MATEI CANDEA

The two faces of character: moral tales of animal behaviour

In order to ask what work the elusive concept of 'character' might do for anthropology, this article first asks what work the concept does for Euro-American epistemology more broadly. It examines two invocations of 'character' in relation to animals at a scientific research site in South Africa. The first is the commonplace use of the term to denote the way the research subjects have been made into 'characters' on the TV show *Meerkat Manor*. The second is the technical term 'biological character' – the basic unit of contemporary evolutionary biology, and the main object of study at the site. These two characters are more than mere homonyms – they hark back to related concerns about purposive action, they populate conflicting moral narratives, and they operate on the threshold between self-conscious fiction and essential truth. Building on this case, I argue that the distinctive value of the concept of character for anthropology resides in its ambivalence – the way it can point both to a contrived mask (a character in an account) and to the very essence of the entity in question (its true character). Such ambivalence maps a particular social form, which echoes across the anthropology of institutions, of ethics and of knowledge.

Key words animals, narrative, evolutionism, science, morality

Introduction: the mask and the mark

This special issue seeks to articulate an anthropology of character. Yet anthropology has many terms already which seem to map the conceptual space in which one might imagine inserting character: person, individual, agent, actor, actant, are some of them. Do we need 'character'? Does it have distinctive work to do? Yes, I would argue, insofar as it specifically and productively denotes the double nature of an entity as both real and artificial. Consider the two contemporary meanings of the term 'character' in English: on the one hand that of a role played (as a character in a fictional narrative, a mask) and on the other that of the true identifying mark or feature (the distinctive character or characteristic of something). This duality echoes in the language of the human and social sciences also: 'character' points on the one hand to the terminology of a dramaturgical approach to social life (Goffman 1990) in which what is at stake is the management of 'impressions' and the playing of a part, which is definitionally separate from the real, authentic self. And on the other hand, it points to debates in moral philosophy and moral psychology about the unitary nature of a subject's moral make-up – their true moral character (see, for instance, Doris 2002). I will argue that this double nature of 'character' as a mask and a mark is useful for anthropology because it opens up a suggestive set of comparative questions, subtly different from those raised by notions of the person, the actor or the subject.

Now on the face of it my argument might seem to be premised on a play on words. These two directly contradictory meanings of character (character as a mask, character as a mark) might seem to be mere homonyms – a historical and etymological

coincidence. I will argue in this article, however, that this is not the case and that there are complex mutual entailments between these two versions of character.

In order to demonstrate this, the article examines in some detail one extended ethnographic setting in which both versions of character are deployed. The article revisits a field I have written about elsewhere (Candea 2010, 2013), namely the Kalahari Meerkat Project (henceforth KMP), a research station in South Africa in which behavioural scientists study the social life of meerkats. Ethnographically, the word character is invoked in two different ways. One is in relation to meerkats' role as 'characters' in films and TV shows. Most famously, a number of the KMP meerkats starred as characters in the long-running real-life soap opera *Meerkat Manor*. The other way in which character is invoked belongs to the technical vocabulary of the research conducted at the site. Researchers at the site are studying what evolutionary behavioural biologists term *behavioural characters*. Characters in this sense, also known as 'evolutionary phenotypic modules', are the basic units of contemporary evolutionary biology. These two might seem, as noted above, to be mere homonyms – that is certainly how researchers at the site themselves would see it. And yet, building on the work of literary theorists and anthropologists of ethics, I will suggest that there is a more profound kinship between these two kinds of non-human 'character' and the sorts of narratives which are articulated around them. Character as a mask and character as a mark are fundamentally linked.

This is not a metaphysical or ontological claim but merely an observation about a contingent conceptual set-up. The current shape of the notion of character in some Euro-American settings draws together questions of relationality, individuality and authenticity in a particular way. I will suggest in the conclusion that this ethnographic observation in turn is preliminary to considering what 'character' might do for anthropology as a comparative term of the art.

One caveat before I begin. This article deals with the character(s) attributed to or found in various non-human entities: meerkats and – rather more abstractly – bundles of repetitive animal behaviour. Nevertheless, and at the risk of disappointing some readers, I must be clear that this will not be a 'multispecies' ethnography in the now canonical sense (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). I have done this sort of work elsewhere, building on related material. Here however, my concern is primarily with the older problematic of the role non-human animals play *for* humans. The interspecies turn's call to attend to non-human participation in society, however valuable and important, need not erase older problematics. The role which human understandings of animals play for humans is still a legitimate topic of enquiry, even once we have acknowledged that it does not exhaust the questions which anthropologists might ask of non-human animals.

