The view that virtues are character traits is commonplace. Both the status of virtues as character traits and the existence of traits of character are taken as a given by many virtue ethicists. In recent years, however, a few people have challenged this view of virtue by calling into question the status, if not the existence, of character traits. Gilbert Harman and John Doris, amongst others, have criticized the concept of character traits by relying on studies done in the field of social psychology.\(^1\) Gilbert Harman has argued that research in social psychology shows that much of our ordinary moral thought commits “the fundamental attribution error.”\(^2\) This error is committed when someone assumes that behavior patterns are due to the character traits of an agent, rather than to situational factors. Harman believes that experiments in social psychology have shown that there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits, and thus “we need to abandon all talk of virtue and character.”\(^3\) John Doris has drawn similar conclusions from the “situationist” experimental tradition in social psychology. Although Doris stops short of claiming the need to abandon all talk of character, he does claim that the situationist research has shown that the concept of virtue assumes a problematic moral psychology.

The claims of Harman and Doris depend upon what implications can be legitimately drawn from the results of the experiments in social psychology. The results of the experiments, as will be explained, do not warrant the conclusions Harman and Doris draw from them. It is not just the case that these particular experiments do not yield evidence of a lack of character traits, but any experiment of the kind they discuss will not yield such evidence. Social psychology does not undermine a virtue theoretic approach to ethics. Virtue ethicists need not deny that much ordinary moral thinking
commits “the fundamental attribution error” – in fact, a proper understanding of virtue can help to explain the nature of this error. The first part of this essay will assess Harman’s take on the social psychology experiments, since Harman puts forth a more radical claim than Doris does. Several of the arguments presented against Harman will also apply to Doris, since Doris refers to all the experiments that Harman uses to support his conclusions. In the second part, Doris’ more moderate claims will be assessed, as well as the additional experiments that he discusses. The strategy for both will be to show that the results of the experiments do not justify the conclusions they draw.

Harman claims that trying to explain behavior by referring to a person’s character traits is problematic. He views the results of the experiments of social psychologists as showing that character traits do not figure into the best explanation of the behavior of the test subjects in the experiment. In one experiment, for instance, the best predictor of whether the test subject would stop to help someone lying on the ground was the situational factor of whether the test subject was in a hurry. Harman’s conclusion is that these experiments show that there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits, and that an attribution error is committed whenever someone attempts to explain behavior by reference to character traits rather than situational factors. He takes this conclusion to undermine virtue ethics in particular, since most varieties of virtue ethics presuppose the existence of character traits.

Harman describes character traits as “relatively long-term stable disposition to act in distinctive ways.” It would seem that if one wanted to test for the existence of such traits, it would involve testing to see whether individuals exhibit a stable disposition to act in a certain way in a variety of situations and over a long period of time. Doris refers to these two factors as temporal stability and “cross-situational consistency in behavior.”
However, in none of the experiments that Harman and Doris discuss are individuals tested in a variety of situations or over an extended period of time to see whether they exhibit any stable dispositions of the sort in question. In both the Millgram (1963) and the Good Samaritan (1973) experiments, which will be discussed in detail later, the subjects were tested to see how they would respond in only one situation. It is unclear how the existence or non-existence of character traits could be established by this kind of experiment. It seems that these are the wrong kind of experiments to test for the existence of character traits, given that the experiments were not designed to test for the presence of dispositions.

In the Millgram experiment, the test subjects were given the task of administering increasingly painful shocks to another person who was a conspirator in the experiment and was not seen by the test subject, whenever the conspirator gave an incorrect answer to a question asked by the test subject. No shocks were actually administered, but the conspirator acted out being shocked. The test subjects thought they were helping to carry out a scientific experiment (which they were, but they were unaware that they were actually the subject of the experiment). The shocks started out putatively at 15 volts and went as high as 450 volts, and included labels such as ‘Slight Shock’, ‘Strong Shock’, and ‘Danger: Severe Shock’.

