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Character as an Achievement

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RESUMEN

Las narraciones clásicas suelen presentar tramas y entornos en los que se manifiesta el carácter de los protagonistas. En *Narratives and Narrators* (2010), Gregory Currie defiende que el valor que atribuimos a tales narraciones depende de que el carácter juegue un papel fundamental en nuestras vidas. En estas circunstancias los experimentos situacionistas no solo constituyen una amenaza para la relevancia del carácter en nuestras vidas, sino que socavarían también el valor que atribuimos a las narraciones clásicas. Argumentaré, sin embargo, que los experimentos situacionistas más relevantes, lejos de cuestionar la centralidad del carácter en nuestras vidas, la reivindican y, de ese modo, subrayan el valor que atribuimos a las narraciones clásicas en nuestras vidas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *carácter, narración, situacionismo, identidad, sumisión.*

ABSTRACT

Exemplary narratives typically design plots and environments where a character's psychological profile or Character – capitalised to disambiguate – is manifested. In *Narratives and Narrators* (2010), Gregory Currie argues, however, that the value we attach to such narrative procedures rests on the assumption that Character plays a fundamental explanatory role in our real lives. It follows that situationist experiments may not only challenge the explanatory relevance of Character in real life but undermine the value we attach to exemplary narratives. I will argue, however, that some central situationist experiments, far from challenging the centrality of Character in our lives, contribute to vindicating it in a way that enhances the value of engaging with exemplary narratives.

Keywords: *Character, Narrative, Situationism, Identity, Subordination.*

In *Narratives and Narrators* (2010), Gregory Currie examines what makes a certain narrative high in narrativity. He alludes to some exemplary fictional narratives – such as those of Charles Dickens or Henry James – as placed at the top of the scale of narrativity and, therefore, as providing the best means to grasp this concept:

In calling something a narrative, we may be doing any of three things. We may be contrasting it with things which, like general theories, are not narratives at all. We may be placing it on a scale of narrativity somewhere above a certain, contextually determined, threshold. We may be placing it in the class of what I will call *exemplary narratives*: a sustained account focusing on the histories of a few highly interrelated persons and their fortunes, replete with information about connections of dependency (which, for simplicity, I will assume to be causal dependencies), all this held in place by something I have not focused on so far: thematic unity. We find combinations like this exemplified in a great deal of literature, popular and canonical: in the novel, the short story, but also in drama and in film [Currie (2010), p. 35].

Exemplary narratives typically design plots and environments where a character's psychological profile or Character – which, following Currie, I will capitalise to disambiguate – is manifested in rather economic and revealing ways. Currie argues, however, that the value we attach to such narrative procedures rests on the assumption that Character plays a fundamental explanatory role in our real lives. It follows that situationist experiments, such as Stanley Milgram's obedience to authority experiment and that of the Good Samaritan,¹ would not only challenge the explanatory relevance of Character in real life but undermine the value we attach to exemplary narratives and, ultimately, our capacity to engage with them. I will argue, however, that these two situationist experiments, far from challenging the centrality of Character in our lives, contribute to vindicating it in a way that enhances the value of engaging with exemplary narratives. Hereafter, I will use the phrase 'situationist experiments' to allude only to Milgram's and the Good Samaritan experiments. It would certainly be more accurate to refer to them as 'the so-called situationist experiments', since I will argue that such experiments do not really support a situationist view, but, for the sake of simplicity, I will omit the 'so-called', except when the context may require it.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section I, I will briefly present Milgram's and the Good Samaritan experiments together with the *prima facie* skeptical problem that they pose for the explanatory relevance of Character and, therefore, for our engagement with exemplary narratives. I will then object to Currie's attempts to minimize the skeptical implications of such experiments. In section II, I will introduce the distinction between trivial and identity facts about oneself and argue that the latter constitute an indispensable part of one's Character. I will then explore the conditions under which such identity facts can be discerned

and individuated. For this purpose, I will rely on Bernard Williams' notion of acknowledgement and Simone Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience. As a result, I will distinguish between a third-person, explanatory perspective on Character (*E-Character*) and a first-person, agential perspective (*A-Character*). In section III, I will explore the conditions under which a subject's E-Character is formed and how the outcome of situationist experiments, far from challenging the explanatory relevance of E-Character, contribute to confirming its centrality. In section IV, I will emphasise how, as a result, A-Character comes as a major achievement of our agency and how this fact enhances the value of engaging with exemplary narratives.

