

## Character, Situation and Excellence

### *I. The Problem: Skepticism about Character Traits*

Alexander the Great was a proud and ambitious man, whose rise owed much to his boldness and strength of will. So one may read in books, and claims about the nature and character of Alexander and of less famous individuals often pass for common knowledge. But it has been argued that trying to explain an individual's behavior as the result of personal character traits is misguided because there are in fact no individual character traits at all, including the supposed traits of pride, ambition, boldness and willpower. According to John Doris and Gilbert Harman, two philosophical advocates of this dissenting view, those who believe in personality traits as usually conceived are committing the *fundamental attribution error*. "Fundamental attribution error" is a label invented by Lee Ross for the mistake of underestimating the influence of specific situations on human behavior and of overestimating the consistency of an individual's behavior across different situations. Harman and Doris further hold that much ordinary talk of moral virtues commits this error and is infected by wrong beliefs about character and personality.<sup>1</sup>

Let us set aside some ambiguities. People sometimes say as a form of praise that a certain individual *has character*, or *has strength of character*. We might say this if we think the person is able to resist social pressure or the pull of local circumstances to behave in a praiseworthy way. To say that someone lacks character in this sense is to offer a moral criticism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nisbett and Ross (1980), p. 31 credit Ross with introducing the expression "fundamental attribution error". On character traits, see Harman (1999), (2000), (2001), (2003), (2010). Doris's most extended treatment of character can be found in Doris, J. (2002). For some further thoughts, see Doris (2010), especially the chapter 'Character', by Doris, Merritt and Harman. Peter Vranas (2005) has a discussion of consistency and character that differs from Doris and Harman in some respects but is generally supportive of their view. Some of the philosophical debate about character draws upon earlier work, taking Ross and Nisbett (1991) and Mischel (1990) as representative of research done by social psychologists since the watershed Mischel (1968).

But this is a special use of the word ‘character’ to mean something like ‘praiseworthy moral character’. (The ambiguity is punned upon in the title of Doris’s book *Lack of Character*.) To simply claim that there are such things as character traits is not necessarily to issue favorable moral evaluations.

There is also a difference between what is characteristic of a species or class and that which is characteristic of a particular individual. Some behavioral features hold of lions and of cats universally or for the most part: sleepiness, twitchy tails and stalking habits, for instance. Young cats as a group are generally more playful than their elders. Similarly, with few exceptions, human beings exercise linguistic skills, seek companionship, and try to avoid physical harm. But these characteristic behaviors do not count as individual character traits in the sense that is being considered. Unlike individual personalities and character traits the existence of generic or species wide characteristics is not in dispute.

Finally, there is a distinction to be drawn between character in the broader sense of a thing’s unchosen idiosyncrasies and, on the other hand, individual character construed as something formed and expressed by the deliberate acts of an agent. In the broader sense, any particular individual with a certain idiosyncratic nature is a candidate for having its own individual character, e.g. a certain building, a snappish dog, an oddly behaving fruit fly, or an old car which starts only on certain days. But in the latter sense, only agents capable of deliberate actions are said to have a character. It is clear that Doris and Harman are speaking of character traits in this latter sense: individual personality traits, whether morally praiseworthy or otherwise, which are shaped and revealed by acts subject to conscious control. The existence of such traits is what they are concerned to deny.

The view that features of situations and not robust character traits are predictive and explanatory of behavioral consistencies, is sometimes called ‘situationalism’ or ‘situationism’. But what evidence is there for situationism? Why deny that individuals really have such personal traits as pride, ambition, shyness or compassion, an idea that appears to be underwritten by everyday observation? Situationists like Harman and Doris argue that robust qualities of character such as friendliness, aggressiveness, honesty etc., would have to show themselves consistently in behavior over a wide range of circumstances; but (they say) the results of personality tests for these traits do not correlate well with actual behavior under controlled conditions. Such regularities as we do see in individual behavior are in part a misleading result of confirmation bias (where evidence supporting a previously held view appears unduly prominent), and in part a result of the fact that people usually function within a small range of familiar and repeated situations.

One stock example frequently mentioned in discussions of situationism is the series of “electric shock” obedience experiments conducted by Milgram, in which subjects were encouraged to inflict what were represented as increasingly painful and dangerous jolts of electricity upon other people.<sup>2</sup> While many people who hear descriptions of the experiment confidently predict that they would not have behaved as the actual subjects did, the fact is that in response to the insistent commands of experimenters, a surprising number of subjects were led to administer what appeared to be extremely strong and possibly even fatal shocks to other persons. Thus, in one episode, when prompted to go on doing so every one of 40 subjects continued giving shocks past the level marked “Very Strong Shock”, 33 of them continued on past the level “Danger: Severe Shock”, while 26 went right up to the maximum voltage, ominously marked

---

<sup>2</sup> Milgram (1974).

