

Character and Situation: How to Transcend the Traditional Dichotomy as an Aristotelian

In his book, *Lack of Character* (Doris, 2002), John Doris strongly challenges conventional character based views of moral behavior. He does so by examining and reinterpreting results of seminal studies such as Stanley Milgram's (1974) obedience experiments, Zimbardo's prison experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973), Darley and Batson's (1973) "Good Samaritan" study, and studies examining the relationship between mood and helping (Isen & Levin, 1972; Levin & Isen, 1975; Weyant, 1978). Based on his interpretation of these studies, Doris concludes that the empirical literature does not support "traditional notions of character ... embedded in this culture" (p.108). This conclusion leads him to advocate for the elimination of these views in favor of what he sees as a more accurate form of ethical reasoning based on the distinctive characteristics of situations.

Doris' position is not unique. Rather, it is representative of the views held by many psychologists and philosophers that character and virtue are either non-existent or unhelpful in explaining behavior (Harman, 2009; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Those who hold these views are frequently referred to as situationists because of their central belief that situational factors are more powerful explanations of behavior than character is (Doris, 2002; Harman, 2000). Although interest in situationism has recently resurged, the debate about the explanatory value of situations and character traits spans several decades (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985; Fleeson & Nofle, 2008; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Many critics find fault with situationist thought because of its reliance on a simplified and inaccurate understanding of character (Homiak, 2011). Opponents also point out that situationist scholarship is often inconsistent in its definition of character (Sreenivasan, 2002). They further

draw attention to the importance that definitions have in research and note the taint in situationist conclusions that comes from their simplistic definition of character (Kupperman, 2001).

Building upon this work, we take issue with the simplistic understanding of character and the concomitant dichotomy that situationists establish between character and situation. We find the description of character presented by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1962) to be much richer and more useful. Understanding character from an Aristotelian framework dispels the dichotomy and, at the same time, offers a useful heuristic for understanding the role of situations and character. In addition, this perspective suggests a whole range of interesting empirical hypotheses. In this presentation, we first contrast the situationist conception of character with an Aristotelian conception. We then show how an understanding of Aristotle's notion of character types leads to different interpretations of mood-related helping studies than those drawn by situationist scholars. We conclude by discussing the implications an Aristotelian understanding of character types has for the study of character in psychology.

Views of character

In situationist thought, character is typically defined in opposition to situations. Two mainstream situationist scholars, Gilbert Harman and John Doris, uphold the definition of character as “relatively long-term stable dispositions to act in distinctive ways” (Harman, 1999, p.317; see also Doris, 2002), emphasizing “dispositions.” Consequently, they frequently place dispositionalist accounts in competition with situationist views. Although Doris and Harman do not argue for a complete dichotomy between character and situational influences on behavior, both seem to assume an *ipso facto* division between the effects of the situation and character. In his interpretation of the social psychology literature, Doris frequently assesses the explanatory power of the situation against that of personality traits. He seems to see situations and character

competing to explain the existing behavioral variance, without leaving much room for a relationship between the two. These views lead Doris and others to interpret the literature in favor of situations and conclude that character is an empirically inadequate concept.

Situationists also tend to equate highly specific behaviors in generically presented situations with character (Homiak, 2011), which biases the research toward the empirical falsification of character. In their interpretation of empirical studies, situationists often claim that the presence or absence of a particular behavior in a single situational instance makes it possible to deny the existence of a character trait. In essence, a situationist might see the fact that I volunteer every Tuesday night at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center as sufficient evidence to infer that I am a helpful person. Although this explanation is certainly possible, it overlooks a host of motivational elements that could be underlying my decision such as the possibility that I volunteer there because it is an excellent place to get deals on drugs. If this were the case, it is no strain to see that any expectation that I might help in other situations would not be met. When character is viewed in this way, it is very nearly a foregone conclusion that character does not exist.

In contrast to situationist views of character, Aristotle did not consider character to be in conflict with situational forces. Rather, Aristotle created a typology of character based on the interaction between motivation and virtuous action that makes predictions about the situational susceptibility for right action that differs for each of the character types. His virtuous person would not only act virtuously but would also act out of desires that are consistent with virtuous action. This harmony of duty and desire renders the virtuous person relatively impervious to subtle situational enticements to act less virtuously. Aristotle's other four character types—continent, incontinent, vicious, and beastly—each exhibit different combinations of desires and

virtuous actions and characteristically vary in their susceptibility to minor situational inducements (see also Fowers, 2008 for a further discussion of character types).

