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## **Virtue Ethics and Social Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

*Virtue ethics has emerged as an alternative to deontological and utilitarian theory in recent moral philosophy. The basic notion of virtue ethics is to reassert the importance of virtuous character in ethical judgement in contrast to the emphasis on principles and consequences. Since questions of virtue have been largely neglected in modern moral theory, there has been a return to Aristotle's account of virtue as character. This in turn has been questioned as the basis of virtue ethics and there has been a search for alternative accounts of moral agency. One aspect of this critical reflection on virtue ethics is an engagement with social psychology as a source of criticism of the Aristotelian conception of character and as a more plausible alternative foundation for a theory of moral character with contemporary relevance. This paper aims to introduce this area of moral theory to a psychological audience and reflect on the interpretation of social psychological theory and evidence in criticisms of virtuous character, focusing on the use of Milgram's (1974) experiments on obedience to authority as an argument for situationism. A number of questions emerge concerning the interpretation and use of social psychological theory and evidence in debates within moral philosophy.*



## **Introduction**

In moral philosophy there has been a recent revival of interest in questions of moral agency. After many years of relative neglect and scepticism towards psychological aspects of ethical conduct, virtue ethics is experiencing a renaissance. Virtue ethics focuses on, and treats as basic, questions of character in contrast to moral judgements of action (deontological ethics) and judgements of consequences (utilitarianism).

Modern moral philosophy has been dominated by deontological theory and utilitarianism and the emergence of a new alternative is arousing considerable interest. However, virtue ethics is not new; it has its origins in the classical writings of Homer, Plato and Aristotle, so the renewed interest in virtue recovers relatively neglected texts and traditions. There are a number of excellent monographs and collections of readings devoted to the topic, which I will draw on here and which the reader interested in finding out more can consult (Darwell, 2003; Dent, 1984; Hursthouse, 1999; Statman, 1997).

The revival of interest in moral agency in philosophy also involves confronting the historical scepticism towards philosophy of psychology. These developments have potential interest for psychologists and the first aim of this paper is to introduce virtue ethics to a psychological audience. However, there is a more specific reason for psychologists to be interested in these developments. Some philosophers who are broadly sympathetic to a focus on agency in moral questions are nevertheless critical of the psychological assumptions in Aristotelian concepts of virtue. Writers such as Doris (2002) and Harman (1999), in particular, criticise the use of indigenous psychology as a source of concepts for virtue ethics. They argue that Aristotle's assumptions are both anachronous and problematic. Interestingly, they

base their critique upon a reading of examples from contemporary experimental social psychology.

The second aim of this paper is to examine the way that social psychological research is interpreted in these philosophical writings. I am not attempting here to contribute to debates in virtue ethics as a domain in philosophy, where there are disagreements about the implications of empirical findings from social psychology for virtue ethics. These range from the view that the results of social psychology experiments require a radical reformulation of the presuppositions about character made in virtue ethics (e.g. Harman, 1999; Doris, 2002) through the idea that such findings are irrelevant to philosophical discourse (e.g. Hursthouse, 1999; Sreenivasan, 1997). Nor is my concern to arbitrate between these different views but rather to examine the ways in which moral philosophers interpret empirical social psychology. In this paper I will focus on the interpretation given to Milgram in the work of Doris (2002) and Harman (1999) in particular, for two reasons. First, because they argue that social psychology provides a substantive critique of virtue as character because it demonstrates the dependency of human conduct on social situational determinants. Second, because they both draw on social psychological research and theory in developing positive proposals for virtue ethics, arguing that empirical social psychology is a potentially better source of normative assumptions for an ethical theory based on character than are the speculative reflections on virtue in writers from Aristotle to the present day. Again, my focus is not on the validity of these arguments *per se* or on evaluating their place in philosophical debates over virtue ethics but on the interpretation of social psychological theory.

