

Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics

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Several philosophers claim to have discovered a new and rather significant problem with virtue ethics.¹ According to them, virtue ethics generates certain expectations about the behavior of human beings which are subject to empirical testing. But when the relevant experimental work is done in social psychology, the results fall remarkably short of meeting those expectations. So, these philosophers think, despite its recent success virtue ethics has far less to offer to contemporary ethical theory than might have been initially thought.

In this paper, I hope to suggest some plausible ways in which virtue ethicists can resist arguments based on empirical work in social psychology.² My plan is to proceed as follows. In the first three sections, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the line of reasoning being used against virtue ethics by

¹ See for example Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999), pp. 315-332 and "The Nonexistence of Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000), pp. 223-226, John Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Noûs* 32 (1998), pp. 504-530 and *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and John Campbell, "Can Philosophical Accounts of Altruism Accommodate Experimental Data on Helping Behavior?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1999), pp. 26-45. Other philosophers who seem to show some sympathy towards this objection include Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 36 and Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 44. In the field of social psychology, personality based explanations have been criticized by, among others, W. Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), W. Mischel and P. Peake, "Beyond déjà vu in the search for cross-situational consistency," *Psychological Review* 89 (1982), pp. 730-755, and R. Nisbett and L. Ross, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc, 1991).

² For some important preliminary responses, see Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), Michael Depaul, "Character Traits, Virtues, and Vices: Are There None?" *Proceedings of the World Congress of Philosophy*, Volume 1 (Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), pp. 141-157, Maria Merritt, "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3 (2000), pp. 365-383, Nafsika Athanassoulis, "A Response to Harman: Virtue Ethics and Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2001), pp. 215-222. Recently Gopal Sreenivasan ("Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution," *Mind* 111 (2002), pp. 47-68) has developed a more sustained response to Harman, "Moral Philosophy," and Doris, "Persons." He mentions two reservations he has with their approach, but only has space to defend the first. In what follows, I take up the task of developing something like his second reservation concerning the "scope of a theory of virtue" (57). Thus this paper can be viewed as complementing

looking at the recent work of Gilbert Harman and John Doris. Sections four and five will then be devoted both to responding to their challenge as well as to briefly sketching a positive account of character trait possession.

I. HARMAN'S PRELIMINARY FORAY

Gilbert Harman has been the most prominent moral philosopher to utilize the results of certain experiments in social psychology as evidence against the descriptive claims of virtue ethics.³ A large part of his work has focused on drawing the attention of philosophers to this neglected body of empirical work which he thinks will have a crucial role to play in adjudicating disputes in contemporary ethical theory.

Harman's preliminary statement of his view goes as follows:

Empirical studies designed to test whether people behave differently in ways that might reflect their having different character traits have failed to find relevant differences . . . Since it is possible to explain our ordinary belief in character traits as deriving from certain illusions, we must conclude that there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits.⁴

This passage nicely captures the two facets of the strategy Harman hopes to employ against virtue ethics. His negative approach involves showing how studies in social psychology fail to satisfy certain behavioral expectations which assume that there is widespread possession of robust character traits like virtues and vices. While it is this line of argument which will be the primary focus of this paper, it is also worth noting that Harman supplements his negative program with a positive theory intended to explain why it has been so common to believe in the existence of such traits. It is to the details of both of these

Sreenivasan's response, although he should in no way be construed as endorsing any of what follows.

³ See in particular his "Moral Philosophy" and "Nonexistence." The presentation of Harman's view is based on the earlier article.

It is important to note that while virtue ethics is a type of normative theory, it like many such theories is also committed to the truth of certain descriptive claims. Similarly, one might think that some consequentialists are committed to the existence of states of affairs, and some deontologists to the existence of faculties of practical reason. In the case of virtue ethics, what exactly the relevant descriptive commitments are, will be considered at some length in sections two and five.

approaches that we now turn.

Let us begin by examining what character traits are supposed to amount to on Harman's view. He gives us a rather loose characterization as follows:

- They are relatively long-term stable disposition[s] to act in distinctive ways.
- The relevant dispositions must involve habits and not just skills.
- A person's character traits help to explain at least some things that the person does.
- Character traits are *broad based* dispositions that help to explain what they are dispositions to do.⁵

Here most virtue ethicists are likely to regard such a list as perhaps necessary but nowhere near sufficient for a rich and nuanced understanding of any character trait which could potentially play the role of a virtue.⁶ But for now, let us accept his characterization.

It is important to make a distinction at this point between two different kinds of character traits, a distinction which we will need to appeal to repeatedly throughout this paper. Harman's description of character traits shows that he is merely interested in the existence of what are sometimes called *global* character traits, or stable traits that exhibit a certain degree of cross-situational consistency. Thus a global character trait like honesty is such that those who have it as part of their characters typically exhibit honest behavior in a wide variety of honesty-eliciting circumstances. *Local* character traits, on the other hand, are such that those who have one of them need only exhibit trait-specific behavior in a narrowly construed set of circumstances. For example, someone might manifest the local character trait of honesty in examination situations and still unabashedly lie when gossiping to his friends because he lacks the distinct local trait needed to be honest in *those* circumstances. For now we can leave this distinction between local and global character traits rather vague, as we will return to it again at greater length in

⁴ Harman, "Moral Philosophy," p. 316.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-8. Emphasis his.

⁶ Thus Harman wants to exclude schizophrenia, mania, depression, shyness, and sadness from being character traits (*Ibid.*, p. 316), but it is not at all clear that he is justified in doing so based on these standards alone. Nor do his

sections two and five.

Harman next sketches two famous experiments from social psychology whose results allegedly have important consequences for the existence of global character traits. In the first set of studies, the so-called Milgram shock experiments, subjects were told to administer an exam to a “learner” while an experimenter supervised the process. If the learner answered incorrectly, the subject was required to flip a lever after first turning a dial responsible for regulating the strength of what the subject took to be an actual electric shock given to the learner as a form of punishment. The more wrong answers, the further the dial was turned, and the greater the apparent shock would become after flipping the lever. Of course, unbeknownst to the subject, the learner was actually a cohort of the experimenters and his reactions to the “shocks” were staged.

Since the experiment was rigged such that the learner would get three out of every four questions wrong, the subject in every case was supposed to administer shocks of increasing strength as time went on. However, once subjects observed the pain they seemed to be causing the learners, they would frequently try to end their participation in the experiment.

It is at this point that the really interesting results of the Milgram experiment play out. For the experimenter, upon receiving a report of non-cooperation from the subject, would verbally encourage him or her to continue administering the exam. And, perhaps surprisingly, many subjects would obey the experimenter even to the point of giving the maximum, and what seemed to them to be lethal, level of shock on the dial.⁷

criteria seem able to exclude anorexia, bulimia, talkativeness, smoking, alcoholism, drug addiction, and many other “long-term stable dispositions to act in distinctive ways.” See also Depaul, “Character Traits,” pp. 143-146.

