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978-0-521-63116-7 - Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior

John M. Doris

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## Lack of Character

This book is a provocative contribution to contemporary ethics and moral psychology, challenging fundamental assumptions about character dating to Aristotle. John Doris draws on an array of social scientific research, especially experimental social psychology, to argue that people often grossly overestimate the behavioral impact of character and grossly underestimate the behavioral impact of context. Circumstance, Doris concludes, often has an extraordinary influence on what people do, whatever sort of character they may appear to have. He then considers the implications of this observation for a range of issues in ethics, arguing that with a more realistic picture of affect, cognition, and motivation, moral psychology can support more compelling ethical theories and more humane ethical practices.

John M. Doris is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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*for my father,  
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We have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is much more in danger than our life; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us “remember that you must die,” would have done much better to remind us of this great danger that threatens us.

Primo Levi

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## Preface

### *A Renaissance of Virtue*

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?

Henry James

The 1990s were a good time for virtue. Not because people behaved especially well; like other decades, the decade saw its share of moral lapses, from the horrific to the pathetic. The difference was that folks were talking about virtue more often, and more earnestly, than they had in generations. Rather churchy tomes on character began to shoulder aside sex and scandal on the best-seller lists, and virtue, as one columnist put it, was in fashion.

By then, virtue – at least talk of virtue – had been fashionable in academic philosophy for some time; philosophers in English-speaking university departments have been calling for increased attention to such notions since the 1950s. Of course, this agenda was something less than radical even then; neoteric discussion of virtue and character has antiquarian roots, most especially in Aristotle's monumental *Ethics*. The new wisdom, apparently, is much the same as the old wisdom.

I regard this renaissance of virtue with concern. Like many others, I find the lore of virtue deeply compelling, yet I cannot help noticing that much of this lore rests on psychological theory that is some 2,500 years old. A theory is not bad simply because it is old, but in this case developments of more recent vintage suggest that the old ideas are in trouble. In particular, modern experimental psychology has discovered that circumstance has surprisingly more to do with how people behave than traditional images of character and virtue allow. The expected response to James's question – that character is the determination of incident – may be an illuminating way to look at fiction, but it is a misleading way to look at life.

This misleading conception of human psychology, I've come to suspect, engenders problematic ethical conceptions, and I write in the hope that doing better in psychology can help people do better in ethics. Motivating

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*Preface*

this suspicion, and grounding this hope, is not the stuff of best-seller lists; getting things even part way right in thinking about character and ethics requires a painstaking look at delicate issues in psychology and philosophy. I've tried to take the requisite pains, but I expect that some readers – even readers who have consulted the fairly extensive notes collected at the end of this volume – will conclude that I've not taken pains enough. I don't deny it; although others have argued that philosophical ethics neglects the human sciences at considerable peril, the interdisciplinary conversation that promises to ameliorate this neglect is just beginning, and there remain serious questions about how best to proceed. But if there is reason to believe, as more than a few have suggested, that the present condition of philosophical ethics – and also of less rarefied ethical thought – is not entirely healthy, perhaps it is not unduly rash to forge ahead, even where the course is poorly charted and conventional wisdoms counsel turning back.

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