The experiment was designed to test how far the subjects would go in causing pain to another person under these conditions. Given that this is what the experiment was designed to test for, Harman ought to have explained why one would be justified in drawing conclusions about the existence of character traits from an experiment where character traits were being neither tested nor controlled, but no such explanation was given. The rather surprising result of the experiment was that most people went far
beyond the point where the experimenters predicted most would stop, at the level of ‘Very Strong Shock’. In addition, in one experiment 65% of the test subjects gave the maximum shock. It seems that something has gone very wrong with the responses of the test subjects, but how is this best explained? One possible explanation is to attribute a defect in the character traits of these test subjects. However, Harman does not think that the results of the Millgram experiment are best explained by attributing a character defect to the majority of the test subjects, especially since all the test subjects were willing to go as high as 300 volts. The other possible explanation that Harman cites, and prefers, is one that invokes relevant features of the situation, such as the gradual shift from giving relatively painless shocks to giving cruel and dangerous shocks, to explain why subjects went as far as they did.

There is no need to deny that ordinary moral thinking might lead people to view the results as due solely to character defects. Virtue ethicists, however, are not committed to viewing the situation in this way. First, character trait attributions are justified only after seeing how a person reacts to a variety of situations over time, and so one should be hesitant about attributing character defects to these people after only seeing their reaction in this one situation. Second, Harman seems to be suggesting that if you view character traits as relevant to explanations of behavior, then you do not view features of the situation as relevant to that explanation, but this does not necessarily follow. Virtue ethicists need not deny that factors of a situation are relevant in explaining how a person responds. Harman is presenting a false dichotomy; that one looks either at the character of the agent or the features of the situation, but not both. These are the only options that Harman discusses; never once does he consider that perhaps the best explanation of what went on in the Millgram experiment would invoke both features of the agents and
features of the situation. Harman owes an explanation of why it has to be one or the other.

Contrary to Harman’s claim, there is some reason to suspect that character traits could be relevant to explaining the results of the experiment. What, for example, explains that after 300 volts, 35% of the test subjects stopped administering shocks at various times before reaching 450 volts? This requires an explanation, and it is not obvious how invoking relevant features of the situation will provide a plausible explanation, since all the subjects remained in the same situation. One possible explanation is that there is difference in the character traits of the test subjects. Of course, this experiment cannot show that the difference is due to character, but the point is at least it is a possible explanation and that another explanation other than situational features is needed. If the features of the situation are held constant among all the test subjects, then what else does Harman think could explain the differences in behavior in some of the test subjects? On this point, Harman is silent, and so it seems he has not completely closed the door on the potential relevance of character traits in explaining behavior in the Millgram experiment.

In the Good Samaritan experiment, performed by Darley and Batson, the test subjects were students in a theological seminary. Each subject was told that he had to give a talk in another building. Along the way to the other building, each subject encountered a ‘victim’ slumped in the doorway. The experiment was designed to test under what conditions a subject would stop to help the ‘victim’. A few of the variables were what the subject was assigned to talk about, the subject’s religious and moral orientation, and how much time the subject had to make it to the talk. The key result of the experiment was that “only one of these variables that made a difference was how
much of a hurry the subjects were in.”vi 63% of the subjects in no hurry stopped to help, 45% of those in a moderate hurry stopped, and 10% of those that were in a great hurry stopped. Harman takes the results of this experiment to confirm his view, but what do the results really show?

The experiment shows that the amount of time the subject had to get to the other building was a major factor, but it does not show that it was the only factor. Harman believes that the subjects’ religious or moral outlook made no difference to how they acted. While it is true that this seems to have made no difference in explaining the different responses within the group of theological students, it does not follow that their religious and moral views had no effect at all on their actions. Perhaps the subjects’ views had an effect that would show up if their responses were compared to that of some other group of people who were not engaged in the study of religious or ethical issues. What sort of results would one get if the subjects in the experiment were, say, a group of criminals? Perhaps if an experiment were run with a group of criminals on death row, the criminals would not have aided the ‘victim’ at as high of a rate as the theological students. If such an experiment were performed, then it is plausible that there would be a significant difference between the students and the criminals that could not be explained just in terms of the features of the situation. Other experiments would need to be performed to reach Harman’s conclusion.

The Good Samaritan experiment only shows that if you have a group of theological students, all of whom are concerned with religious and moral matters, the feature that best explains the differences in their behavior is whether they are in a hurry. However, this does not show that their character or moral views were irrelevant to whether they gave assistance. One might even view this experiment, at least in
comparison with the Millgram experiment, as actually controlling to some extent for the character of the test subjects. Of course the characters of the students could differ a lot, and probably do, but it seems plausible to think that they as a group would be more likely to have the sort of character traits that would be relevant to aiding those in need. If the experiment to some extent makes character a constant rather than a variable, then it would be expected that differences in behavior would not be explained by reference to character traits.

