invocation of the development of ‘character’ as an antidote to the wave of corporate scandals unfolding since the beginning of the millennium (London, 2015), up to and including the representation of ‘character’ as the ‘critical success factor’ in leadership development and a core dimension of an organization’s ‘talent acquisition strategy’ (Heuer, 2015). What unites the various contemporary paens to the importance of ‘character’ is an assumption that it is a crucial component of *ethics* and thereby holds the key to establishing and maintaining virtuous conduct; moreover, that the cultivation of ‘character’ is at best under-valued and at worst actively undermined and denigrated in any number of contemporary organizational practices – whether that be expressed in a singular focus on ‘exam success’ as the sine qua non of effective secondary school education, a similar fixation on publication in so-called high quality journals as the key to a successful career in academia, or on the capacity to ‘deliver’ or ‘execute’ as the ‘core business’ of the ‘good’ public manager (Brooks, 2015; Seldon, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Barber, 2008). Such obsessive singularity, it is argued, can ingrain habits and shape action in ways that produce forms of conduct that are more ‘self-concerned and distinction-hungry’ (Brooks, 2015: 8) than virtuous.

In this article, we seek to interrogate aspects of this recent upsurge of interest in questions of character as they have been articulated in particular debates about the reform of economic and organizational life, notably in the fields of organizational sociology, leadership studies, and in healthcare. As we shall demonstrate, the turn to character works across a number of different contexts and has done so for quite a while – from the theoretical to the practical and from the critical to the mainstream. Our choice of examples – (i) Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character*, (ii) a famous *Harvard Business Review* article on leadership by Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr. and (iii) the cultivation of compassion as a meta-virtue in British healthcare – are chosen to indicate the diversity and breadth of this ‘turn to character’, but also to illustrate how, across these different settings, similar modes of abstraction are at work. Thus, whether we are dealing with critiques of the character corroding effects of capitalist work practices, with an attempt at cultivating character to live up to the demands of these very practices, or with making British healthcare practitioners exhibit a more ‘compassionate character’, we see similar de-contextualised normative ideals in play. All three examples we argue are typified by a notable lack of contextual specificity - not simply in relation to questions of ‘character formation’, but also crucially in relation to questions of organization, and indeed of the relation of one to the other. As a result, the analysis of character in/and organization proffered tends towards such a level of abstraction and generality that its practical ethical usefulness is compromised.

In contrast to the stance advocated in this treatment of ‘character’ – one characterized (sic) not only by a high level of generality and lack of contextual specificity, but also by a tendency towards what Jacques Maritain (1951) termed ‘hypermoralism’ – we highlight an approach to questions of character in/and organization derived from an *ethics of office,* or as it is sometimes, perhaps a little misleadingly, termed ‘role morality’ (Condren, 2006; du Gay, 2008b; Hennis, 2009; Strathern, 2017; Uhr, 1994). We argue that while ‘character counts’ it does so in a specific manner, in terms of the characteristics, qualities, or competencies (the terms deployed are quite numerous) required by the role in question or ‘the task at hand’. That is, evaluations of ‘character’ are made in relation to the office or role an individual occupies. Following in the footsteps of one of its late, great exponents, Max Weber, we seek to indicate how an ethics of office or role precisely approaches the analysis of organizational character and conduct in a manner that combines contextual, practical rationality with ethical seriousness.

**‘Character Counts’, but how?**

The contemporary enthusiasm for ‘Character’ in many different policy arenas owes not a little to the revival of what has come to be known as ‘Virtue Ethics’ (Uhr, 2005; Zacka, 2017). As Uhr (2005), puts it, the resurgence of interest in questions of ‘character’ in public and private sectors, for instance, is inextricably linked to a renewed prominence accorded to ‘Virtue’. Virtue Ethics has a very long history, but its most recent revival dates back to the latter decades of the twentieth century. It is now generally regarded as constituting one of three major approaches in normative philosophical ethics, alongside deontology and consequentialism (Condren, 2006). What distinguishes virtue ethics from consequentialism or deontology is the centrality accorded to the formation of virtuous character – as something akin to a ‘central generating mechanism’ – in the theory itself. In other words, modern Virtue Theory ‘universalizes virtue as the basis of the theory and argues that all moral agents should seek to develop a virtuous character’ (Coleman, 2013:24). Think of any of the many legal requirements that certain public posts or positions be held by ‘fit and proper’ persons and one soon realises that occupation of an office – no matter how high or low – often entails something of a ‘character test’.

Virtues are generally represented as deeply rooted character traits acquired and developed through habituation, training and practice. As Nussbaum (1999:170) has expressed it, virtues are ‘settled patterns of motive, emotion, and reasoning that lead us to call someone a person of a certain sort (courageous, generous, moderate, just, etc.)’. Thus someone who possesses a ‘virtue’ will be likely to display a propensity to act in a certain manner, to exhibit a constancy of behaviour across contexts, situations, and circumstances. Given this, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that ‘character’ has become seen as a significant element in contemporary attempts to address perceived problems of organizational conduct in a host of different contexts, whether in the banking sector in the light of the financial crisis, or in corporate leadership more generally in the wake of highly publicised scandals at Enron, World Com, Anderson and so forth at the beginning of the current millennium, for instance.

Despite their intuitive attractiveness, however, virtuous-character based approaches run into a number of difficulties (Zacka, 2017: 134-136). One of the most significant of these relates to what is often termed the ‘situationist’ critique. Derived in large part from work in social psychology, a number of studies have argued that praiseworthy consistencies in behaviour – of the kind typically attributed to virtuous character traits – are considerably more context-dependent and specific that many virtue ethicists are wont to assume (Harman, 1999; Doris & Stich, 2005). In other words, the situationist critique suggests that a common tenet of virtue ethics, namely that ‘the possession of the motivational structure of virtue’ is largely ‘independent of factors outside of oneself, such as particular social relationships and settings’ is deeply flawed (Merrit, 2000: 374-5). Returning to the notion of offices being occupied by ‘fit and proper persons’, the situationist critique suggests that we look first at the offices themselves and the conduct they presuppose of their incumbents rather than talking about ‘virtuous character’ in general. The point then is not that ‘character counts’ *per se*, but that it does so in relation to the characteristics, qualities, or competencies of the office or role in question[[1]](#endnote-1).