As a social psychologist I am interested in these developments for several reasons. One is the novelty of philosophers paying attention to social psychology

compared with the greater engagement with cognitive and physiological psychology to be found in writings in the philosophy of mind (see Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson, 1996, for a review). While there has been a productive and valuable interchange between philosophers and psychologists over questions of consciousness, experience and representation, there has been little direct interplay over social psychological questions and theory. In the face of this lack of interest, social psychologists concerned with philosophical questions have tended to engage with continental philosophy and social theory rather than analytic philosophy. The deployment of evidence and arguments from social psychology in analytic moral philosophy therefore arouses curiosity. Several questions immediately suggest themselves: Which social psychology have moral philosophers been reading? How do they interpret the findings of social psychology? What notice do they take of the theories of social psychologists? How do they deploy their reflections on social psychology in their own debates? But before addressing these points I will introduce virtue ethics.

### **Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics has a long history and a short past. Although its origins can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, for many years moral philosophers have eschewed discussion of virtuous character in favour of questions of duty. Initially the idea of a reconsideration of questions of virtue was the subject of the occasional piece, notably those by Anscombe (1958) and Foot (1978); questions of virtue were also at the centre of MacIntyre's (1981) influential work *After Virtue*. More recently there has been an explosion of interest in virtue ethics. Statman (1997) documents the rapid rise of virtue ethics as a response to growing dissatisfaction with the entrenched opposition between utilitarianism and deontology, and to the desire for an alternative approach to ethical theory. This was partly given impetus by the development of

practical questions in medical or legal ethics that were complex and contextual, amenable neither to the categorical imperative nor to the analysis of utility. Questions of choice in medicine and the law often seem to turn on the qualities displayed by moral agents in their role as patients or doctors, clients and lawyers in complex social institutional contexts. Such observations appeared to be anomalies for traditional accounts, inviting a radical shift in moral theory.

In his book *After Virtue* MacIntyre (1981) started from a scepticism concerning accounts of morality based on duty and sought to address the imperative to find an alternative foundation for ethics in the contemporary age. He notes that scepticism towards abstract moral principles is widespread in contemporary culture and argues that this scepticism has led to the rise of emotivism in moral theory and in ethical practice. Emotivism argues that it is a 'mistake' to think that foundations for moral theories, and consequently ethical judgments, are possible at all in principle; instead, moral statements should be read as attempts to persuade. MacIntyre partially accepts and partially rejects this position. He suggests that many contemporary moral dilemmas (e.g. abortion, the dependency of justice on equality, and the use of military power in international relations) are widely debated and contested even though there appears to be little chance of agreement, consensus or resolution of such dilemmas and that attempts to resolve them seem to make matters worse by producing increasingly polarised and entrenched positions. Thus, MacIntyre agrees that many contemporary moral debates are best understood as expressions of opposed positions grounded in deeply incommensurable views, and that what appears to be moral argument is often no more than an attempt to persuade people to one view or another. But here MacIntyre parts company with the emotivists. They would argue that moral disputes are to be entirely understood as discursive constructions and that it is a

mistake to think that there are any foundations for moral positions or that there can be any substantive moral arguments or debates. In contrast, MacIntyre (1981) takes the view that what has led to this position is the deployment of outmoded conceptions of moral theory and debate, and that it is not necessary to reject in principle the use of moral reasoning of any kind in any circumstance. Indeed, MacIntyre suggests that mainstream deontological and utilitarian theory still provide sound models of moral reasoning but that their purchase has loosened on contemporary debates. The problem is that people espouse deeply held moral positions that are incommensurable with their alternatives but they still argue as if principled moral justification and resolution were possible by recourse to universal criteria of judgement or an analysis of the consequences of action. For MacIntyre, radically opposed positions on key moral debates are not resolvable through such arguments: no consensus can be reached because such arguments cannot be 'reframed' in terms that stand outside the foundational commitments of the moral positions taken. Consequently, there is nothing to be done except to argue one's position as strongly as possible, and this appears to be the nature of contemporary moral judgement and debate.