“XXX”, even though the apparent victims of the shocks had pounded on the wall and then ceased to respond.

Harman suggests that if we explain this willingness to inflict pain as an effect of character we will have to conclude that all or most subjects of the Milgram experiments share some serious character flaw, a flaw which must also be very widespread in the population. (With the word ‘flaw’ we see him introducing moral evaluation along with causal explanation.) However, Harman feels that positing such widespread character flaws is implausible. An alternative explanation of the disturbing behavior would stress some features of the situation which have been noted by the social scientists Ross and Nisbett.<sup>3</sup> These include the stepwise progression from relatively benign compliance with authority into potentially homicidal behavior, making it hard to find a natural stopping point. There was also the urging of the experimenters, who were instructed not to accept an initial refusal but to reply to any objection by saying, “It is absolutely essential that you continue” and “You have no other choice, you *must* go on”.

The Milgram experiments have garnered much attention, and a second representative study among others also appears to show that features of a situation explain more about actions, and features of the individual agent are less explanatory, than many people suppose. In the often cited “good Samaritan” experiment of Darley and Batson (1973) certain seminary students, instructed to give a talk at a venue across campus, were deliberately sent past an actor slumped in a doorway feigning distress. The students were of various religious persuasions. Some had been assigned to speak on the “good Samaritan” parable of Luke 10:29-37, while others had been

---

<sup>3</sup> Ross and Nisbett (1991). Clearly a sense of responsibility was dulled in the subjects, or there was a sense that responsibility was shifted onto others. Sabini and Silver (2005) offer some further convincing remarks on the actual motives and behavior of the Milgram study participants, including the role of the institutional context and the pressing desire to avoid embarrassment and confrontation with the experimenters.

assigned to speak on different topics. Researchers found that religious orientation as expressed on a questionnaire was not significant in predicting whether the young seminarians would pause to help an apparent victim; nor did it matter whether a given student was on the way to talk about the edifying example of the good Samaritan. The only variable significantly correlated with whether students would stop was how much of a hurry they were in, a factor determined by how much time the experimenters had given them to get across campus. In Harman's view, this is further evidence that variables in a situation are more important than individual personality factors, such as religious conviction, in explaining behavior.

Situationists do not deny that all or most people share certain robust behavioral traits or dispositions. As was noted earlier, species wide traits are not under dispute. Harman, for example, is happy to admit that people are widely disposed to commit the fundamental attribution error.<sup>4</sup> He would deny, though, that this cross situational disposition is an individual or personal character trait, since it is not characteristic of individuals. Situationists can also grant that individuals do have characteristic narrow dispositions which may be fairly stable over time, such as *talkativeness at lunch*. But talkativeness in the specific lunchtime situation, though it may be a persistent behavior over time, need not be highly correlated with talkativeness in other situations. Hence it cannot be identified with a robust or general character trait of talkativeness which shows itself across the board: at parties, say, or during history class. Again, Harman allows that specific dispositions may reflect skills or strategies that have worked in the past. However, he goes on to state that ordinary thinking about personality and character attributes is concerned with global traits like honesty and talkativeness, not with such skills or strategies and not with situation specific regularities (Harman 1999).

---

<sup>4</sup> Harman (1999).

The challenge to common sense notions of character and virtue can now be summarized. First, it is said that many moral judgments posit robust personal character traits in the course of describing or explaining individual human behavior. Second, the empirical evidence strongly suggests these robust traits do not exist, as the pervasive behavioural consistency that they would predict is not observed in practice. Harman and Doris claim that the effects on behavior of situational factors like social pressure and mood influences are much greater than would be expected if the robust individual traits of “folk psychology” really existed. Such traits would entail *both* behavioral differences among individuals *and* cross situational consistencies in one and the same individual, neither of which in fact appear. If they existed, moral virtues (and perhaps vices, though they are not generally discussed) would have to play some explanatory, ordering, predictive or causal role in cross situational behavior. They would have to be, or depend on, broad based character traits. Since broad based traits do not exist on this view, traditional talk of moral virtue and vice is without foundation. So goes the situationist reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

A further line of thought suggests itself here which, if pursued, might undermine moral criticism even more generally. Suppose that individual characteristics of an agent contribute little to the explanation of an action, and the only predictive variables of interest are found in situational factors. Harman (2001) ventures so far as to claim that “What a person with a seemingly ideal moral character will do in a particular situation is pretty much what anyone else will do in exactly that situation, allowing for random variation.” Then one might be tempted to infer that the agent’s circumstances rather than the agent are to be held responsible for the action