The implications of this for moral formation are significant and at odds with the tenets of much modern virtue ethics and of the contemporary turn to Character. Instead of encouraging those charged with a particular role or office to develop character traits that would render them impervious to their context, they point instead in the other direction, towards the cultivation of particular virtues requisite to the office or role to be occupied. Minson and Hunter (1993:3), for instance, make this point clearly in their discussion of bureaucratic ethics when they write:

The moral and intellectual conditions of bureaucratic judgment do not and cannot lie in the personal morality of the individual public servant; they lie instead in the (…) instituted ethos of bureaucratic office. When acting in an official capacity the public servant’s moral comportment must be governed by the ethos of her office.

As we noted earlier, in contemporary policy debates character is often described and discussed in very general terms – clearly derived from the tropes of modern virtue ethics – as a kind of universal muscle of the spirit, a particular ‘mindset (…) that people have adopted to put iron in their core and cultivate a wise heart’ (Brooks, 2015: xi), or as a set of virtues that underpin ‘a good and flourishing life’ (Lexmond & Grist, 2011: 29). The latter virtues, capabilities, dispositions or capacities are routinely held to include, inter alia, and phrased in the language of the moment: application, exercise of agency (‘locus of control’), responsibility (for others and self), self-regulation, including emotional resilience and equanimity, and empathy (Lexmond and Reeves, 2009: 16-19 – see also Halsall and Brown, 2012; Kelly et al., 2007). In effect, the cultivation of ‘character’ is here associated with the broad question of how to be a well-integrated human being. While it might seem intuitively plausible to argue that all formal organizational roles – in public administration, medicine, or education, for instance – would be best served by being occupied by ‘well integrated human beings’, such an assumption begs a number of important questions. For instance, how long are we expected to wait for those charged with performing work – in public administration, medicine, education and so forth – if they must first become ‘well integrated human beings’ (if that alludes to something morally ‘higher’ than living up to the duties and obligations incumbent upon their occupancy of a particular office or role)? And, more importantly, whether by the standards posited by Lexmond and Reeves (2009) above, for instance, ‘well integrated human beings’ might be the last people one would require for the effective performance of certain organizational roles and tasks. After all, many such roles require their incumbents to develop capacities and ‘character traits’ that might well be considered vices from the point of view of the values informing Lexmond and Reeves (2009) analysis of virtuous ‘character’ and a ‘flourishing life’[[2]](#endnote-2). Undercover operatives in the intelligence services, for example, need to be convincing liars. So, for someone occupying this role, the capacity to lie effectively would be seen as a crucial virtue, whereas according to Lexmond and Reeves it would be seen as a personal vice. For military personnel too, the capacity and willingness to do harm (including mortal harm) to others in the pursuit of organizational objectives without a crisis of conscience might well be considered a virtue, whereas by many other standards, including those of ordinary interpersonal morality, it would most likely be seen as at the very least a significant ‘character flaw’. As these examples suggest, specific questions of virtuous character and conduct in a particular organizational role might well be best considered as a function of the work to be undertaken in that role rather than the performance of the work itself being evaluated in terms of whether it helps build up or subtracts from a conception of the ‘whole human being’ and the associated notion of a ‘good and flourishing life’[[3]](#endnote-3). As John Rohr (1998: 21) suggests, framing questions of character in such general terms – in relation to ‘the whole human being’ and the good life per se – might be useful in ‘assisting an individual integrate the various roles’ they can play in their lives, ‘but it is less helpful in raising specific questions pertaining to one of those roles’. In other words, because questions of character and conduct in relation to the performance of particular organizational roles are specific to those roles, all the way up and all the way down, it is important to tailor our inquiry to the demands of those limited roles rather than expanding it to cover the broader question of how to be a well-integrated human being. As Max Weber puts it, mining a similar seam, ‘Is it then possible that any ethic in the world could establish substantively identical commandments applicable to all relationships, whether erotic, business, family, or official, to one’s relations with one’s wife, greengrocer, son, competitor, with a friend or an accused man?’ (1994: 357). Following in Weber’s footsteps, then, we seek to indicate how an ethics of office or role precisely approaches the analysis of organizational character and conduct in a manner that combines contextual, practical rationality with ethical seriousness.

**Character as an aspect of Office or Role**

In a series of detailed studies, Wilhelm Hennis (1988, 2001) has convincingly argued that the work of Max Weber should be viewed as fundamentally concerned with questions of *character* and *conduct*, and that the work itself expresses a particular stance, attitude and intellectual comportment towards these questions. Hennis (1988, 2001) indicates that at the heart of Weber’s work lies a moral anthropology at profound variance with both a positivistic and high theoretical social science, one which, in Weber’s own words, had sought to ‘shift its location and change its conceptual apparatus so that it might regard the stream of events from the heights of reflective thought’ (1949, quoted in Hennis 1988: 104). In such a social science, the central problems preoccupying Weber, questions of *Lebensführung* (the conduct of life), of ‘personality’ and ‘life-orders’ (*lebensordnungen*), would have little interest. However, if we managed to descend from such heights, Hennis suggested, they might once again become very important indeed. For Hennis (1988: 104), Max Weber’s work finds a place in the pre-history of this sort of abstracted or otherwise highfalutin social science only once his central problems, questions, and stance are neglected. For Weber, as Hennis indicates, no ultimate moral or philosophical justification for a given form of life is possible in modern societies, ‘because the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another’ (Weber 1989: 22). Between these different life orders there is frequently a battle of different gods of different religions. In *Science as a Vocation*, Weber encourages his audience to be ‘polytheistic’, and to take on the persona specific to the life order within which they are engaged. In the absence of a universal moral norm, or a conclusive victory for one form of organized rationality over all others, Weber asks, how are individuals to develop ‘character’ or ‘personality’ (*Persönlichkeit*)? In considering the future of modern societies, and the individuals existing within them, Weber’s deepest concern, Hennis argues, is the cultivation of individuals willing and able to live up to the ethical demands placed upon them by their location within particular life-orders, whose life-conduct within those distinctive orders and powers – the public bureau, the firm, the parliament, the clinic – can combine practical rationality with ethical seriousness.

For Weber, the individual with ‘character’ is one who is capable of personal dedication to a cause (*Sache*), or the instituted purposes of a given life-order, in a manner that ‘transcends individuality’ (Hennis, 1988: 88). It is in this sense that it is possible, for example, for bureaucrats to be ‘personally’ committed to the ethos and purposes of their distinctive office even though that ethos lies outside of their own personal (i.e. individual) moral predilections or principles. Lawyers too often refer to the ‘law’ precisely in this way. As Weber puts it in *Science as a Vocation*, ‘Ladies and gentlemen: Personality is possessed in science by the man (*sic*) who serves only the needs of his subject, and this is true not only in science’ (1989: 11). As Hennis (1988: 65) puts it, the life-orders possess an inner regularity which involves a formative tendency for ‘character’.. For Weber, though, there is no transcendental unity of ‘character’, no meta-character appropriate to the performance of all institutionalised offices or organizational roles.

