



**CHARACTER TRAITS, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY,
AND IMPEDIMENTS TO HELPING BEHAVIOR**

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Character Traits, Social Psychology and Impediments to Helping Behavior

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ONE OF THE LIVELIEST AREAS OF WORK in experimental philosophy in the past ten years has examined the implications of empirical results in social psychology for the existence and nature of character traits. Gilbert Harman and John Doris in particular have argued that these results give us good reason to reject the existence of character traits as traditionally understood, while philosophers sympathetic to Aristotelian notions of character and virtue have attempted to carve out an important explanatory role for them to play in the lives of at least some human beings.¹ Given the extensive array of traditional character traits and the thousands of experiments in social psychology which could potentially bear on their existence, it is not surprising that, in order to focus the discussion, both sides have largely examined only one such trait, namely compassion.

In a number of recent papers, I have begun to develop a new theory of character which is conceptually distinct both from traditional Aristotelian accounts as well as from the positive view of “local” traits outlined by Doris.² On my view, many human beings do have robust traits of character which play an important explanatory and predictive role, but which are triggered by certain situational variables that preclude them from counting as genuine Aristotelian virtues. Like others in this discussion, I have focused on helping behavior in particular, and have gone on to argue that much of the social psychology literature is compatible with this new view. The goal of this paper is to develop the model as it pertains to helping behavior in a new direction by examining how helping-relevant traits can serve as impediments to helping behavior.

More precisely, section one of the paper briefly outlines my positive view of what I call “global helping traits,” and contrasts this position with the two main rival approaches mentioned above. Section two then turns to the ways in which negative mood states can inhibit helping behavior in certain conditions, in particular those in which the perceived benefits for the agent of helping are outweighed by the perceived costs. Section three then examines the bystander intervention literature, and attempts to delineate some of the conditions under which the presence of others in a situation can inhibit helping behavior. The overall conclusion of the paper will be that, just as

¹ See Doris 1998, 2002, Campbell 1999 and Harman 1999, 2000. For responses, see among others DePaul 1999, Athanassoulis 2001, Sreenivasan 2002, Kamtekar 2004, and Sabini and Silver 2005, as well as my 2003. For some of the central experiments in this exchange, see Milgram 1963, Zimbardo 1973, and Darley and Batson 1973.

² See my forthcoming, 2009a and 2009b. The distinction between global versus local character traits will be developed in section one below.

character traits associated with helping often augment helping behavior in ways which we are likely to find morally problematic, so too do they often serve to impede such behavior in problematic ways.

1. The Conceptual Terrain

In order to clarify the positive view of character traits pertaining to helping behavior which is on offer here, we first need the distinction between global versus local traits. Following Doris, let us say that a *globalist* conception of character is one which accepts the following two theses:

- (1) *Consistency.* Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions that may vary widely in their conduciveness to the manifestation of the trait in question.
- (2) *Stability.* Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviors over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions.³

Hence a *global character trait* is a character trait which exhibits both cross-situational consistency in a wide variety of trait-relevant circumstances, as well as stability in repeated instances of the same kind of trait-relevant circumstances. To take an example, someone who is courageous would be expected to exhibit courage in a wide variety of relevant situations (i.e., the battlefield, the courtroom, the sports field, etc.), as well as in repeated instances of the same kind of situation (i.e., many battles over multiple years). A global trait can thus be counted on to play two central roles – an explanatory role of figuring centrally in causal explanations of agents’ trait-relevant behavior, and a predictive role of grounding accurate predictions of future behavior in the relevant circumstances.

Harman and Doris advocate what we can call *global trait eliminativism*. On their view, experimental results from social psychology seem to show that, to a surprising extent, our behavior is not the product of global traits of character which are part of our psychological lives, but rather the product of situation influences in our external environments. To this negative claim about global traits they add a positive claim about the existence of local traits. Such traits are ones which could in theory satisfy *either* the cross-situational consistency requirement or the stability requirement (but not both), although in practice they are typically understood as traits which are stable but not cross-situational. In the case of Doris, for instance, he is willing to countenance the widespread possession of local traits such as “courage in the courtroom” or “honesty in taking tests.”⁴ When it comes to compassion, then, they both

³ Doris 2002: 22. Doris also mentions a third globalist thesis, evaluative integration but, as he does in much of his discussion, I leave it to one side in what follows.

⁴ Doris 2002: 23, 25, 64. Harman’s positive view is a bit harder to pin down, since at times he seems to reject the existence of character traits in general, while at other times he seems to

reject the claim that there is a global trait of compassion that plays a significant role in explaining the helping behavior of most people, but they can at the same time accept that some people might have the local trait of “compassion at the office” or “compassion at home.”

Traditional Aristotelians, on the other hand, are *global trait realists*. They accept the existence of traditional traits of character such as courage, greed and honesty, and take the cultivation of those global traits which are virtues to be one of the main goals of the ethical life.⁵ As far as the actual extent to which ordinary people have traits such as the virtues and vices, there is no consensus amongst contemporary Aristotelians. Since it is common to think that the possession of each global trait comes in degrees of more or less,⁶ an Aristotelian could claim that most people have the virtues to some minimal extent. Or the advocate of the view could claim that such traits have very little explanatory value when it comes to most of the folk today, as in general only a few people have the virtues to even a minimal degree. And clearly other, intermediate positions are available. We shall return to this issue of the scope of virtuous trait possession again at the end of this section.

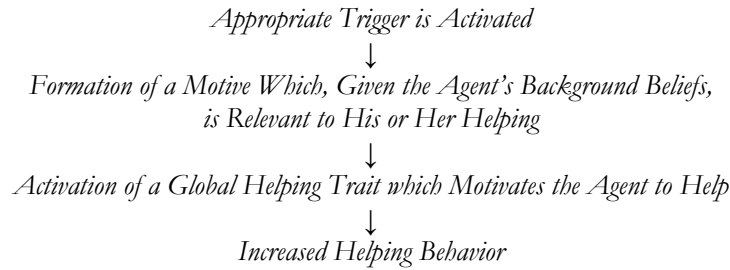
My own view about helping behavior is also a form of global trait realism. The heart of the view is the claim that many people have one or more “global helping traits” (GHTs), which are dispositional states that are highly sensitive to a number of different psychological inputs that can trigger the activation of a GHT and thereby increase the probability that the agent will attempt to help when in situations where helping opportunities are thought to be available, other things being equal.⁷ Diagrammatically, the picture is as follows:

be willing to allow local but not global traits to play an explanatory role. For our purposes here we do not need to take a stand on this interpretative issue. See Harman 1999, 2000.

⁵ See, e.g., MacIntyre 1984, Hursthouse 1999 and Taylor 2006.

⁶ See, e.g., Wallace 1979: 143 and Watson 1984: 58.

⁷ Global helping traits are characterized here in terms of the probability that the agent will “attempt to help,” rather than actually help, simply because circumstances in the agent’s environment may preclude him or her from actually helping (say, if there is a storm occurring, or the agent has broken his leg, or he discovers that he does not in fact have any spare change with which to make a donation). Characterizing GHTs this way is not intended to suggest that they have only weak behavior implications, and so in that sense could perhaps even be accepted by Harman and Doris. As we will see later in this section, I understand GHTs to have robust behavioral implications which can confidently ground predictions about how agents would likely behave in a wide variety of circumstances. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments here.



Here the arrows are intended to symbolize causal influence. What are these triggers? The past 40 years of research in social psychology have shown that helping behavior is remarkably sensitive to the following psychological factors (among others): guilt,⁸ embarrassment,⁹ moderately good moods¹⁰ and empathy.¹¹

By way of illustration, consider embarrassment, which can lead to the formation of a motive to eliminate the embarrassment. Given the agent's background belief that he is in a position to help certain people, this motive could activate the relevant GHT which motivates the agent to try to do so. Other triggers could lead to the formation of quite different motives, however, such as a motive to eliminate feelings of guilt or to maintain a good mood. These motives in turn might be just as effective as the motive to eliminate embarrassment in leading to helping behavior.

GHTs are not mysterious entities. Rather, I use the expression "global helping trait" to refer to a disposition constituted by a certain cluster(s) of mental states – beliefs, desires, intentions and the like – which mediates the relationship between the presence of a trigger on the one hand, and elevated or reduced helping behavior on the other. Thus GHTs are intended to play a robust explanatory role which is no different in kind from that played by the various mental states we standardly postulate in psychological explanations of human behavior. Returning to our example, the agent's GHT is partially constituted by the following mental states which causally mediate between the motive to eliminate embarrassment and elevated helping behavior:

- (a) Beliefs about which helping tasks can contribute toward prolonging or alleviating the agent's feeling of embarrassment, and about the extent to which they do so.
- (b) A motive to help, when doing so will contribute toward alleviating the embarrassment, and more so than any alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.

We will see examples of other mental states which additionally constitute a GHT in sections two and three of this paper.¹²

⁸ Regan 1971.

⁹ Apsler 1975.

¹⁰ Isen 1987, Carlson, Charlin and Miller 1988, and Schaller and Cialdini 1990.

¹¹ Batson 1987, 1991, 2002 and Batson et al. 2003.