⁷ For further details about this experiment, see Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67 (1963), pp. 371-378 and the helpful discussion in Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, pp. 293-300 and Athanassoulis, “Response to Harman,” p. 216. For important recent work on Milgram and obedience experiments, see W. Meeus and Q. Raaijmakers, “Obedience in Modern Society: The Utrecht Studies,” *Journal of Social Issues* 51 (1995), pp. 155-175, F. Rochat and A. Modigliani, “The Ordinary Quality of Resistance: From Milgram’s Laboratory to the Village of Le Chambon,” *Journal of Social Issues* 51 (1995), pp. 195-210, T. Blass, “The Milgram obedience experiment: Support for a cognitive view of defensive attribution,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 136 (1996), pp. 407-410, T. Blass, “The Milgram paradigm after 35 years: Some things we now know about obedience to authority,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 29 (1999), pp. 955-978, and *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, ed. T. Blass (Mahwah: Erlbaum,

Certainly the results of the Milgram experiment are important and disturbing. But it is not at all clear what implications they are supposed to have with respect to the issue of the existence of global character traits. For example, Harman does not tell us what global character trait is supposedly lacking in this case. Nor are we told why the subjects who did resist the experimenter's orders were not exercising compassion,⁸ and why those who did not were not being obedient.⁹ Finally, we are not given an argument for why the results of this extremely contrived experiment are supposed to have any bearing on the issue of the extent of trait possession in general.¹⁰

Instead, Harman presents us with a juxtaposition of two causal explanations for the behavior of the subjects involved. On the one hand, “[i]t is extremely tempting to attribute the subject's performance to a character defect in the subject rather than to details of the situation. But can we really attribute a 2 to 1 majority response to a character defect? . . . Does *everyone* have this character defect? Is that really the right way to explain Milgram's results?”¹¹ This is the extent of his argument against character-based explanations, but surely something more is needed to arrive at the conclusion that such explanations are vacuous. In fact, as we shall see in section four, the results that Harman takes to be a *reductio* of character-based explanations, may actually turn out to be precisely what one should expect on a sufficiently nuanced understanding of virtue ethics.

Harman, following Nisbett and Ross, instead prefers to interpret the results of the Milgram experiment as evidence for situationism. Roughly, according to this view it is features about the situations

2000).

⁸ After all, some explanation has to be given for why roughly one-third of the participants did not turn the dial up all the way. Given that they were in exactly the same situation as the other subjects, it would seem that such an explanation would have to appeal to certain features of their psychology and personality in order to account for the difference in behavioral outcome.

⁹ One subject reacted to the outcome of his participation by remarking, “So he's dead. I did my job!” (S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 88). And another obedient subject reported that he models himself on a grandfather who, “believed one should take and carry out an order whether one believed it was right or wrong, as long as the person giving it was in authority to give it” (A. Elms and S. Milgram, “Personality Characteristics Associated with Obedience and Defiance toward Authoritative Command,” *Journal of Experimental Research in Personality* 1 (1966), p. 288).

¹⁰ For similar concerns, see Athanassoulis, “Response to Harman,” p. 217. Milgram himself observed that for “a large number of cases the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies” (“Behavioral Study,” p. 374).

in which agents find themselves, and not features internal to their characters, which best explain and predict behavioral outcomes.¹²

The second experiment that Harman discusses is the Good Samaritan helping case by Darley and Batson. Here Princeton Theological Seminary students were asked to walk to another building and record a lecture on a pre-assigned topic. Along the way to give their lecture, students had to pass by a man who was slumped over against a wall. What determined whether they stopped to help the man? Darley and Batson manipulated the case such that:

The dependent variable was whether and how the subject helped the victim. The independent variables were the degree to which the subject was told to hurry in reaching the other building and the talk he was to give when he arrived. Some subjects were to give a talk on the jobs in which seminary students would be most effective, others, on the parable of the Good Samaritan.¹³

And the outcome? It turned out that the subject of their talks made no statistical difference. Instead, the only important variable was the degree of hurry – only 10% of those who were told to proceed quickly to the building stopped to check on the man, whereas 45% in a moderate hurry and 63% in no hurry stopped to help.¹⁴

Harman is even less forthcoming in his interpretation of this study. He assumes that prior to the experiment being conducted, we would have anticipated that the helping behavior of the students should have depended primarily on the makeup of their character and their religious orientation. But, he says, to do so would involve, “overlooking the situational factors, in this case overlooking how much of a hurry

¹¹ Harman, “Moral Philosophy,” p. 322. Emphasis his.

¹² For a detailed discussion of situationism, see G. Allport, “Traits revisited,” *American Psychologist* 21 (1966), pp. 1-10, K. Bowers, “Situationism in Psychology: An Analysis and a Critique,” *Psychological Review* 80 (1973), pp. 307-336, Nisbett and Ross, *The Person and the Situation*, chapter one, and Doris, “Persons,” p. 507.

¹³ J. Darley and C. Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973), p. 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105. For interesting recent work, see G. Maio and J. Olson, “Values as truisms: Evidence and implications,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (1998), pp. 294-311, G. Maio *et al.*, “Addressing

the various agents might be in.”¹⁵ Yet it seems reasonable to think that we should focus on the students’ internal dispositions in order to predict the outcome of this experiment only if we had strong antecedent reasons for believing that a majority of the test subjects possessed the relevant global character trait(s) to begin with.¹⁶ Since neither Harman nor Darley and Batson give us any reason to make this assumption, it seems only natural that we would also want to take situational considerations into account.

Despite the lack of explicit argumentation, Harman takes these and other experiments as sufficient to establish two conclusions. The first is that human beings often commit what Ross has called the Fundamental Attribution Error.¹⁷ Third party observers are guilty of making this mistake when they focus on dispositions in explaining and predicting human action, rather than paying more careful attention to situational influences on participant’s behavior.

It is true that there is very strong experimental evidence from social psychology for the claim that ordinary observers do under-emphasize the role that situational variables can play.¹⁸ But this is a result that virtue ethicists can readily accept. For nothing follows about the existence of character traits in general from the tendency of American psychology test subjects to fall prey to this error.¹⁹ In fact, it may even be worthwhile for virtue ethicists to gain some familiarity with the relevant empirical data in order

Discrepancies between Values and Behavior: The Motivating Effect of Reasons,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 37 (2001), pp. 104-117, and the references cited therein.

¹⁵ Harman, “Moral Philosophy,” p. 324.

¹⁶ Unfortunately we are not told which trait(s) this is supposed to be, although likely candidates include compassion, empathy, and charity.

¹⁷ See L. Ross, “The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings,” in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 10 (New York: Academic, 1977) and the nice discussion in Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, pp. 306-7.

¹⁸ See Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, Ross, “Intuitive Psychologist,” P. Pietromonaco and R. Nisbett, “Swimming Upstream Against the Fundamental Attribution Error: Subjects’ Weak Generalizations from the Darley and Batson Study,” *Social Behavior and Personality* 10 (1982), pp. 1-4, Nisbett and Ross, *The Person and the Situation*, esp. chapter five, and Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, p. 285. For important recent work, see D. Gilbert and P. Malone, “The correspondence bias,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995), pp. 21-38, J. Uleman *et al.*, “People as flexible interpreters: Evidence and issues from spontaneous trait inference,” in M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Volume 28 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996), pp. 211-280, V. Yzerbyt *et al.*, “The Dispositional Inference Strikes Back: Situational Focus and Dispositional Suppression in Causal Attribution,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001), pp. 365-376, and the references cited therein.

