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Book Review

J. M. Doris, *Character Trouble: Undisciplined Essays on Moral Agency and Personality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 384 pages. ISBN: 9780191788697. Hardback: $90.00.

Character Trouble is a collection of essays in moral psychology by John Doris. 'Character' is to be interpreted very broadly; while Doris is famous for his scepticism of Neo-Aristotelian global character traits, the collection canvasses a variety of topics outside of traditional virtue theory. Among other things, they look at responsibility, agency, the psychology of atrocity, desert, lapses in judgment, excuses in criminal law, and one contains a precis of his second book (J. M. Doris, *Talking to Our Selves: Reflection, Ignorance, and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). It is difficult to provide a comprehensive summary given such range, but there are some common themes. The most obvious is a generalised scepticism about the empirical commitments of our philosophical concepts or theorising, and the importance of actually checking what the scientific evidence says. The latter thought is fortunately more widely accepted today than several decades ago – thanks in part to books like Doris's *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) – and the collection contains many first-rate examples of how to examine the extent to which psychological evidence can be squared with our philosophical theorising, and how to improve our theories when it can't.

Readers exclusively interested in virtue and character need not worry about this broader scope; even they will benefit from this collection in a number of ways. First, to my mind, divorcing investigations into character from broader moral psychology is untenable: one needs to have a firm idea of what people are actually like, what evidence we have 'on the ground' about this, our methods for acquiring that evidence, and an awareness of the intersections between character and related notions like agency and reflection. On this front, readers will be hard-pressed to find a philosopher who is more thorough

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and meticulous than Doris in surveying our existing psychological evidence and synthesising it with philosophical theory.

Second, this collection features a new essay which provides a sustained examination of our prospects for becoming virtuous given the oft-made analogy between virtue acquisition and skill acquisition. To become builders we practice building, and to become virtuous we practice being virtuous, or so the theory often goes. This analogy is also sometimes used as a defence against charges that virtue ethics is empirically inadequate; that virtue is rare could account for our failure to observe it without impugning its existence, so long as it remains achievable (and thus observable) with enough effort. Doris examines to what extent differences in skill between chess players are actually the product of practice rather than other variables like natural talent or environmental circumstances (spoiler: much less than people who appeal to such analogies tend to assume). He also examines to what extent the analogy is strained given moral skill acquisition, in many ways, isn't like the acquisition of skills like chess-playing (being acquired much more implicitly, for one thing).

While I think this is important reading for anyone prone to making such analogies, the amount of attention given to explaining variance among chess players could perhaps be more qualified. A chess player's Elo rating is explicitly relative to other players, but virtue as an excellence is more commonly thought of in absolute terms (*Lack of Character,* p. 75). There's no conceptual limitation on everyone having the virtue of compassion, but there is on everyone being a grand master, and an intervention which, e.g., increases everyone's absolute ability equally won't show up in measures of relative variance. I take it that injunctions to practice are commonly concerned with increasing one's level of absolute skill. When we keep this in mind, relative variation within a sample seems of less interest: so long as practicing makes me better than I was, and significantly increases the chances I'll eventually pass some threshold of skill, thinking about chess practice can be a useful model for those aiming to improve their moral skillset.

The third – and most significant – benefit for readers is another new essay which provides a bird's eye view of the history of the situationist-virtue debate. This is a *very* detailed map of the argumentative territory that has been explored over the past 25 years, and Doris's comprehensive thoughts on the *many* intersecting battle fronts that have opened up. These include a look at philosophical methodology, different understandings of character, terminology, what the debate is (not) about and what is (not) in dispute, and the relevance of psychological research for thinking about ethics more broadly.

Notable in this essay is a particularly thorough analysis of Milgram's 'obedience to authority' studies and the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE).

Despite a long list of objections, particularly regarding ecological or external validity, Doris convincingly argues these studies are still important for thinking about how situations can affect our behaviour, and that common calls to dismiss or ignore these studies – including from psychologists – are overstated. (For instance, it is particularly notable how people who think the SPE does not show anything about situations remain quite reluctant to run replications, precisely because they are worried about how subjects might treat one another in this environment). There is also an extended treatment of how to think about the relevance of effect sizes to our theorising about traits and character, and in particular, how to put the very commonly reported ~0.3 effect sizes in context: what this amounts to, why this is arguably less than what global trait proponents normally hope for, and why we should be pessimistic about the prospects for ever increasing this figure with future research.

This essay will be very useful for both newcomers struggling to orient themselves in the literature and established academics wanting a careful, up-to-date articulation of what the different lines of inquiry and theoretical choice points are, what points different theorists agree or disagree on, and why Doris has hitherto not been persuaded by defenders of global traits. In my experience, many people familiar with *Lack of Character* and the ensuing debate still misunderstand the power and precise content of his objections. They may be familiar with some replies made on behalf of traditional virtue theory but much less familiar with the replies Doris has made in turn; I still regularly encounter people who take the situationist threat to have been defanged with 'What about the replication crisis?' 'Virtue is supposed to be rare!' and 'Doesn't it matter how individuals interpret their situation?.' In fairness, it is no small task to get acquainted with the ins and outs of the debate: objections and replies are scattered throughout a very large and nuanced literature, constraints like space limitations can sometimes prevent philosophers from addressing everything worth addressing, and one's thinking can develop over time and as new evidence comes in. Consequently, having a definitive and comprehensive state-of-the-field survey on the record, located somewhere parties interested in Doris's earlier writings can easily access, is an extremely valuable addition: at a mammoth 40,000 words, such a work would normally be both too long to find a home in most journals, and too short and exegetical to be published as a monograph. Whatever objection one has to the situationist, it is in here, it has been considered, and it likely has costs which any intellectually honest defender of global character traits needs to grapple with.

The collection closes with a previously published open letter from Doris and Machery to students on both the importance of doing interdisciplinary

moral psychology, and advice for how to do it well. Such lessons include the need to know your questions (and e.g., being careful not to overestimate the relevance of the is/ought gap), the need to read the science (rather than relying on philosopher's third-hand reconstructions), the need to check lots of studies and multiple meta-analyses, and the need to get familiar with the uses and abuses of *p*-values, effect sizes, sampling, null hypotheses, as well as the broader environment in which scientific publishing occurs (e.g., how publication bias and ideological suppression of some results can occur).

Even if some of these sound obvious, or well-known, it is also valuable to have two academics at the top of their field emphasising their continued importance. These lessons are also usefully paired with several real-world examples of academics failing to heed them (e.g., regarding stereotype threat and ego depletion), and the existence of such failures seem like good evidence the letter won't only be useful for students. As they say, that advice is obvious does not mean it is bad, and I might add, that good advice has been given before does not mean it has since been heeded. The essays in *Character Trouble* are exemplars of what we get when it is.

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