¹² It is important to be clear that these mental states actually *constitute* the disposition, rather than being separate states from the GHT which are merely associated with it. Of course,

Why think there is anything that needs to be explained in the first place about the relationship between these triggers and the level of helping behavior? The following experiment on empathy and helping by Toi and Batson (1982) can serve as one of many illustrations why. Half of the volunteers from an introduction to psychology course were asked to listen to a broadcast and be as objective as possible, whereas the other half were told to imagine the perspective of the person being interviewed. The tape they each heard next contained a (fictional) interview with Carol Marcy, a freshman in the class who had had both of her legs broken in an auto accident and was worried about being able to still pass the course. After listening to the interview and filling out a questionnaire, subjects received an envelope with letters from both the professor of the course and from Carol asking for help in going over the missed lecture notes.¹³ The dependent measure was whether the subjects filled out a slip agreeing to help Carol. Here were the percentages who volunteered:¹⁴

Controls	33%
Empathized	71%

The only relevant difference in the experimental setup was a difference of two sentences in the instructions the two groups were given before listening to the broadcast, and yet the different perspectives that were thereby generated led to dramatic differences in actual helping behavior. Similar patterns have arisen in dozens of other experiments on empathy and helping

there will also be many *other* mental states associated with a GHT as well as potentially with numerous other character traits, but which are not themselves a part of what we are counting as the GHT itself. Indeed, the agent's motive to eliminate his or her embarrassment is just such a mental state.

Of course, "global helping trait" is a technical expression, and I can characterize it as I wish. But why do I not include motives like eliminating embarrassment or guilt among the states which constitute a GHT? Because by themselves they have no direct connection to helping. If a helping opportunity turns out to be available and is thought to be a good means to eliminating embarrassment, then the agent might help. But if no such opportunity is thought to be available, or if it is deemed to be too costly, then the agent is likely to pursue some other means altogether to achieving this goal. So it seems to me to be conceptually clearer to say that the motive to eliminate embarrassment is often *associated with* the mental states which make up a GHT, but it does not play a role in actually constituting such a GHT. Naturally others might prefer a different characterization, and ultimately the issue is not about terminology but about the existence of the mental phenomena in question.

Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify these issues.

¹³ Furthermore, Carol indicated that she would not be coming back to school but would be studying at home until next semester. Thus Toi and Batson reasoned that subjects who did not offer to help would not have to actually see Carol for the rest of the semester and so would not feel (as) guilty.

¹⁴ Toi and Batson 1982: 288.

behavior conducted by Batson and his colleagues,¹⁵ and the same is true with helping and the other three triggers mentioned above.¹⁶

On my view, the default condition for most people with GHTs is that none of the appropriate triggers is typically present, and that frequently a GHT is not activated even in helping-relevant circumstances. This latter feature marks one of the crucial differences between a GHT and the virtue of compassion, as we will see in a moment. And such a failure to activate appears to be in line with experiments in social psychology on helping behavior in which, for many helping tasks, only a small percentage of control subjects attempts to help. We saw that only 33% of controls volunteered to help Carol Marcy and, in Robert Baron's 1997 study examining the effect of pleasant fragrances on helping behavior in shopping malls, such behavior ranged from 12.5% to 25% for subjects near control sites like clothing stores, but jumped to between 45% and 61% for subjects who had just passed stores like Cinnabon and Mrs. Field's Cookies, where the strong fragrances had put them in a moderately good mood.¹⁷

On the other hand, when activated in one of the relevant ways, and again other things being equal, GHTs should likely contribute significantly to a person trying to help both in a wide variety of circumstances and in repeated instances of the same circumstances, thus bearing the two central properties of a global trait. At the same time, we would expect such continued helping behavior to be performed *provided that* the motive which leads to the GHT's being triggered is still present at a suitable strength. In our example, the motive to relieve embarrassment can trigger a GHT which motivates several instances of helping behavior aimed at relieving the embarrassment. But if such behavior is actually successful in achieving this goal, then we would expect the helping behavior to dissipate.

As global character traits which are alleged to be widely possessed, GHTs are meant to play a robust predictive role. Concerning the latter, they allow us to formulate conditionals which can offer fairly precise, testable empirical predictions for helping behavior. For example, for moderately good moods we would get conditionals like the following:

- (a) If an adult possesses a GHT and is experiencing intermediate levels of increased positive affect, that person will probably engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.¹⁸

¹⁵ For overviews, see footnote 11.

¹⁶ In three recent papers I have examined these patterns at length, and so set such details to one side here. See my forthcoming, 2009a and 2009b.

¹⁷ Baron 1997. For similar results for control subjects, see among many others Isen and Levin 1972, Levin and Isen 1975, Weyant 1978, and Baron and Thomley 1994.

¹⁸ Since as Doris himself notes, "sporadic failures of trait-relevant behavior probably shouldn't be taken to disconfirm attributions" (2002: 19), probabilistic qualifiers are built into the consequents of the conditionals in (a) through (c).

The “moderate” qualifier in the consequent is intended to exclude what are taken by the agent to be extremely demanding acts of assistance, which we can predict are not likely to be performed very frequently. Similarly for a trigger like empathy:

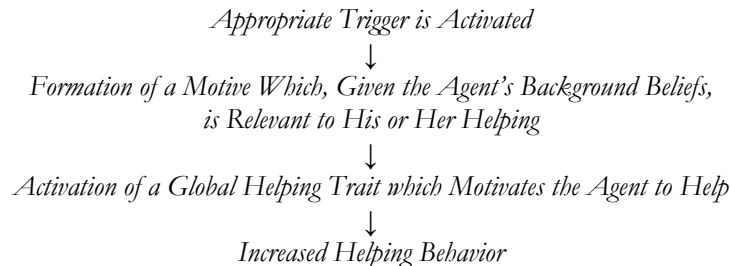
- (b) If an adult possesses a GHT and is experiencing intermediate levels of increased empathy, that person will probably engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

However, if no inputs are present to trigger a GHT, then:

- (c) If an adult possesses a GHT which has not been triggered, that person will probably not engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

Naturally it is assumed that various other relevant considerations are being held equal, i.e., that the person is not also experiencing depression or an intense emotion like anger or fear.

Much more could be said about GHTs, and I have done so elsewhere. Let me end this section by clarifying how this view differs from the two leading positions on character traits, and then expand the view in a new direction which will be the focus of the remainder of the paper. As a form of global trait realism which is intended to apply to most people, my view is clearly incompatible with Harman and Doris’ global trait eliminativism. What may be less clear is how a GHT is supposed to conceptually differ from the way compassion is typically understood by Aristotelians. Indeed, it is not obvious that Aristotelians could not also accept this same picture of a GHT:



For example, a compassionate person might see someone suffering, which triggers the formation of an altruistic motive to relieve that person’s suffering, which, together with certain beliefs about how to do so, can motivate behavior aimed at helping the person.

So far this concern is legitimate. Where the differences emerge is when we turn to the following claims which should be plausible for most Aristotelians:

- (i) A person who is compassionate will, other things being equal, typically perform simple and straightforward helping tasks when in helping-relevant circumstances.

- (ii) A compassionate person's trait of compassion will, other things being equal, not be dependent on the presence of morally problematic or morally insignificant triggers such as guilt, embarrassment or moderately good moods in leading the person to perform compassionate actions.
- (iii) A compassionate person's trait of compassion will, other things being equal, typically lead to helping behavior which is done for morally admirable reasons and motives, or at the very least not for reasons and motives which we would find morally problematic.

For example, we would expect a compassionate person to help pick up dropped papers for virtuous motives, and do so regardless of whether she is in a good mood or not. On the other hand:

- (i*) A person with a GHT will, other things being equal, typically *not* perform simple and straightforward helping tasks when in helping-relevant circumstances unless his or her GHT has been triggered.
- (ii*) A person's GHT will, other things being equal, often *be* dependent on the presence of morally problematic or morally insignificant triggers such as guilt, embarrassment or moderately good moods in leading the person to perform helping tasks.
- (iii*) A person's GHT will, other things being equal, often *not* lead to helping behavior which is done for morally admirable reasons and motives, but rather for morally problematic ones.

Thus, such a person might often not help pick up dropped papers and, even when he does help, he might do so as a result of feeling guilty or embarrassed, thereby making the helping behavior at least partially if not entirely dependent on morally suspect motives like a desire to overcome one's embarrassment.

Given these ways that compassionate traits and GHTs are meant to function, there should be a clear difference between the following two statements:

- (3) Many people have the trait of compassion to some degree and not a global helping trait.
- (4) Many people have a global helping trait to some degree and not the trait of compassion.

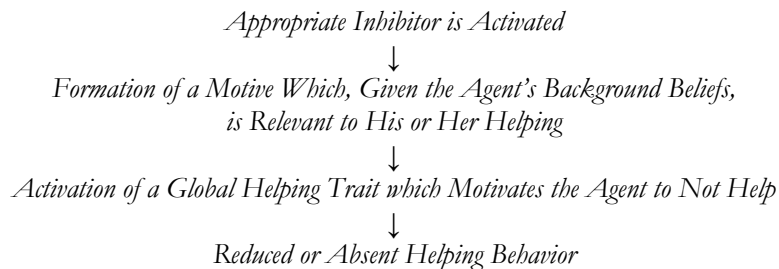
My view is that the social psychology literature casts serious doubt on (3), but does not undermine (4). Thus I take my view to be a legitimate alternative to the Aristotelian approach primarily on conceptual grounds, but if Aristotelians were to affirm (3) on empirical grounds, then experimental work in social psychology does give us good reason to part ways with them there. Fortunately, many contemporary Aristotelians can reject (3) and instead only accept this weaker claim:

- (3*) Only a few people have the trait of compassion to some degree and not a global helping trait.