I. THE ISSUE

When engaged with exemplary narratives, we have a deep sense of being driven by a sequence of events. We often feel caught up within a predicament or, at least, within a network of expectations. This capacity to engage the reader or the viewer is greatly favoured by the idea that characters – like real people – have a Character that, among other things, places demands on them that they struggle to meet despite the circumstances. Moreover, we can say that Character contributes to the narrativity of exemplary narratives (that is, to their capacity to engage us) *because* we see our predicaments displayed and examined in their plots and, consequently, *because* we assume that Character is central to the way we lead our lives:

Just as the intention-driven coherence of a narrative helps us to read the Characters of its people, so Character itself may add to the coherence of narrative, enriching the connections between its events... But, while introducing motive can make events understandable, motive by itself will leave them disconnected, for any two actions can follow from quite different motives... While Character's unifying power lies partly in its capacity to discern explanatory patterns across distinct behaviours, there is also a forward-looking aspect to it. Character helps to create expectation, and to make salient what might happen. Character can be used in many ways to form a landscape of expectation [Currie (2010), p. 192].

Milgram's and the Good Samaritan experiments seem to challenge the explanatory relevance of Character in our everyday life. Milgram's experiment involved three people: a teacher, a learner, and an experimenter.

People who played the role of a teacher in the experiment were recruited from different professions, trainings, social conditions, ages, etc. It was their behaviour that constituted the real object of the investigation, even if they were misleadingly told that the experiment had been designed to study the interconnections between memory, punishment and affective states through the interaction between a teacher and a learner. The latter was supposed to perform a rather simple task, whereas the teacher had to apply an electric shock every time the learner made a mistake. The outcome was that most subjects, despite their robust intuitions to the contrary, were ready to apply heavy electric shocks to the learner, just because someone bearing the marks of scientific authority told them to do so. The overall idea seems to be that, when placed within a system of authority, subjects tend to defer their moral decisions to whom they may regard as the person in charge, regardless of whether what the latter dictates conflicts with their fundamental moral principles.

In the Good Samaritan experiment, several seminary students were recruited. Once they had conducted a first part of the experiment, they were told to go to a second building for the second part, but with different levels of urgency. On their way to this building, they came across someone who was clearly injured and needed help. It seems that, regardless of their prior convictions, what made a difference in their readiness to help this person was how urgent they had been told it was to get to the second building. So, this seems to show that rather circumstantial matters, such as being or not being in a hurry, turn out to be more relevant than one's religious or moral convictions. Still, I would like to stress that, like the subjects in Milgram's experiment, the students in this experiment were placed within a system of authority and exposed to a conflict between their moral and religious convictions and the demands of the person in charge, and what the experiment suggests is that the latter had a significant impact on the motivational force of the former.

Currie's worry is that situationist experiments such as these have skeptical implications for the role of Character not only in our real lives but also regarding our capacity to engage with exemplary narratives. More specifically, his concern is as follows: *Given that our engagement with exemplary narratives – and, therefore, their narrativity – relies heavily on the explanatory relevance of Character in ordinary life, something that situationist experiments call into question, we must accept that such engagement is based on a false belief and, consequently, that the value that we attribute to such narratives is ungrounded.* Currie seeks to palliate the skeptical impact of this line of argument on our en-

gement with exemplary narratives by two fundamental means, namely: the Humean and the Dispensability strategies.

The Humean strategy recognises that situationist experiments have severe skeptical implications concerning Character but excludes its elimination in real life, as the fact that we might become aware of the explanatory irrelevance of Character will hardly permeate our way of dealing with each other. This line of argument places us in a position similar to Hume's regarding induction, namely, even though one might be convinced by his skeptical argument about induction, no one could take it seriously except when doing philosophy:

While I am aware of, and indeed impressed by, the evidence for scepticism about Character, I have not yet got to the position of vividly imagining what it would be like thoroughly to disbelieve in Character... Given this, it is unlikely that I can fully understand how narratives of Character would affect me if I thoroughly and whole-heartedly came to disbelieve in Character, instead of being inclined, as Hume was about induction, to abandon scepticism on leaving the study" [Currie (2010), p. 215].