---

<sup>5</sup> Doris and Harman have developed their views over time, but in the ‘Character’ chapter of Doris et al. (2010) they continue to write that ‘Systematic observation does *not* reveal pervasive behavioral consistency’ and that ‘Behavior is *not* typically ordered by robust traits’, arguing that these claims “or something in the immediate vicinity” are true (pp. 357-9). They concede that there may be certain virtuous dispositions of a frail and fragmentary sort, which can have great moral importance.

since agents, while a causal locus, contribute nothing that is characteristic of themselves as individuals. And if agents are not to be held responsible, it would be inappropriate to praise or blame them. That is, if pretty nearly everyone would behave similarly under the same circumstances and agents contribute nothing characteristic of themselves to an act, then it seems unfair to single out some people for praise or blame. But neither Doris nor Harman wants to go this route. Neither wishes to suspend all moral criticism, or hold that everyone is equally worthy of praise or blame. Harman allows for moral judgments based at least in part on the “moral luck” of being in favorable situations, while Doris (2002) argues at length that situationism “does not erode materials required for a viable...ethical practice” (129). Whether they can in fact accommodate the notion of personal responsibility, or whether their attack on the character traits of “folk morality” actually undermines that notion, is a question that is worth considering further but one which I will not try to address here.

## *II. Some Responses to Situationism*

The situationist challenge to common sense talk of individual character traits and robust moral virtues has provoked different rejoinders. Some commentators grant that the experiments debunk robust character generally, but assert that virtue talk does not require character traits of this sort: moral criticism for virtue and vice can do without any robust or broad based traits. Other commentators grant that robust character traits are indeed necessary for virtue and vice, but assert that the evidence is actually compatible with the required broad based traits. That is, one could argue that virtue requires no personality in the form of character traits; or that the experiments have been misinterpreted, and while virtue does require some robust traits, those traits are compatible with the experimental evidence after all.

Maria Merritt (2000) takes the former of these two paths. More precisely, she concedes that it is futile for most of us to try to build a character that yields stable behavior independently of local circumstances. In particular, the web of human relationships in a moral agent's life is very important in sustaining or discouraging behavior of one sort or another. On Merritt's view, situationists have successfully shown that personality traits which are robust across widely varied social situations and social expectations are rare in human beings. Since it is a mistake, at least for most of us, to strive for motivational independence from our community setting, she suggests an alternative model of motives and acts that frankly depend on favorable situations and social relationships. In pursuit of our long term goals and overall conception of how to live, what we can and should do is to try and cultivate settings and social relations that are supportive of virtuous choices. Merritt gives up what she takes to be an Aristotelian ideal of self aware agents with enduring, motivationally independent virtues. She holds that we can still properly call those persons virtuous who show stable positive dispositions within favorable social settings, though she grants that people can also be virtuous in a more general way in respect of their goals and overall conception of how to live.

In practice, Merritt's advice to seek out supportive social situations is surely worth heeding. However, she may concede too much to situationism. If it is possible to have an overall conception of a good life and a purposeful, reasoned policy of seeking out favorable situations, it should also be possible to adopt, say, a deliberate policy of taking other steps so as not to lose one's temper during arguments (doubtless not all at once, but by training oneself gradually in anger management) or to become a better host, a more moderate eater, a more patient driver, a more thoughtful friend, a more fiscally prudent or attractively outgoing person. Granted, breaking oneself of undesired habits can be most difficult, and people routinely fail,

especially in the absence of social support. But some people in the pursuit of longer term goals do succeed to a degree in forming new dispositions which get manifested over a variety of local situations. So on Merritt's own showing, one can cultivate habits that hold across different situations. We will return to this point later, but since behavior is indeed accessible to reason and systematic self adjustment, moral criticism for certain personal habits must be possible.

Nafsika Athanassoulis (2000) takes the second approach, of being less prepared to give ground to the situationists on robust traits. Rather than conclude that character has no explanatory role in action, she interprets the Milgram results as evidence that most people do have a certain robust trait: deference to authority. Indeed, she sees Milgram's experiments as grounds for thinking that the deference most people are disposed to show towards authority figures is often excessive. Further, Athanassoulis argues that even if we find virtuous dispositions hard to acquire, or hard to exercise in trying circumstances, we can continue to aim at acquiring them, and this aim can shape our behavior. Her response has been less welcome to Harman than Merritt's. In Harman (2000) he has responded to Athanassoulis by saying that not only are there no such traits in humans, it is also impossible or futile to aim at having them. Moreover, Harman and Doris would not agree that deference to authority is a broad based personality trait whose existence is supported by the Milgram experiments. In other situations with other influences, the Milgram subjects would behave differently and not necessarily in a deferential manner. They do seem to be reacting to subtle situational pressures rather than deliberately pursuing a deliberate and coherent strategy of obedience to authority.<sup>6</sup> It seems that her reading of the Milgram experiments would need a stronger defense than Athanassoulis (2000) provides.