And this is a claim that I have no reason to reject and indeed find plausible; furthermore even a global trait eliminativist like Doris has admitted that he is happy to accept a claim like (3*).¹⁹ For what the Aristotelian would thereby be conceding is that she has no story having to do with the possession of virtues and vices which either explains or predicts much of the helping behavior that most people *actually* exhibit, thereby calling into question the contribution that the Aristotelian has to make to a realistic understanding of moral psychology in this area.

Thus my goal is to offer an account of character traits associated with helping which (i) posits global character traits, (ii) takes them to be conceptually distinct from Aristotelian virtues and vices and (iii) comes the closest of any theory of character in accurately reflecting the actual characters of most human beings on empirical grounds. Aristotelians are welcome to help themselves to this account of global helping traits, but in doing so they would be acknowledging that their own conceptual framework involving the virtues and vices has very little empirical traction when it comes to the lives of most human beings.

Having thus hopefully clarified and adequately distinguished my positive view, let me end this section by focusing on a new and important element of this account which will be developed and supported in the remainder of the paper. That element concerns the way in which GHTs might not only augment, but also *inhibit* helping behavior. As we know from social psychology experiments, some control subjects will still perform a given helping task. But it turns out that, in certain conditions, subjects will help at rates much *lower* than controls, which suggests that there is some factor present which is making it even more unlikely that they will help than was the case to begin with. Fortunately our picture of GHTs can be readily expanded to account for such impediments:



As with triggers, I take the default case to be that many people with GHTs do not have any relevant inhibitors activated much of the time, but, when they are activated, they can significantly reduce the probability of that per-

¹⁹ See Doris 2002: 60, 65.

son's helping, other things being equal. Examples of such inhibitors include the following (among others):

Anger
Moderately Bad Moods in Certain Conditions
Fear of Embarrassment
Fear of Being Blamed
Perceived Situational Ambiguity

Given limitations of space, the remainder of the paper will omit discussion of anger²⁰ and instead examine moderately bad moods in the next section while devoting section three to the remaining inhibitors above in the context of discussing group effects on helping.

2. Bad Moods and Helping

It might initially be thought that there is nothing particularly surprising about people in bad moods helping less than control subjects. But in fact the experimental evidence suggests that in certain cases subjects in bad moods will help much *more* than controls. So we need to proceed carefully.²¹

Let us begin with the following claim:

- (5) Subjects construe certain environmental variables negatively in such a way that they produce a moderately negative mood, other things being equal.

Such moderately negative moods, or states of “negative affect” as they are commonly labeled in the social psychology literature, are to be sharply distinguished from clinical depression, anger and frustration. Rather they are typically understood as feelings of sadness which are temporary in duration and moderate in intensity.²² In the experimental literature, the kinds of manipulations designed to produce such moods have, for instance, included recalling a sad event, hearing loud noises or being informed of a poor performance on a test.

The claim in (5) is intuitively compelling, and so let us add to it the following:

- (6) Experimental subjects in moderately negative moods often display either reduced *or* elevated levels of helping behavior as compared to controls, other things being equal.

²⁰ For relevant discussion of anger and helping in the social psychology literature, see Weiner 1980a, 1980b, Reizenstein 1986, and Schaller and Cialdini 1990: 278. For *empathic* anger as a potential trigger rather than inhibitor, see Vitaglione and Barnett 2003.

²¹ In this section I draw on some ideas from my 2009a.

²² See, e.g., Manucia et al. 1984: 357 footnote 1, Cialdini et al. 1987: 750, Cialdini and Fultz 1990: 211, and Schaller and Cialdini 1990: 266.

Many social psychologists take the best model for understanding this relationship between negative moods and helping to be provided by the mood management hypothesis.²³ On this view, forming a bad mood will typically generate a motive in the subject to eliminate that mood and return him to an equilibrium condition. The subject might take there to be a number of means for him to elevate his mood and, for many subjects one such means would be helping others if an opportunity presents itself because of the social rewards and gratification associated with such behavior. The mood management hypothesis thereby generates a number of testable predictions. One is that, other things being equal, subjects experiencing negative affect will likely not engage in helping behavior when the benefits for themselves of doing so are not perceived to outweigh the costs. In such cases helping will be perceived to make no contribution to negative mood elimination. A second implication is that, other things being equal, if there are other available actions which by the subject's own lights are also conducive to eliminating a bad mood, but at the same time are much less costly for him or her to perform, then in those cases we should not expect negative affect to lead to increased helping.²⁴

Two studies are particularly helpful in illustrating and supporting the mood management hypothesis. In Weyant's well-known 1978 experiment, some subjects had their affect levels lowered by being led to believe that they had performed poorly on an anagram test. After learning the results of the test, they were presented with an opportunity to donate their time to charity work, with a different opportunity being given to different groups of subjects. The proportion of subjects who volunteered their time was as follows:²⁵

	Negative Affect	Controls
High Benefits/High Costs	29%	33%
High Benefits/Low Costs	71%	33%
Low Benefits/High Costs	5%	29%
Low Benefits/Low Costs	33%	33%

As expected, given the mood management hypothesis, it was only in the high benefits/low costs scenario that negatively affected subjects exhibited a greater degree of helping behavior than controls.

Perhaps even more compelling is the 1984 study by Manucia, Baumann and Cialdini. Mood was varied by asking subjects to recall and reminisce

²³ See Weiss et al. 1973, Cialdini et al. 1973, Cialdini and Kenrick 1976, Weyant 1978, Benson 1978, Manucia et al. 1984, Cialdini et al. 1987, Schaller and Cialdini 1988, 1990, Batson, et al. 1989, Salovey et al. 1991 and Taylor 1991. For criticism of the mood management model, see Carlson and Miller 1987 and Miller and Carlson 1990. For discussion of two alternative models, see Carlson and Miller 1987: 92-93 and Salovey et al. 1991: 222-223.

²⁴ For discussion of these implications, see Cialdini et al. 1973, Benson 1978, Cunningham et al. 1980, Manucia et al. 1984, Carlson and Miller 1987, Schaller and Cialdini 1988, and Salovey et al. 1991.

²⁵ Weyant 1978: 1173.

about past sad experiences. Subjects were then given a drug which unbeknownst to them was merely a placebo. Half were told that the drug has the effect of “freezing” their present mood state, while the other half were not told this. Finally, as subjects were leaving the experiment, they were presented with an opportunity to volunteer their time to make a number of calls of their choosing (between 1 and 10) for a local nonprofit blood organization. The results were as follows:²⁶

	Sad Subjects	Controls
Labile Mood	58% volunteered, mean of 3.25 calls	33% volunteered, mean of 1.25 calls
Fixed Mood	42% volunteered, mean of 1.25 calls	42% volunteered, mean of 1.58 calls

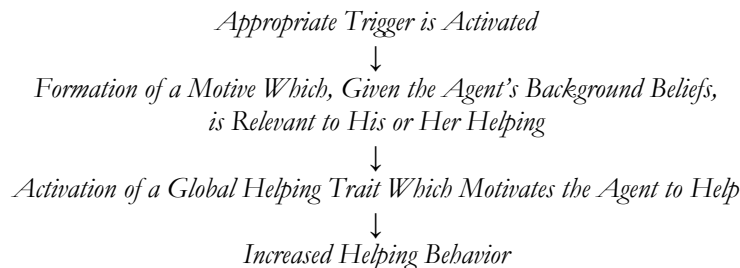
In other words, “sad subjects helped more than neutral mood controls only if they believed their mood was alterable. When sad subjects were led to believe that helping could not improve their mood, they were no more helpful than neutral mood subjects.”²⁷ And this is precisely what the mood management hypothesis predicts.

Thus given studies such as these above, we can add a third claim to the first two of this section:

- (7) In cases of helping behavior *augmented* by negative mood, the person’s helping mechanism leads him or her to help due at least in part to having been augmented by the output from the mood management system. Similarly, in cases of absent or reduced helping behavior *inhibited* by negative mood, the person’s helping mechanism does not lead him or her to help due at least in part to having been inhibited by the output from the mood management system.

Naturally, this claim assumes that other things are equal; helping behavior will not result for a putative high benefits/low costs helping task if, for instance, there are malfunctions in the helping mechanism or insurmountable obstacles in the circumstances.