Virtue ethics provides a potential way forward because it can be used to articulate the basis of personal commitments and it links an analysis of the moral agent to duty expressed as obligations in social contexts. The shift in emphasis to the agent reverses the relation between right conduct and virtue. The utilitarian position focuses on the consequences of behaviour as the basis for moral judgement, thereby sidestepping the motivations of the moral agent. Deontological positions take virtue to be the following of duty or moral principle wherever possible. Both positions make virtue depend upon prior definitions of right behaviour. In contrast, virtue ethics gives analytic priority to virtue and considers action to be right to the extent that it is an



expression of virtuous character. Moral philosophers have returned to classical accounts of human character and to Aristotle's account of the virtues, in particular as a way of reinvigorating the philosophical account of moral agency. Aristotle had focussed in his ethics, as in much of his philosophy, on classifying and ordering conceptions of human nature (McIntyre, 1981; Harman, 1999).

What is virtue or good character according to Aristotle? Aristotle finesses indigenous or common sense concepts of virtues as character traits, distinguishing character traits from other dimensions of human psychology such as innate aspects of temperament (e.g. shyness or optimism) and psychological disorders (Harman, 1999). Not all character traits, however, are virtues for some are value-neutral traits (such as friendliness and talkativeness). However, the virtues do share the nature of all character traits in that they are relatively long-term dispositions to act in distinctive ways. Harman (1999) gives the example of an honest person disposed to act honestly and a kind person disposed to act kindly. These dispositions have a dual aspect combining ability or knowledge (know how) with motivation (habits of desire), a combination familiar in social psychology as cognition and motivation. A virtuous person has to know how to "do being honest" but that is not enough for them to be virtuous – they must also be generally inclined to be honest, all things being equal. Both knowledge and desire are necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the attribution of a virtue. Aristotle also suggested that character traits were best understood as a series of opposite temperaments and that virtues were often moderate dispositions that fall between extremes that tend to be vices (a general idea of restraint underpins this notion of virtuous character). Harman (1999) gives the example of courage as a virtuous character trait halfway between timidity and rashness; benevolence is similarly positioned between stinginess and profligacy.

Another feature of the common sense psychology of virtue is the observations that people differ in terms of the possession of virtuous character traits; some have a given virtue, others have the equivalent vice. These dispositions are graded so that individuals are more or less honest or benevolent. Character is revealed when people behave differently in similar circumstances. For example (again from Harman), on finding a wallet on the pavement an honest person will try to locate the owner whereas the dishonest person will take the money and throw away the wallet. The indigenous or common sense psychology of virtuous character suggests that in such circumstances the person behaves in the way they did because they were disposed to be either honest or dishonest. Character traits are broad-based dispositions covering a range of behaviours. Attributions to underlying traits of character are withheld for specific aberrations: for example, Harman (1999) suggests that being afraid of riding a roller coaster is not sufficient to ascribe cowardice as a character trait to the individual.

Character traits are understood to be relatively independent; for example, courage cannot be inferred from honesty. One aspect of Aristotle's ethics that Harman (1999) relatively neglects is the notion of *telos* or the good life that results from virtuous action, together with the idea that institutional forms and social contexts create the conditions for virtuous conduct. Virtue ethics suggests that moral education is best achieved by teaching people the relevant habits of action, habits of desire and the relevant knowledge and skills (Harman, 1999). It also has implications for how moral judgements can be made, suggesting that what a person ought to do in a given situation is modelled on what a person of good character would do. Thus, although virtue ethics is concerned with virtuous character, conduct and situation, it is also a normative moral theory that places more emphasis on character than other moral

theories, but one that also includes conceptions of human flourishing and the good society.

Although there are different versions of virtue ethics, Harman (1999) suggests that they all make three common assumptions: that there are people who do have character traits of the appropriate kind; that people differ in which character traits they possess; and that possession of these traits helps to explain differences in the way that people behave. In sum, virtue ethics implies a moral psychology. At the very least, such assumptions raise a number of social psychological questions, which I will now discuss.