This being said, in another sense, this article partakes of the post-humanist inspiration of the multispecies turn, in that it connects the classic humanist problematics of character (in terms of moral virtue or role-play) to concerns with character as definition and specificity, which do not end at the boundaries of *Homo sapiens*. The recurrently ambiguous position of meerkats in this story – are they moral actors, or is character merely projected onto them for human amusement? – is part and parcel of this broader destabilising move. That is also the justification for a slightly strange structural feature of this piece. The anthropology of ethics – which has, more than any other branch of anthropology, thematised 'character' in its various forms – is, as will emerge progressively throughout this piece, an important inspiration and interlocutor here. However,

direct consideration of this literature is withheld until the conclusion, in order to allow the problematic of character to develop first on a broader footing, beyond the confines of the human.

Meerkat characters

As characters on *Meerkat Manor* (henceforth MM), meerkats are individual subjects who face tragic and mundane choices, behave in good and bad ways, act as heroes or villains, live up to or shirk their duty. In this vernacular use however, the sense in which MM meerkats are 'characters' instantly calls up the sense in which they refer to, yet are not, the 'real' meerkat individuals on the ground. Its particular format as a 'docu-soap' means that the show plays a complex game with this pair. On the one hand, the show uses real footage of the meerkats of the KMP, follows and represents real individual meerkats, and recounts events which actually occurred to them. On the other hand, the production of a narrative as described above is self-consciously a construction that takes work. On the film-makers' own account, this work involves tacking back and forth between meerkat characters and the real meerkats on the ground. As we shall see below, this dynamic also became a key attraction for the viewers of the show.

Thus, the opening move is the decision to centre the narrative on one group – the Whiskers – and their leader, Flower. This narrative decision casts the Whiskers group (usually referred to as a 'family') as the protagonists and neighbouring groups (tellingly referred to as 'tribes' or 'mobs') as antagonists. It casts Flower as the heroine, and distributes other roles in an economy of supporting and minor characters. Once this casting has introduced a perspectival focus, the film-makers can step back. The real meerkats' actions and life events will then supply a wealth of meaningful and engaging events, plots, developments and surprises. At that point the film-makers step back in to tell those stories on film. Since the actual events are rarely themselves caught on camera, the show tells the real stories by cutting and pasting footage of meerkats acting in often quite generic ways (leaving the burrow in the morning, foraging, fighting, playing, lying down, etc.). It then ties together this footage with a carefully written voice-over narrative. Music is deployed to give emotional depth and implied meaning to otherwise stock footage, for instance of a meerkat staring into a distant sunset.

Many of these narrative techniques are common to animal documentary genres (Mitman 2009). What was specific about MM, however, was the soap-opera element, and associated longevity of the narratives. Insofar as it was committed, year after year, to an initial decision to recount, broadly as they happened, the adventures of a select group of real individuals on the ground, the show really did have to hand over to the meerkats the direction of the story in an open-ended way.

This device of tacking back and forth between real meerkats and meerkat characters is the core move of the show, and key to its ability to capture viewers. The show garnered an impressive number of dedicated fans, many of whom wished to visit the research site to meet the real meerkat stars. In thinking of this peculiar attraction towards the 'real meerkat' hidden behind the 'character', I find it helpful to follow Adam Reed's (forthcoming) invocation of an argument by literary theorist Alex Woloch concerning 'minor characters'. Woloch seeks to combine the insights and approach of formalist literary theory (in which characters emerge as formal devices defined by their function in the structure of the narrative) and a humanist approach

which scans characters for meaning. The power of literary characters, and particularly of minor characters, Woloch argues, lies precisely at the intersection of these two visions: in the tension between an implied human being rendered into a restricted literary form. 'It is this referential status of minor character, its implied person, that makes the reader feel its narrative position is always restrictive, and which in turn motivates an interest' (Reed forthcoming). Much as with 'minor characters' in Woloch's account, the appeal of MM characters lay in their double nature as an 'implied person' constricted into a 'delimited role'. MM's characters' key appeal lay in the way they pointed to, but did not exhaust, the real-life meerkats beyond. These 'real meerkat characters', partly revealed and partly concealed by the show's characters, became the attraction for many fans, who were prepared to spend money on an annual subscription to access data about them drawn from the project's database (Candea 2010: 242).

This conscious play on the double nature of meerkats as characters and real individuals also opened MM up to a line of criticism for distorting, concealing or misrepresenting 'the facts'. It became a commonplace for KMP volunteers and researchers on the ground, in particular, to denounce the show's narrative devices as anthropomorphic distortions. But what lay behind the show's meerkat characters? What was the real character of meerkats on the ground? What did the researchers and the volunteers at the site see? As we shall see below, the researchers and volunteers at the KMP were as passionate about individual meerkat characters and their trials and tribulations as the viewers of the show were. However, their vision of individual meerkat characters entangled in narrative plots was intersected by another kind of narrative and another kind of 'character'.

