

No Character or Personality

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As a recent introductory textbook in social psychology (Kunda, 1999) remarks,

there is surprisingly little consistency in people's friendliness, honesty, or any other personality trait from one situation to other, different situations. . . . [W]e often fail to realize this, and tend to assume that behavior is far more consistent and predictable than it really is. As a result, when we observe people's behavior, we jump to conclusions about their underlying personality far too readily and have much more confidence than we should in our ability to predict their behavior in other settings (page 395).

These conclusions are uncontroversial and a similar account can be found in almost any recent textbook in the social psychology. Such conclusions are supported by a very large amount of disparate evidence.

These conclusions and the evidence for them have significant implications for business ethics. In an extremely interesting and useful account Solomon (forthcoming) notes that one implication is that "We need less moralizing [about character] and more beneficent social engineering." But, while praising an important new book that elaborates the philosophical implications of the results of social psychology, written by the philosopher, John Doris, (Doris, 2002), Solomon defends a version of business virtue ethics (partly in response to Harman, 1998-99), arguing that I and Doris overstate what Doris calls the "fragmentation of character" implied by the scientific results.

In this note, I want to suggest that Solomon underestimates the force of the threat to his version of business virtue ethics and I want to say a bit more about how the evidence from social psychology implies such "fragmentation."

Psychology and Folk Psychology

It is uncontroversial that there is usually a difference between the study of ordinary conceptions of a given phenomenon and the study of the phenomenon itself. We distinguish between folk or

common-sense physics, which is studied by certain psychologists, from physics, which is studied by physicists; these are both interesting subjects, but they are different. Similarly, there is a clear difference between the study of conceptions people at a certain time had about witches and witchcraft and the study of what was actually true about people who were taken to be witches and phenomena thought to be witchcraft. We distinguish between the study of how people conceive of God from the study of theology. We distinguish between the study of doctors' views about good medical treatment and an investigation into what sorts of treatment are actually effective. We distinguish interviewers' conceptions of the value of interviewing from whether interviews actually improve selection processes.¹ In the same way, there is a clear conceptual difference between what people generally think about character and personality and what is actually the case; the study of what people think about character and personality (as in "personality theory" or "personality psychology") is part of the study of folk psychology and is not the same as a study of character and personality.

Surprisingly, Solomon expresses doubts about this sort of difference with respect to the virtues. He says that "there is an easy but wholly misleading analogy with physics." He agrees that "many of our moral intuitions are erroneous or archaic," but insists that "our moral intuitions are not *like* our intuitions in physics. There is no 'matter of fact' independent of our intuitions and attitudes." Furthermore, he says, "*All* psychology, if it is psychology at all, is one or another version of 'folk psychology' ('the only game in town,' according to Jerry Fodor)."

In response, I have to say that, although it has often been argued (e.g., by Dennett, 1981; Fodor, 1987) that psychology has to be belief and desire psychology, I am not familiar with any similar argument that psychology must for that reason also include commitment to character and personality traits. In particular, I do not believe that Fodor has ever made such an argument. Fodor's (1975) "only game in town" is supposed to be a certain sort of computational functionalism involving a "language of thought" with no reference whatsoever to character traits.

Furthermore, whether or not there is a matter of fact about what is right or wrong, it is obvious that many moral judgments presuppose matters of fact. To belabor the point, if I say you were wrong to hit Bob in the nose, I presuppose that in fact you hit Bob in the nose and, if you did not, I am mistaken. Similarly, if I say that you have a certain virtuous character, I presuppose that you have a character. Perhaps, as Solomon believes, it is not a matter of fact whether such a character is virtuous. But it is a matter of fact whether you have that character, and whether there are character traits at all.

In addition to offering these relatively a priori arguments for doubting that social psychology could undermine ordinary conceptions of character and personality traits, Solomon also notes the existence of the field of "personality theory." He has, he says, "long been an advocate of cooperation between moral philosophy and the social sciences in business ethics." But, he says,

What about that voluminous literature *not* in social psychology but in the (artificially competing) field of personality theory? ... If we want to play off moral philosophy and virtue ethics against the social sciences, let's make sure that all of the social sciences are represented and not just social psychology.

The thing is, personality theory or personality psychology is in pretty bad institutional shape. Solomon refers to Funder (2001), a bravely upbeat review of the current (utterly dismal) state of personality psychology that nevertheless sort of acknowledges that personality psychology has collapsed as an academic subject. So, Funder revealingly bemoans

the permanent damage to the infrastructure of personality psychology wreaked by the person-situation debate of the 1970s and 1980s. ...[O]ne reason for the trend ...for so much personality research being done by investigators not affiliated with formal programs in personality may be that there are so few formal programs to be affiliated with. The graduate programs in personality psychology that were shrunken beyond recognition or even abolished during the 1970s and 1980s have not been revived (213).

Why does the critique of virtue ethics appeal to social psychology rather than to personality psychology? Because personality psychology has been concerned with characterizing ordinary folk conceptions of personality. Social psychology is concerned with the accuracy of these conceptions. To the extent that you are interested in the truth and accuracy of claims about character and personality, you need to consult social psychology, not “personality psychology.”²

What Is the Fundamental Attribution Error?

