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BOOK REVIEW

Character Trouble: Undisciplined Essays on Moral Agency and Personality, by John Doris, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 384, $42.55 (Hardback), ISBN 9780198719601

A man named Reinhold Hanning served as a guard at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp during World War II. He led thousands of prisoners to the gas chambers. After the war ended, Hanning lived a quiet life as a truck driver and a salesman. Many years later, when Hanning was in his nineties, federal prosecutors in Germany found him guilty of facilitating the murder of 170,000 people. A judge called him a "willing and efficient henchman" in the Holocaust (BBC News, 2017). In all likelihood, however, had the Nazis never come to power, Hanning would have spent his life as a regular, law-abiding citizen. Indeed, one could imagine an alternative history in which the judge who sentenced Hanning, being born five decades earlier, ended up becoming a Nazi guard, and Hanning, having grown up in a different time and place, was the judge and reprover in the other's trial.

Such is the power of situations. And such are we, people. There is something amorphous, unsettled, and disturbingly noncommittal – in the moral sense – about us and our characters. It is this instability and susceptibility to situational influences that occupies John Doris in *Character Trouble*.

It has occupied him for a long time. In what may seem like an anti-situationist twist of the plot involving Doris himself, Doris has, for some twenty plus years, remained (reliably) committed to the task of sorting through the facts in an attempt to trace the elusive contours of human character or else to document the lack thereof. His staunch empiricism makes his work on issues in moral psychology difficult to ignore. Doris, perhaps more than any other psychology-friendly philosopher, compelled those of us interested in character to take situationism seriously.

Character Trouble is a testament to these endeavors. It is a retrospective as well as a prospective – it contains selected essays on character and agency written or coauthored over the course of more than two decades, starting with Doris's 1998 "Persons, Situations, and Ethics." The book also contains two new chapters, "Making Good: Virtues, Skills, and Performance" and "The Future of Character." In "Making Good," Doris traces the implication for moral psychology of the skill analogy – the idea that moral excellences are in many ways like skills. In "The Future of Character," he clarifies the terms of the debate between him and his opponents, corrects what he takes to be misrepresentations of his position, and addresses concerns about situationism that arise in relation to what has come to be known as the "replication crisis" or, more affectionately, "RepliGate."

In what follows, I will say a bit more about Doris's view and take the question of whether and to what extent the evidence he marshals presents a challenge for either commonsense views of character or for virtue ethics.

1. What exactly is Doris's view?

While Doris has been frequently portrayed as a character denialist, he resists the characterization. He writes:

> In fact, I have repeatedly asserted that traits exist, and have repeatedly asserted that I have repeatedly asserted that traits exist . . . One more time in the hopes of forever banishing the distortion: *traits exist* (213).

Doris takes the blanket dismissal of character to bring the denial of individual dispositional differences in its wake, an implication Doris finds implausible (surely, people differ from each other!). Doris describes himself as a character *skeptic*, but he is a skeptic of a particular kind. What he seeks to challenge is not the existence of traits but rather, the view that traits understood as broad-based dispositions that order behavior independently of situational influences are widely instantiated. They are not, Doris's contention is, and this makes them relatively unimportant in ethics and moral psychology. Doris is, however, open to a pluralistic approach on which a modest role for character can be retained with the caveat that "the history of character talk pre-disposes it to immodest connotations (190)."

At this point, the reader may ask why Doris titled his widely read book on character "Lack of Character." Doesn't this title suggest character denialism? Well, a book cannot always be judged by its title, particularly when the title is ambiguous. Doris says that "character" in "lack of character" was meant in what we might call the *laudatory* sense, the sense at issue in "she is truly someone of character." Consequently, Doris meant "lack of character" to indicate unreliability:

> To say someone lacks character doesn't sound to me like saying that they are "characterless" – whatever that may mean – but that they have a character of a certain sort, namely, one that is less that fully reliable ("bad character," if I went in for such talk) (34).

This, in rough outline, is the view. What of it?