¹⁹ See Sreenivasan, “Errors about Errors,” pp. 53-4. As he notes, “From the fact that people happen to add badly, it does not follow that there are no sums. Likewise with character traits” (54).

to investigate ways in which such tendencies might be combated.²⁰

But Harman is not finished. For suppose that people routinely fall prey to the Fundamental Attribution Error in making trait-based explanatory attributions. In other words, suppose that emphasizing character dispositions over situational influences is *itself* a widely held disposition. Then according to Harman we would have a plausible explanation for the prevailing folk belief in the existence of character traits.²¹ Combine such a disposition with a confirmation bias towards ignoring disconfirming evidence, and we have what Harman takes to be a compelling alternative account for why we believe and act the way we do when it comes to trait attribution.

Of course, such an explanation will succeed only if there is no good evidence for thinking that there actually are global character traits. Hence the role of Harman's second conclusion:

(H1) There is no empirical basis to support the existence of global character traits.²²

Of course, even if Harman is right about the experimental results and even if he is able to supply the requisite details needed to show that such results are incompatible with the existence of global character traits, then he would have merely succeeded in showing that the following is true:

(H2) There is no empirical basis from the results of social psychology to support the existence of global character traits.

To get from (H2) to (H1) he would also need to show that one of the following is true:

(1) There are no other sources of empirical evidence which could support the existence of global character traits.

(2) Every other source of empirical evidence for potentially inferring the existence of global

²⁰ For a preliminary sketch of various ways to resist committing the Fundamental Attribution Error, see Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, pp. 313-4, Doris, "Persons," p. 519, and Merritt, "Virtue Ethics." For some difficulties, see Yzerbyt *et al*, "The Dispositional Inference Strikes Back."

²¹ Harman, "Moral Philosophy," pp. 324-330 and "Nonexistence," p. 223.

²² Harman, "Moral Philosophy," p. 316 and 330. It is not clear whether Harman wants to reject *local* character traits as well. At times, he claims that his target is merely character traits as ordinarily conceived, which presumably is meant to include global but not local character traits ("Nonexistence," p. 223). But he also writes that, "[w]e need to abandon all talk of virtue and character" (Ibid., p. 224). It would be surprising, however, if his project was to reject

character traits, does not in fact provide adequate support for their existence.

As far as I can tell from his writings, Harman does not argue for either of these claims.

II. GLOBAL CHARACTER TRAITS

Before turning to John Doris' recent work, it is worth spending a moment clarifying the virtue ethicist's commitment to what we earlier called global character traits. Here some taxonomy will be helpful in setting the stage. Broadly speaking, there are three families of views one can take regarding the existence of such traits:

Global Trait Realism: There really are global character traits which play a central role in the behavioral outcomes and psychological makeup of those individuals who possess them.

Global Trait Instrumentalism: There really are no global character traits, but it is useful for explanatory and predictive purposes to talk *as if* there were such traits.²³

Global Trait Eliminativism: There really are no global character traits, and we should eliminate all reference to them from our thought and language.

This way of carving up the landscape nicely illustrates the fact that mounting an attack from social psychology against realism is insufficient by itself as a positive argument for eliminativism. Such a strategy must also be supplemented with arguments for why talking as if there were global character traits, is itself an unproductive or even potentially harmful enterprise.

As we saw, Harman is a Global Trait Eliminativist.²⁴ But for now our concern is not with the plausibility of the eliminativist view, but rather with whether Harman is right in thinking that virtue ethics is committed to Global Trait Realism. Now virtue ethics is not necessarily wedded to such a view of character traits,²⁵ but it is certainly true that most virtue ethical approaches have been inclined towards a

local character traits too since he has given us no reason for doing so, and in fact there is abundant empirical evidence for their existence, as we shall see in section five.

²³ According to another form of Global Trait Instrumentalism, we are not justified in believing either that there really are or that there really are not any global character traits, but it is still useful to talk as if such traits did exist.

²⁴ He explicitly rejects Global Trait Instrumentalism in his "Nonexistence," p. 224.

²⁵ As Harman himself readily acknowledges. Thus Judith Jarvis Thomson has recently been developing a version of

realist view when it comes to the virtues and vices construed as global character traits.²⁶ These traits are taken to be causally efficacious in the production of certain actions, and are meant to serve an important explanatory role for consistent sortal behavior over time.²⁷ Thus, for example, the just man performs the relevant action *because* he is just, and his just action can be *explained* in light of his just character.²⁸

For both trait realists and virtue ethicists alike, global character traits are typically understood as dispositional properties of individuals. An individual who possesses the virtue of courage is disposed to act courageously whenever he or she is in the appropriate courage-eliciting circumstances.²⁹ Such dispositional theories of global character traits in turn lend themselves naturally to counterfactual analyses of dispositions.³⁰ Roughly, such an account would look something like the following:

- (3) For any dispositional character trait T and agent A, A has T only if, if A were in the relevant T-eliciting circumstances, then A would probably attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act.³¹

virtue ethics which focuses on virtuous action rather than on the cultivation of virtuous character dispositions. See in particular her “Evaluatives and directives,” in G. Harman and J. Thomson (ed.), *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 125-154 and “The Right and The Good,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997), pp. 273-298.

²⁶ Thus Owen Flanagan writes that, “[t]he entire enterprise of virtue ethics depends on there being individual traits of character which are causally effective in the production of behavior across situations of a kind” (*Varieties of Moral Personality*, p. 282). See also Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 11-12, 29.

²⁷ Hence MacIntyre: “From an Aristotelian standpoint to identify certain actions as manifesting or failing to manifest a virtue or virtues is never only to evaluate; it is also to take the first step towards explaining why those actions rather than some others were performed” (*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 199). See also Stephen Hudson, “Character Traits and Desires,” *Ethics* 90 (1980), pp. 539, 542, Michele Moody-Adams, “On the Old Saw that Character is Destiny,” in Owen Flanagan and Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 111, and Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*. For similar claims in psychology, see Allport, “Traits revisited” and Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, p. 5. One might reasonably doubt whether all explanations have to be causal or whether the virtue ethicist is committed to giving a causal account of trait-based action. Unfortunately, adequate discussion of these important issues will have to wait for another time.

²⁸ It needn’t follow, of course, that he did the relevant action for the *reason* that it was just. Rather, because he was just he recognized that particular reason, whatever it may be, as the one he ought to act on.

²⁹ For more on character traits as dispositions, see in particular Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 9, 35-7, Richard Brandt, “Traits of character: A conceptual analysis,” reprinted in *Morality, utilitarianism, and rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 266, and Brandt, “The Structure of Virtue,” reprinted in *Morality, utilitarianism, and rights*, pp. 289-311.

³⁰ Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, p. 279 and Brandt, “Traits of character,” p. 266.

³¹ See Doris, “Persons,” p. 509. The counterfactual is merely a necessary condition since the virtue theorist may also want to insist that the T-sortal act also arise from a *stable* disposition and from the appropriate intentions and desires. Additionally, the probability qualification is important since trait possession is not an all or nothing event, but rather comes in degrees of more or less (see Brandt, “Traits of character,” p. 266). We shall return to this point at

A more sophisticated account of trait possession will have to wait until section five, but for now it is important to note that a counterfactual understanding of dispositions allows for the making of predictions about how agents would act in novel circumstances. If a person has the virtue of courage to a high degree and we are aware of that fact, then other things being equal we can reliably predict what he would do in various combat or rescue situations even though he has never been in those particular circumstances before.