The Humean strategy also applies to exemplary narratives. Thus, some could argue that, even though such narratives are based on false belief about Character, there is no way in which we could approach them from this skeptical perspective. Hence, our engagement with such narratives will not be genuinely affected by the skeptical arguments about Character either.²

By contrast, the Dispensability strategy explores the idea that we might after all dispense with Character and rely exclusively on a thinner moral psychology to account for people's actions and expectations or, in other words, that we might rely only on specific mental states and attitudes rather than on Character to account for people's behaviour and attitudes:

... Character is an organizing principle around which a novel like *Middlemarch* plays out its moments of emotional conflict, its trackings of growing disappointment and dawning hope, its depictions of moral compromise and confusion. These things would survive the abandonment of Character as a psychological-explanatory concept, as long as we retain a thinner moral psychology based on desire, deliberation, and responsibility" [Currie (2010), p. 212].³

The Dispensability strategy could preserve our engagement with exemplary narratives only if we endorse a revisionist view about them, as we

might now acknowledge that Character does not play such a crucial role in our engagement with them and, therefore, in their narrativity.

The Humean and the Dispensability strategies are certainly at odds with each other, for while the former defends the indispensability of Character in our ordinary interactions and in our engagement with narratives, the latter calls it into question. Nevertheless, both strategies assume that situationist experiments have skeptical implications regarding Character. In what follows, I will challenge this assumption and defend the view that so-called situationist experiments reinforce, rather than challenge, the role of Character in our lives and, therefore, the value of engaging with exemplary narratives. To deploy my line of argument, I will focus on a certain aspect of Character that is central to our agency, or so I will argue.⁴

II. IDENTITY FACTS AND PRACTICAL NECESSITY

Bernard Williams crucially distinguishes between facts about oneself that are trivial, such as having four limbs or liking tomatoes, and those that form a part of one's identity, such as being a believer in a certain religion or being the daughter of a murderer. Of course, a fact that may be trivial for healthy people, such as having two legs, will shape a new identity for someone whose right leg has just been amputated. For such a person, one might say, there was one life before and another after the amputation [Coetzee (2006)]. Conversely, facts that are *prima facie* relevant to one's identity, such as being a practitioner of a certain religion, may be experienced by some other people as quite external to themselves. They might, in such a case, regard themselves as members of a given religion very much like they are members of a tennis club.

It is clear however that, even if contextual and presumably a matter of degree, the idea of human agency requires the contrast between trivial and identity facts about oneself. There would be something weird or insane about someone for whom this distinction was totally irrelevant or even unintelligible. We can then assume that one's Character must include not only some psychological tendencies or dispositions, but also those projects and commitments one is identified with. In the coming sub-sections, I will explore two questions regarding this indispensable aspect of one's Character, namely: (a) how those projects and commitments that constitute one's identity facts are to be individuated (the metaphysical question) and (b) how they are to be known by the subject

themselves and also by a third party (the epistemic question). My approach to these questions will rely on Williams' notions of acknowledgement and practical necessity, together with Simone Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience. On this basis, I will finally distinguish between a third-person, explanatory and a first-person, agential perspective on Character that will, in turn, be crucial to my anti-skeptical interpretation of so-called situationist experiments and to my vindication of the value of engaging with exemplary narratives. Let us now explore Williams' notions of acknowledgement and practical necessity in order to address, first, the metaphysical question and, second, the epistemic one.

II.1 *Acknowledgement and Practical Necessity*

Williams introduces the notion of acknowledgement to account for the way a subject relates to, say, their national or religious identity. A certain subject might just discover at some point that they are a Jew and still regard this condition as a trivial fact about themselves as much as the colour of their eyes. This is what happened to assimilationist Jews who lived in Austria or Germany at the beginning of the 20th century [Améry (1980)]. After the Nazi ascent, these very same people could no longer without evasion regard their Jewishness as a trivial fact about themselves. They had to *acknowledge* that this feature formed a part of their identity:

A relevant notion here is acknowledgement. Someone may come to acknowledge a certain affiliation as an identity, and this is neither *a mere discovery* nor, certainly, *a mere decision*. It is as though *he were forced to* recognize the authority of this identity as giving a structure and a focus to his life and his outlook. There were circumstances in which what was earlier a mere recognition of a fact may come to compel acknowledgement, as when many assimilationist Jews in the 1930s came to acknowledge a Jewish and perhaps a Zionist identity under the thought that there was no way in which without evasion they could go on as though it made no difference that they were Jewish people [Williams (2002), p. 203; my emphasis].