### **Social psychology and virtue ethics**

The first person to directly raise questions of the relationship between social psychology and the fledgling virtue ethics was Flanagan (1991). Although he did not think that social psychological theory and data could be used to develop a radical critique of Aristotle's account, he argued that social psychology raises a number of important issues and questions for moral theory. Harman (1999) disagrees with this assessment, regarding social psychology as providing the moral philosopher with a number of important criticisms of the Aristotelian tradition. Referring to the work of Ross and Nisbett (1991), Harman argues that there is abundant evidence that common-sense psychology or lay theories are so subject to bias as to be considered wrong and wrong-headed. If indigenous psychology is error prone in the ways suggested by authors such as Ross and Nisbett (1991), then this raises important questions about Aristotle's account of virtue as character traits. One of the biases articulated by Ross and Nisbett (1991) is the actor-observer difference, in which people make radically different interpretations of actions depending on whether they are in the position of actor or observer. The principal difference is a tendency for

actors to attribute their actions to situational determinants and observers to personal traits. If indigenous psychologies are based on the observation of others' behaviour, then they are likely to over-emphasise the importance of personal characteristics compared with features of the situation. So, since Aristotle based his theory of virtue on such indigenous insights, then he is also likely to have overstated the role of personal factors and to have underestimated the impact of situational factors in human conduct.

The general idea that contemporary experimental social psychology provides counter-intuitive findings that challenge the voracity of common sense is complemented by an examination of particular experimental findings. The famous experiments by Milgram (1974) into obedience to authority have received special attention from moral philosophers who wish to challenge the adoption of an Aristotelian account of virtuous character in theories of moral agency (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999). As is widely known, Milgram's experiments demonstrated that a high proportion of individuals would subject fellow participants to excruciating electric shocks under the instruction of an experimenter, although, in reality, the experiments were role-plays and no harm came to the recipient of the electric shocks. The point here is that since the naïve subjects in the experiment did not know that the person to whom they were delivering the electric shocks was a confederate, they applied these shocks against their personal inclination and even though it caused them considerable stress. Harman (1999) concludes that this shows the link between virtue and conduct to be fragile in practice because of the binding impact of social conditions. He goes so far as to suggest that there is a consensus amongst social psychologists towards situationism in the person-situation debate. For Harman, these findings violate the assumption in virtue ethics that conduct is caused by character and consequently they

have important implications for how moral agency should be theorised. Harman concludes that if the account of character that emerges in social psychology experiments is valid, then instead of teaching virtue in character, we should, taking account of the biases of indigenous psychology and the power of situational determinants in social behaviour, teach people to overcome their judgement biases and to resist situational pressures and inter-group conflict, so as to create greater tolerance of difference. This is certainly a contrast with Aristotle's account of virtuous character and shifts the emphasis away from restraint of character to the correction of judgement, and away from teaching caution in habits of desire towards teaching awareness of conflict and difference.

Harman takes social psychological evidence to provide an important account of the barriers to ethical conduct in contemporary life. He thus addresses MacIntyre's account of the contemporary scene by arguing that constraints due to social pressure set the context for ethical judgements and conduct. In other words, the conditions of life in contemporary society impress themselves on the individual as constraints and complexity in a way that is not accounted for by Aristotle's account of the relation between virtuous character and *telos*.

### **Critical reflection**

Before I present my critical reflections on Harman's interpretation of social psychological theory and findings I should repeat that the interest amongst moral philosophers in social psychology is to be welcomed and that I am inclined to agree with Harman (1999) that there are important connections between social psychology and moral theory. However, there are a number of questions to be asked about how Harman interprets and makes use of writings in social psychology. I should also say that his position does not represent a consensus amongst moral philosophers. Indeed

Sreenivasan (2002) has explicitly repudiated the efforts of Harman (1999) and Doris (2002), on the grounds that social psychological research inadequately operationalises the notion of character as virtue, although he does not directly interrogate Doris' and Harman's interpretation of social psychological theory and findings. It is also true, of course, that Ross and Nisbett (1991) and Milgram (1974) did not set out to test the relation between virtuous character and moral conduct. Nevertheless, Harman (1999) and Doris (2002) offer a constructive development of Flanagan's (1991) initial view that social psychology raises issues for moral philosophy, issues that are central to the presuppositions of virtue ethics.

