WE LACK CHARACTER, BUT WE CAN LIVE WITH IT

By Tomas Midttun Tobiassen

A central aspect of our moral language and thought concerns the attribution of traits that are supposed to explain and predict behavior. I argue, along the lines of John Doris, that the adequacy of this practice is undermined by research in experimental psychology, and indicate how this poses a problem for ethical theories that emphasize the development of traits or virtues. Furthermore, I show how we can understand and reconcile our common sense intuitions and everyday attributions of traits with the claim that there are no deep personal structures that are determinate of behaviour.

We believe our friends to be honest, we vote for presidential candidates because they are responsible and we praise war heroes for their courage. Our educational system is supposed to make our children virtuous, and many of our day to day judgments are based on attributions of character traits such as "John gave me the roses because he is kind". This practice is anchored in a *globalist* conception of character, i.e. the view that persons have robust character traits that can help us predict and explain conduct over a broad range of situations. In *Lack of Character,* John Doris argues that the globalist thesis is empirically inadequate, and that we should opt for a *situationalist* view on character (Doris 2002). The thesis he defends is that moral conduct is so sensitive to what is usually considered morally irrelevant situational features that the globalist conception of character is false. Are we living a lie?

I will assess Doris' arguments against globalism, present his theory about character and discuss the conclusions that can be drawn. In part I I discuss the field of philosophy from which the arguments against globalism flows, moral psychology, and its relevance for morality, and specify the importance of the globalist thesis for character ethics. I then discuss whether globalism is the kind of thesis that can be attacked by empirical evidence, and try to set some

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criteria for what Doris must show to justify his conclusion that character ethics is empirically inadequate. In part II I survey some of the empirical results Doris appeals to, and argue that they succeed in undermining globalism. Then I present Doris' theory about character, and discuss some

further ideas to consider in connection with the thesis he proposes. Finally, part III provides a suggestion as to why we have globalist intuitions and often use trait-explanations uncritically, and conclude with a few remarks on how society should respond to the conclusions Doris draws.

Part I

Moral psychology investigates the psychological properties of moral agents and considers the implications these might have in the field of conflicting normative theories. Moral psychology can be concerned with many things, but the conception of moral psychology I endorse here is one concerned with using empirical data to help determine which moral theory we should adopt. The field of moral psychology thus revolves around these two questions:

(a) What empirical claims about human psychology do advocates of competing perspectives on ethical theory assert or presuppose?
(b) How empirically well supported are these claims?
(Doris & Stich 2006:§1)

I will not discuss how we are to choose between ethical theories but rather assume that "an ethical conception that commends relationships, commitments, or life projects that are at odds with the sorts of attachments that can reasonably be expected to take root in and vivify actual human lives is an ethical conception with – at best – a very tenuous claim to our assent" (Doris & Stich 2006:§1). I propose that we should aim at an ethical theory deriving from a realistic conception of the complex entities with which any ethical theory is concerned – humans. How to identify the *empirical* claims a specific theory makes about the psychology of moral agents is a question of scholarly interpretation that can make the refutation of an ethical theory difficult. It might be unclear exactly which claims are empirical, and which are normative. Here, I will not be concerned with a thorough analysis of any specific theory, but rather attack what seems like an assumption made by a class of ethical theories that I believe is open to empirical assessment. It is a question of methodological dispute[1] whether *any* psychological assumptions are crucial to an ethical theory, but here, I will assume a tight relationship between ethics and human nature. The idea is that moral conduct is dependent on psychological features, and if the goal of our theory is to lead people to good lives, the psychological nature of agents is important. That being said, given the fact that there are other considerations to be made when we assess ethical theories (e.g. the normative claims they make, relation to other crucial features of agen-

thood), moral psychology should not be seen as a highway to refutation, but rather a way to get more evidence involved in the difficult questions of ethics. With this, I wish to qualify any claims made later about how far empirical evidence can bring us. If the empirical evidence suggests *radical* revision, then arguments can be made for no revision at all. I will not give any of these here, but rather assume that moral psychology can help us in the choice of ethical theory. From this it follows that if an ethical theory makes false claims about the psychology of agents, it counts against it.

