
‘She did that kind thing because she is a generous, considerate person’; ‘He will not give way to that moral pressure because he is brave and resolute’. Our use of character and personality traits in explanation and prediction is entrenched in our everyday thought and talk about other people, and in our literary and philosophical heritage, from Homer to Macaulay, from Aristotle to Hume. Entrained as it might be, John Doris, in this interesting and important book, brings a welter of empirical evidence to bear against it. I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone interested in moral philosophy and in the idea—surely a good one—that moral philosophy should be consistent with a realistic moral psychology. Kant would not have felt at home here: throughout the book, Doris insists that ‘systematic observation should be a powerful constraint on theory construction’ (p. 14).

To be clear, Doris’s target is not *all* thought and talk of character and personality traits. In this respect he differs from Gilbert Harman’s extraordinarily extreme position (see, for example, ‘Moral Psychology Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 [1999], pp. 315-31). Doris’s target is restricted to what he calls *globalism*. Globalism consists of three theses: *consistency*, the idea that traits are reliably manifested across a ‘diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions’; *stability*, the idea that traits are reliably manifested ‘over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions’; and *evaluative integration*, the idea that, roughly, someone’s having one good (or bad) trait makes it more likely that they will have other good (or bad) traits (p. 22). So thought and talk of character is impugned only if it has globalist implications or aspirations.

Most moral philosophers these days are more or less aware of the work in empirical psychology on character, and Doris does us the favour of distilling a lot of this ‘less than user-friendly’ (p. 68) work into a form that is readily digestible for philosophers; for those who want to delve even deeper, some 100 pages of the book comprises useful notes and an extensive bibliography. But the take-home message that Doris gives us from all this research is simple: globalism is false.

What is Doris’s alternative? The answer is that ‘personality should be conceived of as fragmented: an evaluatively disintegrated association of situation-specific local traits’ (p. 64). And this, he says, is supported by the accumulation of evidence: ‘low consistency correlations, the astonishing situation-sensitivity of behaviour, the disappointments of personality research, and the confounds of biography’ (p. 65).

The target, the evidence, and the alternative, are all clearly spelled out in a highly persuasive manner. So too are the implications. I would like to mention three that Doris specifically discusses. First, unsurprisingly, we can, and should, resist ‘over-attribution’; taking the empirical evidence to heart, ‘[w]e will be reluctant to evaluate persons in terms of robust traits or evaluatively integrated personality structures, because we will think it highly unlikely that actual persons instantiate such psychological features’ (pp. 114-15). Secondly, ‘[r]ather than striving to develop characters that will determine our behavior in ways substantially independent of circumstances, we should invest more of our energies in attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes’ (p. 146). And thirdly, ‘[p]eople would be better off eschewing globalist moral emotions’ (p. 157). Shame—shame
about what sort of person you are—is the moral emotion which is the likely globalist culprit, Doris thinks. Instead, the person with the propensity to guilt will regret what he has done, but, in contrast to the shameful person, ‘he does not implicate global character structures in the mess he has made of his life’ (p. 165).

Philosophers who subscribe to virtue ethics in one form or another have tried a variety of lines of defence against this attack. I will briefly discuss three. One response is to deny that the empirical data lend any support to the anti-globalist thesis. In particular, it is often observed by philosophers in this camp that there are hardly any longitudinal empirical studies of character, and it is this longitudinal view that pervades our ordinary psychology. For example, in the best known version of the Milgram experiment, whilst 65 per cent of participants went to the maximum shock level, the rest did not; and, according to this defence, there is nothing in the data that implies the falsity of the thought that these people did not do what the majority did because of something about their character. However, the problem with the position is that the data really do seem to undermine our longitudinal thoughts about character: we do expect more of the 65 per cent of people who went to the maximum (amongst their number could have been people we know, even ourselves perhaps); and personality tests on the remaining minority do not suggest any common explanatory character trait. So I will not continue to explore this line of defence.

A second line of defence is rather more nuanced. It claims that our notion of personality and character is so deeply ingrained in our everyday psychology that no empirical evidence could possibly persuade us to do without it; maybe it is even a priori. This defence might well work against Harman’s extreme view that there is no such thing as character, but I am not so sure that it would succeed against Doris’s attack. After all, Doris is by no means rejecting all talk of personality and character. It is just globalism that he is arguing against, and it is far from obvious that this notion is so deeply ingrained in our psychology that it is ineliminable. As Doris puts it, his moral psychology is ‘conservatively, and not radically, revisionary’ (p. 129).

It is the third line that I am inclined to favour, which is something of a variation on the second. According to this line, we should agree with Doris that his evidence does indeed tell against his target, and we should agree with him about the alternative that he puts forward—the fragmentation of character. We do attribute robust traits to people in fairly unthinking ways, often on very thin evidence, and it is often a sign of prejudice which we would be much better off without.

So is that game, set and match to Doris? No, because there is still a rightful place for globalist thinking. It is connected with Doris’s talk of identification. For Doris, identification is principally concerned with action and motive: one identifies with one’s motive on an occasion. But a centrally important aspect of identification is surely concerned with setting oneself reliably to have a certain kind of motive on a certain kind of occasion. And this is just what a character trait is. So, on this story, your identification with your motive on an occasion (your having a generous motive, say) depends on your prior identification with your character trait; it is only because you identify with your trait that you identify with the motive on this occasion. This is thoroughly globalist at least in respect of the first two theses, consistency and stability. But being globalist in this way is perfectly consistent with holding that you will not always live up to your ideal—for that is what it is, an ideal. Why be idealistic? Because it makes no sense to aim, for example, to have generous thoughts and to act generously except when there are unnoticed aspects of the situation that impede one’s