





those options that you've given us so far; can you please help us

This form of curious openness to the world makes me think of the way Moses is depicted in Exodus. When the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the episode of the burning bush, the text suggests that Moses was an appropriate recipient of revelation because he had a certain character trait: curiosity or open-mindedness. "I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up" (Exodus 3:3). Moses could have simply ignored the awesome sight and continued on his way.

Both Hurwitz and Moses share a certain character trait: a form of curious openness to the world that enables them to be attentive to new opportunities, and to see those opportunities as opportunities ~~for~~ **then** Sarah didn't simply ignore the email from the DC JCC; she paid attention, and she was open to learning something new from an Intro to Judaism course. Likewise, Moses turned and looked at the burning bush, he didn't rush past it because he was too preoccupied with his own business. This made him an appropriate recipient of revelation.

Consider an example that illustrates how character can be the source of tragedy and misfortune. Euripides' Medea is portrayed as a woman who is habitually disposed to anger. She consistently imagines that other people are wrongfully or inappropriately injuring or harming her, and she responds by trying to get revenge. In the play, her husband Jason takes a new wife, and Medea eventually ends up killing her own two children, because she believes that will be the most hurtful thing she could do to Jason (but of course also to herself). Medea's character, her tendency to respond in anger to the actions of others, makes her situation much worse than it could have otherwise been.

I + 1043

I see. So we started with a problem: there is both something appealing about the notion that things happen for a reason, that life is not just random. There's something appealing about that idea. But there's also something that feels a little bit dangerous or worrisome about it. Similarly, with the notion that things are just random, and stuff happens for no reason at all, there's also something both appealing and disturbing about it. Neither of the options feels good. You're offering us a third alternative, saying that we can capture some of the good parts of that notion of things happening for a reason, if we think not about some external force, but character as being what it is that shapes our destiny. So it becomes destiny because of character, not because of something else. There's something about an individual that endures over time that shapes decisions and thoughts, and it also affects life outcomes.

This is a useful way of thinking about it, then

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happen to. But this is worrisome, because if character is destiny in this sense, doesn't this mean I'm kind of stuck? It seems that it might have some of the same advantages of the first position, that things happen to us, because it's just fated to happen to us. If we say things happen to me, because my character is a certain way, I'm also kind of stuck. That doesn't feel so good either. Does it mean that we can't do anything to shape our own destiny?

M T 1234

Good, good. So, no. I think there are a few things we can do to try to shape our character and in that way control our destiny. For example, I think of Freudian psychoanalysis as a practice that en

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individual is in. As you point out, different kinds of individuals might be needed to work together in some larger system. That's an interesting notion: the idea that we might imagine a sort of psychoanalysis or character development process for a collective and not just for an individual. Another interesting idea is the fact that nations might have characters, and thus, nations might have destinies. Those destinies, as you've argued, might be partly malleable through some sort of a process that allows them to change or modify that national character in a particular direction. So you've shared several very interesting ideas here about the notion of destiny and how it is an attractive notion, but also a disturbing notion. You working with the notion of character as an alternative way of thinking about it helps us avoid some of those unpleasant consequences, and maybe get the best of both worlds. So thanks very much, Karin. Now I'd like to bring in Scott and ask him if he's got a few questions for you.

I I 23:12

Hello, and thank you. Thank you so much, Karin, for such an interesting conversation, which gave me a lot to think about. I have a couple questions for you, really friendly questions just aimed at thinking through a couple of the points you raised.

So my first question: at the very end of the conversation, you very briefly noted that you perceive character to be destiny. But of course, there are all sorts of institutions and structures that influence our lives as well. That was something I was really thinking a lot about as I was listening to your conversation with Stanton. I found myself wondering whether there might be something dangerous about a way of thinking that privileges individual behavior, over the impact of systems and institutions in our lives. In a sense, it seemed you might be sort of nudging a poor person, for instance, to ask themselves, "What character traits do I have that keep me poor?" Rather than asking a question like, "Why is the minimum wage so low, and what could be done to change that?" Your comment right at the end made it clear to me that you are thinking about this relationship between individual qualities and systems, but I'd love to ask you to say a little bit more about that.

M T 24:26

Right. Thanks, Scott. The reason why I mentioned that point is I think, to my mind, that's the most obvious objection to the view that I'm presenting here. The way that I'm thinking about this is in some ways different from the way that Freud thought about it, but I think some more contemporary Freudian analysts include aspects of what I'll say now. That is, these sorts of economic, social, and political factors can also affect our character. For example, I've just been reading work by young scholar-philosophers who set it in a



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M T 2840

Yeah, that's a great question. I was also thinking about

that the research suggests that quality is much more context-specific. So to take me as an example, to take perseverance as an example. I have an enormous amount of perseverance when it comes to editing a paper and solving a statistical problem.

situation and your relationships so they enable you to bring out different aspects of your character that you would rather embrace.

I I 35:22

Well, thank you very much. It's really interesting. I really appreciate you considering these questions and for me at least, it really deepens my thinking about the conversation I had a chance to listen to.

M T 35:32

Thanks so much for your questions; they were really great. I enjoyed our conversation.

I † 35:37

Thank you, Karin. Thank you, Scott. We appreciate you bringing these ideas forward and it has certainly pulled us up short and given us a lot to think about. Thanks, everyone for being here. Check out the American Anthropological Association website at [americananthro.org](http://americananthro.org). Please subscribe to Pulled Up Short wherever you get your podcasts, and follow us on Twitter @PulledUpShort.