> **The conception of moral psychology I will be assuming is one that tries to use empirical data to determine which moral theory we should adopt.**

We will be concerned with moral theories that claim that the moral properties of *persons* are relevant in determining the moral status of an action. I will call ethical theories that hold morality as essentially concerned with the *character* of an individual (i.e. the behavioral *dispositions* assumed to derive from character traits such as honesty, courage, benevolence), rather than the *actions* of the individual, character ethics.[2] The specific details are irrelevant for our purpose because we will be concerned with a *psychological premise* of the theories; the existence, or at least possible existence, of character traits, and their relevance for moral conduct. If we have good empirical grounds for believing that there are no such traits, or that there are no traits that can play the role reserved for them in the ethical framework, or that traits often are irrelevant for conduct, character ethics will be in trouble; adopting a theory that emphasizes development of character, when there is no such thing, will be a poor choice; it will not enhance our lives.

The fundamental assumptions of these theories are anchored in traditional Western thinking about morality[3], where it is often thought that character is the underlying *cause* for conduct; think about how we commonly blame people's behavior on their "laziness" or "untidiness". These kinds of explanations are very common. I will ignore the distinction between character traits (traditionally thought of as expressions of *values*) with personality traits (which are more concerned with description of dispositions and predication); it will not matter much to the thesis under consideration.

Doris' claim is that the assumptions character ethics make about human psychology are not empirically supported; to the contrary, they are more or less refuted by research done in experimental psychology. We will formu-

late the *globalist* thesis, which seems to be a subset of the descriptive claims of character ethics that are necessary for the psychological adequacy of the theory, in this way:

(1) An individual with a particular moral character trait (among these; charity, patience etc.) will exhibit trait-relevant behavior across a broad spectrum of trait-relevant situations.

(2) According to the Stability Claim, moral character traits are relatively stable over time. The Stability Claim does not preclude the possibility of an individual changing his moral character over time. Rather, it holds that such changes take time.

(3) According to the Unity Claim, there is a probabilistic correlation between having one virtue and having other virtues. For example, an individual who is temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from food (the virtue of abstinence) is likely to also be temperate with regard to the pleasures derived from sexual intercourse (the virtue of chastity).

A few words of clarification: "Trait-relevant situations" are situations in which we would pre-theoretically *assume* that the relevant trait would be manifested. A compassionate person will be compassionate in most situations in which it is appropriate to be compassionate. And so on. I will often use "robust trait" to talk about a trait that satisfies (1) and (2). Doris believes the globalist thesis is committed to this type of traits. Doris and Stich writes:

> The virtues are paradigmatic examples of [robust] traits: if someone possesses the virtue of courage, for example, she is expected to consistently behave courageously across the full range of situations where it is ethically appropriate to do so, despite the presence of inducements to behave otherwise (Doris & Stich 2006:§4).

We can say that the virtues are the traits *simpliciter*; we can imagine someone being kind to children, but not towards old people, and such a person will not have the virtue of kindness. The virtues are very broad structures, but when we say that someone is compassionate, we expect them to be so over a broad range of situations. The central question for the weakening of character ethical theories is whether we can show that the idea of "trait" implicit in the theories is often irrelevant in moral conduct. Character ethics emphasize the development of traits that will, almost magically, guide behavior on the morally right track. If it can be shown that in general, the kind of traits so central to globalism is just a drop in the vast ocean of causes of human behavior, we should consider revising our moral theories. Having a moral theory that emphasizes an irrelevant part of the mechanics of moral action might be considered *immoral.* More on this in part III.

I claim that if (1)-(3) are supposed to be a substantial part of a moral theory, they are up for empirical assessment. Simply put, if a moral theory is to serve as a guide to good human conduct, the theory should emphasize what is important for behavioral outcome. (1)-(3) are claims *about* the traits of persons. Now, are (1)-(3) crucial for character ethics? Doris thinks so, and argues for the commitment using claims about *virtue* from Aristotle, McDowell and Dent (Doris 2002:17–18). The problem with this kind of argument is that the *virtuous agent* is an ideal, and as such, it is debatable whether empirical data that shows that the average man does not exhibit (1)-(3) affects the claims about the virtuous person. When we look closer at the empirical evidence, I believe we see that (1)-(3) can not be sustained in the sense necessary to ground a practically interesting character ethics. If character ethics is to be considered a serious theory about the moral aspect of human lives, it can not only be concerned with an ideal agent, it has to engage with the "man in the street". If the development of (1)-(3) is so hard that (almost) no one exhibits them[4], I think character ethics stands a small chance of having a role to play in our moral framework. We can now formulate the challenge empirical evidence pose to character ethics more succinctly: If the goal of character ethics is to develop the virtues/traits and thereby guide us to good action and lives, then skepticism about the existence of these traits undermines the possibility of reaching the goal, and we should consider revision.