To elaborate on the notion of acknowledgment, Williams initially appeals to the contrast between discovery and decision, but this distinction fails to reveal how these two attitudes, with opposite directions of fit, could be unified into a single one. By contrast, his phrase 'being forced to' points to a unified attitude closely related to the notion of *practical necessity* that Williams introduced in previous writings [Williams (1981b), (1993): pp. 75-76]. This sort of necessity has to do with a kind of motivation

that the subject doesn't experience as coming from within themselves, that is, as depending on one or another desire or drive they may occasionally have, but as a *confrontation* with something:

The experience is like being *confronted* with something, a law that is part of the world in which one lives... It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come 'from outside' in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside — from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others [Williams (2002), pp. 190-1; see also Williams (1981b), pp.130-1].

As we see, Williams claims in this passage that practical necessity seems to come both from outside and from deeply inside, but how can this phenomenon be at all possible, for it sounds rather paradoxical. To address this, I will examine Simone Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience.

II.2 *Two Notions of Obedience*

The notion of obedience that I associate with the concept of practical necessity has to do with the fact that our beliefs cannot be changed at will; they tend instead to change in view of evidence. I cannot deny that the keyboard is there, in front of my eyes, nor can I intelligibly choose not to believe that it is there. This is similarly the case with the conclusion of a mathematical proof when I understand it. It imposes itself upon me, although this imposition, far from degrading my agency, comes to enhance it. This sort of imposition has to do with a certain notion of obedience, namely, obedience to something I am confronted with, to an order or a necessity that is out there for me to acknowledge and, as a result, to feel forced to comply with. This sort of imposition and obedience contrasts with the motivational force typically regarded as constitutive of passions, which only comes from within, since passions are idiosyncratic and yielding to them is almost always degrading for the subject. As Weil puts it:

Obedience. There are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship of things. In the first case we do what we are driven to by the imagination that fills up empty spaces. We can affix a variety of labels to it, often with a show of truth, including righteousness and God. If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the

relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not any notion of necessity and we have no sense of obedience [Weil (1963), p. 43; see also p. 38].

In connection with these two notions of obedience and necessity, we may say that human beings are subject to two sorts of orders. There is first the order of gravity that, according to Weil, only rules over our lives insofar as we are prey to a certain epistemic distortion: we take for real what is just a creature of our imagination. This confusion derives from our difficulty to confront the void, to look at it face to face, without the sort of consolation that our imagination might deliver. This is an activity we must refrain from if we are to honour the second sort of order, namely, the relations of things. We let ourselves be guided by the relations of things inasmuch as we may succeed in resisting the temptation to distort them with our imaginings. There is a clear epistemic benefit in this attitude, but furthermore a gain in agency.

The order of gravity degrades the subject, whereas their ability to act on the basis of the relations of things, such as when accepting the result of a mathematical proof, makes of them the master of their life. For this connection between agency and faithfulness to the relations of things to be at all plausible, Weil must have a rather specific understanding of what is included within the relations of things. The relations of things cannot merely encompass what the natural sciences may individuate as a fact, but must also comprehend all sorts of evaluative features, either moral or otherwise.

These features cannot be in the world in itself, independently of us, as particles and their motions are. They depend on how we respond to the world in a way in which particles and their motions do not. For instance, we cannot identify an action as cruel, generous or shameful unless some emotional responses on our side are mentioned [Stroud (2011), ch. 4]. These responses cannot be construed, however, as completely idiosyncratic. It is true that they can change from one individual to another, from one context to another, but they cannot intelligibly vary in a way that is arbitrary from a moral point of view. Two people may disagree about the legitimacy of abortion, but for their views to be at all moral their disagreement must be grounded on features that are recognizably moral.⁵ This imposes an order not only on the world but on the subject's psychological condition as well. Only those aspects of their experience that are shaped by this sort of normative constraint could be taken into

account in the process by which the relations of things are to be individuated [Corbí (2012) ch. 4].

The metaphysical conditions for the act of acknowledgment are thus discerned in terms of an outside order that imposes a certain response, even though the response, insofar as it is subject to a certain sort of normative constraint, contributes in turn to determining the outside order itself. We are thus in a position to understand how the idea that practical necessitation may come both from outside and from deep inside. Of course, this approach is rather controversial since, among other things, it implies that there are mental states and attitudes with a dual direction of fit. Unfortunately, I have no room in this paper to explore this issue in any reasonable detail. The line of argument in this paper may be taken, though, as a contribution to an exercise of reflective equilibrium in defence of this controversial view.⁶ This much for the metaphysical underpinnings of the notion of acknowledgment, but what about its epistemic complexities?