In addition, there is still the need to explain why 37% of the students did not give aid to the ‘victim’ when they were in no hurry. Presumably, they were in the same situation as the 63% who gave aid, so what other than situational features can explain the difference in behavior? One could claim that there must be some features of the situation, and not the agent, that account for the difference between those who did and did not stop to help, since the background feature of being in a hurry is held constant between the two test subject groups. However, there needs to be some evidence or argument that supports the view that the difference between these two groups is due only to situational features and cannot be explained by appealing to the existence of character traits. Although this does not amount to proof that character traits are the right explanation, it does represent a possible explanation that Harman has not succeeded in eliminating.

Those are the only experiments that Harman discusses in his article. Yet, Harman believes those experiments provide sufficient evidence to at least throw character traits into doubt. At this point, one could argue that only two experiments, even if they did provide evidence against the existence of character traits, are too few to draw any definite conclusions about character traits. However, Harman does not want to give the impression that these are the only relevant experiments:
I need to emphasize that the Milgram experiment and others mentioned so far are only a very few of a very large number of different experiments illustrating subtle effects of situations and the ways in which observers fail to understand those effects, leading observers to make the fundamental attribution error.

It does not really matter whether there have been very few or very many experiments, for these kinds of experiments do not address the conception of virtue found in the virtue ethics literature. In addition to the problems mentioned so far, there are at least two other aspects of virtue that the experiments are not designed to test for or otherwise reveal. The first aspect is the reason for which the test subjects act. According to Rosalind Hursthouse, one of the conditions for acting virtuously is that “The agent acts for a reason and, moreover, for the ‘right reason(s)’.” There is a moral difference between those who gave shocks because they wanted to help with scientific research and those who wanted the chance to inflict harm on others. The other aspect of virtue concerns the feelings and emotional responses of the test subjects. Hursthouse states that another condition for acting virtuously is that “The agent has the appropriate feeling(s) or attitude(s) when she acts.” The appropriate feeling when giving the shocks would be regret, not joy. Although these psychological experiments might be relevant to folk conceptions of personality and virtue, they do not address the conceptions of character and virtue found in current accounts of virtue ethics. These experiments are far from justifying Harman’s claim, “we must conclude that there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits.”

Harman’s approach also obscures the contribution a proper understanding of virtue can make to understanding “the fundamental attribution error.” The one problem that Harman makes frequent reference to is that “people are quick to infer from specific actions to character traits.” This is problematic because in so doing people assume that
situation factors are not relevant for explanations of behavior. Social psychologists have labeled this “the fundamental attribution error.” Although this is a problem, it is not the case that this “widespread error raises the question whether the notion of a character trait is of any real value.” Quite the contrary, a proper understanding of virtue can help to explain the nature of this error. As stated previously, character traits are stable and enduring dispositions, and are exhibited across a variety of different situations. In ordinary life, we have to see how someone behaves in a number of different situations, over a period of time, before we can be justified in attributing a long-term stable disposition to that person. One action alone cannot provide sufficient evidence for the presence of a long-term stable disposition. It may be quite true that people have a tendency to make hasty inferences from the observation of just one action to the presence of a character trait in the acting agent, a tendency that Harman illustrates with numerous examples. Such inferences are faulty precisely because the evidence upon which the conclusion is drawn is insufficient to justify that type of conclusion. A proper understanding of what it is to possess a virtue explains why “the fundamental attribution error” is an error. In logical terms, “the fundamental attribution error” is an informal fallacy, a type of hasty generalization. Someone who commits this fallacy assumes that the behavior of the agent in this one situation is representative of how the agent would act in almost any situation, because the person making this judgment has assumed that the behavior of the agent is due to a character trait of the agent, which would account for the expected behavioral consistency. However, the error occurs because the assumption that the behavior is due to a character trait is unwarranted given that the evidence does not support either temporal stability or cross-situational consistency in the behavior of the acting agent, since the evidence is just the observation of only one action.
Virtue ethicists need not deny that ordinary moral thinking commits this type of error, which is what social psychologists take the results of the experiments to show. The fact that people are prone to make this type of error only shows that this is a common fallacious type of reasoning, but it does not follow that there are no character traits. However, Harman wants to give a different explanation of why “the fundamental attribution error” represents an error in reasoning. Harman takes the social psychological research to show that there are no such things as character traits – or, at least, that there is no empirical support for their existence. If Harman has drawn the right conclusions about the research, then any reference to character traits in explaining behavior would be in error, because character traits do not exist or we have no evidence of their existence. Harman is giving a type of “error theory” for talk of character and virtue. The conclusion that character traits do not exist or that we have no evidence at all for their existence, however, cannot be drawn directly from the experiments. Furthermore, it is not the case that views that presuppose the existence of character traits have no resources for explaining the problematic nature of the inference from a single action to the existence of a character trait. “The fundamental attribution error” will remain an error regardless of the outcome of the debate about the existence of character traits, and so admitting that this is a frequently committed error, which it seems to be, does not place one on either side of the debate.

