

## CHARACTER AS MORAL FICTION

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.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02672-8 - Character as Moral Fiction  
Mark Alfano  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02672-8 - Character as Moral Fiction  
Mark Alfano  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# CHARACTER AS MORAL FICTION

MARK ALFANO



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02672-8 - Character as Moral Fiction  
Mark Alfano  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City  
Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107026728](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107026728)

© Mark Alfano 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by MPG Books Group

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*  
Alfano, Mark, 1983–  
Character as moral fiction / Mark Alfano.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-02672-8 (hardback)

1. Character. 2. Virtue. 3. Normativity (Ethics) I. Title.

BJ152.L.A44 2013

179'.9—dc23

2012029713

ISBN 978-1-107-02672-8 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to  
in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02672-8 - Character as Moral Fiction  
Mark Alfano  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

*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’.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 58. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff, edited by Bernard Williams. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

“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.”

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, edited by Janet Todd and Antje Blank, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 34.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page viii</i>
Introduction: tripartite naturalistic ethics	I
PART I    FACTITIOUS MORAL VIRTUE	
1    Identifying the hard core of virtue ethics	17
2    Rearticulating the situationist challenge	35
3    Attempts to defend virtue ethics	62
4    Factitious moral virtue	82
PART II   FACTITIOUS INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE	
5    Expanding the situationist challenge to responsibilist virtue epistemology	III
6    Expanding the situationist challenge to reliabilist virtue epistemology	139
7    Factitious intellectual virtue	157
PART III   PROGRAMMATIC CONCLUSION	
8    To see as we are seen: an investigation of social distance heuristics	183
<i>References</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	225

## *Acknowledgments*

Nothing of value is accomplished alone. First in these acknowledgments and first in my heart is my brilliant wife, Veronica. She somehow managed to keep both of us sane while we simultaneously wrote books in the same 60-square-foot office. My parents, Ronald and Marjorie, my in-laws, Mary and David, and my dwarf silver marten, Nori, all provided moral support.

I would also like to thank the many people who helped in many ways during the planning, research, writing, and revision of this manuscript. The vagaries of memory may prevent me from thanking everyone who deserves it, but I hope at least to thank everyone I do mention as well as they deserve.

Jesse Prinz advised the writing of my dissertation, on which the first half of this book is based. The dissertation committee also included John Doris, Gilbert Harman, Michael Levin, and Rohit Parikh, all of whom offered useful criticisms and suggestions along the way. Also involved were Graham Priest and Samir Chopra, who served on my prospectus committee.

The dissertation would not have been completed nearly as quickly without the regular feedback of a small group of fellow graduate students: Brian Robinson, Daniel Shargel, Myrto Mylopoulous, and Todd Beattie.

Chapter 8 is very loosely based on my Master's thesis, which was advised by Richard Sorabji and Catherine Wilson. Thanks also to Bernie Frischer for comments on the chapter.

The book manuscript was revised over the course of the 2010–11 and 2011–12 academic years, during both of which I gave a number of invited lectures and conference papers related to the manuscript. During 2010–11, I received incisive criticism and feedback from Gideon Rosen, Daniel Garber, Anthony Appiah, Joshua Knobe, Nickolas Pappas, John Greenwood, Stephen Stich, Nancy Snow, Daniel Russell, Peter Vranas, Christian Miller, Neera Badhwar, James Beebe, Michael Sechman, Rachel



### *Acknowledgments*

ix

Feddock, Benjamin Morison, Urs Fischbacher, Julia Driver, Chandra Sripada, Christopher Hitchcock, Tamler Sommers, David Wolfsdorf, and Miriam Solomon.

During the 2011–12 academic year, I had the good fortune to be a fellow at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, where I received plenty of time for research and helpful feedback from Robert Roberts, Vittorio Hösle, Daniel Lapsley, Paul Stey, Anastasia Scrutton, Darcia Narvaez, Robert Audi, Anne Marie Baril, and Paul Stey. In addition, quite a few people asked difficult and helpful questions during conversations, conference presentations, and invited lectures, including: Abrol Fairweather, Heather Battaly, Guy Axtell, Jennifer Lackey, Jonathan Webber, Alvin Goldman, Adam Morton, John Turri, Margaret Cameron, Zachary Horne, Jonathan Livengood, Alex Voorhoeve, Carlos Montemayor, John Basl, Christian Coons, and Nicole Smith.

I owe special thanks to Jonathan Adler, who took the time to send me detailed comments on a chapter despite his diagnosis with terminal leukemia. Special thanks are also due to David Rosenthal, whose wisdom and judgment are unparalleled. And special thanks are of course due to Hilary Gaskin at Cambridge University Press for agreeing to have my manuscript reviewed and working alongside me for the last year as I learned how book publishing works.

Thanks also to Eddy Nahmias, Andrea Scarantino, George Graham, Jessica Berry, and – most of all – AJ Cohen at Georgia State University. They'll know why.

My interest in moral psychology and factitious virtue more particularly stemmed from an interest in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, so I suppose I should thank him, as well as Dave Murphy, the high-school English teacher who first introduced me to Nietzsche, and Alexander Nehamas, my undergraduate instructor in Nietzsche.