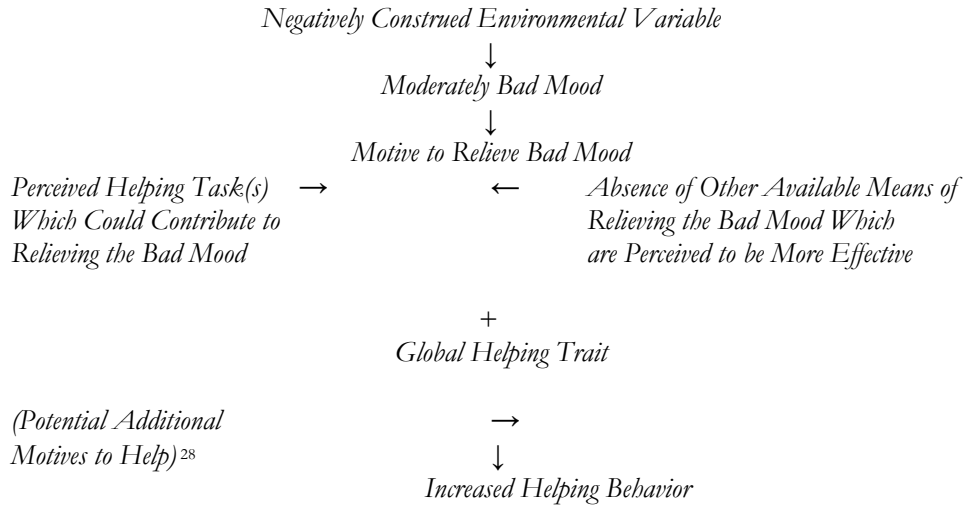
How does this discussion of negative moods and helping relate to the account of global helping traits sketched in the previous section of this paper? There we provided a rough outline of the way such a trait could be triggered as follows:



²⁶ Manucia et al. 1984: 362.

²⁷ Ibid.

By combining claims (5), (6) and (7) together with the mood management hypothesis, and holding other things equal, we can see that another trigger of a GHT that needs to be added to our list is a moderately bad mood in certain cases. Diagrammatically we get the following:



What exactly is the contribution that the GHT is supposed to make to this story about helping behavior? We said earlier that “global helping trait” is a label for a disposition constituted by certain cluster(s) of mental states and the states in that cluster which pertain specifically to helping and mood would include the following:

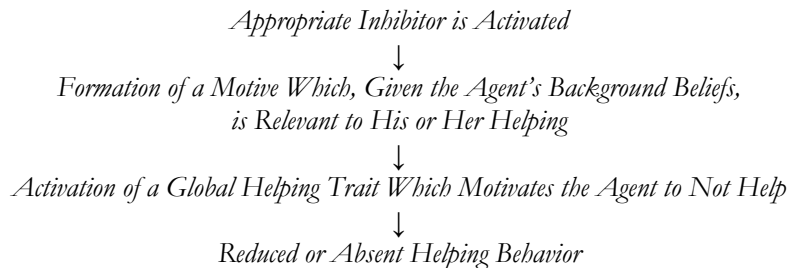
- (c) Beliefs about the relationship between helping tasks and various personal costs, such as lost time, money, alternative activities and so on.
- (d) Beliefs about the relationship between helping tasks and various social reactions, such as being thanked, applauded, reciprocally helped in the future and so on.
- (e) Beliefs about the fact that these personal costs can extend whereas the social reactions can alleviate the agent’s bad mood, and about the extent to which they can do so.
- (f) A motive to help when doing so will contribute toward alleviating the bad mood, and more so than any alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.
- (g) A motive to not help when doing so will perpetuate or worsen the bad mood, or will not alleviate the bad mood as effectively as some alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.

Thus the agent might have a motive to relieve his bad mood, and a belief that a helping opportunity is available. The first two sets of beliefs in (a) and (b)

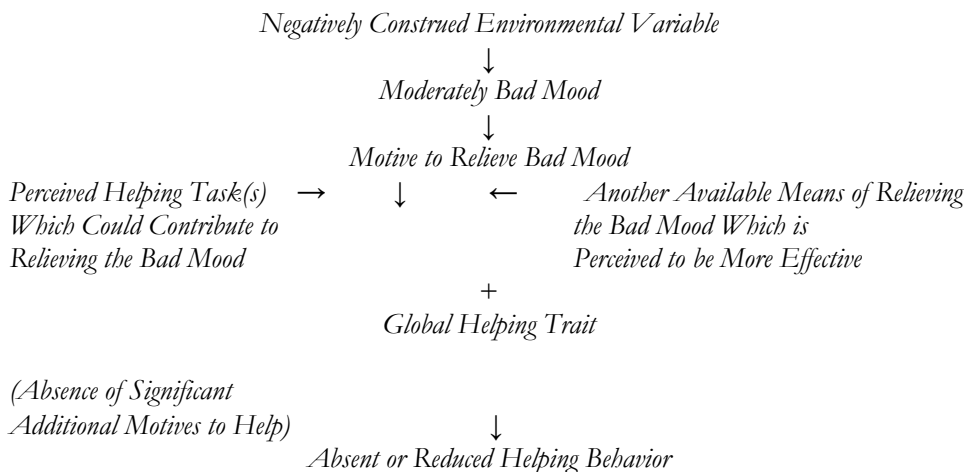
²⁸ The mention of additional helping motives is important. Even if negative affect augments helping by treating such behavior as a means to relieving the negative mood, it does not follow from this that the motive of relieving a bad mood is the *sole* or even the *dominant* motive when it comes to a particular instance of helping behavior. Instead, that motive might combine with several other independent motives to help, and simply add its own motivational contribution to the mix.

might lead him to an implicit judgment about what social reactions and personal costs might ensue if he actually helped. And the third set of beliefs in (c) might lead him to connect the personal costs and social reactions to alleviating his bad mood. Finally, this might bring to bear a motive to help or to not help in connection to relieving the bad mood.

We also said in section one that a GHT might inhibit rather than activate helping behavior, and represented that process as follows:



So again using (5), (6) and (7) together with the mood maintenance hypothesis, we can see why a moderately bad mood in certain other conditions should be added to the list of inhibitors, rather than triggers. For those cases in which the helping task is thought to be highly costly, this could lead to the formation of the motive in (e) to not help when doing so will perpetuate or worsen the bad mood. Similarly we can model those cases in which helping is perceived to be an advantageous means of relieving the bad mood, but not the most advantageous means, as follows:



Here the key contribution made by the GHT is the formation of the motive to not help when, in this case, doing so will not alleviate the bad mood as effectively as some alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.

Now it might seem puzzling why the GHT is said to be actively *inhibiting* helping in these cases, rather than just not motivating it. But if a GHT only

augments helping, then we would expect subjects in these cases to help at roughly the same level as controls. And this is not what we find when we look at the experimental results. In Weyant's experiment, for example, while 29% of controls in the low benefits/high costs case volunteered their time, only 5% of subjects in the same case but also in a negative mood signed up to volunteer. So it seems that the negative mood was actively leading to the *suppressing* of their helping behavior, rather than just not augmenting it.

At this point we should address an important challenge.²⁹ Our picture of GHTs has them partially constituted by conditional motives such as, in the above, a motive to help or to not help when doing so will contribute toward alleviating or perpetuating a bad mood. But a more straightforward model could understand GHTs as constituted primarily by a simple motive to help others who are thought to be in need. On this alternative picture, the simple motive to help would explain why even in control cases some subjects still helped, including in the high-cost low-benefits scenario of Weyant's experiment – perhaps subjects perceived someone's need for help, which activated their motive to help and led to their helping behavior. And triggers could still activate a GHT on this understanding by strengthening the motive to help others, whereas inhibitors could weaken or overwhelm the motive.

This is certainly a viable model that is worth taking seriously, but I have two primary reasons for initially resisting it. First, I claimed in section one that:

- (1) Many people have a global helping trait to some degree and not the trait of compassion.

But it seems false as a matter of fact that many people have a simple motive to help. We have already seen in several studies how dismally low the helping rates are for control subjects. Similarly, Regan et al. (1972) had only 16% of controls notify a woman that her bag was leaking candy, and Konečni (1972) found that only 15% of controls would stop to help pick up dropped computer cards. This might not be surprising if the helping tasks were very demanding or time consuming, but note how relatively trivial these tasks are. So based on these and many other experimental results, I am less than confident that we have adequate empirical evidence to claim that many people have such a desire, unless it is a desire that is typically so weak that nothing much is at stake in postulating it. At the same time, based on the same empirical evidence, I *am* confident that many people are reliably and cross-situationally motivated to help when certain specific prior motives are at work, such as a motive to eliminate a negative mood.

The second point to make is to emphasize that GHTs were never intended to tell the *whole* psychological story about the mental states which lead many humans to help. Rather, they were always described as traits which are

²⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

meant to explain *increased and decreased* levels of helping in subjects relative to the baseline level exhibited by controls. So it could very well be that, in control cases, some subjects helped primarily in virtue of having a simple desire to help (no doubt other explanations are available as well), and this is entirely compatible with their *also* possessing a GHT which can augment or inhibit their helping. In the special case of compassionate individuals, on the other hand, such a simple desire might be deep-seated and psychologically powerful in consistently leading to helping irrespective of whether a GHT is even present.³⁰

Finally, we can conclude this section by noting that the discussion of moderately bad moods and helping provides us with a specific illustration of the difference between a GHT and the traditional virtue of compassion. Note that, if the data from social psychology is accurate, then subjects' helping behavior will be significantly influenced by whether they are in a bad mood – a causal influence which most moral theorists would plausibly take to be morally irrelevant to whether they should help or not. Furthermore, when subjects *do* help while in a bad mood, an important part of what motivates them could often be the elimination of their bad mood, rather than motives centered on promoting the well-being of the person in need. And, finally, many times subjects in bad moods will *not* help at all if they perceive there to be no significant net benefits to themselves in doing so, even if someone else would be made much better off in the process. Each of these three claims is a consequence of the account of GHTs developed in this paper, and yet all of them seem to be fundamentally incompatible with the motives and behavior of a genuinely compassionate person. In these respects, at least, it is GHTs which seem to more accurately capture the psychological lives of many adult human beings today rather than the widespread possession of the virtue of compassion.