The librarian carried the old woman’s groceries across the street. The receptionist stepped in front of the old man in line. The plumber slipped an extra \$50 into his wife’s purse. Although you were not asked to make any inferences about any of these characters, chances are that you inferred that the librarian is helpful, the receptionist rude, and the plumber generous. Perhaps because we do not realize the extent to which behavior is shaped by situations, we tend to spontaneously infer such traits from behavior.” (Kunda, 1999, p. 435.)

Psychologists refer to this tendency as “correspondence bias” or “the fundamental attribution error.” It is a bias toward explanations in terms of corresponding personality traits, the error of ignoring situational factors. The bias seems to be associated with a perceptual tendency to pay more attention to a figure than to its ground, and there appear to be significant cultural differences in the extent to which people are subject to this tendency and to the fundamental attribution error (Nisbett, 1998).

Having once attributed a trait to a given person, an observer has a strong tendency to continue to attribute that trait to the person even in the face of considerable disconfirming evidence, a tendency psychologists sometimes call “confirmation bias,” a bias toward noting evidence that is in accord with one’s hypothesis and toward disregarding evidence against it.³

Even in a world with no individual differences in character traits or personality traits, people would still strongly believe that there were such differences, as long as they were subject to the fundamental attribution error and to confirmation bias. This means that the apparent obviousness

of the claim that people differ in such traits (as in Ed Hartman's comparison, endorsed by Solomon, between Hempel and Nixon) is less evidential than one may think. True, it is "obvious" that some people have different character and personality traits than others. But our finding this fact so obvious is predicted by our tendency to the fundamental attribution error whether or not there are such differences.

Subtle Situational Effects

Minor and seemingly irrelevant differences in the perceived situation sometimes make significant differences to what people do. Doris (2002) discusses several examples.

Imagine a person making a call in a suburban shopping plaza. As the caller leaves the phone booth, along comes Alice, who drops a folder full of papers that scatter in the caller's path. Will the caller stop and help before the only copy of Alice's magnum opus is trampled by the bargain-hungry throngs. . . . [I]n an experiment by Isen and Levin (1972) . . . the paper-dropper was an experimental assistant or 'confederate.' For one group of callers, a dime was planted in the phone's coin return slot; for the other, the slot was empty. [The results are that, of 16 callers who found a dime, 14 helped and 2 did not; of 25 who did not find a dime, 1 helped and 24 did not.] . . . Finding a bit of change is something one would hardly bother to remark on in describing one's day, yet it makes the difference between helping and not. (Doris, 2002, p. 30)

Whether or not a theology student stops to help someone who seems to be having a heart-attack may depend on how much of a hurry the student is to accomplish a comparatively trivial goal (Darley and Batson, 1973). Whether someone in a waiting room will go to the aid of another person who seems to have fallen off a ladder in the next room may depend on whether there is another person in the waiting room who seems unconcerned with the apparent fall (Latané and Darley, 1970).

In the Milgram (1974) experiment, subjects were led by gradual steps to do something they would never have done straight away, namely to administer very severe electrical shocks to another person. The gradualness of the process with no obvious place to stop seems an important part of the explanation why they obeyed a command to shock the other person in that experiment although they would not have done so if directly ordered to give the severe shock at the very beginning.

Similarly, if you are trying not to give into temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food, the best advice is not to try to develop "will-power" or "self-control". Instead, it is best to head the situationist slogan, "People! Places! Things!" Don't go to places where people drink! Do not carry cigarettes or a lighter and avoid people who smoke! Stay out of the kitchen!

Sometimes a person acts well or badly in a seemingly unusual way. Concerning any such case, there is an issue as to what makes the difference that leads to such seemingly unusual behavior. When you perceive or learn about someone you do not know doing such an unusual thing, you have

a strong tendency to attribute the behavior to some good or bad trait of the person in question. When you learn that a certain seminary student walked right past someone who seemed to be having a heart attack, actually stepping right over the person, you tend to think of the student as incredibly callous.

The question is what makes the difference that leads to the unusual or surprising behavior. Is it that some theology students are more compassionate than others? Does the Milgram experiment show that almost everyone is basically evil?

Solomon says that certain character traits are relevant in these cases, namely, (1) obedience to (the experimenters') authority and (2) promptness. But relevant to what? Since Solomon thinks that all the experimental subjects had these traits, he does not suppose that these common traits are responsible for the *differences* in helping behavior that were observed. Nor do they account for the difference in obedience between a subject who is commanded to give an intense shock to someone at the very beginning and a subject who starts by giving a little shock and who increases the shock by very small steps.

No one supposes that these two experiments, taken by themselves, show that there are no character traits. What they show is that aspects of a particular situation can be important to how a person acts in ways that ordinary people do not normally appreciate, leading them to attribute certain distinctive actions to an agent's distinctive character rather than to subtle aspects of the situation. In particular, observers some of the events that occur in these experiments are strongly inclined to blame those participants who did not stop to help or who provided intense shocks, thinking that the explanation of these agent's immoral actions lies in their terrible character. But the observers are wrong: that cannot be the explanation.

