Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued*

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Of late philosophers have begun to write about the implications of research in social and personality psychology for the study of ethics. The spirit of this movement is that ethics should be founded on a realistic conception of human nature and that social and personality psychology have important things to say about these matters. Examples of philosophers involved in this movement are, inter alia, and most prominently, Doris, Flanagan, Harman, and Vranas.[1] On the psychologists' side, Ross and Nisbett are the most prominent examples of those attempting to insure that the findings of psychology find their way into our conception of human nature.[2] We want to sign up for this movement too. But we are afraid that these philosophers and psychologists have drawn wrong conclusions from psychological results. We believe the lesson to be learned is substantially narrower than the movement seems to believe.[3]

EMERGING CONSENSUS

There seems to be a consensus among members of the movement that social/personality psychologists have made discoveries that undermine,

* We would like to thank the referees and editors at *Ethics* for their comments, criticisms, and encouragement.

1. See John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 315–31; Peter Vranas, "Respect for Persons: An Epistemic and Pragmatic Investigation" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2001).

2. See Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

3. Rachana Kamtekar's ("Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character," *Ethics* 114 [2004]: 458–91) article on Doris's critique of virtue ethics appeared as our article was in final review. In light of this, we have addressed some points of convergence and divergence in footnotes, rather than in the body of our text.

Ethics 115 (April 2005): 535–562
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or at least substantially challenge, a lively branch of ethics, virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, derived ultimately from Aristotle's *Ethics*,[4] is (roughly) the view that the proper aim of ethical thinking and training is the development of appropriate characters; ethics should be about what is the best kind of person to be and how people can become such. The psychologists and philosophers participating in this movement argue that the psychological data show that people do not have characters, in the sense required by virtue ethics, and this undermines virtue ethics.[5] We will argue that the data do not show this and that virtue ethicists need not abandon character because of psychologists' discoveries. Our aim, then, is limited; we will not be arguing in favor of virtue ethics as opposed to other approaches to ethics; our more limited aims are:[6] (1) to show that virtue ethics can survive the challenge from social psychology and (2) to articulate what social psychology has found that is relevant to virtue ethics.

SITUATIONISM VERSUS DISPOSITIONALISM (GLOBALISM)

The challenge to the notion of character and, therefore, to virtue ethics has a rallying cry, "situationism."[7] Situationism is a term embraced by all of the philosophers and psychologists named above; it is the key concept in the attack on virtue ethics, so part of what we will be up to here is getting clear just what it means. Those who embrace situationism also have a term—actually two terms—to characterize what they believe virtue ethics (and Western folk psychology) believe (falsely) about character; virtue ethicists and Western laypeople are accused of "globalism," as Doris put it, or "dispositionalism," as Nisbett and Ross put it. So what, then, is the doctrine of situationism?

4. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe and Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

5. Doris allows that people have characters of a sort but, as we shall see, not of the right sort. Do Doris's arguments (and the data on which they are based) impugn ethics more generally, or are they relevant to virtue ethics alone? Doris thinks that his arguments do not impugn ethics more generally (*Lack of Character*, 107–8). But we believe that the standard interpretation of some of the social psychological findings which Doris reviews does impugn all forms of ethics. We believe that the standard interpretation denies the idea that behavior follows from beliefs, desires, and values. We shall have much to say about this.

6. For the most part, though not entirely, for the purposes of this article we grant the claim that if Doris's interpretation of the social psychological literature were correct, it would embarrass virtue ethics. Our aim is to show that Doris's interpretation is not correct. Compare Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," for an in some ways parallel and in some ways divergent discussion of the same material. Kamtekar provides a more detailed discussion of virtue ethics per se.

7. The psychological version of this term is "situationalism."

SITUATIONISM

We have to be very careful with situationism because there are senses in which it is almost certainly true. And there are senses in which, if it is true, it has serious implications for our thinking about human nature. But we must be sure that the senses in which it is likely to be true are the same senses in which it has serious implications. For example, Doris writes, "But situationism's fundamental observation can at the start be stated plainly enough: behavior is—*contra* the old saw about character and destiny—extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstance."[8] Now, this is an interpretation of situationism that is almost certainly true, but does it have implications for our idea that people have characters?[9]

On our campuses at least, students attend lectures in lecture halls, people play tennis (pretty much only) on the tennis courts, people eat in the cafeterias and restaurants (for the most part); people, if they practice the piano, practice in the practice rooms, urinate in the rest rooms, and buy books and mugs in the bookstores. And so on. All of this illustrates sensitivity to circumstances, but it does not infirm character or virtue ethics. Nor does the fact that if asked where you are from while on a street in Paris you might answer, "New York," but if asked on a street in New York, you might reply "the upper west side," while if asked on the upper west side, you might say "on 93rd Street," and if asked on 93rd Street you might point to a building, and if asked in the courtyard of the building you might say, "on the third floor," and if asked on the third floor, "312." Exquisite sensitivity: no threat to character. We mention this, not because we believe that Doris, or others in this tradition, really believe that mere variation of behavior with circumstances is a threat to virtue ethics, but rather to suggest that situationism's main observation cannot be stated quite so plainly. We will be offering a definition which draws on the arguments of situationists but is not a definition they explicitly offer. We do that because the definition that Doris explicitly offers, at least, is inadequate.

HOW DO FACTS ABOUT HOW PEOPLE ACTUALLY BEHAVE AFFECT VIRTUE ETHICS?

The tradition has been a bit less than explicit about this, but we suppose that the facts about behavior affect virtue ethics this way:[10] Ethics is

8. Doris, *Lack of Character*, 2.

9. Of course, in fairness to Doris, these are only his first words on the topic, and his whole book might be seen as his attempt to clarify what he means. Yet he does advance this as, at least, a starting gloss, and we want to pause with it, just because it is so obviously true, to show just how lacking in implications it is.

10. See Doris, *Lack of Character*, 112–27.

otiose if it prescribes behavior that people cannot perform or, more generally, if it urges people to be the sorts of people they cannot become. But if empirical research discovers that no one does (or is) what virtue ethics say they should do (or be), then that is, at least, prima facie evidence that people cannot do (or be) what virtue ethics requires. The question, then, is: has social and personality psychology shown that no one does (or is) what virtue ethics says they should do (or be)? Of course, the "no one" in the above is a very strict standard. Diogenes' finding one honest person really isn't enough to warrant preaching honesty; virtue ethics will be troubled if the data show that there aren't many people who do (or are) what virtue ethics says they should (be).

WHAT DOES VIRTUE ETHICS SAY PEOPLE SHOULD DO (OR BE)?

According to Doris, the going conception of character, and the one that underwrites virtue ethics, is "globalism," and it has three components:

> (1) *Consistency.* Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions that may vary widely in their conduciveness to the manifestation of the trait in question.
>
> (2) *Stability.* Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviors over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions.
>
> (3) *Evaluative integration.* In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences.[11]

Doris accepts point 2 as supported by the empirical evidence: people don't change all that much from one day to the next, so long as we observe them in the same circumstances.[12] But he rejects points 1 and 3. The third point, that honest people are also kind, courageous, and so on, is in Doris's view less important than is the first point. As to point 1, Doris believes that it is vital to our conception of character, and to virtue ethics, and false on the data. He believes that the data show that though Peter might be perfectly honest in his business dealings, that is no reason to think him honest in his dealings with his bowling league, or his wife, or the cable company. Honesty exists, but generally honest people don't exist.