The possibility of different categories and practices of personhood requiring and expressing distinctive ethical comportments, irreducible to common underlying principles, appears quite foreign, though, to those for whom a common or universal form of moral judgment is held to reside in the figure and capacities of the self-reflective person or individual agent (Habermas, 1989, for example). Weber’s context-specific, and thus ‘limited’, conception of ‘character’ cautions against the siren-calls of those – Weber names various socialists, anarchists, and *litterateurs* of his own time, and we could include numerous ‘prophets’ from our own - seeking to hold onto, or re-establish, the idea of the ‘whole’ or ‘complete’ human being: an ultimate, supra-regional persona that could function as the normative benchmark for all others. For Weber, as we indicated in the introduction, any ethic attempting to establish ‘substantively identical commandments applicable to all relationships’ ends up adopting a stance that Jacques Maritain (1951: 61-2) termed ‘hypermoralism’. Maritain argued that reflex attempts to judge political and governmental actions in terms of interpersonal ethics, for instance, put intolerable strains on the political system. For Maritain (1951: 62), unless one distinguished between the norms appropriate to the conduct of government and those appropriate to the conduct of personal relationships, for instance, one would quickly become disillusioned with public life and despair of the relevance of *any* moral consideration in government. As we will have cause to note in due course, this is a trap that Sennett’s (1998) conception of ‘character’ comes perilously close to falling into because it is represented as unitary, and thus transcontextual, and because morality is represented as personal, as opposed to regional.

*Office as a Vocation*

In Hennis’s view, Weber’s work belongs to the late history of a distinctive ethical tradition: the ethics of office (Condren 2006; du Gay, 2008, 2009); with Weber’s ‘Vocation’ lectures, for instance, providing classic accounts of the ways in which a distinctive and important role for an ethics of office can be maintained in an increasingly alien environment – one where individual autonomy is allotted increasing moral significance. To put it in its most general propositional form: an office was a set of responsibilities and subordinate rights and liberties asserted to be necessary for their fulfilment and manifested not in an individual, represented as a distinctive, reflective and autonomous ‘self’, but rather in a persona.

For Weber, bureaucracy, for example, was a historically contingent and variable ‘life order’ constituting a distinctive ethical milieu and forming a particular persona. Thus, in his classic account of the ‘persona’ of the bureaucrat, Weber treats the impersonal, expert, procedural and hierarchical character of bureaucratic conduct as elements of a distinctive ethos (1978, II: 978ff). Here administrative office constitutes a ‘vocation’, a focus of ethical commitment and duty, autonomous of and superior to the bureaucrat’s extra-official ties to kith, kin, class or individual conscience. The ethical attributes of the ‘good’ bureaucrat – adherence to procedure, commitment to the purposes of the office, abnegation of personal moral enthusiasms and so on – representing a remarkable if ultimately fragile (because contingent and thus contestable) achievement because, as Weber (1978, II: 983ff) stresses, this ethos constitutes an important political resource serving to divorce the administration of public life from private moral absolutisms (Hunter & Minson, 1993). Without this fragile historical accomplishment, he argues, the construction of a buffer between civic comportment and personal principles – a crucial feature of liberal government – would never have been possible. Indeed, without the ethos of bureaucratic office-holding, many of the qualitative features of contemporary government that are regularly taken for granted – for instance, formal equality, reliability and procedural fairness in the treatment of cases – would not exist.

Thus, Weber (1978 I: 225-226) argued that it was odd for the *literati* to criticise the ethos of bureaucratic conduct and the ‘character’ of the bureaucrat as antithetical to the realisation of substantive ends. Rather, as Weber makes clear, the ‘formalism’ of bureaucratic conduct and character – its instituted blindness to inherited differences of standing and prestige – produces substantive effects – enhancing democracy and equality, for example –that the literati of his own time, and critics of our own, claimed bureaucratic conduct would destroy (Weber, 1978 I and II, 1994b). Weber’s point here, and it is one made time and again in his work, most notably in the Vocation lectures, is that the formation of ‘character’ in organizational or institutional life is related to occupancy of a particular role or office – that bundle of capacities and duties instituted for a specific set of purposes – and borne by a persona: the self cultivated for the performance of that specific role or office. Any discussion of the reform, corrosion or development of character therefore needs to specify the official persona with which it is dealing as the latter inevitably vary depending on institutional context. Character is therefore never set in stone but is always contestable (though not always contested). What is at stake in specific programmes of organizational reform, in terms of ‘character’, therefore derives from the contestations they generate concerning the instituted purposes particular persona serve. We can specify this in more detail now, by focusing on three particular examples relating to contemporary economic and organizational life derived from the fields of organizational sociology, leadership studies, and healthcare reform.

**Character and/in Organization Studies: Some themes**

Perhaps the most widely cited sociological study of the consequences of contemporary programmes of organizational reform for questions of ‘character’ is Richard Sennett’s (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*. The latter is a provocative sociological essay focused on exploring the increased preoccupation with flexibility, innovation, projectification, and enterprise in structuring work and organization, and specifically with the latter’s effects on ‘personal character’. In the new, and still emerging, economic, ideological and technological calculus, Sennett argues, the cost of co-ordinating work is diminishing as fast as the cost of delaying work is increasing. In this calculus, formal organization appears too costly and too unwieldy. The pressure to be increasingly ‘virtual’ – to have fewer fixed costs and assets – becomes difficult to resist. Encouraging the organization of work on a more informal and temporary basis – letting it move unheeded by formality between small temporary teams that can co-ordinate themselves in response to market signals seems much more efficient. In the face of the new calculus, he suggests, it makes sense for organizations to inaugurate and pursue ever-greater modes of flexibility. But what are the consequences for ‘character’ of this ‘flexible capitalism’? This is Sennett’s main question and in seeking to answer it, he draws heavily upon the work of Max Weber, and especially his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a text insistently marked by a concern with *Lebensführung* – the ‘conduct of life’, and with questions of character and judgment (Hennis, 2000)[[4]](#endnote-4). For Sennett, ‘flexible capitalism’ creates a short-termism in work and organizations that in turn requires an almost infinitely malleable, calculative, risk-taking, responsive individualism on behalf of those in its employ, ‘a pliant self, a collage of fragments unceasing in its becoming, ever open to new experience’ (Sennett, 1998: 133). Sennett suggests that this particular form of individualism actively corrodes *moral character*. In making this case, he adopts a broad definition of ‘character’ deploying the term to refer to ‘the long-term aspects of our emotional experience’. Thus, character

is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end (…). Character concerns the *personal* (our emphasis) traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others. (Sennett, 1998: 10)