3. Group Effects and Helping

Thanks in large part to Latané and Darley's pioneering work in the 1960s and '70s, the inhibitory effect of groups on helping is one of the most well-known and reliably documented phenomena in social psychology. Yet there

³⁰ This discussion does introduce a complication to our account of inhibitors. For perhaps rather than involving a motive to not help, perhaps all that a GHT does to inhibit helping behavior is to prevent the simple desire to help from doing its normal work. This could also adequately explain why helping levels are lower than they are for controls in such cases.

I want to make two points here. First, this proposal involves postulating a widespread simple desire to help in order to explain how inhibited helping can occur, and in the text above I already registered my doubt about the extent to which humans possess such a desire. And, second, *even if* there is a widely held desire to help, we will see in the next section that often inhibited helping involves an element of psychological conflict for the agent, rather than just the elimination or undermining of a simple desire to help. See in particular footnote 63.

are also plenty of cases in which being in a group does *not* play a significant inhibitory role. So as in the previous section, we need to proceed carefully.

Latané and Rodin's 1969 "Lady in Distress" experiment is a classic illustration of the group effect. Subjects thought they were taking part in a market research survey, and met a female representative in a small room. While they filled out forms, the representative went to the next office and after four minutes:

... if they were listening carefully, [subjects] heard her climb up on a chair to get a book from the top shelf. Even if they were not listening carefully, they heard a loud crash and a woman's scream as the chair fell over. "Oh, my God, my foot . . ." cried the representative. "I . . . I . . . can't move . . . it. Oh, my ankle. I . . . can't . . . can't . . . get . . . this thing off . . . me." She moaned and cried for about a minute longer, getting gradually more subdued and controlled.³¹

The main dependent variable was whether subjects exhibited any helping behavior, even if it was just calling aloud to the representative to check on her. The four experimental groups were: just one subject in the room, one subject paired with a confederate who ignored the crash, two subjects who were strangers and two subjects who were friends. The percentage helping was as follows:

Alone	70%
Two Friends	70%
Two Strangers	40%
Subject plus Confederate	7% ³²

If we treat the alone subject as the control, then clearly helping is being seriously inhibited by the presence of others,³³ and this is not at all what we would expect if the subjects had the virtue of compassion to even a moderate degree. Rather, in this experiment, such a character trait seems irrelevant to the psychological explanation of behavior, especially in the third and fourth conditions.

Similar helping patterns have arisen repeatedly in a number of different experimental setups,³⁴ which, following Latané and Nida (1981), can be divided into four categories:

³¹ Latané and Darley 1970: 58. For the original study, see Latané and Rodin 1969.

³² Latané and Darley 1969: 193-195, 1970: 60-63.

³³ Even in the two friends case, Latané and Darley note that, "[w]hile superficially this appears as high as the Alone condition, again there must be a correction for the fact that two people are free to act. When compared to the 91 percent base rate of hypothetical two-person groups, friends do inhibit each other from intervening" (1970: 63).

³⁴ For reviews, see Latané and Nida 1981 and Latané et al. 1981. In examining 48 studies, Latané et al. found that, in group effect studies using confederates, 75% of alone subjects helped, whereas less than 53% of subjects in groups did. For group effect studies using groups of subjects with no confederates, 50% of alone subjects helped, whereas 22% of subjects in groups did (1981: 291).

Emergencies Involving the Subjects. Here the paradigm experiment involves a stream of smoke coming into the room where one or more subjects are seated.³⁵

Emergencies Involving a Victim in Danger. Examples include hearing a woman fall off a chair,³⁶ a man have an epileptic seizure,³⁷ a maintenance worker fall off a ladder in another room³⁸ and a man cry out in pain from what seemed to be a serious electric shock.³⁹

Emergencies Involving Third-Party Criminal or Immoral Behavior. Examples include subjects watching a thief steal cash from a receptionist's envelope,⁴⁰ observing young men steal a case of beer from a discount store⁴¹ and hearing a bully beat up a child.⁴²

Nonemergency Settings. Subjects in groups have been found to be less likely to help with knocked over discs,⁴³ accidentally dropped coins in an elevator⁴⁴ and evaluating written work.⁴⁵

Indeed, being in a group can not only inhibit helping behavior toward others, but it has also been found to inhibit the promotion of the agent's own self-interest.⁴⁶

But matters are more complex than this, as there are versions of group effect studies in which helping is *not* inhibited or, if it is, it is not inhibited to nearly the same extent as the studies above found. Here are some examples:⁴⁷

Group Cohesiveness. Friends in a group were significantly faster in responding to a perceived epileptic fit than were strangers in a group⁴⁸ and, in another study, subjects in groups of four who had been allowed to meet and interact with each other for 20

Garcia et al. (2002) even found that actually being in a group context is not necessary for a group effect to result; rather merely priming subjects with the idea of being in the presence of others had a significant effect on dollars pledged using a charity-giving measure.

³⁵ Latané and Darley 1968. For additional studies, see Ross and Braband 1973 and Latané and Nida 1981: 311.

³⁶ Latané and Darley 1970: chapter seven.

³⁷ Darley and Latané 1968, Latané and Darley 1970: chapter 11.

³⁸ Clark and Word 1972.

³⁹ Clark and Word 1974. For additional studies, see Gottlieb and Carver 1980, Schwartz and Gottlieb 1980, Latané and Nida 1981: 311, and Tice and Baumeister 1985.

⁴⁰ Latané and Darley 1970: chapter eight.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 82. For additional studies, see Schwartz and Gottlieb 1980, Latané and Nida 1981: 311, Chekroun and Brauer 2002, and Fischer et al. 2006: 268.

⁴³ Karakashian et al. 2006.

⁴⁴ Latané and Dabbs 1975.

⁴⁵ Petty et al. 1977b. For additional studies, see Petty et al. 1977a, Latané et al. 1979, Latané and Nida 1981: 311, 313, Wiesenthal et al. 1983, and Chekroun and Brauer 2002: 855.

⁴⁶ Petty et al. 1977a, for instance, found a decrease in willingness to take coupons for a free burger in group rather than alone contexts.

⁴⁷ For some additional examples besides these, see Latané and Nida 1981: 321, Chekroun and Brauer 2002, and Karakashian 2006: 28.

⁴⁸ Latané and Darley 1970: 105-6. See also the discussion of friends versus strangers in groups in Latané and Darley 1969: 200-201.

minutes helped at a much higher rate than did subjects who were not so allowed (68.9% versus 25.8%). Indeed, highly cohesive groups of four helped more than did highly cohesive groups of two, thereby reversing the group effect.⁴⁹

Acquaintance with the Victim. Subjects helped at the same rate and speed in a group as opposed to alone when they had some prior interaction with a victim of a seizure.⁵⁰

Non-Ambiguous Emergency Situation. Subjects in four different group configurations helped at a rate of 100% in a non-ambiguous emergency involving a maintenance worker falling from a ladder in another room.⁵¹ Similarly in 62 out of 65 cases, an ill-looking man was helped after he collapsed on the floor of a New York City subway.⁵²

Gaze. In an experiment involving dropped coins, 33% of subjects helped when alone versus 11% in the presence of a passive confederate. However, when the victim gazed directly at the subject, 57% of those alone helped and 82% of those in the presence of the confederate did.⁵³

Startle Response. Subjects facing each other in groups responded to the sound of a screen crashing on a workman and his painful groans at roughly the same rate as alone subjects did (80% versus 90%), whereas non-facing subjects in groups responded much less (20%).⁵⁴

Future Interactions with Other Group Members. Being told to expect future face-to-face interactions greatly increased responses by subjects in groups to a choking emergency in which a victim cried for help, and according to the experimenters brought about “the near elimination of the bystander effect.”⁵⁵

The main overarching challenge for social psychologists in this area has been to develop a plausible model of group effects on helping which can account for such mixed results. Perhaps the most promising account continues to be the one initially proposed by Latané and Darley, which appeals to the three central psychological processes of diffusion of responsibility, social influence and audience inhibition.⁵⁶ Let us briefly take each of these in turn:

Diffusion of Responsibility. The more people thought to be present, the more the costs associated with failing to help are not taken to be born just by the one subject but rather are partially shared by all the bystanders. By shifting some of the responsibility onto others, the subject’s fear of being blamed is often

⁴⁹ Rutkowski et al. 1983.

⁵⁰ Latané and Darley 1970: 108-9.

⁵¹ Clark and Word 1972.

⁵² Piliavin et al. 1969. For additional studies, see Clark and Word 1974, Schwartz and Gottlieb 1980, and Fischer et al. 2006.

⁵³ Valentine 1980.

⁵⁴ Darley et al. 1973.

⁵⁵ Gottlieb and Carver 1980: 258.

⁵⁶ For overviews, see Latané and Darley 1968, 1970, Schwartz and Gottlieb 1980, Latané and Nida 1981, Latané et al. 1981 and Cacioppo et al. 1986.

proportionally alleviated.⁵⁷ Note that such a process helps to explain the way that gaze might combat the group effect. By singling out a particular member of a group using a focused gaze, a person in need of help can thereby block diffusion of responsibility by seemingly putting more responsibility on that person's shoulders than on other members of the group.