---

<sup>6</sup> The view that Milgram's shock experiments show most people to have unexpectedly deferential personalities is considered and rejected by Sabini and Silver (2005), p.547n33, though they are critical of situationist conclusions for other reasons to be mentioned below.

Some other authors have argued that studies taken by situationists to test for certain character traits or virtues have in fact been poorly suited to reveal the presence or absence of those traits or virtues. Rachana Kamtekar (2004) and Gopal Sreenivasan (2002) have both claimed that whatever traits have been debunked in experiments cited by situationists, they are not the robust traits needed by a philosophical theory of the virtues. Thus Kamtekar (p. 467ff) notes some ways in which what she calls traditional virtues differ from situationist character traits. First, traditional moral virtues and vices might be widely or universally shared. There is no contradiction in saying (as do some of our sterner moralists) that everyone or nearly everyone has a certain moral vice, whereas the dispositions objected to by Doris and Harman would (if they exist) be traits distinctive of individuals and not universally shared.

Kamtekar also argues that traditional virtues need not always be very broadly based, and may be wrongly identified by experimenters or by popular opinion. For example, experiments by Hartshorne & May (1928) designed to test for honesty showed little correlation among three different dispositions of schoolchildren, viz. to pocket loose change, tell lies under certain conditions and cheat on certain tests. Taken as a group, children disposed to do one of these things were overall not much more or less inclined to do the others.<sup>7</sup> One might be tempted to conclude that positing character traits called “honesty” and “dishonesty” is not a helpful move in predicting or explaining what a child will do in a given situation. However, it remains to be seen whether honesty has been discredited as a character trait by these results, since there might be some narrower character traits at play, either traits which might better be identified with honesty or which perhaps have no name in the English language. Both Kamtekar and Sreenivasan argue that in reality there may be no single moral virtue which covers respect for

---

<sup>7</sup> Kamtekar and Sreenivasan register some doubts here over what group tendencies show about the absence of character in individuals, since overall averages are consistent with strong correlations in some individuals among the three dispositions considered by Hartshorne and May.

property, truth telling and obeying test rules. Granting this would not entail that none of these three are robust character traits, nor even that in reality there is no such robust character trait as honesty at all.

Third, both Kamtekar and Sreenivasan make a related point about the identification of character traits and the evaluation of behavior as virtuous: people may disagree on whether or not some situation counts as relevantly similar to some other situation. In particular, agents themselves may classify their own situations differently than experimenters or other observers do. In connection with the Hartshorne and May honesty study, Sreenivasan argues that it is debatable what response if any the virtue of honesty might have called for in the various situations. For example, pocketing loose change might be seen by the person involved as an instance, not of stealing, but of some possibly more defensible principle like “Finders keepers”.

Sreenivasan maintains more generally that good empirical tests for the possession of a morally virtuous disposition have to meet criteria which have not been met in the experiments discussed by Doris and Harman. He proposes as a condition of experiments designed to test for character traits that the experimenter and the subjects agree on how to characterize the specified responses and situations (Sreenivasan 62). The person being tested must agree with the experimenter on what action would be virtuous in the situation.

Sreenivasan’s claim seems too strong, inasmuch as subjects may be blameworthy without admitting the fact, even to themselves. Those who are fussy and small minded may describe themselves as suitably careful or prudent, buffoons may imagine they are merely being sociable or showing suitable ready wit, individuals too eager for control over the lives of their neighbors may carry on their meddling under the guise of being public spirited or properly concerned with social order, and so forth. But although we cannot give subjects a veto over how they are

evaluated, we can surely agree that judgments for virtue are often controversial and that observers may not always be privy to relevant facts about an agent's motivation and intentions.

In order to understand what dispositions people are revealing, we do need to know how they see the situation they are in and what they are trying to do. Questions thus arise about how the notion of a "situation" is to be operationalized in this or that context, since the idea of a situation itself and of similarity among situations has often remained unclear. It is obvious that fixing identity conditions for situations raises many of the same considerations as fixing identity conditions for events, and that classification depends on our interests under the circumstances. What situation one is in is in some measure relative to one's purposes, and the construal of the experimental subject and that of the experimenter may differ. A person's higher level intentions might remain constant, even while he or she behaves in different ways in situations which are superficially similar: to take a simple example, traveling down the same road, now in one direction, now in the opposite direction, as a means to the end of picking up supplies.