I will make a number of criticisms of Harman's (1999) argument: first, that he is highly selective and only considers particular and not necessarily representative theories and data from social psychology; second, that he neglects important aspects of both Milgram's (1974) and Nisbett and Ross' (1991) theory; and third, that he is wrong in his broad-brush characterisation of a social psychological consensus on situationism, instead arguing that interactionism expresses the norm in social psychology. These points not only concern the detail of Harman's (1999) interpretation of social psychological theory and experiment but also give rise to a number of deeper and more significant misgivings that I have with his argument. Both Harman and Doris write with considerable naivety about the methodology of Milgram's experiment. I shall suggest that the Milgram experiment can be interpreted as leading to conclusions directly opposite to those reached by Harman. In consequence, questions are raised concerning the status that Doris (2002) and Harman (1999) grant to Milgram's experiment as science, which in turn lead me to contest the claims that Milgram is both opposed to common sense and independent of moral theory. Both Harman (1999) and Doris (2002) place a great deal of store by the

'situationist' social psychology of Ross and Nisbett (1991). However, if we examine Ross and Nisbett's (1991) book, *The Person and the Situation*, we see that there is plenty of evidence for the interaction of personality and situational variables and that the authors acknowledge the mutual interdependence of the person and the situation. For example, they examine the way that people create their own environments through choosing and altering situations. This is far removed from the picture of their work in Harman's and Doris' work. Throughout their writings, Ross and Nisbett (1991) are concerned to counter what they see as the over-dependence of social psychology on common-sense psychology but it would be wrong to conclude that they deny the importance of personal characteristics in social behaviour. Harman and Doris pit the social psychologists against the layperson by suggesting that lay people are all personologists and social psychologists are all situationists, thereby missing the central insight of social psychology that human conduct is the result of the interaction between persons and situations, indeed that they co-constitute each other.

The subtlety of the relation between persons and situations is also an important feature of Milgram's (1974) theory and experimental designs. Harman and Doris particularly neglect Milgram's theoretical contributions. Milgram combines an interpretation of the binding factors in the interactional setting of the experiment with a social learning explanation of the establishment of norms of personal responsibility and obedience to authority that are placed in conflict in the experimental context. Milgram explains the behaviour of subjects in his experiment as a reaction to the proximal social pressures in the situation mediated by the internalisation of social norms, which result from the more distal socialisation of the individual. In their commentaries, Harman and Doris miss the important detail that the subject and the confederate are introduced to each other at the start of the experiment as if they were

both subjects. The experiment is then described to both 'subjects' and a coin is tossed to see who will occupy the role of teacher (to administer the electric shocks) and learner (who will receive the shocks). This procedure establishes pre-commitment in the subject, which is strengthened by the use of graduated shocks, which start at a mild 15 volts and are only gradually increased to dangerous levels. The reason for the graduation of intensity of shocks has to be understood in terms of Milgram's theory of norm competition (a widespread theory in social psychology at the time). At the beginning of the trials and having gained commitment through the briefing and coin tossing, the subject is put in a position that favours the norm of obedience to authority since the harm to the learner is mild, as was demonstrated by giving them an illustrative electric shock of 15 volts, so that they understood what they were going to be doing to the (confederate) subject. Consequently, at the start of the experiment, the electric shock could plausibly be thought of as a mild device to punish the learner for making mistakes (the rationale that was presented to the subject). As the experiment progressed, the subjects found themselves in circumstances that more and more favoured the norms of personal responsibility (when intense shock causes discomfort and pain). Milgram takes the point at which the subject refuses to apply the shocks as indicating that the initial commitment to the norm of obedience to authority has been superseded by the norm of personal responsibility. Harman's interpretation, however, is that Milgram's experiment demonstrates that human conduct is determined by context, thus missing an important feature of the study. Milgram was using a set of controlled circumstances to examine what was, for him, a process of social judgement based on conflict between internalised but opposing norms.