So construing the virtues as global character traits creates certain expectations which will be of importance when it comes to examining the results of experiments in social psychology. In the first place, an individual who fully possesses such a trait or group of related traits is expected to act in a consistent and reliable manner in most if not all trait-eliciting circumstances, even if those circumstances vary widely in their particular situational details.³² And if that person does in fact act in the appropriate way, then it is precisely his possession of that trait or group of related traits which *explains* his behavior.³³ Let us call this the *Consistency Expectation*:

If an agent A has global character trait T, then A would probably attempt to behave in a variety of T-eliciting circumstances in such a way that is consistent with possessing T.

In other words, we'd expect a courageous person to behave courageously in various circumstances in which courage is required.

The second important expectation is that if an individual possesses a certain global character trait, then third party observers who understand the nature of that trait could reliably predict how the individual would probably behave in some set of either actual or non-actual trait-eliciting circumstances.³⁴ Let us call this the *Predictive Expectation*:

greater length in sections four and five. Finally, the qualification about merely attempting to perform the relevant action is needed for those cases where external impediments prevent the agent's *actually* being able to perform it.

³² See Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, pp. 9, 13, N. Dent, "Virtues and Actions," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1975), pp. 327-8, Moody-Adams, "On the Old Saw," p. 118, and Merritt, "Virtue Ethics," p. 365.

³³ Brandt, "Structure of Virtue," p. 289, Stephen Mumford, *Dispositions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 11-12, and Harman, "Moral Philosophy," p. 317.

If an agent A has global character trait T, then third party observers who understand both the nature of T and the degree to which A possesses T, could reliably predict what action A would probably attempt to perform were A in the relevant T-eliciting circumstances.

Taken together, the Consistency and Predictive Expectations are the primary means by which to illustrate the bearing that empirical work in social psychology has on the truth of certain descriptive claims about global trait possession.

III. DORIS' MORE SOPHISTICATED ATTACK

According to John Doris, data from social psychology provides the necessary empirical justification for thinking that few if any character traits satisfy both the Consistency and Predictive Expectations.³⁵ As I read him, Doris' main argument takes the form of a dilemma for the virtue ethicist.³⁶ He devotes most of his energy to defending the first horn of the dilemma, and while he does not formulate his argument there explicitly, something like the following reconstruction is surely what he has in mind:³⁷

- (i) If there were widespread possession of the virtues and vices understood as global character traits and if the Consistency Expectation were true, then systematic empirical observation would reveal that many agents attempt to behave in a wide variety of trait-eliciting circumstances in such a way that is consistent with their possessing the relevant traits.³⁸
- (ii) However, systematic empirical observation (in social psychology experiments) fails to report any such patterns of action.
- (iii) Furthermore, if there were widespread possession of the virtues and vices understood as global character traits and if the Predictive Expectation were true, then systematic empirical observation would reveal that third party observers who understand both the nature of the trait in question and

³⁴ See Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, p. 10, Moody-Adams, "On the Old Saw," p. 118, and Mumford, *Dispositions*, p. 11.

³⁵ See his "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics" and *Lack of Character*. Here our focus will be on Doris' argument in the earlier work.

³⁶ Doris, "Persons," p. 520.

³⁷ See especially *Ibid.*, pp. 505-7.

the degree to which it is possessed, could reliably predict what actions agents would probably attempt to perform when in the relevant trait-eliciting circumstances.³⁹

(iv) However, systematic empirical observation (in social psychology experiments) fails to produce any such results.⁴⁰

(v) Therefore, there is not widespread possession of the virtues and vices understood as global character traits.⁴¹ [(i), (ii) MT and (iii), (iv) MT]

Now one quite natural response would be simply to grant the soundness of this argument and then deny that the virtue ethicist is committed to the claim that there is widespread possession of global character traits. Doris does consider such a move, but thinks that virtue ethicists who make it would then fall prey to the second horn of his dilemma.⁴² But before turning to those considerations, let us first spend a moment examining in more detail why the virtue ethicist can readily accept something like the conclusion in (v).

IV. A SUFFICIENT REJOINDER

Both Harman and Doris reason roughly as follows. Take some alleged global character trait T. On the view of traits as counterfactual-grounding dispositions, we can form certain expectations about how an agent with T would act in T-eliciting circumstances. But according to several experiments in social psychology, when the agent is subsequently placed in the relevant circumstances, our expectations fail to be met. Therefore, these alleged traits serve no explanatory or predictive purpose; situational factors are primarily responsible for dictating action. Therefore, there are no global character traits.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 505, 507-9.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 509, 522 fn. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 523 fn. 23. In this regard, it seems to me quite plausible to think that the Milgram and Good Samaritan experiments provide some supporting evidence in favor of premises (ii) and (iv). If, for example, many of the seminary students did fully possess such virtues as charity and benevolence, then third party observers should have been able to predict that the students would not let time considerations distract them from aiding the slumped-over man. But as Darley and Batson showed, the degree to which the students exhibited helping behavior seemed to be strongly influenced by the degree to which they took themselves to be in a hurry. So it does seem as if these students did not fully possess the relevant virtues as robust features of their characters.

⁴¹ Alternatively one could take the argument to show that the Consistency and Predictive Expectations are false, but that is not Doris' aim.

One interesting feature of this reasoning is that it takes a specific disconfirming example as important evidence against the existence of the relevant global character trait. Thus if the trait is charity and the circumstances are those of the Milgram experiment, then participants with full possession of this virtue would not engage in what they took to be the infliction of terrible pain on the learners. And yet while many participants tried to stop, the situational change brought about by external compulsion from the nearby experimenter would in many cases keep them turning the dial as far as it would go. So in this experiment, nothing about the participants' characters seems to explain why they acted in the way that they did.

Such a case will count against the virtue ethicist only if her view is committed to an extremely strong account of character traits according to which an agent has a particular global trait T only if he attempts to perform the relevant T-sortal act in *every* T-eliciting circumstance. But I can see no reason why any virtue ethical theory should be saddled with such an implausible account. For it has rarely been part of the view that possession of a virtue is an all or nothing phenomenon; rather, it comes in degrees of more or less.⁴³ In addition, acquiring a particular virtue is typically thought to be a very gradual process full of numerous setbacks. The life of progression to full virtue is one of continuous struggle in overcoming character defects and external obstacles.⁴⁴ For the Plato of *The Republic*, true virtue can be achieved through participation in a long and demanding educational process out of which very few ever emerge successfully.⁴⁵ Similarly for Aristotle, the virtues are traits that must be habituated in children and positively reinforced in adults over extended periods of time.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., pp. 511-512.

⁴³ For a start, see James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 143, Gary Watson, "Virtues in Excess," *Philosophical Studies* 46 (1984), p. 58, and Brandt, "Traits of character," pp. 285-7.

⁴⁴ Athanassoulis ("Response to Harman," pp. 218-9) makes a similar point in response to Harman, "Moral Philosophy."

⁴⁵ For further discussion of this point in the context of responding to Harman, "Moral Philosophy," see Depaul, "Character Traits," pp. 150-153.

⁴⁶ See in particular Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 1099b29-32, 1103b16-31, 1152a30-34, 1179b25-29, 1180a1-5, 15-19, M. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 69-92, and Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 38-9 for Aristotle's account of moral development.