If there is an agent and another person who is the object of that agent's acts, are they in one and the same situation? Yes and no, since one may be a gift giver and the other a gift recipient, for example. In some broad way and for some purposes, all contemporaries of the same age, sex or social class are in the same situation. Any two humans share the human condition and so on. Suppose two soldiers awaiting an attack are sitting in adjacent foxholes. In an important respect they are in the same situation since they are side by side facing the same enemy. But perhaps one of the two is a recent recruit while the other is an old hand who has acquired knowledge, skills and expectations from other battles. In this respect, the situations of the two soldiers are far from the same, and the reactions of the veteran to events might be considerably altered as a result of past training and experience. To include the agent's

knowledge or past experience within the scope of a situation would, however, make the idea of a situation too broad for situationists, since the possession of knowledge and experience may often plausibly be considered a part of an individual's character or personality.

Kamtekar and Sreenivasan both point out that a broad based disposition may be present even where is not acted upon. There may be interfering dispositions triggered which mask the original disposition. That is, possession of more or less robust traits is sometimes compatible with particular blocking influences under special circumstances, such as temptation or the demands of a conflicting virtue. Thus, while people do often overestimate the amount of consistency in behavior there may still be some broad based traits which are not always acted upon for one reason or another. A glass may be fragile even if it fails to break on account of having been carefully wrapped; similarly, a person may act "out of character" in circumstances that count as abnormal, without causing us to revise our judgment.

All bets are off on how a genial host will treat the guests in the face of imminent mortal danger, or left without food for a few days. We may truly say that someone is an affectionate parent without necessarily knowing how he or she would behave after thirty hours of sleep deprivation. Still, perhaps crediting someone with a loving parental nature does commit one to some general predictions even under extreme circumstances. A loving parent would probably react otherwise to great stress than an indifferent one, but what ordinary ascriptions of personality traits commit one to in abnormal environments becomes less clear according to the extent of the abnormality. Similarly, asserting that someone is generally well intentioned toward other people or respectful of their rights might not commit one to saying what kinds of electric shocks he or she would be prepared to administer while being deceived and manipulated by a group of researchers conducting a psychology study.

The responses outlined above to situationism provide some reasons for caution in accepting situationist interpretations of experimental data. The notion of a situation is not very clear, but there are some relatively robust traits though they may be misidentified and may show themselves in different ways. The capacity for impulse control, for instance, is a good predictor across many different situations and is unevenly distributed throughout the population.<sup>8</sup> Harman himself is tacitly committed to the existence of at least one character trait, namely that which disposes individuals to pursue similar strategies across different situations. Thus, he approvingly cites Ross and Nisbett (1991) as saying “individuals may behave in consistent ways that distinguish them from their peers not because of their enduring predispositions to be friendly, dependent, aggressive, or the like, but rather because they are pursuing consistent goals using consistent strategies, in the light of consistent ways of interpreting their social world”<sup>9</sup> Intended to hedge the situationist view, this is instead a fatal concession. Since a reflective disposition to pursue strategies is broad based, and since the exercise of this disposition varies among individuals, it counts as a personal trait in Harman’s terms, though to attribute it to someone is not yet to make a moral evaluation. We mustn’t overplay this point. While there is indeed such a thing as rationality and people can sometimes be evaluated as exhibiting it to a greater or lesser degree, the extensive literature on cognitive biases underlines the fact that reasoning is often more fragile and easily manipulated than we might like to suppose.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Impulse control has been explored extensively by Walter Mischel and others in experiments described in Mischel (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Ross and Nisbett (1991), p. 20. Quoted in Harman (MPMSP, p. 5)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Doris et al. (2010) p. 360: Reason and behaviour cannot be easily disentangled, and one can sometimes see behavioural “inconsistencies” as cognitive failures of a situationally susceptible reason.

### *III. Character Traits and Moral Virtues*

To understand the significance of these observations for moral criticism we need to think clearly about what a virtue is. Confusion about the difference between description and moral criticism has clouded much of the discussion about character traits and virtues, with many of the authors discussed shifting back and forth without notice between description, explanation and value judgment.

What then is a virtue? In general, a virtue is a special case of goodness. To issue a judgment of virtue is to issue a value judgment, a claim that some subject is in a certain way good or excellent. Here are some examples of moral virtues: humanity, wisdom, courage, fair-mindedness, temperance, generosity, loyalty, filial piety, and so on, things for which one is praised. To say that an individual displays or instantiates one or more of these is to say that the person, or something about him or her, is in a certain respect adequate or sufficient for praise, admiration or emulation. Further, since to assert that something is sufficient for praise is to praise it, to utter such judgments sincerely is to give praise and express respect, and this is what we should suppose given that virtues are special cases of goodness.