Social Influence. In ambiguous situations where it is not immediately apparent to the subject that someone needs help, he or she may look to others in a group for guidance as to how to understand what is going on. If they are unfazed and non-responsive, then other things being equal the subject is much more likely to conclude that help is not required. Thus a state of what is often called pluralistic ignorance can result from the joint presence of a desire for situational clarity, a belief that a potential helping situation is ambiguous and a belief that others appear to act as if nothing significant were transpiring.⁵⁸ Such a process helps to explain why, in the non-ambiguous emergency cases mentioned above, helping did not seem to be significantly inhibited.

Audience Inhibition. The third component of Latané and Darley's model appeals to the fear of embarrassment. The more people thought to be present, the greater the negative evaluation that might ensue if it turns out that the subject has misconstrued the situation, attempts to help and yet in fact help is not needed.⁵⁹ Such a fear can nicely account for the difference in helping inhibition between groups of friends versus groups of strangers. Subjects are likely to be much more comfortable acting in front of their friends and to fear their negative evaluations much less than they would acting in the presence of complete strangers.

By appealing to three separate processes, it might appear as if this model is needlessly complex. But a number of experiments in the past 30 years have supported the importance of all three processes in accounting for group effects on helping. For example, Latané and Darley ran an experiment which

⁵⁷ The same applies to the fear of feeling guilty. For additional discussion, see Latané and Darley 1970: chapter 10, Gottlieb and Carver 1980, and Latané et al. 1981: 298.

⁵⁸ For discussion, see Latané and Darley 1968, 1969: 198-199, 1970: 40-42, Latané et al. 1981: 298, and Clark and Word 1974. For more on pluralistic ignorance in general, see Miller and McFarland 1991 and Prentice and Miller 1996.

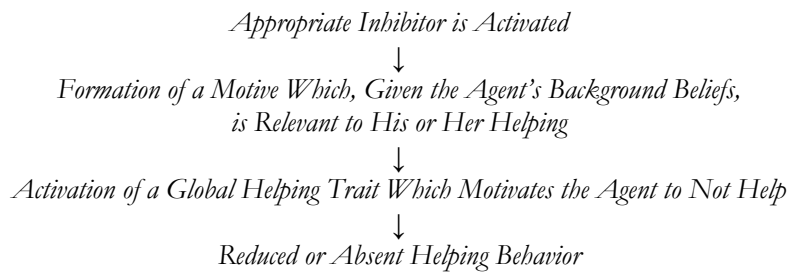
⁵⁹ As Latané and Darley note,

[T]he bystander to an emergency is offered the chance to step up on stage, a chance that should be every actor's dream. But in this case, it is every actor's nightmare. He hasn't rehearsed the part very well and he must play it when the curtain is already up. The greater the number of other people present, the more possibility there is of losing face (1970: 40).

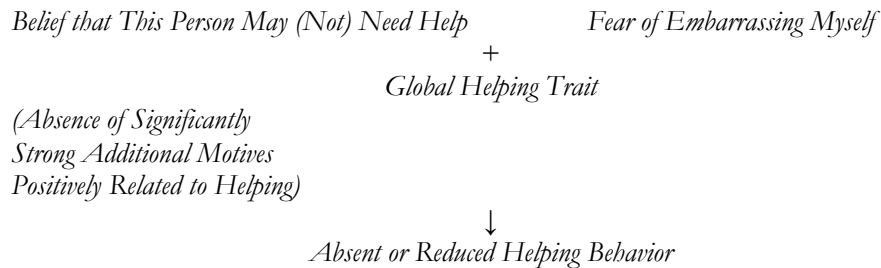
For additional discussion, see *ibid.*, 38-40, Latané et al. 1981: 297, Miller and McFarland 1991, Prentice and Miller 1996, and Karakashian et al. 2006.

varied channels of communication.⁶⁰ In addition to the alone condition, some subjects were in a no-communication environment (to test diffusion of responsibility), a one-way communication environment (to test diffusion of responsibility plus audience inhibition) and a two-way communication environment (to test all three processes). As expected, the highest helping rate was in the alone condition, followed by no-communication, one-way communication and full communication, with a significant percentage drop-off from one condition to the next. Studies such as this one have been taken to show both that (i) even one of these processes can significantly inhibit helping by itself and (ii) in certain cases all three processes seem to be at work together in jointly inhibiting helping at a rate that is greater than if only one were active.⁶¹

By now the connection of these inhibitory processes to our discussion of global helping traits should be clear. We said that such GHTs can inhibit helping in the following way:



And in broad outline at least, this seems to be exactly what is happening with the three group effect processes above.⁶² Here, for instance, is one way of partially modeling the effect of audience inhibition on helping in groups using GHTs:



⁶⁰ Latané and Darley 1976. See also the summary in Latané et al. 1981: 299.

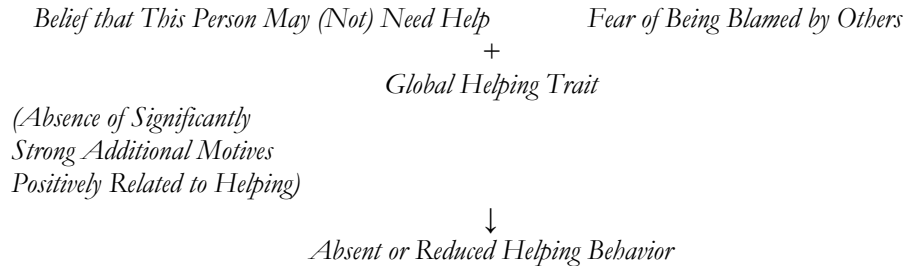
⁶¹ For additional studies relevant to the importance of each process, see Latané and Darley 1968, 1969: 199-200, 1970: 111, Petty et al. 1977a, and Schwartz and Gottlieb 1980.

⁶² Note that no claim is being made that these are the *only* three processes at work. For instance, Cacioppo et al. have claimed that what they call confusion of responsibility also plays a role, where this is not the “responsibility a potential helper feels for helping a victim, but rather it is ... the responsibility for harmdoing the potential helper believes others will attribute to him or her should he or she help the victim” (1986: 101). And for additional elaboration of the Latané and Darley framework, see Latané et al. 1981: 300-309.

The central mental states of the GHT which are relevant to the above would include the following:

- (i) Beliefs about the extent to which others are in a position to observe the agent's helping behavior, and about the extent to which they will evaluate and judge him or her for trying to help.
- (ii) A motive to help when helping is thought to potentially earn the approval of those observing the agent.
- (iii) A motive to not help when helping is thought to potentially earn the disapproval of those observing the agent.

Similarly for diffusion of responsibility:



Here the relevant mental states of the GHT would be:

- (i) Beliefs about the extent to which others are in a position to help as well and, therefore, about the extent of the agent's own personal responsibility to help.
- (ii) A motive to help when the agent is thought to bear a significant degree of personal responsibility and so would be blamed for not helping.
- (iii) A motive to not help when the agent is thought to not bear a significant degree of personal responsibility and so would not be blamed for not helping.

And we can note again that on all of these models the GHT is actively *inhibiting* helping, rather than just not augmenting it, since the helping rates in such cases are significantly lower than they are for controls who find themselves alone.⁶³ Indeed, such language is not foreign to social psychologists – the

⁶³ This inhibitory effect should not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that these subjects were not motivated *at all* to help (which might be a misleading implication of the diagrams above), or that typically the group effect serves to completely *undermine* prosocial motivation. Rather, the more plausible interpretation is that the subjects are often motivated to help to some extent and, when alone, typically do so in emergency cases. But in at least some group effect studies, subjects in groups are conflicted by opposing motivation arising from, for instance, fear of embarrassment. Thus these subjects experience motivational tension, and in many instances the motivation to help is outweighed by the motivation arising from one or more of the group effect processes of the kind described above. As an illustration of this tension, Latané and Darley observed about their epileptic seizure experiment that “[m]any of these subjects [who did not help] showed signs of nervousness: they often had trembling hands and writhing palms. If anything, they seemed more emotionally aroused than did the subjects who reported the emergency” (1970: 100). But as

group effect literature is replete with talk of the “inhibition of helping.”⁶⁴

Thus I claim that the experimental literature is compatible with the widespread possession of GHTs which can inhibit helping when an agent is in a group setting. At the same time, we can see once again that this literature clearly seems to *not* be compatible with the widespread possession of compassion, since such a virtue, at least as commonly understood and possessed to a significant degree, would counteract the influence of motives such as fear of embarrassment or fear of being blamed for not helping someone. Other things being equal a compassionate person would not let the mere presence of strangers prevent him or her from coming to the assistance of someone thought to be in need, especially if that involved merely calling out verbally to see if the person is okay or informing a third party that something might be amiss.

4. Drawing Some Implications

The goal of this paper has been to continue to elaborate a realist position about global character traits pertaining to helping which is both (i) a legitimate conceptual alternative to the eliminativist views of Harman and Doris as well as the realist positions of contemporary Aristotelians and (ii) is compatible with the central experimental results on helping from social psychology. More specifically, I hope to have illustrated how what I call global helping traits can not only augment helping as a result of, e.g., prior feelings of guilt or empathy, but can also inhibit helping in certain cases involving moderately negative moods, fear of embarrassment, fear of blame and other situationally sensitive psychological variables. In this final section of the paper, I briefly draw some empirical and philosophical implications from this account.