Behavioural characters

The appeal of MM – the reason why its viewers find it engrossing – was obvious even to one who was not himself passionate about the series. The intricate interweaving of storylines, the way seemingly interchangeable animals displaying seemingly repetitive behaviours slowly turned into recognisable individual characters, to whom unexpected events happened – that entire apparatus for generating interest will be familiar and transparent to anyone raised in a world of soap operas, reality TV and box sets. The volunteers and researchers at the site working with meerkats on the ground engaged in this sort of narrative interest – they too came to know the meerkats as individual persons, endlessly discussed their strengths and foibles, laughed and cried over their actions and life events. They too saw their own characterisations of the meerkats ('Rocket dog – he's a lover, not a fighter!') as partly fictional.

And yet the volunteers and researchers were also, in parallel, captivated by a different narrative, vaguely gestured towards as 'the science'. The most general name for this broader subject – the core focus of much of the research at the site – was 'the evolution of cooperation'. The way this particular narrative worked to captivate the researchers will require rather more contextualisation.

Approaching a scientific research project as a non-scientist ethnographer poses a number of challenges. One of the most subtle ones is precisely getting a grip on 'where the action is' – understanding why researchers find interesting the particular things they find interesting, what counts not only as a possible question, as relevant data and as a valid answer, but more profoundly, what is enthralling or exciting about the narrative

woven together by the strings of papers published in that particular field. I stumbled initially in pinning this down for the KMP. 'The evolution of cooperation' seemed a rather flat narrative, and one whose protagonists remained elusive. I soon discovered that the research was not really about meerkats in any significant sense – most of the questions asked of meerkats at this site had been asked of other species before, and the answers were primarily interesting within a broader comparative frame: this was research about social mammals, and more broadly about social animals. Meerkats were merely a convenient model species for asking broader questions and most of the researchers who worked on them had worked on other species and/or planned to do so in future.

If this particular species was only of minor importance, then, perhaps the action lay with individuals? Indeed, the behavioural ecologists I spoke with were often insistent that what they cared about were individuals: it was at the level of individual animals, for them, that evolution operated. Fortuitous events in the mix of inheritance and environment lead individuals to exhibit particular differences from each other, these differences in turn lead these individuals to have more or less success in reproducing, and those differences which can be passed on genetically or epigenetically will then be exhibited by more individuals in the next generation. Certainly, the KMP was busy naming, tracking and counting individual meerkats, and comparing them against each other. And yet it soon became obvious that in an important sense, the individuals were not where the action was. It was never individual meerkats which made it into scientific discussions or papers. No important arguments hinged on them, none of their specific life events were the topic of conversations between scientists *qua* scientists.

In reaction to this sense of vagueness about where the action was, I was tempted to follow the line of critical writing which characterised behavioural biology as mere genetic reductionism. Despite their talk of individuals, I decided, these researchers were in fact telling stories about selfish genes (Dawkins 1976) – the individual animals in these accounts were mere puppets, driven by the strange schemes and calculations of the genes within them, as Eileen Crist (1999) argued for the sociobiological accounts of animal behaviour of the 1970s and 1980s. Again, there seemed to be evidence for this. In theoretical terms, contemporary behavioural ecology owes much if not all to sociobiology, and the founder of the KMP, Tim Clutton-Brock, had been a prominent exponent of that school of thought – indeed, it is precisely of Clutton-Brock's earlier work on deer (e.g. Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1989) that Crist made the above observation about genetic narration. And yet, once again, the hat did not quite seem to fit. For these scientists didn't talk or write of genes, any more than they talked or wrote of individual meerkats. These scientists might occasionally refer to genes as a useful theoretical construct, but they were not geneticists – their arguments did not hinge on the discussion of specific genes. Mapping behavioural complexes to particular genetic determinants was neither possible nor of immediate concern to the kind of research that went on at the KMP. Again, the action was elsewhere.

The core protagonists in this story, I eventually came to realise, were neither meerkats as a species, nor individual meerkats, nor genes, but something which moved in between and tied together those different scales, namely, *behavioural characters*. The notion of a behavioural, and more generally, a biological, character belongs to the technical language of evolutionary biology, and explaining it requires a plunge into that technical language – while I take on the expository voice of a behavioural biologist for a moment, the reader is encouraged to remember that everything that follows is to be taken as ethnography – an account of an account.

In taxonomy, the notion of character has a fairly simple definition. Characters are the distinctive phenotypic marks which enable taxonomists to classify an individual as belonging to a species or genus. The relationship is scalar: characters are parts of individuals (spines, say) and they also define categories of individuals (vertebrates, as animals with spines). This is the sense in which characters are used in other forms of classification, for instance of buildings (see Yarrow this issue).