Doris sets it as his aim to show that:

> There is a marked disparity between the extent of behavioral consistency that familiar conceptions of the trait lead one to expect and the extent of behavioral consistency that systematic observation suggest one is *justified* in believing (Doris 2002:20, my italics).

I see two claims arising from this:

A. The assumptions about character that are necessary for character ethics are seriously challenged by empirical research.
B. Everyday conceptions of traits are not justified in light of empirical research.

I think there is something right about both these claims, and I more or less endorse (A) in part II, but defend a way to see (B) as not totally right in part III.

Part II

The argument Doris puts forward against globalism can be formulated like this:

P1 If behavior is typically ordered by robust traits, systematic observation will reveal pervasive behavioral consistency.

P2 Systematic observation does not reveal pervasive behavioral consistency.

C Therefore, behavior is not typically ordered by robust traits (Doris & Stich 2006:§4).

If the globalist thesis is to have any practical value, it seems one has to accept (P1); if it is impossible to observe the consequences that follow from having robust traits, what good would it do to invoke such structures and explanations, not to say focus moral education on these? Ockham should get to work; there is only so many times we can say "I don't know why he was so aggressive; he *is* very patient". Therefore, we will grant (P1), and rather discuss (P2). This is where most would try to resist Doris' argument against globalism; but my claim will be, with Doris, that empirical evidence suggests (P2), and thus defeats an assumption on which character ethics seem to rest, i.e. that behavior is ordered by robust traits. Doris focuses on these studies:

- Isen and Levin (1972:387) discovered that subjects who had just found a dime were 22 times more likely to help a woman who had dropped some papers than subjects who did not find a dime (88% v. 4%).
- Darley and Batson (1973:105) report that passersby not in a hurry were 6 times more likely to help an unfortunate who appeared to be in significant distress than were passersby in a hurry (63% v. 10%).
- Mathews and Canon (1975:574–5) found subjects were 5 times more likely to help an apparently injured man who had dropped some books when ambient noise was at normal levels than when a power lawn mower was running nearby (80% v. 15%).
- Haney et al. (1973) describe how college students role-playing as guards in a simulated prison subjected student prisoners to intense verbal and emotional abuse.
- Milgram (1974) found that subjects would repeatedly punish a screaming victim with realistic (but simulated) electric shocks at the polite request of an experimenter (Doris & Stich 2006:§4).

It is important to note that this is just some of the research conducted in the field of experimental psychology, and that the tendencies shown are found in a broad range of studies. I urge the reader to inquire into this himself.[5]

I believe Doris' arguments goes a long way to show that much conduct is determined by factors *other* than traits (these studies are concerned with compassion, but let us assume that it is a general phenomenon). Remember that the globalist thesis suggests that *if* someone has a trait (e.g. compassion), *then* they will act in accordance with the trait in a broad range of situations. That only 1 out of 25 in the "non-dime" condition in the Isen and Levine study would be considered compassionate, while the 14 out of the 16 in the "dime"-condition are good, compassionate people just seems *too* implausible (Doris 2002:30). The intuitive explanation of the effect is that the dime triggered positive affect, but the explanation does not matter much for our purpose; the moral to draw from these studies is that apparently, external, usually explanatorily *neglected* facts about situations seem to play a determinative role in our behavior. This suggests that faced with the unruly character of situations, the causal role that is supposed to be played by character traits is undermined by situational factors. The Milgram study, furthermore, suggests that situations can be extremely *persuasive*; given the "right" situation, people can act in ways that are completely "out of character". This evidence strongly suggests that in many of the situations where we make moral judgments about people based on traits, we are invoking false explanatory structures.