11. Ibid., 22–26.

12. So Doris allows as how there might be people (perhaps even most people) who consistently exhibit virtuous conduct in a narrow range of circumstances: he is an honest fellow in terms of his paying his electric bill, or maybe even more generally, his utility bills. (See ibid., 62–71.)

Doris assembles four kinds of data to show that people are not globally virtuous (insofar as they are virtuous at all): data on trans-situational correlations, data on social influences, data on mood effects on behavior, and, indirectly, data on the fundamental attributional error.[13] We shall be reviewing and reinterpreting the first two kinds of data in some depth. We shall not discuss the data bearing on the fundamental attributional error for two reasons. First, that literature is about why people would think that globalism's key first criterion is true even if it isn't—which is something of a subsidiary issue of relevance to virtue ethics, relevant only so far as one has independent reason to believe that globalism is not true. And second, we have discussed and critiqued this literature elsewhere in fair detail.[14] And that leaves us with the mood effect literature.

There is a substantial literature showing that very minor (by any standard) manipulations can affect people's moods and behavior. For example, Doris discusses in some detail a study in which people who found a dime in the coin-return slot of a pay telephone (you can see how old the study is!) were more likely to help another person pick up dropped papers than were people in a control group who did not find a dime.[15] And Doris is right to point out that this is just one of a large number of studies which show that even more trivial matters than a found dime can have effects on behavior.[16] But we must differ with Doris over whether these mood effects reach the sort of seriousness that would cause us to think much about the character of someone doing them (or not doing them). That is, we grant that whether someone will help pick up your dropped papers will depend on what kind of mood they are in, and we grant that it might only cost a dime (well, nowadays, maybe a quarter) to change their mood. But we just do not believe that

13. The other philosophers in this movement tend to rely on the same data; see, e.g., Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology."

14. See John Sabini, Michael Siepmann, and Julia Stein, "The Really Fundamental Attributional Error in Social Psychological Research," *Psychological Inquiry* 12 (2000): 1–15; and John Sabini and Maury Silver, "Internal and External Causes of Behavior," *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 2 (1987): 11–23. Of course it might be argued that there is no empirical reason whatsoever to believe in globalism; then the finding that there is a widespread illusion producing a belief in globalism is relevant. But as we shall argue below, following Abelson, there may well be enough empirical generality in behavior to sustain the notion that there really are some global traits. We agree, however, that people overestimate the degree of consistency in behavior.

15. See Doris, *Lack of Character*, 30–32; Alice Izen and Paula Levin, "Effects of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 384–88.

16. Interestingly, being put in a bad mood can have positive effects on behavior too! (See John Sabini, *Social Psychology*, 2nd ed. [New York: Norton, 1995], for a review.)

picking up or not picking up your papers is a very important manifestation of a moral trait.

A second connected point is this: one of the ways that these mood effects are thought to operate is via attention. Good moods are thought to broaden attention, bad moods to narrow it. Moods, apparently, affect how our attention is engaged by the world around us. Now a person might well argue that the failure to notice the petty trials and tribulations of those around us is an excusable failing of a person in a bad mood. To be sure, being in a bad mood does not excuse the failure to notice screams of agony and the like, but it is the sort of thing that excuses the failure to notice some dropped pencils! And, for these reasons, at least, the fact that people are inconsistent in whether they pick up (or not) depending on their mood is not sufficient inconsistency to warrant abandoning virtue ethics. So we will discuss mood effects no further.

BEHAVIORAL CONSISTENCY

Flanagan, Doris, and Harman follow Ross and Nisbett in following Mischel in claiming that people are too inconsistent from one situation to another for global traits to be usefully invoked in the explanation of behavior.[17] Skepticism about consistency begins with the famous studies of honesty by Hartshorne and May.[18] They observed children over a range of circumstances and noted that the correlations between honesty in one circumstance and honesty in another were quite small. Most of the children cheated neither all of the time nor none of the time but rather did so sometimes but not others.[19] And, indeed, Mischel in two very influential books pointed out that the correlations from situation to situation in the personality domain rarely if ever exceeded .3 and were typically closer to .2.[20] The smallness of this number has been taken as evidence that personality, traits, or character is "fragmented," that people simply do not have global, consistent characters—either good ones or bad ones.

However, no one thinks the correlation from one circumstance to another is zero. That is, no one thinks that if you know that someone has been honest in one circumstance you know nothing about whether

17. See Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (New York: Wiley, 1968), and *Introduction to Personality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).

18. See Hugh Hartshorne and M. A. May, *Studies in the Nature of Character*, vol. 1, *Studies in Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

19. As Doris points out, children are not the ideal subjects to decide the question of whether adult character exists, but they are the best we have. Walter Mischel and Philip Peake, "Beyond Déjà Vu in the Search for Cross-Situational Consistency," *Psychological Review* 89 (1982): 730–55, reached the same conclusion about college students vis-à-vis the trait of conscientiousness.

20. Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, and *Introduction to Personality*.

they will be honest in another. And no one thinks the correlation is 1.0; that is, no one thinks that if you know about honesty in one circumstance you have perfect ability to predict behavior in the next circumstance. The question, then, is one of degree: are correlations in the .2 to .3 range sufficient to underwrite some conception of character?[21]

One thing is sure; people expect the correlations from one situation to another to be higher than this,[22] but that is not really the issue. The issue is: are these correlations high enough?

Doris presents some background to put these correlations into perspective. He points out, for example, that Jennings, Amabile, and Ross have found that people can barely detect regularities of such magnitude, and he suggests that this means these correlations are too small to underwrite character.[23] We will try now also to provide some perspective, a different perspective, to suggest that while these correlations are smaller than we might have expected, they are large enough to serve, and perhaps they are really no smaller than we should have expected. We do so with some reservations. As we shall argue below, correlations from one situation to the next are only distantly related to what we really want to know. Still, the fact that these correlations are small is undeniably a fact indirectly related to the discussion of the reality of character, and they do cast a shadow over the discussion. So we think it appropriate to consider how big these correlations really are, even though we are not persuaded that the issue is as crucial as the degree to which it is discussed suggests.

IS .3 REALLY THAT SMALL?

Consider baseball:[24] Abelson pointed out that the difference between the batting average of Ted Williams (344), one of the greatest hitters

21. As Doris points out, we do not have the data we really want to answer this question. We would want to have longitudinal data about the behavior of adults in ethically relevant circumstances in which they did not know they were being evaluated. We just do not have those data, so we must make do with what we do have.

22. See Ziva Kunda and Richard Nisbett, "The Psychometrics of Everyday Life," *Cognitive Psychology* 18 (1996): 195–224.

23. See Dennis Jennings, Teresa Amabile, and Lee Ross, "Informal Co-variation Assessment: Data-Based versus Theory-Based Judgments," in *Judgments under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, and Paul Slovick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

24. Of course it might be argued that baseball is a poor analogy to what we care about in terms of virtue ethics. Perhaps. But we discuss it here, as Abelson did, not to create an analogy but rather to make the more general point that even these small correlations can be of substance and worth noticing. However, in the next section we also discuss why correlations are not directly the right issue for virtue ethics. The point we want to make here is simply that believing in globalism is not entirely a matter of succumbing to an illusion.

of all time, and Bob Uecker's (200), one of the weakest, accounts for between .33 percent and 1 percent of the variance in whether these particular batters will get a hit on a particular occasion.[25] The personality coefficient (what Mischel dubbed a correlation of .3) is between 3 and 27 times as predictive of particular instances of honesty and dishonesty as batting averages are predictive of whether someone will get a hit on a particular turn at bat. Now, most baseball fans consider the difference between Williams's and Uecker's batting averages to be significant indeed. The reason they do is that this difference does make a difference in the long run, and if a fan is going to pay careful and even breathless attention to a particular player and a particular turn at bat then it will be to Williams and not Uecker. If one twenty-seventh of the predictive power of the personality coefficient is important for baseball, isn't it rash to conclude that the personality coefficient isn't sufficient to support our entrenched notion of character? Abelson suggests that we might want to rethink whether correlations really capture our intuitions about the importance of an effect.