For Sennett (1998), contemporary programmes of organizational reform affect all these dimensions of character, not least by disrupting the conditions sustaining them. How then, he writes, ‘do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly being redesigned?’ (Sennett, 1998: 10). Succinctly put, as we spend our days toiling in ‘virtual companies’ or as ‘e-lancers’, ‘are we fated to become virtual men and women, efficient and adaptable but without substance?’ (Carr, 1999). If ‘flexibility (…) does not give, cannot give, any guidance for the conduct of an ordinary life’, how, then, Sennett (1998, 148: 116-17) asks, can the fundamental question of character, ‘How should I fashion my life?’, be answered.

This is indeed a remarkably similar question to that asked by Weber in his vocation lectures, for example, but with an important twist. Whereas Sennett attaches his questions of character to ‘the person’ and ‘life’ taken as a whole, Weber’s concerns are tied to specific and non-reducible personas – that of the ‘scientist’, on the one hand, and the ‘politician’, on the other, for instance, in *Science as a Vocation* (1989) and *The Profession and Vocation of Politics* (1994b), respectively. This may at first seem but a minor distinction when both Sennett and Weber are clearly concerned with ‘big questions’ of human character and judgment in their respective historical contexts, yet it is actually very significant (Scaff, 2014). Not least, because questions of context are themselves very significant determinants of ‘questions of character’[[5]](#endnote-5). For Weber, as an ethicist of office or ‘role’, as we noted earlier, it was because different patterns of moral quality and skill (‘character’) helped distinguish one office – that of ‘science’, say - from another – that of ‘politics’, for instance – that the ethics of office was not exhausted by any global pattern of virtue (such as those posited by Sennett: ‘loyalty’, ‘mutual commitment’, ‘involvement’) (Condren, 2006; du Gay, 2007; Hennis, 2000). For Sennett (1998: 143ff), on the other hand, because ‘character’ appears to be a unifying function there is a strong temptation in *The Corrosion of Character* to look for their unifying source – in the ‘dangerous pronoun “we”, for instance, otherwise known as the ‘good community’ (one where ‘mutual incomprehension and conflicts among people are acknowledged’). This, as another contextualist ethicist of office, Amelie Rorty (1988: 45) argues, is an elementary error. ‘A desire for unity’, she writes, ‘cannot by itself perform the conjuring trick of pulling one rabbit out of several hats’: a transcendental unity of the concept of ’character’, ‘unifying the variety of distinct, independently unifying functions that each regional concept plays’ (1988: 45).

Rorty’s preference, like Weber’s before her, is for a strongly contextualist approach, with its privileging of description rather than theoretical colonisation or (social) reconstruction; an approach which refuses to provide a general answer to the question: how are entities – such as ‘character’ – identified across contexts? Instead it accepts that since questions and contexts are particular ‘all the way up and all the way down’ (Rorty, 1988: 8), questions about identifying entities across contexts are themselves given their sense and direction by the context within which they arise. ‘The question, “How are contexts identified and individuated?” is answered by the counter-question, “Which contexts?”’ (Rorty, 1988: 8).

Sennett’s book raises many important questions about contemporary organization, work and character, and does indeed provide something of a counterbalance to the often empty-headed boosterism characteristic of much of the writing on the value (and inevitability) of ‘disruption’, for instance. That said, though, his analysis is pitched at such a level of generality (where the enthusiasts of ‘disruption’ also abide) that it is difficult to know what significance should be attributed to it. Surely, his claims concerning the ‘corrosion of character’ express a certain metaphysical longing, despite his protestations to the contrary (1998: 117), if one accepts a la Weber, that ‘questions of character’ are not transcendental, but regional, relating to particular personas, not to the ‘whole person’ and their (entire) ‘life’. Thus, rather than focusing questions of character (and its corrosion) upon the ‘whole person’ as Sennett does, we might better consider them in relation to particular ‘personas’ – those distinctive, non-reducible, regional ‘selves’ cultivated for holding a particular (organizational) role, function or office[[6]](#endnote-6).

**Character and/in Leadership**

While character and its corrosion within organizational life has been a significant theme in sociological inquiries a la Sennett, questions of character have also achieved prominence in another area of economic and organizational life: discussions about leadership (e.g. Badaracco, 1998; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Sancor, 2003; Sosik, 2006; Sarros et al., 2006; Crossan et al., 2013). Whether in boardrooms, the business press, or the growing academic area of ‘leadership studies’, the character of leaders is deemed to be of utmost importance to contemporary organizational life. Both in processes of CEO-recruitment and selection as well as in the enduring preoccupation in the field of organization and management studies with pinpointing the ‘key’ attributes of leaders, however, formal organizational, role-specific capacities and competencies related to specific forms of organized activity, such as coordinating and controlling the organization of work, are increasingly de-emphasised in favour of highly generic and moreover *personal* attributes (e.g. Drath, 2001; Khurana, 2002; Vikkelsø, 2015; Lezaun and Muniesa, 2017). In the literature on transformational leadership, heroic and grandiose conceptions of leadership are promoted (Bass, 1998, for example) as pre-packaged, generic leadership solutions (Cf. Case et al., 2012; Silwa et al., 2012). This poses a stark contrast to the capacities and comportments previously deemed necessary for appropriately heading an organization. Whereas the competencies of top executives used to include role-specific capacities related to in-depth knowledge of the organization, its inner workings, and its environment – what Chester Barnard (1968: 235) termed ‘sensing the organization as a whole and the total situation relevant to it’ – today less context- and role-specific capacities, such as an ability to inspire, communicate, be passionate, and instigate change are deemed of greater significance (e.g. Peters, 1992, 1994; Heifetz and Laurie, 1998). This ‘abstraction’ from organizational role-specific circumstances and contexts, is however, a pedagogy directly aimed at managers and leaders who happen to occupy *distinct* roles with *precise* responsibilities and duties in *specific* organizations pursuing *concrete* goals and purposes. And it is precisely written with the explicit intention of forming and altering the conducts, comportments, and self-images of managers and leaders *in* those precise settings and contexts from which much of the leadership literature abstracts. In this sense, and contrary to Sennett (1998), the ambition of this sort of leadership literature is not to critically question the character-corroding conditions of contemporary capitalism, but rather to (critically) assist the would-be leader to live up to perceived demands and necessities structuring existence in the contemporary organizational world by overcoming his or her boring – role specific – organizational self and substituting it for a more personal, charismatic and dynamic self (Vogelgesang et al., 2017). However, when leaders are urged to dismiss and break free from their formal organizational roles, and ‘to think outside the box (…) you’ve got to expect that the boxes themselves will begin to deteriorate’ (Brooks, 2015: 115; du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016: 32)[[7]](#endnote-7).