So failure to perform the required T-sortal act in the particularly demanding circumstances studied by Darley, Batson, Milgram, and other social psychologists, should not necessarily be seen as evidence that the participants do not possess any global character traits whatsoever. Rather, at best what can be concluded is that they fall short of *fully* possessing the relevant traits. And such results are exactly what we should expect given how difficult virtue ethicists take the proper acquisition of global character traits to be.

Thus rather than disconfirming virtue ethics, social psychologists have to some extent provided supporting evidence for certain traditionally prominent features of the view. Virtue ethicists can readily agree that some experiments in social psychology confirm that there currently is not widespread full possession of global character traits.⁴⁷ But what has not been persuasively argued by opponents of virtue ethics, is that there is not widespread *weak* and *moderate* possession of these traits. Even this preliminary challenge has yet to be met. But suppose it can be. Then there would be nothing inconsistent with a generic virtue ethical position to retreat again and deny that there was any justifiable expectation that people in general would attain even modest forms of global character trait possession.⁴⁸ After all, many people might for the most part exhibit behavior which is continent, incontinent, or in some other way non-virtuous.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See also Athanassoulis, "Response to Harman," pp. 219-220. In light of the above, it is extremely odd that Campbell formulates his argument from social psychology as an attack on what he takes to be the popular Kantian and virtue ethical commitment to, "powerful forces toward helping behaviour that are widespread if not universal, and which occupy a central place in many persons' motivational constitution" ("Can Philosophical Accounts," p. 41).

⁴⁸ Aristotle himself writes that, "the many naturally obey fear, not shame; they avoid what is base because of the penalties, not because it is disgraceful. For since they live by their feelings, they pursue their proper pleasures and the sources of them, and avoid the opposed pains, and have not even a notion of what is fine and truly pleasant, since they have had no taste of it" (*Ethics*, 1179b11-16). And according to Athanassoulis, "[v]irtue ethics presumably requires that moral behaviour, in the form of possessing virtuous character traits, is a possibility, rather than an actuality for the majority of people" ("Response to Harman," p. 217). See also Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 94-6 and Doris, "Persons," fn. 32.

What it is for a global character trait to be "weakly" or "moderately" possessed will be discussed in more detail at the end of section five.

⁴⁹ Thus Aristotle seems to locate most people somewhere between continence and incontinence when he writes that, "[i]ncontinence and continence are concerned with what exceeds the state of most people; the continent person abides [by reason] more than most people are capable of doing, the incontinent person less" (*Ethics*, 1152a25-27). The issue of continence introduces an important problem for arguments based on social psychology. For the

However, Doris maintains that such moves would be unwise for virtue ethicists to make. According to the second horn of his dilemma, by retreating from the thesis of full and widespread global trait possession, “the empirical critique is disarmed, but virtue theory no longer has the selling point of a compelling descriptive psychology.”⁵⁰ In particular, the view can no longer lay claim to three important advantages it purports to have over its deontological and consequentialist rivals, starting with the first:

- (a) An account of moral development and education which emphasizes, “the sort of character agents may inculcate, rather than the advantages of reflection on a rarefied ideal.”⁵¹

Here it is hard to see why a more modest view of global trait possession could no longer emphasize character inculcation. Through a process of proper moral habituation and development, children would be brought closer and closer to the ideal of full virtue. Admittedly, there is no guarantee that they would ever succeed in attaining this goal; in fact, many would probably fail. But it certainly does not follow from this that such an approach could not even be a live option from the beginning. So much more needs to be said about this issue.⁵²

What about the second advantage? According to Doris, virtue ethicists could no longer lay claim to:

- (b) An account which permits our ordinary practice of appealing to virtues “in the explanation of behavior.”⁵³

But again it is hard to see how this line of reasoning is meant to go. Just because few individuals are fully virtuous, it certainly does not follow that the virtues as such would be useless in giving causal explanations. In some cases of character trait attribution, individuals with those traits might fail to meet certain expectations in particularly demanding circumstances. Nonetheless, character traits could still be

empirical experiments do not usually discriminate between actions properly described as virtuous and those that are merely continent. The same problem arises with vice as opposed to incontinence (see also Athanassoulis, “Response to Harman,” p. 218).

⁵⁰ Doris, “Persons,” p. 520.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 512.

⁵² A more detailed account of global trait acquisition is developed in the next section.

⁵³ Ibid.

important causal factors in an explanation for why those people behave the way they do in most ordinary situations. So again further clarification is needed.

Finally, Doris thinks that a modest virtue ethic cannot be:

(c) An account which avoids problems associated with theoretical mediation.⁵⁴

Since practical deliberation by the majority of people who do not possess global character traits would have to involve appealing to an ideal of virtue and to what a fully virtuous individual would do, virtue ethics would become susceptible to some of the same kinds of worries about practical reasoning which allegedly plague other normative theories.⁵⁵

Yet this also is not obvious. For the primary cases in which theoretical mediation might seem to be a problem, are those in which an agent is uncertain about what to do in novel circumstances. Here concerns about alienation might in fact arise in much the same way as they do for other normative theories. But unless the virtue ethicist wants to maintain that *everyone* is fully virtuous, which of course none do, then giving action guidance in novel circumstances without theoretical mediation will be a problem for *any* form of virtue ethics. Since action guidance is a perfectly general problem for any virtue ethical approach to morality, it is not clear how the considerations Doris has raised against this third advantage fall directly out of his arguments from social psychology. Perhaps they are instead motivated by independent concerns he has with virtue ethics.⁵⁶

So for now at least, the strategy developed in this section for resisting the empirical argument from social psychology looks particularly promising.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 520.

⁵⁵ In particular, the work of Bernard Williams and Michael Stocker is sometimes taken to show that appealing to impersonal rules or norms in the course of deliberation is dehumanizing and introduces a form of schizophrenia between an agent's reasons and motives. See especially Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 116, 131, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 54-70, and Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Moral Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), pp. 453-466. Yet according to Doris, "[t]heoretical mediation through an ideal of virtue is no less obviously problematic than through an ideal of rationality, duty, or maximizing happiness, and alienation, if it is a genuine difficulty, may plague character-based ideals no less than other ideals" ("Persons," p. 520).

⁵⁶ For a rather different and in my view convincing response to Doris on theoretical mediation, see Merritt, "Virtue Ethics," pp. 370-371.

V. A SKETCH OF AN ACCOUNT OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL TRAIT POSSESSION

Much of this paper has been concerned with the negative task of responding to an objection to virtue ethics. Let us end, however, by providing the rudiments of a positive account of global trait acquisition and possession that is both faithful to contemporary work in social psychology as well as compatible with many forms of virtue ethics. Naturally the account as presented here will be overly simplified, but I hope to provide a more detailed presentation elsewhere.