As Doris discusses, this point is an old one. Measures of personality are of little use in predicting behavior in any specific situation; they are of much greater use in predicting the frequency of behavior in aggregates of situations.[26] So if one insists that the ordinary conception of character must have predictive utility if it is to be thought of as legitimate, then, we would argue, it passes that test, though perhaps not with flying colors. But we need to reflect, now, on what we think the magnitude of the correlation should be between one situation and another in a trait such as honesty for our conception of character to survive.

HOW BIG MUST IT BE?

We said above that empirical social psychology had implications for virtue ethics if it could show that there are very few honest people in the world. Well, let us ask this question: suppose 20 percent of the people in some sample were indeed consistently honest. Would that be enough to keep virtue ethics in business? It is hard to know how many honest people are enough honest people, but 20 percent certainly seems like enough people for Diogenes to be happy. Now let us ask this: Suppose there were a situation in which it was very difficult to behave in an honest way. Not one in which it was all but impossible to do so—extreme

25. See Robert Abelson, "A Variance Explanation Paradox: When a Little Is a Lot," *Psychological Bulletin* 97 (1985): 129–33.

26. See Seymour Epstein, "Aggregation and Beyond: Some Basic Issues on the Prediction of Behavior," *Journal of Personality* 51 (1983): 360–92; and Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, "Attitudes towards Objects as Predictors of Single and Multiple Behavioral Criteria," *Psychological Review* 81 (1974): 59–74.

torture, threats to the lives of one's children—but one where the temptation to lie was high. Now let us imagine that in this circumstance 20 percent of the population did tell the truth in this circumstance; now imagine another situation in which very few people would be seduced into lying. So the 20 percent who told the truth in the first situation once again tell the truth, but an additional 60 percent of the population would, too. What is the correlation in honesty between those situations? .25. However, if 90 percent tell the truth in the second circumstance the correlation between it and the first would be .176. Now we have no idea whether it is true that 20 percent of any sample would be consistently honest; our point is merely that correlations of quite low magnitude are consistent with there being a substantial percentage of honest people. Put another way, consistently high correlations would require not only that some people are consistently and virtuously honest but also that other people are consistently, and perhaps perversely, dishonest. That's how correlations work; they consider the consistency of the virtuous and the not virtuous together. But virtue ethics does not require that those without substantial virtue be consistent in their transgressing.[27] Let us make this argument more psychologically real.

Consider for a moment cheating on exams. Let us imagine that people possess the trait of honesty to various degrees, some to a very large degree and some to almost no degree. Now it is tempting to suppose that if this were so, then the correlation between cheating on an exam and the degree to which a person possessed the trait would be close to 1.0. But reflection shows that this simply is not so. For one thing, whether one cheats on an exam has to do with more than whether one is honest (or how honest one is). For example, it depends on how smart one is! Smart people are more likely to know the right answer without cheating than are not-so-smart people. And even if you are very little gifted with the trait of honesty, why would you cheat (indeed, how could you cheat) if you knew the right answer? So intelligence and honesty are both implicated in cheating; this must reduce the correlation between whether or not someone cheats and whether that person is honest. Dishonest but smart people will cheat less than equally dishonest but not-so-smart people. And working hard might make one more likely to get the right answer too, so by the same logic, differential tendencies to work hard will reduce the correlation between honesty and cheating. And how much one cares about the topic will matter too. So, in the end, many different factors affect whether anyone will cheat on an exam and will, therefore, erode the correlation between any one of them, including honesty, and observed cheating. And this is so even

27. Compare Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," 482, on Plato, virtue, and consistency.

if it is so that there are some people who would never cheat. The correlations across situations in cheating are not related in as straightforward a way as one might hope to the question at issue: how many genuinely honest people are there?[28]

OTHER TRAITS

Correlational measures of traits like honesty, we have been arguing, do not go very far in telling us what virtue ethics needs to know: how many honest people are there, or, even better, how many honest people could there be? But consistency measures are even worse at telling us about traits like generosity, traits that have motivational components. Imagine two very wealthy and very generous people. Imagine that one of them decides to manage her generosity (or liberality, if you prefer) rationally and looks into which charity provides the greatest bang for one's buck (which returns the greatest utility for each dollar spent). And she gives all of her donations to that charity. Now imagine that the other person is less disciplined and gives money to every charity that solicits. Imagine at the end of a year that each has given away the same amount of money. The first philanthropist shows no consistency from one "situation" (various charities) to the other; the second is highly consistent.[29] But is one more generous than the other? The point is that even general motives in the course of a lifetime become channeled in one way or another into specific paths, but this is not to deny that the relevant trait terms still apply.

Our review of this literature on the consistency of personality does persuade us that most people overestimate how consistent (in morally relevant ways) people are from one situation to another. But it leads to two questions: Given all else people know about human behavior, are their expectations too high? And second, are the correlations so low as to convince us that they are useless and, most important for current purposes, thus to persuade us that Diogenes' quest is doomed: that there are no (or at least not very many) virtuous people about? To the first we reply maybe; to the second we answer no.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE STUDIES AND SITUATIONISM

We now turn to the final and, to us, the most important source of data typically cited in these discussions, studies of social influence. In

28. Doris, *Lack of Character*, 62–91 passim, also discusses the controversy in personality psychology about the utility of self-report measures of traits; i.e., can we learn much about people from asking them about themselves? We will pass on this topic, since it is about how we know who is honest, not whether there are honest people.

29. Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," 483–84, too insists that virtues must recruit practical reasoning, which will sometimes lead to superficial inconsistencies in the service of important goals, such as our philanthropist's.

these studies we do find people presumably of good character, more people than we would ever imagine, acting in ways that depart from the path of virtue. These are the studies that threaten our conception of character.

We begin our review of these studies by refining our conception of "situationism." Doris devotes much of his book to articulating a conception of situationism and, indeed, one important contribution of the book is just this articulation. We and Doris believe that writers in this tradition mean by situationism something like the following set of claims—regardless of the definitions they offer.

Morally significant behavior is affected by features of the immediate situation which:

1. are not in themselves of moral significance;
2. are not, prima facie, of great motivational significance;
3. are not well known either to laypeople or to the philosophical literature;
4. are numerous; and
5. do not form a coherent class from the point of view of folk psychology.

This, then, is the doctrine of situationism that threatens our conception of character and virtue ethics.[30] Does the evidence from psychology support this doctrine?

In the most important of these studies, subjects were induced to shock a protesting, middle-aged, avuncular confederate of the experimenter to 450 volts despite his screaming in pain and demanding to be released.[31] They were induced to do this in the context of an experiment purportedly on learning in which an experimenter matter-of-factly ordered them to continue. (The shocks were not real.) Sixty-five percent of both male and female subjects, a reasonable cross-section of inhabitants of New Haven, Connecticut, continued to shock the victim until the experimenter allowed them to stop. Most people's characters were not adequate to the task of preventing this brutality. The question is: does this result (and others we shall review) rely on a narrow defect of human nature, or does it require a more radical revision, à la situationism?