Near the end of his remarks, Solomon says, "Empirically-minded philosophers love to find a single experiment or perhaps two that . . . provide the basis for speculative excursions which go far beyond the (usually rather timid) findings of the social psychologists themselves." I need to emphasize that the Millgram 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. Furthermore, as I have been insisting, the "speculative excursions" Solomon attributes to Doris and me do not go "far beyond the . . . findings of the social psychologists," but are in fact part of the settled core of the subject of social psychology.

Traits

We must distinguish individual acts of honesty or dishonesty, courage or cowardice, compassion or coldness from the corresponding character traits. The ordinary conception of a character or personality trait is of a relatively broad-based disposition to respond in the relevant way with acts of the corresponding sort. In an important discussion, Merrit (2000) shows that Aristotelian virtue ethics and most contemporary versions of virtue ethics (*but not Hume's theory*) appeal to character traits in this broad sense.

Now, the evidence indicates that people may differ in certain relatively narrow traits but do not have broad and stable dispositions corresponding to the sorts of character and personality traits we normally suppose that people have. Doris' (2002) defense of the fragmentation of character, derided by Solomon, is so widely accepted by social psychologists that a similar account can be found in any introductory textbook in social psychology. This is how Kunda (1999) puts the point:

Our notion of traits as broad and stable dispositions that manifest themselves to the same extent in a variety of situations cannot hold water. However, this does not mean that there are no enduring and systematic differences among individuals. My intuitions that I am a very different person from my brother or that my children have predictably different patterns of behavior need not be wrong. Such intuitions may be based on meaningful and stable differences among individuals but not the kind of differences implied by the traditional understanding of traits. . . . [For example,] Carol is extremely extroverted in one-on-one situations, is only moderately extroverted when in small groups, and is not at all extroverted in large groups. She will appear very comfortable and outgoing if you meet with her alone, but will clam up and appear very shy and awkward if you encounter her in a large group setting. Linda has a very different profile. She is extremely extroverted in large groups but not at all extroverted in one-on-one situations. She may appear composed and comfortable when lecturing to a large audience but withdrawn and aloof if you approach her alone. (Kunda, 1999, pp. 443-4).

In conclusion, it appears that we are truly quite consistent in our behavior within each situation, and it is quite appropriate to expect such consistency in others. But we run into trouble when we expect this consistency to extend to other situations as well. Even slight variations in the features of a situation can lead to dramatic shifts in people's behavior. (Kunda, 1999, p. 499).

Free Will and Responsibility

Solomon worries that in the rejection of the sort of character and personality traits that are accepted in ordinary moral thinking and in his version of virtue ethics,

something extremely important can get lost . . . It is the idea that [one] can and should resist [certain] pressures, even at considerable cost to oneself, depending on the severity of the situation and circumstances. That is the very basis on which virtue ethics has proven to be so appealing to people in business.

This is clearly a different issue. Of course, people can and should resist such pressures and we should encourage them to do so. But the point has nothing to do with whether people have character traits. As Solomon would certainly agree, even a person without relevant character traits can and should resist.

Solomon worries about the philosophical consequences of denying the existence of character, because that would be to go "over to causal and statistical explanations of behavior instead of a continuing

emphasis on character, agency, and responsibility.” But people do not need character traits in order to have agency and responsibility. As Doris (2002, chapters 7-8) persuasively argues, denying the existence of character traits in no way undermines the notions of agency and of responsibility.

Conclusion

Aristotelian style virtue ethics shares with folk psychology a commitment to broad-based character traits of a sort that people simply do not have. This does not threaten free will and moral responsibility, but it does mean that it is a mistake to base business ethics on that sort of virtue ethics. This leaves open the possibility of what Merritt’s (2000) Humean style virtue ethics in which virtuous behavior is socially supported and sustained.

Notes

¹For discussion of the well-known “interview illusion,” see e.g. Kunda (1999) pp. 179-89, and references cited there. Interviews are simultaneously very unreliable indicators of later performance and also very vivid. Using interviews adds expensive vivid noise to a decision process. Solomon (who says the Princeton Philosophy Department’s practice of not interviewing job candidates is “peculiar”) suggests that the point of interviewing is to see how well the candidate will “fit in” with others on the job. The point about expensive vivid noise obviously applies here as well, as is noted in Miller and Cantor (1982), who nevertheless suggest that there is still a point to having a candidate for a teaching position give a talk to members of the hiring department, because these members will almost certainly all have the same impression of the talk, so their decision will tend to be unanimous. (When the Princeton Philosophy Department discussed whether to continue interviewing job candidates, it considered the Miller Cantor point but decided that it did not particularly care about unanimity.)

²Doris (2002, pp. 67-75) discusses the relation between social psychology and personality psychology in some detail.

³Confirmation bias is discussed, e.g., in Gilovich (1993), chapter 3.

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