Imagine observing someone participating in the phone booth experiment: We would be prone to judge the act of helping a compassionate action stemming from the helpers' character – never would we think about the dime! But we would indeed be incorrect – in light of this evidence, it is plausible to say that the *dime* is playing a central causal role. Presumably, this is a ubiquitous phenomenon. The question the evidence poses for the character ethicist is where to locate the traits in this picture. If we all are very sensitive to situational factors, the question of the behavioral relevance of character is pressing. I will not engage in a thorough discussion about what the evidence actually shows about when and where we will be affected by situational factors. Presumably, we always are to one

degree or other. Maybe there is something called "character" that makes it possible to claim that Alf will behave "better" than Betty if the *situation is the same*. The obvious problem with this solution is that the evidence suggests that things as *arbitrary* as a dime (Isen and Levin 1972), or the induced belief that you are in a hurry (Darley and

tribution error. Crudely, it is the "tendency to overemphasize internal explanations for the behavior of others, while failing to take into account the power of the situation" (Grinnell 2009:1). Taken together with our tendency to take situations into account when we are explaining our *own* behavior (together, these effects are called the actor-

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Batson 1973), will often undermine our idea of prediction and the prospects for correct moral judgment (if it is based on character) because these effects are everywhere, and we presumably will not know where they are. I will not discuss the implications of this, but a weak conclusion to draw is that the power of situations is often overlooked, and we should seriously consider incorporating this crucial feature of moral conduct into our theory.

The best explanation of these findings seems to be that it often, and in surprising ways, is the external situation, rather than the intrinsic character, that brings about the behavior. This suggests that claim (1) above does not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

I believe there is another effect in social psychology that supports Doris' thesis, the so-called *fundamental at-*

observer bias), this suggests that we are making quite a lot of false attributions. Even though it is a plausible hypothesis that our tendency to attribute, especially our own shortcomings, to external situational factors because of guilt and similar emotions, I believe this effect also relates to the fact that we have more of the *relevant information* available when *we* are the agent. The actor-observer bias, then, points in the same direction as the empirical evidence; it suggests that even though we often think and explain in terms of dispositions and traits, a more situation-sensitive explanation is more correct.

I believe these findings suggests that we should be skeptical about traits, and that this skepticism challenges the psychological assumption that underlie character ethics. I think we can find evidence of the situational sensiti-

vity suggested by the empirical evidence through personal examination as well: Again and again, you find yourself helping people when you are in a good mood; I have a tendency to give money to beggars when I am in a good mood (because I believe I *should*), much less so when I have had a bad day. The same is presumably true for others; our behavioral patterns are greatly affected by factors not deriving from our character. Again, the explanation of this is second order for our purpose here; maybe we pay more attention to the details around us when in a good mood, or maybe we are more prone to feel empathy, but the point is that in the relevant ways, these effects outrun the explanatory resources of globalism.

Consider a situation in which you have just got some bad news, e.g. that you are fired. In such a situation, you are *much* less prone to lend aid to others. But from a moral point of view, you are still as obligated to help the old woman having a hard time carrying her bags up the stairs. This is where the character ethicist seems to be in conflict with our moral intuitions; the fact that almost *everyone* will be affected by the bad news does not make it *less obligatory* to help the woman. And it is questionable whether the development of virtues (if there are any such) will change the behavioral outcome. The virtue ethicist will claim that the virtuous person will have the *right* attitudes in light of any external situational factor, but both social psychology and personal experience tells us that the dim virtuous light of the average man is so often eclipsed by situational factors that character development should not be at the center of our ethical focus. In the face of the empirical evidence put forward, and an appeal to honest introspection, I think we should join Doris in concluding that characterological explanation of behavior is often inadequate; to think that you yourself, or other people, are acting as you do *because* of traits will be a fallacious inference.

In the face of all this evidence against the globalist thesis, Doris puts forward a theory about moral character, called *situationalism*, that can be summarized in this way:

(1*) Non-robustness Claim: Moral character traits are not robust – that is, they are not consistent across a wide spectrum of trait-relevant situations. Whatever moral character traits an individual has are situation-specific.

(2*) Consistency Claim: While a person's moral character traits are relatively stable over time, this should be understood as consistency of sitation-specific traits, rather than robust traits.

(3*) Fragmentation Claim: A person's moral character traits do not have the evaluative integrity suggested by the Integrity Claim. There may be considerable disunity in a person's moral character among her situation-specific character traits.