The place to begin is not with global but rather with what we earlier called *local* character traits. For it turns out that there is actually a great deal of experimental evidence that such local traits not only exist but are in fact widely possessed.⁵⁷ These traits are such that they satisfy the Consistency and Predictive Expectations, but only for behavior restricted to the same narrowly construed particular type of trait-eliciting situation. One way to spell this out more rigorously is the following:

(LT) For any dispositional *local* character trait T, time t, and agent A, A has T only if there is a set of narrowly defined T-eliciting circumstances C such that, other things being equal, the following is true of A:

[(if A were in C at t₁, then A would probably attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act),
(if A were in C at t₂, then A would probably attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act), ...
(if A were in C at t_n, then A would probably attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act)].⁵⁸

Thus a person might have the local character trait of honesty *for some particular type of situation S* (a

⁵⁷ For a start, see Mischel and Peake, "Beyond déjà vu," J. Wright and W. Mischel, "A conditional approach to dispositional constructs," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (1987), pp. 1159-1177 and "Conditional hedges and the intuitive psychology of traits," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55 (1988), pp. 454-469, Y. Shoda, W. Mischel, and J. Wright, "Intuitive interactionism in person perception: Effects of situation-behavior relations on dispositional judgments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56 (1989), pp. 41-53 and "Intra-individual stability in the organization and patterning of behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67 (1994), pp. 674-687, and W. Mischel and Y. Shoda, "A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality," *Psychological Review* 102 (1995), pp. 246-268.

⁵⁸ The "probably" qualifier in the consequent of each conditional is intended to capture the fact that local character trait possession can come in degrees. Note as well that strictly speaking (LT) can also serve as a necessary condition for *global* trait possession. Thus it is not meant to isolate the relevant difference between local as opposed to global character traits, but rather to emphasize the important role that temporal stability plays in the case of the former. What instead serves as the central differentiating condition is the failure of local character traits to exhibit cross-situational consistency.

standard examination situation, for example). If so, then third-party observers could reliably predict how he would act the next time he is in some S-situation token. Yet the only way such observers could be justified in predicting whether he would behave honestly in any given *non-S* situation, is if they also had good independent reasons for thinking that he had other *distinct* local character traits especially well-suited for *those* kinds of situations. Without the appropriate array of local character traits, the agent in question would not demonstrate the relevant cross-situational consistency.

One intuitively plausible psychological picture underlying this account of local character traits is the following. Take an agent with a class of cognitive and affective or motivational states about S-type situations, and suppose those states are not isolated from one another, but rather stand in various relations both to themselves and to the remainder of the agent's personality. Hold these states and their relations fixed in the agent's psychology for some significant length of time, and call this the agent's *personality network for S-type situations*. Then put the agent in some S-situation token in which she does, say, the appropriately compassionate thing by helping someone with certain kinds of needs. The account will be, roughly, that this action as opposed to some other is chosen as a result of certain features of the situation interacting with the agent's S-type personality network of cognitive and affective states. Crucially, the features of the situation in question which are taken to be relevant, will depend on the contingent makeup of the agent's corresponding personality network and the various ways in which it both draws her attention to some features as opposed to others and interprets those features as being of a certain kind.⁵⁹ Thus given the activation thresholds of the relevant states in the individual's personality network, only certain features of a particular S-situation will be noticed and categorized in such a way as to trigger further cognitive and affective processes such as the agent's plans, goals, and strategies for regulating behavior.⁶⁰ The eventual outcome in many cases will be the generation of trait-specific action.

If it could be worked out in detail, such a model would account for various forms of behavioral

⁵⁹ See Mischel and Shoda, "Cognitive-Affective System Theory."

⁶⁰ See W. Mischel, "Toward a cognitive social learning reconceptualization of personality," *Psychological Review* 80 (1973), pp. 252-283 and Mischel and Shoda, "Cognitive-Affective System Theory."

variance. Two people in the same situation might act differently as a result of the divergent ways in which their particular personality networks draw attention to and classify certain features of the situation. And the same person might behave quite differently in two closely related situations if, for example, some of the features unique to one of the situations pass a recognition threshold and trigger different states in the agent's personality network which ultimately engender different act-tokens.

Notice that such a view would also avoid the extremes of both crude situationism and naïve trait dispositionalism. For on the one hand, it is not situations alone which dictate action, but rather the ways in which we selectively focus on and categorize various aspects of them given our relatively fixed personality structures.⁶¹ Yet it is also true that variations in situational details may bring about a lack of cross-situational consistency if different cognitive and affective states are being activated in the same stable personality.⁶²

Interestingly enough, something like this view of personality networks has been defended in the contemporary social psychology literature.⁶³ But given that it seems to eschew reliance on global character traits, the personality system sketched above may not be an account which many virtue theorists would be willing to accept. Thus more needs to be said in order to bridge the gap between local and global character traits.

What is needed is an understanding of moral education and trait acquisition whereby an agent is habituated in such a way that different kinds of situations can meet the activation threshold for the same

⁶¹ Mischel and Shoda, "Cognitive-Affective System Theory," pp. 252, 256.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 256-7. See also W. Mischel and Y. Shoda and R. Mendoza-Denton, "Situation-Behavior Profiles as a Locus of Consistency in Personality," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11 (2002), p. 53.

⁶³ See especially the important studies cited in footnote 57. For more recent work in this area, see also Y. Shoda and W. Mischel, "Toward a Unified, Intra-Individual Dynamic Conception of Personality," *Journal of Research in Personality* 30 (1996), pp. 414-428 and "Personality as a stable cognitive-affective activation network," in S. Read and L. Miller (eds.), *Connectionist models of social reasoning and social behavior* (Mahwah: Erlbaum, 1998), pp. 175-208, K. Vansteelandt and I. Van Mechelen, "Individual differences in situation-behavior profiles: A triple typology model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 (1998), pp. 751-765, D. Cervone and Y. Shoda, *The Coherence of Personality: Social-cognitive bases of consistency, variability, and organization* (New York: Guilford, 1999), C. Morf and P. Rhodewalt, "Unraveling the paradoxes of narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model," *Psychological Inquiry* 12 (2001), pp. 177-196, R. Mendoza-Denton *et al.*, "Person x Situation Interactionism in Self-Encoding (I Am ... When ...)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80 (2001), pp. 533-544, Mischel, Shoda, and Mendoza-Denton, "Situation-Behavior Profiles," and J. Forgas, "Feeling and Doing:

set of plans and strategies for behavior regulation. To see how this would go, let us start with two situation types which seem to differ only slightly in their personality activating features. Here the dime helping experiments discussed in the appendix to this paper are particularly illuminating. Setting aside worries about the reliability of the experimental data, suppose that the slight situational variance of finding a dime in the coin return slot after making a payphone call typically engenders a dramatic difference in helping behavior. Then someone who defends the existence of global character traits need only argue that most of the test subjects did not receive an adequate moral education which habituated them into both recognizing and responding to the demands of the situation. If they had received such a training, then their activation thresholds would have been lower; they would not have needed the event of finding a dime to trigger an internal feedback mechanism which disposed them to exercise helping behavior. Similarly in the other direction – if they had been properly habituated, then a negative situational influence experienced immediately prior to encountering a potential helping opportunity should not have offset their predisposition to render assistance.

