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A Critical Realist Exploration of the Moral Character of Insider Social Change Agents

Navigating Between the Invisible and Visible

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From insight to impact.

Insider Social Change Agents: A New Force for Good

Employees pushing for **social change** from within their organizations (e.g., NEXT in Zurich Insurance, Gen B in Bühler, Siempact in Siemens, etc.).

Driven by values that safeguard the **common good** of future generations, not just business goals:



Source: NEXT Movement in Zürich Insurance Group (2021)

Face internal tension: **loyalty** to the organization vs. staying **true** to themselves and their values (Creed, 2003; Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

The Missing Piece: Moral Character

Largely anchored in **moral psychology**, current research examining "who" these agents are (e.g. identity, role, and motivation) focuses on the **identity** and **cognitive works** that these agents undertake to reduce these internal tensions (e.g. Creed et al., 2002; Gutierrez et al., 2010; Hemingway, 2005; Wright et al., 2012).

→ But what about their **moral character**?

Moral character:

- Centuries-old concept grounded in Aristotle's moral philosophy of **virtue ethics.**
- Pattern of stable dispositions bridging **being** and **acting** → distinct from values, personality, and other similar psychological constructs.

Research Question and Objective

What does this mean?

- Moral character = foundation of ethical action, what enables one to act with **integrity**.
- We are not fixed by personality—we can **cultivate** character.
- Crucial for understanding **influence** beyond formal roles.

How does Aristotle's concept of moral character bring ontological and epistemological depth to who insider social change agents are and how they influence others?

Objective: use an **Aristotelian** and **critical realist** lens to explore the **visible** and **invisible** aspects of moral character and its role in enabling change agents to **influence** others despite lacking formal authority.

Moral Character: The Invisible Foundation of Influence

In his works (cf. NE and Rh), Aristotle distinguishes two types of character:

- **Inartistic character** [ethike] made of one's true intentions and habitual dispositions, and
- **Artistic character** [ethos] that is revealed through speech.

→ It is eventually how others **perceive** this **artistic character** [ethos] that will determine how **influential** the person speaking will be: how we speak partly reflects who we are (cf. character-based leadership).

In other words, moral character might best be described as a **multi-layered** concept that is composed of both visible and invisible aspects:

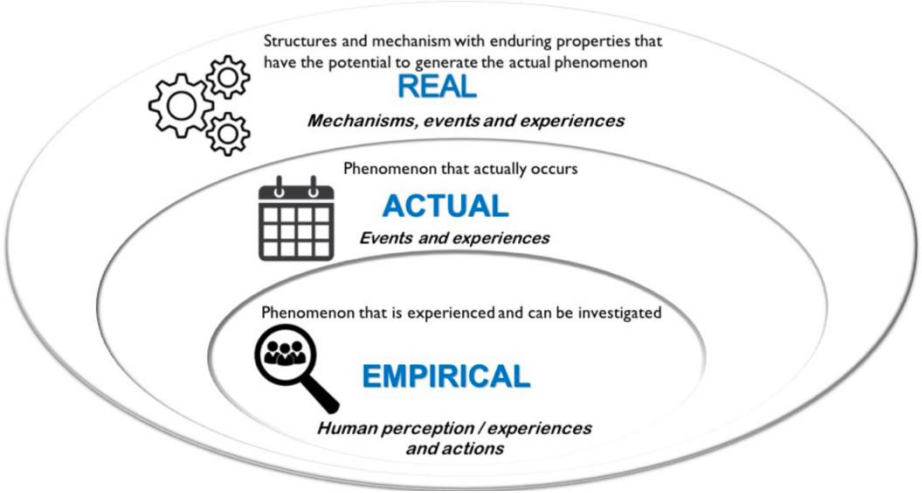
- **Invisible**: *real nature* or *essence* of moral character (ontological basis);
- **Visible**: *knowledge* about moral character that can be obtained though *rhetoric* and *observations* (epistemological basis).

Bridging the Visible and Invisible Through Critical Realism

Assumes a fundamental difference between the world as it **truly exists** (ontology) and what **human knowledge** (epistemology) about it can be derived (Elder-Vass, 2022).

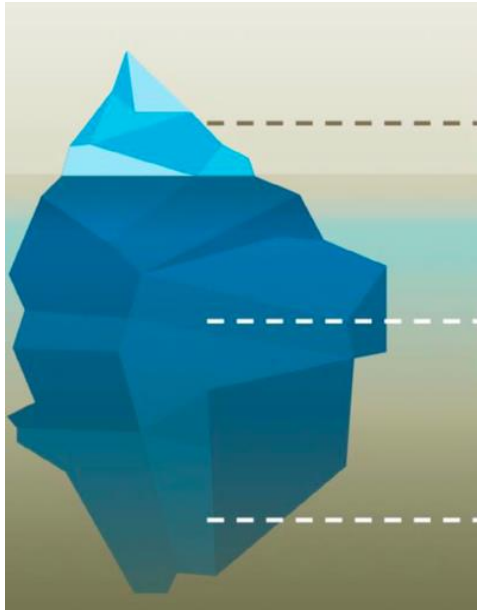
Describes reality as being composed of three interrelated domains: the *real*, *actual*, and *empirical* (Bhaskar 1978; Brönnimann, 2022).

CR helps us to show how **visible** and **invisible** layers of moral character **interact**—and explain why that matters for influence.



Source: Mukumbang et al. (2019)

Layers of Moral Character: From the Invisible to the Visible



Perceived moral character (perceived *ethos*)
- Located in the *empirical* domain (visible)
- How change agents are "seen" by others
- Shaped by audience's subjectivity (moral character as social construction)

Expressed moral character (artistic character, *ethos*):
- Located in the *actual* domain (might or might not be visible)
- How change agents "express" their true selves through rhetoric
- Multiple ways to actualize moral character

Real moral character (inartistic character, *ethike*):
- Located in the *real* domain (invisible)
- Authentic inner self: "who" change agents truly are
- True nature of moral character exists independently of whether it is observed

→ **Influence depends on alignment between these three layers**

Why This Matters: Authenticity, Influence, and Change

> "Aristotle argues that the speaker's **character**, as revealed through speech itself, can serve to **persuade** to the extent that the audience **perceives** that character as virtuous."
>
> Koehn (2013, p.251)

This means that **effective influence** comes when these three layers (real, expressed, and perceived) align: true character is expressed clearly and interpreted by others as virtuous.

Through this multi-layered view on moral character, we

- Show how change agents can **secure or lose influence** based on how well they align their moral core with its outward manifestation (degree of authenticity);
- Acknowledge that **perception isn't always reality** – there might be a gap between who change agents truly are and how they are perceived by others;
- Emphasize the importance of being seen as **authentic** and **virtuous** to inspire change and action when lacking formal authority.

Conclusion: Bringing Depth to "Who" Change Agents Really Are and How They Influence Others

By integrating Aristotle's virtue ethics with critical realism, we gain a deeper ontological and epistemological understanding of **"who"** change agents are – and why they become **influential**.

We argue that moral character might best be described as a **multi-layered** concept that combines **visible** and **invisible** elements – whose alignment is crucial to generate influence and change.

So how can change from within be effectively supported?

- Focus on **moral development** – not just performance;
- Train change agents in **rhetorical awareness** – how to express their true selves and core values clearly and persuasively;
- Create room for deeper **authenticity** – character should be recognized beneath the surface.

Questions?




Thank
you!