Of the five character types, virtuous individuals most consistently make the moral choice across varying situations. Part of the reason virtuous individuals are so consistent is because they experience a harmony of duty and desire. This means that a virtuous person does not need any outside influence to be motivated to act morally because she has cultivated a genuine desire to act in the best ways. A virtuous life also leads a virtuous person to have a refined sense of pleasure, to the extent that she experiences pleasure in virtuous action and does not find pleasure in non-virtuous action. The inherent attractiveness of moral behavior to a virtuous person, coupled with a habitual dedication to virtuous action, renders a virtuous person relatively impervious to subtle situational influences. Ordinary fluctuations in mood do little to entice a virtuous person to act contra her virtuous nature.

A key component of virtuous action is practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is “the capacity to recognize the essentials of what one encounters and to respond well and fittingly” (Fowers, 2005, p. 52). It is especially important when a situation seems to call for conflicting virtues. For instance, practical wisdom would guide the virtuous person in deciding whether a child’s crying calls for nurturance or correction. In essence, a person would not be considered virtuous without the possession and active use of practical wisdom to know how to apply virtues to the unique circumstances of daily life. Practical wisdom helps the virtuous to act morally in a wide range of situations.

In contrast to a virtuous person, a continent person acts morally, but he often does so in spite of contrary desires. From an outside perspective, a continent and virtuous person may appear very similar: both are generally just, generous, and kind. However, because a continent

person is plagued by desires that are less than admirable, virtuous action frequently follows conflicted deliberation. This internal conflict impedes the continent from experiencing the pleasure that could come in virtuous actions.

A continent individual also differs from a virtuous individual in consistency. Because the continent person is not completely motivated to act virtuously, his contrary desires will sometimes produce errors in deciding the most fitting action for a certain situation. Thus, it is more likely that a continent individual will be influenced by subtle situational effects either for good or for ill than a virtuous person would be. For example, the smile of a coworker might be sufficient to motivate a continent person to help her pick up some dropped papers when he otherwise would not have had the moral impetus to help. Though a continent person typically makes the moral choice, he will not be quite as consistent as a virtuous person.

Incontinent persons face a similar disharmony between duty and desire as the continent, but they frequently yield to the baser desire. They also have a comparable degree of knowledge and ability to judge situations as continent individuals, but they more consistently choose to act contrary to virtue. In particular, incontinent persons are characterized by an excessive pursuit of bodily pleasure and pain avoidance against their better knowledge. Although they have some desire to follow virtue, it is frequently overpowered by emotion, often leading incontinent people to feel guilty.

Even more than continent individuals, incontinent individuals tend to act inconsistently. Because duty and desire are opposed for the incontinent person, she will sometimes choose one and sometimes choose the other. The incontinent person's lack of conviction leads her to act based solely on her desires. For example, in coming across an old lady who dropped her groceries, an incontinent person would recognize the moral choice to make would be helping and

might do so under ideal circumstances. However, small things like having to cross the street to help her or the number of bags the lady dropped might stop the incontinent person from helping. Of the various character types, incontinent people demonstrate the greatest degree of sensitivity to seemingly insignificant situational factors; indeed, their behavior may be better predicted by the type of situation than by an overarching desire to act morally.

The fourth character type that Aristotle proposes is the vicious person. The vicious person characteristically makes deplorable choices; however, these choices are not made after an internal conflict but stem from a dedication to base desires. Like a virtuous person, a vicious person will be very predictable because he experiences no disharmony between duty and desire. He does not act capriciously but acts consistently with his distorted perception of what is choiceworthy. For example, a vicious person might maintain a narcissistic view that everything done should have some immediate benefit to him and would not have a problem ending friendships that no longer provide the sort of gratification he wants. Because he is so consistent in his actions, a vicious person will be relatively unaffected by situational factors to act otherwise.

Whereas the first four character types perform some type of moral evaluation of the situation, Aristotle's last type, beastly individuals, do not. Rather, they pursue pleasure and avoid pain according to their current emotional state and the current situational factors without regard to morality. They are considered incapable of moral action because they have lost their esteem for the well-being of others as well as the ability to rationally evaluate a situation. A beastly person would use whatever means were available to obtain his desired ends, regardless of the relationships he would be damaged or laws he may break.

Beastly individuals are not fully culpable for their actions, but they may be responsible for creating their present state. Individuals may become beastly through no fault of their own due

to disease, extended abuse or profound trauma, making them psychologically incapable of making moral choices. It is also possible that a series of choices could lead to a beastly character as in those whose lives are completely ruled by addiction. Beastly individuals are more the exception than the rule, and are relatively uncommon in society. Because beastly individuals are not guided by reason or morality, their behavior will be strongly dependent on situational factors.