Empirical Predictions of Inhibited Helping Behavior. As we did in the case of triggers for GHTs, we can thus formulate conditionals which offer testable predictions for helping behavior. Given what we have seen in the previous two sections, here are a few examples of such conditionals:

- (d) If an adult possesses a GHT and:
 - (i) is experiencing intermediate levels of increased negative affect,
 - (ii) takes the benefits for himself of helping to outweigh the perceived costs to himself, and

Ross and Nisbett write, this cognitive dissonance in group settings is “characteristically resolved in favor of the group’s view, often not by simple compromise, but by wholesale adoption of the group’s view and suppression of one’s own doubts” (1991: 46). For related discussion, see Darley and Latané 1968: 382, Latané and Darley 1970: 80, 122, and Ross and Nisbett 1991: 45-46.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Latané and Darley 1970: 38, 126, Latané and Nida 1981: 309, Tice and Baumeister 1985: 421, 424, Garcia et al. 2002, and Chekroun and Brauer 2002: 863.

- (iii) does not take there to be any more effective means available for relieving the negative affect, that person will probably engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.
- (e) If an adult possesses a GHT and:
 - (i) is experiencing intermediate levels of increased negative affect, and
 - (ii) takes the costs for himself of helping to outweigh the perceived benefits to himself, that person will probably not engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.
- (f) If an adult possesses a GHT and:
 - (i) takes the need of someone to be helped to be ambiguous,
 - (ii) believes that the other bystanders are strangers acting as if this person is not in need of help, and
 - (iii) does not have any special connection to the person potentially in need of help, that person will probably not engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant circumstances.

And as usual these are to be read as *ceteris paribus* conditionals.

Global and Local Helping Traits. We have also seen at some length that not only is a GHT conceptually distinct from the traditional virtue of compassion, but also that on empirical grounds the claim that:

- (3) Many people have the trait of compassion to some degree and not a global helping trait.

is much less plausible than the claim that:

- (4) Many people have a global helping trait to some degree and not the trait of compassion.

Similarly, GHTs are conceptually distinct from the local character traits posited by Doris, precisely because they are *both* cross-situationally consistent and stable. But are GHTs actually better supported empirically than local traits? Here some caution is in order.

To empirically evaluate the positive claim made by (4) properly, we would need to have extended longitudinal studies which follow the same subjects over time as they proceed from one situation to another. If we find that their behavior is in line with predictions like those in (a) through (f), then we could take that data as strong evidence in favor of (4). Unfortunately, however, extended longitudinal studies on helping behavior are hard to come by in social psychology, and so at best all Doris and I are entitled to is the claim that our respective views are compatible with the empirical data that we have today, and not that there is clear evidential support for one view over the other.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ For similar remarks by Doris on the absence of relevant longitudinal studies, see his 2002: 38.

At the same time, if our characters merely consisted of a collection of various local traits, we would expect helping behavior to be highly fragmented – many people experiencing positive moods, for instance, might help in one kind of situation but not in another because they lack the distinct trait associated with the latter circumstances. And yet repeatedly in the experimental literature, we find subjects exhibiting the same patterns of significantly augmented and inhibited helping behavior as compared to controls when factors such as positive mood, negative mood, guilt, embarrassment, empathy, anger, fear of embarrassment, fear of blame and the like are at work. And despite the studies being carried out using different subjects, locations and time periods, these patterns reliably persist from one experimental helping task to another, such as volunteering for a charity organization, donating blood, helping someone who has fallen in another room, making change for a dollar, looking for lost contact lenses, picking up dropped books and so forth.

Furthermore, these patterns allow social psychologists to make predictions about the results of new experiments involving helping tasks that have not been experimentally studied before. For example, we could predict that, other things being equal, subjects in a moderately positive mood would be more likely to hold the door for someone walking with crutches or would volunteer to work more hours at a nearby homeless shelter than would control subjects. Such predictions would be made on the assumption that the helping patterns that have been observed in different circumstances in the past would likely continue to be exhibited in the future in these new circumstances – an assumption that seems to involve a commitment to some degree of cross-situational consistency in helping behavior. So while these remarks are admittedly speculative, they do suggest that, absent longitudinal studies, GHTs might have an initial explanatory and predictive advantage over local traits.

The Scope of GHTs. Thus far we have been presenting the idea of global helping traits at a very high level of generality – as traits which are relevant to helping across many situations and periods of time. This is due to the way GHTs are grounded – they have in their underlying causal base a diverse array of mental state dispositions, including dispositions to form beliefs and desires (broadly understood) which pertain to empathy, guilt, anger, good moods, bad moods, embarrassment, fear of embarrassment and so forth. Indeed, we can stipulate – since “global helping trait” is a technical expression which we can define as we like – that GHTs range over all dispositions to form mental states which have a direct bearing on thought and action pertaining to helping others who are thought to be in need.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ See also footnote 12 for relevant discussion. What counts as having a “direct” bearing is of course vague, but I doubt we will be able to say anything precise here. The same challenge

But we should also note the likely scenario whereby certain people have some of these dispositions but not others. For instance, a person might not be capable of feeling empathy for the distress of others, while still wanting to alleviate feelings of guilt. And this naturally suggests that we can formulate GHTs at a narrower level of specificity which consists of, for instance, a global helping guilt trait, a global helping empathy trait, a global helping mood trait and so forth. And there is no reason to stop at just one level. Recall we said there were two desires pertaining to negative mood relief – a desire to help, if so doing would contribute toward alleviating a negative mood, and a desire to not help if so doing would contribute toward increasing negative mood. So it is at least imaginable that there could be two global helping negative mood traits.⁶⁷

Of course, once we start focusing on these narrower traits, there is a natural tendency to want to either (i) deny or (ii) at least ignore the existence of the more general traits. So maybe we have made a mistake by starting at the top level of generality and working down, rather than focusing only on the most narrowly construed GHTs.

But in my view such a tendency should be resisted in both of its forms. First of all, there is no reason to deny the existence of *both* the narrow and more general traits. GHTs, recall, are not mysterious entities – they are constituted by certain interrelated dispositions to form mental states. So there is no reason why the mental states which constitute two negative mood traits cannot underlie a global helping negative mood trait in some people, and why in turn these people cannot also have the mental state dispositions which underlie a global helping empathy trait, guilt trait, etc., which together give rise to a global helping trait in general.

As far as the practicality of more general traits is concerned, it is true that narrower traits have a significant edge in terms of their predictive value. If a person has a global helping guilt trait but not a global helping empathy trait, then predictions based on attributing a GHT in general to him or her will not turn out to be as accurate as those which are formulated at this narrower level. Nevertheless, two things can still be said for the practicality of

would apply when trying to determine what dispositions to form mental states underlie the virtue of compassion.

Note that the above allows for the existence of conflicts between GHTs and other traits of character in a person. For instance, the motivation to help a given person arising from a GHT might conflict with the motivation to keep a promise or to not tell a lie, where the latter arises from discreet character traits associated with promise-keeping and truth-telling, respectively.

⁶⁷ It is worth making two comments about these narrower traits. First, they are still not local traits, since even a global empathy trait would allow for consistent helping behavior across a range of different situations. And, second, by introducing these narrower traits, we have also introduced the possibility of another kind of conflict between traits beyond that mentioned in the previous note. For instance, we can imagine a case in which an agent is experiencing both empathy for the distress of another, and also fear of embarrassing himself if he tries to help. The motivation arising from both traits could lead in opposite directions.

more general traits. First, there will often be cases in which a person does not just have a single narrow trait but several narrow traits whose underlying mental state dispositions give rise to a more general one. So predictions based on the more general one will be just as accurate as those using the more cumbersome narrower trait framework. And, second, in cases where a person does not have all the narrower traits which make up a (general) GHT, it does not follow that predictions using such a trait attribution have no predictive value – they can still be highly accurate in a number of situations, and certainly are much more valuable than not postulating any GHT whatsoever in the first place.

