Skepticism about Character Traits

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1 Brief Sketch of Recent Skepticism about Character Traits

1.1 Philosophy—Sartre

Sartre (1956) describes ways in which one may present oneself to others as being a certain sort of person. In one of his examples, a waiter presents himself as a waiter by as it were acting the part of a waiter. More generally, Sartre argues that, wanting to be, or at least to appear to others to be, a person of a certain sort or character, one often acts the part of a person of that sort of character. Sartre denies that people have fixed characters in the sense that they actually are in themselves any of the sorts of people they present themselves as being. People merely pretend, sometimes even to themselves, to be one sort of person rather than another.

Sartre takes such pretense to oneself to be a paradigm instance of what he calls "bad faith". (The basic pretense to oneself, according to Sartre, is the pretense that one lacks free will and cannot do otherwise.) One may have actually acted

bravely, or cowardly, in a friendly or unfriendly way, etc. in the past and one may have been a brave, cowardly, friendly, unfriendly, or whatever person on various past occasions. But that does not mean that one now *is* such a person. Because of one's free will, nothing that is now settled can make it the case that one *is* such a person.

1.2   Sociology—Goffman

Goffman (1959) powerfully develops a related idea in his classic empirical study of "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," leaving it open whether there is any "real" or "true" self beyond various presentations of self.

1.3   Social Psychology

Taking a somewhat different approach, social psychologists study how a person's situation can affect what the person does, in ways that appear to conflict with ordinary thinking about personality and character. There is a vast relevant literature, one aspect of which Kunda (1999) summarizes as follows:

> 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 (p. 395).
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> Our notion of traits as broad and stable dispositions that manifest themselves to the same extent in a variety of situations cannot hold

water (p. 443).

Even slight variations in the features of a situation can lead to dramatic shifts in people's behavior (p. 499).

1.4 Personality Psychology

Personality psychology studies the ways ordinary people think about personality and character traits, which is to be distinguished from studying the truth about personality and character traits.

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. 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 is part of the study of folk psychology and is not the same as a study of character and personality.

It happens that personality theory or personality psychology is in pretty bad

institutional shape as a scientific discipline. Funder (2001), one of the few remaining defenders of personality psychology, reports that personality psychology has collapsed as a serious academic subject. He regrets

> 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).

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 one is interested in the truth and accuracy of claims about character and personality, one needs to consult social psychology, not personality psychology. (There is further discussion of this point in Doris, 2002, pp. 67-75).

1.5 Political Theory

Hardin (1995) observes that, although many terrible actions by groups, such as those in the former Yugoslavia are often attributed to historical "ethnic hatreds," it is often possible to explain these events in rational terms. Suppose there are limited resources and a successful coalition will benefit its members more than those excluded from the coalition. Such a coalition is possible only if insiders can be distinguished from excluded outsiders and only if it is possible to keep members from defecting to other groups. Coalitions formed around ethnic or religious lines might succeed. The threat that one such coalition may form can lead other groups

to form competing coalitions and to struggle against each other. If stakes are high enough, such struggles can become violent. If we attribute the resulting violence to ethnic hatred, we may very well doubt that there is anything we can do. If we understand the way the violence arises from the situation, we may see more opportunities to end the conflict.

1.6   More Recent Philosophy

Flanagan (1991) argues that moral philosophy should pay more attention to psychology and philosophy of mind. Among other things, Flanagan discusses some of the social psychological research that might be interpreted as casting doubt on the existence of character traits in anything like the usual sense, arguing that the challenge from this research does not succeed in undermining ordinary views about character.

Railton (1997) mentions (among other things) how results in social psychology may cast doubt on explanations of behavior that appeal to character traits. Doris (2002) provides an elaborate account of the psychological literature and its potential philosophical morals.

1.7   Are There Broad Stable Character Traits?

Are there any character traits of the sort that people ordinarily attribute to others, involving broad and counterfactually stable dispositions of the relevant sorts? While it seems obvious at first that there are, this obviousness may simply be due to our regularly making a "fundamental attribution error." That is, we explain an action by appeal entirely to features of an agent's character, overlooking the relevance of subtle aspects of the agent's perceived situation.

Sabini et al. (2001) argue in response that "The Really Fundamental Attribution Error in Psychological Research" is the error of thinking that there is a fundamental attribution error. More precisely, they argue that it is unclear how exactly to characterize the relevant error involved. But they agree that research in social psychology shows that observers often wrongly attribute character traits to actors on the basis of inadequate behavioral evidence. This leaves it unclear whether we have any reason to believe there are character traits of a sort that people ordinarily attribute to others.