This new leader-ideal is more often than not conceived as *an extra-organizational self* or as a ‘moral agent’, that expands the domain of effective freedom, the horizon of conscience and the scope for altruistic intention’ (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 211). The leader is supposed to cultivate this ideal and use it as a platform or springboard from which organizational decisions then can be reached. Through specific techniques of the self and modes of reflection, the leader is urged to listen to and nurture this extra-organizational self that will then guide his or her decisions. In the following, we will point to examples of this ‘abstraction’ and ‘personalization’ of character in leadership and indicate some of its organizational consequences. We shall do so by analysing a few of the self-techniques, or ‘spiritual exercises,’ as Pierre Hadot (1995) calls them (see also Lezaun and Muniesa, 2017), described in the *Harvard Business Review* article ‘The Discipline of Building Character’ by Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr. We have chosen this article for three reasons. First, being published in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR), the article is aimed not simply at academics, but directly targeted at practicing managers, aiming to influence how they relate to and work upon themselves. For this reason, it gives us insight into how would-be-leaders are supposed to develop ‘character’ in and across any number of organizational contexts. Second, according to the back-cover-text of the HBR-volume in which the article is published, it is among ‘the most influential articles on leadership’ published in HBR (HBR, 1998). It is therefore not merely one among many, but rather an article HBR deems to be of considerable importance in its description of the relation between character-building, leadership and organizational conduct. Third, the article’s insistence on abstracting from role-specific competencies, and the accompanying valorization of the leaders personal beliefs as mandatory for successfully navigating organizational life provides a complementary example to our discussion of Sennett and leads directly into our analysis of character and leadership development in the healthcare sector. Thus, rather than the metaphysical longing inherent in Sennett’s account, we are here presented with a number of techniques aimed at infusing ones organizational role with personal, moral beliefs and convictions.

To begin with Badaracco, Jr. (1998) identifies what he calls defining moments through which the leader’s character is built. These moments are characterized by what is referred to as right vs. right decisions, through which we are challenged to ‘choose between two or more ideals in which we deeply believe’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 91). In these character-building, defining moments we not only ‘test ourselves because we discover whether we will live up to our *personal ideals* or only pay them lip service’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 91, our italics), we are also presented with ‘opportunities for inspired action and *personal growth*’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 112, our italics). However, since there is no easy way to navigate defining moments, it is necessary to have techniques at ones disposal through which one can resolve them, and through which the requisite character can be built. As a first approximation of what these techniques aim at, Badaracco, Jr. states that to ‘become leaders, managers need to translate *their personal values* into calculated action’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 91, our italics). Already at this point, as the italics in the quotes indicate, it is evident that the bridge from management to leadership involves the utilization of something personal, something outside ‘the chain of managerial tasks’, something ‘below the busy surface’ of the managers ‘daily life’, something pertaining to the managers extra-organizational and personal ‘core values and principles’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 91; see also Carroll and Levy, 2008).

In conjunction with this, Badaracco, Jr. refers to the ‘most basic type of defining moment’ that confronts people in a work situation, namely that which ‘demands that managers resolve an urgent issue of *personal identity*’ (1998: 93, our italics). What is interesting here is not only that issues of personal identity are woven into organizational problems, but that solving work-related problems of this kind can only be done via addressing the personal, extra-organizational self that, by definition, is outside the role occupied.

The techniques laid out in the article proscribe that what is necessary for the character-building aspirations of the would-be-leader is to engage in a ‘personal process of introspection’ in order to cultivate ‘an authentic and strong identity based on’ one’s own, ‘rather than on someone else’s, understanding of what is right’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 92). Through such a ‘process of self-inquiry’, we are told, managers will be able to handle ‘their most elusive, challenging, and essential business problems’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 92). In this way, Badaracco, Jr. states, the manager can gain access to his or her innermost feelings and convictions, and then let them be the guiding principles through which ‘defining moments’ are to be resolved. Thus, by ‘framing defining moments in terms of our feelings and intuitions, we can remove them from its business context and bring it to a more personal, and manageable, level’ (1998: 95). Once this operation of abstraction is complete, we are then urged to pose a second ‘character-building’ question to help us resolve the defining moment: ‘*Which of the responsibilities and values that are in conflict are the most deeply rooted in my life and in the communities I care about?*’ (Badaracco, Jr., 1998: 95). This prioritization of personal morality and beliefs over office-based duties and role-morality, however, is a slippery slope. When leaders are urged to suspend their organizational role and instead listen to their private convictions and most inner felt beliefs, problems can begin to emerge.

The unfortunate dynamics of this have been noticeable within the private as well as the public sector. In the former, and in conjunction with the ‘triumph of markets’ (March, 2008), and the rise of ‘investor capitalism’ (Khurana, 2002), the traditional virtues and competencies of top executives have been delegitimized and replaced by a highly different set of capacities: The ‘new members of the business elite’ are ‘no longer defined as professional managers but instead as leaders, whose ability to lead’ consists ‘in their *personal* characteristics or, more simply, their charisma’ (Khurana, 2002: 69, our italics). As Khurana (2002: 71) puts it, whatever ‘the precise job description, the charismatic CEO stands in stark contrast to the professional Organization Man (…).’ Now, the ‘pages of *Business Week*, *Fortune*, and *Harvard Business Review* are (…) filled with stories about heroic leadership, the habits of successful people, and the personal characteristics displayed by leaders. (…) In the process, individuality has become a desired attribute, not a liability’ (ibid.).[[8]](#endnote-8) In spite of the fact that a leader’s projected personality and charisma might be considered crucial to inspiring, motivating, and/or persuading employees, customers and/or investors, the drawback and dangers of abstracting from role-based morality needs emphasising. A leader with a can-do attitude, a strong personal conviction and lots of charisma is akin to a tiger which when taken by the tail can inflict considerable damage, as recent high profile cases in the private sector testify (see Tourish and Vatcha, 2005, for example, on the ‘charismatic leadership’ at Enron).