Milgram's results surprised everyone. But he also knew people would claim after the fact that they knew this about people all along,

30. We shall not dispute here whether character and this conception of situationism could coexist; we will content ourselves with arguing that the data do not support this version of situationism. Compare Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," for a discussion relevant to this point.

31. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper, 1974).

so to guard against this dismissive reaction, he took the precaution of asking people who did not know of the results to predict what would happen; specifically, he asked people in the street, Yale graduate psychology students, and Yale psychiatrists to predict what percentage of people would continue to shock to the end. None of these samples predicted that more than .6 percent would continue that far. Predictions, then, were not just wrong but radically wrong. This experiment, then, produces two mysteries: Why did people obey? And why did no one think they would?

To address the second question first, Milgram thought that when asked to predict what subjects in this experiment would do, people would imagine that subjects' behavior would follow from their values, desires, and beliefs, that their behavior would follow from the sort of things we recognize as character, or, at least, as relevant to character. People would imagine that the subjects would believe that administering strong shocks would be dangerous or, at the very least, painful and that they would not want to inflict danger and pain on the "other subject"; that they certainly wouldn't value such behavior; and that, therefore, they would refuse to continue to shock. People who were asked to predict subjects' behavior would, then, assume that the subjects valued the confederate's right not to be tortured and would, therefore, stop. But subjects did not behave this way. So Milgram and others concluded that the answer to the second mystery—why did no one expect people to do what they did—is that their predictions were based on the wrong model of the genesis of action. People expected action to follow from beliefs, desires, and values—from character—but, for some reason, it did not.[32] This leads us, then, back to the first question: why did the subjects do what they did? Does the answer to this implicate a narrow defect of human nature or a swarm of defects, as situationism would have it?

Faced with this conflict between what we expected the subjects to do and what the subjects did, we have interpretive choices. We might,

32. Of course someone may be skeptical about virtue ethics and the reality of character without being skeptical about beliefs, values, and desires. But it is difficult to sustain a belief in character if one is skeptical about behavior's being under the control of beliefs, desires, and values. The standard interpretation of these studies (see below the quotation from Ross and Nisbett concerning the Milgram demonstration) is that behavior in them (and by extension in morally important situations of everyday life) are under the control of subtle, situational forces rather than an agent's dispositions (beliefs, values, and desires). If the behavior seen here is under the control of situational forces, then, the argument goes, it is not under the control of beliefs, values, and desires and, therefore, it is not under the control of character. Our aim here is to defeat this string of claims by defeating the claim that the social influence studies demonstrate behavior that has escaped from control by beliefs, desires, and values.

for example, decide that people value obeying authority more than we thought they did. This would leave the formula that behavior follows from values, desires, and beliefs—in short from their characters—intact by deciding that the subjects' values, desires, or beliefs were different from what we thought they were. But this was not the interpretive path taken by most social psychologists or by philosophers who followed them.[33] Rather, the path chosen was this one well articulated by Ross and Nisbett:

33. Orne's famous "demand characteristic" account—that subjects continued to shock because they knew the shocks weren't real—is one attempt to take the first approach (Martin Orne, "On the Social Psychology of the Psychological Experiment: With Particular Reference to Demand Characteristics and Their Implications," *American Psychologist* 17 [1962]: 776–83). Space prevents us from discussing this here; suffice it to say that we find that approach wholly uncompelling. (See the debate about this in Arthur Miller, ed., *The Social Psychology of Psychological Research* [New York: Free Press, 1972].) Suppose one believed, contrary to situationism, that people really are more inclined to obey authority than we had thought—despite Ross and Nisbett's claim. What significance would the Milgram findings then have for our conception of character? Presumably, we would conclude that American character was far more authoritarian than we thought it was. This is indeed the conclusion reached by the Berkeley group, about fifteen years earlier than the Milgram studies, in their masterful volume on the authoritarian (originally fascist) personality (Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel Sanford, and Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* [Oxford: Harpers, 1950]). This might be a disheartening and even correct interpretation, but it was not the judgment reached by the scholarly community and, more important for our discussion, it would not have transformed our conception of character. It would have suggested that Americans had worse characters than we thought, rather than no characters. It is interesting to note, by the way, that Ross and Nisbett, two very hard-nosed experimental scientists, dismiss this interpretation of the results, not with data but with an anecdote, quoted below. Is there any better reason to reject the "authoritarianism" account of the results? We think so. People, when asked what they would do if placed in the experimental situation, overwhelmingly—almost unanimously—report that at some point (usually very early) they would refuse to obey. What should we make of these, obviously incorrect, assertions? Certainly, they are failed predictions, but we think they are something else too; they are statements of what people think they should do; in other words, they are statements of what people value. And they are our best reason for believing that in the Milgram experiment people do other than what they value, than what they believe they should do, than what their characters dictate, not, as the Berkeley group would have it, that people have different values. Further, Milgram made a film depicting a few of his subjects obeying and disobeying in the experiment. Watching this film, one, as it were, feels the "situational forces" arising to oppose the subjects' desires to stop the experiment. Watching the film convinces one that what does not happen is that subjects dispassionately decide what is more important to them, following the experimenter's commands to shock the victim or sparing the other subject pain, and then do what they decide is more important. Rather, watching the film convinces one that the subjects do indeed act contrary to their dispositions. This causes people—Doris and others—to flee to situationism: the idea that subtle (what Doris might call capricious, unprincipled) aspects of the situation dictate behavior. It is what causes one to take refuge in the notion of subtle "situational forces." In the end, then, we are in agreement with Ross and Nisbett, Harman, and Doris, inter alia, that the Milgram obe-

> We trust that the point of this detailed analysis of the Milgram demonstration is clear. We do not find evidence that people are disposed to obey authority figures unquestioningly—even to the point of committing harmful and dangerous acts. (We've never found such slavish obedience forthcoming from the students or advisees whom we enjoin to keep up to date with their reading, take neat lecture notes, and to study for exams in an orderly and timely fashion—and it is not because they do not regard us as authority figures.) Rather, what Milgram offered was a pointed reminder about the capacity of particular, relatively subtle situational forces to overcome people's kinder dispositions.[34]

The picture Ross and Nisbett paint here is this: people come into situations, including the Milgram obedience experiments, with dispositions, inclinations to act in specific ways. Certainly among these dispositions was the disposition to behave in a humane way. But surprisingly, they did not act in ways that are consistent with these humane dispositions. However, as Ross and Nisbett tell it, neither did they act in ways that are consistent with any other dispositions they have. Rather there were "forces," subtle forces in the situation, which overcame subjects' dispositions.[35] Obedience, then, is seen by Doris and others following this standard interpretation as caused by subtle (i.e., not obvious to the person who reflects on the situation from outside) causes not linked to significant motives of the subjects.These causes appear to fit the conception of situationism we proposed above.[36] And it is this conception

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dience experiments do not demonstrate that American character is more authoritarian than we thought, though it might well be. And we agree that "subtle situational forces" is an apt metaphor for what happens in the experiment. But we insist that "subtle situational forces" is just that, a metaphor. We believe that before one can decide whether the operation of these forces reveals something new and different about human behavior, something not known to Aristotle and the tradition that follows him, something that significantly alters our conception of character, we need to be clear about what the subtle forces are.

34. See Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 59.

35. Ross and Nisbett are not the only ones to use the metaphor of "forces." The Gestalt tradition which spawned these experiments relied extensively, both formally and informally, on this notion. Milgram himself uses the metaphor of "force fields" to describe and, perhaps, explain his results. Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," 473, seems to accept an interpretation of the experiment in contrast to ours and to Ross and Nisbett's: that the subjects are torn between a disposition to obey and a disposition not to harm. We agree with Ross and Nisbett in dismissing this account.

