

An Aristotelian Clarification of Two Common Misconceptions of Character

Since the late 1920's, psychologists and philosophers have debated whether traits or situational factors best account for behavior. On one side, personality and character psychologists like Allport (1937) and Epstein (1980) argue that stable personality traits can both explain and predict behavior. On the other, social psychologists, such as Mischel (1969), argue that personality traits are a lay fallacy and have little to no correlation with actual behavior.

Over the last several decades, situational views of behavior have been favored in the academic discourse because they are supported by a massive empirical literature in social psychology that indicates that subtle situational factors impact subsequent behavior in surprising and sometimes drastic ways. Hundreds of studies have been conducted that indicate that various factors like the number of passive bystanders present (Fischer et al., 2011), mood (Carlson & Miller, 1987; Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988), ambiguity of the helping situation (Clark & Word, 1974), perceived deviance of the person requesting help (Bridges & Clark, 2000), noise (Matthews & Cannon, 1975), and temperature (Schneider, Lesko, & Garrett, 1980) affect the rates at which help is offered to individuals in need. A recent meta-analysis of such studies (Lefevor, Fowers, Ahn, Lang, & Cohen, 2015) found that situational factors (such as situationally-induced positive mood) influenced approximately 2.25 people to help for every person helping who was not influenced by the situation.

Taken together, these studies show that situational factors undeniably affect helping behavior. Some have gone as far to posit situational factors as the *primary* determinants of behavior. In particular, a group of social psychologists and philosophers, who have come to be known as situationists (e.g., Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999), interpret the empirical social psychology literature as evidence that situational factors are sufficient to explain behavior

without reference to global character or personality traits. In his analysis about the plausibility of character, Doris (2002) concludes that there is no empirical support for “traditional notions of character ... embedded in this culture” (p. 108).

In addition to their empirically-backed claims, situationists make several philosophical assumptions about the nature (or lack thereof) of character. Situationists such as Doris (2002) argue against a ‘global’ conception of character. Character thus conceived entails consistency, reliability, and evaluative integration. In other words, to possess a given character trait, an individual must repeatedly display trait-like behaviors in applicable situations over time. Failure to do so is interpreted as a lack of that character trait. Because situationists consistently find that people fail to demonstrate character traits along their expectations, they conclude that character traits are a flawed concept based on a poor understanding of human nature.

Situationist conclusions exert a powerful influence on psychological thought and have led many to abandon the study of character. However, both situationists’ empirically and philosophically backed claims are based on troubling assumptions about character. In this presentation, I explore two questionable assumptions that situationists make about character that limit the cogency of their conclusions. Then using an Aristotelian lens, I illuminate the non-necessity of these assumptions and explore alternative assumptions about character that could be made. First, I examine situationists’ use of social psychology studies of the impact of situational factors on helping strangers as a test case for character. Situationists assume that an individual’s commitment to helping strangers is an adequate representation of the individual’s compassion or helpfulness. An Aristotelian perspective, however, does not consider helping strangers to be a critical test for character, nor does it consider compassion or helpfulness to be core virtues. Second, situationists rely on the egoism/altruism dichotomy to support their conclusions. They

assume that if people can be shown to act out of self-interest, they are not virtuous. This view is at odds with an Aristotelian perspective, which posits various motivations for helping. Thus, situationist conclusions about character are likely overstated as they are based on a commitment to a particular worldview that may or may not be accurate.

Helping Strangers

The situationist understanding of character are largely based on an empirical literature of hundreds of helping behavior studies, most of which entail helping strangers. I begin by reviewing two classic social psychological studies of helping that are illustrative of research traditions in this literature. These are Latané and Rodin's (1969) "Lady in Distress" study on the bystander effect, and Isen and Levin's (1972) phone-booth study demonstrating the effects of mood on helping behavior.

Bystander studies examine the effects of groups of people on an individual's helping behavior. In a typical bystander paradigm, such as the "Lady in Distress" study (Latané & Rodin, 1969), participants are observed either alone or in groups when they suddenly encounter an "emergency" situation like overhearing a crashing sound in the next room. The degree of assistance participants offer to the person in the next room is then recorded as the primary dependent variable. Permutations of this basic paradigm have been tested across a range of scenarios including over e-mail (Barron & Yechiam, 2002) or in response to "virtual subjects" represented by pre-recorded conversations (Darley & Latané, 1968). The key characteristics of a manipulated group size and helping a stranger are constant. People are found to typically help more frequently when alone than when they are in the presence of others (Fischer et al., 2011).