II.3 *E-Character vs A-Character*

When addressing the epistemic question, one must focus on the first-person perspective and place oneself in the viewpoint of someone struggling to elucidate what the situation may demand from them, what it is, if anything, that they must recognise as being forced to do, and whether they regard themselves as being up to such requirements. This is the perspective from which readers engage themselves with the drama of the protagonists of exemplary narratives either in novels or in films, or even in paintings. It is precisely the drama to affirm oneself or to be transformed in light of what one recognises as important that, according to certain views about self-knowledge, constitutes the very idea of a strictly first-person perspective. This approach was initially defended by rationalist views about self-knowledge [Moran (2001); Boyle (2009), (2011)], but it has also been argued for within expressivist approaches [Finkelstein (2003), Corbí (2012)]. From this point of view, the demands that a particular subject (or character) might be required to acknowledge as being placed upon them as well as their capacity – or incapacity – to meet them form a part of their identity and, therefore, are central to their Character. In this paper, I will focus exclusively on this aspect of one's Character, leaving aside any other merely peculiar or idiosyncratic traits that a subject or a character might have.

It follows that we *must* approach the notion of Character not only from a third-person, explanatory perspective (*E-Character*, hereafter), as situationist experiments do, but also from a strictly first-person, agential perspective (*A-Character*, hereafter), that is, from the viewpoint of the subject's – or the character's – struggle to meet the demands that a situation imposes upon them.⁷ Situationist experiments have almost exclusively focused on E-Character and have thereby challenged the explanatory import of Character thus conceived. I will argue however that, appearances to the contrary, so-called situationist experiments, far from undermining the explanatory relevance of E-Character, come to emphasise it. But, what happens with A-Character? What are the implications of situationist experiments for a strictly first-person, agential approach to Character? In section IV, I will argue that, far from undermining the centrality of A-Character, situationist experiments contribute to stress its significance by emphasising the difficulties of the struggle to acknowledge and meet what the situation may demand from us. It will then be easy to bring out that, in the ability to express such struggle from a strictly first-person perspective lies much of the value we attach to exemplary narratives. Let me first explore why so-called situationist experiments enhance the explanatory relevance of E-Character.

III. CHARACTER AND SUBORDINATION

We typically assume that subjects vary remarkably in their Character and also that what one should expect from any given subject crucially depends on their specific Character [Currie (2010), p. 189]. This is why finding out someone's main traits of Character sounds like a most intriguing and important matter. Situationist experiments have come, however, to highlight how variations in the situation are significantly more important in accounting for changes in behaviour than alleged differences in Character. I intend to challenge this skeptical conclusion by placing situationist experiments in the context of a certain view of the formation of the subject. A key notion to this conception is that of subordination, and my line of argument is basically as follows: (a) there is no subject without *identification*; (b) there is no identification without *subordination* and, therefore, (c) there is no subject without subordination. If this line of argument turns out to be correct, then we should not be surprised if within a system of authority – as happens with Milgram's and the

Good Samaritan experiments – we tend to comply with its demands rather than resist them.

In the previous section, I stressed how the idea of a subject requires a distinction between trivial and identity facts about oneself and I now intend to argue that such identity facts constitutively involve subordination. Williams considers the case of being Jewish – and his point obviously applies to apparently trivial features such as one's skin colour or one's accent – to stress that the specific features that articulate one's identity are not entirely determined by the subject themselves but are partly defined by their social context and, ultimately, by others.⁸ After the Nazi ascent, assimilationist Austrian or German Jews could no longer regard their Jewishness as a trivial fact about themselves and had to acknowledge this feature as central to their identity. In general, we might say that a subject's identity is formed in a given historical context that crucially includes a certain view about what is most important in life. Yet this notion of importance essentially exceeds what any specific historical articulation of it may provide and, when confronted with a particular situation, the subject must struggle to discern what really matters beyond any assumptions and distortions that may come with any specific historical articulation of such notion, including the one in which they have been formed. This is the sort of endeavour that a subject must engage in if they really want to discern what a particular situation demands – or, in other words, what sort of response is practically necessitated – from them. In this process of elucidation, other people's cooperation becomes indispensable in order to avoid all sorts of fantasies and wishful thinking, but it can also be misleading insofar as one's prejudices may be reinforced rather than challenged by other people's views and actions. This is why we can conclude that that we are in the hands of others, not only metaphysically but epistemically as well.