In evolutionary biology, however, characters play a slightly different role. The characters that are of principal interest to evolutionary biologists are not any old differences, but rather the ones that fulfil a role in conferring selective advantage to the individual who bears them. There is an interesting shift here: characters in the taxonomic sense are essentially differences – they can only be identified relationally. The characters that evolutionary biologists are interested in are also differences in this sense: they provide *differential* selective advantage to the individuals and species that bear them. But in another sense they are also units – particular bits, organs, modules – which *do* something: 'A biological character can be thought of as a part of an organism that exhibits causal coherence to have a well-defined identity and that plays a (causal) role in some biological processes' (Wagner 2000: 3). Famous biological characters in the story of evolution are things like eyes, wings or opposable thumbs: they are usually imagined as biological devices or tools, which emerged at some point in time through fortuitous mutation and were preserved ('selected for') because they gave a differential advantage to the individual organisms.

Characters thus sit 'in between' genes and whole organisms, and they allow contemporary evolutionary biologists to mediate between the extremes of organismic holism and genetic reductionism (Lewontin 2000). For on the one hand, focusing on characters necessarily means imagining an individual which can be analysed into parts – in order for evolutionary transformation to be possible, selection must operate differentially on different aspects of the individual organism. On the other hand, since selection applies not to genes directly, but to the actual animal, the relevant parts must be phenotypic entities – developed 'bits' like eyes, hooves or fingers, and not merely the 'code' for them. Thinking about the evolution of characters therefore places biologists in a conceptual space in which genetics, development, epigenetics, historically changing environmental influence and many other factors intersect.

Naming a character cuts out of this entangled space a unit which can be treated as discrete for the purposes of analysis. How one makes this cut in any given instance is of course a subject of much debate among biologists, since

> functional units are created by the life activities of the organism and vary from circumstance to circumstance. The loss of the last joint of my left little finger would surely go unnoticed by natural selection, but it would be of considerable consequence indeed if any livelihood depended on playing the violin. At one moment the entire hand is a character, at another each finger is a character, and at another the hand and the arm form a single functional unit. (Lewontin 2000: xxii)

In sum, to speak of 'characters' – to suggest that one might meaningfully identify causally coherent units with a well-defined identity within organisms – is already a gambit, an as-if which relates to a more complex, shifting reality beyond.

Behavioural biologists, such as the researchers at the KMP, make the additional gambit (Fawcett *et al.* 2013) that the behaviour of animals might be scanned for such

'characters' – that one might detect, in the flow of animal activity, something like units of action which are causally coherent and serve a distinct function. These would need to be observable and broadly stable behaviours – things individuals do over and over again – and they would need to be differential: some individuals do systematically more of them than others. While they would recognise the term, the researchers at the KMP themselves did not speak much of 'behavioural characters' in the abstract – they were constantly speaking, on the other hand, of particular behavioural characters. Daily life at the project was full of talk of 'babysitting', 'pup-feeds' and IGIs (inter-group interactions). These characters can then be bundled together into broader congeries, suites or complexes of behaviours under terms such as 'altruism', 'selfishness' or 'cooperation' (Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1999). Which brings us back to the core stream of research at the site, the one for which the site was designed and set up in the first place, namely the grand narrative arc of 'the evolution of cooperation in mammalian societies'. Implied as the endpoint of this arc, of course, is the enthralling question of the origins of human social life, and of the roots of human sociability.

Put like this, one begins to see why the technical notion of biological or behavioural 'character' and the commonplace one of 'characters' in a story might be more than mere homonyms. It is hardly novel to point out that evolutionary biologists tell stories, albeit stories supported by facts and calculations (Haraway 1989; Schrempp 2012). More often than not, the key characters in these evolutionary stories are, precisely, biological 'characters' – be they physiological ones like eyes, wings and spines, or behavioural ones like cooperation. As Gunther Wagner writes, biological 'characters' are 'the true subjects of evolution' (2000: 2), and can be thought of as 'historical individuals, […] which have a definite beginning and potentially an end' (2000: 10). Of course, biological or behavioural characters are not anthropomorphic entities, they are not imbued with intentions, plans, projects. And yet, being without conscious intention, they are nevertheless defined by their purpose – the other face of the old Aristotelian notion of *telos*. Since these purposes can change through time, they become complex characters indeed. Evolution is a complex tale of characters' purposes perfected, thwarted and abandoned in the face of unanticipated events.

A key feature of the work of evolutionary biologists is to reconstruct these beginnings and ends, and the multiple shifts and transformations in-between. Take the problem of the evolution of cooperation, as seen through the case of meerkats. To the behavioural ecologists, meerkats are interesting because they represent a relatively unusual social structure for a mammalian society. They are 'cooperative breeders': in each group one dominant female monopolises reproduction, while the other females help in the care of the offspring. This system raises comparative questions about the evolution of cooperation in mammals and beyond. How did mammals, who are not physiologically subdivided into reproductive and non-reproductive castes, as social insects are, nevertheless come to develop social systems with relatively stable divisions of reproductive labour? What particular alignment of individual behavioural patterns (aggression, helping, selfishness, etc.) led to the production and contributed to the maintenance of such stabilised systems? Is it possible that such behavioural patterns might in turn lead to the emergence of physiological differentiation, and could such a process then have happened analogously in the evolution of insect societies? These are some of the bigger questions underlying the mysterious tale of the 'evolution of cooperation'.

