



**Review of *Character: What It Means and Why It Matters* by Deborah L. Rhode. New York. Oxford University Press. 2019. 336 pp.**

JENNIFER KAMOROWSKI

Over time, philosophers, psychologists, and the public have held varying views about what comprises character. In her book, *Character: What It Means and Why It Matters*, Professor Deborah L. Rhode suggests that a contemporary understanding of character includes moral reasoning and performance traits. Moral dimensions include qualities such as honesty, integrity, and courage, whereas performance traits are defined by characteristics such as perseverance, diligence, and self-control. This book is about the concept of character and our varying responses to it with examples from law and politics, largely within an American context.

Although a single trait or action provides incomplete evidence of a person's character, such a limited approach is common in certain areas of the law. For example, "good moral character" requirements are contained in statutes governing occupational licenses and in immigration laws. Rhode argues that legal definitions of character are inconsistent with evidence from psychological research about character. Character is often reduced to whether someone has a prior criminal conviction. According to Rhode, unfair evaluations of character exclude millions of Americans from certain occupations and

prompt decisions to deny immigration or deport people for reasons unrelated to a fair and accurate character assessment.

On the other hand, in criminal trials, evidence of past misconduct to demonstrate character is generally inadmissible, but is allowed for some limited purposes. Regardless of why such evidence is admitted, research indicates it inevitably affects jurors' perceptions of character. For example, jurors may consider a defendant's prior misconduct as evidence of his "bad" character and therefore be more inclined to find him guilty because of it. Positive or negative character attributions can also affect jurors' beliefs about how much punishment is warranted, irrespective of the relevant criminal case. Evidence of past misconduct is often allowed to impeach the credibility of a witness, regardless of whether the particular conduct is related to the witness's truthfulness. Regardless of why evidence of past misconduct is allowed, jurors tend to interpret it as representative of a defendant's or witness's character.

Rhode proposes that reforming particular areas of licensing, immigration, and criminal law would increase the consonance between research evidence about character and its effects on legal decision-making. First, she argues that fair, evidence-based policies about occupational licensing and immigration and deportation should be premised on the fact that character is not immutable, and a single bad act is an inadequate measure of character. Second, she argues courts should presumptively prohibit evidence of prior misconduct because of jurors' tendency to associate such evidence with character, and that such evidence should only be admissible when the pattern of prior behavior is closely related to the issue at hand – for example, a witness's truthfulness.

Rhode next analyzes the inconsistent effects character has on American elections. In a 2016 poll, about 95% of Americans agreed that the president's character is important. Yet, in a 2000 study, more than half of the respondents said a politician's effectiveness is unrelated to character deficiencies. Less than one-third said that an elected official's character is more important than his or her policies.

Rhode argues that the character of an

elected official should be valued above their policies. About 75% of Americans think that most elected officials put their own interests above those of the country, and Rhode recounts a litany of American political history that suggests they have good reason to think that way. She suggests these contradictions in what Americans say about the importance of character and how they vote is clearly demonstrated by Trump's election. Before the election, only about one-third of Americans said Trump was trustworthy and two-thirds said he lacked strong moral character. Nevertheless, he won the presidency, shortly after which, only about one-fifth of Americans considered him trustworthy. Rhode concludes that although character is not at the root of all political problems in the U.S., it would certainly behoove Americans to prioritize character when casting their votes.

Finally, Rhode walks readers through the lives of several individuals, including Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Ida B. Wells, and Mohandas Gandhi, to illustrate the principles of service and social justice that defined their character. However, she also notes that each of these individuals also had some personal shortcomings. For example, Mother Teresa has been criticized for her failure to criticize social structures that perpetuate poverty, despite her care for the poor. Others criticize her for failing to promote women's rights by taking a hard stance against contraception and abortion. The point Rhode illustrates with two chapters

about people who demonstrated strong character is that character is not static and no one person is virtuous in every circumstance, despite their overall good character.

Deborah Rhode is a professor at Stanford Law School and a renowned expert in law, legal ethics, and public policy. She has authored thirty books and hundreds of articles, and she is one of the most frequently cited authors in America on legal ethics. What she does well in this book is to present the importance of character to a general audience in a way that is engaging and filled with concrete examples. The book also contains some suggestions for reform; specifically, how more fair and accurate character evaluations may better serve decision-making in law and politics. Overall, the book is well-researched and supported by scientific studies, which lends credibility to Rhode's conclusions.

Although this book is clear, and each chapter on its own is easy to follow, there is some burden on the reader to tie the chapters together. I think Rhode admirably covered a lot of ground, however, at times, the breadth of topics had the effect of obscuring her main message. Nevertheless, she presents readers with several ways in which character affects legal and political decisions that people may not routinely consider. Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in why character matters in modern American society, and especially to those with professional interests in law, politics and justice.