Global Helping Traits and Character Traits. Suppose for the moment that longitudinal studies emerge which do support the predictions made by the account of GHTs developed in this paper. A serious concern might arise that these dispositional states do not get to count as character traits in the first place. After all, we typically think that character traits distinguish people from each other – some people are shy, courageous and honest, while others are extroverted, cowardly and dishonest, for instance. But, it might be thought, GHTs look to capture patterns of behavior common to so many people that they might rather be features of human nature rather than traits of character which some people have acquired and others have not.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, following the points just raised above, it must be granted that we are not in a good position to evaluate the percentage of people who actually do have GHTs without adequate longitudinal studies. Nevertheless, let me at least raise two cautionary remarks about thinking that GHTs are universally held, either as a contingent matter or as a necessary feature of human nature. The first is that there are studies whose results could suggest that GHTs are not found in young children to the extent that they are in adults, thereby supporting the idea that such traits are not features of human nature but are acquired habitually over time. Young children seem to generally exhibit reduced helping behavior when experiencing a negative affective condition, whereas, as we have seen, adults in the same negative condition will often exhibit increased helping behavior.⁶⁹ What best explains this difference? The advocate of the mood management hypothesis has a natural answer – namely that young children have not yet appreciated the social rewards associated with helping. They have not learned how society bestows approval, praise, gratitude, recognition and the like on those who help others in need. Thus they do not have in place a psychological connection between helping, rewards and negative mood relief. Adults, on the other hand, have typically been educated in the social rewards associated with helping, and so

⁶⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

⁶⁹ One exception in the case of young children is when the helping behavior would be noticed by an adult. In that case, children in negative moods help more than controls, presumably for the sake of approval from the adult. See Kenrick, Baumann and Cialdini 1979.

understand, even if inchoately, that negative affect can be relieved by helping. If this explanation of the difference in helping behavior exhibited by children and adults in bad moods is correct, then one would expect there to be a gradual increase in such behavior at various age intervals approaching adulthood. And, according to a variety of studies, this is precisely what we do in fact find.⁷⁰

The second cautionary remark is that, even amongst adults, we almost never see 100% of subjects have their helping behavior respond appropriately to the relevant trigger or inhibitor in experimental contexts. For instance, in Weyant's anagram study, even in the high benefits/low cost scenario, 29% of subjects in a bad mood still did *not* volunteer their time. And 5% of subjects in the low benefits/high costs scenario *did* volunteer their time. Similarly in the classic "Lady in Distress" group effect study, 30% of subjects who were alone still did not make any attempt to check on the representative in the other room who was crying out in pain, while 7% of those in the same room with a confederate did make an attempt to help. Thus, in the absence of longitudinal studies, such results could nevertheless be made compatible with the following:

- (i) All human beings possess global helping traits.

But my preferred interpretation, which is also compatible with the experimental results, is that:

- (ii) Many human beings possess global helping traits.
- (iii) Some human beings possess neither global helping traits nor the virtue of compassion.
- (iv) A few human beings possess the virtue of compassion and not global helping traits.

For instance, (iii) seems to be true of young children, and also perhaps of some of the 30% of alone subjects in the Latané and Rodin study. Claim (iv) might be true of some of the 7% of subjects with the confederate, *as well as* some of the 70% of alone subjects who helped. For this latter group of subjects, we would need to see how they also behaved in a subsequent confederate group helping situation in order to collect data relevant to assessing their characters.

Finally, not only might it be the case that not all people have GHTs, but also that, when they do have one, its possession comes in degrees, which is another commonly held feature of traits of character. For instance, two people might have a GHT but be such that one of them is more strongly motivated to not help when doing so will perpetuate or worsen a bad mood. Or one person might have a deeper fear of embarrassment than another, such

⁷⁰ For further discussion, see Moore, Underwood and Rosenhan 1973, Rosenhan, Underwood and Moore 1974, Cialdini, Darby and Vincent 1973, Cialdini and Kenrick 1976, and Manucia, Baumann and Cialdini 1984.

that, while both exhibit some inhibited helping behavior in group contexts, one of them still helps less over time than the other because of the greater role played by his or her fear. Hence not only the instantiation of GHTs, but also the degrees to which they are possessed, may vary widely amongst human beings.

An Error Theory About Virtue and Vice. If my claim is correct that many people have a global helping trait to some degree but not the virtue of compassion, then we can extend our discussion in interesting ways beyond empirical psychology and into meta-ethics. More precisely, we have the basis for an error theory about character ascriptions of virtue and vice. In the abstract, moral error theories typically take the form of a cognitivist claim that:

- (C) Most ordinary people form moral beliefs which involve, presuppose, assume or, in some other way, are bound up with a commitment to some feature, F. Thus most ordinary moral thought is at least implicitly committed to F.

together with a separate, typically metaphysical claim that:

- (M) F in fact fails to obtain or to be instantiated, or is incoherent, unintelligible or in some other way highly problematic.⁷¹

For example, J.L. Mackie's well-known view seems to hold the conjunction of the claim that:

- (C1) Most ordinary people believe that morality is objectively prescriptive, or at least their moral judgments presuppose this about morality.

with the anti-realist view that:

- (M1) There are in fact no objectively prescriptive moral facts or properties.⁷²

According to Mackie, it follows that most ordinary people are systematically mistaken in their moral thinking and that their positive moral claims such as "Murder is wrong" or "Slavery is bad" are all false.

The error theory in question here would be much narrower in scope. It starts with the cognitivist claim that:

- (C2) On the basis of observations of helping behavior in particular situations, many people implicitly infer that certain people – their family members, friends, community leaders, politicians and the like – are compassionate people.

To this it adds the metaphysical claim that:

⁷¹ Thus as Lillehammer notes, "there is a form of error theory corresponding to every claim that moral judgements entail" (2004: 93).

⁷² Mackie 1977: chapter one. Mackie actually argued for the stronger claim that there are no objective values whatsoever, whether moral or not (15).

- (M2) Few people actually have the trait of compassion, and what is partially responsible for their helping behavior is instead often a global helping trait.

Thus it follows that many moral judgments involving the ascription of compassion to an individual turn out to be false. And such a result does not apply just to this one particular virtue. While it is beyond the scope of this particular paper, elsewhere I suggest that claims similar to (C2) and (M2) apply to the other virtue and vice concepts as well.⁷³ Thus it seems that a significant and widespread error theory turns out to be well motivated.

Suppose it is. Then two new questions become central. The first concerns how we came to make such a systematic mistake in our moral thinking in the first place. And the second concerns what we should do in the future once we come to appreciate this mistake. To expand briefly on the second question, we might adopt a preservationist view and argue that the overall net benefits of our current practice of employing virtue and vice concepts in forming beliefs about peoples' characters, justifies hiding the existence of alternative conceptions of character from the folk. Or we might adopt a fictionalist view, whereby the costs associated with our current beliefs involving virtue and vice concepts outweigh the benefits, and such beliefs should be replaced with one of a variety of alternative fictionalist attitudes about virtue and vice. Or there is always the eliminativist option, where the folk jettison all ascriptions of virtue or vice in favor of talk of global helping and other parallel character traits, unless a given belief about a person's character passes a very high evidentiary threshold which warrants talk of virtue or vice. Clearly this is not the place to sort through these options, although let me register my own preference for the eliminativist route.⁷⁴

GHTs and Virtue Ethics. Finally, what might be the implications of this account of global helping traits for normative ethical theorizing, and in particular for Aristotelian virtue ethics? Given limitations of space, let me briefly mention just one implication.

One of the most frequently cited advantages of Aristotelian virtue ethics is supposed to be its picture of moral psychology, a picture that avoids the alleged impersonality of other views such as utilitarianism or Kantian ethics.⁷⁵ This Aristotelian view of moral psychology can be understood either as a descriptive account of the relevant portions of our mental lives, or as a normative account we should strive to embody. Clearly if the picture of global helping traits is on target and most people have such traits rather than the virtue of compassion, then, when it comes to helping behavior, Aristotelian virtue

⁷³ I develop these ideas in a book manuscript in progress, tentatively entitled *A New Theory of Moral Character*.

⁷⁴ I develop an error theory about virtue and vice in chapter 11 of the book manuscript mentioned in the previous note.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Stocker 1976 and Williams 1985: 54-70.

ethics will have failed to offer an empirically adequate picture of our moral lives. But virtue ethicists might not be worried about this result; they might simply claim that their picture of the habits, reasons, motives, emotions and the like associated with being a genuinely compassionate person is a normative view about the kind of moral psychology we should strive to instantiate and, furthermore, that it is no surprise that in fact so many people fail to live up to it.

A new worry arises here. For now the burden is on the Aristotelian to show how realizing such a normative ideal is psychologically realistic for beings like us. Habituating oneself so as to resist phenomenologically salient and familiar forms of temptation (or not have them serve as temptations in the first place) is one thing. But trying to regulate the subtle and often subconscious influences associated with a negative mood or the presence of another person in a room, is quite another challenge. In the group effect literature, for instance, when asked why a subject did not help in the face of what should have been an obvious emergency, the last thing that tends to come to mind is the effect that the other person had on inhibiting the behavior. And such post-hoc rationalizing is a widespread and well-documented empirical phenomenon in social psychology.⁷⁶ Thus the Aristotelian needs to develop some account of how best we can start with many people whose helping behavior, unbeknownst to them, seems to be so remarkably sensitive to morally irrelevant triggers and inhibitors, and gradually transform them into compassionate people who reliably help when needed and independently of what mood they happen to be in or whether others are or are not responding.

This is a challenge, not an objection. Unfortunately, it is a challenge that has gone almost completely neglected in the virtue ethical literature.⁷⁷ Hence the jury is still out on the psychological plausibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics.⁷⁸

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⁷⁶ See, e.g., Nisbett and Wilson 1977, Wilson 2002 and Johansson et al. 2005, 2006.

⁷⁷ For some brief remarks, see Railton 2010.

⁷⁸ Many thanks to several anonymous referees for very helpful comments, as well as Jessie Lee Miller. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 2009 North Carolina Philosophical Society meeting and as a symposium paper at the 2009 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meeting. Many thanks to the two audiences for their feedback, and to my commentators at the Pacific, Nancy Snow and Linda Radzik, for excellent written comments. Part of the work on this paper was supported by the Character Project grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The view sketched here is developed in much greater length in a book manuscript in progress tentatively entitled *A New Theory of Moral Character*.

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