John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 272.

1. Introduction

This long-awaited book has already become a standard reference in the small but burgeoning field of "empirically informed ethics". Doris begins by contrasting two views of human nature: (i) *globalism*, according to which people possess "robust" character traits (which help their possessors withstand situational pressures) and thus typically behave consistently across situations, and (ii) *situationism*, according to which people lack robust character traits and thus typically behave inconsistently across situations.[1] Doris continues by defending two main *empirical* theses: (1) that situationism is true (and thus globalism false), and (2) that globalism is nevertheless widely accepted by philosophers and laypeople alike. Doris concludes by examining some ethical implications of his empirical theses, and defends in particular two *normative* theses: (3) that we should evaluate people not in terms of robust character traits but rather in terms of "local", situation-specific traits, and (4) that moral education should aim not at inculcating robust virtues but rather at helping people bring about situations propitious to virtuous behavior.

I agree with all four of the above theses, but I will argue that some of Doris's arguments need improvement. I will deal only with arguments in defense of the thesis that situationism is true.

2. Doris's main argument for situationism

To defend situationism, Doris begins by going over some results of psychological experiments on helping and destructive behavior. According to Isen and Levin (1972), 87.5% of those participants who had just found a dime in the coin return slot of a public telephone helped a confederate (of the experimenter) who "accidentally" dropped a folder full of papers, while only 4% of those participants who had found no coin helped.[2] According to Darley and Batson (1973), 63% of *unhurried* participants helped a coughing and groaning confederate who was sitting slumped in a doorway, while only 10% of *hurried* participants helped. According to Milgram (1974), 65% of those participants who were prompted by an experimenter administered the maximum available (in fact fictitious) electric shock to a confederate, while only 2.5% of those participants who were allowed to *choose* the shock levels administered the maximum available shock. From these and other results Doris infers the first premise (namely D1 below) of his main argument for situationism, an argument that can be formulated as follows (38):

> (D1) Many situations are strongly conducive to compassion (in the sense that in such situations most people behave compassionately), and many other situations— often apparently only insubstantially different from the former ones—are strongly conducive to noncompassion.
>
> (D2) People will typically experience many situations strongly conducive to compassion and many situations strongly conducive to noncompassion.
>
> Thus: (D3) People's compassion-relevant behavior will typically be inconsistent across situations.

I have three remarks about this argument.

(1) The argument is only about *compassion*-relevant behavior. To defend situationism, however, one needs to argue not only that people possess no robust character trait of compassion, but also

that people possess no *other* robust character traits. Doris's response to this problem, namely that compassion is an ethically important "test case" (29), does not make the problem go away.

(2) The second premise, which Doris takes to be a "highly plausible speculation" (38), is not clearly supported by the experimental results (which do not always concern situations "typically experienced" by people). This premise is needed as long as the conclusion is about *actual* behavior. But to argue that people possess no robust character trait of compassion it is enough to show that people's actual *or counterfactual* compassion-relevant behavior is inconsistent across situations,[3] and for the purpose of showing this the second premise is redundant. So Doris's reasoning can be strengthened by removing the speculative second premise and replacing the conclusion with a claim about actual or counterfactual behavior.

(3) The conclusion does not follow from the premises. To see this, suppose there are only 40 people, each of whom experiences the same 500 (and no other) compassion-relevant situations: 250 situations strongly conducive to compassion, in each of which 30 of the 40 (i.e., 75% of) people behave compassionately, and 250 situations strongly conducive to noncompassion, in each of which 30 of the 40 people behave noncompassionately. This supposition (which *entails the premises* of the above argument) is compatible with the possibility (which *contradicts the conclusion*) that a full 50% of people behave consistently across situations: 10 people behave compassionately and another 10 behave noncompassionately in *all* 500 situations (whereas the remaining 20 people behave compassionately in 250 and noncompassionately in another 250 situations). This may become easier to see by considering the following table, in which the 40 people have been divided into four groups (A, B, C, and D) of 10 people each:

	Compassion-conducive situations	Noncompassion-conducive situations
People behaving compassionately	A, B, C	A
People behaving noncompassionately	D	B, C, D

50% of people, namely those in groups A and D, behave consistently across situations.[4] Apparently, Doris is aware of such possibilities but shrugs them off as unlikely (46, 48-9). It turns out, however (see Vranas 2005 for details), that an argument similar to Doris's (i) does establish that (as Doris would have it) most people *lack* a robust character trait of compassion, but also (ii) suggests that possibly a *substantial* minority of people (up to an upper limit of around 30%) *possess* such a robust trait. So (i) Doris's reasoning can again be strengthened, but (ii) it seems unwarranted of Doris to suggest that *only very few* people, "the exceptions that prove the rule" (60), possess robust character traits.