John Doris, who has also done work on the implications of social psychology for ethics, presents a different problem for virtue ethics. Although he refers to the same experiments in social psychology as Harman does, and comes to a similar conclusion about the implications of the experiments for a virtue theoretic approach to ethics, Doris does so without trying to claim that character traits do not exist. It is easy to see how
Harman intended to make trouble for virtue ethics, but it is less clear with Doris. A number of quotes from his book will be used in order to help clarify his position. Although new arguments will be given in response to Doris’ claims, some of the arguments directed at Harman will also apply to Doris, since they are general arguments questioning the relevance of the social psychology experiments to any questions about character traits.

Since the discussion so far has mainly been about Harman, it would be helpful to see how Doris describes his differences with Harman. Doris makes the following remark about Harman in a footnote:

In a pointed discussion of the empirical evidence I rely on here, Harman (1999: 328) seems tempted by an extreme skepticism, seriously entertaining the view that “there is no such thing as character.” . . . if forced to pigeonhole my view, I would say that my skepticism is more radical than Flanagan’s and less so than Harman’s. xiii

Doris does not claim that social psychological experiments show that there is no such thing as character traits, although he thinks it highly unlikely that people have the sort of character traits described in accounts of virtue. In his own words: “I’ve given no reason for thinking that the realization of virtue is strictly impossible.”xiv It is, however, “highly unlikely that actual persons instantiate such psychological features.”xv “But as I’ve repeatedly emphasized, nothing in my empirical argument shows that the inculcation of robust traits is impossible.”xvi

For Doris, the implications of social psychology do not concern the issue of the existence of character traits. Instead, Doris states that:
the question concerns the most perspicuous characterization of personality traits, not their existence. The situationist does not deny that people have personality traits; she instead denies that people typically have highly general personality traits that effect behavior manifesting a high degree of cross-situational consistency.  

The challenge to character and virtue centers on the claim that there are character traits with a high degree of cross-situational consistency, which Doris sometimes refers to as the idea that traits are robust. It is a particular characterization or conception of character that is at issue, which Doris refers to as “globalism.” By “globalism” Doris means to refer to theories that hold the following three theses regarding character:

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.

Essentially, consistency refers to the cross-situational consistency, or robustness, of a trait. Stability refers to traits that remain over time. Evaluative integration refers to the idea that the virtues form a unity. In sum, “Globalism construes personality as an evaluatively integrated association of robust traits.” There are two types of psychological theories that Doris claims accept globalism: characterological moral psychology in ethics (represented by varieties of Aristotelian and virtue ethics), and personality psychology in psychology. The least important of the above three theses is evaluative integration, because it is not found much in personality psychology, and is still the subject of much debate in character-based ethics. Given this description of globalism, Doris states his central contention in moral psychology: “Systematic observation typically
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fails to reveal the behavioral patterns expected by globalism; *globalist conceptions of personality are empirically inadequate.* Now the charge against virtue ethics can be seen: Doris is arguing that the moral psychology of character-based ethics is empirically inadequate. The experiments in social psychology are supposed to show the empirical inadequacy of both characterological moral psychology and personality psychology.