2. Objections

2.1. RepliGate

Almost everyone has, by now, heard that multiple experiments in social psychology failed to replicate.[1] In light of this, it has been suggested that we no longer need to worry about situationism. Doris has two responses to this challenge. First, some of the central experiments which gave the impetus for situationist takes on character – above all, Milgram's studies on obedience – have been replicated time and again (234). Doris makes a good case for the claim that even Zimbardo's prison experiment, despite its numerous methodological flaws, remains highly suggestive.[2]

Second, and importantly, failed replications are unlikely to undermine the core situationist claim – namely, that situational factors have a much bigger role and personality variables a much smaller one in determining behavior than we have hitherto supposed. The reason is simple: any given situational factor may be relatively small and easily outweighed by other situational factors. Doris calls this the "Lotta-Little" principle, namely, the idea that many factors play a role in outcomes. Consider, for instance, a series of alterations to the 1979 Isen & Levin's phone booth study (my example).

Suppose we find that due to inflation, perhaps, a dime no longer makes people significantly more likely to help, but a dollar coin does. Perhaps, finding a rare 2-dollar coin makes them even more disposed to come to someone's rescue than finding a 1-dollar coin is. However, finding a roll of bills makes people visibly uncomfortable and unlikely to engage in any interaction. Then again, if the confederate who drops the papers is pushing a stroller with a baby, the helping rate goes up. If she is talking on the phone and looking distracted, the rate goes down. If she is pushing a stroller with a weird, "creepy" doll, then no one at all helps, even if they'd found a rare 2-dollar coin. Perhaps, there are so many small situational factors that it is difficult to reliably produce any effect. This would not constitute evidence against the core situationist thesis. It would, at best, show that our ability to control outcomes through manipulation of situational variables is limited.

The question is not whether any particular situational factor has a big, reliable effect but whether personality dispositions have big effects. The situationist claims that they do not: the so-called "personality coefficient," that is, the correlation of personality dispositions to outcomes of interest, is modest, about .3. Note here that the amount of variance accounted for by a correlation is the *square* of the correlation. So the .3 personality coefficient accounts for about 9% of the variance since .3 squared is .09. All the rest of the variance is accounted for by factors other than personality dispositions. We may not know what all the other factors are or how to control them in order to produce reliable findings, but that's of little help to the personologist and characterologist.

2.2. The person-situation boundary

A person-situation debate makes sense only if we have a reasonably good way of distinguishing between personality and situational variables. In the absence of such a way, neither side can win or even score a point. But do we have a way to draw a boundary between the person and the situation? Intuitively, a situation cannot be described at all independently of personality dispositions. There would be no competitive environments if people had no drive to compete and no temptations to misbehave if people had the kind of perfect will Kant ascribes to Jesus.

Psychologists typically look at individual differences: if everyone in a given situation does the same thing, they chalk up the outcome to situational factors. If, by contrast, different people behave differently, then personality variables are invoked to explain the outcomes. This approach is initially attractive but ultimately unsatisfying. One could imagine a community of virtuous people who very well see how it would benefit them to cheat on their spouses or to obey authority figures commanding them to act in impermissible ways, but who choose not to do those things.[3] There are no individual differences among the people in this community, but their behavior seems, intuitively, driven by character, not situational factors.[4]

It is not clear what way of drawing the person-situation divide *would* be satisfying, but for present purposes, Doris gives us resources to offer at least a provisional response. First, when behavior is influenced by small situational factors, particularly unconsciously – as when a dime in a phone booth or bakery smell increase the rate of prosocial behaviors significantly – the behavior is situationally driven even though there must be *something* about the person these situational influences hook up to or else, they would have no effect. "Helpfulness-after-finding-a-dime" does not sound like a plausible character trait.

The case with Milgram's experiment – which, as we saw, Doris takes as central to his argument – is trickier. Describing the subjects' behavior as due to situational influences or as uncovering a deep propensity to obey authority seem equally plausible, and not simply because we have the word "obedience" and no word to describe a tendency to help after finding money. As best as I can tell, Doris wants to say something like this: if the tendency to obey authority is not consistent, then character skepticism stands. What if it is? In the majority of cases, that tendency would still be at odds with other dispositions of the person, such as to be polite and decent in other circumstances. So the experiment would point to character fragmentation. Character skepticism understood as the view that broad-based (read: not fragmented) dispositions are widely instantiated survives the challenge.