Intersecting moral tales

> A person whose desires and impulses are his own […] is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character. (Mill 1864: 108)

Meerkat characters and behavioural characters are each central to the respective narratives they inhabit – and narratives are, as Cheryl Mattingly notes, inextricably moral tales, 'interwoven into the very fabric of our sociability' (2008: 137). Our very ability to infer each other's motives, to read each other's actions as meaningful, relies on narrative techniques of emplotment and characterisation. With this recognition of the ubiquity of narrative comes a sense that there are better and worse stories to tell. In this connection, Mattingly draws from E. M. Forster a distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters:

> flat characters, in their purest form, are 'constructed round a single idea or quality' ([Forster] 1927: 67). Round characters, by contrast, possess multiple qualities, shadowy ambiguities, outright contradictions. Most important, they are capable of change. Flat characters […] can be predictably reckoned with as causes for outcomes. (2008: 147)

This distinction throws interesting light on the respective characterisations of the two narratives about non-humans we have encountered above: MM and the KMP's research publications. Let us begin with the latter. Behavioural characters at any given point in time are clearly very 'flat' characters – functional units, predictable causes for outcomes. And yet, as one tracks them through evolutionary time and the vagaries of changing environments, behavioural characters come to play far richer and more ambiguous roles – they turn into rounder characters. Defined by their changing purposes and shifting form, biological characters turn into motivated yet complex protagonists, in a plot enriched by multiple contextual twists and turns. The roundness of these characters comes at the expense of that of the meerkat individuals who 'carry' them. Meerkats feature, in this view, essentially as hypothetical maximising individuals. They are contexts and vehicles for the real story of the behavioural characters they exhibit – 'the evolution of cooperation'.

Conversely, MM builds rounded individual meerkats out of a string of essentially flat and interchangeable behaviours. Since MM takes its basic vocabulary and understanding of meerkats from the researchers, the behaviours which the researchers are tracking are also the key units from which the show's narratives are built. But by themselves, these behaviours are all the same, tedious, repetitive. MM characterisation fills the gaps between the documentation of this sequence of behaviours by picking a set of protagonists, suggesting motives and tying together these behaviours into a narrative thread. As the producer said to me: 'Yes, the behaviours were the same, but when they happened to different characters, in different environments, different contexts, it actually feels new and fresh all the time' (Candea 2010: 253). The richness of MM's narrative lies in tracing rounded individual characters out of flat records of behaviour. The richness of behavioural ecology's narratives lies in tracing rounded behavioural characters out of the lives of flat individuals.

The ontological difference between these two narratives is profound. It places MM and behavioural ecology on two sides of a classic philosophical divide about the nature of moral action (Keane 2015: 96) – transposed to the animal realm. MM's animals are often portrayed in terms akin to those of virtue ethicists – as subjects facing moral choices, who have the opportunity to display (or to fail to display) virtuous character. In the evolutionary vision, by contrast, the semblance of moral choices (will the dominant female meerkat allow her older daughters to breed, or force them to focus their resources on their younger siblings?) is an effect of situational factors (such as the genetic, developmental and environmental context in which the said 'choices' arise). On J. S. Mill's view, quoted at the head of this section, MM meerkats are like persons, whereas the meerkats of behavioural ecology are like steam engines.

And yet these two very different ontologies are joined at the hip by their common reliance on implicitly evaluative terms relating to goal-directed behaviour. Terms like cooperation, selfishness, babysitting or aggression can be read as behavioural characters – in the technical sense outlined above – but also as anthropomorphic 'character traits'. Much has been written against the use of such 'anthropomorphic' terms in evolutionary biology, both by those who would like to see scientific language purified (Kennedy 1992) and by those who deplore the sociobiological tendency to 'naturalise', by implication, contingent human social arrangements and inequalities (Sahlins 1976). But both of these lines of critique have a tendency to underestimate the often knowing way in which such anthropomorphic terms are deployed. Viewers of MM and, in a different sense, scientists working at the KMP, are mostly aware that talk of meerkat 'babysitting' or 'altruism' is a perilous as if. But what makes it perilous is also what makes these strange entities attractive: by being simultaneously fictional (a mere technical metaphor for behaviours very different from our own) and yet potentially real (could this be in fact where our own behaviours, our own distinctly human characters come from?), behavioural characters are eminently enticing. As with meerkat characters in MM, the fascination comes in part from the shimmering oscillation between the mask and the mark.

A particularly striking illustration of these divergent moral tales comes from an interview with a long-term volunteer and site manager of the KMP in 2008.