We must accordingly be careful to distinguish between that which is sufficient for praise from the adequacy or sufficiency itself which is common to every case of goodness. To illustrate with a nonmoral instance, there is a difference between a certain height and the sufficiency or adequacy of that particular height for some objective. For example, we can describe the height of someone with the phrase ‘three feet tall’, on the one hand, but we can then go on to evaluate that person as ‘too short’ (e.g. to ride the Ferris wheel). Height, and a sufficiency, insufficiency or excess of height, are quite different things. And likewise, there is an important difference between the dampness described by ‘a humidity level of 99%’, and the excess revealed by ‘too

humid to paint' or 'too humid to walk'. Following Richard Bosley (1991) we can call that which is judged as enough, adequate or sufficient the 'subject' or 'subject range' (e.g. having a certain height) and that which it is judged to be sufficient for (e.g. riding the Ferris wheel) the 'object' or 'object range'.<sup>11</sup>

Consider now the example of tolerance, construed as a disposition to tolerate in others behaviour that one does not like. Tolerance is often spoken of as if it were a moral virtue, yet it cannot be such in and of itself because it is not necessarily something for which one is praised. Instead, it is something of which there can be more or less, too much, too little or enough of it for praise. Thus, aside from not being tolerant enough, one could be overly tolerant, tolerating the wrong things or tolerating something to an excessive degree. If there is a moral virtue in the neighborhood it would be a sufficiency of tolerance rather than tolerance itself, though we do not always make this clear in ordinary speech, speaking simply of tolerance when we really mean to indicate a proper degree thereof.

Similarly with altruism: if we understand altruism at a first approximation to be other-regarding behaviour, then it is possible to be either too altruistic or not altruistic enough for acceptance and praise. More and more other-regarding behaviour and less and less care of the self is not better and better, since there is such a thing as proper self-care and self-regard. Altruism then is not a virtue; though a sufficiency of altruism for praise and for any other ends of moral criticism is a virtue. Neither is self-seeking behaviour always vicious, but an excess of self-seeking will count as the vice of selfishness. Considerable inconsistency surrounds this

---

<sup>11</sup> The understanding of virtues in terms of sufficiency for an end has been elaborated and defended by Richard Bosley. 'Subject range' is a term that he employs for that of which there is too little, enough or too much, its sufficiency for moral praise being a special case of moral excellence. Bosley's talk of virtues as cases of sufficiency draws upon Aristotle, who famously takes virtues to be states lying in a mean between deficiency and excess. At *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6 what is here termed the subject of a virtue is described as something continuous and divisible. However, while the account given here is inspired by Aristotle, I do not mean to be taking an interpretive or critical stand on the broader Aristotelian story about virtue ethics which has many special features of its own.

usage, but it is surely important to distinguish a description of behaviour from a moral evaluation of that behaviour.

Thirdly, consider honesty. Once again we have the danger of sliding between a virtue and a subject of criticism for a virtue, though ‘honest’ is usually reserved as a virtue word. The dishonest are in a way untrustworthy, and it seems that honesty has to do with actions which are such as to maintain trust. True, one may be untrustworthy without being dishonest: for instance, a person might just be hopelessly disorganized, or too weak or forgetful to be relied upon. Dishonesty, it seems, specifically involves acts undermining the trust we have in people to do what they would rather not do, things like telling the truth when it is inconvenient, keeping one’s hands out of the till, refraining from cheating on tests, or staying faithful to one’s spouse. Honesty then, understood as a virtue, is plausibly said to involve those praiseworthy acts which are such as to sustain or strengthen trust in this way.<sup>12</sup>

There is, to repeat, a difference between merely describing something and evaluating it as sufficient with reference to an objective. With the distinction in hand between a virtue or excellence (a case of sufficiency) and its underlying subject range, let us return to the question of whether people can actually practice or exemplify moral virtues. And we can start with the assumption that people sometimes act in morally praiseworthy or blameworthy ways. To deny this commonplace claim would be to give up moral criticism altogether, along with a large chunk of ordinary language which is shot through with evaluative significance. Arguably our way of seeing people as responsible in ways great and small, and subject to moral praise and blame, is even essential to our conception of ourselves and others as persons. In order to qualify for

---

<sup>12</sup> Is it possible to go overboard in some way with regard to these trust-sustaining acts? There is such a thing as being overly fastidious in this regard, for instance, taking extravagant care to return a small overpayment, or being obsessive about telling truths which either don’t matter or are actually harmful. Speaking of this punctiliousness one might misleadingly say ‘too honest’, indicating an excess which lies to the right of the virtue honesty.

moral praise or blame an act must be voluntary, and hence accessible to an agent's own awareness and control. Pulling these strands together, we arrive at the rather obvious fact that people are often in a position to recognize, evaluate and modify their own behaviour on particular occasions, and that this behaviour can sometimes be subject to moral evaluation. For instance, we can say that on a particular occasion someone acted generously or courageously; or, someone can exercise impulse control at a certain juncture and defer a pleasure, showing admirable patience.