36. Kinsey claimed, erroneously, as it turned out, that a majority of men by age forty had been unfaithful to their wives (Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* [Oxford: Saunders, 1948]). This "finding" did not lead to a reconsideration of our conception of character. Readers of Kinsey may have concluded that people, or men at least, have weaker characters then we thought, but not that character is an illusion. This is so, presumably, because though carnal desire may be a "situational force" and of no moral significance, it is hardly subtle.

that psychologists have offered as the fulcrum with which to overturn the common conception of character.[37]

SLIPPERY SLOPES

Ross and Nisbett mention one such subtle force: a slippery slope. Subjects in Milgram's experiments are at first asked to administer a mere fifteen-volt shock; with each mistake the "learner" (confederate) makes, they are asked to increase the voltage—but by a mere 15 volts. This is a perfectly slippery slope, and there is no doubt that the subjects slide down it: at each shock level that they are tempted to quit they must face the question, "If it is wrong to administer the next shock, then was it really right to have administered the last one?" The lack of a qualitative difference in shock intensity helps trap them. (It is also true, however, that most of the subjects who did stop did so at 150 volts, the point at which the confederate demanded to be released.) To some (unknown) degree, then, obedience is attributable to a slippery slope. But the fact that people are trapped by slippery slopes is not news to philosophers or psychologists, or to common sense, for that matter, so we must look for other "subtle forces" in the situation to see whether they undermine our notion of character.

THE EXPERIMENTER AS A CAUSE OF OBEDIENCE

We believe that the key to the subjects' obedience is the experimenter.[38] The experimenter, we argue, plays a double role in producing obedience, and it is here that we find the subtle situational forces. After we

37. The experimenter in Milgram's experiments was armed with rejoinders to subjects' protests. Some of the subjects captured in the film asked who was responsible, and if so, the experimenter replied that he was (Stanley Milgram, *Obedience: A Filmed Report* [New York: New York University Film Library, 1965]). Perhaps other subjects asked themselves this question and reached the same conclusion. Now here we face a threat to our conception of character. To those of us lucky enough not to be in the Milgram situation, the experimenter's claiming responsibility seems absurd. If the shocks were real, the subjects would be guilty of participating in the torture of an innocent victim; for all they knew, they might even have participated in manslaughter (at 350 volts the victim stops responding and for all the subject knows, and for all the subject knows the experimenter knows, the victim might be unconscious or even dead). The idea that people can participate in such activity and so easily pass off responsibility, moral responsibility, leaves very little as grounds to trust people. If people do not hold themselves responsible, then how can we trust them? But as we have said, the shedding of responsibility is something confined to those embedded in the situation; it seems right to think that the "subtle situational forces" that Ross and Nisbett allude to cause this shedding of responsibility and that this is one of the ways that obedience is produced. So it seems to us that the ease with which subjects in these studies come to see themselves as not responsible is part of what needs to be explained. We still want to know what the subtle situational forces are.

38. See John Sabini and Maury Silver, *Moralities of Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 69–71.

dissect these forces, we will be in a position to see whether the fact that they are potent threatens our conception of character. We will also be in a position to determine whether these same "forces" operate in the other studies usually cited in this tradition to make the "no character" point; this will allow us to determine whether there is reason to believe an unprincipled and large list of "situational forces" is to be found.

EXPERIMENTER AS GUIDE

One way the experimenter induced obedience is this: he interpreted for the subject what the appropriate way to act was in this circumstance. He is the authority—not (or not just) in the sense of the person in charge but in the sense of the person who knows what is to be done in the experimental situation. He is the "institutional expert"—to borrow a phrase from Berger and Luckmann.[39] The subjects, after all, are strangers to the world of the laboratory or, better, visitors to this world. They are looking for clues about how to act, and the experimenter provides them.

Now the experimenter's ability to do this is dependent on his role in the institutional context: he does not hypnotize the subjects. We cannot prove it, but we believe that if the experimenter were, in the middle of the experiment, to insist that the subjects stop and shine his shoes, they would not do so. They will kill a man if that seems to be part of the institutional framework, but they would not, we propose, shine the experimenter's shoes because that is not part of the institutional framework, even though shoe shining is considerably less morally fraught than is torturing. For the most part, the Milgram studies were carried out at Yale, and indeed the prestige of Yale University no doubt helped the experimenter; the subjects probably believed that Yale would not allow an experiment that was really dangerous to go on within its walls. But it is important to note that when the experiment was repeated under the auspices of a market research firm in Bridgeport (a somewhat seedy market research firm with plastic drapes on the walls), the rate of obedience was reduced but not by much. So when we speak of institutional framework, we are not referring to Yale per se, but to a broader sense of institutional. Proposing thought experiments in this domain is hazardous, but let us imagine that when the subjects entered Milgram's laboratory they were told, "You are the first subjects in this experiment." Would obedience have been as high? We think not. We think that part of what compels obedience, part of the "subtle forces" is the idea that this experiment is a going concern, that lots of people have been through this experience; the experimenter is a guide to this

39. See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

little bit of the social/moral world. He is taken to be someone who sees clearly what is objectively needed.

CBS television once showed a "docudrama" of the Milgram studies in which the experimenter wheedled, whined, and pleaded with the subjects to continue. But in actuality he did none of these, though, apparently, the network believed that viewers would find it more credible that subjects continued if the experimenter did so. In the actual study, the experimenter matter-of-factly, and in as objective a tone as possible, simply told the subject what was needed.[40] We suggest that had he been more emotional—as CBS thought he should—he would have been less effective. The subjects obey, we suggest, not because the experimenter wants them to, but because the experimenter informs them that the experiment requires that they obey.

The experimenter shows the subjects a vision of the moral order. He "tells" them that the right thing to do here is to shock the victim. He does this not by arguing explicitly that it is morally correct to continue shocking but simply by ordering them in the most matter-of-fact way to continue. In so doing, he shows them that he (a seemingly reasonable, smart, competent fellow) takes it to be morally appropriate to do so. An important fact about the social influence that flows from the experimenter's interpreting the social/moral order is that it relies on the experimenter's view's being unquestioned. In one version of the experiment, there were two experimenters, and at 150 volts they gave conflicting instructions. One said to go on—in the usual manner—but the other said to stop. All of the subjects stopped. The subjects indeed lost their moral rudders when confronting an objective, dispassionate experimenter who interpreted the moral order in an odd way, but when that experimenter's interpretation was obviously not the single, authoritative interpretation of the moral order subjects were thrown back onto their prima facie interpretations, and all of them stopped shocking.[41] But there is another way the experimenter has influence.

CONFRONTING THE EXPERIMENTER

In one version, the experimenter-absent condition, the experimenter gives his instructions over the phone. In this condition, then, the subject does not have to come into face-to-face confrontation with the experimenter in order to disobey. Subjects in this condition are more disobedient than those in the baseline condition, and nothing we have

40. Two of his rejoinders were: The experiment requires that you continue. You have no choice; you must go on.

41. Similarly, when two peer subjects taking part in the experimental session with them refused to continue, so too did a large majority, though not all, of the subjects (90 percent).

said so far explains why. Moreover, subjects in this condition do something a bit odd—they cheat. That is, some subjects in this condition tell the experimenter they have administered a particular shock level, while they have in fact pushed the lever for a lower level (the machine recorded which levers had been pressed). Obviously, this cheating subverted the purpose of the experiment, but it saved the subjects from confrontation.