> I don't want us to come over as insensitive when we get emails [from MM viewers] saying, 'where's Flower's grave?' and stuff like that, and saying well, she hasn't got a grave. You know, she was a good dominant female, she wasn't a fantastic mother as she was portrayed in the show, portrayed as a loving mother. To be a good dominant female, you have to be aggressive, you have to be a bit of a bitch. And that's why she was good. But she […] wouldn't feed the pups really, that's not her, that's not the role of the dominant female in the meerkat group. So […] again, the show kind of takes that and turns them into something they're not. So when they say 'why haven't we got a grave for her', well, why haven't we got a grave for somebody else?

Before returning to the interview to transcribe it, I had remembered this conversation as one in which the site manager rejected the anthropomorphic imposition of human value judgements on the natural behaviour of animals, which is putatively beyond such judgement. And it is true that part of the gist here is the way in which meerkat individuals and groups behave in generic and interchangeable ways ('They all do the same thing'),

acting as a type ('dominant female'), and are only narrativised into individual ethical subjects 'for a story'. It is only on transcribing the interview that I was struck by the extent to which precisely those same evaluative terms were being reinscribed. Flower was *good* because she fulfilled her role (being a dominant female) well – even though her role meant behaving badly ('being a bitch'). Seen in the round, this was as much an exercise in 'righting the record' of proper evaluation, rather than a refusal of the evaluative register. And – crucially – she may not have been exceptional, but she was '*somebody*'.

The same ambivalence about moral evaluation of meerkat behaviour is present in the following passage of Tim Clutton-Brock's popular book *Meerkat Manor: Flower of the Kalahari* (2008), which builds on the success of MM to narrate three intertwined tales: that of Flower, that of meerkat society in general (from a scientific point of view) and that of the KMP and its research. The book's introduction ends with the following paragraph:

> [T]his is the story of Flower, the dominant female of Whiskers. Before I start, there's a warning. As it is a true story, it isn't always pretty. Meerkats are cute, funny, affectionate (to each other), amusing, playful, fearless and amazingly unselfish. But they can also be vicious, ruthless, murderous, uncaring, infanticidal and vindictive, especially to weaker individuals. A female's daughters will lactate for their younger brothers and sisters and will guard them at the burrow for twelve hours at a time, […] sometimes paying for their bravery with their lives. But they will kill each others' newborn pups without compunction […]. This isn't pathological or maladaptive – their actions maximise the chance that they will survive and breed successfully. It's just how meerkats are – and human values are not relevant. Welcome to Flower's world. (Clutton-Brock 2008: 31)

If 'human values are not relevant', what is the role of the long enumeration of evaluative terms that precedes that statement? The take-home message of this passage is profoundly ambivalent. The condensation of the same passage on the back cover of the book resolves the ambivalence by doing away with those species-based firebreaks altogether:

> *Like humans*, meerkats can be cute, cuddly, affectionate, fearless, and amazingly unselfish; also like us, they can become vicious, vindictive, and even murderous within a split second. By explaining the lives of the Whiskers, Clutton-Brock shares his perspective on how the lives of all animals *(including humans)* are structured by the need both to compete and to cooperate. (2008: back cover, emphasis added)

Thus, on the one hand, the study of behavioural characters explicitly calls for a suspension of purportedly anthropocentric moral evaluations of the workings of 'nature'. On the other hand, and on a different logical level, such explanations are inherently normative, insofar as the very nature of 'explanation' in this paradigm implies finding some functional aim or purpose to behaviour which would otherwise seem aberrant or arbitrary (such as for instance, infanticide). Sociobiological explanations of this type effectively turn on the ability to re-describe seemingly strange behaviours as examples of an evolutionary 'rationality in extreme circumstances' (Gray and Wolfe 1982: 592).

This is the key sense in which sociobiological explanations of the evolution of behavioural characters are normative. As D'Arcy Thompson noted long ago, adaptationists are reinventing the old Aristotelian aphorism: 'If one way be better than another,

then you may be sure that it is nature's way' (1961: 6). This is why evolutionary narratives are always in danger of naturalising the social forms which feed into their production (Sahlins 1976). Whatever their own personal political commitments, behavioural ecologists telling stories about the evolution of cooperation are also telling metaphorical moral tales about gender, race, class and global geopolitics (Haraway 1989, 1991). Evolutionary accounts of behaviour are, to the best of their authors' ability, true – but they are also moral tales. Conversely, as characters on MM, meerkats are individual subjects whose moral worlds and dilemmas seem to echo ours. In this respect, MM is the heir of a long tradition of semi-fictionalised animal films (Mitman 2009). We know that this is anthropomorphic projection, but lurking under the fiction is, nevertheless, the real life of actual animals who did, in fact, do these things. These are moral tales – but they are also true.