Doris’ argument against virtue ethics depends on making two points convincing; globalism is an accurate portrayal of the psychological commitments made by virtue ethics, and the results of the experiments undermine globalism. The strategy for refuting Doris’ attack on virtue ethics is to claim that virtue ethics need only partially accept a globalist conception, and that this is not undermined by the research. Essentially the claim is that what Doris labels as globalism seems to be an adequate conception of the descriptive claims made by many virtue ethicists about the psychology of the virtuous person, but no such claims to globalism are necessarily endorsed about the non-virtuous person. As previously noted, virtues are thought to be stable dispositions to act in a certain way across a variety of situations. Having a virtue leads to certain expectations of behavior. Non-virtuous people would presumably then be those who lack temporal stability or cross-situational consistency, or both, in their actions. Although personality psychologists may ascribe globalist conceptions of personality to everyone, virtue ethicists seem to reserve this conception, and the resulting descriptive commitments in moral psychology, only for virtuous people. That the research fails to show much cross-situational consistency in the subjects basically amounts to the claim that these people are not displaying virtue, but how is that an objection to virtue ethics?

The basic claim is that Doris has misinterpreted the virtue ethicists’ descriptive commitments in moral psychology. This calls for some attempt at explaining how the
misinterpretation might have occurred. One caveat that ought to be stated up front is that Doris maybe accurate in attributing this view to one person or another. No defense is offered to the effect that no virtue ethicist has ever thought the globalist conception was true of people in general. Virtue ethicists typically do not, and more importantly need not, assent to the view that globalism is true of anyone who is not virtuous.

That being said, I think Doris’ mistake results from failing to distinguish between action and character evaluation when using virtue terms. For example, one might think that on a virtue ethics account, honest behavior necessarily implies that the person behaving that way is honest. This is not the case, however. What is described as “honest” behavior is what we would expect someone with the virtue of honesty to do in the situation. People can act in the same way as a virtuous person would, but without actually possessing the virtue. A person can act honestly without it being the case that the person should be ascribed the trait of honesty. Having the virtue of honesty is to have a stable disposition to act honestly across a variety of situations. Lacking the character trait of honesty does not imply that a person never behaves honestly (although that might be the case), but instead the only implication is that the person does not act honestly in either a variety of situations, over a long period of time, or both. The following passages give reason to believe that Doris thinks otherwise about virtue:

In their investigation of honesty in over 8,000 schoolchildren, Hartshorne and May concluded that deceptive and honest behavior are not the function of “unified” traits but are “specific functions of life situations.”

Hartshorne and May (1928: I, 384) observed that as the situations they studied became more dissimilar, the relationship between behavior in those situations became increasingly tenuous; deceptive behavior in the classroom was less strongly related to deceptive behavior at home than to deceptive behavior in other classroom situations, and so on.
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This variability is not easily explained by globalist theory; if human personalities were typically structured as evaluatively integrated associations of robust traits, it should be possible to observe very substantial consistency in behavior. If one thought that honest and deceptive behavior was always, or even most often, the function of unified traits, then it is understandable why the investigation of Hartshorne and May would come as a shock. After all, if honest behavior is the function of unified traits, then when a child displays honest behavior, one should expect honest behavior from that child in most situations, for the behavior is a function of a trait that is consistent, stable, and evaluatively integrated. If human personalities were typically structured in this way, then we would expect to observe substantial consistency, when instead we find much variability. Of course, this is precisely the kind of view that most virtue ethicists deny. The thought that virtue ethics subscribes to the idea that human personalities are typically structured as an evaluatively integrated association of robust traits would amount to the claim that human personalities are typically a collection of either virtues or vices. But virtues and vices are habits that take a long time to develop, and require acting in a certain way across a variety of situations, and so people can have personalities without having developed virtues or vices, especially so in the case of children. While it may be the case that folk views on personality, or personality theories in psychology, adopt globalism as a view about the typical structure of personality, it is certainly not a required belief for character-based ethics. An evaluatively integrated association of robust traits would need to be an actual possibility for people in order for a character-based ethics to succeed, but it need not be the case that human personalities are typically structured in this way.
Situationist experiments likely have a valid target in personality psychology, where people endorse the globalist conception of the typical structure of personality. Others may endorse such a conception as well, but Doris is mistaken in thinking that character-based ethics must also accept a globalist view of character as being true of people in general. The research of social psychology is important, but it does not undermine virtue theoretic approaches to ethics in either the way Harman or Doris think it does.


Ibid., p. 125.

Harman, 1999, p. 316.

Ibid., 326.


Ibid., p. 112.

Ibid., p. 115.

Ibid., p. 122.


Ibid., p. 22.

Ibid., p. 23.

Ibid., p. 23.

Ibid., p. 63.

Ibid., p. 64.

Ibid., p. 64.

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