Everyone wants to be virtuous, but recent psychological investigations suggest that this may not be possible. Mark Alfano challenges this theory and asks, not whether character is empirically adequate, but what characters human beings could have and develop. Although psychology suggests that most people do not have robust character traits such as courage, honesty, and open-mindedness, Alfano argues that we have reason to attribute these virtues to people because such attributions function as self-fulfilling prophecies – children become more studious if they are told that they are hard-working, and adults become more generous if they are told that they are generous. He argues that we should think of virtue and character as social constructs: there is no such thing as virtue without social reinforcement. His original and provocative book will interest a wide range of readers in contemporary ethics, epistemology, moral psychology, and empirically informed philosophy.

MARK ALFANO is Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Center for Human Values, Princeton University, and Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oregon.
CHARACTER AS MORAL FICTION

MARK ALFANO
for my wife, who tells me what I need to hear,
and for my parents, who always kept an eye on me
“Only as creators! – This has caused me the greatest trouble and still does always cause me the greatest trouble: to realize that what things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the worth, the usual measure and weight of a thing – originally almost always something mistaken and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and quite foreign to their nature and even to their skin – has, through the belief in it and its growth from generation to generation, slowly grown onto and into the thing and has become its very body: what started as appearance in the end nearly always becomes essence and effectively acts as its essence! What kind of a fool would believe that it is enough to point to this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy the world that counts as ‘real’, so-called ‘reality’! Only as creators can we destroy! – But let us also not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new ‘things’.”


“Sir Walter […] had been flattered into his very best and most polished behavior by Mr. Shepherd’s assurances of his being known, by report […] as a model of good breeding.”

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