The notion of biological function – which is so key in defining evolutionary characters – is the distant descendent of Aristotle's final cause. This is the same conceptual ancestor which, through a different set of mutations, gives us the 'telos' beloved of anthropologists of ethics, the constant purpose around which virtuous characters coalesce, and more broadly the purpose-filled narratives of human inter-subjectivity. There is thus a conceptual kinship between the two meanings of character described in the sections above – characters as purposive figures in a narrative; characters as functional units in evolutionary process. While they are profoundly dissonant in many ways, these are both positions within a broader (perhaps Euro-American, or folk-Aristotelian) conversation about purposeful action.

Conclusion: character as an analytic

I have suggested that the particular case examined in this article might shed some light on broader entailments of the notion of character in contemporary Euro-American settings, and that this in turn might open up some considerations about 'character' as a comparative anthropological term. In relation to the first point, consider the way the term character (*personnage*)[1] blinks in and out of Mauss's classic essay on the person:

> the word *persona*, an artificial 'character' (personnage), the mask and role of comedy and tragedy, of trickery and hypocrisy – a stranger to the 'self' (moi) – […] had also become synonymous with the true nature of the individual. […] The [Greek] word *prosopon* did indeed have the same meaning as persona, a mask. But it can then also signify the 'personage' (personnage) that each individual is and desires to be, his character (the two words are often linked), the true face. […] The word *prosopon* is extended to the individual, with his nature laid bare and every mask torn away, and, nevertheless, there is retained the sense of the artificial: the sense of what is the innermost nature of this 'person' (personne), and the sense of what is the 'role-player' (personnage). (Mauss 1985: 13–14)

The term character (*personnage*) emerges precisely at those junctures where Mauss is seeking to pin down the paradoxically double nature of the person as both essential and contrived. For Mauss, this ambivalence denoted the transitional nature of character, as one step along the way from the 'primitive' persona or mask, through to the 'modern' self with its unitary innermost nature. One might see here an analogous dynamic to

1 The translator's oscillations bespeak the difficulties of pinning it down.

that of Mauss's account of the gift (Mauss 1970) as analysed by Parry (1986). According to Parry, the Maussian gift is intended to figure as a kind of hybrid precursor to the modern capitalist split between pure commodities and pure (free) gifts. Similarly, here, Mauss seems to be suggesting that an initially hybrid relational person – a 'primitive' person whose fundamental essence is nothing other than the situational role it plays in different ritual and social settings – is progressively split into the double figure of the authentic modern inner self and its contrived outer masks.

One doesn't have to subscribe to Mauss's evolutionist conceit to see that there is something interesting going on here. Subtract the vision of a progressive shift from 'primitive' to 'modern' and you are left with three mutually entwined terms which form a part of the contemporary Euro-American 'field of concepts' surrounding the person (Strathern 2018a). The first is character as a contrived mask, a role one plays within the structure of a broader narrative or encounter. This character is defined from the outside in, by the necessities of a situated interaction or of a narrative structure. The second term is the inner character, the true self which purportedly underpins yet sometimes challenges this contrived, externally imposed role. This is the character of 'a person whose desires and impulses are his own' or of a well-integrated functional unit. Taken together, these two opposed visions of character map a familiar set of Euro-American concerns at the intersection of individuality and authenticity. They speak of a vision of authentic, self-possessed individuals who are thrown into social relations. The moral tensions of virtuous subjects finding ways to compromise in the real world; the presentation of the self in everyday life (Goffman 1990); the tentative shadow of real people 'behind' fictionalised accounts (Reed forthcoming); the mystery of how selfish genes in individual organisms might have produced social animals (Crist 1999) – these are all avatars of the same Euro-American metaphysics in which authenticity and primacy lie with individual entities, to which relationships are additional.[2]

But there is also, within this same Euro-American conceptual field, a third position, which Mauss, and many other anthropologists since, have been tempted to map onto non-western others. This is the position in which the two faces of 'character' are collapsed: the vision of an authentic character, the truth of an entity, entirely exhausted by or made up of its relational position. That possibility is not so alien to Euro-American metaphysics as Mauss and others suggest. To begin with, a vision of characters as authentic relational marks is fundamentally entailed by any epistemology which recognises that a thing can only be known by its position within a field of differences: this is the 'character' of taxonomy – a distinctive mark which is nothing other than a relational difference. This structuralist[3] theme has direct echoes in discussions of relational, fragmented, contingent personhood furthered by post-structuralist Euro-American thinkers (Humphrey 2008). But elements of that picture of contingent, fragmented or relational selfhood are much older still, echoing throughout the history of western philosophy, in the work of Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Mill, James, Mead, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty (Murray 1993: 9). As Murray perceptively noted, western intellectuals – anthropologists definitely not excepted – have a tendency to 'invent their own traditions' for argumentative convenience, picking out certain features of western notions of personhood as characteristic, while forgetting others.

2 I am grateful to Sarah Green for pointing out this pattern in the material.
3 Although I do not have space to pursue this here, there is a direct kinship between anthropological structuralism and the biological structuralism which informed much typological thinking (see Candea 2018).