In the last section of the paper, we turn to a contemporary case of character development in the healthcare sector. Here we show, among other things, how the understanding of leadership as represented by Badaracco, Jr. in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) has gained prominence in leadership development programmes not only in private sector management but also in public sector management and policy development.

**The return to ‘character’ in healthcare**

Our turn to the contemporary case of healthcare management can help illuminate how character is increasingly evoked not only theoretically but also practically in public sector management – equally as an ‘antidote’ and as a new kind of policy intervention in relation to what is seen as the accumulated flaws of contemporary programmes of public sector reform. More specifically, we show how in British healthcare, recent scandals and the introduction of a dominant New Public Management ‘target-culture’ have led to a new focus on – or a ‘return’ to – health professionals’ ethical conduct and character as the foundation for delivering appropriate care, now introduced in the very specific form of a policy programme on Compassionate Care. Although this return to character can be understood as a noble attempt to make healthcare more ‘human’ and virtuous, it is not without problems and in close alignment with the organizational sociology of Sennett and contemporary leadership literature, the Compassionate Care policy agenda suffers from a lack of context-specificity. By understanding compassion as a universal virtue applicable to all relationships and formal organizational roles in healthcare, the compassion agenda focuses upon health professionals as individual agents rather than upon those individuals’ distinctive public roles or ‘offices’ in the health system. Thus, instead of tailoring compassion to task and role-specific duties in specific healthcare situations, for instance in relation to patient-communication, compassion is treated as an abstract idea about creating ‘whole’ or ‘well-integrated’ humans beings motivated by compassionate feelings across all types of healthcare offices, not least in healthcare management.

***The Compassionate Care case***

The comprehensive policy of Compassionate Care – propounded, inter alia, by Jeremy Hunt (Secretary of State for Health) – can be approached as a character-focused response to what is understood as two highly interrelated problems in the British National Health Service (NHS); on the one hand, an increase in healthcare scandals concerning breaches of safety or cases of below-standard care; and on the other, an accumulated dissatisfaction with what is identified as a increasingly dominant control or target culture resulting from the large number of New Public Management reforms that have swept British healthcare since the 1980s.

Of the scandals that have paved the way for the compassion agenda in NHS, the Mid-Staffordshire case has been the most important. The Compassionate Care reform programme has even been described as a direct result of what is termed the ‘Francis effect’ named after the two public inquiries that investigated the scandal in 2010 and 2013. The Francis inquiries told an uncomfortable story about appalling incidents of suffering by large number of patients at Stafford hospital between 2005 and 2009. They showed in detail how the NHS, and more specifically the Mid Staffordshire NHS hospital trust, had for years failed in its primary duty to protect its patients and maintain confidence in the healthcare system. Interestingly, this failure was quickly linked to the ethical conduct and character of the health professionals and not least the managers in question. Thus, in October 2011, the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (CHRE) published an interim report (responding to the first Francis Inquiry and ‘The Dalton Review[[9]](#endnote-9)), that first catalogued the ethical standards expected of NHS managers, namely integrity, honesty and probity – and, it was added; ‘The strength of character to actively challenge decisions, behaviours, or situations that they believe to be wrong, or detrimental to welfare’ (CHRE, 2011: 16). In this way ‘character’ and especially a cultivated strength of character was understood as essential to the management of healthcare institutions and thus as a solution to prevent future care scandals.

In the political arena, the Mid-Staffordshire case and the inquiries that followed it became part of a wider call for compassionate care in the NHS. In response to the scandal, then Prime Minister David Cameron urged healthcare professionals’ at all levels to develop a culture of compassion, and he specifically suggested that nurses’ paycheck should be dependent on their ability to demonstrate compassion in their jobs (Campbell, 2013). The apparent character flaws that had led to what was deemed politically to express a lack of compassion in the Mid-Staffordshire case were also linked to a critique of dominant ways of organizing healthcare, in which, it was argued, New Public Management had led to a compassion-less culture focused on performance targets, economy and measurement. Thus, the comprehensive compassionate care policy programme was ‘to replace tick-box targets as the major focus on boards and wards’ (NHS, 2014a) and should accordingly be understood as a challenge to and replacement of dominant elements of the New Public Management agenda (see also NHS, 2012). In opposition to increasingly ‘cold’ management ideals, Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt wished to reintroduce an image of the NHS as a moral organization driven by ‘human values’ expressed in the culture and character of the people working in it:

‘The NHS was set up with a moral purpose and is - at its heart - a moral being. It is an institution ultimately driven not by treatment or targets or pills - but by the values of the people who work in it. And if we don’t create a culture that nurtures those values, organizational change, policy change, even money will count for little.’ (Hunt, 2014b)

Specifically, this new focus on ‘the values of the people’ working in the NHS was translated into an comprehensive meta-virtue of compassion and into specific policies to identify, develop and reward compassionate character among staff, from student-nurses to hospital managers.

***Compassion as a meta-virtue in NHS***

From an ethics of office perspective where organizational character is related to a particular office and to conduct in relation to the performance of particular roles, the Compassionate Care case raises a number of concerns. The latter relate to the identification of compassion as an overarching or integrating virtue – a meta-virtue – required for the performance of any or all of the tasks and obligations facing any nurse, midwife, physician, surgeon, chief executive and financial manager in the healthcare system. Indeed, as formulated by the NHS, the bolstering of compassion is an urgent need even ‘amongst commissioners and throughout arm’s length bodies, assurance and oversight bodies’ reaching far beyond the healthcare institutions themselves (NHS, 2014b: 2).

Thus, as an overriding virtue required by all staff, the call for compassion comes with the risk of explicitly or implicitly ignoring the complex system of roles that defines the instituted and official purposes of different categories of healthcare staff. It ignores that obvious fact that often, for instance, a compassionate attitude seems to be a more relevant virtue for a nurse faced with constant patient contact than for a surgeon who spends most of her time in the operating theatre. Also in relation to the specific offices’ particular tasks and obligations, a compassionate attitude seems unequally relevant. Thus, for instance, compassion might well be a virtue in the medical encounter where a surgeon is disclosing a serious diagnosis to a patient. Here exhibiting kindness, empathy and compassion is an important part of the role, and should be inculcated in the same manner as any other vital skill that relates to how surgeons conduct themselves in particular clinical situations. But compassion could well be a vice in the operating theatre where the conduct of the same surgeon should rather be guided by the mastery of sophisticated skills of surgery, a strict adherence to rules and protocols, and an artificial cool-head that secures the necessary discretionary abilities in instances where critical decision-making or swift action is needed. Abilities that, one might suspect, will not be optimized by overly compassionate feelings for the patient (see also du Gay, 2008). It is therefore possible to argue that when it comes to the performance of surgery it is potentially dangerous to instil compassion as the dominant motivational force in the operating theatre.