So morally insignificant variations to the inputs of global character traits had by well-trained personality systems should make no significant difference to outputted actions, and a person with such a personality should thereby typically exhibit cross-situational behavior which satisfies both the Consistency and Predictive Expectations. Furthermore, it turns out that there is significant psychological evidence that such personality training can occur in both natural and artificial contexts. Thus Mischel and Shoda write that because of various forms of habituation:

. . . usually after repeated attempts and over some time, new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving may become activated in relation to particular features of situations so that the cognitive-affective personality system and its activation pathways itself may change in some degree. This occurs when purposeful interventions to encode social stimuli in new ways and to activate a new pattern of cognitions, affects, and behaviours in relation

to them begin to reroute and modify the pathways of activation in the personality system, changing the organization in the mediating network. Such changes occur naturally in the system in the course of development through the experience of significant life events and by biological changes.⁶⁴

Ultimately such interventions can, “facilitate later proceduralized, automatic responses when the appropriate situation features occur.”⁶⁵

Something like this account of habituation may also provide the resources needed for understanding global trait dispositions whose activation is triggered by more diverse sets of circumstances. For example, in accordance with ordinary usage someone might perform honest actions as a result of being honest and being in circumstances involving examinations, courtrooms, lie-detectors, and so on. What allows us to attribute the trait of honesty to an agent who repeatedly displays honest behavior in such divergent situations is a certain understanding of her personality according to which different experiential inputs activate similar personality states which in turn trigger particular goals and behavioral strategies for acting in such a way that one tells the truth in these particular circumstances.⁶⁶ Such an ability to recognize that the truth should be told will only arise as a result of a long process of moral habituation of the kind described briefly by Mischel and Shoda above, and in far more detail in the relevant ethical and psychological literature.

It might be wondered where exactly this positive proposal stands in relation to (i) Doris’ own view, (ii) the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics, and (iii) our ordinary notions of virtue and character. Taking each of these in order, my view agrees with Doris in countenancing the important explanatory role

⁶⁴ Mischel and Shoda, “Cognitive-Affective System Theory,” p. 261. See also B. Roberts *et al.*, “The Kids are Alright: Growth and Stability in Personality Development From Adolescence to Adulthood,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001), pp. 670-683 and the references cited therein.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Mischel and Shoda go on to note that individuals, “can link goal-relevant plans and implementation intentions to the relevant situations in ways that will trigger the desired behavior when needed” (p. 261).

⁶⁶ According to Sreenivasan, “In one study, Charles Lord found that an individual’s cross-situational consistency in conscientiousness was significantly higher when the pair of situations in question was regarded as similar *by the individual* himself or herself” (“Errors about Errors,” p. 65, emphasis his). For Lord’s study, see “Predicting Behavioral Consistency from an Individual’s Perception of Situational Similarities,” *Journal of Personality and*

that must be played by local character traits, but goes beyond his view in still preserving a modest role for global traits in a way that also satisfies his demand for consistency with the latest findings in social psychology. Concerning (ii), my view is in conformity with traditional philosophical accounts of the virtues to the extent that virtue ethicists need not expect that there will always be widespread possession of global character traits. Where some tension with the tradition may arise is with respect to a way in which my view also departs from common-sense thinking about the virtues. Here what Sreenivasan says nicely outlines the relevant issue:

[C]ross-situationally consistent character traits will be narrower than imagined. Certainly, they will be considerably narrower than the range of behavioral specifications permissibly associated with a given trait by common sense. For any given virtue trait, it is an empirical question how wide the widest bundle of paradigmatic behavioral measures is that is consistently instantiated by an actual person; and it is another empirical question how many individuals exhibit the trait with *that* range.⁶⁷

In other words, the range of situations in which an agent can be expected to exhibit behavior which results from the same global character trait may be somewhat narrower than is typically supposed. Of course, this is an empirical matter and much work needs to be done before we can determine what each trait-specific range of circumstances will be. So in general, I take my view to represent a middle position between the seemingly exclusive emphasis by both ordinary people and traditional virtue theorists alike on a few broadly construed global character traits, and the equally exclusive emphasis by Doris and perhaps Harman on local character traits.⁶⁸

Admittedly the above is only a sketch, but it does allow us to conclude this section by providing an important necessary condition for global trait possession. In order to do so, let us define the notion of a

Social Psychology 42 (1982), pp. 1076-1088.

⁶⁷ "Errors about Errors," p. 66. Emphasis his.

⁶⁸ Another departure from ordinary thinking about ethics was noted at the end of section one in the context of discussing the Fundamental Attribution Error. My view readily agrees with the claim that ordinary people are far too

minimal subset of a character trait as follows:

(MS) For any dispositional global character trait T and agent A, a set is the *minimal subset* of T just in case it is the least membered set of T-counterfactuals of the form:

If A were in the relevant T-eliciting circumstances C_n , then A would attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act.

such that, other things being equal, A has T only if each member of the set is true of A.⁶⁹

The intuition behind (MS) is that we typically think someone must act in the appropriate way in certain paradigm trait-eliciting situations in order to qualify for even minimal forms of global trait possession. Thus someone would not be compassionate if, other things being equal, he did not help another person in great danger if it involved no risk of harm to himself, or did not forgo the satisfaction of a trivial desire in order to aid a friend in emotional distress.

The technical device of a minimal subset provides us with a way of more formally measuring the process of coming to perfect acquisition of a global character trait. For on the one hand, there are agents with global character trait T such that only the minimal subset of T is true of them. On the other extreme, an agent who possesses T fully is such that he will attempt to perform the appropriate T-sortal act in *every* T-eliciting circumstance.⁷⁰ In-between these two extremes is a continuum of degrees of trait possession determined by the size of the set of T-counterfactuals true of the relevant agent.⁷¹

By employing the device of a minimal subset, we can once again see why the main empirical findings adduced by Harman and Doris are entirely consistent with a modest thesis about global trait possession. For the virtue ethicist need not be committed to the following strong view such that:

quick to appeal to characterological explanations without sufficient evidence of temporally and cross-situationally repeatable trait-evincing behavior.

⁶⁹ A similar idea seems to have been expressed less formally by Watson, "Virtues in Excess," p. 58, Brandt, "Traits of Character," pp. 277, 285-288, and Mumford, *Dispositions*, pp. 41-42.

⁷⁰ See Brandt, "Traits of character," p. 285.

⁷¹ Unfortunately, (MS) is inadequate as it now stands for various reasons both technical – whether there can be a least member set if the minimal subset is infinite in size, whether there is vagueness in determining what falls inside and outside the scope of the minimal subset, whether there can be a determinate truth-value for counterfactuals concerning free human actions, whether (MS) can accommodate moral dilemmas – and intuitive, such as whether

(4) For any global dispositional character trait T and agent A, if A has T and is in T-eliciting circumstances, then A will attempt to perform the relevant T-sortal act.

Rather, all she need claim is that:

(5) For any global dispositional character trait T and agent A, if the minimal subset of T is true of A, then other things being equal:

- (a) If A is in some T-eliciting circumstances C in T's minimal subset, then the probability is very high that A will attempt to perform the relevant T-sortal act.
- (b) If A is in some T-eliciting circumstances C* not in T's minimal subset, then A may not attempt to perform the relevant T-sortal act due to the influence of situational factors unique to C*.

If this more modest claim is right, then a virtue ethicist can reject the claim that the Milgram and Good Samaritan experiments provide important evidence for Global Trait Eliminativism. For it may well be the case that an individual has a particular trait which he exercises in many trait-eliciting circumstances in both C and C*. Yet perhaps his character is not fully developed to the point at which he can stand up to certain particularly difficult circumstances in C*; in those cases, he gives in to the demands of the situation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this paper can be stated very concisely. Opponents of virtue ethics have tried to argue that:

(6) At the present time, there is no empirical evidence from social psychology for the existence of global character traits.

But if what has been said above is correct, then they have not succeeded in ruling out even the following claim:

there might be more than one minimal subset for any given global character trait. I take up each of these issues in more recent work.