To illustrate this idea, we may reflect on the conditions under which a subject identifies themselves with a certain gender and, as a result, they become sensitive – and also vulnerable – to the demands that such an identification imposes upon them. Judith Butler describes the process by which the subject is thus formed as an iterative process of subordination to some set of demands that are, nevertheless, ideal, insofar as no human agency could really meet them.⁹ Subjects must, nevertheless, strive to comply with them because any failure – and failures occur all the time – can be the basis for the subsequent exclusion or erasure from the social context that makes their lives liveable.¹⁰ This threat of exclusion renders the subject fundamentally vulnerable to the judgment of others and this fact constitutes, according to Butler, the cement of our social world.¹¹

If following Williams I have suggested that (a) there is no subject without identification, now we can recognise that (b) there is no identification without subordination to the powerful, once this latter has been invested with authority. However, this kind of response does not manifest the absence of Character. On the contrary, the fact that one has been formed as a subject through a process of subordination stresses rather than challenges the explanatory import of a rather evenly distributed trait of Character, namely, a disposition to subordinate oneself to authority, so that any other more substantial trait will typically yield if in conflict with this fundamental one.

IV. NARRATIVITY AND CHARACTER AS AN ACHIEVEMENT

It might be objected, however, that one common assumption about Character is that it varies from one individual to another, while my account proposes a rather uniform distribution of Character, which is precisely what situationist experiments seem to confirm.¹² To put it another way, it sounds as if my line of argument has only provided a Pyrrhic victory against the challenge that such experiments pose to Character, since one must renounce the assumption that traits of Character are unevenly distributed. We may turn, though, from E-Character to A-Character in order to articulate a proper reply to this objection. As Butler repeatedly stresses, the iterative process by which the subject is formed does not determine their behaviour and attitudes. There is always room for various kinds of resistance and for attempts to re-articulate one's position with regard to the normative ideal.¹³ The possibility of resistance, disobedience and re-articulation is an obvious outcome of the iterative – and, therefore, rather unstable – nature of the process by which a set of norms is established as a normative ideal, but it also derives from those features of the subject's bodily and psychological condition that fail to fit within the often stringent mould of this ideal. In other words, regarding our ability to comply with a normative ideal, there is something that lies within us but is external to our will and that may interfere with any effort on our side to meet its ideal demands [Williams (2002), ch. 8; (1981a)].

In light of this, we might revise what sort of projects and demands may more deeply form a part of our identity and, as a result, resist and re-articulate those projects and endeavours that one had so far mistakenly acknowledged as genuinely one's own. The possibility of this revision is actually present in some situationist experiments, as happened with a certain

man who, at some point, refused to go on with Milgram's experiment and, in the after talk, mentioned that he had experienced Nazi rule and knew where some kinds of subordination lead to: "He is hard on himself and does not allow the structure of authority in which he is functioning to absolve him of any responsibility" [Milgram (1974), p. 52]. We could thus say that this man's Character had been shaped in response to the situations he had confronted, so that he has now the ability to resist a certain kind of pressure. I am not thereby assuming that he would manage to behave along these lines on all future occasions, but rather that his brave resistance to certain commands provides the fabric of narrativity, the kind of possibility we are most interested in when reading or viewing narratives, that is, a situation where one's agency comes through despite all the hurdles or, on the contrary, dramatically fails to meet some crucial demands [Coetzee & Kurtz (2016)]. The effort a character may make to discern their way or to be faithful to the fate that a given situation has imposed upon them, is the sort of dynamics that engages us in the fictional world that exemplary narratives create. The difficulties of this kind of exploration and of being faithful to the demands that one may acknowledge as a result are not denied but enhanced by the situationist experiments themselves. Of course, success or failure in this kind of endeavour is a rather personal and uneven matter, which is the feature that Currie presents as constitutive of Character.

I must stress however that exemplary narratives do not properly invite us to look at the characters' struggle from the inside, but to experience from a first-person perspective how the fictional world imposes or necessitates a certain kind of response upon them. In other words, we must experience, as readers or viewers, some aspects of the fictional world as necessitating – or as failing to necessitate – a certain response from the character's side. This sort of necessitation is subject to the same metaphysical and epistemic constraints that Williams attributes to the notion of acknowledgement and, therefore, has to do with the idea of obedience that, according to Weil, honours the relationship of things insofar as it is not blurred or distorted by one's interests or fantasies [Williams (2002), p. 191]. And, as we see, this sort of necessitation seems to play a crucial role in our engagement with exemplary narratives.

