

**PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy**  
***Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology***

**Spring 2013**

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**[Handout #3]**

**John Doris, *Lack of Character*, Chap. 2-3**

**Situationism vs. Globalism**

**§ The Main Argument:**

1. People's moral behavior is not necessarily the result of their moral character. Oftentimes seemingly insubstantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do.
2. But if our moral character and personality were really as robust as virtue ethicists claim, then insubstantial factors would not so frequently have such impressive effects.
3. Therefore, .... (What conclusion can we draw here?)

**Target theory: Globalism**

**§ Globalism:**

**\_\_ The view that holds that personality is an evaluatively integrated association of robust traits.**

**• The globalist conception of *character*:**

- (i) **Consistency:** to possess a trait involves exhibiting trait-relevant behavior in a wide variety of trait-relevant conditions.
- (ii) **Stability:** Character and personality traits are reliably manifested by a given agent in trait-relevant behaviors over repeated trials of similar conditions.
- (iii) **Evaluative integration:** In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences.

**Q: What ethical theories would be considered globalism?**

**§ Situationism**

- Information about people's distinctive character traits, opinions, attitudes, values, or past behavior is not as useful for determining what they will do as is information about the details of their situations. (Rachana Kamtekar)
- Behavioral differences are due less to individual dispositional differences than to situational ones.

### The Situationist's Claims:

- People typically DO NOT have highly general personality traits that effect behavior with cross-situational consistency.
- Lack of good conduct in certain situations does not manifest a general “character flaw”; similarly, behaving morally in certain situations does not indicate a superb moral personality either.
- People “typically” behave without the consistency required for trait attributions; and evaluatively inconsistent dispositions may cohabit in a single personality.

### How do we settle on this debate?

<b>Globalism</b>	<b>Situationism</b>
Global traits integrated ___ Personality is an evaluatively integrated association of robust traits ___ consistency, stability and evaluative integration ___ behavioral regularity is to be primarily explained by reference to robust dispositional structures	Local traits, fragmented ___ local traits are not likely to effect the patterns of behavior expected on broad trait categories. ___ it rejects consistency and evaluative integration theses, but not the stability thesis. ___ behavioral regularity is to be primarily explained by reference to situational regularity

### Moral Character and Moral Behavior

#### § Empirical Cases of Compassion: how do you explain them?

- The stabbing of Catherine Genovese (1963)
- Phone booth and paper dropper (Isen and Levin 1972)
- Smoke in the room (Latané and Darley 1970)
- Princeton Theological Seminary (Darley and Batson 1973)

#### Q: What are the situational factors that affect our moral behavior?

- Mood effects – feeling good leads to helping
- Group effects – being in a group inhibits helping
- Pressure of time – being in a hurry inhibits good Samaritans

#### § Altruism and Situationism

- It would be a serious mistake to understand the situationist experiments as empirical evidence against the existence of altruism.
- Altruism = unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others.

- Is pure altruism possible? <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/19/is-pure-altruism-possible/>
- The situationist point is not that helping is rare, but that helping is situationally sensitive.

\_\_\_ Q: If helping is situationally sensitive, does this dispute character ethics?

**Q: What are the situational factors that make us do bad things?**

❖ **Milgram experiments** – Obedience to authority

\_\_\_ The experiments do not prove that we are a bunch of meanies. They do highlight the power of the situation: the majority of subjects were willing to torture another individual to what seemed the door of death without any more direct pressure than the polite insistence of the experimenter.

**Questions for discussion:**

In the Milgram Experiment, subjects did not show blind obedience; rather, they were highly conflicted –many of them “sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh.” What does this prove? If they were so conflicted, why did they obey?

**Q: Can the “situation” also bring out the worst in us?**

❖ **Stanford Prison Experiment**

\_\_\_ The students playing the role of guards seemed to enjoy their roles; they improvised all manner of creative sadism.

\_\_\_ The Stanford guards were not under direct orders to maltreat others; much of the abuse resulted from the guards’ initiative and creativity.

**Questions for discussion:**

In the Stanford Experiment, there are two sets of behavior – guard and prisoners. Do we have the same explanatory strategy for both groups of people? Why did they follow the rules of the game to the point of destruction?

**Q: Can the same explanation apply to daily horrors in human history?**

❖ **Genocide**

- It takes a lot of people to kill 800,000, 6 million, or 100 million human beings, and there just aren’t enough monsters to go around.
- It does not take a monster to do monstrous things: a very substantive percentage of perpetrators in the Holocaust had previously led lives characterized by ordinary level of compassion.

**Q: Could we become monsters under the “right” circumstances? Or, are we intrinsically monsters who get released under these circumstances?**

- Haritos-Fatouros (1988): In the right circumstances anyone may become a torturer.
- Levi (1989): “Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic.”
- Doris: The Nazi were the most evil of men. But their evil is not easily understood as a function of global character structures.

## § From Stanford to Nazi

### How do we explain the behavior of Nazi doctors or war criminals?

1. coercive indoctrination and control
2. internal demons released
3. stepwise progression: With the passage of time, what was once unthinkable became unremarkable; persons and nations alike are subject to “**moral drift**” – a slide into evil as individuals and groups are gradually acclimated to destructive norms.

- **A question for ethicist:**

\_\_\_ If moral drift is a common phenomenon, what should ethicists say about it? What kind of ethical theory can be constructed to deal with this phenomenon?

**Doris:** Just as descent into evil can be stepwise, so too may the ascent to heroism be stepwise. Involvement with altruism was often incremental – an initial small act of kindness resulted in the individuals becoming progressively more involved with rescue activities, until such behavior became a central focus in their lives.

### § Conclusion: Personality or Situation?

- Ordinary people may be swept up in evil, but they may also be swept up in heroism. As everywhere, persons and situations interact, with results that may be inspiring or atrocious, depending in large measure on circumstance.
- The empirical evidence indicates that compassion relevant behavior is far more situationally variable than the globalist theses of consistency and evaluative integration would have us believe. This result seriously undermines globalist moral psychology.

**Conclusion: Globalism is an empirically inadequate account of human functioning.**