3. What have we learned?

3.1. Virtue ethics

Doris suggests that the empirical findings have implications for virtue ethics. Do they? I take virtue ethics to be in the first instance, a view about the standard of right action.[5] So far as I can tell, nothing in those studies shows that the virtue ethics standard is wrong. What Doris contests is what he takes to be the empirical assumptions of virtue ethics and possibly, the strategy of character development recommended by the view. The thought is briefly this: virtue ethics implies that some people have virtuous characters and that emulating a virtuous person is a good decision-making heuristic. But there are no such people, and neither is there evidence we can become morally better by emulating – presumably non-existent – virtuous people.

But virtue ethics' virtuous person can be taken to be a regulative ideal, which, like the ideal of democracy, is never fully instantiated but may be approximated more or less.

As for emulating the virtuous person – or the ideal of one – it is fair to ask whether that helps. Do we behave better if we get into the habit of asking what a virtuous person would do in our place or is it better to adopt strict moral rules (251) and use situational buffers, as Doris would have us do? These are good questions, and I do not know what the answers are, but neither, I suspect, does Doris, as to my knowledge, no relevant studies have been conducted. I would note, however, that the virtuous person of virtue ethics is a practically wise person – a *phronimos*. The *phronimos* idea is flexible enough to accommodate both rules and situational buffers should it turn out that this is how we can best keep ourselves on the straight and narrow (Cf., Hughes, 2021). A wise person, after all, is good at planning and creating the conditions for her own good behavior. At one point, Doris asks us to consider the question of whether we should, while in a monogamous marriage, schedule dinner for two with a flirtatious colleague, secure in the knowledge of our own righteousness or whether, instead, we should avoid the temptation altogether (18). It stands to reason that it would be better to avoid the temptation. But I think this is precisely what a practically wise person – *a phronimos* – would do. A wise person is a good planner, someone who makes use of strategies for diachronic self-control, not someone who recklessly relies on her own righteousness. Plausibly, she has fairly strict rules for avoiding temptations also. It follows that if we are trying to emulate the virtuous person of virtue ethics, that's what we will do too.

3.2. Folk psychology

Another alleged upshot of the view is that there is something misguided about commonsense views of character and character cultivation. Doris suggests that analytic philosophy aims at once to reflect commonsense and not to be at odds with empirical science. The trouble, in his view, is that, like a servant with two masters, it cannot satisfy the two sets of demands. Virtue ethics, as we find it in the analytic tradition, remains true, Doris contends, to commonsense. He urges that we remain loyal to empirical science instead.

If commonsense views of character cannot survive empirical scrutiny, this would be a significant result, arguably, much more significant than the implications of research for some philosophical theory as it would cut to the core of how we all think of ourselves and of each other. Do situationist studies show that folk psychological views of character are seriously misguided?

This question is a difficult one to answer, because folk psychology is a rich tapestry of adages, intuitions, and lore that no one has ever organized and systematized.[6] Moreover, it is not clear that Doris himself thinks commonsense views are anti-situationist. At one point, he considers an objection derived by d'Cruz and Cohon to the effect that thoroughgoing situationism is incompatible with the practice of making promises. When I promise to stand by you come what may, I am precisely not saying that I will stand by you in the absence of obstacles and situational distractions. Doris's response is that our practices of making and keeping promises already rely on situational buffers: we make public marriage vows, for instance, precisely because we see ourselves as "situationally sustained individuals" (250). But if so, then there is a strong situationist undercurrent to commonsense views of people.

There is a characterological bent as well, no doubt. Consider the following: in an attempt to combat a culture of power abuse among police, Australia began using recruitment methods designed to appeal to people who care rather than to people who like power.[7] Power may corrupt, but we do not believe it corrupts everyone equally, the thought was. (The strategy worked.) So commonsense makes room for both personal dispositions and situations. However, Doris who, as I mentioned at the outset, accepts individual differences, would presumably be fine with these results. So we have not yet uncovered anything in his account that puts him squarely at odds with folk psychology.

But while the panoply of folk psychology may be so rich as to contain strands of every view, I suspect Doris does want to say something more radical than *dominant* commonsense ways of thinking would allow. This is my last point. Perhaps, no matter how many cases of people such as Nazi guard Reinhhold Hanning we encounter, we just can't shake off the conviction that neither we nor anyone we associate with would ever sink so low, and that we know ourselves and each other well enough to declare this with confidence. Ordinary decent folk don't do that. Something like this way of thinking must be, after all, why so many found the results of the Milgram experiment surprising.