Although Harman interprets Milgram's experiment as unproblematically revealing that social behaviour is determined by situational factors, there have been



many criticisms of Milgram's experiment within social psychology widely repeated in social psychology textbooks. These include criticisms of the ambiguity of the situation, the limitations on the subject's role in the experiment, the isolation of the subject, the generalisability of the findings and the ethics of the research. Not only have Harman and Doris no critique of the experiment as a social occasion, but the interpretation that they come to has often been questioned in social psychology. In particular, the focus on the 65% who obey in the most austere version of the experiment leaves out the fact that 35% refused the commands of authority. This was, in Milgram's terms, because they chose to follow the norm of personal responsibility – how can their behaviour be accounted for if the situation determines behaviour? Also, crucially, in the numerous variations that Milgram conducted, there were many occasions when the level of obedience to authority was much lower (even as low as 9%). Strictly speaking, this was not an experiment, but a demonstration of responses to norm conflict in an artificial situation, a role-play. Milgram (1974) went on to subject this demonstration to a number of experimental manipulations that, which varied features of the relationship between the experimenter and the subject and between the confederate and the subject. The key variation was social distance (proximity between teacher and learner and visibility of learner and experimenter). Since most of the variations in proximity produced a marked reduction in obedience, it emerged that the original demonstration turned out to be a very special situation indeed.

Implicitly, Harman (1999) and Doris (2002) treat social psychology as an empirical science entirely separate from moral philosophy. Indeed, the force of their argument is that psychological knowledge is exogenous to philosophical discourse and so can be used to critique Aristotle and to arbitrate among philosophical accounts

of virtue. Yet, in *Obedience to Authority*, Milgram starts his deliberations by explicitly considering the impasse between contract theory and utilitarianism. Milgram took this impasse as an important motivation for an empirical social psychological exploration of ethics. He goes so far as to suggest that moral philosophy is moribund and that we should look to social psychology to answer moral questions. He also cites the influence of Arendt's (1963) ideas of the banality of evil, couching the rationale for his experiment in terms of moral theory as an exploration of the limits of conscience and the inadequacy of explanations of extremes of human conduct. His experiments, in other words, were an attempt to operationalise the dilemmas that face people in their everyday lives when they have to choose between norms of obedience to authority and personal responsibility. The value of the role-play experiment is that it created a motivating context in which these norms could be pitched against each other so as to place the subject in a moral dilemma. Milgram also had in mind the acquiescence of ordinary people under the extreme conditions of Nazi Germany. Indeed this is the historical and ethical context usually used to introduce his work. Thus, we could say that Milgram used the social psychology role-play experiment as a concrete realization of contemporary moral dilemmas, attempting to replace thought experiments with these controlled performances.

This is not just an argument about the rationale for Milgram's experiments. I was struck, when reading both MacIntyre's and Harman's accounts of Aristotle, by how his ethics resembles the social psychology that emerged in the interwar years in the USA. The central concepts of 'attitude' and 'value' in particular embody many features of Aristotelian character traits. Historians of social psychology have emphasised how the emergence of social psychology in the USA during the interwar years was against the grain of the European emphasis on the relation between

individual and collective consciousness (Richards, 2003; Danziger, 1990; Farr, 1996). Indeed, the emerging social psychology in the USA was more concerned with relations among individuals and with the problems of co-ordinating or organising human action across lines of social difference for the pragmatic purposes of trading and living in relative harmony. These considerations have a clear overlap with the Aristotelian world view and stand in contrast to the preceding, more collectivist orientation of European social psychology. Richards (2003) and Cartwright (1997) have argued that the Second World War led to a distillation and dominance of individualist social psychology as typified by the research cited by Doris and Harman. Although Harman and Doris treat social psychology as independent of philosophical discourse, social psychology is not neutral with respect to the differences between moral theories. I argue, indeed, that social psychology can only be understood as an encoding of various philosophical assumptions, making it inappropriate to treat social psychology as a 'test' of the psychological presuppositions of moral theory in the way advocated by Doris (2002) and Harman (1999). What is called for is a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between philosophical discourse and social psychological research.