(7) At the present time, there is empirical evidence from social psychology that a majority of experimental subjects have attained either:

(a) Only local character trait possession, or

(b) Some local and some weak or moderate global character trait possession.⁷²

And (7) is a thesis that traditional advocates of virtue ethics who are skeptical about the extent to which most people are deeply virtuous, can readily endorse.

⁷² For all we know, a few of these subjects may possess well-developed global character traits. In the Good Samaritan experiment, ten percent of participants in the high hurry scenario and forty-five percent in the intermediate one, still stopped to help the slumped-over man. What is the best explanation of this behavior which seemingly neglected occurrent external determinants of action? Well, perhaps one way to answer this question would be to take that particular group of subjects and submit them to several other helping experiments involving varying degrees of situational influence. If the majority of participants continue to exhibit helping behavior, then we might have some empirical evidence that they in fact have the relevant virtues as part of their characters. See also Pietromonaco and Nisbett, "Swimming Upstream" and Campbell, "Can Philosophical Accounts," p. 43.

A follow-up study was done by Elms and Milgram on the significant number of disobedient participants in the Milgram experiment, and there some significant personality differences were uncovered, although how best to interpret their results still remains unclear ("Personality Characteristics," pp. 282-9).

APPENDIX – THE DIME HELPING EXPERIMENTS

The discussion in this paper would be noticeably incomplete if nothing were said about the experimental results from social psychology that Doris devotes the most attention to in his paper, namely the so-called dime helping experiments.⁷³

In the original 1972 study by Isen and Levin, 41 adults were observed making phone calls at particular public telephone booths. The experiment was set up such that a randomly selected half of the unsuspecting subjects would find a dime if they checked the coin return slot. Subjects who were not alone or who did not check the slot were excluded from the study. Once a subject left the phone booth, a confederate started moving, “in the same direction as the subject and, while walking slightly ahead and to the side of him or her, dropped a manila folder full of papers in the subject’s path. The dependent measure was whether the subject helped the female confederate pick up the papers.”⁷⁴ And the results? According to Isen and Levin:⁷⁵

	Helped	Did Not Help
Dime	14	2
No Dime	1	24

If these results are accurate and generalizable, then they seem to provide strong evidence for situationism – a trivial difference in the situation brought about a significant difference in helping behavior.

The results recorded by Isen and Levin strike me as surprising given my own repeated observations of the rather high number of people who are typically willing to help someone pick up dropped papers, but even if we do tentatively accept their findings, there are still a number of ways in which a virtue ethicist might want to resist the employment of the dime helping case as evidence against the existence of global character traits. For example, she might want to deny that the virtue ethicist is

⁷³ Doris, “Persons,” p. 504.

⁷⁴ A. Isen and P. Levin, “Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972), p. 387.

committed to *widespread* moderate or weak global trait possession when the trait in question is something like compassion for the misfortune of others. Alternatively, she could note that the opposite scenario of negative mood alternations has not been shown experimentally to consistently generate reduced helping behavior.⁷⁶

But there is another important consideration, namely whether the empirical findings are in fact repeatable and generalizable. Perhaps not. For Blevins and Murphy employed the same experimental conditions and came up with the following results:⁷⁷

	Helped	Did Not Help
Dime	6	9
No Dime	15	20

Thus they concluded that there is “no relationship between finding a dime and helping.”⁷⁸

In order to validate their earlier results, Levin and Isen varied their phone booth case in the following way. Instead of potentially helping a confederate pick up dropped papers, subjects were given the opportunity to mail a stamped addressed envelope that seemed to have been inadvertently left behind in the phone booth. Thus subjects noticed the letter *before* they checked the coin return slot. Here were the results:⁷⁹

	Mailed Letter	Left Letter
Dime	10	1
No Dime	4	9

It is once again hard to know what to make of such data, especially since the sample size was so small and a non-trivial number of subjects mailed the letter even without finding a dime in the slot.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See for example the studies cited by J. Weyant and R. Clark, “Dimes and Helping: The Other Side of the Coin,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 3 (1977), p. 107.

⁷⁷ G. Blevins and T. Murphy, “Feeling Good and Helping: Further Phone booth Findings,” *Psychological Reports* 34 (1974), p. 326.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ P. Levin and A. Isen, “Further Studies on the Effect of Feeling Good on Helping,” *Sociometry* 38 (1975), p. 146.

Interestingly enough, other researchers once again had difficulty replicating the results. Thus Weyant and Clark, using five different locations and over four times as many test subjects, came up with the following:⁸⁰

	Mailed Letter	Left Letter
Dime	12	42
No Dime	15	37

Given these findings, they concluded that, “subjects who found a dime did not mail an apparently lost letter more often than did subjects who did not find a dime.”⁸¹

What this particular set of helping experiments shows is that philosophers should exercise a great deal of care when employing data from social psychology as independent evidence for their ethical claims. And virtue ethicists in particular have every right both to demand sustained empirical replication of experimental results and to question exactly what claim is allegedly being falsified by such findings. Of course, such inquiries should be carried out on a case-by-case basis. For every appeal to psychological evidence as purportedly mitigating against some descriptive commitment of virtue ethics, the defender of the view should not immediately fall back upon a stock response meant to handle all such situationist

⁸⁰ Weyant and Clark, “Dimes and Helping,” p. 109.

⁸¹ Ibid. See also their graphite variant on the payphone experiment (Ibid., pp. 107-8). It is worth noting that J. Schellenberg and G. Blevins (“Feeling good and helping: How quickly does the smile of dame fortune fade?” *Psychological Reports* 33 (1973), pp. 72-74) also could not duplicate the results of a different helping experiment described by Isen and Levin in their “Effect of Feeling Good on Helping.”

In their 1979 study, Batson *et al.* varied the dime case in such a way that, upon completing their calls, subjects were presented with the opportunity first to acquire information about the history of their state, and then soon afterwards help a female confederate who dropped a large folder of papers. The results were as follows for 40 test subjects:

	Acquired Information	Did Not Acquire
Dime	18	2
No Dime	12	8
	Helped	Did Not Help
Dime	13	7
No Dime	6	14

Here again we would want to insist that the data can be duplicated, especially given the small sample size. But even if they are generalizable, the results of this study do not seem nearly as dramatic as those obtained in Isen and Levin’s original experiment. After all, 30% of subjects helped and 60% acquired information even without the mood elevation of finding the dime in the coin slot. For more, see C. Batson *et al.*, “Generality of the ‘Glow of Goodwill’: Effects of Mood on Helping and Information Acquisition,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 42 (1979), pp. 176-179.

arguments. Rather, she should investigate the details of each particular experiment, and once satisfied that the results are authentic, proceed to examine exactly how the argument is meant to go from there.^{82 83}

⁸² For important recent work on similar kinds of helping experiments, see R. Baron and M. Bronfen, "A Whiff of Reality: Empirical Evidence Concerning the Effects of Pleasant Fragrances on Work-Related Behavior," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 24 (1994), pp. 1179-1203 and R. Baron, "The Sweet Smell of . . . Helping: Effects of Pleasant Ambient Fragrance on Prosocial Behavior in Shopping Malls," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (1997), pp. 498-503, as well as the more general issues about affective influence raised by Forgas, "Feeling and Doing."

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