At one point, Doris considers Arpaly's suggestion that while "characters cannot be described personal-ad style (honest, loyal, down-to-earth, etc.)," they "could be described in thirty pages by Balzac" (34). Arpaly's point is that Balzac may probe the depths of someone's character and paint a picture such that the person's behavior would be possibly inconsistent with regard to (personal-ad style) traits but would have a kind of overall unity. Doris agrees with this but insists that the truth of the observation

would not go against his project for it would remain true that, unobservable character depths notwithstanding, people could be shown to be unreliable with respect to measurable traits.

I suspect, however, that Doris wants to say something more radical than that, something more in line not with a reasonable Balzacian picture but with the sort of thoroughgoing anti-essentialism espoused by Luigi Pirandello in "Six Characters in Search of an Author." The response to Arpaly's point we can derive from Pirandello is that the characters described by Balzac are fictional, and that a fictional character, however nuanced, multi-faceted, and subject to development throughout a novel, is likely to exhibit more stability and reliability than actual people. At one point in Pirandello's play, a character (the Father) approaches the director and asks him who he (the director) is. The director does not quite know what to say. Here is what follows:

> The Manager (astonished and irritated): If this fellow here hasn't got a nerve! A man who calls himself a character comes and asks me who I am!
>
> The Father (with dignity, but not offended): A character, sir, may always ask a man who he is. Because a character has really a life of his own, marked with his especial characteristics; for which reason he is always "somebody." But a man – I'm not speaking of you now – may very well be "nobody" (Pirandello, 1921).

A fictional character can be someone with clearly defined interests and propensities albeit not propensities for which we always have precise character terms. This is because all the facts about fictional characters can be fixed by the author. By contrast, there is something amorphous and shifting to a real person. How many of us would have done just what the subjects in the Milgram experiment did? Worse still, how many would have done what Reinhold Hanning did? Who are we, really? One can argue that an actual person's character is too unstable and fragmented to precisely capture, even in 30 pages by Balzac. And *that's* not a commonsensical idea although Pirandello, as an armchair observer and not an empiricist, is, at one level, developing a strand of thinking that, however fringe, is already implicit in folk psychology.

My point here is not that a Pirandello-style picture is true, but that it is what I think is most in line with Doris's own sympathies. Though again, as Doris embraces ecumenical pluralism, he is unlikely to insist that radical instability *exhausts* human character.

Notes

1. In fairness, replications failed in multiple disciplines, including, most disturbingly, perhaps, medical research. See, e.g., Prinz et al. (2011).
2. One of the main objections raised is that Zimbardo did not remove himself from the experiment as he should have (participants in a study tend to adjust their behavior to meet experimenters' wishes and expectations, so experiments should be run by people with no horse in the race). Doris points out that if the subjects playing guards were trying to please Zimbardo, that would simply make Zimbardo's experiment similar to Milgram's (209). He notes also that the guards were on their worst behavior late at night, when they believed the experimenters were asleep (Ibid.). As for the much-discussed failed replication by BBC, Doris suggests that the participants there knew they might be on TV, a powerful situational disincentive of bad behavior (205).
3. I attempt to offer an account immune to this problem in Fileva (2016).

4. See, Sabini et al. (2001) for a discussion of the boundary between person and situation.
5. As it happens, I myself do not think this standard is right. In my view, the virtuous thing to do is generally morally better than the right thing to do. See, Fileva (2008).
6. Consider how many seemingly contradictory sayings there are in folk psychology: “Out of sight, out of mind” but “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”; “You are never too old to learn” but “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”; “Silence is golden” but “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” See, Kellenberger (2015). Folk wisdom, much more so than Doris’s book, appears *undisciplined*.
7. The case was related by Brian Klaas, author of Klaas (2021) in a 21 March 2022 interview with physicist Sean Carroll for the *Mindscapes* podcast: https://www.preposterousuniverse.com/podcast/2022/03/21/189-brian-klaas-on-power-and-the-temptation-of-corruption/.

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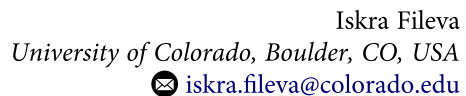

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