To better illustrate the differences in character type, consider the way the following scenario distinguishes between the character types. Imagine a man arrives to a gas pump to realize that the pump is mistakenly activated to dispense a limitless amount of free fuel. If this man were virtuous, he would understand the situation and report the incident to the gas station attendant with little hesitation. The virtuous person would decide to do this because he desires to engage in fair exchange and would require relatively little time to act once the situation became clear. If he were continent, he would understand that the moral thing to do would be to tell the attendant about the pump but would have a hard time doing this because of his desire to get free gas. After some deliberation, he would probably decide to dutifully act according to his values and tell the attendant, but he may be impeded from this action if he were in a bad mood or if he thought that he had gotten a raw deal earlier that day. If the man were an incontinent person, he would probably arrive at the gas pump and be overjoyed at the prospect of free gas. Shortly thereafter, he would realize that taking the gas without paying was contrary to his sense of what he should do. Despite this realization, he would fill up his car, possibly driving away feeling guilty for not being more principled. If our traveler were a vicious person, he would get to the pump and start to fill the car without any hesitation. He would see his action as rational and logical, perhaps because he thinks, "it's a survival-of-the-fittest type world out there." If the man were beastly, he would be prone to act according to his desires at the moment. He would fill up

his car without any thought about the justness or injustice, being entirely influenced by the opportunity presented by the situation.

Overall, character types most reliably differ on the concordance of duty and desire as well as their susceptibility to situational influences. A virtuous person has a complete harmony and acts virtuously notwithstanding contrary situational influences. Continent and incontinent people are plagued with disharmony between what they feel they should do and what they want to do. Consequently, they are more easily influenced by salient situational characteristics. Between the two, continent people make the moral choice more consistently while incontinent people are more guided by situational influences. A vicious person experiences a harmony of duty and desire, but it does not lead to virtuous action because of a distorted sense of what is good. Vicious people are relatively unaffected by situational influences because of their commitment to base action. Beastly individuals are characterized by a loss of rationality and complete yielding to pleasure and may be governed completely by situational pulls.

Mood Studies

Character types are widely unacknowledged in situationist scholarship due to situationists' oversimplified view of character and their focus on between group effects in experimental studies. We take the literature on mood-related helping as exemplifying situationist scholarship. Many of the studies of the effects of mood on helping behavior share similar experimental designs and conclusions. Generally, participants are randomly assigned to either a mood induction group or a control group. A positive or negative mood may be induced by giving cookies, by having participants unexpectedly find a small sum of money, or by having participants read a depressing story. Shortly after the mood induction, participants find themselves in a situation that calls for helping such as a confederate dropping papers or someone

requesting a monetary donation. Researchers then record whether or not the participant offered to help or how much help they offered. Generally, researchers find a statistically significant effect of the situation on helping in the mood induction group (although there is some disagreement in the literature, i.e. Miller, 2009), which often leads them to conclude that helping was primarily controlled by changes in the situation instead of by character.

However, if character types are understood well, the results of the mood-related helping studies are inconclusive about the existence of character. In fact, these studies indicate trends that would be expected of the various character types. As an illustration, consider a hypothetical study that compared the number of people helping in a positive mood induction group with a control group that received no mood induction (see *Figure 1*). In the control condition, we would expect that the virtuous would help while the vicious and the beastly would not help. Despite the lack of situational inducement, many continent people would help while the majority of the incontinent people would not help. Overall, this would add up to a relatively balanced proportion of people helping and not helping. In the positive mood condition, we would expect that virtuous people would help whereas vicious and beastly people would not. Given the mood induction, a large majority of continent people would help. The mood induction would be even more influential with incontinent people, and a majority of those individuals would be influenced by the situation to help. Overall, a significantly larger number of people would help than not. Thus, when situational factors succeeded in increasing the amount of helping behavior, it would appear that the incontinent and continent were persuaded to act favorably. If the situation succeeded in decreasing helping, it could be said that incontinent and some continent people were being dissuaded from virtuous action. Relatively little variability would show up among virtuous helpers and vicious or beastly non-helpers, which could be reflected in part by the substantial

number of people consistently helping in the control condition and the number not helping in the mood induction condition. Hence, conclusions from mood-related helping studies would be much more limited than presently assumed. These experiments in general may only be primarily mapping the behavioral variation of incontinent people, and, to a lesser extent, continent individuals, because they are the most susceptible to situational influence.