This is an adequate revision of (1)-(3) in light of some of the data. However, we must also acknowledge the "power" of situations. (1*)-(3*) can not explain why so many of the Milgram-subjects went all the way if we do not want to say that they have a "situation specific disposition" to "under situations of force X do what the situation dictates". There are no such traits. I do not see this as an objection to (1*)-(3*); rather, it shows that it leaves things unexplained. Intuitively, factors like these should be left to the "situational" component of behavioral explanations, but the notion of a "situation" is now somewhat problematic.

The problem is that Doris is vague about what a situation is. Doris usually talks about situations in terms of nominal, i.e. external experiment-manipulative, conditions, but how are we to understand the difference between a dime and a belief causing action? Doris builds (1*)-(3*) around the idea that a person can be consistently "marriage honest" but still can be "paying taxes dishonest", and I agree that this is how we should understand the classical traits such as honesty and patience; they are seldom served whole.[6] The problem is rather how much we want, and are able to, build into the situation. Doris uses "situations" about almost anything in terms of which we can explain behavior. *Information* can create situations (broadly construed), as it did in (Darley and Batson 1973), where the belief "I am in a hurry" created a "situation" which seriously altered the probability of compassionate behavior. Doris used this to argue that behavior is very sensitive to situational factors. But now we might ask ourselves; when is something not a situation?

To make sense of all the data, we could opt for a broader conception of "situation" than it seems Doris endorses[7], in which also motivational and doxastic elements are parts of situations. Doris sometimes seems to blend these factors into the situations, but I think they are better thought of as properties the agents bring to the situation, given the obvious fact that people will react differently to stimulus. Attributing these factors to the agents is compatible with psychological explanations of these phenomena, and in agreement with our common sense idea that the individuals are bringing about the effects. If we specify the beliefs, motivations and emotions involved in some scenario, and then map behavior onto quantifications of the dif-

ferent components, we have the makings of a predictively powerful theory. For example, having lost your job will greatly decrease the probability of compassionate conduct; this will merely be a quantification/predictive theory, without any explanatory input. The prospects for predicting behavior of individuals in contexts aside, I think beliefs and motivations should not be blended in too strongly with situational factors, as I hold that both psychological and situational factors are necessarily different when it comes to *explanation* of action. In light of this, maybe there is room for a fine-grained theory about personality which describes how we react to different nominal situations in light of some cognitive consistency.[8]

A hypothesis to note is that the evidence surveyed can be taken to suggest that it is in some *special class* of situations in which we make moral choices that situational factors are at (dominant) play. Maybe the weight tip to "good" or "bad" action because of small changes in the situation (a dime, mood, loud noises, experienced hurry or motivational factors) because of some general pattern of features of the cases. Choices are sometimes "made for us" by the situation, especially when we are having a hard time deciding, or do not use all our cognitive powers considering what to do. In many of these cases, *character* does not seem to play a determinative role, because either we have introspected our "character" (in this sentence, I am using "character" to refer to our more or less stable beliefs, goals, desires etc…), but can't decide on what is "in accordance with it", thus succumbing more easily to situational factors, or the act is so negligible that we did not *think* much about it. If this is a general feature of the cases in which we are sensitive to situational cues, the door might be kept open for character to shine through the wilderness of situational determinants in a class of situations in which we have time to choose, and we really care. When making a big decision, maybe you will put yourself to it and come up with a "definite solution". If so, the above hypothesis grants that you did so to some extent because of what we call *character*: Specific behavioral (and maybe cognitive) dispositions sufficiently stable to ground the idea that you made the decision *because* of these. But the evidence suggests that these traits are narrow, probably are not very transferable to other situations, and that often, other factors will determine the behavior.

> **Again and again, you find yourself helping people when you are in a good mood; much less so when you have had a bad day.**

Part III

I think we should conclude that the way character ethics thinks about traits and the causal and explanatory power of traits is problematic. In the end, the question comes down to whether behavior should be explained in terms of robust traits, or situational regularity. The choice will determine what explanatory resources will be at our hands in understanding moral conduct. Having an *adequate* account of moral conduct is necessary to make correct moral judgments, and correct moral judgments are necessary for giving people what they deserve, correctly decide punishment and determine a host of other ethical and socially important issues. I will not here discuss whether our moral framework needs revision in light of the evidence undermining some of the building blocks of our everyday conception of moral theory, rather, I will discuss what can be considered an objection to my discussion; the apparent success of our everyday trait attributions.