In Sabini and Silver, *Moralities of Everyday Life*, we noted that one of the subjects captured in the filmed version of the experiment said to the experimenter, "I don't mean to be rude, but don't you think we should look in on him?"[42] This is an extraordinary utterance. The victim, after having been shrieking and demanding to be released, at this point had ceased responding. The subject, obviously, did not know if the learner was all right (conscious, alive). And the subject knew that the experimenter was in the same room he was in and hence also could not know of the learner's state. The obvious thing to do at such a moment would be to insist—rude or not—that the experimenter look in on the learner or, failing to persuade the experimenter to do so, to look in on him oneself. But instead of these assertive moves (which no subject made) the subject diffidently apologized for possible rudeness and ineffectually suggested that the experimenter look in. The experimenter didn't look in, and the subject continued to deliver shock.

We made the following interpretation of the interaction between subject and experimenter: the subjects, or, at least, many of them, really wanted to disobey; they certainly did not want to go on shocking.[43] But when they expressed their desire to stop, the experimenter parried their attempts by telling them that the "experiment required" them to continue. The experimenter as authority pushed on them the view that they had a duty to continue. And indeed they did have a duty to continue; they had after all been paid to take part in the experiment. The problem is that anyone outside the situation can see that their duty to continue is overshadowed (to say the least) by their duty not to torture the confederate. They are blocked from seeing this by, we suggest, the experimenter's uncontested insistence that it isn't so and by the action consequence that would follow from their seeing it: if the subject were to come to see that the experimenter is ordering them to do something monstrous, as people outside the experimental room do see, then the subject would recognize their obligation to stop the experiment. And that requires that they say, not "I don't mean to be rude," but something far more forceful, "No, I will not continue to shock because to do so would be morally wrong." That would justify their stopping, but it would

42. See Sabini and Silver, *Moralities of Everyday Life*, 35–55.
43. Ibid.

also be a moral reproach of the experimenter. And, as we argued, that is very hard to do.

We argued that direct face-to-face moral confrontation is rare and difficult—at least for Americans. Americans tend to try to avoid it. For example, we use indirect ways of getting people to do the right thing, "I don't mean to be rude, but don't you think we should look in on him?" Or we try to persuade people that the moral thing to do is in their pragmatic interest, or in some other way we try to resolve the moral question at hand without addressing it head-on. So now we are ready to tell a story about how the subjects in Milgram's experiment came to obey.

TO REVIEW: WHY DID SUBJECTS OBEY?

First, they are confronted by an experimenter who seems like an ordinary, reasonable, smart person. The experimenter orders them to do something that to them seems wrong, morally wrong. But the orders follow a slippery slope.

The subjects want to stop shocking; really they want to stop. And they try to hint to the experimenter that the experiment should stop, but the experimenter will not take their hints. They grow confused; they begin to lose their moral compasses. To make matters worse, they find that in order to stop, they must confront the experimenter; they have to tell him off morally, and that is difficult, very difficult—unless he isn't there, unless he is on the other end of the phone. Then it is easier. But some people do come to disobey; how do they do it?

Well, they do and they don't disobey. Not one of the thousand or so subjects who eventually took part in the experiment came to the victim's aid directly.[44] That is, not one of them released the victim from the chair into which he was supposedly strapped. Not one of the subjects attacked the experimenter and forced the experimenter to release the victim. Not one of the subjects simply left the room. Suffice it to say that the disobedient subjects were really quite passive in their disobedience. But the question we must address is: does this evidence of passivity challenge the ordinary conception of character? Before we answer, we must examine the other studies in the tradition cited by proponents of situationism.

44. In one condition in which there was no authority ordering escalation, some subjects did forcibly come to the victim's aid directly. They confronted a confederate in the absence of an authority.

ASCH STUDIES OF CONFORMITY

Milgram's mentor, Solomon Asch, had conducted experiments in which subjects were shown stimuli consisting of four lines.[45] One line was called the standard, and the other three were labeled *A*, *B*, and *C*. The subject's task was to indicate which of the latter lines was the same length as the standard. On the critical trials, a number of confederates of the experimenter (typically six, though sometimes more or fewer) gave a patently wrong answer, calling out *A*, say, when *C* was the obviously correct response. In the typical experiment there were twelve such trials, and about 75 percent of the subjects gave the wrong answer—the answer the confederates gave—on at least one trial. Overall about one-third of the responses were errors. Marie Jahoda's observation that just about every subject found the experience upsetting—whether they came, in the end, to give the right or the wrong answer—is as important as the numerical result.[46] Two further points obtain. First, when a single confederate gave the right answer, or gave an even odder answer than the majority's, then the rate at which the subjects erred dropped to about 10 percent. So the pressure to conform to the majority depended, not on how many confederates there were who gave the wrong answer, but on the confederates' being unanimous. Subjects in Asch's experiment, we argue, were thrown into doubt about their view of the physical world by the unanimous, differing opinion held by seemingly normal other subjects. (Subjects in Milgram's experiment, we argue, were thrown into doubt about their view of the moral world by the differing opinion held by the seemingly normal experimenter.)[47]

Second point: in another version of the Asch experiment, there were sixteen subjects and one confederate. The confederate gave the wrong answer; the subjects gave the right answer. They also laughed at the poor confederate. They laughed smugly. They believed, no doubt, that their view of the world was correct and in no way dependent on what others thought about that world. As Asch pointed out, they had no idea what it would feel like if there were sixteen confederates who gave the wrong answer and they were forced to confront that situation. People are, we suggest, oblivious in their day-to-day lives of the degree

45. Solomon Asch, *Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority*, Psychological Monographs 70, no. 9, whole no. 416 (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1956).

46. Marie Jahoda, "Conformity and Independence," *Human Relations* 12 (1959): 99–120.

47. Interestingly, the one place that one does not see such conformity to the group's opinion is in matters explicitly labeled as taste. See Sabini and Silver, *Moralities of Everyday Life*, for more on this.

to which their cognitive world could be thrown into chaos by the unanimous rejection by others of their view of it.[48]

On our interpretation, then, the subjects' conception of the morally right thing to do is uprooted in the Milgram experiments by the seemingly ordinary acceptance on the part of the experimenter of the notion that torturing the confederate is an appropriate way to act in the experimental context, just as subjects in the Asch experiment find their visual world thrown into chaos by the unanimous rejection of it by the confederates. The lesson to be drawn, it would seem, is that when people are confronted—without allies—by a view of things very different from their own, they cannot be trusted to follow the dictates of their own conscience (or, for that matter, visual system) against the commands of authority or a group. If this is the correct lesson to draw, should we abandon our conception of character?

BYSTANDER STUDIES

Latané and Darley also carried out an important series of studies relevant to these issues.[49] Their research was occasioned by the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese in Kew Gardens, Queens. Kitty Genovese was attacked by a mugger and beaten for twenty minutes. The mugger left but then returned and killed her. The New York press discovered the next day that about thirty people watched the attack from their apartment windows; none intervened; none called the police. The press decried this incident as evidence of New Yorkers' apathy, apathy to the welfare of others.

Latané and Darley's experimental studies were based on a quite different interpretation of this passivity. One of their findings was that the personality measures they administered failed to predict who would and who would not help victims in their experiments; this is a point to which we shall return. But first we must describe the experiments.