V. CONCLUSION

Exemplary narratives, such as Marcel Proust's and Henry James', rank high in narrativity insofar as they manage to engage the reader or the viewer in virtue of their appeal to Character. Their capacity to engage

us by such means depends, in turn, on the assumption that Character has a crucial explanatory import in real ordinary lives. However, situationist experiments, such as Milgram's and that of the Good Samaritan, seem to challenge the explanatory relevance of Character in our real life and, consequently, to call into question the grounds on which we engage with exemplary narratives and appreciate their value. This is the concern expressed by Currie that I have tried to address in the present paper.

Currie himself sketches two strategies to address this issue, namely: the Humean and the Dispensability strategies. Even though these strategies are inconsistent with each other, they both presuppose that situationist experiments do have skeptical implications for Character. I have argued, by contrast, that such experiments, far from having such skeptical implications, come to enhance the explanatory relevance of some crucial elements in one's Character and, derivatively, the value of engaging with exemplary narratives.

For this purpose, I first introduced Williams' contrast between trivial and identity facts about oneself and stressed that the latter constitute a crucial aspect of one's Character insofar as it encompasses those projects and engagements one is identified with. I then focused on the conditions under which these identity facts can be individuated and discerned. Regarding individuation, Williams' notion of acknowledgement serves to introduce the notion of practical necessity as coming both from outside and from deep inside, which, in turn, has been elucidated in terms of obedience to the relations of things, following Weil's apt terminology. Once one's identity facts were thus individuated, I explored how they could be discerned and, as a result, I have distinguished between a third-person, explanatory (*E-Character*) and a first-person, agential (*A-Character*) perspective on Character. In light of a certain view about the formation of the subject, I then argued that situationist experiments contribute to the centrality of both *E-Character* and *A-Character*.

Regarding *E-Character*, my line of argument is: (a) there is no subject without identification, (b) there is no identification without subordination and, therefore, (c) there is no subject without subordination. Step (a) has to do with the distinction between trivial and identity facts I have just mentioned, while (b) is grounded on a view about the formation of the subject that stresses the relevance of the social context in the determination of one's identity facts. But (c) follows from the combination of (a) and (b); and, once (c) is granted, it is easy to see that situationist experiments such as Milgram's and that of the Good Samaritan come to confirm the prevalence of subordination as a rather formal aspect of

one's identity over any other more substantial project one might identify with. In response to the objection that this would make of Character a rather evenly distributed element among members of a certain population, contrary to what was initially assumed, I turned to A-Character and argued that having a Character in this sense comes as a exacting struggle to acknowledge and meet the demands a situation may impose upon oneself. It was then easy to vindicate the centrality of A-Character in one's capacity to lead a life and, derivatively, in the value we attach to exemplary narratives.

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NOTES

¹ See Milgram (1974) and Darley & Batson (1973). respectively. For the standard challenge to the explanatory relevance of Character on the basis of situationist experiments, see Doris (2002), Harman (1999), (2000), and Merritt et al. (2010).

² We could, indeed, distinguish between (a) our capacity to engage with exemplary narratives, (b) the value we actually attach to such engagements and (c) the value we should attach to them. The Humean strategy assumes that (c) is certainly challenged by skeptical views about Character, but neither (a) nor (b) are significantly altered by such views. In what follows, I will not systematically distinguish between these three aspects given that my line of argument is meant to vindicate all of them and, therefore, there is no need to differentiate the impact that skeptical views might have on each one. I will, though, emphasise one or another aspect depending on what may be more appropriate to the context.

³ Some developments in psychology, such as the cognitive-affective personality system [Mischel and Shoda (1995)] and the Big Five model [McCrae and John (1992), Goldberg (1993)], may be regarded as an exploration of the Disposability

strategy insofar as they tend to decompose the global idea of Character into simpler psychological elements. The Values in Action approach [Peterson and Seligman (eds.) (2004)], instead, seems to take for granted that Character plays a significant explanatory role but it hardly articulates the metaphysical and epistemic framework within which such explanatory role could be vindicated.