It might be considered a consequence of my discussion that our trait-heavy everyday language is inadequate, and maybe even false. The argument I have in mind goes along these lines: "We use traits to explain and understand behavior every day, and it works! If your conclusion is true, this practice is false, or at least inappropriate. But it can not be because it works so well. So your conclusion must be false." Another related concern is that the idea of traits being stable and highly linked to behavior seems to be a common sense platitude, and we should be skeptical to any philosophical argument that tries to undermine these. To answer these worries, I will sketch an explanation of the origin and background for our everyday practice. I think it is important that we incorporate the common sense data in our explanatory framework if we can. We then do not have to opt for a thorough revision of an important part of our moral explanation and understanding. At the same time, we should be honest, and consider whether we should continue our practice, seeing that the stakes of false judgments about moral conduct are high. If we can justify our everyday language-use, then we are not living a complete lie, only a partial one. That should be considered mildly comforting.

I believe the reason for our extensive use of trait-language is that we do indeed experience a high degree of behavioral consistency in our personal relations. The thing to note is that in many instances, this is explainable in terms of the more narrow traits Doris invokes. We should think of this consistency as the conjunction of situational regularity and the claim that changes in our goals and motivations stably correspond to situational changes. I believe

our everyday discourse takes changes in the behaviorally relevant (external) variables into consideration. When it comes to people we know, we often *talk* about the relevant external factors and make them explicit; if you are behaving "out of character" one day, you would usually give an *explanation* for this. For instance, your deviation from normal patience derives from you losing your job, or your bringing flowers home the first time in years is due to your promotion. The fact is that people *do* expect regularity, and we often explain the irregularities so that they are glossed over in our attribution of character. The guy who brought home flowers *because* he was promoted will not be known as the "bringing-back-flower-husband". So how is it that we can expect, and indeed experience, such a high regularity in our more intimate relationships? The obvious solution in light of situationalism is that situational regularity governs these relationships. This fits well with the situationalist thesis, which says that in similar situations, we will on average behave similarly. What is important in situationalism as a critique of our explanation of conduct, is that "situations" must be taken more seriously. Our everyday experiences might even be taken to suggest situationism, because situational similarity co-varies with behavioral consistency. But co-variation does not independently imply causation, and an explanation invoking character is just as well supported by the co-variation. The point to note, however, is that the situationist can explain the experienced consistency in many of the situations in which we participate by invoking similarity of situations and narrow traits as determinative factors.

This suggests that our explanations often are predictively correct, but maybe not causally correct (depending on how we interpret the totality of data presented and the possibility of explaining the co-variation both ways); given the situationist thesis, we do not do what we do *because* of (inherent) traits, but rather because of situations. Maybe we can reconstruct traits such that they somehow depend on situations. This would be a deviation from character ethics, and also from this discussion. So our everyday talk might be justified in "close" relationships, but notice that the justification does *not* transfer to other situations in which we are just as prone to invoke trait-explanations: encountering a sales clerk, watching a politician or slamming the door at the door seller, who we have few second thoughts to judge lazy, greedy or annoying – simpliciter. If anything, our survey suggests that this is probably not true.

Noticing that we often give *reasons* for our "out of character behavior" opens up a way to legitimize our every-day trait attributions and explanations in terms of these. We can think of them as *ceteris paribus*-claims. Consider if someone says P: "John gave me the flowers because he is kind". If this is true, maybe we should take the utterer not to assert that John has the trait of being kind simpliciter, but rather that in such and such situations, he acts kindly. However, do we not use such claims to predict behavior in situations that are *different* from the one in which the explanation was invoked? Having heard someone say P, we would expect John to be kind to his grandma as well. We might expect this, but what if we came to know that John's grandma is a nasty old woman? Then we would not have the same expectations. So I think our predictions are, or at least *should* be, conditional; they are *ceteris paribus*. I think this is how we often use trait attributions, at least in our more intimate relationships. Considering this in light of the fact that personality traits often justify us in rank ordering and inferring probabilities about behavior (Doris 2002:75), I do not think our common sense character attributions are totally astray, but please think again before you judge the tired sales clerk "lazy", or the unfortunate politician "irresponsible".[9]