In the experiments in this series, the subjects thought they were taking part in a study of college life. In one study, subjects were ushered into a cubicle with a microphone and earphones. They were told that

48. Jeb Stuart Magruder, a well-brought-up young lawyer and an avid supporter of Nixon's moral majority, found himself one fine day in the office of the attorney general of the United States, hearing a presentation, in the presence of the attorney general himself, of a variety of illegal things the Republicans might do to insure reelection of Richard Nixon. The least unimaginable of these activities was bugging the campaign headquarters of the Democratic Party in the Watergate Hotel. Magruder thought the attorney general would throw the person putting on the presentation (G. Gordon Liddy) out, but he didn't. Instead he approved the least offensive of the illegalities. At that moment, according to Magruder, he lost his moral compass. Such is the power of authority.

49. Bibb Latané and John Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970).

they would be recording a discussion on going to school in an urban environment. The researchers would not listen in on the conversation live, but they would listen to the tapes later. Each person would be in their own cubicle, and only one microphone would be live at a time. Some subjects were led to believe there would be one other participant; others were led to believe there would be two other participants; and still others thought there would be five other participants.

During the experiment the other (or one of the other) subject reported that he was epileptic, and, indeed, he eventually made it seem that he was having a seizure then and there. The questions were: would subjects come to his aid, and how quickly would they help? As we mentioned above, the personality measures the researchers administered did not predict who would help, but what did predict was the number of other people present. Eighty-five percent of the subjects came to the "epileptic's" aid within the first two minutes when they thought they were alone with him, but this number fell to 62 percent when the subjects thought there was another subject there who could help, and it fell to 31 percent when they thought there were four other potential helpers present.

This decline in helpfulness with the number of other people present is called "diffusion of responsibility" and is one of the most reliable of social psychology's phenomena. And it is another example of how "situational forces" affect behavior even though personality seems not to. As in the Milgram experiment, it would seem that people's better angels cannot be counted on when the chips are down. What are we to make of (*a*) the failure to find personality correlations of helping and (*b*) the dependency of altruism on "subtle situational forces"?

First, we must report another experiment in this series. In this experiment subjects are asked to fill out a questionnaire in a room; they do so alone or with two confederates of the experimenter or with two other real subjects. In all cases, as the subjects are filling out their questionnaires smoke begins to billow out of the ventilating system (fake smoke, actually). About 75 percent of the subjects tested alone reported the smoke to the experimenter in the first two minutes.

Two confederates of the experimenter were trained simply to sit there, ignoring the smoke, seemingly filling out their questionnaires. In this condition only about 10 percent of the subjects reported the smoke in the first two minutes, and, indeed, with two other ordinary subjects present, the rate of reporting the smoke was only about 14 percent; so once again a seemingly irrelevant variation on the nature of the situation had a big effect on behavior. But notice that in this experiment altruism is obviously not an issue.[50] We would expect subjects

50. Doris discusses this experiment in his review of research relevant to compassion,

to report the smoke to save their own skins regardless of their propensity to altruism. So why don't they report the smoke when others are present?

Are these results consistent with our interpretation of the Milgram and Asch studies? The subjects, of course, believe there is a fire and think they should leave and report it. And when tested alone, this is exactly what they do. But when there are other people present, and those other people don't seem to be acting as if it were an emergency, the subjects come to wonder whether their interpretations are correct: perhaps it isn't an emergency after all (something that Latané and Darley saw as the emergence of a norm of inaction) and this leads them to wait to act. Then, too, there is this issue: supposing it is an emergency, why should I be the first one to act (something Latané and Darley call "diffusion of responsibility").

In the epileptic experiment we fail to see the altruism we expect; in the "where there's smoke there's fire" study we fail to see the self-protective behavior we expect. One might ascribe the failure to help the epileptic to apathy to the welfare of others, as the New York press did, but not reporting a fire that would consume you is not a candidate for apathy. We follow Latané and Darley in suggesting that the subjects' failures in both cases follow from their believing that emergencies are objective matters, matters of fact, matters which others as well as they should be able to see. If other people aren't treating this as an emergency, then maybe it isn't. But, it seems to us, this account does not really go far enough. Suppose in the smoke experiment that the subject is not sure that it is an emergency, so what? Why not just report the "smoke" anyway? What is the cost? The only account we find plausible is that the subjects do not want to embarrass themselves by looking like a fool, by losing their cool.

FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO

Finally, we must comment on a study which is quite prominent in Doris's account and which seems to be the most difficult for us to handle: the Darley and Batson "Jerusalem to Jericho" (1973) study of Princeton seminarians.[51] In this study (to simplify a bit), Princeton Theological Seminary students agreed to give a talk about the obligation to help people in immediate need even when one has other pressing obligations. Along the way to keep their appointments, they encounter a shabbily dressed man slumped in a doorway in an alley; there is no one else in the alley. Some of the seminarians were led to believe that they were

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but as we have indicated, subjects' own skins are at risk in this study, which indicates that whatever the forces are in this experiment, they are not relevant just to compassion.

51. John Darley and C. Daniel Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 100–108.

on time to give their talk, and in this case 63 percent stopped to help the fellow. But others were led to believe they were going to be late and were, therefore, in a rush. Only 10 percent of the students in the rushed condition stopped to help or even to see what the situation required. And who stopped and who didn't had nothing to do with their religious orientation as previously measured. If we take their responses on the previous measures, as well as their choices to become ministers, to be indicative of their characters, then the fact that 90 percent didn't stop to help in the rushed condition certainly seems to be an indictment of the idea that character matters much.

As always, the issue is how one interprets the results, what one takes the psychology of the participants to be. If one resists venturing into that psychology, one is drawn, indeed, to the notion of "situational forces" as an explanation, an explanation which is not so much wrong as it is vague. The issue is, Once we have given content to those vague forces, then what impact do they have on our ordinary notion of character?

First, we point out the essential ambiguity common to this situation and the other helping situations; as the experimenters write, the " victim should appear somewhat ambiguous—ill-dressed, possibly in need of help, but also possibly drunk or even potentially dangerous."[52] So though we interpret the situation as one in which seminarians pass by a victim in need, other interpretations are possible. Still, having said this, we must concede that 63 percent of the seminarians who weren't in a rush helped even though they faced the same ambiguity. Second, and more important, Why was it so difficult for the rushed seminarians to stop to help? Presumably it is difficult because to do so will make them even later than they already were. But so what? one might ask. It seems that either these seminarians have an almost religious commitment to being on time—for its own sake—or, far more plausibly, it is the interpersonal difficulty, embarrassment, that they will face when they eventually get where they are going that makes them so reluctant to be late.[53] The test, of course, would be what would happen if they were on their way to tape-record—by themselves—such a talk; this would be, then, the equivalent of the "experimenter-absent" condition of the Milgram studies of obedience. Perhaps, then, the same engine that drives the other social influence studies drives this one: the difficulty of failing an ob-

52. Ibid., 102.

53. Kamtekar treats the same experimental results by accepting that the seminarians in a hurry chose to be on time rather than to help the victim; she argues that this should not upset virtue ethicists, since regardless of their choice they are being helpful—either to the person in the doorway or to the experiment. But shouldn't the subjects see that one is more important than the other? Doris realizes that this failure to perceive the obvious also needs to be explained.

ligation, at least in the eyes of other people. If the "situational force" in this study too turns out to be the anticipation of embarrassment, does character fall?