3. Doris's second argument for situationism

To defend situationism further, Doris distinguishes between "intersituational" and "intrapersonal" (behavioral) consistency: a *population* exhibits high *intersituational* consistency if there is a high (positive) average correlation between the distributions of the population members' behavior in various situations, whereas a *person* exhibits high *intrapersonal* consistency if the person's behavior is highly consistent across situations. Given this distinction, Doris's second argument for situationism can be formulated as follows (63):

  (D4) Intersituational consistency is low.[5]
  (D5) If intrapersonal consistency is typically high, then intersituational consistency should be high.
Thus: (D6) Intrapersonal consistency is typically low.

The conclusion of this argument falls short of what Doris needs: low consistency falls short of inconsistency (contrast D6 with D3). Moreover, the conclusion does not follow from the premises, which entail that intrapersonal consistency is typically *not high* (as opposed to *low*). Nevertheless, according to Doris "the best explanation of the low intersituational consistency is that intrapersonal consistency is typically low" (63). I will argue, however, that the second premise—which Doris does not support, apparently because he takes it to be obvious—is false, and that understanding why it is false suggests an explanation of the low intersituational consistency not ruled out by Doris.

Distinguish two kinds of intrapersonal consistency: noncomparative and comparative. A student who gets the same grade in ten tests exhibits *noncomparative* consistency, but if in five of those tests she gets a better grade than 90% of test takers and in the other five tests she gets a worse grade than 90% of test takers then she lacks *comparative* consistency. So noncomparative consistency is consistency of "absolute" scores, whereas comparative consistency is consistency of "percentile" scores. To defend situationism, at least with respect to character traits like compassion, Doris needs to show that people typically lack *noncomparative* intrapersonal consistency: a person who behaves with the same "degree" of compassion across situations (and thus exhibits noncomparative consistency) seems immune to situational pressures and thus provides little support for situationism even if she lacks comparative consistency (because, e.g., in many situations she behaves more compassionately than most people and in many other situations she behaves less compassionately than most people). So intrapersonal consistency must be understood noncomparatively in the conclusion, and thus also in the second premise, of Doris's second argument. But then the second premise is false: it can be shown that intersituational consistency is high only if *comparative* intrapersonal consistency is typically high,[6] and comparative intrapersonal consistency can be typically low even if noncomparative intrapersonal consistency is typically high. So an explanation of the low intersituational consistency not ruled out by Doris is that people are typically comparatively inconsistent but noncomparatively consistent.[7]

4. Conclusion

To my mind, the above weaknesses detract only slightly from the value of Doris's book. The book is unusually thorough: it discusses numerous objections and provides extensive references, often in the copious endnotes. It is to my knowledge the best text so far published in the field of "empirically informed ethics". It deserves to be widely read.[8]

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[1] Doris defines globalism as a cluster of *three* theses, but the main thesis I take to be the one I mentioned; similarly for situationism.

[2] As Doris (180 n. 4) notes, however, doubts exist about the replicability of Isen and Levin's result.

[3] At least this is so if the counterfactual behavior occurs in situations *similar* to those that people actually experience; but if the evidence for D1 supports the existence of *actually* experienced situations strongly conducive to compassion and to noncompassion, then this evidence also supports the existence of similar *counterfactually* experienced such situations. Doris does consider the possibility of appealing to counterfactual behavior but argues that such an appeal would be redundant because we can predict how a person *would* behave in a given situation only if we already know how the person *does* behave in similar situations (117-8). But to argue that a person's compassion-relevant behavior is inconsistent across situations it is not necessary to predict how the person would behave in *any given* situation: it suffices to argue that the person would behave compassionately in *many* and noncompassionately in *many other* situations. (As an analogy, to argue that a coin would fall heads many times and tails many other times in a thousand tosses it is not necessary to predict the outcome of any given toss.)

[4] It can be similarly shown that, if consistent behavior is understood as behavior which is more or less the same in *most* (rather than in *all*) situations, then it is possible that 50% of people behave consistently although in some situations *all* people behave compassionately and in some other situations *all* people behave noncompassionately.

[5] Doris supports this premise by referring to psychological experiments reported by Hartshorne and May (1928), Mischel and Peake (1982), and Newcomb (1929). To my mind, this support is not quite adequate because the experiments referred to by Doris examined different character traits (honesty, conscientiousness, and extroversion/introversion respectively), so there is no accumulation of evidence for any single trait.

[6] The precise statement of the mathematical result is complicated; see Vranas 1999, available from the reviewer (vranas@iastate.edu).

[7] To see how this can happen, take a toy example. In tests 1, 2, and 3, student 1 gets respectively scores of 90, 88, and 89; student 2 gets 89, 90, and 88; and student 3 gets 88, 89, and 90. Then each student exhibits noncomparative consistency (she gets more or less the same score in all three tests) but lacks comparative consistency (for example, student 1 performs at the top of the bunch in test 1, at the bottom in test 2, and in the middle in test 3).

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