Mood induction studies examine the effects of experimentally induced mood on an individual's helping behavior. In Isen and Levin's (1972) now classic study, participants are

induced to a positive mood by “finding” a dime in the coin return slot of a payphone. As participants are leaving the phone booth, they happen to cross paths with a confederate of the researcher who drops a stack of papers he is carrying. Whether participants help or not is then recorded. Mood studies vary in the kind of manipulation they employ, the mood state induced, and the type of helping behavior expected. Mood is consistently found to affect the rates of helping behavior (Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988; Carlson & Miller, 1987)

In both of these research paradigms, and indeed in nearly all of the studies relied on by situationists, participants experience some sort of manipulation of their environment and then their helping is measured. Typically, the helping behavior appears disconnected from the experiment and involves helping someone that the participant has never met. Further, in many studies, participants’ helping behavior is observed in response to pre-recorded cries for help disguised as a person in the next room or letters requesting help for a “friend” in distress (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Latané & Rodin, 1969). Thus, not only is it a stranger, but it is a stranger who doesn’t even exist. Lefevor et al. (2015) analyzed who the recipients of help were in 286 studies that situationists typically rely on to make their conclusions. Of the 286 studies analyzed, 121 involved helping someone participants had never seen or heard prior to the moment of helping. The remainder of the 165 studies involved participants helping the experimenter or a research confederate whom they did not know prior to the time of the study. None of the studies surveyed included participants helping someone with whom they had a pre-existing relationship. Thus, *all* of the studies surveyed involved participants helping *strangers*.

Although helping strangers is an important and interesting phenomena in itself, it may be qualitatively different than helping in the context of established relationships. In a study investigating the effects of familiarity on helping behavior, Baer (1977) noted that “mere

interpersonal contact between strangers, regardless of whether or not the contact was a request for assistance, facilitated prosocial behavior” (p. 214). This supports the idea that the results from studies involving strangers may be different from studies conducted in the context of established relationships. Situationists’ disregard for this distinction represents an unexamined assumption that findings from studies examining helping strangers will be applicable to helping in other contexts. This is troubling because results from these studies are used to make generalizations about helping behavior as a whole, without discussing the limitations of the contexts employed.

Implicit in the assumption that helping strangers can be generalized to helping people in general is the belief that both are representative of the same underlying trait of compassion or kindness. Situationists then use this as a test case for virtue, typically assuming that if people fail to display or inconsistently display helping behavior, these traits do not exist. These beliefs reflect a commitment to a worldview that does not differentiate between helping strangers and acquaintances, friends, or family. However, from an Aristotelian perspective, helping strangers is not a test case for *any* virtue. Aristotle discussed several virtues related to helping behavior such as generosity and magnanimity, but the context of his virtue framework assigns very different meaning to these terms. I will briefly examine the role of these two virtues within an Aristotelian framework.

The virtue most closely related to helping for Aristotle is generosity, which he characterizes as “giving to the right people, the right amount, at the right time” (1120a, 24). He clarifies that the generous person “will not, however, be careless of his personal possessions, since he wishes to use them as a means of helping others” (1120b, 2) and that “a generous man will not give to the wrong people, at the wrong time, and so forth; for if he did, his actions would

no longer be dictated by generosity, and if he spent his money on the wrong things, he would have none to spend on the right ones” (1120b, 20). Aristotle’s concept of generosity is representative of his view of virtues as a mean between vices: one who gives too little is stingy, one who gives too much is extravagant, and one who gives the right amount is generous.

The other Aristotelian virtue related to helping is magnificence. Aristotle differentiates between magnificence and generosity by specifying that magnificence “is confined to those [actions] that involve spending, but in these it surpasses generosity in scale” (1122a, 19). Though magnificence is of a greater scale, Aristotle’s concept of magnificence as a mean between vices is similar to that of generosity. He says, “A man who, like the proverbial, ‘to many a wanderer did I give,’ spends appropriate amounts on insignificant or only moderately important occasions is not called magnificent” (1122a, 25). Rather, Aristotle purports that “virtuous spending is right spending” (1122b, 29). Thus, like generosity, magnificence is seen in giving the right amount to the right people at the right time.

Taken together, the virtues of generosity and magnificence both involve giving to the “right people, the right amount, at the right time” (1120a, 24). There is no expectation in either of the virtues that a person would be always willing to lend a helping hand, especially to a stranger. Rather, Aristotle decries such aimless giving as extravagance because if a person “spent his money on the wrong things, he would have none to spend on the right ones” (1120b, 20). The same parallel could be made with helping strangers: if someone dedicated the majority of her time to helping strangers, she might not have time to help those with whom she is close. Aristotle’s virtues of generosity and magnificence contrast starkly with the situationist assumption that helping strangers is a test for virtue. Not only does Aristotle not consider helping

strangers to be a test case for virtue, but he goes as far to posit that helping strangers may be *un-*virtuous behavior.