By the way, Sabini and Silver (2005) interpret me (in Harman, 1999, and 2000) as claiming that "the psychological data show that people do not have characters, in the sense required by virtue ethics." (Tucker, 2004, interprets me in a similar way.) I prefer to say that the data show that people often wrongly attribute character traits to actors on the basis of inadequate evidence and that it is unclear there is any more reason for us to believe in character traits on the basis of our personal experience than for psychotherapists to believe in the effectiveness of their version of psychotherapy merely on the basis of their personal experience.

Kamtekar (2004) observes "that the character traits conceived of and debunked by situationist social psychological studies have very little to do with character as it is conceived of in traditional virtue ethics." But for me the point at issue is not about social psychology's conception of character traits. It is about whether the results cast doubt either on ordinary views about character traits or on the conception of character in one or another version of virtue ethics. If so, as I believe, then I think there are reasons to worry about certain versions of virtue ethics.

2   Character Traits and Virtue Ethics

There are many versions of virtue ethics. Some are concerned with character traits. Others only with virtues of actions, with no commitment to virtuous or unvirtuous character traits. Of versions that refer to virtuous character traits there are differences in how such traits are conceived. Some versions take character traits to be broad and counterfactually stable; others may treat them as mere regularities in behavior. Of versions that take character traits to be broad and counterfactually stable, some require that people actually have such traits while other versions treat relevant traits as ideals that may or may not be attained or even attainable by actual people. Empirically based skepticism about character traits is only relevant to some versions of virtue ethics.

2.1   Virtue Ethics with Traits as Merely Actual Regularities

Consider those forms of virtue ethics that take character traits to have a counterfactual aspect, so that whether one has a certain trait depends not only on how one reacts in actual situations but also in how one would react in certain other possible situations. In this view, a virtuous person *would not* have tried to give powerful, possibly lethal electric shocks to a "learner" in the Milgram (1974) experiment, so the results of that experiment show that hardly anyone is really virtuous.

Merritt (1999) argues that there is another, Humean, conception of character traits involving how a person actually behaves. In this other conception, it may be that the actual subjects of the Milgram experiment became unvirtuous because of the way they acted in the experiment without any implications for the character traits of those who did not participate. Similarly, perhaps the citizens of Nazi Germany were horrible people for not objecting to and resisting the Nazi's

treatment of Jews, whereas citizens in England or Connecticut were not horrible people in the same way even if they would have acted as German citizens did if they had been living in Germany. Merritt uses this idea to argue for a conception of character traits as existing in particular social contexts, without counterfactual implications.

2.2 Virtue Ethics without Character Traits

Thomson (1996, 1997, 2001) defends a related view of virtue ethics. Terms for virtues are to be applied in the first instance to acts: a kind act, a courageous act, etc. and there need be no commitment to character traits of any sort.

Maybe that is the way to think of the subjects in the Milgram experiment or the citizens in Nazi Germany who allowed and participated in the persecution of the Jews. They acted badly. Others who did not participate in the Milgram experiment and did not live in Nazi Germany did not act badly. We don't have to say anything about character. What is needed, in this way of looking at things, is social support for virtuous actions.

This fits in with Sartre's idea that in one sense you are what you have done and in another sense you are free to act the same or differently in the future, where it is irrelevant and perhaps indeterminate how you would have acted under other circumstances.

2.3 Virtue Ethics with Robust Traits

On the other side, Hursthouse (1999) describes a form of virtue ethics with robust character traits. She defends three theses, (1) that it is possible to use the idea of a virtuous character trait to explain other moral notions, (2) that moral motivation

is best understood in terms of what motivates a virtuous person, and (3) that there is or may be an objective basis for a single set of human virtues of character.

However, she appears to conflate virtues of character with virtues of actions when she defends her claim that it is possible to explain other moral notions in terms of virtue. Consider the objection that the right thing to do cannot always be identified as what a perfectly virtuous human being would do in the circumstances, because sometimes a completely virtuous human being could never be in the relevant circumstances (Harman, 1973). Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics is still applicable, because it provides *rules* that can apply to such a case. However, even if virtue ethics can provide rules, it remains unclear how the rules provided could apply to this particular situation.

Hursthouse says that every virtue of character yields a positive rule of action and every vice or defect of character yields a negative rule; so, virtue ethics allows for such rules as that one ought to tell the truth, one ought to keep ones promises, one ought to be kind to others and and one should not act meanly, lie, or break promises. Where these simple rules conflict, Hursthouse proposes to fine tune them by considering what a virtuous human being would do in various circumstances. But this fine tuning cannot obviously yield the right rules for circumstances no virtuous human being could be in.