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That being said, I do not think this practice is sufficient for (1)-(3) to hold; there simply are *too many* cases in which the *ceteris paribus* does not hold. In short, *ceteris paribus* does not reach far enough to justify the relevant existence of robust traits because things are seldom equal. Life is so complex, and the human psyche so sensitive to situational factors, that it seems like the idea of robust character traits is an unrealistic dream. Character ethics need the idea of traits that are amenable to extrapolation across a wide range of situations and justify equally wide ranging prediction. For character ethics to get off the ground there has to be traits we can cultivate so as to hold in a multitude of situations – the whole idea is that good action will derive from good character which is constituted by the virtues, which are paradigmatic examples of robust traits. But alas, we will have to look for other ways to bring about good action. And even though there presumably is a character basis from which we can predict *rank order* between subjects, an ethical theory mainly concerned with the individual's traits is a problematic one, because rank order is not sufficient for character ethics, and the evidence surveyed suggests that the traits are not robust enough.

> **Life is too complex, and human psyche so sensitive to situational factors, so it seems like the idea of robust character traits is an unrealistic dream.**

In light of the discussion in part I and part II, I believe a compelling argument can be made that we should somewhat rethink morality. Maybe one of our most pressing moral obligations concerns the construction of societies that generate situations in which we are encouraged to behave in pro-social ways, and even more importantly, which reduce the number and strength of situations prompting anti-social behavior. If practical philosophy is concerned with the good life and the good society, we have a moral obligation to take Doris' conclusion seriously. If we neglect it, our moral progress can be substantially delayed because of repeated attempts to achieve virtues that fade in the light of real life. The field of ethics is concerned with many things, but to actually get people to do the right thing should be one of our main goals. To vindicate virtue is good, but if it is an unreachable goal with few actual consequences, our money and intellectual resources should be put to better use. Even though we seem to lack robust character, I want to end with the optimistic suggestion that this insight enables us to have constructive aims for how to do better. Maybe we should start putting dimes in the phone booths.[10]

NOTES

[1] See Helle (this issue) for a discussion of these matters.

[2] This follows Doris' terminology. It is important to notice that "virtue ethics" is a type of character ethics. The paradigmatic example of ethical theories emphasizing the *action* of agents are consequentialism and deontology.

[3] There are studies that show that Eastern cultures seem to think somewhat differently about character.

[4] I will not be concerned with a discussion about whether some people actually are virtuous, or what this amounts to. This is a question of the interpretation of any particular characterological theory, and I will not engage in that. Again, we are assuming that character ethics require a realistic possibility of developing virtue, or at least that *traits are morally significantly relevant.*

[5] The Stich and Doris (2006) article is a good starting point, and there one can find references to the studies themselves.

[6] I will not discuss this here, but we should be sceptical to any claim about the "wideness" of traits; being a courageous warrior doesn't in any way guarantee courage in the face of emotional war, social revolution or mice. There is empirical evidence also in this domain, but it is disputed what it actually shows. Suffice it to say that we do have an intuitive grasp on the "fragmentation" of the traits.

[7] Doris does acknowledge that he has left "situation" vague, but thinks he can leave it more or less so because he believes more fine-grained conceptions of "situation" will just support his thesis that character ethics can not make sense of this. I agree with him in this, and the following is more an attempt to extend the framework Doris has established, and is an attempt to show in which direction we should think about these things.

[8] Theories that take this approach are known in psychology as "Social Cognitive Theories".

[9] Rank ordering implies holding everything constant between individuals, and then making a prediction. But the problem we have noticed is that very small changes in what we hold constant will possibly make big changes in behaviour (narrowness of traits), and it is also debatable whether rank-ordering is sufficient for character ethics, which seems to require that it is plausible to say that someone *are good,* or *are honest.* But you are only honest comparably to a rank ordering, and at *the least,* this does not suggest robust, intrinsic traits.

[10] Having made such a serious suggestion, I do believe there is a hope of cultivating the local character traits of people, if there are any such. There is presumably more to character ethics than could be vindicated in this paper, where the main goal was to suggest that the assumptions about character face serious problems. The possibility of local traits, and the possibility of cultivating these so that they have *substantial* behavioral consequences, could be an important discussion in the wake of the ideas Doris presents.

LITERATURE

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