Egoism/altruism

The egoism/altruism debate is essentially a question of motivation: are individuals primarily motivated by a concern for self or can they be motivated by concern for others? (Batson & Shaw, 1991). Though some have argued that the focus of the debate ought to be on other motivation constructs (Batson, Ahmad, & Stocks, 2011) or an intricate cost/benefit analysis (e.g., Krebs, 1991), egoism and altruism are most commonly discussed as motivational constructs. In a multi-decade debate, prominent social psychologists, Batson and Cialdini, argued back and forth about the existence of altruism (Cialdini, 1991). Batson and his colleagues conducted several empirical studies seeking to validate Batson's central hypothesis that empathy leads to increased altruistic behavior (see Batson & Shaw, 1991). Cialdini and his associates sought to demonstrate that supposedly altruistic helping could be better explained by reference to non-altruistic factors, such as the desire to reduce negative feelings or perceived oneness (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Maner et al., 2002; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984). Currently the debate continues without resolution (Batson, Ahmad, & Stocks, 2011; Brown & Maner, 2012; Gantt & Burton, 2013).

The debate has often taken on a dichotomous tone, assuming that if proponents of altruism can demonstrate at least one act of pure altruistic motivation, supporters of egoism will be forced to yield the conceptual point. If not, all altruistic action will be assumed to be reduceable to a form of egoism. Situationists enter this debate on the side of egoists. They assume that if egoistic motivation is at the root of behavior, it means that character has no explanatory role to play.

In contrast, Aristotle addressed motivation in a way that elides the imposed dichotomy between egoism and altruism through his concept of individual and shared goods. Recall that for Aristotle, human activity is directed in pursuit of goods, which he defined as “an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue” (1098a 16-17). For Aristotle, *how* goods are pursued is at least equally important as *what* goods are pursued. The highest good is *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as happiness but is better understood as flourishing because *eudaimonia* describes both a state and the activities constitutive of that state (Fowers, 2010b). *Eudaimonia* is not a single aspect of life but is comprised of an integrated balance between several goods such as knowledge, friendship, and justice. There are several distinctions that may be made among the kinds of goods Aristotle describes. Space and time do not permit an in-depth discussion of all these distinctions. The interested reader is directed elsewhere for an in-depth discussion of the role of instrumental and constitutive goods in *eudaimonia* (Fowers, 2010a; Fowers, 2012). I focus on individual and shared goods as most relevant to the current discussion.

Goods can be divided into those which are pursued and possessed by individuals and those that may only be pursued and possessed by groups of people. Individual goods such as pleasure, wealth, and health can be pursued largely independently from others’ pursuit of the same goods. Shared goods, on the other hand, can only be pursued and possessed by a group of people who are engaged in the pursuit of the same good. For example, justice cannot be successfully pursued or possessed by a single individual. Justice may only exist among a group of people who are engaged in the processes constitutive of it such as lawmaking, observation of laws, law enforcement, and fair distribution of benefits and burdens. Other examples of shared goods include friendship, democracy, community, and intimacy.

Both individual and shared goods are necessary for *eudaimonia*. However, psychology as a discipline is predisposed to value individual experiences and subjective realities above those of the group to the point that the group is often seen as the collection of the individual constituents of it. This individualistic bias has been thoroughly critiqued (e.g., Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). For this paper, the important point is that there is no *a priori* justification for an individualist worldview, and thus both individual and shared goods may be seen as important.

The existence of shared goods elides the dichotomy between egoism and altruism. Egoism assumes that individuals always act entirely for their own benefit, and altruism assumes that individuals, at least occasionally, act entirely for the benefit of others. Shared goods, however, assume that most of the time, groups of people act for the benefit of the group. Shared goods can only be possessed by the group of people and benefit both the individual and the group. Any given individual motivated only for concern for self may destroy a shared good (e.g., it only takes few instances of uncorrected cheating to break cooperation).

Conclusion

I have argued that situationist conclusions about character are based on two questionable assumptions: 1) that helping strangers as a test case for virtue and 2) that egoistic motivation underlies behavior and thus precludes a genuine expression of character. I have illustrated the ways in which each of these assumptions is apparent in situationist thought. Then, using an Aristotelian lens to illustrate alternative assumptions that could be made, I have discussed the non-necessity of these assumptions. An understanding of the Aristotelian virtues of generosity and magnificence illustrates the way in which helping strangers may be best seen as a non-indicator of, or even detriment to virtue. Understanding the difference between individual and shared goods illuminates ways to escape the egoism/altruism dichotomy that are amenable to the

study of character. I conclude that situationist conclusions about the non-existence of character are overstated because they are based on an unexamined worldview that may not be best representative of lived experience. Additional investigation of the validity of character should be engaged in to test its plausibility as an explanatory construct.