Hursthouse then observes that someone in a situation no virtuous person might reason using something that sounds like the terminology of virtue and vice. "Perhaps it would be callous to abandon A, but not to abandon B. Perhaps it would be more irresponsible to abandon A than to abandon B. ... Then marrying A would be the morally right decision." But in these remarks the vices of callousness and irresponsibility are characteristics of possible actions rather than character traits of the agent, so the fact that someone might use virtue concepts in this

way does not show that there is a way to explain right action in terms of virtuous character traits!

Now consider Hursthouses third thesis, that there is or may be an objective basis for a single set of human virtues of character. She observes that it is *possible* that there is a unique set of character traits that are natural to human beings and are such that, if everyone has them, it is generally true that an individual's having them promises to contribute to that individual's preservation, the preservation of the human species, the function of social groups to which the individual belongs, and the flourishing of that individual and others. If that possibility were realized, that set of character traits would be the objective set of human virtues in her approach.

One way for this to fail would be that a satisfactory outcome for people would require some human beings to have one set of character traits while others had a different set, as in Nietzsche's master and slave moralities, and somewhat as there are worker bees and queen bees. While Hursthouse thinks that this is a view within virtue ethics that needs to be taken seriously, she also thinks that we have not yet been given sufficient reason to give up on the existence of a single set of human virtues. (I take a different view in Harman, 1983, 1996.)

Another way for her favored approach to fail would be for it to turn out that no distribution of character traits will promote the flourishing of all human beings. Hursthouse argues that we do not have to accept the conclusion that human beings are in this sense just a "mess," because, "When we look, in detail at *why* so many human beings are leading, and have led, such dreadful lives, we see that occasionally this is sheer bad luck, but characteristically, it is because either they, and/or their fellow and adjacent human beings, are defective in their possession and exercise of the virtues on the standard list." She adds in a footnote, "I suppose

that one of the reasons we find it so hard to come to terms with the Holocaust is that pre-Nazi German society looks so like our own at the same period, and we are forced to the unpalatable conclusion that if it happened there because of lack of virtue in its members, we must have been similarly lacking and might have gone the same way" (264).

Now, it seems to me that what happened in Nazi Germany and in Bosnia, Somalia, etc. taken together with results in social psychology about the relative explanatory importance of individual character versus the situation in which a human being is placed, indicate that the very natural human tendency to think in terms of character traits leads us in the wrong direction. To the extent that we are interested in improving the lot of mankind it is better to put less emphasis on moral education and on building character and more emphasis on trying to arrange social institutions so that human beings are not placed in situations in which they will act badly.

Hursthouse agrees with the need to set up the right social institutions. So, perhaps the best way to think of her program in this respect is to claim that there are attainable institutions that would, if in place, encourage in participants the development of the relevant character traits, where these traits would tend to sustain and be sustained by the institutions. Presumably, this would require Merritt's second conception of character traits involving only actual rather than counterfactual regularities in the way people act, feel, etc.

I still think it would be best simply to replace thought and talk about virtuous character traits with thought and talk about virtuous acts and other responses, because ordinary thinking about character traits is such a mess. As Hardin points out, it blocks rational thought about international issues. In domestic politics it leads to a concern with the alleged character of candidates instead of consideration

of policies.

3 Conclusion

I do not think that social psychology demonstrates there are no character traits, either as ordinarily conceived or as required for one or another version of virtue ethics. But I do think that results in social psychology undermine one's confidence that it is obvious there are such traits.

In thinking about this issue, it is important to distinguish giving an account of the folk conception of character traits from giving an account of what is actually true. (Perhaps defenders of virtue ethics are best understood as trying to give an account of the folk conception.)

The word "virtue" and the phrase "virtue ethics" can be interpreted in various ways and it is important to be clear about how they are being used in a particular context. Virtue or character as a fleeting feature of an act must be distinguished from virtue or character as an enduring characteristic of a person. There is more reason to believe that there are virtuous and vicious acts than to believe that people have virtuous or vicious characters.

Furthermore, virtues or character traits of a person might be interpreted as having counterfactual implications or they might be interpreted as limited to actual world regularities. It is more reasonable to believe in character traits of the latter sort than to believe in character traits of the former sort.

Finally, there is the issue that Sartre (among others) raises: Given human freedom, can someone really have character traits of the first sort with their counterfactual implications? I am inclined to agree with Sartre in answering this question in the negative, but I have not tried to discuss the point here.

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