### **Reinterpreting Milgram's Moral Experiment**

Although there are legitimate questions concerning the interpretation of Milgram's experiment made by moral philosophers, I do think that the encounter with virtue ethics raises some interesting points about Milgram's work. From Milgram's point of view his experimental situation exemplifies norm conflict, where people have to judge whether they should obey the norm of personal responsibility or the norm of obedience to authority. The Aristotelian conception of virtue treats character traits as independent, whereas Milgram forces people to choose between two virtues and this

may partially explain the strain that people felt in the study. These considerations also point to some ambiguity in the experiment, since obedience to authority in the USA in the early 1960s is socially valued whereas it is retrospectively considered a vice in relation to Nazi Germany. Under a different interpretation, we could say that whatever the subjects in Milgram's experiment did was virtuous; those who chose not to shock could be said to exhibit the virtue of personal responsibility, those who did shock exhibiting the virtue of obedience to authority. Furthermore, the Aristotelian conception of character combines knowledge and desire and surely these dual aspects of character are also placed under strain in the Milgram experiment. The authority figure is also one of expertise and the whole set-up was clearly very unusual from the point of view of the subjects. We could say that they had little know-how to fall back on in this strange situation and it is difficult to see what their desires might be. As Aristotle suggests, it is difficult to act virtuously with neither knowledge nor desire.

Taken together, these points suggest the opposite of Harman and Doris' conclusion that the Milgram experiments demonstrate that character has no purchase on ethical conduct. Indeed, it seems that the Milgram experiment is a highly complex, contrived, unusual, constructed set of circumstances. Harman reads the experiment as indicating how easily people are influenced by circumstances when making ethical judgements. On the contrary, the great deal of trouble that Milgram goes to by scripting a complex occasion with props, setting and a complex interactional script involving several actors in a role-play all indicates how difficult it is to get people to forgo their personal responsibility and accept the conditions they are in as binding. In other words it took an amazing and unusual set of circumstances to get people to follow situational constraints and even when they did so they expressed an internal conflict of character.

## Conclusions

This paper was stimulated by the encouraging engagement by moral philosophers with theory and evidence in social psychology as a serious attempt to relate social psychological findings to philosophical presuppositions about character. We have seen that there are convincing arguments that social psychology, at the very least, provides insights which challenge Aristotelian conceptions of character and which provide alternative suggestions regarding the barriers to virtuous conduct, together with implications for ethical judgement and moral education. Consideration of philosophical arguments about social psychology has also led to some interesting interpretations of Milgram's experiment. I have identified a number of problems with Doris' (2002) and Harman's (1999) interpretation of social psychology. The selection of material, the interpretation of theory and results, the implicit account of the experimental method and the understanding of the relationship between philosophical discourse and experimental social psychology have all been challenged. On balance, these problems bring Doris' (2002) and Harman's (1999) interpretations into question. However, these criticisms do, ironically, support Harman's view that social psychology can provide a way of interrogating and criticising philosophical assumptions about virtue.

However, the point of view that emerges here is that philosophical discourse and empirical social psychology cannot be regarded as completely autonomous and, further, that social psychological theory is as relevant to issues of virtue as are empirical findings. Harman (1999) and Doris (2002) treat empirical research in social psychology as equivalent to the thought experiment in philosophical discourse, the implication being that philosophers need not bother themselves with the problematic

details of theoretical and practical contexts but only with the headline findings. In contrast, I hope to have demonstrated that the relations between philosophy and social psychology are more complex but not less fruitful for that.

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