References

- Allport, G. W. (1937). *Personality: A psychological interpretation*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Barron, G., & Yechiam, E. (2002). Private e-mail requests and the diffusion of responsibility. *Computers in Human Behavior, 18*, 507-520. doi: 10.1016/S0747-5632(02)00007-9
- Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N., & Stocks, E. L. (2011). Four forms of prosocial motivation: Egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism. In D. Dunning (Ed.), *Social motivation*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Batson, C. D., & Shaw, L. L. (1991). Evidence for altruism: Toward a pluralism of prosocial motives. *Psychological Inquiry, 2*, 107-122.
- Bridges, F. S., & Clark, S. M. (2000). Differences in lost letter responses from smaller rural communities. *North American Journal of Psychology, 2*, 121-126.
- Brown, S. L., & Maner, J. K. (2012). Egoism or altruism? Hard-nosed experiments and deep philosophical questions. In D. T. Kenrick, N. J. Goldstein, & S. L. Braver (Eds.), *Six degrees of social influence: Science, application, and the psychology of Robert Cialdini* (pp. 109-118). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Carlson, M., Charlin, V., & Miller, N. (1988). Positive mood and helping behavior: A test of six hypotheses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55*, 211-229.
- Carlson, M., & Miller, N. (1987). Explanation of the relation between negative mood and helping. *Psychological Bulletin, 102*, 91-108.
- Cialdini, R. B. (1991). Altruism or egoism? That is (still) the question. *Psychological Inquiry, 2*, 124-126.

- Cialdini, R. B., Brown, S. L., Lewis, B. P., Luce, C., & Neuberg, S. L. (1997). Reinterpreting the empathy-altruism relationship: When one into one equals oneness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 481-494. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.73.3.481
- Clark, R. D., & Word, L. E. (1974). Where is the apathetic bystander? Situational characteristics of the emergency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *29*, 279-287. doi: 10.1037/h0036000
- Coke, J. S., Batson, C. D., & McDavis, K. (1978). Empathic mediation of helping: A two-stage model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *36*, 752-766.
- Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *8*, 377-383. doi: 10.1037/h0025589
- Doris, J. M. (2002). *Lack of character: Personality and moral behavior*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Epstein, S. (1980). The stability of behavior: II. Implications for psychological research. *American Psychologist*, *35*, 790-806.
- Fischer, P., Krueger, J. I., Greitemeyer, T., Vogrincic, C., Kastenmüller, A., Frey, D., ... Kainbacher, M. (2011). The bystander-effect: A meta-analytic review on bystander intervention in dangerous and non-dangerous emergencies. *Psychological Bulletin*, *137*, 517-537. doi: 10.1037/a0023304
- Fowers, B. J. (2010a). Instrumentalism and psychology: Beyond using and being used. *Theory & Psychology*, *20*, 1-23. doi: 10.1177/0959354309346080
- Fowers, B. J. (2010b). *Aristotle on eudaimonia: On the virtue of returning to the source*. Unpublished manuscript.

- Fowers, B. J. (2012). An Aristotelian framework for the human good. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*, 10-23. doi: 10.1037/a0025820
- Gantt, E. E., & Burton, J. (2013). Egoism, altruism, and the ethical foundations of personhood. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 53*, 438-460. doi: 10.1177/0022167812464685
- Harman, G. (1999). Moral philosophy meets social psychology: Virtue ethics and the fundamental attribution error. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 99*, 315-331.
- Isen, A. M., & Levin, P. F. (1972). Effect of feeling good on helping: Cookies and kindness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 21*, 384-388.
- Krebs, D. L. (1991). Altruism and egoism: A false dichotomy? *Psychological Inquiry, 2*, 137-139.
- Latané, B., & Rodin, J. (1969). A lady in distress: Inhibiting effects of friends and strangers on bystander intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 5*, 189-202.
- Lefevor, G. T., Fowers, B. J., Lang, S., & Cohen, L. (2014, August). *Helping behavior reinvisioned: A meta-analysis of decades of situational psychology research*. Poster presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.
- Maner, J. K., Luce, C. L., Neuberg, S. L., Cialdini, R. B., Brown, S., & Sagarin, B. J. (2002). The effects of perspective taking on motivations for helping: Still no evidence for altruism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 1601-1610. doi: 10.1177/014616702237586
- Manucia, G. K., Baumann, D. J., & Cialdini, R. B. (1984). Mood influences in helping: Direct effects or side effects? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*, 357-364.

- Matthews, K. E., & Canon, L. K. (1975). Environmental noise level as a determinant of helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *32*, 571-577. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.32.4.571
- Mischel, W. (1969). Continuity and change in personality. *American Psychologist*, *24*, 1012-1018.
- Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schneider, F. W., Lesko, W. A., Garrett, W. A. (1980). Helping behavior in hot, comfortable, and cold temperatures: A field study. *Environment and Behavior*, *12*, 231-240. doi: 10.1177/0013916580122007