SOCIAL INFLUENCE SUMMARY

We suggest, then, that there is a single thread that runs through social psychology's discoveries of people acting in surprising and demoralizing ways: people's understandings of the world—the physical world in the case of the Asch experiment, the moral world in the case of the obedience experiments, and the social/moral world in the case of the bystander intervention studies—are strongly influenced by what they take to be other people's perceptions of those worlds. We smugly assume that we stick to our guns when no one challenges us, but it turns out that it is harder than we think to do this when we must face (without allies) a confrontation with other people's apparent views. And, the theme continues, the emotional price people pay when they face a situation in which they must act by their own lights contrary to what they think are others' lights is embarrassment. People who must act in such circumstances are confused and inhibited by the anticipation of embarrassment, and that we argue is the lesson to be drawn from social psychological research.[54] People are also, we suggest, unaware of how potent fear of embarrassment is as a motivation for behavior.[55]

54. We do not mean to suggest by this that if people were given the choice "Obey and continue to shock that fellow or face five minutes of embarrassment," they would elect to continue to obey, and we certainly don't mean to suggest that if they were to choose explicitly between risking burning up in a fire or being embarrassed by losing their cool, they would choose burning up in the fire. Rather, we suggest that when people are already confused by what seem to be different perceptions of reality, when reality does not admit of different perceptions, then embarrassment inhibits them from acting without their articulating to themselves that they really have nothing to fear but embarrassment.

55. We do not, however, share Doris's concerns about people's motivational self-knowledge. We do not think that people are in general ignorant of why they are doing what they are doing, but we do think that embarrassment is a motive that people underestimate. For those readers who would like to get a better sense of what confronting people feels like, even though this confrontation is different from the morally fraught confrontation in the obedience experiment, we call attention to this: in the early 1970s Milgram assigned students in his graduate seminar to go into the New York City subway system and very politely ask seated passengers, "Excuse me, may I have your seat?" It turns out that for many people this is a very difficult thing to do; indeed it was for Milgram, who remarked that when he tried to do it he finally understood what it felt like for his subjects to try to confront the experimenter (see Stanley Milgram and John Sabini, "On Maintaining Urban Norms," in *Advances in Environmental Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Andrew Baum, Jerome Singer, and Stuart Valins [Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978]).

THE PROBLEM WITH SITUATIONISM

Situationism is the idea that we are pushed around by "subtle situational forces," but that way of putting things is, to our minds, vague and misleading. We have argued, then, that social psychology since the Second World War has indeed discovered something, something more specific, something important about character and morally significant action. The tradition begun by Asch and continued through Milgram and Latané and Darley has revealed just how weak, morally weak, we are when confronted with a resolute authority or a unanimous group of other seemingly normal people who seem to see the social, moral, and even physical world differently from the way we do. This weakness is partly cognitive—people tend to lose their moral compass—but is also partly a matter of people's being unable or unwilling to expose themselves, to disrupt social situations, by exposing their different perceptions of the world.[56]

We strongly disagree with interpreters of this tradition who believe that something vague has been discovered, something such as that people are susceptible to "subtle situational forces." It is the psychologist's job to go beyond metaphor and to say what those subtle situational forces are, and that is what we have tried to do. We confess, again, that there is a good bit of speculation in our account, but we must insist that in order to decide whether these studies pose a threat to our ordinary conception of character, one needs to explain the behavior of

56. But what of the failure of personality measures to predict behavior? Well, first of all, in the Milgram experiment authoritarianism does predict behavior (Thomas Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60 [1991]: 398–413; and Alan Elms and Stanley Milgram, "Personality Characteristics Associated with Obedience and Defiance toward Authoritative Commands," *Journal of Experimental Research in Personality* 1 [1966]: 282–89). And, indeed, it has been argued that personality variables predict obedience better than do situational variables. But beyond that, we have suggested that in all of these experiments subjects want to, are inclined to, are disposed to do the right thing, but they are inhibited. Researchers have sought to find variation in people's desires to do the right thing: in the Latané and Darley experiments, e.g., researchers look for differences in people's sense of responsibility, believing that those with a greater sense of responsibility would be more likely to help. But suppose that everyone desired to help; perhaps what distinguished those who helped from those who didn't was not how much they wanted to help, but how inhibited they were by embarrassment. If that is where the variance is in helping, then the measures that have been applied were measuring the wrong things. Kamtekar, similarly, points out that although most subjects want to do the right thing, deciding under pressure just what the right thing might be is a difficult achievement that requires a degree of practical wisdom that, apparently, most people lack, especially when coming to the right conclusion involves disregarding usually reliable social cues.

the subjects in these experiments in terms of their particular beliefs and desires.[57]

IS SITUATIONISM SUPPORTED BY THE EVIDENCE?

We argued above that situationism entails that morally significant behavior is affected by features of the immediate situation which (1) are not in themselves of moral significance, (2) are not of great motivational significance, (3) are not well known either to laypeople or to the philosophical literature, (4) are numerous, and (5) do not form a coherent class from the point of view of folk psychology. We agree that point 1 is sustained. And insofar as the anticipation of confronting other people with different views is the source of subjects' behavior, while common sense is aware that this is a motivation, it does not treat it as of great significance. (So we in part agree with 2.) Still, embarrassment and ambiguity are not aspects of situations commonsense actors are unaware of (contra 3). We do not believe, however, that the evidence shows that there is a great number or great variety of such influences (contra 4 and 5). The disturbance to our conception of character is local, not global.

HOW DOES THE DEBATE ABOUT SITUATIONISM MATTER?

We believe that social psychologists have found a reasonably small number of previously unrecognized aspects of situations that tend to make it difficult for people to live up to their own moral aspirations. Moreover, we do not believe that what has been found is the tip of an iceberg. The doctrine of situationism suggests to the contrary that people are typically (not just in exceptional cases) unaware of what is influencing their behavior in morally significant ways. But this seems like a disagreement about degree, not kind. If so, why is it important?

We and Doris share the same aim: to enhance, make more effective, ethical reflection. We believe that the advice the situationist gives—be sensitive to situational features that may affect your behavior in subtle ways—is in this regard useless, for the same reason that warnings about heightened terrorism threats are useless: they are unfocused; they warn people to be suspicious of everything! One can't be suspicious of everything! What good does it do to tell people that their behavior is likely to be under the control of situational variables, without any hint as to

57. Of course there is a diverse set of things which affect moods: finding a dime in a coin return, being given a cookie, being given a tiny note pad, being told one is creative, reading self-affirming sentences (even knowing they were not written about you). The sun's being out. And people in good moods are kinder and gentler than those not in good moods, but we reject these small effects as support of situationism.

what those variables are?[58] We suggest instead that people should stay away from slippery slopes, that they should be very wary when their moral perceptions seem to clash with others', and that they should understand both that it is hard and that it is possible to confront other people who are doing wrong. We think that this advice is warranted by the facts social psychologists have discovered and is really quite practical. Of course, we realize that warnings about slippery slopes and face-saving encounters are not of tremendous help to the person who wants to act ethically; we recognize their narrow applicability. The situationist position appears to be, of course, of much greater generality, but we believe that its greater generality is apparent, not real. When the situationist position is distilled, the remaining substance is exactly as narrow as our prescription.[59]

58. Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics" (491), reaches essentially the same conclusion.

59. A question remains: does our narrow conception save virtue ethics? Advocates of virtue ethics have always understood that the application of virtue requires the exercise of practical intelligence (Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics," 479–84 passim). We think that the import of the social influence studies is that the exercise of practical intelligence is, in specific circumstances, harder than the commonsense view expects. This fact might give us reason to believe that virtuous characters are rarer than we might have imagined, but it does not trouble the notion of character or show that virtue is unattainable.