

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

**Spring 2013**

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**[Handout #4]**

**John Doris, *Lack of Character*, Chap. 4-5**

**The Fragmentation of Character**

• **Empirical studies:**

1. Hartshorne and Mary (1928): Deceptive and honest behaviors (studies done on 8000 schoolchildren) are not the function of “unified” traits but are “specific functions of life situations.”
2. Mischel and Peake (1982) found a mean inter-correlation of .08 for different situations intended to tap conscientiousness in college students.

**Doris’ observation on these studies:**

1. The correlations are typically low, this shows that the associations are fainter than the marked relationships one would expect if behavior was ordered by robust traits.
2. The best explanation of the low intersituational consistency is that intrapersonal consistency is typically low.
3. Individually, each type of evidence is only suggestive, but the collective import is unquestionably awkward for globalism.

• **Argument against Globalism:**

1. Under globalism’s hypothesis, human personalities are typically structured as evaluatively integrated associations of robust traits.
2. If globalism is true, then it should be possible to observe very substantial consistency in behavior.
3. However, there is remarkable situational variability of behavior.
4. Therefore, globalism is false.

Doris: Inasmuch as positing global personality structures entails expectations of behavioral consistency, the approach is likely to generate misleading predictions and explanations.

**§ Local Traits**

1. Behavioral reliability is highly specific: one can expect the usual only in the usual circumstances.
2. This can warrant local traits attribution.

3. However, local traits are not robust; they are not reliably expressed across diverse situations with highly variable degrees of trait-conduciveness.
4. Therefore, we should expect local traits without the expectation of consistency.

**Personality and local traits:**

- personality test and vocation
- IQ tests; EQ tests
- personality traits and job proficiency: conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience

**Q:** Are these tests useful at all? How do they relate to ethical theories and virtue ethics?

**• Fragmentation of Character**

\_\_\_ Character or personality traits are “contextualized”, just as IQs are contextualized.

**Discussion:**

\_\_\_ What exactly are the differences between a globalist and a localist view on character? What kind of evidence do they need to have respectively?

\_\_\_ Does the empirical inconsistency support the *fragmentation* claim?

**§ Aggregation Solution**

\_\_\_ Behavioral measures of personality are very often confined to single behaviors on single occasions, and isolated behaviors can be unreliable measures of personality attributes. So the empirical studies cannot falsify personality theories.

\_\_\_ Furthermore, personality theories are in the business of describing **general regularities**, not predicting and explaining isolated events.

\_\_\_ If we compare aggregated scores or trait-related behavior over two runs of various trait-related behaviors, strong relationships will emerge. Unlike the faint relationships among individual behaviors, the relationships among the aggregates are of respectable magnitude

\_\_\_ Therefore, the problem has been resolved by aggregation.

Doris’ Reply:

\_\_\_ But characterological moral psychology does not typically exhibit this kind of good sense. For the Aristotelian, virtues are robust; in attributing a virtue we are expressing a high degree of confidence that the subject will not engage in trait-contrary behaviors. Such claims are committed to particular predictions.

\_\_\_ The evidence is simply too weak for personality psychology.

**§ Social-Cognitive Theory**

1. It acknowledges situational variability.

2. It understands behavior as a *function of each person's cognitive-affective personality system*: the organization of beliefs, feelings, goals, competencies, and strategies that is supposed to support stable and distinctive patterns of intra-individual variability in behavior.
3. It focuses on coherence and continuity of personality, rather than strict consistency.

- The case of Eisuke Shigekawa on Mount Everest  
([http://www.richardcowper.com/site/exped/ever\\_article1.html](http://www.richardcowper.com/site/exped/ever_article1.html))

“Above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality.”

**\* Suggestion by social-cognitivism:**

\_\_\_ Consistency is relative. Talk of consistency or inconsistency *simpliciter* is meaningless, and inconsistency relative to one standard may be consistency relative to another.

\_\_\_ Any run of behavior will be consistent relative to some perspective. And since each individual infuses his environment with distinctive meanings, his behavior will be ordered according to those meanings rather than an objective taxonomy of situations and traits.

Doris' reply:

\_\_\_ Without compelling argument to the effect that the standards expressed in traditional moral traits names are misbegotten, inconsistency with regard to them is important for moral psychology.

**Doris' critique of Social-cognitive theory:**

1. Continuity is hard to prove: there is the empirical problem of identifying behavioral patterns indicative of coherence.
2. There is also the conceptual difficulty of evaluating continuity without concrete points along the continuum.
3. Where I see fragmentation, social-cognitivists see coherence; where they see impressive order, I see alarming disorder.
4. Character is likely to be profoundly disintegrated relative to traditional evaluative categories and standard trait taxonomies, even if social-cognitivists can establish coherence and continuity.

### **Judging Character**

**[overattribution] and [fundamental attribution error]**

\_\_\_ The error of inflating the importance of dispositions and neglecting the importance of situations in explaining behavior.

- When asked to describe people or explain behavior, Americans strongly favor trait attribution. Examples: good vs. bad; nice vs. mean; liberal vs. conservative
- Stereotyping is the most obvious problem. – social perception is infused with stereotypes of negligible evidential value.

- Empirical work also demonstrates that people generally demand greater regularity for positively valenced traits than they do for negatively valenced traits. Numerous studies have documented a “negativity bias” – people are more likely to make a dispositional inference when observing a negative behavior than a positive one.

What is Doris’ argument?

1. Globalism is not only present in philosophy and psychology, but also prevalent in the beliefs of lay people.
2. But overattribution of character traits is very problematic in lay psychology. It is more pronounced in life than in the lab.
3. Therefore, we should get rid of attribution of character traits.

**Q: What is the alternative?**