Implications for the study of character

Experimental mood induction studies are ill-equipped to examine differences in character. Researchers typically analyze the results by comparing randomized group differences and neglecting the key moderating variable of character type. This approach makes it impossible to parse the differences in character type because the various types are lumped together into larger groups of “good mood” or “neutral mood.” Such conclusions are appropriate in assessing the relative strength of a situation on helping behavior in general; however, they do not offer any insight into the character of the individuals in the groups.

This clarifies that character cannot be measured through group comparisons because it is an individual differences variable. Character cannot be seen by comparing the average behavior between groups because character does not exist in groups! (This makes this area of study an interesting example of being broadly subject to the ecological fallacy.) Instead, repeated measures of the same person’s behavior across time would be necessary in order to assess his character. Combining this method with a proper understanding of character, we hypothesize that virtuous behavior would be best predicted by the interaction between situation and character type. We would expect a study properly conducted to identify proportions of character types in the control and experimental conditions, recognizing that it is not reasonable to expect situations to be equally powerful across character types. This analysis suggests an important way in which a

domain of psychological research can avoid fallacious conclusions by being informed by a deeper theoretical conception of its subject matter.

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Appendix

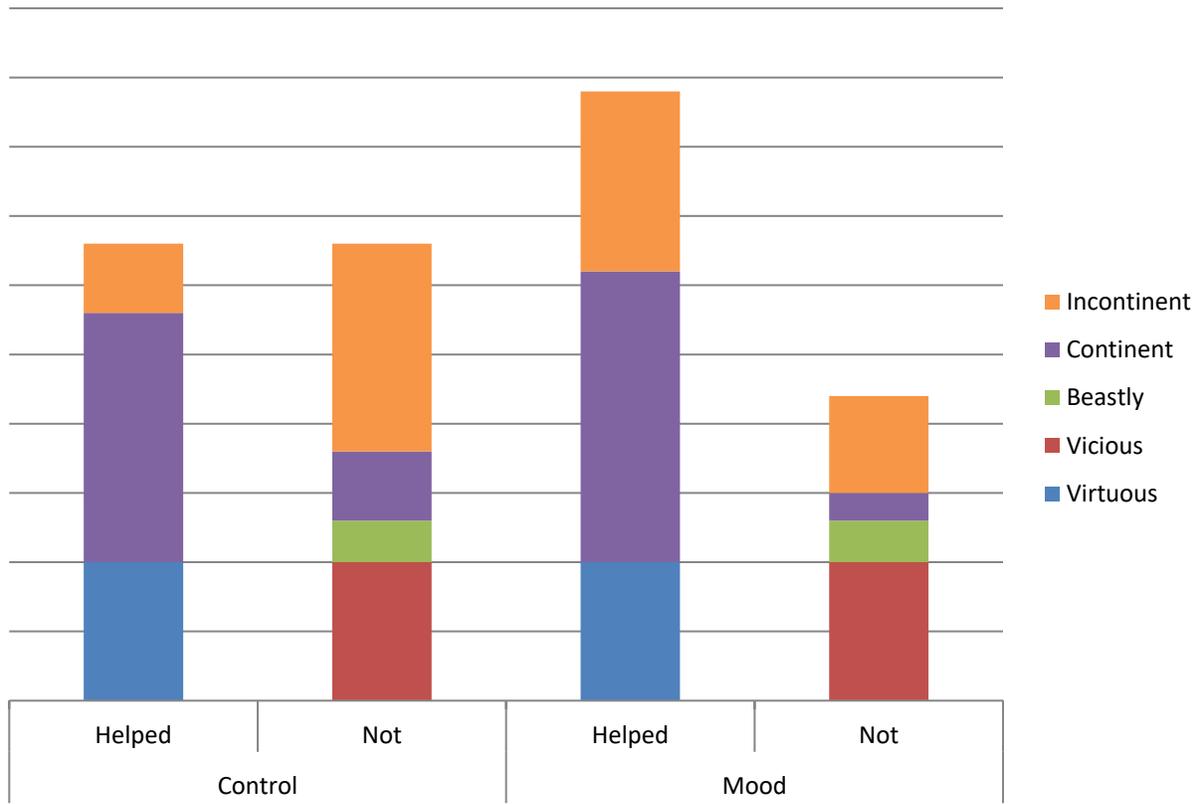


Figure 1. Potential distribution of character types in a typical mood induction study.