The difference in roles and obligations and the problems of assuming that compassion can guide all of these is easily illustrated in relation to the question of management. In order to discuss the appropriateness of applying compassion as a meta-virtue across offices, roles, work arrangements and specific work tasks we therefore turn for a moment to the NHS policy on compassionate leadership. As we indicated above, one finding of the public inquiries and reviews following the Mid-Staffordshire case was that the criminal neglect of patients and the organizational dysfunctions outlined came about because of NHS leaders’ poor decision making and prioritizing of financial health and performance targets above safe care. With the Compassionate Care agenda these findings are used to develop policies particularly targeting leaders, as they – through the building of a compassionate character – are understood as the change agents who can make a radical transformation of the NHS culture and environment possible. Thus a compassionate leadership programme has been introduced built on the assumption ‘that greater compassion within and through leadership has the potential to (re)align the NHS to its core purpose and truly transform patient care.’ (NHS, 2014c: 10)

The leadership development program’s mission statement declaration that ‘Compassionate leadership is everyone’s business’ (NHS, 2014c: 3) nicely captures its high level of generality and lack of contextual specificity. From those at the frontline of patient care to medical directors and board members, compassion is understood to be key to improving everything from patient experiences, personal effectiveness, organizational planning activities to team performance. But as with the case of the surgeon, we do not have to look far to think of administrative or managerial functions in healthcare where compassion can, in some contexts and situations, be a vice. For a patient flow manager, for example, it is essential to practice his or her office with a developed sense of justice, treating everyone equally independently of kith, kin, or class (see Weber, 1978). Here it is ethically – and often also legally – required that the flow manager prioritizes and acts with cultivated indifference to the particular patient in question, looking only to distinctive criteria (related to diagnosis and need) when deciding, for instance, who is to have the earliest slot for surgery. When the main virtues imply securing fairness and equality through impartiality, the demand for compassion becomes problematic as this would make possible situations in which the patient flow manager would be likely to prioritizes patients whom he or she had the most compassionate feelings towards (see also du Gay, 2008a). In this particular case, a compassionate ethos would therefore likely be in conflict with the values of equality, equity and justice traditionally so central to the NHS.

Interestingly, the curious assumption that compassion should be the guiding virtue not only for healthcare workers but for healthcare managers at all levels is based on the premise that if, as a manager, one of your key responsibilities is to ensure the compassionate care of patients, and the compassionate character of your employees, then one of your own main virtues must also be to embody compassion. As an implementation plan for building and strengthening leadership puts it, it is important that an individual ‘distil the essential leadership behaviors, attributes and characteristics that embody a compassionate leader’ (NHS, 2014b: 2). The reason for this, the NHS plan states, is that: ‘A leader displaying compassion will win the respect of staff and allow them to deliver good quality care and feel more aligned with the organization’s objectives. The leader will be more credible, more authentic, and more likely to be followed’ (NHS, 2014b: 22). In this way, it is no longer the specific tasks and obligations pertaining to a certain type of managerial position within a particular context that defines the virtues by which the job is to be evaluated, but rather the manner in which the leader positively and eagerly engage in developing a generalized ethical character. Because, as Hunt suggests, ‘this is a change in culture that has to be adopted enthusiastically – not imposed unwillingly’ (2014a).

In making this case, Hunt adopts a broad notion of character, one remarkably close to that posited by Sennett, and based on generalized principles such as emotional intelligence, integrity, authenticity, reflexivity, and responsiveness, to name but a few (NHS, 2014c). In the NHS Implementation Plan for Building and Strengthening Leadership, managers are encouraged to bolster compassion in the ‘self’ (NHS, 2014b) and various strategies are advocated for developing personal leadership that share a remarkable similarity to those encouraged by Badaracco Jr. One of these concerns improving self-mastery through the development of ‘routine habits to stay balanced’ (NHS, 2014b: 7). It is argued that exercises on the ‘self’, for instance through the use of a coach to promote ‘personal feelings’, development of ‘personal mission’ and ‘ensuring a psychosocially rich life and opportunities to refresh, e.g., walking the dog; living fully in and out of work (NHS, 2014b: 6)’ provide a gateway to character development with the goal of enabling ‘one to be present and available to the needs of others’. ‘Others’ seem here to include both personal relationships and relationships with patients, colleagues, co-managers, and so on.

The norms embedded in the compassion agenda can thus be understood as embodying a reinvention of character, but compassion – and herewith increased self-awareness and self-reflection – is represented as part of the health professionals individual selves; they are deemed to need to develop into ‘whole’ human beings. In this way, the new compassionate care policy does not only signal a return to a more moral and ‘value-based’ NHS as a means of challenging some of the downsides of the New Public Management regime, but brings with it a new all-encompassing set of rationalities and methodologies that demand an internalization of one particular meta-virtue – compassion – not only to guide the conduct of everyone hired by the NHS but also to foster more ‘well-integrated’ human beings. The compassion agenda thereby falls into the trap – one that also as we have shown confronts parts of the organizational sociology and leadership literature – namely that morality is not embodied in a particular organizational role and thus limited to this, but is dependent on a generalized understanding of appropriate ethical behavior that includes both professional relationships and personal relationships independently of the very different status of these relationships. In other words, we are back once again to Maritain’s (1951) ‘hypermoralism’.

**Concluding comments**

In a recent article, Carl Hendrick (2017) refers to an experiment conducted on the capacities of air-traffic controllers. Given the nature of the tasks they undertake, not least the large amounts of fluid information they need to be constantly aware of while making, under extreme pressure, life-or-death decisions across rotating 24-hour work schedules, researchers wanted to explore if they had a general enhanced ability to “keep track of a number of things at once”, and whether that capacity could be applied to other situations. After observing them at their work, researchers gave the air-traffic controllers a set of generic memory-based tasks with shapes and colours. They discovered that when tested on these skills outside their own area of expertise, the air-traffic controllers did no better than anyone else did. Their remarkably sophisticated cognitive abilities did not translate beyond their role.