⁴ This aspect of one's Character tends to be neglected by current developments in psychology. I will argue, however, that it is central to our understanding the role of Character in our lives and in our engagement with exemplary narratives. For a discussion of its role in the current debate about self-knowledge and practical deliberation, see Corbí (2012), ch. 6; also (2017), (2023).

⁵ "Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many. But not indefinitely many: they must be within the human horizon. If they are not, they are outside the human sphere. If I find men who worship trees, not because they are symbols of fertility or because they are divine, with a mysterious life and powers of their own, or because this grove is sacred to Athena - but only because they are made of wood; and if when I ask them why they worship wood they say 'Because it is wood' and give no other answer; then I do not know what they mean. If they are human, they are not beings with whom I can communicate - there is a real barrier. They are not human for me. I cannot even call their values subjective if I cannot conceive what it would be like to pursue such a life" [Berlin (1958), pp. 11-12; see also (2000), p. 9, Corbí (2012) ch. 4].

⁶ See Dunn (2006), Frost (2014), Little (1997), and Zangwill (2008) for a challenge to the claim that the very idea of a mental state with dual direction of fit is incoherent. For further discussion, see Anscombe (1963), Gregory (2012), Humberstone (1992), Schueler (1995), and Smith (1994).

⁷ See Bar-On (2004), Bilgrami (2006), Cassam (2014), Dunn (2006), Finkelstein (2003), (2012), Gertler (2011) and Moran (2001) for a defence of a strictly first-personal point of view that ultimately favours the contrast that I have suggested. In Corbí (2010), (2012) ch. 6, (2017), (2023), I articulate an account of self-knowledge based on the idea of practical necessity – and that of obedience to the relations of things – that favours a view of A-Character as a remarkable achievement.

⁸ Needless to say, the colour of one's skin or one's accent sound like trivial facts about oneself and, yet, it is hardly so in most cultures. In cases like these we need a story that associates a certain skin colour with features that matter so that this trivial feature may intelligibly form a part of one's identity.

⁹ "As a rejoinder, one might consider that identification is always an ambivalent process. Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This "being a man" and this "being a woman" are internally unstable affairs" [Butler (2011), p. 86].

¹⁰ "This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not

yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” [Butler (2011), p. xiii].

¹¹ A similar conclusion may be derived from Richard Wollheim’s analysis of guilt in terms of the accusation of an internal figure [Wollheim (1999), ch. 3; see also Taylor (1985) and Williams (1993)]. He regards internal figures as the outcome of a reiterative process of introjection and projection. The subject first introjects the external critic in a desperate attempt to keep them under control, but ends up projecting that introjected figure upon other external critics. It is the internal figure thus constituted that judges and condemns the subject and to which they respond with a global and devastating attack on themselves that is specific of feelings such as guilt or shame.

My analysis of this process of introjection and projection differs from Wollheim’s in one crucial respect, though [Corbí (2012) ch. 5]. In my view, the subject does not introject the external critic in an attempt to increase their control over it, but due to the subject’s apprehension of its immense power and their conviction that the external critic may inspect not only their external acts and behaviour, but also their innermost desires and feelings. This exercise of severe supervision responds to the subject’s need to trust the world. This is why they are so inclined to believe that those powerful people who are attacking them do not act arbitrarily but are motivated by some serious reason, namely: because the subject has done something wrong and they are trying to correct them. The subject ends up regarding the attack as deserved, as this allows them to confront the world as a hospitable place, with the severe judge trying to preserve its vulnerable order from the threat that their inappropriate behaviour may pose to it. This line of reasoning suggests that guilt is the product of an iterative process of subordination to the powerful, whom the subject regards as endowed with authority – and, therefore, as grounded on good reasons – only in virtue of their own helplessness. It follows that, insofar as guilt may often lie behind people’s faithfulness to moral principles, we should expect that, in the case of conflict between the demands of morality and those of the particular system of authority one is confronted with, moral principles should yield, as situationist experiments come to confirm.

¹² “The explanatory and evaluative use to which we put Character suggests that we regard Character traits as very unevenly distributed... We choose our friends, we think, partly because their Characters, and this would make no sense if Character did not distinguish people” [Currie (2010), p. 189].

¹³ “Although he [Althusser] refers to the possibility of “bad subjects,” he does not consider the range of disobedience that such an interpellation law might produce. The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation” [Butler (2011), p. 82, see also Butler (2009), p. 412].

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