The question is, must we suppose that people reveal a broad based character trait whenever they are praised for e.g. courageous, or appropriately patient, behaviour on a particular occasion? Aristotle seems to think so, as he says that a truly virtuous act must be chosen by someone who has knowledge, who deliberately chooses the act for its own sake, and “who acts in a constant and unmovable way” (NE 1105a30-33).<sup>13</sup> Must the knowledge and motives necessary for a virtuous act be such as to show themselves on more than one or few occasions? Aristotle may be too placing too strong a condition here, since we can imagine someone behaving courageously only intermittently and without being a very courageous person in general; or being courageous in a qualified way, as a frequently courageous arachnophobe whose normal confidence disappears where spiders are involved.

So we do not suppose that someone must be a courageous person generally when we judge that he or she has behaved courageously here and now. The person acting virtuously need only have the right knowledge and motives at this time. Yet there will also be people who are

---

<sup>13</sup> Or, ‘who acts from a constant and firm character/disposition’: ἐὰν καὶ βεβαίως καὶ ἀμετακινήτως ἔχων πράττη. Aristotle puzzles about a related point, wondering how anybody can become virtuous by habitually doing virtuous acts, given that one already has to be virtuous in order for one's acts to be so ‘...for if people do just and temperate things, they are already just and temperate, just as they are already grammatical and musical if they do grammatical and musical things’ (1105a19-21). His solution is so say that we do such things initially by chance or under the guidance of someone else.

more dependably disposed to act in courageous or honest or patient ways. These people will be judged according to the sufficiency of their dispositions for praise or blame. It is a question open to further systematic inquiry as to the causes of their behaviour and as to just how broadly based the underlying traits are (taking care to note that the virtues are distinct from their subject ranges). Nevertheless, if you concede that self awareness and self appraisal of behaviour are possible for agents, that they are capable of impulse control in varying degrees, and that their actions can be deliberately modified and adjusted by themselves in light of their ends, then you have pretty much conceded that a practice of virtue is possible.

It would be quite simplistic to identify the practice of a virtue with a disposition like talkativeness. Aside from the fact that one might talk too much, enough or too little for praise on a given occasion, the practice of a single virtue can involve quite a number of distinct dispositions, skills and abilities. Thus, we may praise someone for hospitality. Various skills and abilities, gained by experience or in other ways are part of what constitutes a person's being a good and hospitable host. For instance, freely serving food and drink, throwing enjoyable parties, being talkative or attentive as needed, making visitors feel welcome and at ease, could all count towards being a gracious host under normal circumstances. Hospitality involves many attitudes and dispositions and requires the mastery of certain social conventions and knowledge of the preferences of other people. It may require metacognitive skills and a certain amount of impulse control, with different reactions appropriate to different circumstances. Thus, it would be a mistake to try and identify the virtue of hospitality with any simple underlying disposition, construed as some broad based character trait. Instead, complex subject dispositions, if within an agent's control, can be evaluated with regard to the objective of moral praise.

A situationist might reasonably object to any view which says that in order to act hospitably or courageously a person must have acquired a state called ‘hospitality’ or ‘courage’ that causes hospitable or courageous behavior in any circumstance in which such behavior is appropriate. But hospitality or courage need not be any such thing, not least because it is problematic to think of virtues as being causes in the way that their subject dispositions are. One can also act courageously on some occasions and not on others, and one can be notable for acting courageously when others do not. If we can praise people for acting courageously, it is a short step to saying that some people are apt to act courageously and thus to praise them as courageous people, perhaps with qualifications.

### *Concluding Remarks*

The adjustment of behaviour to situation is amusingly illustrated by the Oliver Goldsmith play ‘She Stoops to Conquer’, in which young Marlow shows himself rakish with barmaids and preemptory with the servants, yet tongue-tied with ladies of station and easygoing with men of his own class. His remarkable shifts are noted by the character Miss Hardcastle:

*Miss Hardcastle: In which of your characters, sir, will you give us leave to address you? As the faltering gentleman, with looks on the ground, that speaks just to be heard, and hates hypocrisy; or the loud confident creature, that keeps it up with Mrs. Mantrap, and old Miss Biddy Buckskin, till three in the morning? Ha! ha! ha!*

Is Marlow, in reality, the mild, modest, sentimental man of gravity, or the bold, forward, agreeable Rattle of the Ladies Club? We have more than one way to go here. We could try saying that Marlow has no particular character at all, but responds differently to each situation that arises. This, indeed, would be an answer in the situationist vein. However, it seems that there are at least some useful things that can be said about Marlow’s individual intelligence,

attitudes, habits, and impulse control as they show themselves in normal circumstances. We could instead try to choose between the alternatives of bashfulness and extraversion, as to which of these two describes his true character; but this simple dichotomy would probably not do enough justice to the complexities of social behaviour and the effects of different settings. It is likely better to make room for both character traits in Marlow, qualifying them in some context-relevant way. Or, what is not mutually exclusive, we can try to settle on some higher level traits (perhaps with no single name) which manifest themselves in a range of situations.