This small experiment indicates some of the problems attendant upon assuming that certain ’skills’ developed and honed in relationship to specific forms of organized activity can be applied to each and every form of organized activity. It as a problem which, as we have sought to indicate through the three distinct but interrelated examples presented in this paper, shadows the contemporary ‘turn to character’ in organizational life and its analysis, as elsewhere. The all-purpose ‘muscle of the spirit’ or ‘meta-virtue’ called ‘character’ is indeed assumed to offer a set of general capacities and dispositions that can be applied in any context. Max Weber indicated the problem with such thinking in his remarkable ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1989). In the latter, as Ian Hunter (2017) has recently reiterated, Weber presented his readers with some stark choices.

To the extent that someone remains within the immanent order of a *Wissenschaft*—a publicly demonstrable knowledge based on rule-governed procedures—they may pursue this calling in a relatively untroubled manner. Should someone demand to know, however, whether this *wissenschaftliche* calling or form of life is ‘meaningful’ or ‘valuable’ in some absolute sense—that is, on grounds that lie beyond all particular sciences or forms of life—then no answer can or should be given; for all meanings and values are internal to particular ways of life (*Lebensführungen*) and existential orders (*Lebensordnungen)* (Hunter, 2017).

At this point, the best that an academic teacher can do is to clarify this fact—that is, the immanence of values to particular *Weltanschauungen* and the conduct of life they entail—and to refrain from promising to reveal an ultimate value-sphere or form of life. As Hunter argues, for Weber, ‘the teacher who promises this steps out of their *wissenschaftliche* calling and into the shoes of the ‘academic prophet’, whose claim to reveal the ultimate moral or metaphysical grounds for all the life-orders can only be specious and demagogic’ (Hunter, 2017).

Following Weber, and in line with the argument we have presented, advocating ‘character’ as a de-contextualised meta-virtue, rooted in a ‘whole self’ and providing the common ground for agency in any form of organized activity, is not only an illusion, but its practical consequences can be organizationally dysfunctional. While it is clear that the impetus driving the turn to ‘character’ is a heartfelt response to matters of considerable contemporary ethical concern that have followed in the wake of a range of controversial management and organizational reforms in both public and private sectors, it is nonetheless the case, we argue, that the way in which questions of ‘character’ are framed and ‘solutions’ formulated are as problematic in their own way as the developments they are designed to remedy. This is in large part because in terms of both ‘problematization’ and ‘solution’ the ‘turn to character’ tends towards such a level of generality that it cannot get at the distinctive qualities of the formal organizational roles (the work itself) that are of foremost significance, we argue, in any meaningful reflection on their ethical presuppositions and effects. As Bourdieu (1987), for instance, has argued, if we do not describe the context in which forms of personhood are developed and which provide them with their content or ‘substance’, we can say nothing very useful about their implications for character. As he puts it, ‘who would dream of describing a journey without an idea of the landscape in which it was made?’ Similarly, as John Rohr (1998: xi), among many others, has noted, in relation to recent reforms of the public administration as an institution of government, the New Public Management ‘movement’ has much to say about managing individual performance and responsibility for results, but nothing to say about how this relates to the function, duties, and obligations pertaining to the conduct of public office, no matter how ‘high’ or ‘mundane’ the latter may be, that an individual public administrator occupies. As our ‘compassion’ case attests to, this argument applies also to the healthcare sector where it seems that New Public Management’s consistent lack of attention to the duties and obligations of distinct offices of healthcare professionals and managers have led to a new generalized ‘turn to character’. However, both this ‘turn to character’ and the reforms it seeks to redress, share a ‘wood for the trees’ problem of the same order.

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1. Interestingly, in *On Duties*, for instance, Cicero characterised actions not as virtuous *in themselves* but in terms of whether they were proper or fitting in relation to a particular social status or role. Ciceronian *officia* or duties of office were thus understood as governing conduct in accordance with what is fitting for such roles as magistrate, citizen, patron, client, and so on. The ultimate moral horizon for this conception of duties was society understood as a structure of offices or roles, and the function of offices was to render the conduct of individuals suited to life in such a society. Here, the ethic of offices is distinct from the personal morality or ‘virtue’ of those occupying them. This is because to occupy an office it is necessary to cultivate the virtues required by the office—courage for the soldier, justice in the judge, prudence in the prince—as opposed to exercising personal virtues. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Amélie Rorty (1988: 16) argues that ‘virtue’ theories’ tend to approach ‘character’ in terms of offering an account of the appropriate configuration of traits in a system of checks and balances. As she argues, though, ‘describing the proper configuration of a system of virtues presupposes a theory of the proper weighting of the activities that constitute the whole lifespan of a variety of well-lived lives. A system of virtues designed to enhance the best performance of the activities of youth or middle age is, for example, likely to differ from one that values the habits and traits required for a thriving old age, particularly because stressing the virtues of youth may sometimes present difficulties in developing those of age, or vice versa. Similarly, distinctive social roles (…) may require different configurations of a system of checked-and-balanced virtues. Because these models of virtue can compete with one another for dominance in forming or directing a culture’s ideals, attempts to harmonize them can lead to profound political disagreements.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For classic instances of such a stance in relation to espionage and military conduct respectively, see for example, Dobel (1999: 70ff): ‘finely drawn studies of the psychological and moral pressures, discretion and dilemmas of an activity provide the best insights into the character required’ by those undertaking it; and Von Clausewitz (1976), Chapter 3 ‘On Military Genius” where he refers to ‘character’ in terms of a highly developed ‘aptitude for a particular occupation’, one developed through an extensive familiarity with (and thus experience of) it. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sennett is not alone, of course, in turning to Weber’s ‘most famous work’ to discuss contemporary work ethics. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) make an identical ‘Weberian’ move in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (for a discussion of Boltanski and Chiapello’s Weberianism, see du Gay, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As Bourdieu (1987: 302) puts it, ‘to try and understand a life as a unique and autonomous series of successive events without any link other than association with a “subject“ whose constancy is doubtless only that of a proper name, is almost as absurd as trying to account for a journey in the Metro without taking into consideration the structure of the railway network, i.e. the matrix of objective relations between the different stations.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It is important to note that ‘person’ is not synonymous with ‘individual human being’ as not all human beings are ‘persons’ in all contexts and not all persons are human beings (corporations and states, can possess legal personhood, for instance). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Given that charisma is one of Weber's key forms of authority, it is evident that the cultivation of charisma can itself be understood as falling within the ethics of office, rather than always already being its antithesis. This opens up discussion on a slightly different terrain to that we traverse here: ie.,whether (or when) charismatic leadership can be a desirable feature of a particular ethics of office (eg., in the military). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Individuality’ seen as a protean autonomy from official obligations was approximate to villainy in earlier times (see Condren, 2006: 144-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)