In that context, the conceptual value of the Janus-faced concept of character is precisely that it picks out the 'dialectical relationship between contrastive themes of self-hood' (Murray 1993: 18). 'Character' maps a field of partly contradictory and partly connected conceptual problematics: problems that arise for persons at the intersection between relational definition and authentic existence. Imagining this in turn as a comparative term, then, subtly reshuffles the problematics raised by comparative enquiries into the person or the subject. Rather than setting forth from straw-man vision of singular or settled western selfhood, to discover pre-configured alterities elsewhere, thinking about 'character' comparatively suggests that one might look to compare not fixed forms of selfhood, but rather fluid and contested *problematics* of selfhood.

Some of this work has already begun in the anthropology of ethics, where the Janus-face of character – holding together the mask and the mark – has clear resonances. Anthropologists of ethics have sought to open up essentialist visions of moral character, to show the ways in which they are simultaneously real and socially scaffolded, constructed or contrived (Keane 2015: 96–8) in and through intersubjective social interaction. Productive theoretical possibilities lie at the intersection between notions of moral character as an ethical substance, a distinctive and true mark of the subject which is worked on individually and collectively (Pandian 2009), and the invocation of various 'characters' as named moral exemplars (Humphrey 1997) or more broadly, sociological types in relation to which a speaker might index or reflect on their own action and moral possibilities (Keane 2011; Liu 2002: 21–5). The intersection between these two faces of character would, I suspect, repay further investigation.

These explorations might interdigitate in productive ways with an older literature pertaining to the classic field of 'role theory'.[4] Thus Marilyn Strathern's (2008) piece, *The disappearing of an office*, recalls the way in which that now rather forgotten tradition of anthropological theorising played on a productive tension between individual and person, and also between person and office. As Strathern writes, 'there were situations in which the two concepts, each thereby essentialising the other, were opposed, paired, linked or elided to great creative effect' (2008: 128). Strathern does not – any more than the original authors she evokes – call up the notion of character in that essay (but see Strathern 2018b). However, Adam Reed (forthcoming) makes that link by connecting Strathern's claim to an argument about characterisation, which, as we saw above, he draws from literary theorist Alex Woloch. Reconsidered in this light, as something more than a euphemism for structural-functionalism, role theory might well be ripe for a reinvention.

In sum, my aim in this article has not been to articulate something like a 'theory of character', but rather to make a proposal for the particular heuristic value of the term, in an anthropology which is after all already saturated with partly overlapping terms (person, subject, individual, and so forth). The distinctive value of 'character', I have argued, is the way the term indexes a particular kind of specificity which is simultaneously inherent to the entity described and yet recognised as contrived. This doubleness is indexed in the way the 'character' of a thing or person can be used to denote both its specific mark, its distinctive essence *and* a mere role it plays. The broader value

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4 Liu (2002: 21–5), following Macintyre, distinguishes characters from social roles in that the former are socially determined from outside and require a complete fusing between personality and social role. Macintyre's 'character' in this sense covers only the third position described above – that of an entity which is simultaneously authentic and defined purely in external structural terms. In the view taken here, as suggested above, this specific distinction would be one aspect of the comparative problematic of 'character' writ large.

of 'character' for anthropology, I suggest, is its ability to raise comparative questions about such dynamics within and beyond Euro-American settings.

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Les deux faces du caractère : contes moraux du comportement animal

Afin de voir ce que le concept insaisissable de « caractère » apporterait à l'anthropologie, cet article aborde en premier lieu le rôle de ce concept dans d'autres travaux. Il étudie deux invocations du « caractère » au sujet d'animaux présents sur un site de recherches scientifiques en Afrique du Sud. Il s'agit d'une part de l'utilisation banale de ce terme pour désigner la façon dont les sujets de recherche ont été transformés en « personnages » dans l'émission télévisée Meerkat Manor; d'autre part, du terme technique « caractère biologique » – l'unité de base de la biologie de l'évolution contemporaine, et l'objet principal d'analyse sur ce site de recherches. Ces deux types de « caractère » sont plus que de simples homonymes – ils renvoient à des préoccupations du même ordre relatives à une action intentionnelle, alimentent des récits moraux contradictoires et opèrent sur le seuil entre la fiction autoréférentielle et la vérité essentielle. S'appuyant sur ce cas, l'article tente de montrer que la valeur distinctive du concept de caractère en ce qui concerne l'anthropologie réside dans son ambivalence – la façon dont il peut désigner à la fois un masque artificiel (un personnage dans un récit) et l'essence même de l'entité dont il est question (son vrai caractère). Une telle ambivalence décrit une forme sociale particulière, qui fait écho à travers l'anthropologie des institutions, de l'éthique et des connaissances.

Mots-clés animaux, science, moralité, évolutionnisme, récit