In short, character traits may not be exactly the ones that common sense judgments supply, but common sense is also not necessarily committed to the strong claims that critics have suggested. Such traits as underlie our appraisals for virtue are sometimes robust enough to warrant more or less qualified judgments about someone's personality. While situationists have drawn attention to the fact that common sense attributions of broad based traits are sometimes too hasty or general, they have not given reason to doubt that some such traits exist. It seems we can say some informative things, suitably hedged, about the personality of young Marlow and his habitual deportment.

Such robust traits as do exist are however not to be confused with moral virtues, though this mistake is frequently made. Once the distinctions are grasped between virtues and subjects of criticism, the appeal of radical situationism as an objection to virtue theory weakens. The notion that a virtue must be a character trait doesn't do justice to moral criticism. As has been argued above, rather than being identified with the subjects that underlie them, such virtues are special cases of sufficiency for praise. The skills, beliefs and habits that on particular occasions are judged sufficient in the practice of a given virtue are usually complex. Displays of relatively broad based conscientiousness, sociability, impulse control, aggressiveness etc., may thus all be

evaluated for sufficiency in the practice of a single moral virtue as, say, loyalty or courage.

People are able to practice forms of excellence, including moral excellence, and the claim that moral criticism for virtue must be misguided has not been made out.

*Glen Koehn*  
*London, Ontario, June 2015*

## References

- Aristotle (1984). *Nicomachean Ethics* tr. W. D. Ross, J. O. Urmson. In *Complete Works of Aristotle*, J. Barnes (ed.) Princeton.
- Athanassoulis, Nafsika (2000). "A Response to Harman: Virtue Ethics and Character Traits" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 100, 215-221.
- Bosley, R. (1991). *On Virtue and Vice: Metaphysical Foundations of the Doctrine of the Mean*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973), "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27.
- Doris, J. M. (2002). *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. Cambridge University Press.
- Doris, J. M. et al. (2010) *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, Oxford University Press.
- Harman, G. (1999). "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1998-9, 99, pp. 315-31. (Retrieved from Harman website.)
- Harman, G. (2000) "The Nonexistence of Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 100, pp. 223-6. (Retrieved from Harman website.)
- Harman, G. (2001) "Virtue Ethics without Character Traits," from Byrne, Stalnaker, and Wedgwood, eds., *Fact and Value*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 117-27. (Retrieved from Harman website.)
- Harman, G. (2003) "No Character or Personality" (a response to an article by Robert Solomon), *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13 pp. 87-94. (Retrieved from Harman website.)
- Harmon, G., Mason, K. and Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2010) 'Moral Reasoning' in Doris, J. (2010).
- Hartshorne, Hugh and May, Mark A. (1928). *Studies in the Nature of Character* Vol. 1 *Studies in Deceit*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kamtekar, R. (2004). "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character." *Ethics* 114, April 2004, pp. 458-91.
- Koehn, G. (2003). "Human Goodness and the Golden Mean", *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 37, 3, pp. 179-94.

Koehn, G. (2012). "The Archer and Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean" *Peitho: Examina Antiqua*. 1 (3), pp 155-67. <http://peitho.amu.edu.pl/online-access/>

Kupperman, Joel (2001). "The Indispensability of Character." *Philosophy* 76, 239-50.

Merritt, M. (2000) "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*. 3, 365-83.

Merritt, M., Doris, J., Harman, G. (2010) "Character" in Doris, J. (2010).

Milgram, S. (1963). "Behavioral Study of Obedience." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, 371-78.

Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row.

Mischel, W. (1968) *Personality and Assessment*. New York: Wiley.

Mischel, W. (2014). *The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.

Nisbett, R., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. (1991). *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sabini, John & Silver, Maury (2005). "Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued" *Ethics* 115, 535-62.

Sreenivasan, Gopal (2002). "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution," *Mind*, Vol. 111, pp. 47-68.

Vranas, Peter B. M. (2005). "The Indeterminacy Paradox: Character Evaluations and Human Psychology", *Nous* 39:1, 1-42.